A Postmortem on NaNoWriMo: Analyzing the Creative Process of Writing Under Time Constraints

Mary Westveer
Western Michigan University, skoobmw@ameritech.net

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/2472
A Postmortem of NaNoWriMo: Analyzing the Creative Process of Writing Under Time Constraints

Mary Elizabeth Westveer
Lee Honors College Thesis
Spring 2014
Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to the following people for helping me complete my thesis: both of my parents, Deb and Randy Westveer, for always believing in me and encouraging me to follow my dreams. My committee members, Professor Hiscox and Dr. Wardrop, for all their insightful critiques and advice on how to strengthen my thesis. Scott Frienser, my thesis mentor, who was there every step of the way guiding me through writing my thesis and who gave me the kick in the pants I direly needed. My thesis would not be completed without the assistance of this amazing and accomplished man. I also need to thank my best friends; Tia, Jenny, and Allison. I would not even have attempted to try my thesis without the support of these wonderful and lovely women. They encouraged, cajoled, and badgered me into working on it. None of this would have been possible without the support of all these incredible people. I owe my thesis and my sanity to them.
People of every profession often attempt extravagant things, such as inventing a new, more precise way to do surgery or running into burning buildings to save others. Writers also often try to test the limitations of their creativity in extreme and excessive ways. One such way is NaNoWriMo (National Novella Writing Month), where the goal is to write a 50,000 word story in one month. While such a feat seems nearly impossible, every November people from all over the world log in and attempt to do so. Some writers are even more ambitious and shoot for higher goals of 100,000, 500,000, and even 1 million words. For a 50,000 word story, the daily average number of words that needs to be written is 1,667. This past November, I joined the fray along with two of my best friends and we attempted such a feat. By no means did I anticipate that this adventure would go smoothly and easily; I am a full time student who is also a tutor, part-time worker, and intern. Time would not be on my side. However, I did not anticipate running into the obstacles that I faced during NaNoWriMo; I did not foresee characters rebelling and breaking free of the script, or pivotal plot points changing; nor did I anticipate the impact my friends would have on my writing. Among all the trials and tribulations, I learned about who I am as a writer, what I needed to improve, and how I work best within the creative process.

Beyond writing a 50,000 word story, there are no restrictions or creative limitations for NaNoWriMo; participants are not assigned any characters or plot lines to follow. The subject, plot, and characters are left to the author’s creativity, and stories range from a pirate slaving company to robots working at a bed and breakfast. Letting the writer choose his/her own story allows for both more creativity as well as more passion.

The story I wrote for NaNoWriMo is based off of a board game called “Betrayal at the House on the Hill.” The number of people playing determines the number of characters on the board. The characters start within the house because the purpose of the game is to maneuver
characters around the board while opening, discovering, and exploring rooms along the way. Sometimes a player has an event happen to them or they may retrieve an item, and as the game progresses, a traitor will be revealed. The players can have as many as twelve people participating in the game. The game provides six character cards, and every card has a different character on each side. All the characters are allotted different numbers in four different categories: Speed, Might, Sanity and Knowledge.

The game also contains room tiles to be placed on the board as the characters explore the house. The house has three stories: upper floor, ground floor and the basement. The back of the room tiles states which floor the room can be placed on. Many of the room tiles have different symbols on them that represent either an item card, event card or omen card the player can pick up.

An item card allows the player to receive an item, such as a revolver or a medical kit, that could help them in the game. Each item has different properties; for example, the revolver allows the character to attack with Speed instead of Might. So if a character’s Might is at a four, but
his/her Speed is at a five, the player can use that number to attack instead. The medical kit can help to restore a character’s health. To be able to use the item, the player who draws the item card needs to roll a certain number on the die. For example, for the medical kit, if the player rolls an eight or higher on the die then he/she can add three points to his/her character’s traits. For a six or seven, the player can add two points; a four or five allows the player to add only one point; for a roll of three, two, one or zero, the player earns no points.

An event card is something that affects a player’s character. When a player draws an event card, two of the possibilities among the forty-five options are “Webs” or “Debris.” To protect the player’s character, the player has to roll a certain number or higher on the die. The number the player rolls dictates what happens to his/her character. For example, if the player draws “Debris” and rolls below the specified number, the card would dictate that the character is stuck in that room for a certain number of turns or until another player rolls the correct number and frees him/her.

The last card a player can draw is an omen card. An omen affects the game itself in either benign or malicious ways. An example of a malicious omen card is “Bite.” When a player draws “Bite,” the player to the right of that player will need to roll four dice to make a Might attack against the player that drew the card. The game itself has a total of eight dice but each dice only goes as high as two, so the highest a player can roll with four dice is eight. After the player to the right of the player that drew the card has rolled, the other player will need to roll the number of dice according to his/her Might as a defense against the attack. If the player that drew the card rolls lower than the player to his/her right, then that player needs to take the point difference as damage which decreases his/her Might; if the player that drew the card rolls higher than the player to his/her right, then nothing happens to him/her.
An example of a benign omen card is the “Dog” card. By drawing this card, the player gains a point for Might and a point for Sanity. There is no need to roll the dice so that the player may be able to use the item. Moreover, the dog can also carry items to other places or people. Besides their physical properties, the omen cards can either give to or take away from the players; every time an omen card is drawn the player that draws it needs to make a haunt roll. A haunt roll is made with six dice and the player making the roll must try to achieve a number higher than the number of omen cards on the table. For example, if five omen cards have already been drawn, the next player to draw an omen card would need to roll a six or higher. If he/she rolls the required number then nothing happens and the game continues on. However, if the player rolls lower than the required number, he/she becomes the traitor.

Once the traitor is revealed, the game changes. Instead of just exploring the house, the player who becomes the traitor is now trying to kill his/her teammates while the other players, often called heroes, are trying to kill the traitor and fulfill tasks so that they can get out of the house. The game has multiple different ways that it can unfold with up to fifty different scenarios. The room the character occupies and the omen card drawn in that room dictates some of the action; it establishes how the traitor will try to kill the heroes and how the heroes will try to defeat the traitor. For example, if the character of the player who draws the omen card was in the Gallery and the “Bite” omen card is drawn, then the players would play “United We Stand.” There is a reference table for which game is being played at the beginning of the Traitor’s Tome. The Traitor’s Tome is one of two books that come with the game; the other book is Secrets of Survival, which also contains rules for the version of the game the players need to play. The player who has become the traitor takes the Traitor’s Tome and separates from the rest of the
players, often to a different room, while the heroes stay with the “Secrets of Survival” manual. The players who are not the traitor stay and discuss the objectives of the specific game.

For example, in the “United We Stand” version of the game, the traitor’s objective is to try to kill at least two of the other characters so that their flesh can be absorbed by the traitor to make him/her stronger, which means an increase in Might. When in certain rooms, the traitor can pull heroes to him/her so that he/she may attack them. The objective for the other players is to set the house on fire because that is the only way to kill the traitor. To set the house on fire, a hero needs to make a Knowledge roll of five or higher in the Furnace room so that the furnace will start overheating. Once that player’s turn is over, the Furnace Room explodes, killing anyone in it. After that whenever any explorer’s turn is over, a new room catches fire. Once all this has occurred, the heroes need to make their way to the Entrance Hall and get out of the house, which is achieved either by making a Knowledge roll of four or higher to pick the lock or a Might roll of the same number to break down the door. All the while, the traitor is trying to kill at least two heroes and make it out of the house first.

