

How to Write a Novel

Writing Help Creating a Fictional World Drafting the Novel Revising the Novel

Creating a Fictional World

Drafting the Novel

Revising the Novel

A novel is a fictional work of narrative prose. Good novels illuminate reality even as they transcend it, allowing readers to find truth and humanity in worlds that are completely fabricated. No matter what type of novel you want to write - literary or commercial, romance or science fiction, a wartime epic or a family drama - you'll need boundless creative energy and a commitment to see you through drafting your novel, and the revision and editing process.

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Writing Help

Sample Short Novel Outline

Sample Short Novel Excerpt

Method 1 of 3: Creating a Fictional World



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1 Get inspired. Writing a novel is a creative process, and you never know when a good idea might come to you. Carry a notebook and a pen so you can jot down ideas wherever you go. You might feel inspired by something you hear on your morning commute, or while daydreaming in a coffee shop. You never know when you'll be inspired, so you should keep your eyes and ears open wherever you go.

- Use your notebook to write fragments - paragraphs, or even sentences, that will become part of a more complete story.
- Think about all of the stories you've been told -- stories passed down from your great-grandmother, a story that fascinated you on the news, or even a ghost story from your childhood that has stuck with you.
- Consider a moment from your childhood or past that stuck with you. It could be the mysterious death of a woman in your town, your old neighbor's obsession with pet ferrets, or a trip you took to London that you can't stop thinking about.
- People say that you should "write what you know." Others believe that you should "write about what you don't know about what you know." Think of something from your own life that has inspired, troubled, or intrigued you -- how can you explore this topic more fully in a novel?

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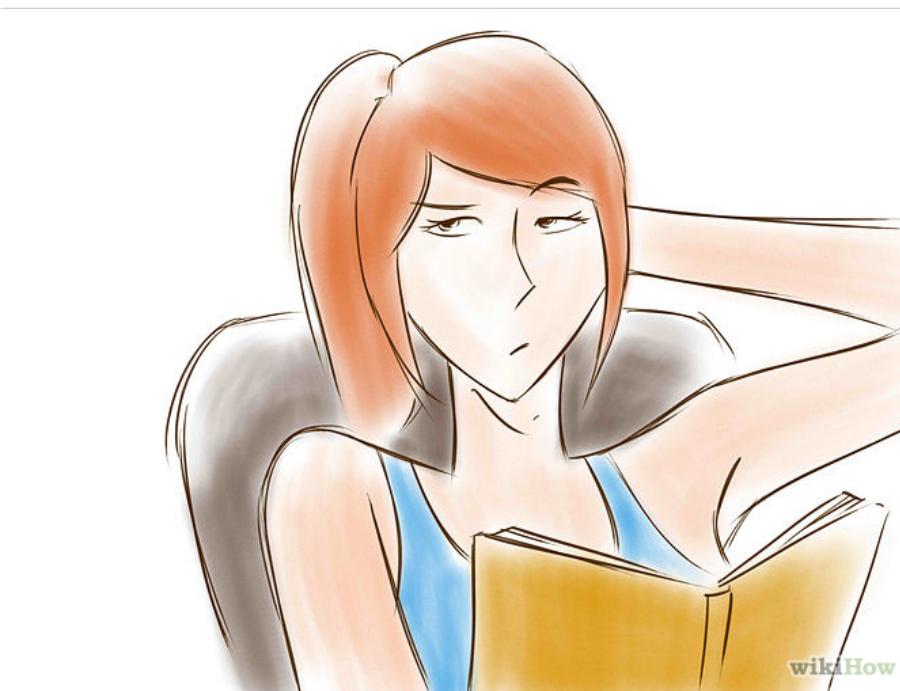
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2 Consider your genre. Not every novel fits neatly into a certain category, but it's helpful to think about your intended genre and audience as you begin planning your work. Read all of the major works that fall into your chosen genre to get a good understanding of how to construct a novel according to the standards of your chosen genre. And if you haven't completely decided on one genre or are working in more than one genre, then it's no problem -- it's more important to be aware of what tradition you're working in than to stick to one specific genre or category. Consider the following options:

- Literary novels are intended to be works of art, complete with deep themes, symbolism, and complex literary devices. Read classic works by the great novelists and refer to helpful lists like *The Guardian's* “100 Greatest Novels of All Time”.
- Commercial novels are intended to entertain audiences and sell a lot of copies. They are divided into many genres, including science fiction, mysteries, thrillers, fantasies, romances, and historical fiction, among others. Many novels in these genres follow predictable formulas and are written in long series.
- There is plenty of crossover between literary and commercial novels. Many writers of science fiction, fantasies, thrillers, and so on create novels just as complex and meaningful as writers of novels that are classically “literary.” Just because a novel sells well does not mean it isn’t a work of art.
- Whatever genre you like or choose to focus on, you should read as many novels within that genre if you haven't already. This will give you a better sense of the tradition you'll be working in -- and how you can add to or challenge that tradition.



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3 Consider your setting. Once you've decided which genre (or genres) to write within, start dreaming up a setting for your novel. This goes beyond the particular city where your characters will dwell; you've got an entire universe to dream up. The setting you create will determine the mood and tone of your novel, and will affect the problems your characters will face. Think about these questions as you sketch out the parameters of the new world you're creating:

- Will it be loosely based on places that are familiar to you in real life?
- Will it be set in the present, or in some other time?
- Will it take place on Earth, or somewhere imaginary?
- Will it be centered in one city or neighborhood, or expanded to a range of locations?
- Will it take place over the course of a month, a year, or decades?
- Will the world be cast in shadows, or will it inspire optimism?



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4 Create your characters. The most important character of your novel will be your protagonist, who should be fleshed out with recognizable personality traits and thought patterns. Protagonists don't necessarily have to be likable, but they are usually relate-able in some way so that readers stay interested in the story. One of the joys of reading fiction is recognizing yourself and living vicariously through your favorite characters.

- Your protagonist and other characters don't have to be likable, but do have to be interesting. Like *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert, the character can be despicable -- as long as he is fascinating.
- Your novel also doesn't have to have just one protagonist. You can have multiple characters that engage the readers, and can even play around with telling the story from multiple points of view.
- Your world should be populated with other characters too. Think about who will interact with your protagonist, serving as either friends or foils.
- You don't have to know exactly who will populate your novel before you begin. As you write, you may find that your real protagonist is actually one of the minor characters you created, or you may find new characters creeping up where you didn't expect them to be.
- Many novelists describe thinking of their characters as real people, asking themselves what the characters would do in a given situation and doing their best to stay "true" to the characters. Your characters should be so well-developed in your mind that it feels natural to help them navigate your fictional world.

5 Visualize the plot. Most novels, regardless of genre, have some sort of conflict. Tension builds until the problem comes to a climax, and then it's resolved in some way. This doesn't mean novels always have happy endings; it's more about providing motivations for the characters' actions and creating a vehicle for change and meaning across the span of your novel.

- There is no set formula for the plot of a perfect novel. Though one traditional approach is to have rising action (building the details and tension in the story), a conflict (the main crisis of the novel), and a resolution (the final outcome of the crisis), this is not the only way to do it.
- You can start with a central conflict and work backwards to show why it matters. For example, a girl can be returning home for her father's funeral, and the reader may not know why this is going to lead to a major conflict momentarily.
- Your novel also doesn't have to neatly "resolve" the conflict. It's okay to leave some loose ends undone.
- Your novel also doesn't have to be linear. It can start in the present can can jump back and forth between the past and the present, or it can start in the past and jump ahead twenty years -- do whatever works best for telling *your* story. For an example of a nonlinear novel, see *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar.
- Read some of your favorite novels and follow the plot arc. See how the novel is put together. This can be even more interesting if the novel isn't linear.

6 Decide on a point of view. Novels are typically written in the third or the first person, though they can also be written in the second person, or in a combination of multiple perspectives. The first person is the "I" voice that is told directly from the point of view of a character; the second person, less commonly used, addresses the readers as "you" and tells the reader exactly what he or she is doing, and the third person describes a character or set of characters from an outside perspective.

