

A Map is Not a Journey!

Presenter – Lisa Wilde.

From: Guide to Fiction Writing by Phyllis A. Whitney. 1982

Publisher: The Writer Inc., Boston.

Hello and welcome! This presentation is on how to organize the process of writing. It is based on a method used by the prolific writer Phyllis A. Whitney, and in her words it's "An application of common sense to the organization of your work."

I first came across the Whitney Notebook method back in the early 80's, in an article entitled "A Map is Not a Journey", in an anthology of writing articles. I have long forgotten the name of that anthology, but Ms. Whitney's article has stuck with me through the years. More recently, I have discovered one of the books on writing that she wrote – Guide to Fiction – and while there are some differences between the book and the article (which I believe came first) the basic premise is still there.

Today's session is my take on her method – how I make use of it, including modifications for the modern age. I plan to walk you through the method, with insights from Whitney's book to help us on our way. I

hope that there will be some elements that will be useful to you in your own writing journey!

A How-To Guide in planning out the work of writing a story. From creating a viable work calendar, to story summary, character bios, chronology, and much more – putting your story information down before you start writing is an efficient and effective way of keeping your ducks in a row, with lots of room for spontaneous creativity. It worked for Whitney – maybe it can for you too!

Do you have trouble keeping your interest high after those first few chapters? Maybe your ideas start fizzling out? It's not an uncommon problem for writers – and I don't just mean the dreaded writer's block, but that is part of it. Consider that this could be because you don't know in advance where your story is going. This method could be what you need to help keep your story growing whenever you find yourself running dry.

It is not unusual for writers to keep a folder or a box or whatever to contain all those odds and ends of notes, story ideas, narrative bits and other various pieces of writing. Personally, I've got dozens of journals and Word files for so many different stories that I've lost count. Trying to keep track of it all is cumbersome and inefficient. The Whitney method is just a means to organize it all, and in a way to make it easily accessible as you write. It's a way to not only organize your materials, but your time as well.

In the original article I read, Whitney stated that on average she would produce one adult novel and two young adult novels every year. She didn't start out that way – and in fact didn't sell her first story until she was in her late 30's. But organizing her writing life made a huge difference, both in her output and the quality of her writing as well. Her genre was mostly romantic mysteries – heavy on the mystery – but her method can be applied to any genre. I myself write speculative fiction – which is a catch all term for the fantasy-science fiction type of stuff that I do.



Who is Whitney?

That would be Phyllis A. Whitney – prolific writer of over 70 romantic novels of suspense in both Adult and Young Adult, numerous articles and short stories, and three books on writing, including Guide to Writing Fiction.

She was born in 1903, had her first novel published in 1941, and passed away in 2008. Her last novel was published in 1977. That's 36 years of writing!

In that article of hers that I read, she stated that on average she wrote 1 adult mystery and 2 young adult mysteries every year. That was after she got into her groove, and she credited her Notebook Method as how she did that. She said that by allowing herself sufficient time for planning that she increased both her output and the quality of what she wrote.

Whitney wrote more than seventy novels, won an [Edgar Award](#) from the [Mystery Writers of America](#) for Best Juvenile novel twice, as well as [Grand Master Award](#) for lifetime achievement. She also received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Romance Writers of America, and the Malice Domestic Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Agatha Awards. She taught classes on writing for twelve years.

Some basic Whitney advice on writing:

- Work Discipline is the most important habit of all to develop!
- Choose a stretch of time that you can spend regularly on writing, whether it's an hour a day or three or eight. Find a period that is comfortable and possible for you!
- Make sure this time period is as dedicated as possible! And devoted **ONLY** to the business of writing!

This book is full of good, solid advice for new writers, and is an excellent resource for any writer. At the start of the book, she talks about this. No new ideas here – and it's all plain common sense. Developing your Work Discipline is key, and if you aren't able to develop that, then no method of organization is going to help much.

It doesn't matter how much time each day you can spend on writing – just that you do it! Whether it's one hour or eight – block off the time that you are going to write. If you work 9 to 5, don't schedule your writing period from 1-3 – unless you have a really understanding boss! I'm not going to go into details about how or why you need to do this – you've probably heard it a dozen times before.

