

How to Write Activist Literature – Introduction

Many of you know that I worked for a long time writing Preston and trying to polish it into a salable format for publishers and agents. I have probably told you this before, but it bears repeating. The reason I wrote the book was that I wanted to explain to Christians why a gay man – or a gay teenage boy – would choose not to be a Christian in light of the treatment that we have received by the church.

Therefore, I consider Preston activist literature. I feel that if enough people were to read the book, it could make an impact on the way society integrates homosexuality and religion.

I also know that I might not be successful. Unfortunately, failure is a risk anytime you undertake a massive project like a novel or even a series of short stories. So I have decided that I would write out the process I go through to write literature and be as detailed as possible so that those of you that are interested in trying your hand at it might be more successful at it than I am. Ronald Reagan once said, “You can get a lot accomplished if you don’t care who gets the credit.” That’s why I don’t consider my process to be some kind of trade secret, and really that process is just a conglomeration of other processes that I have read that others use.

Rather than completely rehashing everything that has been written on the subject of writing novels, though, I will tailor this topic for those that want to write activist literature. The material you find here may not work as well for other kinds of literature such as mysteries, horror, or science fiction. While there is nothing wrong with writing these or any other kinds of fiction, there are plenty of resources on the Internet already that address these topics, so I’m going to focus on activist literature. One thing I want to note is that activist literature is not constricted to literature with gay themes and struggles, so this material should work very well if you want to write about African American Rights, women’s rights, animal rights, or any other theme of activism.

Just to give you some idea of the topics I intend to cover for you, I have listed them below. This blog will continue to be updated every two days, as always, but the topics for the next 20 days or so are as follows:

1. Choose a theme
2. Write a one line summary
3. Make a list of things in the book you would like to see happen
4. Write out the plot
5. Fill in the gaps
6. Make note cards with scenes
7. Write the manuscript
8. Revise the manuscript
9. Query agents and publishers
10. Work on your next book

I will put up the first of these ten posts two days from now. Please note that these posts assume that you are fluent in English and have a solid working knowledge of English grammar – or whatever language you plan to write in. They also assume that you have a little experience writing and that you have done some writing in the past – such as writing essays or short stories. They also assume that you are willing to do some weak novel writing at first until you improve your skill and that you're okay with that. No one starts out being a great novelist – I'm not a great novelist yet either. But I will show you the ropes if you're willing to heed some common sense advice.

Finally, they assume that you have done enough reading that you at least recognize a good, well written novel when you read one. Reading novels for a novelist is like going to medical school for a surgeon. If you have not been to medical school, don't come and tell me you want to cut me open because I'm not convinced you're going to know what you'll find when you do so.

At the end of this series, I will make sure that you have access to all of these posts in an article format so that you can review them from time to time without having to sift through so many posts.

This is the first series of posts I have written, so I hope you enjoy it. Please send me any feedback you think would make these posts better, and I will be happy to review it.

How to Write Activist Literature – One – Choose a Theme

This post is part one of how to write activist literature, and the first step is to choose a theme. Let me explain what I mean by a theme. For many years I have been mistrustful of Christianity, and often Christians will ask me why. They tell me that not all Christians hate gays and that Christ died for everyone. They tell me that God loves me. They tell me that they love the sinner and hate the sin. So in choosing a theme for Preston, I decided that I would answer that question. Here is the theme to Preston, formed as a question:

“Why would a religious, gay teenager renounce his faith in God?”

A theme can also be written in the form of a statement that can be proven or disproved. For example, “A religious, gay teenager should renounce his faith in God.” Perhaps you could write a similar theme as, “Christianity fails gays.” Or you could write it as, “Christianity has a lot to offer gays.” The goal of a theme, in my humble opinion, is to give the reader something to think about when he or she finishes reading the book. It needs to make an impact on the reader and it needs to be something that your audience cares about.

If you’re writing literature about animal rights, your theme might be, “The meat industry cares about money to the detriment of animals.” Perhaps that is a simple theme, but you might want to choose something broader and write on many different levels. The classic theme I think of in this regard is, “Love conquers all,” something that Holly Lisle writes about on <http://hollylisle.com>, her excellent site for writers.

Now many of you will argue that theme is a matter of fluff and that I am just trying to fill this blog with a meaningless post. That is not true. If your goal is to write a piece of activist literature, the theme of that literature is perhaps the most important decision you can make. The theme will drive the entire story. When you have a doubt about where the story is going, you will return to the theme for guidance. That is why it is so critical that you write the theme down and commit it to memory.

So now, you ask, what is the best way to go about writing a theme or even coming up with a theme? There are basically two ways to go about coming up with a theme.

The first is to consider something you care very much about. When writing activist literature, chances are you have something in mind already that you want to write about. If you’re like me and want to write about a gay teenager, then you would start with the preoccupations of gay teenagers. You could think about problems in school, drug abuse, coming of age, new relationships, relationships with older men, sexual abuse, etc. There are some subtler things that go along with all of these – the emotional aspects of each of these problems. If it’s a relationship with an older man, for example, then you might consider all the emotional problems associated with being so insignificant in the eyes of someone you truly love, as is often the case when a married man pursues a teenager. From there you could write a theme based on these problems. For example, “Gay

teenagers cannot find true love in a married man.” Or you might try, “No one really cares about gay teenagers.” If you want to be more positive about it, you could try something like, “Gay teenagers can find true love regardless of their circumstances.”