The individual game that provided the basis for my story is the “The Stars Are Right” version. This version of the game is played when one of the players draws the “Medallion” omen card in the Pentagram Chamber. Once the traitor is revealed, he/she is also allotted a certain number of cultists to use to kill the heroes; the number of cultists corresponds to the number of players. The traitor is able to move the cultists independently of his/her character, so it is as if he/she has multiple characters on the board. The cultists have their own Speed, Might, and Sanity, so they may attack and the heroes can retaliate. Some versions of the game contain monsters that do not have any of the four traits and thus cannot be attacked. The traitor and cultists are trying to kill the heroes so that the heroes can be used as a human sacrifice to
summon the cultists’ god. The traitor needs to earn thirteen points to be able to summon the god and can earn these points in a number of ways: the traitor can earn four points by killing an explorer; the traitor also can attack another player and steal either the “Girl,” “Madman,” or “Dog” omen card to earn two points, or attack another player and steal any other omen or item card to gain one point. The only way the traitor can accomplish these goals is to make a Might attack against another player by rolling the number of die corresponding with his/her character’s Might. The player who is being attacked would also make a Might roll and hope to receive a higher number than the traitor. If the traitor receives the higher number, he/she can choose either to do damage to the other character or to steal an item. If the other player receives a higher number, nothing happens to either character.

The objective of the heroes is to desecrate the pentagram in the Pentagram Chamber with paint so that it interrupts the summoning ceremony. This objective needs to be reached before the traitor can earn the required points and summon the cultists’ god. The paint used to desecrate the pentagram is symbolized by black, triangular chips. These chips need to be placed in specific rooms and the heroes must retrieve the paint tokens, carry them to the Pentagram Chamber, and throw them in. There are not any rolls that need to be made to pick up or carry the paint cans or to throw them into the Pentagram Chamber, but the heroes must make it past the traitor and the cultists.

From my perspective, it did not make sense to have all my characters set in the house at the beginning of the story as it would not correspond to the world of the story. The characters need to have a reason for being in the house and that reason is a distant, exceptionally rich, and previously unknown relative who has died and left all of her wealth and possessions to these characters. But before situating my characters in the house, I gave some of them back stories to
help round out the world of the story as well as help the reader get acquainted with them before they entered into a hazardous and stressful situation. What happens in the house changes the characters, so there needs to be something for them to change from. Since none of the characters know each before entering the house, each character has his/her own back story predicated upon the character’s daily or weekly routine.

I had not specifically chosen “The Stars Are Right” version as the basis for my NaNoWriMo story. This version was just one of the games recorded after I had made the decision to utilize “Betrayal at the House on the Hill” as the premise for my story. There were several reasons for my decision. First, given my other time commitments, I had hoped that basing my story off of a familiar game would make the attempt to write a 50,000 word story a bit easier. The game provided me with a cast of characters, setting and plot, and I would not need to focus so intensely on creating the plot or the characters from scratch. While part of the reason the game was chosen as the premise for my story was to facilitate the writing, that is not why I first came up with the idea. The second and primary reason I chose the game as the premise for my story was that my friends and I love to play it. It brings us immense entertainment and joy when we play, and we always have a good time. I had hoped that using something I loved and gave me enjoyment would make writing during NaNoWriMo more fun; I had hoped that the fun I had when playing the game would translate into having fun while writing the game.

The game offers the possibility of up to twelve characters to play. Out of those twelve, my friends and I used five of the characters: Zoe Ingram, Heather Granville, Father Reinhart, Madame Zorestra, and Peter Okomoto. However, these are not the only characters to appear in my story. For the sake of making the story more cohesive, I created a few original characters, Grandma Sue and Cornelius Denholm, to help round out the characters already available to me.
Since my story began with character back stories, it would have been strange if the only characters to appear in the story were the ones from the game. After all, many of the characters would have interacted with someone outside of the house. It also would have been confusing if all the characters seen in the story ended up in the house, and this strategy would not have given an accurate image of the world of the story.

After figuring out what characters were played in the specific game I based my story on, I had to decide if I wanted to use the information that the game provided or come up with information of my own for each character. The character cards for the game provide separate information beyond a character’s speed, might, knowledge and sanity, such as the character’s age and his/her hobbies. I changed some of the characters’ ages, while for others I altered their hobbies.

The game card for Zoe Ingram states that she is eight years old and interested in dolls and music. I changed her age from eight to her early twenties because the thought of writing an eight year old girl into stressful and dangerous situations did not appeal to me. Zoe’s age was also changed because Zoe and Heather Granville are supposed to be counterpoints to one another, which would have been difficult if Zoe stayed eight. Since the game provided Zoe’s interests, I had to decide if I wanted to integrate them into her character or if new interests would suit her better. The second option seemed like a better fit because an eight year old girl’s interests would be different than the interests of a woman in her early twenties, even if they were the same person. Due to life choices and social circumstances, people grow out of things and gain new interests, and while they could possibly retain some of their childhood interests, they certainly wouldn’t stay interested in every single one. Before I began writing for NaNoWriMo, every time I pictured Zoe, she was tall, thin, blonde, gorgeous, self involved, and unnecessarily cruel. To
me, she had the same air as the prima donnas often featured on television, akin to an older version of the type of bratty, spoiled girl on *My Sweet 16*. In my mind, Zoe was an early-twenty something year old version of these characters. And since Zoe was so desperate for attention, she is also boy crazy; she desperately wants a boyfriend and when she has one, she constantly seeks his attention.

Heather Granville, the counterpoint to Zoe, is strong, confident, and independent. Heather is a feminist. She does not believe that she needs a man to support her or take care of her in any way. Her desire to be able to take care of herself is shown through her passion for kickboxing. Whereas Zoe wants and requires her parents’ support, at least financially, Heather does as much as she can not to ask her parents for help and, at times, doesn’t get along with them. In Heather’s case, I didn’t have to change much from her character card. On the card, Heather is said to be eighteen, so I didn’t change her age a lot; I added a few years and made her twenty-three. I did alter Heather’s interests. On the card, her hobbies are listed as shopping and television; the Heather that I created was not interested in these things. While she didn’t completely hate shopping, her approach was more functional, shopping only when she required something as opposed to going out often with her girlfriends and getting new outfits.

Heather and Zoe were the focal point of my story and emerged as my protagonists. When I was looking over the notes I made of the game my friends and I played, I connected the most with Heather and Zoe. I was the most interested in what I could do with the two of them: how different types of femininity could be portrayed, how different views of the world would be shown, and how those different personalities interact with each other. Unfortunately, into the story I was unable to get far enough in it to truly explore those possibilities. I did get a chance to
start discovering how those questions would be answered when Zoe and Heather met at the reading of the will, but was unable to explore it further.

The other characters that I had inherited from the game did not attract me as much nor were they as fleshed out as Zoe and Heather, so their personalities and age did not deviate much from the characters cards. Both Father Reinhart’s and Madame Zorestra’s ages stayed close to the ages shown on their characters cards; Peter Okomoto became a little older; his card said he was thirteen and I made him sixteen. Their interests also remained similar to the interests stated on their character cards. Father Reinhart is a priest and interested in gardening; he is not interested in monetary things, such as any possessions that may reside in the house. Madame Zorestra is eclectic and extremely interested in astrology as well as Paganism. In her back story it was going to be revealed that she owned her own occult shop which was where she was going to receive the phone call about her relative and the will. I kept Peter Okomoto’s interest in insects, the same as on his character card. Peter’s character had the least amount of thought put into him, but the other characters from the game really did not have much more. Unfortunately, writing Zoe’s and Heather’s back stories took quite a bit longer than anticipated, so I did not get to the rest of the characters’ back stories.