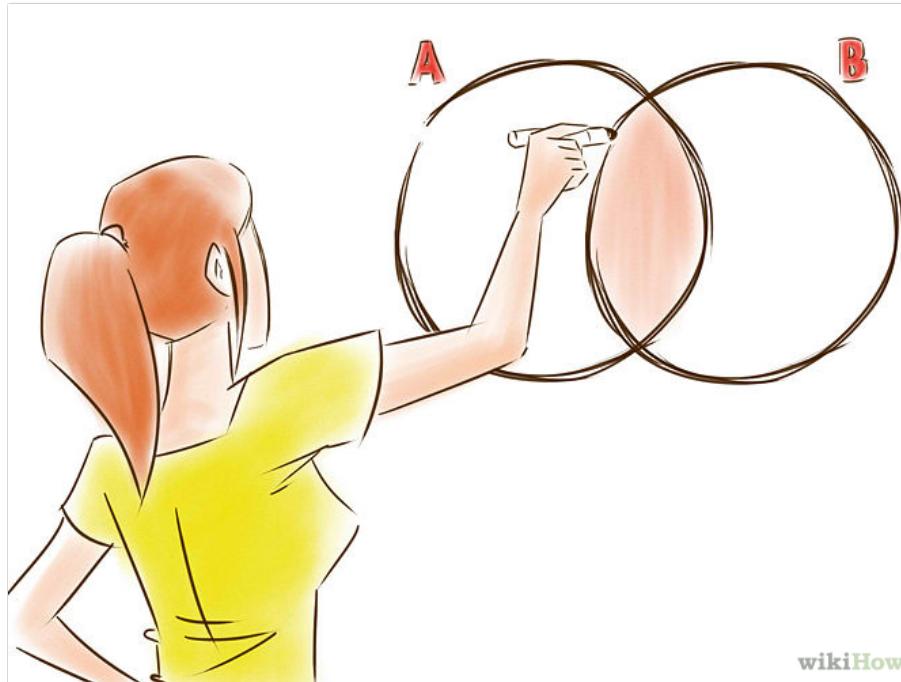
- You don't have to decide on the point of view of the novel before you write the first sentence. In fact, you may write the first chapter -- or even the entire draft of the first novel -- before you have a better idea of whether the novel will sound better in the first person or the third.
- There's no hard and fast rule about what point of view will work better for what type of novel. But if you're writing a panoramic novel with a wide variety of characters, the third person can help you manage all of the characters that populate your novel.

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Consider starting from scratch. Though it's great to start with a genre, plot, characters, and a setting in mind, if you want to write a novel, you shouldn't get too bogged down with all these details first. You can get inspired by something simple -- a historical moment, a snatch of a conversation you hear in the grocery store, or a story your grandmother once told. This can be enough to get you writing and to start creating something from what you already know.

- If you're too worked up about getting the details figured out before you write a draft, you may actually be stifling your own creativity.

Method 2 of 3: Drafting the Novel

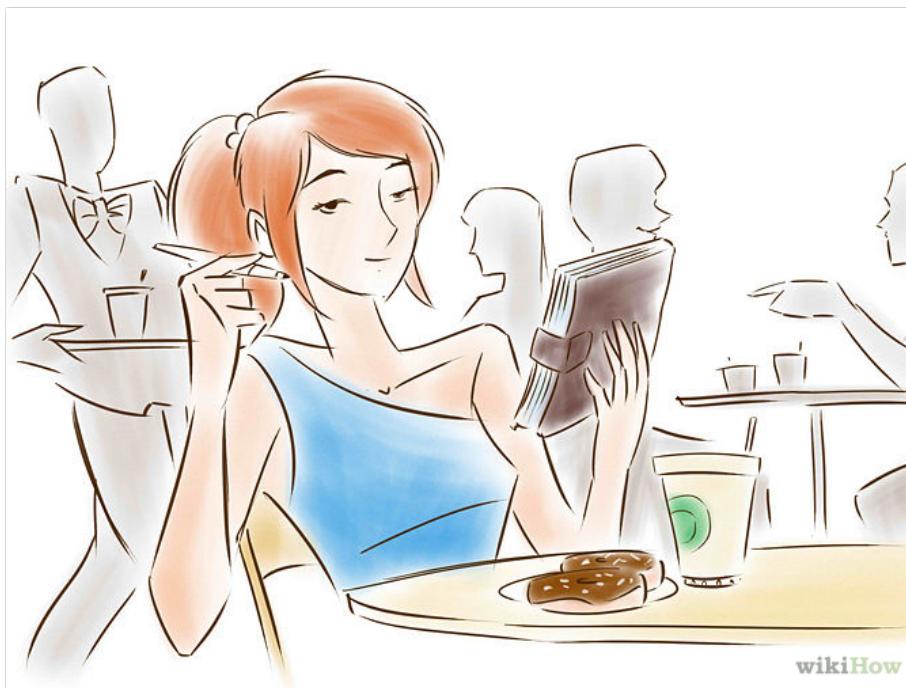
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Consider making an outline. Every novelist has a different method for starting a new novel. Creating an outline can be a good way to map out your ideas and give you small goals to accomplish as you work toward the larger goal of writing an entire book. But if you write from the hip and don't have all the details -- or any of them -- down yet, then you should just let yourself get inspired and write whatever feels right until you latch on to something that really appeals to you.