Start with the problem, and go from there. I cannot reiterate enough, though, that a well written theme is critical to the success (or failure) of a book’s salability.

The second way to go about a theme is to go from your plot you already have. I have met countless people who have said, “Oh, I want to write a book, and I already know what it’s going to be about, but I just haven’t written it yet.” Now I started my book Preston by coming up with the theme, but let’s say I had started with the plot. Let’s say I had been mulling over the idea of writing a book about a gay teenager that is very religious but chooses to give up his religion. The theme would come naturally from that: “Why would a religious, gay teenager renounce his faith in God?”

Please note that this theme does not have to be earth shattering. You don’t have to write the next earth shattering novel, and most people never do – for that matter, most people never write a novel at all, so you’ll be well ahead of the game just by writing one. When you write a theme, please just write one. Give yourself the opportunity to be creative and do something fantastic, even if you have to improve over time.

The next step is to write a one sentence summary, and you can find that on this blog in two days’ time.

How to Write Activist Literature – Two – Write a One Line Summary

Now that you have a theme to your literature, you need to decide, second of all, what your novel is going to be about. This is perhaps the easiest step in the process because most people that consider writing a novel already have some idea of what they want the novel to be about. When you know what your novel is going to be about, you need to commit to writing and to memory a one line summary.

When I wrote Preston, my one line summary was this – “My novel is about a religious, gay teenager that falls in love with his best friend.”

Generic? Yes, absolutely. But that doesn't make the summary bad. Here's why – there's very little that has not been written about before. Your goal is to write material that will present old ideas in a new way. Certainly there have been books about gay teenagers that have fallen in love with their best friends. There have been books about straight teenagers that have fallen in love with a female friend as well. You must understand that there are books about everything.

Why do I tell you this? Because at some point you're going to meet some well-meaning friend that says, “Oh, so you're writing a novel? What is it about?” And you'll give that friend your one line summary – which is part of the summary's purpose. Then your friend is going to roll his eyes and say, “Oh well NO ONE has EVER written about THAT before!” speaking sarcastically, of course. Then you're going to be discouraged and feel like you're a failure and that you should just give up the whole writing scheme. That is simply not true.

In a later post, we're going to talk about crafting a great plot, and yes, there is a difference. The summary is not the same thing as a plot. The one line summary is just a quick statement of what the book is generally about. It has nothing to do with all the twists and turns you're going to see in your novel. Those twists and turns make up the plot. You, on the other hand at this point, just want a one line summary. Why? Because you have to start somewhere.

You may want to be in Los Angeles, for example, but if you're in New York, you need to realize that. You have to make the journey, and that journey starts with a single step. Yes, this step in the process is the easiest you're going to make because it's simple, it's short, and you're just starting so you're still excited and you're not tired. Regardless, this is a very necessary step in the process and must be completed and given attention. Even if you only spend five minutes on this step, you need to do it and have it on paper.

You don't need to type it. You can write it out by hand. But let's say you have no idea what your book is going to be about. Then you have to come up with something. There are a few things you can do to come up with your summary.

First, consider books that you have read in the past – yes, you **MUST** have read a number of books in the past to be even a fair novelist. What were their summaries? Think of

your favorite book. In one sentence, what was it about? Can you tell someone in just one sentence – two tops – what the book is about? You may have to think really hard to break down the story to its bare bones, but you can do it. Think about it hard.

Second, look at your own life. Are there things in your life that are interesting? You don't have to write an autobiography in order to come up with a good summary, but sometimes you can get ideas from your own life. You will find that the problems that you have run across in your own life are a good starting point for a summary because a lot of people have probably gone through the same sorts of issues.

Another source of ideas for a summary are in the form of fantasies that you've had. Who of us has not, at some point, wanted to have a romantic relationship with a celebrity? Or wanted to win the lottery? Or thought about what it would be like if your best friend were diagnosed with cancer? Learn to ask the question, "what if?" which is actually a good way to write a summary. For example, "What if a Black man were asked to leave a crowded restaurant in New York in 2010 because of his race?" That's a great summary. You don't have to answer that question on this step; your objective now is simply to determine what your book is going to be about.

This step might take anywhere from five minutes to two days – but please no longer. If it takes you longer than two days to write a one line summary, then you have crossed the line from careful thought into procrastination. Go ahead and make the plunge. Decide what your book is going to be about and then simply run with it.

The next step in this process is to make a list of things you want to see happen in the book and begin planning the plot. You see, writing a novel is not easy, but it can be painless if you take it one step at a time. Now, in two days' time you will see the next post, making a list of things you want to see happen.

How to Write Activist Literature – Three – Make a List of Things in the Book You Want to See Happen

So at this point, you have written your theme and you have written your one sentence summary. If you haven't done either of these things, that's okay. If you haven't even started, that's ok. These posts are meant for you to be able to come back to again and again whenever you're ready to review them. As I stated earlier, at the end of this series, I will post a link to these steps so that you can have them all in one place.