The characters from the game are not the only characters to appear in my story. There are also two original characters that have no holds or direction from the game: Grandma Sue and Cornelius Denholm. Grandma Sue, Zoe’s grandmother, does not go into the house with the rest of the characters; Zoe is at Grandma Sue’s house when she receives the call about her dead relative and the will. I included Grandma Sue in the story because I felt it was essential to broaden the world of the story with characters that were not a part of the game. I wanted to give it more diversity as well as adding a little more logic to the story. It would have been illogical
and an outrageous coincidence if the only characters introduced all ended up in the house, especially since every character would have family and/or friends that they were leaving behind when they entered into the house who would worry about them. It would have been harder to understand the impact the events in the house had on the characters if the reader was never given any indication of what the characters were leaving behind.

Cornelius Denholm is the late relative’s butler who calls all the characters to the house for the reading of the will. The late relative, Jessica, ended up with a butler simply because I needed some way of getting the characters into the house. This is how the idea of the late relative and the will came into being. In the game, the characters simply start in the house; I created a late relative and a will to get the characters into the house. Mouthy, presumptuous, and bossy, Cornelius isn’t a good butler. He does not blend in well nor does he try to behave as if he were invisible. Cornelius thinks very highly of himself. At first, Cornelius was intended to have a short, insignificant appearance in the story: he needed to get the characters to the house for the reading of the will, explain how they would be able to acquire items, and then leave. But Cornelius’s importance grew as the story unfolded. While he started off as a plot foil, he soon grew into the main antagonist. Even though the story does not get that far, I intended Cornelius to be the person who sets up everything: his employer dying, the cultists that try to take over the house, and why only Zoe, Heather, Father Reinhart, Madame Zorestra, and Peter Okomoto are present. He would engineer the motivation for the characters to get in the house, then masterminds the cultists’ access to the house, and provide the characters to become their human sacrifices.

Since I pulled most of my characters from “Betrayal at the House on the Hill” and their names and interests from the character card, I believed that I had a good understanding of my
characters before I started writing. I mistakenly assumed that their names, ages, and hobbies were all I needed to know to be able to write these characters, and I soon found out how wrong that assumption was. Before starting NaNoWriMo, I did not try to write a list detailing information about any of the characters, such as how many parents they have, where their parents stood financially, whether they had any siblings, their actual physical description, their livelihood and hobbies, or anything else that could contribute to making a character believable. Failing to do so was a big mistake.

Not having a good lock on my characters’ personalities put me in a pretty tough predicament. I was forced to try and figure out who my characters were as I was writing them. I recognized this was the course of action required of me, yet my characters’ individual personalities fluctuated, and at times, switched with another character. Zoe and Heather were the worse for the latter. Zoe’s personality vacillates between a self-centered, spoiled brat to a considerate individual, while Heather’s switched from independent and strong to judgmental. The characters’ personalities shifted because the characters were not sufficiently concrete in my mind. Without knowing the characters well, it is hard to say what would be consistent for their character.

However, it could also be said that these shifts and changes are just facets of their personality. No one character or person experiences the same emotion all the time; people constantly alternate and switch between the spectrum of emotions. So it is plausible that the switch in personality is just another side to the character. But considering this switch in personalities happens between one scene and the next, it is hard to believe this to be the case. Discovering that I did not know my characters well was extremely frustrating. I began NaNoWriMo with the assumption that I understood my characters, only to find out quickly this
was not the case. It often became aggravating to find out that I did not know my characters. While writing a scene, I could not judge whether or not a thought or action was consistent with a character, which made it difficult for me to write some of my characters. I did not know how to choreograph an event or a character when I was unsure of how they would react. This dilemma made a small contribution to why I fell behind in my writing.

Another and much larger contribution to falling behind was the other demands on my time. While trying to work on NaNoWriMo, I was also a full time student, part time worker, intern, and tutor. All these things required time and effort, so I could not focus solely on NaNoWriMo during the month of November. My classes and schoolwork demanded the most of my time among the litany of things that occupied my day. I had to go to class as well as do any work that was required of me, such as homework, which could take anywhere from an hour to four or five hours for a single class. Sometimes, there was very little time left over or NaNoWriMo, especially when the goal was to write almost 1,700 words in a day.

Yet, the hardest part of it all was switching between schoolwork and NaNoWriMo because I found that each task required a very different mindset. Coursework was more factual and analytical while NaNoWriMo was more creative. A great deal of my course work entailed memorizing information or dissecting works of fiction. NaNoWriMo was almost solely creative. Sometimes the analytical and creative brain functions would cross over and I would need to write a piece of creative fiction for my creative writing class as well as look something up for the story I was creating for NaNoWriMo, but for the most part, the two did not often overlap.

The excess of everything I was simultaneously trying to do was extremely draining. I had late night classes the semester I did NaNoWriMo, and so I would come back from class, make dinner, do my course work and only when that was all done could I work on my story for
NaNoWriMo. Often, I would be tired before I even got to my school work and then I would have to work on my NaNo story while being physically and mentally exhausted. It was like trying to start the car only to realize that the battery is dead. I was constantly missing or overlooking things in my story and some of the time it would take me a while to realize that I was writing nonsense. I would start a sentence with one thought and end it with a different one, sometimes unaware that I was doing this.

The pace took a toll and I could not keep it up forever. There were days when I had nothing left to give for my NaNo story. I would spend hours just staring at my computer screen, desperately trying to find something to write; I would wait for a whisper or an inkling of something I could put down on paper, anything really, but sometimes nothing would come. It was upsetting on the days that I was unable to write anything; I would just fall further behind and become even more discouraged about reaching the fifty thousand word goal. Being absolutely drained and unable to write also made it incredibly difficult to start writing again the next day.

While the pace took a toll, the simple act of sitting down to write everyday was not hard to sustain once it was actually started. It became my habit to sit down with my computer and write some of my story for NaNoWriMo. It was the act of sitting down to write that was the hardest; I would become distracted with something on tumblr.com or want to read instead. Forcing myself to sit down and work on my story took more effort, but once I was able to do so, the daily writing was not difficult. When mental exhaustion prevented me from writing, I had trouble getting back into the ritual of writing. All it took was one day off for the habit to be broken.
I was not the only one who experienced this difficulty. The creators of NaNoWriMo scheduled various authors to send the participants of NaNo pep talks throughout the month. One author who sent a pep talk that stated:

Sometimes if you haven’t touched your laptop in a while, you begin to fear it. You’re afraid to start typing and you’re afraid to not start typing. […] The good news is that the simple act of getting words down again instantly un-sticks you! Writing moves your thoughts and feelings through you and out into the world. (McGhee Nov 28, 2013)

This fear of my laptop and writing happened to me. After missing a day or two of writing, I would start to over-think the process of writing. But once I sat down and started writing again, the process became easier.

The struggle through NaNoWriMo and my other obligations taught me one major thing about writing stories: to write a story, you need to sit down and write. There is no waiting for inspiration to strike or being in the mood to write. There is just writing. There was one author who sent the participants of NaNoWriMo a pep talk about this very subject. The author, Malinda Lo, said:

I’ll let you in on a little secret. If you wait for inspiration to strike before you sit down to write, you’ll probably never finish a damn thing. Inspiration is like that hot girl or guy you met at a party one time—and when you talked to him or her, it seemed like you totally clicked. There was eye contact; there was flirting; maybe there was even a bit of casual brushing of your hand over theirs, right? I know. I’ve been there. At the end of the night they asked for your number and said, “I’ll definitely call you. We should hang out.”

But then they never did, and you were left waiting for a call that never came, feeling increasingly like a fool.
That’s what inspiration is. It’s seductive and thrilling, but you can’t depend on it to call you. It doesn’t work that way.

And she was right. What it takes to get a story from your head to paper is taking the time to sit down and write. Writers need to spend time exploring the world of their stories and the characters that inhabit it.

