# Finish Your Book in Three Drafts

HOW TO WRITE A BOOK,
REVISE A BOOK,
AND COMPLETE A BOOK
WHILE YOU STILL LOVE IT

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CHAPTER ONE:

# The Messy Draft: How to Generate Material

Thank you, Anne Lamott, for corroborating (on the previous page) the three-draft process right off the bat. I mentioned earlier that we would be calling the first draft the messy draft, tempting as it may be to call it the shitty draft. How do you feel about writing something messy? If that notion gives you a shiver, you may be, by nature, more of an *outliner* than a *pantser*.

You may have heard that there is this debate about who has a better way to write between pantsers and outliners. A pantser is someone who, as the name suggests, writes by the seat of his or her pants. An outliner, on the other hand, is someone who meticulously crafts every writing session.

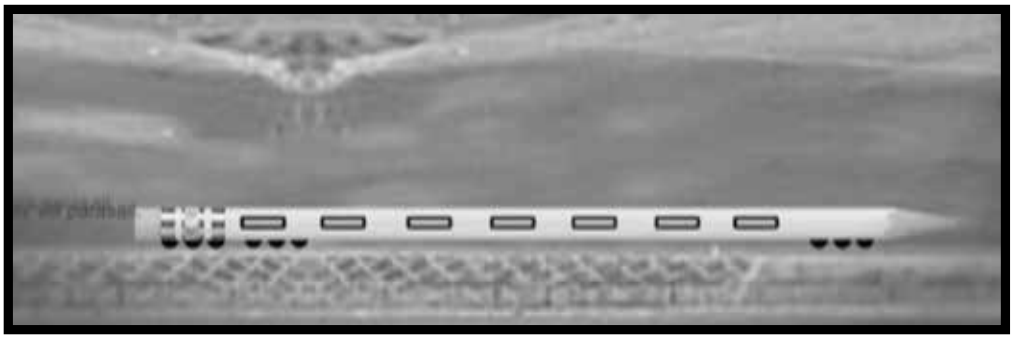
This isn't a real debate, by the way, because we are all both of these at different times. Even the most ardent pantsers are bound to somehow

keep track of where they are going next and what they have already accomplished, while even the most rigorous outliners get surprised when they sit at their desks and discover something about their books that they didn't already know. There's an interplay between outlining and pantsing, and while every writer is different, I suggest that you create the messy draft by pantsing.


"And in this corner!..." It kind of looks like a boxing ad, doesn't it? In the left corner, we have Biz, your prototypical pantser. And in the other corner, we see Ro$hi, who has an outlining system that he wants to impart. Rather than identifying exclusively with one or the other, I think it is helpful to think of these two characters as different sides of one's own psyche. Then we can see what happens when they interact.

We start with Biz, a fellow writer whose experience may mirror your own, as she boards her pencil train and continues her journey as a writer.