This next step, which is making a list of things that you want to see happen in the book, is also very important. I want to take a moment and address one of the concerns that you probably already have – you might be concerned at this point that we are already on step three in the process of writing a piece of activist literature and we have yet to write the first word of the manuscript. The fact is that a good novelist will carefully plan his novel before ever writing the first word – or at least that is the school of thought that I come from.

Writing a novel is a lot like building a house. You will plan the whole project on paper before ever laying the first brick. There might be some people that say that takes all the fun out of building a house. They might say that they don't want to know what the house is going to look like until it's already built. There is one problem with this theory – it is madness. How can you construct a house – or a novel – without having planned it out? How are you going to know what twists and turns the plot should take unless you've reviewed them in advance. I should dispel the myth that a novel just comes together perfectly just because someone sits down at the computer and types 90,000 words. This is not true any more than a construction worker could build a house just by slapping a bunch of bricks together.

That said, let's continue.

Once you've written your theme and your one sentence summary of the book you intend to write, you must have some idea of what you want to happen in the book. The fact is, it doesn't matter what these events are; but every work of fiction has events, internal and external. You must make a list of some of these and judge how well you like them.

In addition to events, you must know who your characters are. Again, you may not come up with an exhaustive list, but here's an assignment for you. Start with your main character – the protagonist. What is his or her name? Let's assume it's a male. How old is he? What does he look like? What is his occupation? What are some of the things that have happened to him in the past? What is his personality like? What is his family like? What is he trying to accomplish? Does he want a raise? Does he want to save the world? Does he want to get out of debt? Find love?

Where is he from? What does his house or apartment look like? What is his religious background? What is his education? What does he like to do? Who are his friends? What are his vices? Coffee? Alcohol? Food? Pride? Where does he like to hang out?

What does he think of his job? His boss? His coworkers? Does he live alone? With family? Roommates? Is he overweight? Athletic? Tan and beautiful? An old, wrinkled man? A little boy?

Who are his enemies? Why do they hate him? What do they want to do to him? Kill him? Ruin him financially? Break up his marriage?

You may not need to know all of this information, but go ahead and write it out anyway. You can't write about a character you don't know. Write all this down for the protagonist, the antagonist (someone that is against the protagonist), and several other characters. It's better to have too much information than not enough.

Note that you're still not writing the book. You're still planning. You have to know your characters and what they do under normal circumstances. You have to know what is going to change them, what will make them do something out of the ordinary. You have to know why he does what he does and what would make him do something different. These are going to be critical things to know in step four.

The other thing you have to do with characters is write out their relationships to each other. We all have relationships, even people that don't know each other. They're called strangers. There are strangers, acquaintances, friends, enemies, celebrities (people that I know but don't know me), lovers, and family. You can probably think of some others. Also, remember that relationships change. Some people start out as friends and then become enemies when they both fall in love with the same person. Some people are friends and then lose contact and go back to being acquaintances. In your notes, you don't have to allow for every single change your characters' relationships will go through (you don't even know them yet, and won't until Step 4), but have some idea of what is going on. For example, how does the protagonist know the antagonist? Do they actually know each other? Did they meet at some point? Were they best friends in elementary school? Are they applying for the same promotion and work on the same team at the same company? All other relationships in the book should stem from these two very important characters.

In Preston, obviously Preston is the protagonist. There are actually two antagonists – Billy and Jake. That is okay. There can be more than one. An antagonist can also be an event. It can be a feeling. It can be a lot of things. The important thing is to write all that down – but not yet. That comes in Step 4.

Back to your list of events – you don't have to end up using your whole list, and you will almost certainly add additional events once you get started composing the plot in Step 4. Again, this is not a hard step, but it's very important that you do it. When I wrote Preston one of the first events I came up with was Preston praying at his bedside in front of a candle. Another event I wanted to happen was a murder scene at the beginning of the book. I wanted a culmination in a cemetery at the end of the book. I wanted to involve a fundamentalist Christian group in the book picketing a funeral, like what Fred Phelps and his people from Kansas do. I wanted to include a few church scenes where a minister

preaches on the “sin” of homosexuality.

That’s it. That’s the third step. You need to invent the characters and you need to come up with some events. The events don’t necessarily have to have a relationship with each other at this point. There does not need to be an order of events even. They just need to be listed. And you don’t even have to have a lot of detail about what the events are going to involve. You just need to have some idea of what some of them are going to be, because you’re going to use this in Step 4 and Step 5.

This step is NOT the hardest step to accomplish, but it is the longest step you will have encountered at this point. You don’t want to skimp on this one. Less is not more. More is more. Put details and details and details. Write till you’re sick of writing. And write in long hand – at least that is what works for me. I have found typing this information can be stifling, and plus you might want to draw a few sketches or make a few diagrams. There are very few rules associated with this step; the important thing is that you sit down and do it.

Let’s recap. In Step 3, you will first make a list of characters and answer a number of questions about those characters. Second you will make a list of events that you might include in your novel. Don’t think too much beyond this step until you have completed it. Simply do this activity and then proceed to Step 4, which is Writing Your Plot, and will be posted in two days.

