

# Shaping Longer Works of Fiction

by Meredith Sue Willis

**M**OST OF US ARE NOT PREPARED EVEN AS adults for a big task like a master's thesis or the novel we always wanted to write. We may be very good at writing, but the long haul has special requirements. We may start with a period of enthusiasm and inspiration that carries us well into the Big Project, but that first excitement often dies out at some point, and we are left with the daunting tasks of continuing and completing. This chapter makes no promises about helping you finish that novel or thesis, but it will offer some advice and help for writing longer works.

I also believe that seeing the Big Picture and completing a Big Project are skills that can be transferred to other areas of endeavor. Some teachers teach these skills by having their classes tackle yearlong projects. Research in Mayan culture or the life cycle of butterflies allows students to learn how to plan and how to use previous work to enrich new work, as well as how to follow their natural interests and develop new ones.

Some teachers have their students pursue personal writing as the Big Project. These long-term writing projects typically include memoir, autobiography, and biography—life stories. I have been in classrooms where the walls were covered with photos of the students as babies, as well as autobiographical essays and newspaper reports from the days of the students' births together with collections of poems and stories about the events of their lives. Adult writers often write their first long work in the form of an autobiographical novel—a fictionalization of their own life experiences. The Life Story, like the dream, has a structure everyone seems to understand intuitively. The shape is obvious: origins and birth, childhood, young adulthood, middle age, old age, and (for biographies though not autobiographies) death. It is an organic structure that can organize our writing and give grandeur to our memories.

## Novel Writing as a Classroom Project

The Story Building sessions stimulate and structure a lengthier piece of writing. To turn these pieces into a novel involves exercises and assignments that propel the story farther into the future. Younger students may never have thought of writing a novel: for them, a Novel Writing project gives practice in planning over time, thinking about time, and working in a sustained way. This approach is not about The Novel as The Monumental Accomplishment of Genius, but rather about the novel as a creative endeavor that looks at long-term human behavior. Novel Writing projects can work with groups of students or with an

entire class. You can also, of course, do it alone. The same exercises, with little or no adaptation, can be used by the adult writer who needs to get restarted or to move forward. They can also give some shape to those treasure troves of fragments that writers collect.

I worked with seventh graders at the Bragaw Avenue School in Newark, New Jersey, on a Novel Writing project that lasted more than two months. We began with a couple of sessions in which everyone tried several possible ways to begin a novel:

- Writing Idea:** Start with real-life situations such as peer pressure to steal, family problems, etc.
- Writing Idea:** Start with something that really happened when you were younger, then change it (i.e., fictionalize it).
- Writing Idea:** Start with an interesting place. You can bring people in later.
- Writing Idea:** Write physical descriptions of three very different characters.

### From a novel by Shaunte Saunders:

A lawyer: Miss Shandell Walker is 22 years old. She is light skinned with long black hair that swings back and forth when she walks. She is very tall and thin, about 6'3". When she wears heels, she is even taller. She loves to dress up, so when you see her, she is always wearing sharp suits made to only fit her. She lives in a mansion, with a swimming pool in her backyard. She has no kids, so she invited her family to go over whenever they want to. Her parents and family members say she is an outgoing person, and they're right. . . .

After trying several "Starts," choose the one you like best and do these assignments to get deeper into the story.

- Writing Idea:** Put the characters in a scene in which they have to interact.
- Writing Idea:** Make the characters have a dialogue.
- Writing Idea:** Describe a setting (place) that you will add to the beginning of the story.

In the following example, the material added later is in italics:

### The beginning of *Disappearing People* by Umara Campbell

*The classroom looked like a big room with dark floors and big lights in the ceiling. The desks were old-fashioned with a lot of writing on them. The closet doors were darkish brown with language/reading pictures on them. The air was kind of cold and the outside was sunny with dark clouds and a lot of fog in the air like the streets of France.*

It was February 11 in Room 315 at Bragaw. Everyone was in class. It was quiet and dull—not much light and a dark floor. The class was doing reading comprehensive questions.

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Suddenly the closet doors start rumbling and shaking and everyone begins to turn around in shock. When the doors of a sudden stopped, the lights in the room started to bust and the room went pitch dark, then everyone started screaming. Kim said, "Mrs. Decree what is happening?" Then out of nowhere a light shined or it was really like a beam, with a deep voice which said please leave the school or mysterious things will begin to disappear—even children or people. . . .

