# Organize your Novel with a Wiki

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## Introduction

Most every writer will need some sort of organizational structure for writing a novel regardless of where you fall on the spectrum of plotter versus pantser. If you are a plotter, you write to a structured outline, with a significant and extensive amount of pre-planning. If you are a pantser, you let fingers fly on the keyboard in a gush of unfettered creativity. In reality, this dichotomy represents the two extreme ends of a spectrum and every writer uses some system to keep all the bits and pieces of a story together. There are likely as many ways to organize the writing of a novel as there are writers. If you are digitally inclined, a wiki is one technological solution to staying organized no matter what kind of writer you are.

## Definition

According to wikipedia, a wiki is:

> a collection of web pages designed to enable anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content, using a simplified markup language.[1][2] Wikis are often used to create collaborative websites and to power community websites. The collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia is one of the best-known wikis.[2] Wikis are used in business to provide intranets and Knowledge Management systems. Ward Cunningham, developer of the first wiki software, WikiWikiWeb, originally described it as "the simplest online database that could possibly work".[3] (From: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki) [For an interesting discussion of the origins of the word wiki see: http://c2.com/doc/etymology.html.]

Wikis have traditionally been used as collaborative tools in which knowledge is

constructed with multiple contributors adding to the whole. However, the strengths of a wiki--links between related content and searchability--lend it to being a useful tool for the writer.

## Tiddlywiki

While there are several wiki platforms available, many of them free for non-commercial use (see PBWiki http://www.pbwiki.com and Wikispaces http://www.wikispaces.com/ for two popular examples), I have found tiddlywiki (http://www.tiddlywiki.com/) the most useful. Tiddlywiki is described as "reusable, non-linear, personal web notebook," and has several advantages over other wiki platforms.

*Advantages*:

1. Tiddlywiki is open source with a large user community pushing the platform into interesting directions and available for user to user support.

2. Tiddlywiki is small and portable. Because it's a single HTML/Javascript/CSS file, it can easily be emailed or saved to/run from a USB key.

3. Tiddlywiki is cross platform compatible and will run in any browser in an offline session, so you do not need to be on the web to run tiddlywiki.

4. Because Tiddlywiki runs on your local computer, it is private by nature. (Although it can be run on the web as a collaborative wiki.)

5. It is customizable with very little knowledge of coding required. (again, the large user group is active in creating and sharing implementations of Tiddlywiki.)

