

The Hardest Part: First drafts (because you can't fix a blank page)

Unlike many writers, I prefer the rewriting/editing part of writing a book. For me, the first draft is the necessary evil that I have to get through to reach the part I really enjoy. Once I have the entire story down in rough draft form, that's when I can start to play and have fun; because at that point, I've at least got something to work with.

For me, my ideal writing goal is 1,500 words a day. With chapter lengths of approximately 4,000 words, that's about three chapters a week, right? Uh, not usually. Fifteen hundred words a day is when I'm really cranking out the words, inspiration is flowing, my muse is in the room (and cooperative). One thousand words a day more often what happens (because I still have a day job). But what about the times when the words aren't flowing, when I really don't know what happens next?

I write *something*, because nobody can fix a blank page.

I've recently finished writing my seventh book, and I've finally realized that it's easier for me to face a blank page of paper than a blinking cursor in an empty Word document. I used to think it was because a blank computer page was simply more intimidating than a blank journal page. That may be true, but the words just seem to flow easier from my brain to a fountain pen to a blank page. There's more of a visceral connection. As a result, I now save myself a lot of blank-page angst and write the first draft of each chapter in longhand. I give myself permission to write something, *anything*.

I explore my plot and characters on the page, to talk to myself on the page and work out ideas, and even to write what I know to be crap that I'll be tossing in the literal or electronic trash can later. Because I can't fix something that ain't there. For those of you who (like me) shoveled cow manure into the dirt of the family garden when you were kids—you know that it takes a lot of crap to grow a good garden.

Nobody gets it right the first time; and heck, sometimes not even the second or third time. For me, first drafts are about just getting the story down. The second draft is for bringing it to life. The details, the nuances, digging deep for the sub-plots and motivations that didn't (and *couldn't*) make themselves known to me until I had the entire story down.

Unless you're blessed, lucky, or unbelievably skilled, your first draft is going to be what we southerners call "butt ugly." Mine are, and I've accepted that. There's the struggle to get what's in my head onto the paper and then to the screen. But mainly my problem is that I'm still working out the guts of the story while I'm writing it. I know the beginning, some scenes scattered throughout the book, and I know the ending. The trick is to come up with the elements that link all of those together—to *create* the story.

Writing, weaving a story, creating a world that's never existed before, is fun—at least it should be. So give yourself permission to play.