My original character, Cornelius Denholm, was an element of my story that grew from continuously sitting down and writing. He was created with the intention that he would be a minor character, but as I continued to write and learn about my story, Cornelius grew into the main antagonist and mastermind behind getting Heather, Zoe, Father Reinhart, Madame Zorestra, Peter Okomoto and the cultists into the house for the summoning of the cultists’ god.

Cornelius’ transformation started off simply; he needed to be in more scenes than I had originally anticipated. Since the story was starting outside the house, Cornelius needed to contact the other characters about the will. This strategy required that any scene outside the house would also need to include at least Cornelius’ voice to explain to the main character of the scene why he/she needed to come to the house. Since the original plan was to write an opening scene for all my characters that entered the house, it would have entailed a lot of scenes that incorporated Cornelius.

Although Cornelius started as a minor character, he rapidly and unexpectedly changed as he broke free of the script and insisted upon becoming a major character. Ultimately, he turned into the mastermind not only by getting the characters into the house but also by setting them up as sacrifices. Initially, the cultists were conveniently going to be in the house and the characters would stumble upon them, which would allow the cultists to access the rest of the house where they could try to use the characters as human sacrifices. Ultimately, Cornelius broke free from
this unstable and unmotivated plot. By making himself the mastermind behind the plot, he gave the story a little more backbone. There is more motivation and intent within the story now that everything isn’t mere coincidence.

Yet, it was unsettling to have a character break free from the intended structured. This had never been an issue with anything else I wrote, which could most likely be contributed to the length. My NaNoWriMo story is significantly longer than any of my previous stories; it provided more room for the characters to break free. When I started writing, there was a plan for how everything was going to turn out; Cornelius was my first big hiccup in that plan. He changed both the importance of his character and the course of the plot. At the beginning of the story, I felt in control; it was irritating to find out that this was not the case. Yes, I was the author, but my characters also played a big part. Cornelius almost became a real person both within my head and on paper, which was exciting as much as it was frightening. I would write actions or thoughts for Cornelius that I hadn’t originally conceived or planned on writing. It was as if he directed my fingers to type out what he wanted to do. Once Cornelius broke free, my original plan went into the recycle bin. Everything that came after was a mystery. Much of my original plot had to be changed or revised, which made my story stronger but also made NaNo more frightening. I was attempting to write a 50,000 word story in a month and now all my plans were obsolete. NaNoWriMo had transformed from an up-hill battle into an attempt to scale Mt. Everest.

Butlers, whether a character or person, are known for their silence and invisibility. They do their duties quietly without calling attention to themselves. This was how Cornelius was intended to act, but Cornelius rebelled against the butler stereotype. In the first couple of scenes Cornelius appeared in, he did act like the typical butler stereotype; he was polite, reserved and
only a voice on the phone. In those scenes, all Cornelius does is call Zoe and Heather to let them know about their relative’s passing and when the reading of the will would happen. Due to this, I did not have to decide or figure out how he would act physically or what thoughts he would have, just what he would say. As I continued, he began to break free from that stereotype. He became very sarcastic and mouthy; he did not shy away from implying that he thought another character’s question was stupid or pointless. He got especially irate when his actions were not acknowledged, such as when he opened the door for Zoe to let her into the house. She did not thank him for his efforts and he became very short with her because of it. I had not intended for Cornelius to act this way, but anytime I set out to write him, this was how he came out.

Cornelius’ rebellion was thought provoking and influenced me to examine and wonder about the other characters. Was I somehow stunting their fullness as characters? While they were not my characters from the start, would they not be able to impact me and readers in the same way? These questions, never answered within the story or my wonderings, obligated me to analyze the characters I used from the game more closely.

When Cornelius usurped the role as main character and villain, he also changed some of the bigger elements of the plot. As stated earlier, Cornelius became the mastermind behind getting the characters and the cultists into the house which made none of the events after the reading of the will happenstance. Coincidence was the original plan to explain why the characters were in the house and how the cultists came to be there. The change in plot forced me to analyze other parts of my plot line.

The house that the characters enter is dangerous and creepy; they are attacked by spiders, almost killed by poisonous smoke, and have their ear drums broken by mysterious wailing. The first creepy instance in the house happens fairly early within the story. Father Reinhart sees a
ghost of himself rise out of a coffin and it tells him that someone in the house will die. However, if strange and scary things happen to the characters too early in the story without a logical reason, there would be no motivation for the characters staying in the house. While some of the characters would stay out of greed, for others that would not suffice. Why would someone stay if they were being terrorized? I didn’t really have an answer to this when I began writing the story.

The first time any of the characters meet each other is when they gather in the room for the reading of the will. There was no real relationship between any of the characters, so that could not serve as a motivation to keep them in the house. Since a connection to another character was not a motivation for a character staying in the house, I had to figure out another way to keep them in the house longer.

I decided to downplay the creepiness in the beginning of the story either by giving the reader a logical reason for whatever was happening or by having the character be in denial or oblivious to what is going on. I eventually employed both ideas. One instance in which I tried to give the reader a logical reason for something strange and out of place occurs before Father Reinhart sees the ghost of himself in a coffin. Father Reinhart is exploring the game room when he happens upon a coffin in the corner of the room. Curious and appalled as to why a coffin would be in a game room, Father Reinhart decides to open it. When he opens the lid to the coffin, a cloud of what appears to be dust is released. After the dust is released and the coffin is opened, the ghost tells him that someone in the house is going to die. The reader could infer that this was actually a hallucination brought on by whatever was emitted from the coffin since the events were almost simultaneous. Not long after these events, Zoe enters a room that is labeled the “Bloody Room” in the game. It would have been entirely too creepy if blood was dripping down the walls so early in the story, so instead I termed it a “Red Room.” The walls and all of
the furniture were different shades of red. However, at the same time, I did not want the room to come off as benign. If there was no hint of something off within the house, then when the cultists entered into the story it would have a radically different tone than the beginning of the story and would seem out of place. One way in which I made the room feel discordant was by making my characters feel uncomfortable in the room. Being in that room made Zoe fidgety and cautious. The room was also given a distinct coppery smell, which is unusual and different from the musty smell most unused rooms have.

Before November and NaNoWriMo began, I assumed I had a plot all set up; I just needed to follow the characters through the rooms of the house and write about what happens within those rooms. When it came down to actually writing the story, I had to figure out what would motivate the characters to stay in a house that was endangering them. This is where the initial thought of allowing the characters take whatever items they wish from the house came from. Soon it became evident that materialistic gain was not enough to keep someone in a house that could kill them. I never quite got around to figuring something out, which is why I understated the creepiness and danger in the beginning of the story. Without any motivation to stay, the big question was “Why?” Why did the characters decide to stay when there was no reason for them to? Why don’t they just try to leave? Neither of these questions were being addressed in the story.

When writing under strict time constraints, it was difficult to realize that part of my plot did not make sense. I assumed the plot had been figured out and that when the first of November came around I could dive right into writing. Realizing that some of the elements of my plot were not working made it difficult to keep going. I had to work out my plot while at the same time continuing to write every day. It was confusing to write one part of the plot while trying to
puzzle out a later aspect of the plot. My mind was trying to be in two different places at once within my story—the present and the future.

Both the issues with my characters and my plot have made it evident that if I do not know my plot and, more so, my characters inside and out, writing under extreme time constraints will cause the whole story to fall apart. There are too many major edits that need to be done to my story before it is even marginally ready to even think of submitting for publication. Without being able to predict what my characters can and will do and how the plot would evolve, writing under such time constraints is nearly impossible and a little ridiculous.