- Your outline does not have to be linear. You could do a quick sketch of each character's arc, or make a sort of Venn Diagram showing how different

characters' stories will overlap.

- Once you make your outline, don't attempt to follow it exactly. The point is simply to jump-start the writing process with a visual representation of where the story might go. It will certainly change as you begin the writing process.
- Sometimes an outline can actually be *more* helpful after you've completed a draft or two of your novel. This can help you have a better sense of how your novel is structured and can help you see what does or does not fit.



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2 Find a writing routine that works for you. To complete your first draft, you'll need to find a time and place that is conducive to your writing goals. You can write at the same time every morning or evening, write in spurts throughout the day, or write in long bouts three days a week. Whatever your routine may be, you can't just write when you're inspired -- that's a myth. You'll have to treat writing like real work and stick to a regular routine, whether you "feel" like writing on a certain day or not.

- Create a writing space to help you get into a routine. Find a cozy place where you can relax and there are no distractions. Get a good chair to use which won't give you back pains after hours and hours of sitting and writing. You don't write a book in an hour; it takes months, so protect your back.
- Your routine can also include what you need to eat or drink before or during your scheduled writing time. Does coffee make you feel more alert and aware, or too jittery to be productive? Does a big breakfast energize you, or leave you feeling sluggish?



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3 Do your research. The amount or research you need to do will depend on the novel you write. The research you'll need to do to write historical fiction set during the Revolutionary War, for example, will be more copious than the research you may need to write a Young Adult novel inspired by your own experiences in high school. Still, whatever novel you're writing, you'll need to do enough research to make sure that the events in your novel are accurate and believable.

- Make use of the library. You'll be able to find most of the information you need in your local library, and libraries are also excellent places to do some writing.
- Interview people. If you're unsure whether a topic you're writing about rings true, find someone with firsthand knowledge on the subject and ask a lot of questions.
- Part of doing research means reading the other novels that are working in your tradition. For example, if you're writing a novel set in World War II told from a French perspective, read the other novels that are written about this topic. How will your novel be different from the rest?
- Researching can also influence the scope and content of your novel. As you read more about the time period or topic you're writing about, you may find some new details that are completely fascinating -- and which change the entire direction of your novel.



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4 Write a first draft. When you feel ready, sit down and begin writing the first draft of your novel. Don't worry about making the language perfect - no one will read this draft but you. Write without judging yourself. The first draft of a novel does *not* have to be spectacular -- it just has to be done. Don't hold back. The roughest parts of the novel may turn out to be the most compelling in future drafts.

- Make the commitment and write every single day -- or as often as you can. You do need to understand what you're undertaking. Many wonderful writers go unnoticed and unread because their drawers are filled with unfinished novels.
- Set small goals - finishing a chapter, a few pages, or a certain amount of words every few days - to keep yourself motivated.
- You can also set long-term goals -- let's say you're determined to finish the first draft of a novel in one year, or even in six months. Pick an "end date" and stick to it.