6. Tiddlywiki creates its own backups, and can be set to back up to the web as well.

7. Tiddlywiki is sortable and searchable.

## TiddlyWikiWrite

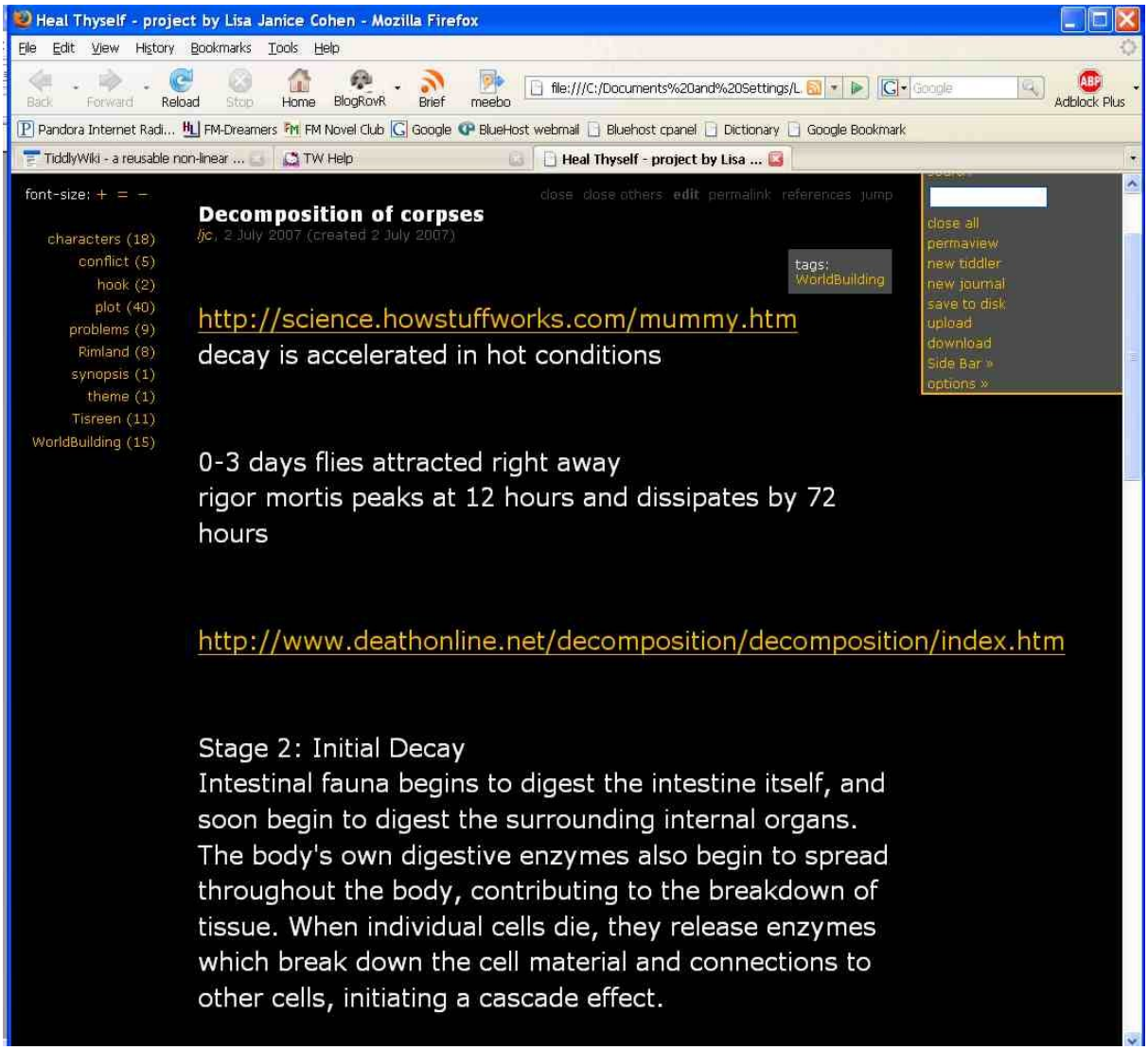
I tweaked the basic Tiddlywiki to create TiddlyWikiWrite. I describe it as a virtual index card system. Information is stored in small chunks (remember creating index cards for high school papers?) called 'tiddlers,' Each tiddler can be tagged and searched. Tiddlers can be sorted and ordered in any view the user needs. Searching is similar to any browser search that you might use.

Links between tiddlers are easily created using the syntax of wikiWords (any words smashed together with a capital letter in the middle like 'wikiWord'). The program will automatically set that word as a link to another tiddler with that title. Links can also be made using the 'wikibar' available from the 'edit' screen. This is a word processor-like editing 'hack' built into this version of tiddlywiki. Tiddlers will also hold html, so links to live websites can be embedded as well. It's set up so that if you can use a word processor, you can use tiddlywiki and this implementation of it.

## Examples of Use

1. Research

Tiddlers can easily hold information gleaned from books or websites, including live hyperlinks to URLs. (At its most basic, think of the Tiddlywiki as a digital repository for virtual index cards.)




*One of the areas I needed to research for "Heal Thyself."*

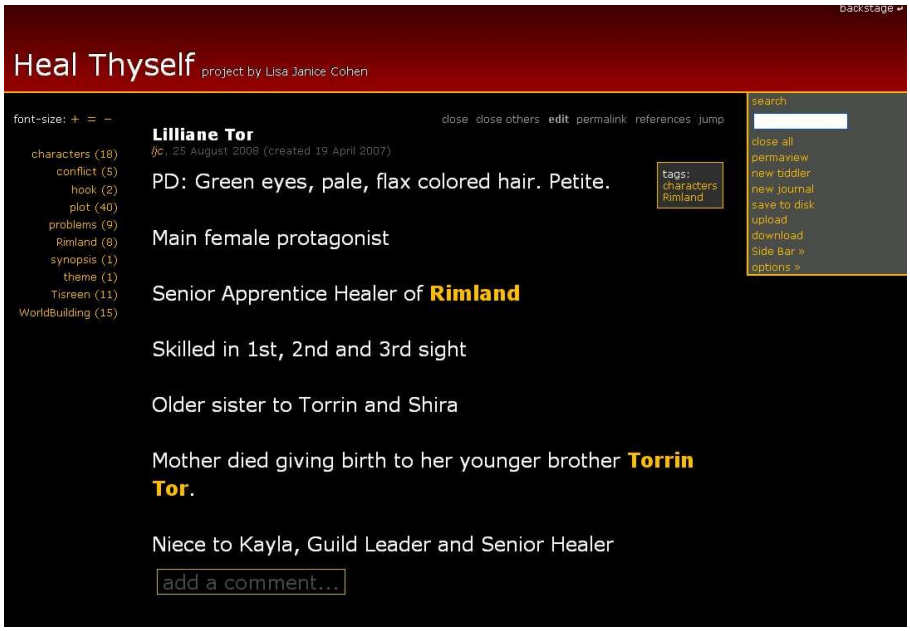
It was much simpler to copy/paste the information into a tagged tiddler along with the URL for the source than to lose the bookmark amongst the hundreds of bookmarks in my firefox setup.