So let's assume you have your designated writing period. Now you have to stick to it. It's ridiculously easy to get sidetracked by life happening around you. Whether it's something your kids need, or incoming emails,

or whatever interrupts you – you must stay firm! Whatever it is, deal with it when your writing time is over for the day. Again – how to cope and manage this kind of thing falls under Time Management, but Whitney believed this was important enough to mention in her book, so I have mentioned it as well.

So now let's assume that your spouse and your kids and the dog are all trained not to disturb you while you are writing (cat might be a bit harder to convince). Let's talk about what to do with this time you have carved out for writing. And remember – this time can be used for any aspect of your process.

Whitney's Notebook Method

What is it exactly?

Basically, it's a way to organize your ideas so that they are easy to access and keep track of them.

Whitney used a large binder, divided into sections, and called it her "notebook". Right from the glimmer of an idea to the very end, she used her notebook to contain and organize all the little details that go into the writing of her book. Each story got its own notebook, although some overlap did happen occasionally. But when she was working on two or three stories at a time, in various stages of writing and revision, it was crucial to keeping everything straight.

The binder had 12 sections, which were divided into three major parts. Over her many years as a writer, she had streamlined things in a manner that worked for her, but she was quick to point out that any writer interested in using her method should feel free to modify and change things up to suit their own needs. So what I'll be going through with you today, is my version of her method. As I go through it, I will share the advice and insights that she had, because she was a wise lady and really knew her stuff!

Whitney's point was that writing is only part of the whole process of creating a novel. Planning, plotting, researching, editing, revising – they're all important aspects of the job of writing. You can schedule when you will be doing these aspects, but if a dry spell hits you while you are "done" with planning and have moved on to writing – well, you can also go back to the Notebook and revisit any of these areas. She found that doing so was often enough to jump start her creativity and she'd be able to get back on track.

The Notebook

Part 1 Preliminary Sections	Part 2 “Heart of the Matter”	Part 3 Subsidiary Sections
Calendar	Characters	To Be Checked
Story Summary	Outline	Background
Problem	Plotting & Development	Research & Bibliography
Situation & Theme	Chronology	Misc Notes

So these are my 12 Sections, which differs only slightly from what Whitney used. I will be going through each in more detail, but this is them in a nutshell. The first group involves setting up your work calendar, and identifying the main elements of your story. The second group is where you begin the nitty gritty of your planning and plotting – starting with your cast of Characters, proceeding through the Outline process in all its permutations, and finally setting the Chronology of your story. The last group includes those things that potentially come up while you are actually writing, as well as where to put the research you do.

Always remember – if at any time during your planning process the itch to write strikes, don’t forcibly ignore it because you are in the middle of doing a Timeline! Write for pete’s sake! You can always go back and finish the Timeline after you’ve gotten that burst of inspiration down on paper or into the computer.

At some point you'll feel you have put in enough time and effort in the planning stage and are ready to start writing – so go ahead and do so! If you run dry later that's fine. Just go back to the Notebook and see what you can re-kindle by reviewing things Section by Section.

How I Do It

- Multi-Media Approach
 - Binder – with Dividers and blank paper
 - iPad Mini – Word document for each section (good for planning on the go)
 - Storyboard – to better Visualize planning and plotting

Set up the Notebook first, with blank paper in each Section ready to receive any ideas that pop into your mind. Then proceed methodically through each section as you begin your planning process. I print off a Cover page for each Section, which includes the description of what that Section contains.

The iPad Mini – can print off full size pages, to be inserted into the binder.

The Storyboard – visualization at my fingertips.

Calendar

Plan on a six month work schedule:

- ★ two months for plotting
- ★ two months to write first draft
- ★ one month for revision
- ★ one month for revision after an outside opinion has been given.

The first section in the Notebook for both of us was the Calendar. This is the work schedule that she used – and it's a good rule of thumb. It's also not written in stone – and she was quick to point out that it was just a basic guideline. Need longer for the first draft? Fine. Less time for the second revision? Ok dokey! Whatever works for you, and the story itself.

And this is the schedule that worked for her – chances are that it won't work for you at all. So figure out what will. I start out with the best intentions of following this schedule, but more often than naught I have to make some adjustments. And I am nowhere near as steady or prolific as Ms. Whitney. But it's not about matching what she did. It's about finding your own rhythm.