Next came some assignments on how to extend the story. These don't have to be written in any particular order, although you may want them in chronological order after you have drafted the story.

- **Writing Idea:** Write what happened "One month later. . . ."
- **Writing Idea:** Write what happened "One year later. . . ."
- **Writing Idea:** Write what happened "Ten years later. . . ."
- **Writing Idea:** Write a part with lots of action.

#### From a science-fiction novel by Sean Williams:

. . . I ran down the hall hitting all the light switches but nothing happened. I ran in Mrs. White's room. And the Green Eyed Monster didn't see which room I went in. He walked right past, chasing Mrs. Thomas. I hid behind Mrs. White's desk. I needed a plan. So I climbed up to the light post. I cut it and put a rope on it. I was ready to attack. The monster came in the classroom sniffing around. He got right under the light and I pulled the string and it crashed his head and he fell. I got up and looked at his body and for some reason he wasn't there.

I heard a book fall off the shelf. I looked back and saw about 20,000 little men with green eyes smile at me. . . .

- **Writing Idea:** Write a crucial dialogue from the middle of the novel.
- **Writing Idea:** Write an important scene near the end.

#### From *A Friend's Betrayal* by Kia Saunders

"Pull your van over," said the policeman, but Maurice just kept driving crazy. We were telling him to stop, but he didn't. The cops caught us and arrested Maurice.

Later on the following month, we heard Maurice was in jail. Two weeks later Maurice had a visitor. It was his friend, Shakeetah, and Maurice had a long talk with her. Towards the end of their conversation, it was not nice.

"If I had the money, I would bail you out," said Shakeetah.

"No you wouldn't," said Maurice. "You and the others are no kind of friends. But that is OK 'cause when I get out (pause) I am gonna bust a cap in your grill. Enjoy your life while you can. . . ."

- **Writing Idea:** Write your last page.
- **Writing Idea:** Write your first page.

Larger structures generally need a kind of simplicity to support their weight and to help both reader and writer keep the whole thing in mind. This is why I like assignments like "Write your first page," which are at once very specific and totally open-ended.

After drafting several scenes, the assignment for the Bragaw Avenue School students became essentially to *Go On; Keep Writing*. Students who had been out sick caught up, and students who had lots to write kept writing. I began at the same

time doing one-on-one conferences in revision. The final step was book production.

Because we had limited access to the computer room and the classes were small, I acted as first-draft typist. I typed up the first several sections of each story before the end of the project because I wanted my students to begin seeing their work in something like its final form. The typed versions (thanks to the computer) became an important part of revision and were a great incentive to those who had never before seen their work in any finished form.

Despite the fact that some of these students were at risk in a dozen different ways—from the drugs on their streets to early pregnancy to a looming standardized test—editing their own novels engrossed them. They changed titles and pored over their author's notes at the end. They learned proofreader's marks from their classroom teacher and indignantly pointed out my typos. I worked with them individually, discussing word choice, how to extend, add settings, and use conversation form instead of dialogue form. We discussed the convention of standard English in the narrative text and street forms in dialogue, within quotation marks.

Here is an example from one:

#### A Conflict over Ibn

By Latoya C. Spruill

*This book is dedicated to my cousins.*

#### Chapter 1

Ibn gets married to Latoya . . .

*One day, one summer day on the side of the garage in a violent neighborhood.*

It was seven of my friends: Ibn, Bo, Nu-nu, Feezah, Tisha, Taneesha, and Baby Girl. We were all just sitting on the side of the garage. I used to like Ibn, so we used to say we go together. At this time I was 9 years old. I didn't know what girlfriend and boyfriend meant. Well anyway, we were all just sitting there doing nothing. When all of a sudden Ibn asked to marry me, I paused but said, "Yes," with confidence. So we started picking up those flowers with the yellow things around it, and got married. When Taneesha said, "You may kiss the bride." I was shy. Next thing you know a girl named Asia came over and said, "Ibn, come here." Everyone said, "No, they're getting married." "Getting married? No, they ain't getting married cause I go with Ibn!" said Asia. "No, you don't," said Ibn. Asia got very mad and hot. Asia was the bully around where I lived so everyone ran no-stopping. . . .

As we went into the revision sessions, I had the students brainstorm ideas for how to improve their writing, and we generated a list that I typed and handed out to each student.