How to Write Activist Literature – Four – Write Out the Plot

Now you've got some busy times behind you. Now you're ready for the hardest step thus far – and the most interesting and rewarding. This is where the plot comes together. As I said before, a plot is MUCH different than the one line summary. This plot will touch on nearly everything you want to include in your book. You've got all the characters sketched and you've got a few events, which you did in Step 3, so you'll start with that.

Note that you're not even writing something like what you'll see on the back of a book cover. You're not writing teaser copy. You're writing a PLOT. This plot is going to include all the events, the characters, the twists and turns, the beginning, the middle, and the end – just not necessarily in that order!

The purpose of writing out the plot is not to get the idea of everything that's going to happen in order. It's just to get an idea of everything that's going to happen. This is where the relationships between the events are considered. The most important questions you can ask in this stage are, "Why?" and "How did this come to be?" This is a stage where you will have to think in more than one direction. You'll have to think forwards and backwards and every other conceivable direction.

So to give you an example from Preston, I decided that I wanted Preston to be highly religious and that I wanted him to pray in front of his bed every night. So that caused me to ask the question, "How did this come to be?" It is my job as the author to set everything up. Characters must always do things for good reason, not a bad reason or no reason. In this case, I had to answer the question of how it came to be that Preston prayed in front of his bed every night. So that put into the works another event that answered that question. In this case, I decided that when Preston was a little boy – a littler boy, that is – there were some stained glass windows that were put into the church and that Preston was so moved by them that he devoted his entire life to God. Was that the best way to answer the question, "How did this come to be?" Perhaps not, but that is the answer I gave.

Another situation in my book was that Preston had a bad relationship with Jake, the star football player. Again, the question was, "How did this come to be?" I knew that if Preston and Jake were going to have a bad relationship, I had to set that up. So I staged a scene on Preston's first day of school where Jake and Preston meet and have a bad encounter. I also set it up so that Preston would be a better football player than Jake, and that would fuel Jake's hatred of Preston. The reason Jake had to hate Preston was that his hatred would fuel even more actions on Jake's part that would move the book along.

This is, perhaps, the hardest part of writing the book. In my humble opinion, it's even harder than writing the manuscript, so let's take it slowly, one step at a time.

Free writing

One very good technique to use in creating a plot is free writing. Basically writing everything that comes into your head about the book. The free writing should be done in

long hand and should be stream of consciousness writing. I no longer have the free writing exercise I did when planning Preston or I would simply post some of it on here... but the following is a fabricated excerpt of what could have been my free writing exercise and what you can expect to happen when you're planning your plot:

"I want Preston to pray every night. But why does he pray every night? There must be some reason. It could be that he saw some stained glass windows when he was younger and was so moved by them that he wanted to pray. At the end of the book, I want Preston to show that he gives up his religion, and I guess I could do that by letting him blow out a candle or something like that. That means that he has to pray in front of a candle every night. But I guess he would blow it out every night, so there has to be some reason that he doesn't blow it out. Maybe there could be a draft in his room and it blows the candle out every night and then Preston considers that his communication device with God.

"But then what? Why does Preston give up his relationship with God? Maybe it's because he falls in love with someone – someone he can't have. He can fall in love with Eric, his best friend. And then he will realize that he is involved in a sin, so he has to question whether he should be gay or religious. I guess Preston and Eric can meet the first day of school because their schedules are messed up so they can go to the guidance office together. But why are their schedules messed up? Because the principal is a moron. Yeah, the principal has a bad relationship with the superintendent so he is trying to improve that. Maybe I can use that bad relationship to show that the principal is hard on gay people so that will fuel the story as well."

Then what? There has to be more. There is a psycho religious fanatic named Billy. How do I show he's a fanatic? I will show him murdering someone at the beginning of the book. But then he has to meet Preston and try to recruit him. Yeah, he will take advantage of the fact that Preston is religious and try to recruit him into the psycho religious group..."

Now just sit at your computer and close your eyes and imagine me writing that in long hand. You can probably see my creative juices flowing as I run across problem after problem and simply solve it. The issue is that once you solve a problem, often it creates another one. So you have this winding, twisting, turning, almost nonsensical and not very well written long hand plot that will fill pages and pages and pages and pages and pages. Be prepared to spend more than a week on this. You need to just write. Write and write and write. Pose what you want to happen in the story and then solve the problems that arise. Answer the questions, "Why?" and "How did this come to be?"

Like I said, this is the hardest part of writing the book. Every time you sit down to work on your plot – and it WILL have to be in several sessions if you do it right – first review your theme and your one line summary from Steps 1 and 2. When you write out the actions of your characters, refer to Step 3, and they will surprise you. They might look at you and say, "I'm not doing that!" as Holly Lisle noted on <http://www.hollylisle.com>, her website for writers.

Keep going. Keep working. Keep answering those questions. If you find that some aspect of your characters doing work, then change them. It's ok. Writing a novel is a messy process, so bring an eraser or be willing to mark through a lot of things.