One of the authors who wrote a pep talk for NaNoWriMo said something that helped me through this blockade. “And – this was crucial for me – to keep moving forward. Normally I start each writing session by rewriting whatever I wrote in my last session. With [...] my NaNoWriMo project, I picked up wherever I left off and kept moving. I never looked back” (Rowell Oct 29, 2013). In some ways this became my mantra during NaNoWriMo – keep moving forward. I could have gotten hung up on past scenes that were not just right or old dialogue that did not flow as well as it could. Instead, I tried to keep pressing forward.

One tool that helped me to continue on was “Word Wars.” Word Wars are a writing tool many of the participants of NaNoWriMo probably used. They run for increments of five, ten, fifteen, twenty and thirty minute stretches. In each category, someone would post in a designated section of the NaNoWriMo forum that they were going to start a Word War. The post would be “I’m going to start at :00. Anyone care to join me?” or “Starting at the :20. Any takers?” The participants of the Word Wars use the :00 instead of 5:00 because NaNoWriMo is an international event and participants are from different time zones. Using the actual clock number such as 7:15 or 8:30 would confuse many of the other participants because they would be
unaware of the time zone of the person who posted. This way there is no confusion on when someone was starting a Word War. So if someone wanted to join, he/she would just respond with a “joining at the :00” or “I’m in!” Once the clock hit the scheduled start time, the people competing in the Word War would type as fast as they could, getting as many words down on the page as possible. Once the time was up the participants would return to the forum thread and post their results—the amount of words they were able to write in that time frame. The winner was determined by whoever had the highest number of words for that word war slot.

For most, this is not a way to get quality writing done. However, it is a tool to get words down on a page. Trying to write 50,000 words in a month is exceedingly difficult and anything that provides a boost in word count helps. NaNoWriMo is all about getting the words of your story down on the page; Word Wars assisted with that. While a lot of the words written during word wars might be revised later, they were really good for sparking inspiration for another scene that could be included in the story or even helping to understand characters better.

Word Wars helped me if I was writing a scene and got stuck because I was debating over whether or not to have my character do one thing in a situation or something completely different; I could spend a lot of time trying to decide what to do. Word Wars do not allow for this type of luxury. I would have to look at the situation and use my first instinct to decide what my character would do.

I often did fifteen minute Word Wars, usually with my friends that were also participating in NaNoWriMo. There were quite a few misspellings and unfinished thoughts that I would try to return to, but sometimes, I was unable to return to the thread of thought and simply removed it. But for the most part, I used Word Wars as a way to get out of my own head and out
of my own way. I have a habit of over-thinking situations when I write. Word Wars served as a catalyst for getting me out of my own way.

I also often used word wars to start my daily writing. I sometimes spent hours staring at my computer, trying to figure out what I would write next. If I used a word war in the beginning of a session, it would jumpstart my thought process. I just had to take what I had and hope I could get it to go somewhere. Word Wars were an effective tool for getting the words on a page and pushing through writer’s block.

However, while word wars were helpful in racking up my word count and pushing through tough parts of my story, they were also exceedingly detrimental to my writing style. My diction was bland and generic; there were no gripping words. There was no sense of urgency or even fun while the characters were exploring the house. My imagery also suffered when I participated in word wars. Either it was very simple and generic, or it was over described with unnecessary details. Word Wars made it incredibly difficult to pause and think about what was being written.

Word wars were also a detriment to my narration. The voice of my narrator fluctuated hastily between third person omniscient and third person limited. While it may be understandable to have the narrator’s voice fluctuate between the two because of how similar they are, it also made things extremely confusing. At one moment during a scene, the narrator is able to access all of the character’s thoughts and the next moment the narrator does not know the name of a character because another character did not. It did not make sense for the narrator to know everything one minute and then only select information the next.

The biggest contribution in keeping me moving forward were my friends, Jenny and Tia. Friends were definitely a luxury that participants of NaNoWriMo had that most other authors
who embark on writing a story do not. The creators of NaNoWriMo came up with a way to create a sense of camaraderie and companionship. They broke each country and state down into small areas, very similar to counties, and each area was assigned a moderator, someone who had participated in and won NaNoWriMo. The moderator would often hold gatherings so that the NaNoWriMo participants of his/her area could get together and discuss their stories and experiences with NaNoWriMo.

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend such a gathering in my area. The gatherings were often scheduled when I had to work. It was upsetting that I was unable to go. I had hoped to go so that I could hear what other people had to say about how their stories were progressing and their thoughts on NaNoWriMo. I was curious if any of the other participants had any tricks or processes they used to get through tough spots in their writing. I wanted to know if they were having the same problems I was having with my characters.

I was unable to have these questions answered by the other NaNoWriMo participants in my area. I was, however, able to get responses to some of my wonderings because two of my friends, Tia and Jenny, also participated in NaNoWriMo; one of them also happened to be my roommate. Since both of them are my best friends and I live with one of them, it was not hard to talk to them about their experiences with NaNoWriMo and their stories. In one author’s pep talk, James Patterson recommended “Don’t go it alone. If you live with somebody, tell them to be unpleasant to you if they see you doing anything else during your writing time. Buy them a water gun. If you live alone, have friends call and check on you” (Patterson Oct 31, 2013). I did not go so far as to get my friend and roommate, Jenny, a water gun, but she definitely reminded me to stay on track and I did not hesitate to do the same for her.
Both of my friends had a similar problem with some of their characters that I had experienced with Cornelius Denholm; their characters also broke free from the original plan. Jenny’s character took over and even came back from the dead in the form of a ghost who simultaneously haunted and helped the Jenny’s protagonist through many of the obstacles that he/she faced. My other friend, Tia, had the same problem as well. One of her characters took control of the story, albeit in a different way than either Jenny’s character or mine; he kept trying to kill himself off by initiating events that resulted in serious harm being done to himself. At one point, another of Tia’s characters was required to drill holes in the main character’s head to release the blood bleeding into his brain so that he would not die. Both Tia and Jenny were just as frustrated with their characters as I was with mine. After a while, they both gave up fighting their characters and surrendered their control.

Tia and Jenny also shared another problem with their characters that I experienced with mine. All three of us discovered characters that altered their importance within the story. My character, Cornelius Denholm, started out as a minor character and became the mastermind. Tia’s and Jenny’s characters also started out as minor characters who were intended to appear for a short amount of time. Tia’s minor character moved up in the ranks to become an essential secondary character; Jenny’s minor characters, designed to be killed off in the beginning of her story, decided to fight back. She thought it would be easy to do and get over quickly but the minor characters had a different idea and quite literally put up a fight. At one point, when one of Jenny’s minor characters and her protagonist were fighting, her minor character came exceptionally close to killing off Jenny’s main character.

For me, having Tia and Jenny there and knowing that I was not the only one struggling with my story almost seemed to validate the problems I was having. I was not the only one who
had characters break free from the script and take control. While these problems cannot be
generalized to all the participants of NaNoWriMo, it helped me to know I was not the only one
experiencing these problems.

Beyond validating some of my challenges and problems, Tia and Jenny were comforting
to have around by providing a sense of companionship and camaraderie. It is bolstering to know
that there are others who are going through the same stressful situation. NaNoWriMo is stressful,
but the stress is lessened knowing that there is support in this endeavor. Yes, it is up to the
individual writer to write his/her own story and attempt to reach the 50,000 word goal, but
having friends transformed the competition from a solitary into a communal experience.