**[Watch Video One: Biz on the Train]**

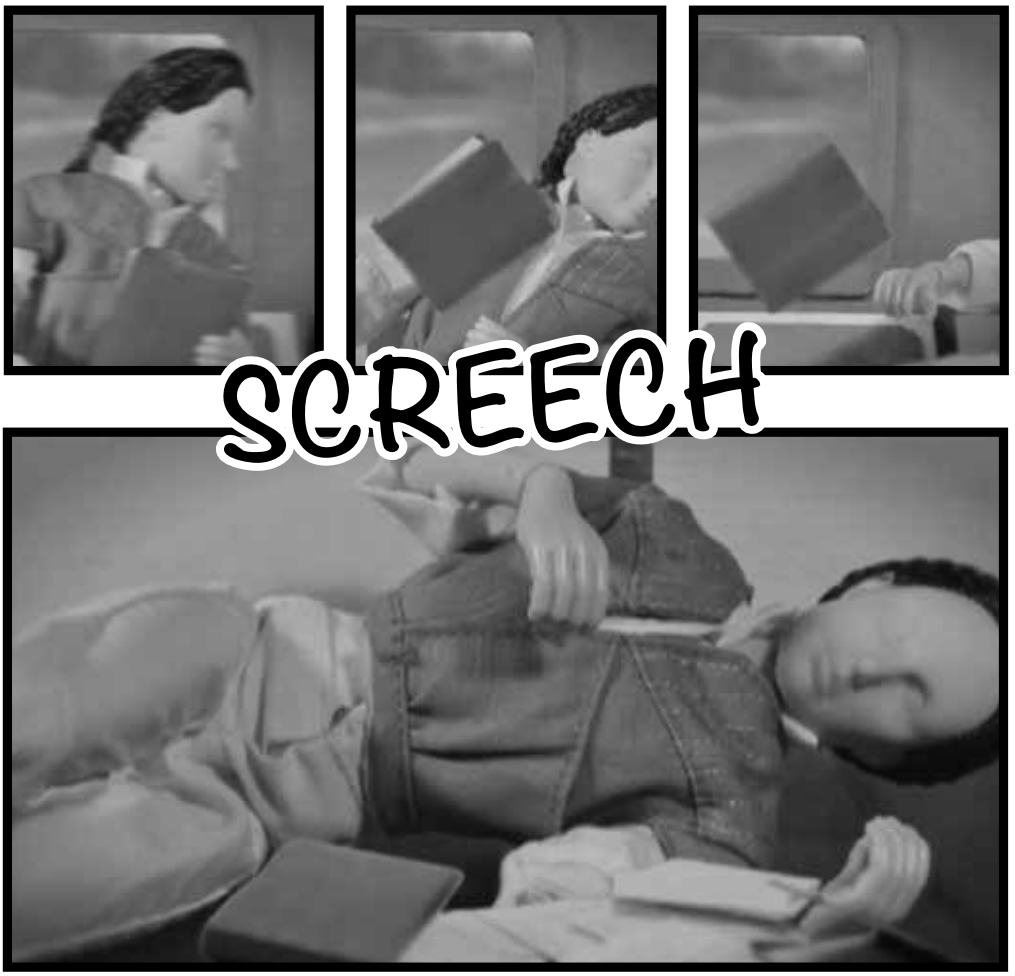


BIZ: I ALWAYS DREAMED OF BEING A WRITER....

...I WROTE MOST OF MY BOOK IN 5 MONTHS.

IT JUST FLOWED, I DON'T KNOW. I COULDN'T WAIT TO GET HOME AND WORK ON IT.

WRITING IS SO MUCH FUN! BUT I NEVER KNEW HOW MUCH WORK IT WOULD BE.




AND THEN I HAD NO IDEA WHAT TO DO.

I MOVED SOME PARAGRAPHS AROUND.

I TRIED TO PUT THE MIDDLE AT THE BEGINNING
TO MAKE IT MORE INTERESTING.

IT STOPPED BEING FUN.

IT WAS EXHAUSTING.


WHEN I GOT HOME FROM WORK, I HAD BETTER THINGS TO DO.

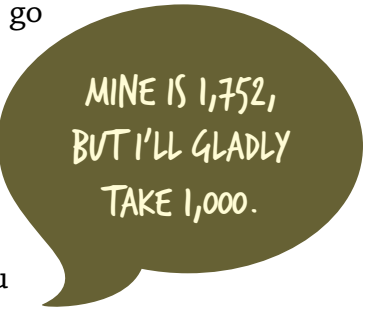
Now, I know what some of you may be thinking: "That sheaf of papers that Biz is holding…I don't even have that much material yet." So let's back up. In my first book, *BYB*, I wrote a chapter titled "How to Generate Material" and called it Action Step Zero. As in, start here. I'll try not to repeat myself too much, but everyone has his or her own favorite tricks or tips, and these are still my six favorites.

## #1. Count Your Words

It seems so anal-retentive, I know, but I count my words for every writing session regardless of what draft I'm in. The computer makes it easy: You can highlight the new section and get the word count in five seconds. But I count even if I'm writing longhand, which I still do sometimes.

Do you ever switch up the medium that you use to write? I recommend it; I wrote the first draft, the messy draft, of this book on my great-uncle's refurbished Hermes 3000 typewriter from the 1960s. I found that doing so removed some of the pressure that I was feeling to get every concept right—I mean, no one is going to read this, with the typewritten xxxxxxxxxx through the places where I was temporarily blocked and the handwritten squiggles that indicated the reordering of ideas, right?

We count our words, because you cannot simultaneously create and know the value of what you are creating—it is like looking in two directions at once. In exchange for quality, then, we go with quantity.




Do you know how many words you typically write during a good session? That is a good thing to be aware of, because then you can set a goal of how many words you want to write in a month. You may have done NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month), an annual novel-writing project in which participants are encouraged to write 50,000 words during the month of November. That is one pantsing thrill ride. And it may not be necessary. Even if you write only 10,000 words in a month, you can still be Biz's equal when she says, "I wrote most of my book in five months!" In *BYB*, I recommended exactly that: producing 10,000 words a month; I called it the 10K challenge. But to get there, you have to count your words.

