

The novel in five stages

Diana Evans

1. Considering

You believe it cannot be done. You believe it must be done. But you are the only person who can do it. You cannot do it. You must do it. So begins the tussle, which will go on for probably years in one form or another, with increasing intensity, until you get to near the end of Stage 5 (editing). This conflicted outset is the assemblage of fear and faith, an uncomfortable, unsettling union. They run in opposite directions – one dark, one bright; one telling you it is hopeless and it's best you give up and do something better with your time, the other professing your great responsibility to this very important work. Psychologically speaking, this Stage 1 is the phase of argument and persuasion. Nothing is actually achieved apart from maybe some uncertain note-making – you might even try writing a scene here and there to test out the idea, to see if it will float (usually it doesn't, because it doesn't yet attach to anything – when a novel is a cluster of attachments, a pattern). You are trying to convince yourself. You will go to a library and browse the shelves, select a few disparate books, and take them with you to a quiet table to see if they hold any positive signs, any magical message or enigma that yes, this is what you must write, now. You will go to a museum and feel the command of history in the wings of your yearning. You stare at cold, random objects. You are quite lost. No one can help you, except for one or two chosen supporters. You will put too much onus on

the things they say, their responses and surprises. They will disappoint and elate you without them understanding why. You cannot stay here forever. Your existence is becoming impossible.

2. Preparing

Finally, you have accepted that some onward motion needs to take place. You have made a commitment. You are going to give yourself to the task of producing this impossible thing that only you can produce. This is definitely a better place, though no less scary. But at least now the searching, the exploring, is clearly focused on the intended reality of the thing; an existential swamp has been surpassed, conquered. If its murky creatures remain, laughing from the sidelines, you will walk on by, absorbed in your duties. These include making lists – of characters, events, objects, moments of dialogue, description and small details. You go for long walks with the people in your story and imagine the world from their angle. You will make more constructive trips to the library, and when you find yourself reading along blind alleys, you will change tack, repointing yourself in the right direction. It is all about following energy, trusting instinct. Instinct is all a writer has with which to spiritually survive. At some point in this stage your research will feel detrimental or superfluous. You will feel that you are losing an original thread and no longer want to hear other voices except in their echoes. Again, you are aware of your complete isolation, and its crucialness. You will spend a day or two pacing the carpet of your room with pieces of paper strewn across the floor – your notes, lists, post-its and snippets of scenes. In a leaning towards order, you will remember what Hilary Mantel said about resisting the urge to organise your material, so as to maintain a sense of looseness. You may nevertheless make a plan – horizontally, as books are read horizontally – which will prove at some juncture utterly useless yet will steady you at the precipice above the fathomless ocean of writing.

3. Writing

Here at last. In the wide, unbridled swimming. This is the freedom time. This is where anything can happen and you are allowed to make as much mess as you want – throw paint at the wall, throw your characters off cliffs, under buses, have them say outrageous, nonsensical things to each other. If you exploit this freedom enough, they will talk to you, often. You will hear their voices in your head while you are listening to the radio, or walking in the woods or buying butterhead salad. You will find them much more interesting than your own family, and you will find yourself exiting a room or a conversation in order to write down what they have just said. For there are essential clues here. Nothing can be missed. You must pay attention at all times, even in the middle of the night, even while dreaming, when a piece of dialogue or a clue might permeate sleep, forcing you to switch on a lamp and reach for your notebook. This is, usually, your favourite, most liveable stage. You are insanely, brilliantly alive. It is like summer, the world looks brighter, the outlines of trees, landscapes and vistas are clearer. It is not a good idea to go on holiday or undertake any major shift in location during this time (unless it is in order to work), because the uncomfortable reality is that you are incapable of experiencing contentment anywhere else but in front of the novel, sitting before it, at the coalface, alone at your desk, with the rest of the world going on outside. Your exhilaration is private and untranslatable. Nobody understands your shiny, secret happiness. They only witness the torture, the one who has been dragged away from her work to be sociable, who does not return calls because speaking might be dangerous.

4. Revising

But does it make sense? Has that period of exhilarating freedom amounted to anything coherent? Do you have 'a novel'? The answer is no, which is why this stage is the hardest of all – you now have to make it make sense.

You have to make everything connect and the pattern work. Uncertainty returns, deeper than before. You are required to read reams of the nonsense you have written and make agonising decisions about what will stay and what must go. This is the time of the losing of the darlings, I won't say killing, which has never been your strong point. They are scattered all over the floor with their beautiful curlicues and flourishes, along with some scenes that don't belong, a character or two who is no longer needed. The overall structural imperative looms heavily in your way, and this is the hardest feat, the one which often does not become clear until right at the end of the journey. You are thinking about the project in macro terms, hacking through woods to reach the clearing – and, as the saying goes, you cannot see the wood for the trees. It takes immense bravery to make it through this stage, as well as persistence. You might be hacking for years and you may feel you will never get out, that there is no end, no completion – that all this work might eventually come to nothing, and every other potential project you have ever thought about writing is what you should have been doing instead. Only that nugget of original faith keeps you going, the part of you that believes it must be done, that the book must exist, and the world will be better for it. You have such grand illusions of the social importance of the work, but it's those illusions that have the power to lift you up when you are an exhausted, bleeding wreck on the forest floor.

5. Editing

If you survived that last bit, Stage 4, you are now on the home straight. Jubilation is possible. The structure is in place, the pattern has revealed itself, and every element of the novel is sufficiently justified. This final stage is by far the easiest. What you are trying to produce already exists – all you have to do is make it sing, massage it, bring every sentence to its optimum state. It is this close, delicious, fine-tuning work that will keep you wrapped in the quietude of your study for hours on end, through long nights, even,

until you hear the voices of the early birds rising with the new day. You can still hear your characters talking to you, and they will bring ever new, ever more specific things to the table as a result of your long commitment. It is a living, breathing thing, this creature you have created, and it has not finished forming until the last sentence. The ending is important, of course, perhaps the most weighted, sacred moment. Everything must fall right. It must be the right beat, the right resonance, the right accumulation of meaning and sensation. Endings make you nervous – that it might not go right, that the directions you have taken might not be capable of leading you to the right place. Afterwards, though, you are filled with warm achievement and huge relief. You look at it one last time, and then leave, get as far away from it as possible, for long enough to return to it with new eyes, like a stranger.

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Diana Evans is the author of the novels *A House for Alice*, *Ordinary People*, *The Wonder* and *26a*, which was the inaugural winner of the Orange Award for New Writers. *Ordinary People* won the 2019 South Bank Sky Arts Award for Literature and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, the Rathbones Folio Prize and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction. She also publishes short stories, essays and literary criticism, which have appeared in among others *Time Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *The New York Review of Books* and on BBC Radio 4. She is an associate lecturer in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. www.diana-evans.com

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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