• **Writing Idea:** Make a list of things to do to make your novel better:

- Divide it into chapters.
- Give the chapters titles.
- Put in quotation marks to make it easy to understand who is talking.
- Put in "tags" to show how the people are saying what they say.
- Trade novels with someone and check for spelling and punctuation.
- Change names from real people's names to fictional ones.

- Have several people read your beginning. Ask them if they want to keep reading? Ask them if they really mean it or are being nice.
- Do you have a conflict? Can you say what it is?

•**Writing Idea:** Do some of them!

As we added and deleted and corrected spelling errors, I used the opportunity to ask the students if they had figured out what was going to happen at the end of their novels. Some of them had the shape of their entire novels mapped out in mind already. Shaunte gave me a five-minute verbal sketch of hers, but Cory did not seem to have any idea of where his was going. I said, “Well, let’s think a minute. What might happen next?” His eyes flickered from side to side, and then he smiled. “I know,” he said. “The boy is going to jail, and then he’ll get out of jail, and get his revenge.” Had Cory figured it out in that fraction of a second under pressure? Likely—he’s a boy who probably thinks best on his feet. But the question challenged him, and he came up with his completed story line.

These seventh graders’ novels were not 300-page manuscripts, but they did use novelistic techniques, and the students worked hard for the duration of the project. I was not only seeking good description and lively conversation, but also a commitment on the part of the writers to work with an idea of past and future, and a concern for the consequences of actions. This large scope and span is part of what gives a novel its special flavor. I wanted these seventh graders to plan and try out different possible endings, to think about causes and effects. Several of the girls made the future into a fantasy of married happiness; a number of boys ended with violent climaxes. Zachary McDaniel ended with a dream of the past:

About two months later, Jim was in his favorite chair. Jim fell asleep. He started to dream. Jim remembered when he was a little boy in his backyard playing ball. His older brother came outside and said, “Let’s get a game.” So they started to play, and he took out. He started to drive to the hole. He jumped and shot. Block! His brother destroyed his shot. They both laughed and then he tried it one more time, but this time he scored. He had beaten his brother for the first time in his life.

The End.

## Novel Writing for Adults

The adults who take my classes at New York University are self-starters. They have chosen to use their time—often after a long day of work—to write books. I am full of admiration for their energy in taking this on. Some of these adult writers have a plot idea that they hope will sell as popular fiction. Others have stories and material from their lives that they feel compelled to tell. Some have taken writing classes in high school and college and use the novel-writing class as a place to get feedback, and perhaps as a touchstone in a lifelong commitment to writing.

Usually what an aspiring adult novelist needs most is the support of peers and a teacher plus ideas for structuring. While the few pages here are not a course, they do suggest ideas for getting on with your novel. These adult exercises, like those for young writers, use the basic elements of fiction. It is also important to learn that sometimes you move forward best by writing a number of high points, then filling in later. The assignments here leapfrog through a projected book, and this

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leapfrogging ideally offers the writer some tentative ideas for giving the novel form.

I begin with Place for many of the same reasons I do with younger students—the process of slowing down and mulling over a description—although this writing does not have to be at the very beginning of the book. *Rather, it is a place that the main character enters and observes.* This allows the writer to explore the character further as well as to create a setting.

The second assignment is to *describe a minor character.* Both these first assignments should focus on the senses, especially the ones other than sight. The third assignment begins the leapfrogging. This assignment is to write about another appearance of that *same minor character much later in the novel.* This assignment furthers the plot by exploring a minor character’s function. It projects the writer deeper into the work. It is extremely freeing as you work on any long project to realize that you need not go in the same precise order that the work will eventually be read. Often, by working on the high points, you discover less interesting parts you can skip. You create an archipelago of scenes that you can connect later or even leave without explicit transitions.

After the second appearance of a minor character from the novel, I ask my adult students to write *a passage from the middle of the novel, inside the main character’s head, while an action is under way.* This can be internal monologue, stream of consciousness, internal third person (also called “the Reflector”), or other. Sometimes I suggest an ordinary action—a kiss, running to catch a plane—but it can be any combination of thinking and acting.

Next I assign a short scene *from somewhere in the middle of the novel.* This scene should have both dialogue and conflict. Conflict can, of course, be overt, subtle, interior, or other. I ask the students to make the scene a little longer than they think it should be. They can always cut later, and they might, by pushing themselves, come up with something interesting that they didn’t know yet. Scenes, often with dialogue at the heart, are the essential material of novels, the basic building block. In poems, the line may be most important, but in novels, it is the short action or scene, which usually but not always involves two or more people. Scenes are the explicitly dramatized parts of the novel, as distinguished from narrative and from long passages of description or internal monologue.