Date Started:		Title Chosen:	
Plotting			
Begun:		Finished:	
First Draft			
Started:	Est Finished:	Actual Finished:	
Revisions			
1 st Started:	1 st Est Finished:	1 st Actual Finished:	
2 nd Started:	2 nd Est Finished:	2 nd Actual Finished:	
Est # of Chapters:	aprox pgs/chapter:	total est pgs:	
Actual # of Chapters:		Total pgs:	

This is the next page in the Calendar section. Sorry the slide is so tightly spaced – you would of course space it however you like. We use this to track our progress

At the top of the page you enter the date you started, and once a title has been picked you put that opposite. Under Plotting, the start and end dates (although that date is fairly arbitrary as until you type The End you might never be quite finished!). Then I record when I start the first draft, an estimated finished date, and the actual finished date. Next are the Revisions – assuming you only do the two. And then at the bottom – guesstimate how many chapters, how many pages in each chapter and therefore how many estimated total pages. And finally, the actual numbers.

Work Calendar

Date	Aprox Words To Be Written	Actual Words Written	Page Count	Notes
June		8000		
July 1-9	3600	3000		
July 10				
July 11				
July 12				
July 13				
July 14				
July 15				

The last part of the Calendar section is an actual Work Calendar. Go out about two weeks – then just keep adding to it.

Recording your work in this way – or a similar way – and in a place that's in a place not easily ignored – even if it's just to record your daily progress – can actually be a motivational tool.

Had a dry day? That's fine. Maybe you spent it working on a bio of a minor character – and worked out how to make him not so minor after all. Record it. Got interrupted by a kid school emergency? Record that too.

Let's get started, shall we?

Now what I'm going to do next is continue to go through the sections of the Notebook, but I thought that instead of simply telling you what each category was, I'd also demonstrate each of them, in a way that will hopefully have meaning for everyone. Not only am I going to be using an actual story as an example, I'll also show you how I set up a working Storyboard as well.

As for the story - it's not a "real" story though. It's a re-telling of Little Red Riding Hood. This version started life as an example that Ilona Andrews was using to demonstrate how she does an Outline (in response to a request someone posted to her blog). She chose Riding Hood, and as it's been done and re-done a gazillion times, she said that what she was creating was for the purpose of responding to that request only. She said "There are only so many way you can spin this old story and many people have done it, so I claim no rights to this" And stated that as it was public domain, so would this "new version", and readers were free to do with it what they

will. So I've taken it, re-purposed it, and expanded it as needed.

So let's start! First – I have the Storyboard all ready to go, with my headings strategically placed.

Story Summary

- in brief, a general rundown of the story's plot.

In my Notebook, I like to put the Story Summary after the Calendar section. Don't forget – you can arrange your Notebook however you want in whatever way works best and makes sense to you. I generally have an idea of what I'm going to be writing about – so having the summary early in the Notebook makes sense to me.

So the Summary of our story.

- How Red Riding Hood and the Wolf meet, and while working together to deal with an evil stalking their village, get to be more than just reluctant allies, they become close friends.

OK. Simple enough. And then I would jot this down on an index card and tack it to the storyboard. I would also have the Work Calendar on the storyboard– although as it's also in the binder if I need more space, the calendar is the first to be pulled off the storyboard.

Problem

- **What is it?**
- **How does it concern the characters?**
- **All characters? What are their motives?**
- **Actions taken?**
- **Consequences?**

Next – we have the Problem. And you want to be specific and as detailed as you can.

- Something evil in the woods has been brutally killing animals. People are getting quite scared – and now two girls are missing.
- Red: She is a little concerned, but thinks the two girls were just foolish and got lost. She's very familiar with the woods, and doesn't plan on letting scary stories keep her out of it.
- Ranulf: He's seen the dead animals, and although there's no trace of the missing girls, he's quite worried. Something is really wrong here. When he sees Red going into the woods alone, he decides to follow and protect her if necessary.

Add it to an index card – and put it on the board – under the Story Summary. You can also use labels that you print off on your computer and stick to your index card – if you don't like doing writing it out by hand. Possibly easier to read!!!