NaNoWriMo is certainly not all glitter and rainbows; there are moments of panic,
hysteria and downright craziness. At times the temptation to delete entire scenes, chapters and
even the whole story is incredibly strong. Working on NaNoWriMo with friends helps to temper
that destructive force into a more manageable crazy one, turning panic into intense frustration,
hysteria into laughing hysterically, and destructive crazy into wacky, sleep deprived crazy. Yet
while participating with friends helps to redirect some of the wilder emotions, it does not
eliminate them. There were a few times when I had to talk Jenny back from the edge of deleting
a whole day’s work, and there were times when Jenny had to reciprocate. There were also times
when we would just start laughing hysterically over a random word or phrase and not be able to
stop. My friends’ participation in NaNoWriMo provided me with someone to rant to about
whatever was frustrating me at the time; they understood the frustration and zaniness that went
along with NaNoWriMo.
My friends were not just a sympathetic ear, they were also someone to bounce ideas off of. When stuck in a scene and unsure how to proceed, I could talk it over with my friends. Sometimes simply discussing my story would spark an idea and I did not need further input from my friends. Talking about my story forced me to process it in a different way than writing it down did. I would be talking to Jenny or Tia and I would stop in the middle of a word because I suddenly knew what needed to happen next. I witnessed Tia and Jenny do the same thing. They would be talking, stop mid sentence, and then begin typing furiously. Other times it was not quite that easy. Sometimes I would actually need to discuss the situation with my friends, and often an idea would spark or I would gain a new perspective on the situation. My friends, not tied as closely to the story as I was, had a different way of approaching my story. I valued their objectivity and I could provide the same for them. We constantly immersed ourselves in our stories, but talking tough spots over with friends afforded us a distance that was sometimes needed. It was like having a mini workshop session. A section of one author’s NaNoWriMo pep talk sums it up perfectly: “What I noticed right away was how easy it was for me to pick up. […] During NaNoWriMo, I never left the world of the book long enough […] I stayed immersed in the story all month long” (Rowell Oct 29, 2013). For this author such immersion was an advantage, while for me at times it was a decided disadvantage.

Deciding to participate in NaNoWriMo with my friends was possibly the smartest decision I made during this entire adventure. Their support and encouragement was monumental in helping me get as far as I did. I do not think I would have been able to obtain even half the word count I did on my own.

However, I do not mean to suggest that having my friends there was always beneficial to me. At times, it was more of a hindrance than an asset to have them also participating in
NaNoWriMo. Since Tia and Jenny were faster typists than I was, they were able to produce more then me in a shorter amount of time. Jenny, in particular, was quicker than I was. She could write almost double the amount of words as I could in the same amount of time. Often she would be finished with her daily word count before I was halfway through mine. Tia and Jenny were also more on top of hitting the daily word count; they were rarely below the goal and if they were, it was only by a few hundred words.

It was very frustrating watching them consistently hit the daily word count while I struggled to get half that amount. To an extent, it forced me to push further with my writing, but for the most part, I was envious of their ability to write so much. I would often sit next to Jenny while we were both working on our NaNoWriMo stories and she would be able to produce words at a rate I could only dream of. I felt a little defeated every time they would hit the word goal and I did not. I never wished for them not to succeed, I just wished I could succeed along with them. Sometimes I would catch myself thinking “what is the point if I am not hitting the 1,667 words a day?” It took me a while but it finally clicked. The point was that almost every day I was sitting down to write. The goal was not to hit some arbitrary number of words in a month; it was to consistently sit down and work on my writing. One author agrees with that statement in his pep talk, “I lost NaNoWriMo […] But I learned some things and improved my craft” (Rothfuss Nov 6, 2013). It did not matter whether I was hitting the daily word goal or not, what mattered was that I continued to work and learn about my writing.

Participating in NaNoWriMo and later writing about my experience for my honors thesis has taught me some significant lessons about my writing. When working on a creative story, I need to spend more time working with my plot and characters. For NaNoWriMo, I devised a basic outline for my plot deciding what rooms the characters would enter and when, but nothing
deeper than that. I did not push myself to think beyond the basics, a strategy which often caught
me off guard and left me reeling. I would often have trouble picking up where I left off. While
there is always going to be something that surprises me when writing, I should have looked
further into the motivation for the characters. Why would they stay in a dangerous house? Why
would Cornelius help the cultists get into the house? Why would he have any connection to the
cultists at all? I could have tried to answer these questions before starting my writing instead of
just shoveling a lot of it under “coincidence.” While I understand that I will not be able to control
everything I write about (Cornelius serving as the perfect example), nor would I want to, I should
establish greater control over the broader messages I want my story to convey.

When writing, I also needed to spend more time focusing my characters. As I had little
more than a basic outline for my characters when I started, many of my characters were two
dimensional or stereotypes; they lacked multiple facets to their personalities. I was often unable
to determine if their personalities were consistent because they were not truly full people to me
yet. Some of them got there, but many of them did not. I do not feel the need to know every
minute aspect of my characters; I feel that planning and knowing the characters that well would
make them seem boring and less mysterious because nothing is left for me or the reader to
discover about them. However, it would have been nice to know them as one does their best
friend. I know so much about my best friends and yet I am still able to learn new things or
discuss new topics; having that relationship with my characters would enable me to determine if
I am writing them correctly. When I was writing for NaNoWriMo, my characters were mere
acquaintances; I was just beginning to learn about them. By the end of NaNoWriMo, I knew
Heather, Zoe, and especially Cornelius much better than the other characters.
The biggest lesson I learned from NaNoWriMo was addressed in the very first pep talk the participants of NaNo received: “Maybe some writers enjoy the first draft – the part of the writing process when anything is possible, and you’re out there forging your own path. I hate that part […] First drafts always make me feel anxious and a little desperate” (Rowell Oct 29, 2013). When I am writing the first draft, I have a hard time even starting. I often stare at my screen as I contemplate what I could write, and instead of writing my ideas down, I continue staring and begin to grow anxious and desperate. NaNoWriMo has taught me that I am the type of writer who needs to get everything I can on the page before I can truly begin working with it. With nothing on the page, I get nowhere, nor is there anything to fix, clarify, or reorder.

After getting words down on the page, I am able to take a step back and begin to think in a different light. I can ask and answer questions that I may not have been able to during the actual writing period, such as what would happen if I told a specific scene through a different perspective or if I altered the order of the events within the plot. During the actual writing, I have one path in mind that does not often allow for deviations. When I remove myself from the story, I am able to consider the different angles from which I can approach a scene.

Once November and NaNoWriMo was over, I was given the chance to take a break from my story. I took that break and a month after the end of November, Jenny, Tia and I were able to talk about our stories without stressing out or cringing at how horrific we thought our stories were. Analyzing my story, I realized the narration was all over the place, and fully realized that the narration style I originally chose, limited third person/free indirect discourse, did not work for the story I was trying to create.

As I discussed my story with friends and thought about it, the more I recognized that Cornelius Denholm is its pivotal character. He masterminds all the characters and cultists into
the house, and arranges a way to stay out of the proceedings to keep himself out of danger. Since he was the main character, why was I not telling the story through his point of view? In one scene Heather questions how Cornelius will know if they leave or not, and he makes the flippant remark that he will be watching them through the security cameras. The narration could follow him as he observes different people entering different rooms. At any time I may decide to remove the distance the video provides and be in the room with a character so that the reader may experience the events first hand. After arriving at the conclusion that the narration was not working, I wanted to highlight Cornelius. He was both an original character and the character who experienced the most growth over the course of NaNoWriMo. I thought centering the story on him would separate it even further from the game and its characters, because he would be watching them through a video feed. My story was already distinguished from the game by its focus on an original character; it would become further removed by having him watch the other characters through a video feed instead of being in the rooms with them.

While I was writing during NaNoWriMo, my story almost exactly followed the proceedings in the game, but given a chance to distance myself, I was able to figure out ways in which it could deviate from the game and thereby make it more my own. I considered removing unnecessary characters, changing the order in which the characters entered the rooms, and integrating the characters’ back stories throughout the story instead of just in the beginning.

