



## Lesson 3 | Setting Writing Goals

By S. D. Howard.

Ah, the sweet smell of writing goals. One of the most important aspects to writing a story, and sadly, one newer authors avoid like the plague. Why? Because of expectations.

Having goals is a good thing, but if you don't have the right mindset about those expectations, you end up feeling like a failure, and we all know how much fun *that* is. That aside, the biggest mistake authors make is setting **unrealistic** goals for themselves. It's do or die. All or nothing.

Thankfully, we can make corrections to that line of thinking and make it more attainable through setting smaller goals that are easier to reach, thus making your brain happy. Better than throwing it off the emotional precipice, right?

### **Set a firm writing schedule (includes firm deadline)**

A lot of authors hate this with a burning passion like the sun, but there really is something to be said about it (hence me talking about the topic). You see, if you have no set writing schedule, you will typically write "when the Muse hits."

The problem is she's a fickle thing, and when she decides to show up after whatever siesta she's been on, it's with a different story. Not very helpful. So, if we cannot rely on the Muse to inspire us, and she's inconsistent, perhaps the problem is us and how seriously we take writing.

Now, you have authors like Stephen King who talk about writing 500 words per day, which is great. Amazing. Good for him.

Anyway, not everyone can do that. I've worked with CEO's, stay-at-home moms, college students, and other who don't have a ton of time because they have lives. Busy lives at that! So, what works for Stephen King won't work for others, but we still try to do it his way.

How about learning to do it *your way*?

I'm going to take you through the steps you need to take in order to build your writing schedule, and I promise you if you do it and use it (based on how *you* write), you will not only see improvement, but you'll also write faster. How do I know? Because I've had dozens of authors do that very thing and they all finished their first drafts in 3.5 months on average.

Let's dance.

## Total Word Count

The first step in setting your goals and establishing your writing schedule is figuring out what the estimated size of your book will be or what you want it to be. And before you say, "Stephen, you're stifling my creative expression!" let's take a step back and look at the bigger picture.

As a developmental editor, do you know the biggest issue I found in the books I worked on? They were **over-written**. Most of time I was having to point out where to cut thing because it was all fluff and filler that didn't need to be there. This happens when authors just start writing without an end in mind and they think they need to hit some mystical "ending" where everything falls into place.

Rubbish.

Set a dang word goal!

When I sat down to write my novel, I picked 80k words as my goal because I knew that is the bottom of the industry standard for YA Fantasy. Do you know what the industry standard is for your book? Do you know what the range is?

Take 5 minutes and do some research into what you're writing. What is the average word count range for it?

Now that you have a better idea of the word count ranges, you need to determine the size *you* want your book to be. This isn't talking about all the books you will ever write, just this one

you're currently working on. How do you know? Well, I'm going to give you a fun little writing hack I discovered during the revisions process.

*Note: I'm going to use 80k for reference through the rest of these examples, but you will need to determine for yourself what makes the most sense for your book*

## Acts

You've probably heard of a 3-Act structure before, especially if you've done screenplays. Many authors use this when writing their books because it gives you a simple Beginning, Middle, and End. The problem I found when writing my book and aiming for 80k words was it didn't fit right. Where my chapters transitioned from one Act to another didn't flow right. So I simply added another Act, and boom! Problem solved!

Here's why:

1 Act = 10 chapters

If we're working with 80k words, it means your "middle" will be around chapter 20. I say around that point because depending on the story, you can have that "middle" point begin anywhere from chapters 18-23. It also means you can set up your "transition chapters" (10, 20, 30, for example) to help launch you into the next Act.

Doing this helps you pace your story as well because you can see when you need to change tone, or if certain events need to take place before the end. Not to mention giving you space to drop plot-bombs.

This works for both Fiction and Non-Fiction because it helps form the structure of the book. Remember, we're **building a book** now, not just writing one. The best part is you can do this for whatever length novel you're doing. You simply add 1 Act per 10 chapters in your outline, regardless of if you fill up that final act.

*Ex: You have 45 chapters in your book. Act 4 would be chapters 31-40, so you would add chapters 41-45 in Act 5.*

I want you to take 10 minutes and think through how you might break down your story into Acts and how many you would need to do it. I'll leave plenty of space for notes below.

## Chapter word count

We're going to further break down our book. We started by actually giving ourselves a limited, then we broke that limit down into Acts so we could see how many chapters would/could fit into the book. Now, we're going to see if our estimate for chapters was correct.

Is there a perfect word count for a chapter? In my opinion, yes. It's between 1500 and 3500 words. Thanks for coming to my TED Talk.

But really, that's the sweet spot and for good reason: It is based on read time.

Have you ever read *The Lord of the Rings*? Do you remember reading "The Counsel of Elrond" and wondering why it seemed to go on forever? That's because it did. If there is a chapter I'm likely to pause in, it's that one, but we don't want readers to pause while reading our book. We want them to *keep reading*. To do this, we need to understand how long it takes to get through a chapter.

