



The Beacon

Your guiding light for writing and publishing

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Outlines, not synopses

Left-brain types outline articles and books, right-brainers probably don't or, at least, not as much.

I've heard writing instructors teach that an outline is essential and I've heard several bestselling authors say they've never outlined a book in their lives. My two favourite editors, who have seen it all before, predict a scattered and rambling ms without an outline. So what is a writer to do? Probably, what works best for you, which is not very helpful advice.

I have found it easy to outline nonfiction books and articles, but challenging to outline my first novel. Fiction outlines prevent sagging middles, unnecessary scenes, poor chronology, and slippage of tension. If you like to write to a goal of 1000 words a day, your pace may outstrip your plotting and this is a strong indication for an outline. Outlines can also keep writer's block at bay, which is a comforting thought, and guide the composition of your long and short synopses.

There are as many ways to tackle an outline as there are writers, and methods can be simple or complex. Books on the craft of writing shed light on techniques to solve the outlining predicament. I recommend two by Elizabeth Lyon (*A Writer's Guide to Nonfiction* and *A Writer's Guide to Fiction*), which have valuable guidance on organization.

Here are a few websites to assist you too:

- http://www.fmwriters.com/Visionback/Issue%2015/novel_outlines.htm
- <http://pbackwriter.blogspot.com/2005/02/novel-iii-outlining.html>
- <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Articles/wc2-3.html>
- http://filmmaking-101.suite101.com/article.cfm/outlining_improves_your_writing
- <http://writing-world.com/fiction/index.shtml>

The Beacon is interested in your advice for outlining books and articles. Please let us know at info@beaconlit.com.

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From the editor's desk

Recent experience has taught me what sucks creativity and motivation out of a writer in a nano-second.

On January 2nd, my husband had a massive heart attack and emergency cardiac surgery. He spent the next 7+ days on life support. Although he is now home and doing well, I still have reduced focus and ability to concentrate. Creative writing remains beyond me.

These six weeks certainly bore out what research tells us: if you are significantly stressed, your adrenalin runs high and it is this high level in your bloodstream that stops creativity in its tracks. I found I wasn't impatient to regain it—I was confident it would return when life re-established its rhythm and tranquillity. While waiting, I relaxed in hot baths, and edited my photos, listened to music, and cared for my husband.

Now my adrenalin is almost normal, I feel the creativity surging again. Perhaps, this is a type of writer's block. Patience worked for me—this time.

Julie H. Ferguson

The Serial Comma—So Much Over So Little

By Joyce Gram, Writer and Editor

Who would have thought that the serial comma, quietly bringing clarity to a list or series in a sentence, would be the subject of passionate argument, much ink in grammar texts, and, yes, even surveys?

The serial comma, also called the Oxford or Harvard comma, is that innocuous squiggle before the final *and* or *or* in sentences such as “The flag is red, white, and blue” and “I want no ifs, ands, or buts.” It is optional—but be careful where you say that. Lynne Truss writes in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, “There are people who embrace the Oxford comma and people who don’t, and I’ll just say this: *never* get between these people when drink has been taken.”

The purpose of the serial comma is to prevent ambiguity, especially where the last element in the series consists of a pair joined by *and*, as in “We ate soup, salad, and macaroni and cheese.” Omitting the comma in the sentence “The flag is red, white and blue” might not cause much ambiguity, but what about “He went to the store to buy milk, butter and eggs”? Is there a product on the shelf called “butter-and-eggs”? Maybe somewhere. *Garner’s Modern American Usage* says that the argument whether to include the serial comma is “easily answered in favor of inclusion because omitting the final comma may cause ambiguities, whereas including it never will.”

The authors of an authoritative-looking website set out to trace the origin of the “Wrong Rule,” taught by so many English teachers, that says the final comma in a series should be omitted. In the course of their research, they found that “except for journalists, all American authorities say to use the final serial comma.”¹ Newspapers and magazines omit it to save space. My own research has yielded the same result, and I am an unapologetic proponent of the serial .../

/...contd. from left-hand column

comma. Interestingly, Truss does not use it and says, “My own feeling is that one shouldn’t be too rigid about the Oxford comma.” Whether you choose to use it or not in your writing, all readers and editors of your work will agree: be consistent!

As to that survey I mentioned, it is being conducted by the West Coast Editor, newsletter of the Editors’ Association of Canada, B.C. Branch, and asks members, are you for it or against it? Results in March 2008. I’ll let you know.

¹<http://www.protrainco.com/essays/serial-comma.htm>

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Enjoy *The Beacon* blog at:
www.beaconlit.blogspot.com

Spring Events for Writers

(for additions, visit www.beaconlit.com/schedule2008.htm regularly)

Mar 1 - *Self-editing for Writers*, Saturday, March 1, 2008, Johnson Heights Secondary School, 9 am–4 pm. Instructor: Joyce Gram. Register at www.ce.sd36.bc.ca/

Mar 8 - *How to Craft Irresistible Query Letters that Get You Published* for fiction and nonfiction writers who want to approach commercial book and magazine publishers with their work. Creative Writing Diploma Program, Johnston Heights Secondary School, Surrey, 9am-4pm. Register at www.ce.sd36.bc.ca.

Apr 12 - *Crafting Irresistible Query Letters that Get You Published* (Saturday, 1-4pm) for the **Powell River Festival of Writers**. Julie will be also available in the Blue Pencil Cafe for discussions about your work in progress and/or your writing career. Register at www.prmicro.com/festivalofwriters/

Apr 19 - *Writing with Power!!* for emerging and experienced writers who want to revitalize their words. Creative Writing Diploma Program, Johnston Heights Secondary School, Surrey, 9am-noon. Register at www.ce.sd36.bc.ca/.

May 10 - *Book Magic: Turning Writers into Published Authors* (9am to noon) and ***Crafting Irresistible Query Letters*** (1-4pm) for all fiction and non-fiction writers (not suitable for poets and screenwriters) who want to learn more about how to get their books published. VCC, downtown campus, 6:30-9:30 pm. Register at www.vcc.ca/programs/pceprograms.cfm.



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