## *#2. Find a Neutral Audience*

I don't know about you, but when I write I find myself avoiding the critics in my mind—those people who bring harsh or careless energy—and seeking out the cheerleaders—those people who I know have my back. But that doesn't really get it in the end. Those critics and cheerleaders are kind of two sides of the same tortured psychic coin.

It's better to find a neutral voice to write to. On the next page, we see Ro$hi, whose neutrality is symbolized by his blank book face. While the critics may say, "You're working in a pretty crowded field…" and the cheerleaders may say, "I've never heard anything like your story…" the neutral audience member just says, if it's fiction, "What happens next?"

and if it's nonfiction, "What do I need to know about this?" It's kind of the corollary to the idea that, if you don't know whether what you're writing is any good, why not write to someone else who doesn't know either?

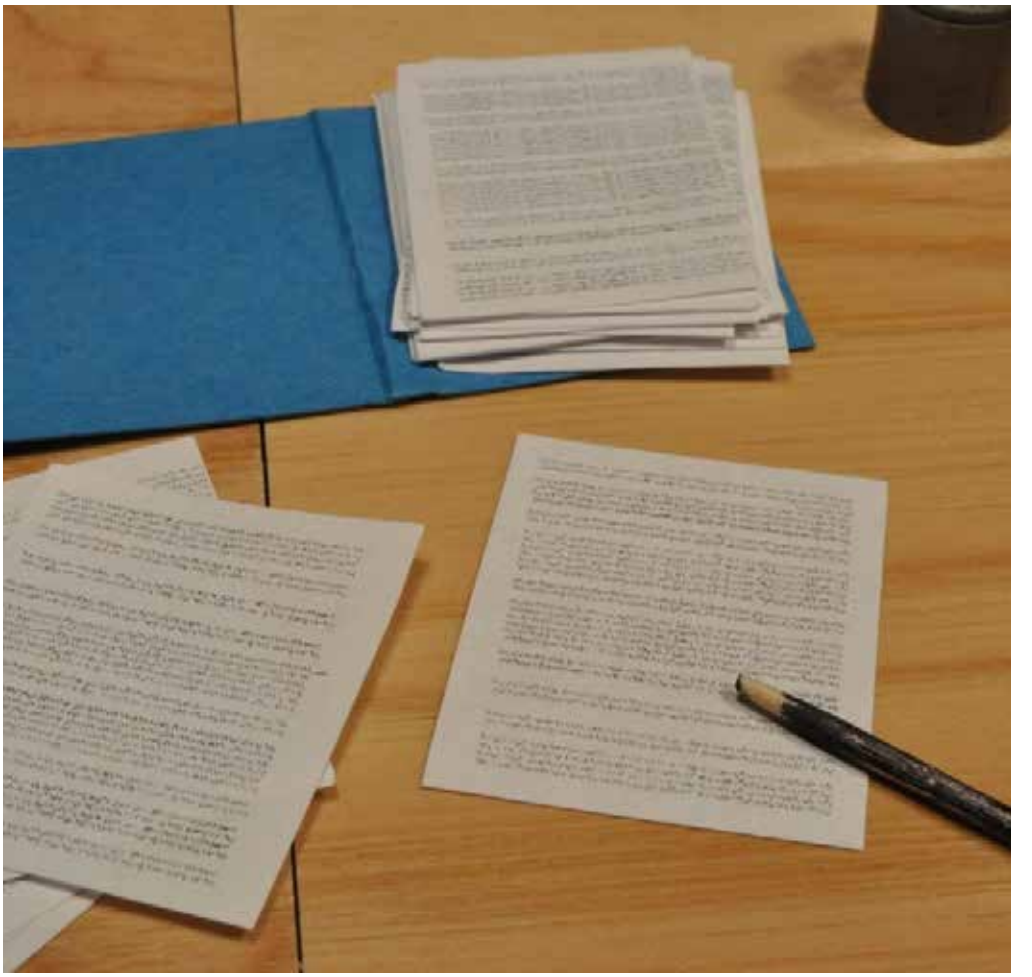
The cheerleader and the critic will appear later in this book in a rather frightening nightmare that Biz has. Neither are very useful, and I try to stress this when I teach a class as well; there are two things you can't say about someone else's manuscript. You can't say, "I love it." And you can't say, "I guess I'm just not your audience" (which is code for "I hate it"). You have to try to be a neutral audience.