NaNoWriMo taught me many valuable lessons about my own writing and how to approach it in the future, such as the need to outline and percolate on my characters before writing them. NaNoWriMo was also a test, a challenge, to discover how I would handle writing under stress within a finite amount of time. It enabled me to see what I was made of and to see where I needed to improve. While at the time that I was experiencing NaNo, the stress of
everything I was required to do was supremely challenging, but looking back the experience itself was rather fun. I bonded with my two best friends in a way I never have before. We all experienced struggles and the madness born of trying to write a 50,000 word story in a month. When I first realized that there was no way that I would accomplish the 50,000 words, I became upset and angry. But one author sent a pep talk that made it apparent how absurd that feeling was:

If at the end of this month, you find you haven’t written a novel […], and have that ‘Shucks, I didn’t write a novel’ feeling: laugh at yourself.

Seriously, think about it: you just got a little angry at yourself because you didn’t write a novel. In a month. Ha! I would have never guessed I’d ever think that. Let alone complain about it. So instead think this: ‘Shucks, I didn’t write a novel. Neither did about seven billion other people. But I tried. (Reichle Nov 23, 2013)

What I did was crazy, ridiculous, stressful, hard, exhilarating, and highly educational. I do not know if I will try it again, but I am exceptionally glad I participated this past November.
Works Cited*


*All works cited have been attached to this document
From NaNoWriMo
Sent at October 29, 2013 14:05
Subject Pep Talk from Rainbow Rowell

Dear Writer,

I was very skeptical about NaNoWriMo at first.

It seemed like something that amateur writers would do. Or young writers. People who needed to be tricked into finishing their books. I’d already written two books by October 2011, and sold them to publishers, and I couldn’t imagine writing either of them—or anything good—in a month.

That’s not writing, I thought, that’s just piling up words.

But then I thought about how wonderful it would be to have a pile of 50,000 words…

Maybe some writers enjoy the first draft—the part of the writing process when anything is possible, and you’re out there forging your own path. I hate that part. All I can think about when I’m starting a book are all the words I haven’t written yet. I actually feel them, hanging around my neck, tugging at me. First drafts always make me feel anxious and a little desperate—like, “Oh God, I just need to get all of this out and on paper, so that I have something to work with.”

I like having something to work with.

That’s why I eventually decided to try NaNoWriMo—to fast-forward through that desperate, blank-page phase and get to the good stuff. I told myself that it didn’t matter if my first draft was bad. All my books have required major revisions, anyway. And even if NaNoWriMo was a complete waste of time—if I ended up with a chaotic mess—a month isn’t much time to waste. (Not compared to the five years I worked on my first novel before showing it to anyone.)

Maybe because my expectations were low, I didn’t have a detailed strategy for the month: I took a few days off work, and warned my husband and kids that I was going to be gone a lot until Thanksgiving. And I set three goals:

- To write every day.
- To write at least 2,000 words every day.
- And—this was crucial for me—to keep moving forward.

Normally I start each writing session by rewriting whatever I wrote in my last session. With Fangirl, my NaNoWriMo project, I picked up wherever I’d left off and kept moving. I never looked back.
What I noticed right away was how easy it was for me to pick up. One of my challenges as an author is staying inside the fictional world I’m creating. I have to write in blocks (at least four hours at a time, at least four days in a row) to make any progress. During NaNoWriMo, I never left the world of the book long enough to lose momentum.

I stayed immersed in the story all month long, and that made everything come so much smoother than usual. I got a much quicker grasp on the main characters and their voices. The plotlines shot forward…

I mean, I still didn’t know whether what I’d written was any good. (I hadn’t even read it all in one piece!) But I was so excited about the novel, I wanted to write every day. And even when I wasn’t writing, my brain was still working on the story.

So… I didn’t actually finish my book that November. I met the word goal, but was only about halfway done with Fangirl. I continued working on it through January, then did a pretty heavy rewrite the next spring. Here’s something that really shocked me during my revisions: I kept almost every word I wrote during NaNoWriMo.

That 50,000-word pile I made wasn’t a mess at all. It’s some of the bravest writing I’ve ever done, and it includes my all-time favorite character, a guy I think I would’ve second-guessed to death under normal circumstances. NaNoWriMo helped me push past so many of my doubts and insecurities and bad habits. And I think that’s partly why I love Fangirl so much now—because I remember how swept away I felt when I was writing it.

Pretty neat trick.
From 🌟NaNoWriMo
Sent at October 31, 2013 14:05
Subject Pep Talk from James Patterson

So Writer, you’re trying to write a novel in 30 days. Has anyone told you you’re crazy yet?

You’re not crazy. I promise. I know because I’ve written a novel in a couple of months. And yes, I’m a human being (just ask my editor, or my wife) and I do sleep. The book even got published. So anyone who tells you it’s impossible is wrong and you should probably stop taking their advice. Unless it’s your mom. Then just stop taking her advice about writing (you should still floss once a day).

There’s no getting around the fact that it’s hard, though, is there? By now you know that better than anyone. Maybe you should give up on this whole novel business and go relax. Or work at a paying job. But I say, keep at it. Because, like I said, it’s possible. And as you must suspect, it’s a pretty fantastic feeling to have written a book.

So how do you do it? Here are some tips on making it to December 1 without going crazy or giving up. (Though if you have to do one of them, I’ve always found sanity overrated.)

**Outline.** If you already have: gold star; proceed to the next piece of advice. If you didn’t, don’t worry, because it’s never too late to go back and make an outline. An outline isn’t something to be scared of, it’s just a chapter-by-chapter description of the scenes that, lined-up together, make your book. On the count of three, tell me the story that unfolds in your novel. All the way to the last chapter. Now write that down. There’s your outline. Easy, right?

**Lie to yourself.** Honesty is a great quality, but we’re writing fiction here, so you’d better get used to a little light lying. Tell yourself you can do this. Tell yourself your book will be great. The world will love it and you’ll be the next J.K. Rowling, J.D. Salinger, Art Spiegelman, or whatever flavor of author you hope to become.

**Get into a writing routine.** Think it’s hard to write every day during NaNo? Most professional writers keep this kind of pace all year round. Holidays, birthdays, vacations—you name it, we’re writing. The trick is making writing into a daily habit. Same time. Same place. Same hot beverage of choice. Every. Single. Day. Again. And. Again.

**Don’t do it alone.** If you live with somebody, tell them to be unpleasant to you if they see you doing anything else during your writing time. Buy them a water gun. If you live alone, have friends call and check on you. And if you have no friends, you will have no trouble writing a
book in 30 days. What else do you have to do? (I’m not knocking friendless people. We’ve all been there.)

**Don’t stress.** I don’t mean to undermine the above, but remember this is one month, not your entire writing career. Try hard, learn from it, and if you don’t get to 50,000 words, figure out what you did wrong so you can get there next time.

**Stop reading this.** Start writing. Now. (Or at midnight your time.)

James
Hello there everybody,

To be honest, I’m not entirely sure what I should write here. Though I’ve known about NaNoWriMo for ages, I’ve only done it once before.

But this is supposed to be a pep talk, so I get the impression that I’m supposed to cheer you on. Inspire you. Encourage you keep NaNoWriMo-ing for all you’re worth.

So. You’re awesome. You know that, right? We’re all writers here. We’re awesome by definition.

Consider yourself cheered.

Now, I’m going to encourage you to break the rules.

I’m not talking about the little rules—grammar stuff like avoiding sentence fragments and ending sentences with prepositions. (Though I encourage breaking those rules, too.)

I’m not even talking about the bigger rules that pretty much everyone agrees on, like Write What You Know, Avoid Adverbs, and Don’t Use The Passive Voice. (Though I can take or leave those rules, as well.)