After perhaps writing two or three such scenes, the students draft an outline. Outlines work best after a substantial number of pages have been written. I like to use an outline as a tool to get a grip on the material I’ve drafted so far. The outline can be any form: chapter titles, scene treatment, flow chart, webbing, etc. The next assignment is *a complete scene from the second half of the novel* using dialogue, action, narration—in other words, a scene combining the elements of fiction.

Further assignments, in class and out, might include some of the following:

•**Writing Idea:** Have a character view the contents of her or his refrigerator.

•**Writing Idea:** Write page 267 of your novel. You have no idea what is going to be happening on page 267? After you write it, you will!

•**Writing Idea:** Describe a drawing that would be chosen for the frontispiece of your novel if it were illustrated—that is, an image of some emblematic scene that would attract a reader to the story.

•**Writing Idea:** Write a scene in which a character is seen at a great distance, as part of a place, like a long shot in film.

•**Writing Idea:** Do the same thing, but with a close-up.

•**Writing Idea:** Write the last important dialogue in your novel.

•**Writing Idea:** Write a friendly review of your finished novel.

Ideally, the student of this novel-writing course would end the semester with quite a few sections and scenes scattered through the book, plus an outline. The writing from these exercises will not necessarily end up in the final version. Rather, they are intended to jump-start the author from vague ideas to a written first draft. They are aimed at getting the beginning author to imagine the novel as a whole thing.



## Q & A: Using Nonfiction as a Resource for Imaginative Writing

by Rhonda Zangwill, with  
Kristin Prevallet

*In her residency at P.S. 116 in Queens, T&W writer Kristin Prevallet used journalistic and historical narratives—nonfiction—to inspire her students to write imaginatively.*

**QUESTION:** How do you use the children’s existing social studies curriculum—in this case, World War II—to teach writing?

**KRISTIN PREVALLET:** I use first-person eyewitness accounts of the war—journalism and oral histories—mostly taken from the Library of America book, *Reporting World War II*. Since the texts can be long and complicated, I use a technique called “active reading.” As I read a passage aloud, I have the students reimagine the text in their heads and at the same time underline everything that they understand, anything that really pops out at them. We then do an “I See” exercise. I ask the kids to write poems based on what they reimaged, what they visualized in the original text.

**QUESTION:** How do you move the students beyond the literal text?

**KP:** Well, I tell them that they are not simply copying what the writer wrote. Instead they are reading it, visualizing it, trying to write things down as they see them in their heads. Of course, just as in regular poetry workshops, students use the language of model poems to write their own poems. That’s how you get them to think about language, visual language. That’s also how you get kids to write interestingly—you give them a text that’s a little beyond them and they mimic the flow, mimic the language, mimic some words. Some of my students took what they initially visualized and then made up a whole stories.

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**QUESTION:** Some of the themes—the Holocaust, or the bombing of Hiroshima—can be overwhelming. Do you have any special strategies for getting students to write about such themes?

**KP:** I use an exercise from *The Story in History* by Margot Fortunato Galt (T&W, 1992) that works very well. When we are dealing with something that is so big, almost too much to manage, I ask the students to look at it through the eyes of an animal, perhaps a stray animal walking through a concentration camp. At P.S. 116, we read an extremely powerful account of a journalist who witnessed the bombing of Nagasaki from a boat. He wrote about it in vivid detail, describing it as something like a monster being let loose. We talked about his descriptions and then I had them personify the bomb. I also brought in photographs and had the students “read” them. They had to pretend the photos were like a text and made lists that described every single thing that they saw. The next exercise was that they were reporters on the scene. Using the lists—and their imaginations—they wrote the story of the events leading up the scene in the photograph.

**QUESTION:** Did you talk about the difference between journalistic and creative writing?

**KP:** The journalists we read all describe things in very poetic language. At the very beginning I asked the students, “Who they think writes history books?” and “What is the difference between history books and oral history?” They understood instantly that oral histories are by people who were actually there. But I really don’t make a separation between the texts we read and creative writing, and the writing that the kids did was creative writing. We used metaphor, personification, vivid language. And most of the exercises we did are exactly the same as I would use in more traditional poetry residencies. I just used different readings—nonfiction texts.