2. Character Development

I created a tiddler for each character, including physical description, role in his/her culture, connection to other characters (linked with wikiWords), history, motivation, etc.

This is a list of all the character tiddlers in my Heal Thyself wiki. It's also helpful to see all my characters' names in one list.

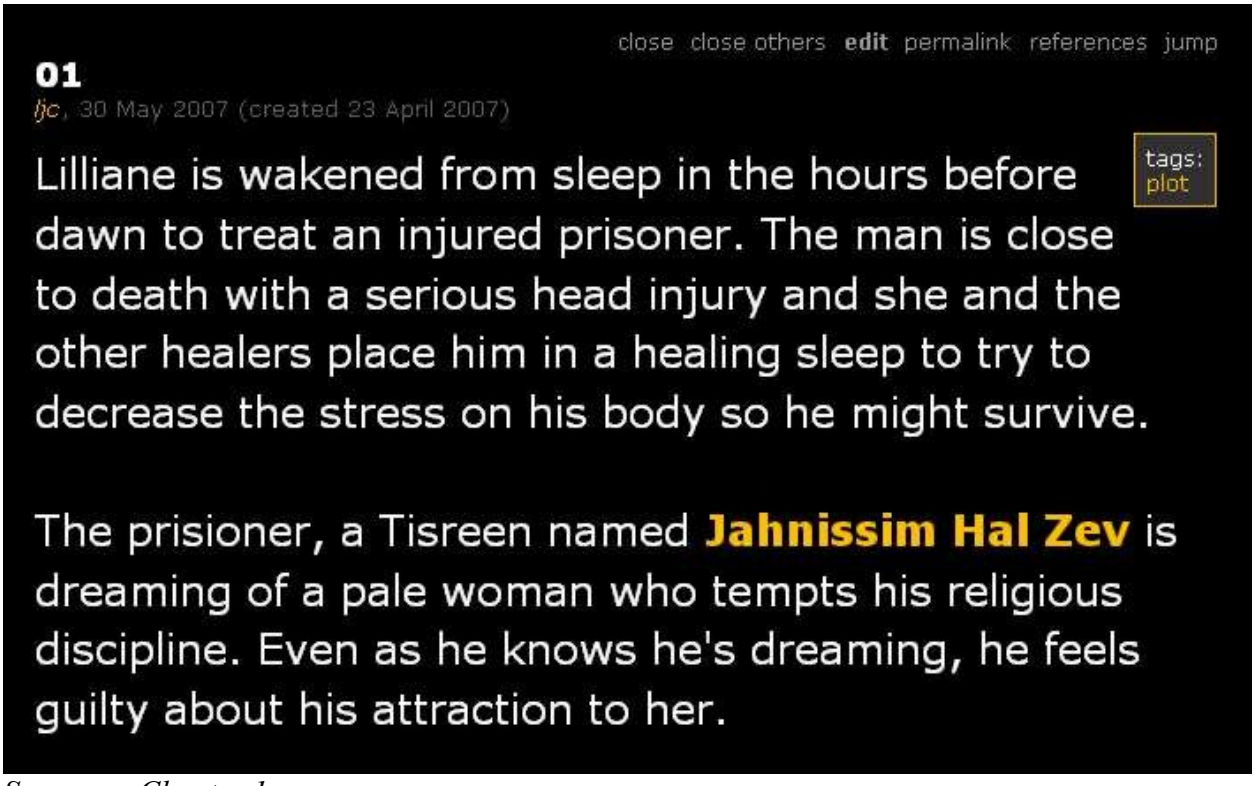
And this is the tiddler for my main female protagonist. Lilliane's entry is not all that extensive, as I only did a minimal to moderate amount of pre-planning with this project. But even approaching this novel more like a 'pantser', I found using the wiki to be invaluable



in keeping me on track.