No. I’m going to encourage you to break the rules of NaNoWriMo itself.

I know what you’re supposed to do here. You’re supposed to start from scratch. Start a new novel and blaze a trail, always moving forward. And most importantly, never ever go back and revise.

And these aren’t bad rules. They encourage you to learn the one true rule of writing. The rule which is absolutely inviolate and true:

1. Yay, Verily. You Must Sit Down and Write.

1a. Thou shalt not go see a movie instead. Or watch reality TV. Thou shalt write. No. Stop. You don’t need to clean out the fridge right now. Neither dost thou need to sort the recycling. I’m not even kidding. Go and write.

1b. Thou shalt not just think about writing. Seriously. That is not writing. The worst unpublished novel of all-time is better than the brilliant idea you have in your head. Why? Because the worst novel ever is written down. That means it’s a book, while your idea is just an idle fancy. My dog
used to dream about chasing rabbits; she didn’t write a novel about chasing rabbits. There is a difference.

1c. Thou shalt not read, either. I know it’s book-related, but it’s not actually writing. Yes, even if it’s a book about how to write. Yes, even if you’re doing research. You can research later. Sit. Down. Write.

NaNoWriMo’s rules are useful because they force you to attend to that one singular Platonic Truth, as outlined above.

That said, I’m going to encourage you to break those rules.

NaNoWriMo is great at teaching you to blaze a trail, but you can have too much of a good thing. I’ve known people who start from scratch every year because that’s part of the rules, and they’ve ended up with a string of half-finished, 50,000-word novels.

So I say unto you: You don’t have to start entirely from scratch. (But you can’t count previously written words in your word count. Obviously.)

NaNoWriMo says you shouldn’t go back and revise. But honestly, writing is all about revision. So if you realize you need to change something three chapters back, go and do it. Sure it means you aren’t constantly churning out words, but it makes your story better. Writing good stories is why we’re all here, right?

So I say unto you: Revise sometimes.

NaNoWriMo says that you shouldn’t switch between projects. When I did NaNoWriMo a couple years ago, I moved back and forth between my start-from-scratch project and the third book in my trilogy. Why? Because I had a brilliant idea for a scene in Book Three. Something that I was excited to write.

Why would I ignore that impulse? When you’re enthusiastic, the writing comes quick and easy. And do you think my editor cried any tears that I’d broken that particular rule? Do you think my readers were pissed? No. No they weren’t.

So I say unto you: Follow your enthusiasm.

Now in the interest of full disclosure, I lost NaNoWriMo when I did all these things. I only wrote about 35,000 words. I did not get bragging rights, the special icon on my profile, or a cool T-shirt.

But I learned some things, and I improved my craft.

Is there a moral to this story? Not really. I’m just a contrary person by nature, and I like encouraging people to think about all their options.
As a writer, considering your options means thinking about what part of your craft you’re looking to improve. So if you’re the sort of writer who needs practice getting words down (like me), maybe the strict NaNoWriMo ruleset is for you. But then again, maybe not…

Either way, the most important thing is to get in there and do it. Sit. Down. Write.

Pat
Wrimos,

I should be here to give some advice. But I don't feel like doing that. Instead, I think I'll brag. Not about writing, as you may expect. Not even about something positive. In fact, my bragging will serve as a cautionary tale.

I am the world's premier procrastinator.

I'm sure some will challenge my title, and I'm sure that I will waste countless hours defending myself from such offenders.

Now I'm sure that some of you are perfect writers, who have never procrastinated for a second of your lives, and I'm sure some of you have as nearly as bad a case of the procrastinatoids as I do. Either way, do your best to avoid following my dark path of tangential Google searches and unnecessary word-count updating. Or else you'll end up like me, writing a pep talk when you should be writing your NaNo-novel—and when you should really be doing your Spanish homework. (Or trying to do all three at once.)

Procrastination can occasionally be a useful thing. The one thing procrastination is good for is building an "information base." Some forms of procrastination will help your novel, because they build information you can use later on. But ten minutes of your life are valuable, so don't spend them on the wrong things. Like arguing. I just spent ten minutes of my November winning an argument about word processors. During National Novel Writing Month, you'll only have room for 21,000 10-minute arguments, and that's if you wake up at six and argue all day.

In my opinion, if you can wake up at six and write all day, instead of arguing or procrastinating in other useless ways, then you can do just about anything.

I think I'll assume the aforementioned super-writer is not particularly interested in my pep talk. I think I'll assume you are all mere mortals like me. And if my assumptions prove correct, then you should be writing rather than reading right now.

And if you are exactly like me, fellow procrastinators, then you'll have paid no attention to that last sentence and will be reading this one just to see what it says. And, hopefully, by the end of this sentence, we'll have a few more writers working and a couple fewer link-clickers, font-
changers, and word-deleters. I know this won't solve everyone's problems, though. I know there will still be at least one procrastinator left.

Don't go down the darker path, Wrimos. Every word you delete, every font you change, and every link you click will bring you closer to my hopeless state. Even when devoid of inspiration, keep writing seemingly dumb, uninspired words until November's up. Then read them, and you may discover that they're more inspired than you originally thought.

One last thing, and bear with me.

If at the end of this month, you find you haven't written a novel (as I will probably find), and have that "Shucks, I didn't write a novel" feeling: laugh at yourself.

Seriously, think about it: you just got a little angry at yourself because you didn't write a novel. In a month. Ha! I would have never guessed I'd ever think that. Let alone complain about it. So instead think this: "Shucks. I didn't write a novel. Neither did about seven billion other people. But I tried. So there."

Tai
Dear Wrimos,

Of everything I have ever learned as a literary agent and as a writer, there is one lesson that I think is more important than any other: you must write for your life.

And so this is for those of you who have always known that you wanted to be a writer, and for those of you who write every day. It’s for those of you who have yet to put a single word on paper, too. It’s for those of you who are lonely, hopeless, and depressed, and to those of you who have never suffered a day in your life.

This is what I know:

Sometimes if you haven’t touched your laptop in a while, you begin to fear it. You’re afraid to start typing and you’re afraid not to start typing. Writing becomes a stranger—and without realizing it, you’ve closed the door on your closest friend, your imagination.

You’ve got to honor your imagination, for it is your ally.

The good news is that the simple act of getting words down again instantly un-sticks you! Writing moves your thoughts and feelings through you and out into the world, and the doors of possibility and wonder open before you again. Just like magic, you are free.

I learned this the hard way.

There was a time in my life, not too long ago, of utter darkness. We had moved from New York City to the suburbs so that our children could have a backyard to play in. It was a catastrophic move for me. I craved the anonymity and solitude of the city, but found myself surrounded by neighbors—I didn’t know how to be in this new world. I did not fit in. I felt trapped. After some time, I didn’t see the world in color anymore either, only grey, and after more time, I didn’t want to get up in the morning.

And then a character, Dessert Schneider, came charging into my life. I didn’t know that my white knight, the one who would save my life, would appear to me in the form of a conniving, confident, bossy third grader who demanded I write her story. I opened the door a crack—and then eventually I opened the door all the way, and I wrote her novel, in her voice—my fingers were on fire. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was writing for my life—I was writing my way out of the darkness and into the light—into believing in myself again, reacquainting myself with my imagination.

The world is at your fingertips, literally. Just as you need to breathe, just as you need sunlight, just as you need water—if you’re a word person, you need to write. Sometimes you may know
where you are going, and other times you may be embarking on the long road to possibly nowhere—it doesn’t matter—you’re getting the words out.

Writing fuels your imagination, which makes you want to write more. And your imagination is always loyal, and it will save your life if necessary, as it did for me. Your imagination is there in the loneliest of times, and in the joyful times, too.

Write for your life.

Holly