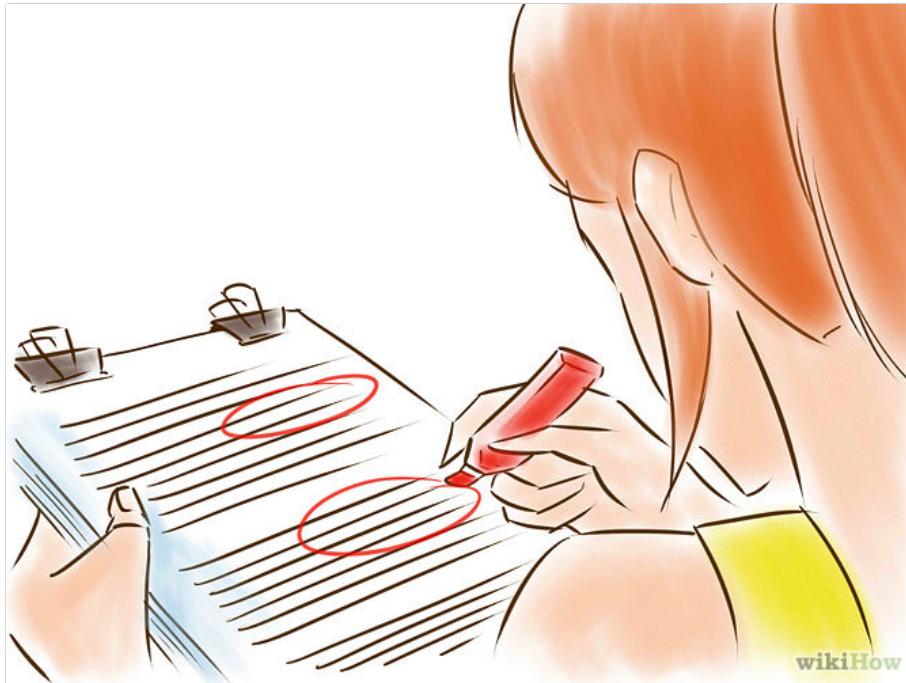
Method 3 of 3: Revising the Novel

1 Write as many drafts of your novel as necessary. You may get lucky and only need to write three drafts to get it right. Or you may write twenty drafts before your novel rings true. The important part is slowing down and figuring out when your work feels done and ready to share with others -- if you share it too early, your creativity will be stifled. Once you've written enough drafts of your novel and feel ready to move on, you can move on to the editing stage.

- After you've written your first draft, take a break from it for a few weeks, or even a few months, and try to sit back and read it as if you were one of your reader. Which parts need more explaining? Which parts are too long and boring?
- A good rule of thumb is that if you find yourself skipping over long chunks of your novel, your readers will, too. How can you make the novel more appealing to them by cutting down or revising these cumbersome parts?
- Each new draft, or new revision, can focus on addressing one or multiple aspects of the novel. For example, you can write one entire new draft focusing

on making the narrator more interesting to readers, another draft that hones in on developing the setting of the events, and a third that fleshes out the central romance in the novel.

- Repeat this process over and over until you have a draft you'd be proud to show other people. It may be months or years before your novel gets to this stage; be patient with yourself.



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2 Practice self-editing. When you have reached the point where you have written a solid draft of your novel, you can start editing your work. Now you can focus on cutting paragraphs or sentences that aren't working, getting rid of any awkward or repetitive phrasing, or just streamlining your prose. There's no need to edit every sentence you write after the first draft -- most of the words will change by the time you've completed a solid draft anyway.

- Print out your novel and read it aloud. Cut or revise anything that just doesn't sound right.
- Don't be too attached to your writing, for example a particular paragraph that just isn't moving the story forward. Challenge yourself to make the right decision. You can always use the paragraph in a different piece.



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3 Show your work to other people. Begin by showing your writing to someone you completely trust, so you can get used to the feeling of having others read your work. Since it isn't always easy to get honest feedback from people who love you and want to spare your feelings, consider getting outside opinions in one or more of the following ways:

- Join a writing workshop. Local colleges and writing centers are great places to find fiction workshops. You'll review other people's writing and receive notes on yours as well.
- Start a writing group. If you know a few other people who are writing novels, arrange to meet with them once a month to share progress and ask for tips.
- Take advice with a grain of salt. If someone tells you a chapter isn't working, get a second opinion before you decide to cut it from your manuscript.
- If you're really committed to finishing a novel, you can consider applying to an M.A. or an M.F.A. program in creative writing. These programs offer a supportive and inviting environment for sharing your work with others. Additionally, they can help motivate you by setting deadlines for completing your work.