You may remember my recommendation for Grammarly in Lesson 2 and why I like it: it gives me the read time. Once you learn to break things down, you won't need to plug it into Grammarly every time because you'll know it by heart. Here's an example:

1500 words = 7min (roughly)  
2500 words = 10min (roughly)  
3500 words = 15min (roughly)

This isn't a hard rule, but the general one based on my experience with Grammarly. With this in mind, we want to find what our average word count per chapter comes out to so we know what the estimated read time will be. Here's how to do that:

**80,000 words/ by the number of chapters you have = average word count per chapter.**

For *The City of Snow & Stars*, this is how it broke down:

**80,000 words / 40 chapters = 2,000 words per chapter on average.**

This is only the *average per chapter*, not what the chapters will come out to every single time. You will write chapters above/below that, but in the end, this is close to what your average will look like.

Take a moment to do the math on your story to see what your average word count is below.

I want to take a moment and address why I put the limit at 3500 words because I've run into authors who balk at it, saying it would create more chapters. To which I respond, "Yeah. Your point?"

This is because readers don't care how many chapters there are if *they are making progress* through the book.

"But you'll spend several chapters in the same area!" they cry.

Yup, also doesn't matter because the reader is moving through the book. If you throw in a Point of View switch in one of those "several chapters" and give a different look at the same thing, you're making it more dynamic, and ***the reader is making progress in the book***. Tell me, which is more appealing to you:

Book A has a chapter that takes you 30mins to work through

or

Book B that has shorter chapters, allowing you to get through 2-3 in the same time?

I recommend 3500 words max for a chapter because, again, we're looking at the reading time of about 15 minutes. I've seen chapters as long as 5000 words, and it was a *slog* to get through. I kept looking ahead to see when the chapter ended. You don't want your reader doing the same thing.

The other reason is because if they pause and set the book down in the middle of that long chapter, then get busy or distracted, they face the daunting task of picking back up where they left off... only they don't remember what happened. I've done this a few times with books, and it sucks.

Alright, we've now come to the bread and butter of goal setting. Are you ready?

## Word per hour

This is where authors I've worked with found success. Sure, the other stuff is important, but this is where you *write*. More than that, this is where you learn how to create writing goals that are realistic, achievable, and it doesn't matter what your schedule looks like; you'll know when to write and how much you can write.

To do this, you need to sit down for 1-hour and write. It's best if you are working on your story, but it could be a newsletter, a blog post, anything you think will take at least an hour to work on. There is no right or wrong at this point.

Take 60 minutes, either now or later, when you know you have the time, and write. Make sure to time yourself.

Assuming you did it, here's the breakdown of what it could look like:

**Computer:** 579 words

**Notebook:** 4 pages = around 250-300 words (depends on the size of notebook)

Remember, there is no right or wrong with these numbers, so don't get in your head about it. This is a tool to help you understand how you write, which will help you *when* you write. And this likely doesn't show your best day. You know there are times when you write faster, but that's not what you want to use for your average. The numbers don't lie here. Go with what you get.

Alright, so you have a number, let us say 579, and you're needing to apply that to your book and all the prep work you've done up to this point. Here's how we put it all together:

**Total Word Count:** 80,000

**Acts:** 4

**Chapters:** 40

**Chapter word count ave:** 2000

**Words per hour:** 579

We take the 2000 average and divide that by our words per hour.

$2000 / 579 = 3.5$  hours (always round up)

So, in order to hit the average word count for a chapter, you will need to plan on writing at least 3.5 hours. You know that there are days where inspiration hits and you bust stuff out, but **at minimum, you** will need this amount of time. Before you freak out, consider this:

A few minutes ago, you probably didn't know what your word count goal was, how to break it down into smaller chunks, or how long it could take you to write a chapter. What you need now is to plan your writing time.

## Coming full circle

The key to writing is consistency, not quantity. Sure, we might love the idea of sitting down and writing 500 words every day, but what if you only have one day a week to *actually* do that? Well, if you take what you learned here and apply it, you'll make better use of that one day a week and make more consistent progress in your book.

But it only works if you do it. Profound, I know.

Don't have 3.5 hours in one day? Do you have three 1-hour slots in your week? Can you break those 210 minutes into seven 30-minute spots? Remember, that 3.5 hours is telling you how much time you need for one chapter, but that doesn't mean you need to do it all at once. You make that time **fit into your calendar**.

Which means you need to block time off consistently at least 3 weeks out. Even better if you set it as a reoccurring time. By doing this, it shows up on your calendar as a reminder, and it keeps you (in most cases) from committing to something during that time spot. It means you're taking yourself seriously, and you're taking your story seriously.

I want to you pause right here and open your calendar and look through it. Where do you have time? If you've never blocked out time, take a few minutes to do that and see where you can set aside time for writing. Take 10 minutes.

One final thing to touch on before we wrap up, and that's setting a goal for completing your first draft. It doesn't have to be pretty (it won't be), and it doesn't have to be garbage (because no one enjoys writing that). A realistic goal for most authors I've worked with who have used everything I've shown you here is about **4 months**. This is a soft goal, meaning it can change depending on the level of progress you make. For instance, you could finish it in 2 months! Or maybe you realize in month three what that 'missing element' was, and now you're starting over because the story needs it (I did this with my first draft). Simply go through the steps again, make sure you know what is required, and then go forth and write.

## **Takeaways**

I hope you can see how setting goals based on what you want for your story helps you build a better story. How it can help you develop your story better, create better flow and pacing, and something readers will truly enjoy. I hope you can see how setting goals isn't as scary as it was before. They are not set in stone; they are milestones on the journey.