In your free writing exercise, you'll find that sometimes you'll write something and you find out later that it doesn't work. That's ok. Just leave it and change it as you write. Say something like this, "No wait. I said Preston was going to be a karate expert before, but now I think he should be a football player..."

Like I said, this is a messy step. It's going to be long and incoherent and maybe even difficult to read, but this is part of the process of solidifying the story. You have to make sure that things flow a certain way and make some sort of sense.

When writing out your plot, always keep the following in mind:

Make sure characters always act for good reason, not a bad reason or no reason.

If Sam always gets up at 5 AM and goes to work, then he had better have a good reason for not doing exactly that one day. Is he sick? Then don't show him going in when he's sick. He has to have a good reason for not going to work if that's what he always does.

That is a simple example, but this is important. In the course of writing a novel, characters are going to change. In Preston, Preston gave up his religion. He had been highly religious for years, and that said, he would not just give up his religion. He has to have a reason. When he realized that the church persecuted him for being gay, he was willing to give up his religion. But even then, you have to keep in mind...

Set everything up before it happens

Preston had a good reason to give up his religion, as noted above, but I had to set it up. I can't leave my readers shocked – too shocked, anyway – that he gives up his religion. It's okay for a reader to think to himself, "Wow, I didn't see that coming, but it makes sense." I just don't want him to say, "Where the hell did that come from?" If they say the latter, then I have done something wrong, and I will need to go back and change something in the story.

I could probably write volumes on how to free write a plot, but the important thing is just to do it. If you get stuck, feel free to start over. Don't give up. Like I said, this is, by far, the hardest part of writing the whole book. If you can just get through this one free writing exercise, the rest will fall into place naturally.

The Ending

With a quick note on the ending of your book... yes, you want to know what it is. You don't get in your car and choose an interstate and start driving unless you have some idea of where you want to go. The same is true of writing a piece of activist literature. You must know where you're going. As part of your plotting exercise, you're going to have to put the end down. Describe it in detail. Write down exactly what is going to happen, and keep your theme in mind. Remember, each of these steps works together, and the fact that you've already written the theme does not mean that you can just put it

out of your mind. When you have decided what your ending is going to be, then make sure that you stay true to your theme and decide if you are going to set up to prove or to disprove that theme. You have to know in advance. Make sure your ending makes sense, that it is set up, and that the changes the characters have gone through are for good reason.

Free writing the plot will lead us to Step 5, which is to fill in the gaps, and that will come in two days.

How to Write Activist Literature – Five – Fill in the Gaps

Congratulations if you have gotten through the free writing exercise. You might want to take a day or two off to recover from that, as that is by far the most difficult part of the process. Now that you have done that, you're ready to go on to the next step, which is to fill in the gaps. Let me explain.

If you used a notebook for your free writing exercise, then you probably want to put a blank sheet in between this step, which is also a free writing exercise. You will want to go back and read your plot you just finished writing and look for things that don't make sense. Yes, they will be there. There will also be points that are weak. Points that need to be expanded. Points that you left out entirely. I'm sorry, but like I said, writing a novel is messy. You're not going to do it right the first time. It takes a lot of patience and hard work and planning to get it right. But the fact that we want to get it right is the reason that we're already and step five and have yet to start writing the manuscript!

"I can't believe you, Andy!" you're going to say. But this is the way it is. You have to have everything written out prior. That means, as I said in the last post, that you have to have the ending written out.

But why all this work prior to ever writing the story? The reason is that if you do the planning properly, then the manuscript will practically write itself. That said, you have to fill in the gaps.

As you read the free writing plot exercise that you wrote, be sure to look at it with a critical eye. This is the time to make sure that everything makes sense, that the characters' actions are for good reason, and that you have set up all the events in the book.

You're going to want to document all these gaps in another free writing exercise in the same notebook with the plot free writing exercise. Just note all the changes that you need to make, and then make them. This is the time that you think through everything that you want to accomplish in the book. You must spend a lot of time thinking through everything. You have to have the courage to be able to say, "Yes, this does not make sense." Or "You know, I don't think this is something that particular character would do." Or "I believe the character needs a better reason to do this than the one I gave."

Once you have identified the problems in your plot free writing exercise, you use the Fill in the Gaps free writing exercise to address each of these problems. You must be very clear and you must be ruthless. If you are to write a tight plot, you must make sure that the gaps are filled in.

Step 5 seems a lot easier than it is. I would recommend, as I stated above, that you should put Step 4 aside for a few days so you can come back to it with fresh eyes. Please note that once you have finished Step 5 and done justice to it, you will have a solid plot to work from when you start writing your manuscript. This is critical. It is not advisable to

start writing your manuscript until you have a solid, solid, SOLID plot that has no gaps and that all loose ends are tied.

Even when you get to Step 6, you will not start writing the manuscript. There is still one more exercise you must go through before you get to that point. But in two days, I will post the next step, which is make note cards with scenes.

How to Write Activist Literature – Six – Make Note Cards with Scenes

Now you've written your plot and filled in the gaps with that plot. Everything is going well if you're following these instructions correctly. The problem with Steps 4 and 5 is that these free writing exercises are a mess. If you've been doing them correctly, there are pages and pages and pages of plot and gap filling. Step 6, making note cards with scenes, will give some rhyme and reason to the whole process.