4 Consider trying to publish your novel. Many first-time novelists look at their novel as a learning experience that can help them write stronger fiction in the future; however, if you feel very confident about your novel and want to try to take it to a publisher, then there are a number of routes you can take. You can choose to try to publish with a traditional book publishing house, an online e-publisher, or self-publish.

- If you're going the traditional route, it helps to find a literary agent to shop your book around to publishers. Go to WWW.writersmarket.com for a list of agents. You'll be asked to submit a query letter and a synopsis of your manuscript.
- Self-publishing companies vary a lot in quality. Before choosing a company, ask for a few samples so you can see the quality of their paper and printing.
- And if you don't want to go the publishing route, that's not a problem. Congratulate yourself on a job well done and move on to your next creative project.

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- Also remember to make characters have some similar and different opinions with you, and same goes with personality traits.
- "It is better to write for yourself and have no public than to write for the public and have no self." Write your story the way you want. There are markets for all genres, and there will always be a slot for your story if

it's well written and interesting.

- Be sure to also know, research, and learn as much as you can about your novel's setting (like the character's culture, the place he/she is in, the time period, etc).
- Just because you love your story, doesn't mean others will. Let a minimum of 3-4 trustworthy, reliable friends read it before sending it off to a publisher. Remember to copyright your work first even if its not finished.
- If you're stuck on how to move the story forward, imagine one of your characters standing behind you and telling you what they'd do in that situation.
- Invest some time (or a lot), while writing or not, into music-- specifically, songs that would cast a particular emotion, sensation, or short story in your mind. Search within your current collection of CD's/tapes/vinyls/MP3s, as well as explore other genres and moods. Compile a list of songs that would fit your novel/story, kind of like the soundtrack to a movie. This can help give you ideas on how to add emotion to parts of your draft that you find bland or lacking in such. Or you can try write a scene or chapter based on what you feel from hearing a particular song.
- Write about anything you desire or fantasize (interpret that in any way you wish). If you're a sci-fi nut, you probably won't get much fun in battering up a historical fiction work.
- Read lots of books (especially ones similar in genre or relevant to yours in any way); before, during, and after you've written your novel. That will help you in many ways.
- To plow through writer's block, read lots of books, watch plenty of movies/TV, look around in magazines, travel, dine out, go out with friends to the bar or dinner, go to parties, explore the city. You'll never know when inspiration might hit you.
- Write a page a day regardless of how creative you are feeling.

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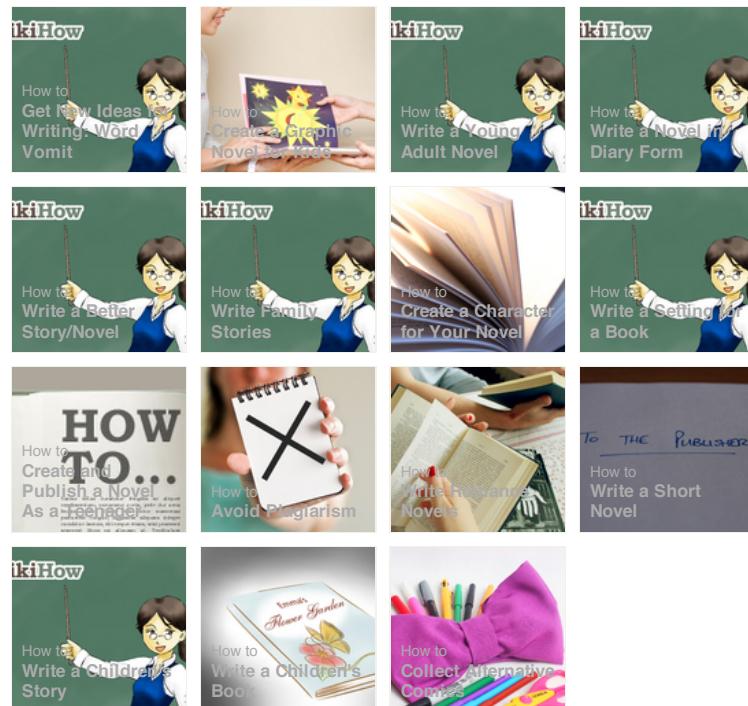
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Sources and Citations

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