Before we leave the second tip, let's reflect on the concept of *audience*, now that we have handled the concept of *neutral*. In your mind, you want to write to someone, or a small group of people, who will actually read your book. Some of them could become your beta readers, who we will discuss in chapter six. If you are writing a book about meditation and running, you will want to picture someone ideally who meditates and runs. You might also picture someone who either meditates or runs, thinking that you might convince him or her to try the other activity. But I wouldn't pick someone who scoffs at the over-examined life and doesn't like to get off the couch. Unless you really are that good.

## #3. Don't Try to Organize Anything

This tip drives outliners crazy. Sometimes clients come to me with these complex notes before they've ever written a word, and I have to tell them that's kinda not the way it works. It could work that way if you were writing a reportorial nonfiction account, and your notes comprise the outline of true events.

But for the rest of us, I think it's like E.M. Forster said: "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" Meaning, things need to get messy.



Pantsing, remember? I have heard that writers need permission to generate material in this way, probably from the outliner side of them, which likes to make plans but can't bring itself to start. It also helps if you trust that there will be a method for fishing out the repetitions and for strengthening the foundations between the first draft and the second draft. That is what the method draft section of this book is all about.

This tip, by the way, is particularly hard for perfectionists to employ. If I am coaching a perfectionist, I will usually try to humor them. "Yes, indeed! I agree with you, by all means, let's write a perfect first draft. Now, how do we do that?…"

Does a perfect first draft strangle opportunities before they have a chance to breathe? Okay, that may be a leading question. Think of what a first draft is for a sculptor, say, Michelangelo, who is excavating a rough-hewn block of marble from a quarry. He's not going to stare at it and ask, "Why aren't you the Pietà yet?"

A perfect first draft covers the ground. A perfect first draft tries material out. A perfect first draft makes a start in a lot of places. A perfect first draft familiarizes you with your material—or, at least, the portion of it that is available to your conscious mind. Successive drafts will fill that reservoir further, deepen your understanding of what you are doing, and enable you to tighten connections and layer in nuances.

Everybody's different; some very smart people I know rewrite the same chapter over and over again before moving on. Sometimes this causes them to advance very slowly, which can lead to a crisis of confidence ("Why aren't we further along than this by now?"). They tell me that they are doing this because they are seeking coherence. I gently

remind them that coherence will be possible only when we get to the end of the messy draft and look back to see, "What are we trying to make cohere?" That work leads to the second draft, what we call the method draft.

In sum, disorganization is an excellent sign. It means that you haven't picked a subject that is too easy and your conclusions aren't too pat. You are allowing the drafting process to accomplish something big and organic. Keep writing the first draft, and keep being okay when it feels like a mess.

## #4. Make the Time

This one is pretty obvious. These are all pretty obvious actually, but there are a lot of aspiring writers who aren't doing this currently. If you want, you can email me, and we can compare notes on day jobs, out-of-town guests, aging parents, child care, grueling commutes, and so forth. The point is, that we make time for these responsibilities, so why don't we make time for writing?


This is Biz going to a coffee shop in a universe parallel to Portland, Oregon. Biz is going to make the time. Let's say that she has allotted two hours for herself to write today. That means she is going to park the car, run into the bank to get quarters to feed

the meter, order her one-pump-mocha-one-pump-vanilla-nonfat-latte-for-the-win, sit down, and then her two hours starts. After two full hours, then she'll get up to do whatever she does in her stop-motion action world.

Nobody is going to make the time for Biz. If she tells other people that she is a writer, chances are that the first question they will ask her is "Are you published?" In Western society, we are all supposed to be producing things, all the time. If your books are for sale and are selling well, you're all right; otherwise, you should be hand-sewing the kids' Halloween costumes, or out on the boat with the rest of your friends, or finding a job at which you can work more hours.

Making time to generate material—disorganized material, at that!—is not looked upon very warmly, even if you do tell people your word count. They would rather you tell them you were going golfing, or back to church for the second time that same day, than that you were going to write. Maybe they are secretly afraid they are in your book.

Whatever the case, the journey for Biz to call herself a writer, and to announce that to whomever is in her life, is hers to take alone. Everything takes effort, and to follow this path in particular requires solitary discipline. The way I look at it, everybody who makes time for their writing can call themselves a writer.

Two quick points: First, when you are scheduling your writing sessions, schedule an extra one each week so that when "life" gets in the way you can let that day go, like a baseball game getting rained out. If you find yourself skipping more than one session per week, life isn't getting in your way…you are. Second, if you see writers in a coffee shop—don't talk to them. You're an extra in their movie.