ASA Professional Development Seminars

Getting Published and Reaching Readers
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Be Your Own Editor— the POPP process

Writing is like drilling in the permafrost. In these icy conditions, if the drill is allowed to stop even for a few seconds, it seizes up. Momentum is all-important if you want to get started and keep going. How do you create momentum?

Start by breaking your novel or other writing project into manageable steps. What can you do to get started right now? Invent a catchy title? Make a research phone call or do a net search? Taking even one step towards your writing goal cranks up the drill. The POPP process helps keep the momentum going. Four steps are involved: preparation, organization, preliminary draft and polishing.

Preparation

The good news is, you’ll never have more opens than you do now. Characters can live or die or never have been born, according to your whim. The bad news is, this is when blank page syndrome can hit hard.

Any task appeals more than tackling the blank page or screen. Fear of failure may drive you to do anything to avoid facing the keyboard. One solution is to talk to your mental critic. Turn it into a person or a creature. What does it look like? Sound like? Jaws? Mr Fussy? A parent? Give it a name such as Killjoy. Ask Killjoy what it needs to give you peace to write.

Sometimes you need rituals before settling in to the writing process. Don’t fight them. Simply set a time when the rituals will end and you’ll start writing. Set up a comfort zone. Have supplies handy. Play music. Use a relaxation technique.

Writing a mission statement may help. The mission statement from one of my nonfiction books might have been, “This book shows readers how they can have a real-life romance as real and lasting as those in my romance novels.”

Organisation

This is the bridge between development and actual writing. Blocks may include panic and reluctance to proceed. You fear you aren’t ready. Read your mission statement to stay on track.

Outline chapters and possible contents. For fiction, start to develop and flesh out characters. Remember everything can be fixed later. Nothing you write now is graven in stone. If still blocked, try to answer, “who, what, when, where and why” regarding your project. Use file cards, plot charts and folders. There’s no right approach, only what works for you. Change or simplify your mission statement as you gain more of a feel for your project.

Preliminary Draft

This is the first writing stage. Write as freely as you can without editing or censoring yourself. Blocks can include fear or failure, and anxiety that the work will fall short of your
expectations. Review your mission statement. Explore your subject in draft form. No-one has to see what you write at this stage. Write in the general direction of your plan. Record your thoughts. Write drafts in longhand. Write longer and longer outlines, whatever works for you. If ideas for new projects pop up, note them down and file them, but stick to what you’re writing now.

**Polishing**

In this step, put the work aside then look at it objectively, editing as many times as necessary to shape it to your vision. There’s no ideal number of drafts you must write. Have a friend read the work “cold”. Don’t explain or amplify anything. Your words are all an editor will have. Ask your reader to highlight “slow” passages and any unclear parts, as well as parts they enjoy. Focus on the work you want each section of writing to do.

Then submit the work to an editor and start the POPP process again while you still have that all-important momentum.

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