Let me start with some background on scenes, which is the purpose of Step 6. Books are like movies in that they're written in scenes. When you watch one of the Star Wars movies, you'll note that one minute you might be seeing something going on in outer space on a ship. Then you might see something going on on a planet. Then you might see different characters on another ship. Each of these moments in time with different characters and different places are scenes. Books are written the same way as movies in this regard. They are written in scenes.

In activist literature, like all literature, a scene has certain elements. It has a certain action, internal or external, that occurs. The scene has a purpose, something that moves the story forward. Remember when I was talking about how all the characters must have good reason to take an action? Remember when I told you that you must set up whatever happens so it makes sense? These are some of the purposes of scenes. In my first scene of Preston, I showed Billy and some of his cronies assaulting another student. I didn't just put that in for my health. There was a purpose, a reason for that scene to be there. The reason was that I wanted to show that Billy was a psycho religious fanatic. Showing that he was a psycho religious fanatic was important to the story because it set up other things that he was going to do later in the book. It leaves the reader saying, "Wow, that was surprising, but I can see it," rather than, "Where the hell did that come from?"

Now that you understand what a scene is and how scenes work, here is a very important aspect to a scene – one that I have already noted but that bears repeating. Each scene must have a purpose. Each one must move the story forward in some capacity. I have explained this in the paragraph above, so you will have some idea of how it works. When coming up with scenes for your book, think along the lines of the purpose of the scene rather than just the action that will take place in the scene.

In the example above with Billy and the assault on another student, I did not know at first that I was going to write about such a scene. I only knew that I had to prove that Billy was a psycho religious fanatic. So the fact that he assaulted another student for committing a "sin" worked well to bring about that purpose. My next scene was simply to show Preston praying in front of his bed and show how that came to be. I had to show him praying in front of his bed every night so the readers could get an idea of what his behavior is. Once he changed that behavior, it was to be a surprise, but they have to know what the behavior that is changing is first. At the end of the book, when he gave up his religion, I had to make sure that the readers would not say, "Where the hell did that come from?" So I had another few scenes that set up what was to happen. One of those scenes showed Preston's friend Eric asking if Preston ever questioned God. Preston

paused in that scene and then said no, he never questioned God. But the fact that he paused showed the readers that he was going in the general direction of giving up his religion. That way, when he did end up giving it up at the end of the book, the reader would say, “Wow, that was surprising, but I can see it.”

Now, you’re going to ask what this has to do with note cards. Since novels are told in scenes, you are going to write a little bit about each scene on the note cards. When I develop my note cards, I write the word PURPOSE at the top. Then I specifically write the purpose of the scene so that I know that the scene is necessary. Then underneath the purpose, I write a few sentences about what needs to happen in that scene, just a very brief summary.

When you get started writing your note cards, make sure you have your plot and gap filling exercises handy so you can use them. You will find – I know, it’s a shock – that there are still even more gaps to fill in. Don’t let that discourage you. Just keep working.

So when you have your plot and gap filling exercises in front of you, just start with any scene you like from that material. Write the purpose of the scene and then jot down a few notes about what will happen in it. Then do another. And another. As you see gaps, fill them in with new scenes that you had not previously thought of. Add things to scenes so that you can “kill two birds with one stone” in a scene. That will work well, and tightens the plot.

You will write about 80 to 100 note cards, I would say, and then you should have covered everything. Once you have written the note cards and have all the purposes and a few things that are going to happen in each scene, then go back and read what you have written in the order that you have placed the note cards – you don’t have to write the cards in order, but you need to put the cards in the order the scenes will be in.

When you read them, you are again looking for gaps in your material. There is a reason you spend so much time looking for gaps. They are so easy to occur and you want to address them before writing your manuscript.

With these note cards finished, if you did them write, you should have the purpose of every scene along with every necessary action in the scene with what character is committing that action as well as a few additional lines in each card telling about the scene. Feel free to use the back of the cards, but you should almost never need to use more than one card. If you do need to use more than one card, use some Scotch tape and tape them together. You don’t want to separate two cards if they’re for the same scene.

When you have completed this exercise, you will have a mini-novel in your hands. You’ll hold those note cards and that will be the blueprint from which you write your novel. But you don’t start writing the manuscript until Step 7, which will be posted in two days.

How to Write Activist Literature – Seven – Write the Manuscript

Ahh, finally, after all this work you're actually going to start writing the manuscript. Can you believe it? Now all you should have in your hot little hands are those note cards that you just finished writing. Those note cards will serve as the basis for writing your novel.

You will recall that you wrote the note cards out of order, but you will write the novel in order, from page one to page whatever is last. This is the easiest part of the bulk of the work, but will take the most diligence.

Start with the first note card and read it – all of it. Know what the purpose is and what is supposed to happen in the scene. Then simply write the first scene. You might want to go back and revise it a little. Put in dialogue, action, and thoughts. Tell each scene from one point of view; don't switch between different characters' points of view until you have gone to the next scene.