Situation and Theme

- **Background**
- **What are you trying to say, and why**

Whitney didn't use Story Summary and Problem as separate sections – they were wrapped into this one. She did it that way simply to save on space, and to not have too many divisions in her Notebook. However, I like keeping them separate.

- This is the story of two outcast weirdos finding each other, and learning to trust someone other than themselves.
- Background – both Red and Ranulf believe that they only have themselves to rely on. Red at least has her grandmother, and her parents, but they’ve raised her to be independent. But lately, she really feels like she doesn’t fit in, at home and definitely not in the village. As for Ranulf - he had a falling out with his own parents, and has learned to be on his own, trusting no one but himself. He channels the territorial urges he has into a strong protective streak. He will also feel pretty guilty over not realizing something awful was happening.

And this is what my little story is about. The index card will be added to the Storyboard in its appropriate place.

Characters

The next section I feel is the most important is Characters. My stories often start with a character or two and possibly a situation as well. I like reading character-driven stories, and those are what I tend to write as well.

Characters

- **List the Characters in the story, with a brief description**

So – like the slide says – you would start listing the Characters in the story, starting with a brief description, which you will expand upon later. For each character, also jot their name down on an index card – maybe colour coded in some way.

Character List

- Red Riding Hood – our female protagonist – rebellious young woman
- Ranulf – our male protagonist - a hunter. Also a werewolf
- Grandmother Natalie – Red's grandma. A white witch
- Gary – a woodsman. Also a psycho, who has been brutally killing forest animals

So these are the main characters of our story. Each one gets a page of their own in the Notebook, as well as an index card.

Characters

- **List the Characters in the story, with a brief description**
- **Do complete sketches of each character, and how each fits into the story. Include motivations, goals, fears – whatever makes each character tick.**

Now it's time to expand on those brief descriptions for each character. Be as complete as you can, although there's nothing wrong with coming back to whoever you don't quite have a feel for yet.

Red

- Red is a young woman living with her parents in a cottage on the outskirts of a village on the edge of a dark forest. She often wears a red cape that her grandmother gave her when she was young, because grandmother told her if she was ever in trouble, it would help her. She knows it's magic, because even though she was very young when she got it, it still fits her perfectly even though she is now an adult.
- She is often headstrong and impetuous, and has little patience for foolishness or "girly" things. She is used to fending for herself, and has no fear of the woods, although she respects it.

So this could be the beginning of Red's Character notes.

Ranulf

- Ranulf is a young man living in a hut in the forest, near the village. He tends to keep to himself, and as a result people think he's a bit odd. But he is a skilled hunter, and they tolerate him for the game and skins he brings in to the village.
- Ranulf's secret is that he is actually a werewolf. But he knows that people are scared of things they don't understand, and this is why he keeps to himself. He is perfectly in control of himself in either form, so he knows he is no danger to anyone.
- Without a pack of his own, he tends to think of the village and forest and everything in it as his pack to protect and watch over. He is incredibly lonely, but is resigned to his lot in life.

And Ranulf. Notice how I mention a secret? Having a secret is a fairly standard thing to add to a character's arc. And it's a good way to add tension and conflict, both internal and external.

Grandmother Natalie

- Red's grandmother also lives in the woods, in a snug little cottage that in no way resembles a Gingerbread House. She is, however, a witch, although most people don't realize that. Red and her parents know, but to most other people Natalie is the one they come to for harmless herbal remedies and what not.
- She spends a lot of time gathering herbs and plants which are the ingredients for her potions and concoctions – not all of which are mundane.
- She too is concerned about the evil lurking in the woods. She knows about Ranulf and his secret – although he doesn't know that she knows – but she knows he's not the source of the evil, even though she's a bit wary of him. He is a werewolf, afterall.

And the Grandmother.

Gary

- Gary is a woodsman who lives in the village. He's often in the woods chopping wood and felling trees, which he sells as firewood and lumber to the villagers.
- Gary's secret is that he is a psychopath. He likes to hurt things, and has been catching and killing animals for a long time. Lately, he's started mutilating them too.
- The missing girls are captive in a cave, and when he sees Red going into the woods alone, he decides to add her to his collection.