3. Chapter summaries

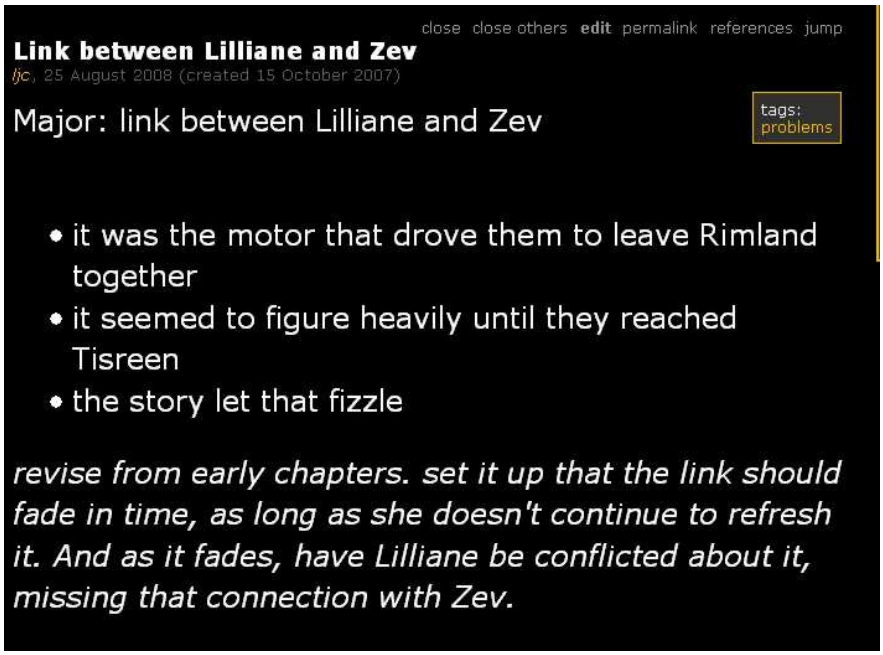
If you summarize each chapter's plot events as you complete the chapter, then it's easier to edit and move plot events around as you can see the tiddlers in any order you wish. In addition, the collection of each chapter's tiddler becomes the first draft of your synopsis.
The plotters out there can plan ahead, writing a extended outlines for future chapters in their own tiddlers and then alter the summaries afterwards to reflect any differences from planning to reality.



*Summary, Chapter 1*

4. Problems

To avoid getting trapped in an endless editing loop, create a tiddler for any problems that crop up as you are writing. Tag the problems as open/closed and when you are ready to edit, you have a list of places you need to address.



*Major problem noted in editing.*

5. Worldbuilding

In "Heal Thyself," I have two main cultures, each with different mores, beliefs, government structure, and language. I use tiddlers tagged 'worldbuilding' and with either 'Tisreen' or 'Rimland' to organize background information.

## Conclusion

TiddlyWikiWrite works for me where index cards do not because of the way I can search, sort and organize the tiddlers. It's far easier for me than to resort to a large corkboard and thumbtacks or multiple word processing files in a folder on my hard drive.

My first novel was organized with a spiral notebook. My second with text files spread across my hard drive. My third and forth were organized using a wiki. I can attest to the fact that writing deep into the novel as well as editing were both significantly easier with the wiki than without it.

TiddlyWikiWrite won't eliminate writer's block, won't cure passive voice, prevent POV violations, or comma splices, but it will keep your information organized in an easy to sort, easy to search format. As with all digital solutions, do make sure to keep your work backed up in multiple places. Happy organizing!

## Appendix

Where to get TiddlyWikiWrite:

TiddlyWikiWrite is free for any interested user to download, use, and alter. You can find it on my website: http://www.ljcohen.net, on this page: http://www.ljcohen.net/Tiddlywiki.htm. To download an empty wiki, click the link at the bottom of the page. In your browser, click 'file/ save as' and select either 'simple html' or 'web page/html only' (depending on your browser). *NOTE: Once downloaded, run it in your browser. You must use the 'save' option on the right hand sidebar of the wiki, not save in your browser file menu.*

There are user instructions provided in 'gettingstarted' and 'help'. You can also email me (link provided in 'aboutme') if you have questions or problems.

About the Author:

Lisa lives in the western suburbs of Boston, MA with her husband, 2 sons, and assorted pets (currently one dog and one rat). When she's not reading, writing, or editing, she's a physical therapist. Lisa is also the head moderator of Wild Poetry Forum. (http://wildpoetryforum.com) She has recently completed her fourth novel and is actively querying for a literary agent. Her writing related blog can be found at: http://www.ljcbluemuse.blogspot.com/.

*This article appeared on the blog: Writer Unboxed, http://writerunboxed.com/, in August of 2008.*