At this point, you're just telling the story, but writing is hard enough. Now that you're writing the novel, you don't have to worry about what is going to happen, or what will happen next. You've already planned that out. Don't worry too much if you want to change something in the cards, as that is okay. The cards give you a guide and you can feel free to follow them to the letter if you like.

Once you have finished a scene, just put some a pound sign in between scenes and keep going. Once you have finished scene one, then write scene two. Go back and revise as you write if you like, or not. I have found that new writers have a tendency to underwrite, whereas experienced writers sometimes overwrite. If you underwrite, then go back and put some meat in each scene, but no fluff. Only relevant material will do. Remember, every word should count, and you want to always move the story forward. That is your whole objective, just move the story forward.

This part of the process can take the very longest of all of them because you're actually putting the story on paper. I HIGHLY recommend you type this manuscript. I know you did long hand on the other exercises, but typing the manuscript is critical because it will have to be done at some point, so it might as well be done at this stage.

Aside from making sure that the manuscript is typed, don't worry too much about formatting. Formatting can be changed in an instant. Don't worry at this point about dividing your book into chapters either. Just write your manuscript and worry about all that during the revision stage.

Once you have written your manuscript, which can take anywhere from 2 weeks to six months (but please, no longer, or you're just procrastinating) you'll be ready to go on to Step 8, which is revising the manuscript.

You might note that actually writing the manuscript is a bit brainless now. Surprising how all the work you already put into planning the manuscript paid off to this extent and

made writing the manuscript practically effortless. Now you don't have to worry about how to end the book. You don't have to worry about what the next scene is going to be. You don't have to worry about anything really, and that is the way it should be. The actual writing of the manuscript should be effortless, so make it so.

When you write your manuscript is not the time to second guess your word choices or the way you string words together. That comes later. The main thing is to throw your paint on the canvas and just get the story out. You will worry about what words don't work and other things like that in Step 8.

A note on completed rough draft manuscripts, for a novel written primarily for adults, the manuscript should be between 80,000 and 120,000 words as a general rule of thumb. Don't worry too much about the number of pages, and there are always exceptions to these rules anyway, but this is a common and perfectly legitimate question for new writers. Most word processing programs have a "word count" feature, so use it from time to time to gauge your progress. If your novel is too short, which is the more likely scenario for a new writer, see if you can add a subplot. This might involve going back to your free writing exercises and seeing where you can add some material. Whatever you do, don't add fluff. This is just BAD and publishers and agents will see right through it.

If your manuscript is too long, on the other hand, then think about dividing the material into two books. See if there is a way to do that. Be creative. But most importantly, don't scrap your own work just because the length is to your liking. If your book is too short, you might consider trying it in the young adult category if the material is appropriate.

In two days, I'll post the next step, which is revising the manuscript.

How to Write Activist Literature – Eight – Revise the Manuscript

Now you have your manuscript completed. Congratulations! You have done something that most of the people who even dream of doing will never do. But you're not finished. Not yet. But for the moment, put your manuscript away for at least 48 hours but no longer than one week. You want to come back to it with fresh eyes for the revision.

Now follow these instructions. You might want to make some revisions in the way you go about them, but follow them regardless.

Print your manuscript. Print all of it. Single sided, double spaced, just print it. Then pick a night that you can stay up all night revising. Both times I have finished a manuscript I took it to Waffle House at about 10:00 at night and sat there until about 6:00 in the morning revising. Take a red, green, purple, or other easy to see colored pen with you. Then start from the beginning.

You're looking for errors in spelling and punctuation. You're looking for big mistakes, again, gaps and things that don't make sense. You're making sure that each scene flows well. You're making sure you've strung your words together well. You're going to second guess your words and see if you can come up with a better choice. This is the time to do that.

Sit there all night if you have to, as this is your victory lap. You have finished your rough draft and are now making it wonderful. Don't be afraid to sit on a word and think about it for several minutes. Give these words the careful thought that you wanted to give them when you were writing – but were self disciplined enough to ignore until now so you could actually finish your manuscript.

I would advise going out to an all night restaurant to do this. You can sit there and practically inject yourself with coffee to stay awake, but you're less likely to be bothered at night. There are fewer people out. The only person that might ask you something will be a waitress or some nosy person that comes in. Just tell them what you are doing and then go back to work.

If you don't know English grammar and punctuation very well, this is going to be a problem. I would still recommend that you go over your own manuscript to make sure that you're happy with all the words you used and the sentence structures, though you might have to submit the manuscript to a proofreader. Let me put it this way; I plan to submit Preston to a proofreader and my knowledge of English grammar and syntax is very good, my mistakes in these posts notwithstanding.

At the end of the night, your pen will have bled all over your manuscript, and that is as it should be. Go home and go to bed. Then get up and make all your changes on the computer.

You'll probably ask why you can't just make the changes directly into the computer. I

suppose you can, but I like to see the book in the same format that my readers will see it – on paper and not on screen. I feel like I see more that way. Then I can make the changes on the computer.

You might want to repeat this step once or twice – but no more than twice, or you're just procrastinating. I say that because your book will never be perfect. I'm sorry, but it won't. You'll just have to let that go.