And good ol' Gary. Who, as it turns out, is our villain.

Characters

- 1. List the Characters in the story, with a brief description**
- 2. Do complete sketches of each character, and how each fits into the story. Include motivations, goals, fears – whatever makes each character tick.**
- 3. Name list. As you develop your character list, keep a list of just names – first and last, and/or initials if relevant. To avoid overuse of alliteration when naming characters!**

Point # 3 is actually a good thing to do, especially if you've got a large cast, and you want to avoid the Lana Lang-Lex Luther-Lois Lane syndrome. Jot the names down and every time you name a new character check to make sure you've chosen a good, unique name. This doesn't need to go on the Storyboard

Outline

This is the section that really starts roughing out your story. Everything up until now has been part of the planning. Now it's time to PLOT.

Outline

- **Begin with chapter numbers and fill in a rough sequence of events. Can be quite arbitrary, and subject to change – this is the initial fleshing out of the story's plot and action.**

So for the Storyboard I will do the Chapter headings on the smaller index cards, then add the rough sequence of events where I think they should happen., with each Action and Plot Point getting its own index card. In the notebook, each Chapter will get its own section, and I will jot down everything that happens – all the Action, as well as all the Plot Points. If there's a lot that happens in a chapter I might even plot out a story structure graph, just to see what it looks like. Although of course I have my Storyboard to look at as well.

Outline

- **Begin with chapter numbers and fill in a rough sequence of events. Can be quite arbitrary, and subject to change – this is the initial fleshing out of the story's plot and action.**
- **Indicate where and when each character is introduced.**

Again – this can be rough. Feel free to move things around as you see fit. And the best way to indicate where each character makes their entrance? You can use coloured string, or a special Sticky Note, or whatever draws your attention to that point on the board. For the Notebook, I would also do a cross reference over to the Character's page to indicate with chapter and which scene they first appear in, and perhaps even what was happening in that scene.

Outline

- **Begin with chapter numbers and fill in a rough sequence of events. Can be quite arbitrary, and subject to change – this is the initial fleshing out of the story's plot and action.**
- **Indicate where and when each character is introduced.**
- **Make detailed outlines of the action, after the first step has fleshed things out – starting with the early chapters – by visualizing the action as *scenes* within each chapter.**

And more index cards. Colour code them to indicate type of action. If you like to track the beats in your story, you can mark them out in this section.

Chronology

Again – a useful tool to track elements of your story. And by Chronology, this is the timeline of your STORY, not real life!

Chronology

- **Timeline:** include Dates of historical events with bearing on story, as well as character relevant dates (ie: birthdates, etc).

So start with the Timeline.

Chronology

- **Timeline:** include Dates of historical events with bearing on story, as well as character relevant dates (ie: birthdates, etc).
- **Indicate on the Timeline the actual time sequence of the story's action as it develops per chapter.**

Then add to your timeline chapter by chapter

Chronology

- **Timeline:** include Dates of historical events with bearing on story, as well as character relevant dates (ie: birthdates, etc).
- **Indicate on the Timeline the actual time sequence of the story's action as it develops per chapter.**
- **Record Chapter # of pages, and starting and ending page #**

There are a couple of ways to do this last bit.

First – in the binder, as a separate page. It's a way to track length. Is Chapter Four twice as long as any other chapter? Maybe it needs to be split up. And so on.

Second – on the Storyboard. Just jot it down on your Chapter headings in the Outline section.

Plotting & Development

- **This is where you start collecting your ideas – random ideas, plot threads, character bits - whatever jumps into your head. Can be a sentence or two, or several pages. Could be handy to develop an indexing system for easy referral as you get into the writing.**
- **changes in the plot, situation, characters or any other development that crop up during the writing and plotting phases**

In Whitney's Notebook, this section was just called Plotting, and was the largest section. She would use this to record every little thing that came to her, and in her Notebook it came before the Outline. She rarely started actually writing until after she'd (mostly) filled the Plotting section, and used that to develop the chapter by chapter Outline.

I use this section to jot down developments that occur to me while I am writing. I like getting a sense of what's going on in each Chapter before I start writing, and thus I put Outline ahead of this section. As for the Storyboard – when I put down a plot development and put it over here – then I can also use the string to link it to the chapter where I think it should go.