Step 8 is something you can do simultaneously with Step 9, as working on them together will probably save your sanity. Remember to put a limit on the amount of revision you do. That extra energy can be better used on other things, so don't take it too far.

With that said, you're ready to start querying agents and publishers, which is the topic of Step 9 coming in two days.

How to Write Activist Literature – Nine – Query Agents and Publishers

Now you've finished writing your manuscript and you're at least in the process of revising it. Now you have to start thinking about a home for your book. That's when it is time to query agents and publishers.

But not so fast...

There are a few tasks to complete before querying agents and publishers. These two tasks are both the shortest and one of the hardest you'll have to do.

First, you must write a synopsis. A synopsis is a summary of the book, and should not be any longer than two pages, single spaced. Sounds easy? It's not! You have just written hundreds of pages on your novel, and now you must condense that whole thing to two pages? That's a daunting task.

The way I tackle the synopsis is to follow these steps:

First, I write a one line summary of each scene from my note cards. Note that this is different than Step 2, which was write a one line summary of the book. This is a one line summary of each scene. Once you do that, you have some idea of the important things that are going on.

Second, you want to pick the important scenes, the ones that go along with your theme - and you thought you were done with your theme didn't you? Amazing how these things just keep coming back to haunt you. So you're going to look for the scenes the resonate most strongly with your theme and you're going to expound on them. You're going to tell the basic, bare bones story and you're going to keep it under two pages. Now, if you write the thing and you find that it's more than two pages, which is likely, then you will have to CUT.

In the synopsis you certainly want to stay true to the story, but you also don't want it to be too long. Two pages single spaced is a good length for a synopsis. You also want to revise the hell out of it. It must be perfect, more perfect even than your novel. And yes, it must divulge the end of your book.

The second task to perform is to write a query letter. When asking publishers and agents to review your work, you NEVER send the whole manuscript without permission. The way you get permission is to send a query letter with the synopsis. A query letter starts out with a punchy, catchy statement or question, something to get the agent or publisher's attention. In my query for Preston, my first line was, "Why would a religious, gay teenager renounce his faith in God?" The purpose of that line is to get the agent or publisher's attention and let him keep reading. The query letter should also have the word count and the genre of the book. Genres include mystery, science fiction, gay or lesbian, non-fiction, etc. For more information on queries and querying agents, check out <http://www.writers.net>. These people are not gentle with newbies, so be sure you have

thick skin before going in, but they do offer some wonderful advice on query letters.

Then in your query letter, you want to give a brief, one paragraph summary of the work you want to send. In the next paragraph, you include a brief summary of your qualifications and why you're the best person to write the book. Then ask permission to send the manuscript.

One other side note is that when querying agents and publishers, there are different guidelines to follow for each one, but one that is NOT NEGOTIABLE is sending a self addressed stamped envelope (SASE). You always send this, and if you don't, you will never get a reply.

One thing to note is that most of the time, you will get rejection letters. They will be impersonal and are often form letters. Don't be discouraged. Rejection has happened to every great writer. I'm sure the people that rejected Harry Potter are probably kicking themselves, so just remember that others might do the same for your work at some point.

If you need a list of agents to submit to, try buying a copy of the current year's Writer's Market. There are also some wonderful resources on the Internet such as <http://www.1000literaryagents.com>. I would recommend submitting to agents before submitting to publishers, but there are authors that submit directly to publishers and do very well with it. You must make that decision for yourself.

As the rejections start piling up, it can be very discouraging. Step 10 actually discusses a strategy for dealing with the infamous rejections, and it may not make you feel much better, but you will see that it really does. I will post about writing your next book in Step 10 in two days.

How to Write Activist Literature – Ten – Work on Your Next Book

Now you're done... kinda. You see, in the world of writing you're never truly done. You never truly finish working on a project – you just abandon it when you're ready. It's like having a kid. Your kid is never truly prepared to go into the world on his own; you just have to let him go, as that is the only way he will ever be prepared.

When you finish your first book and send it out on query quests, you will find that you have something similar to a parent's empty nest phenomenon. You will find that you miss your book. You will be sad. When I finished Preston, I felt like I had lost a part of myself. These feelings are perfectly normal.

Now if your kid is 18 and you started feeling blue because he's moving out, probably the last thing I would tell you is to have another kid. But it's different with writing. If you really enjoyed the project, just write another one. Your next book is bound to be even better because now you've kinda gotten your feet wet and know a little about what to expect.

There are emotional highs and lows in writing. You'll feel good one day and bad the next. You might find that you miss your characters, almost like you've said goodbye to some dear friends. You'll feel empty and abandoned, but like I said, that is okay. But when you write something truly important like activist literature, you realize that it is worth it. Every second of it was worth it.

So follow these steps again and write another book if you have it in you. That will take away from the pain of missing your book as well as getting rejections, both of which are a part of life for a writer of any kind of literature, even activist literature.

Conclusion

I hope you've found these last eleven articles helpful. You can find all the articles together by clicking [here](#).

If you have any questions, please contact me and I will be happy to get back to you as soon as I possibly can.