And by the way – no matter how diligent you like to be about filling all your sections, if the urge to start writing hits you – then Write!!!! The Notebook will still be there to go back to. It's particularly useful as a way

to stave off the dreaded writers block. Inspiration dries up? Go back to the Notebook – read over each section. Check what you had loosely planned for the upcoming chapters, and so on.

Red's cloak

- It is magic. Among other things it can turn her invisible if she wills it. Only she doesn't know that yet.

So - a plot development. Not a Plot Point, however, as it's not something that makes her "change direction" in any way.

To Be Checked

- To keep track of all factual questions that need to be answered
- notes while writing that pertain to another (possibly earlier) chapter, to be considered for the revision phase
- to keep track of any errors, irrelevancies or inconsistencies, so they can be fixed in revision

These next sections are the last in the binder. They're all pretty self explanatory. This one I'd put on the storyboard, but it doesn't have to go there. It can stay in the binder – just don't forget about it!

Background

- **Real life places, situations, people, etc that may be used.**
- **Detailed information about a created place that doesn't necessarily appear in the story.**

For the Riding Hood story, I'd look up info on Bavarian villages in the middle ages. You want to sketch out as complete a picture of your setting as possible. Includes maps and town layouts, with distances between key places in the story.

Most of this will stay in the binder, but you could always have a place to put it on the Storyboard if you think you'll need it. And have room!

Research and Bibliography

- **Details and particulars**
- **To keep track of information sources. Clippings, etc can be kept here.**

Whitney separated these two, but then as she wrote mysteries that were often set in exotic locations, she had lots of research to do. She'd clip articles from newspapers and magazines. She'd also buy non-fiction books that looked particularly interesting to her, and just hang onto them until she needed them for something in a future book, so she'd also maintain a small library of reference materials as well. And being the organized lady that she was – she'd index it all so she knew how to track down what she needed when she needed it.

Her Bibliography section was used, not just to keep track of the reference materials, but to remind her of where she'd found a piece of research, in case she ever needed to go back to it. I combined these two, and even though my writing is spec fic – and much of it made up – there is still a need to do research. So, for Red's story – I'd call it Into the Woods, except that title's taken – I might research techniques on setting traps, or curing furs, or gathering herbs, etc.

Notes and Misc

- **outside opinions, etc.**

My last section. Again, mostly just in the Binder, rather than the Storyboard.

Names

- A list of Names that you come across that look and/or sound interesting to you, for future use.
- Random Name Generator (real world names):
 - www.fakenamegenerator.com
 - Gives you the full name, a fake address, fake phone number, etc
 - You can specify country of origin, as well as ethnicity
- Fantasy Name Generator
 - www.fantasynamgenerators.com
 - Generates names based on hundreds of various categories

My list of Names is completely separate from my Notebooks. But again, it's a useful tool.

And here are a couple of online random name generators – a real world name one as well as a Fantasy one.

How Whitney did it	How I do it
Calendar	Calendar
Titles	Story Summary
Chronology	Problem
Theme & Situation	Situation & Theme
Plotting	Characters
Characters	Outline
Outline	Chronology
To Be Checked	Plotting & Development
Research	To Be Checked
Bibliography	Background
Background	Research & Bibliography
Names	Misc Notes etc

In case you were wondering what the differences were between what Whitney said in her book, and how I do it – this is it. Not really that great a difference.

Remember – Whitney always urged writers to find their own way, saying there was no one right way of Writing, or planning. It's whatever worked best for you. She would change up her own method as the need arose – she called the various section headings, and their placement in the binder, arbitrary and subject to change.

Some final words from Whitney

- “A good book isn't written, it's rewritten.”
- “Problem, purpose, conflict, goal. Use them. Think about them while you are in the planning phase of your novel; keep these elements at the back of your mind to guide you while you write. When you have written a scene, make sure they are all there, or that if one or another is missing, it is intentional and the effect is what you want.”
- “You must want to *enough*. Enough to take all the rejections, enough to pay the price of disappointment and discouragement while you are learning. Like any other artist you must learn your craft—then you can add all the genius you like.”

Thank you all. I hope I gave you some food for thought.