
Taking the NaNoWriMo Challenge

The 50K Word Race You'll Love

By Sandy Bernstein

What drives a writer to take part in a month-long novel-writing contest that involves grinding out a minimum of 1,667 words, or three and a half pages, each day to reach a goal of 50,000 words in thirty days, knowing there is no monetary reward? I can speak only for myself, as I was one of millions of people taking part in the National Novel Writing Month contest known as NaNoWriMo that runs annually during the month of November.

NaNo was started by author Chris Baty ten years ago and it's still going strong. In fact, it isn't just national; it's now a worldwide event on the Web at www.nanowrimo.org, where writers participate by signing in and setting up their own pages. Once you've done this, you can write an author profile and upload your photo, synopsis, and even excerpts of your work. There is also an e-mail buddy list and posting board (broken down by regions), where people can chat and set up write-ins in local coffee houses or bookstores, all in an effort to support one another. Along with all of these goodies, there is a word counter on every writer's page, so you can officially track your efforts. The novel is then dumped, and all that remains is your word total. NaNo is a contest in which your work is not judged; in fact, no one can read your story unless you set up an excerpt. The only thing that counts, literally, is the number of words. And yes, you do get something for all your hard work. At the end of the month, once you've uploaded your novel for the last time, the counter spits out the total, declaring you a winner, or not. The prize is a certificate you download from the site, along with a few thumbnail badges you can place on your own Web site stating that you are a winner. The only downside, if there is one, is that you are strictly writing a very rough draft. It is advised that you do not edit as you go or you'll never reach the goal.

With all this in mind, you might wonder why bother at all; for that matter, why not cheat? Yes, there are several ways you could do so, but why would you? You would only be shortchanging yourself. As I've learned, NaNo is more than the end result of accomplishing a tough task. It's a month-long journey of inner discoveries, as the instructor who ran the workshop told us the week before it began. And he was right.

I must admit that the experience was an unexpected wild ride, not at all just a lesson in self-discipline, as I first thought. It was a month full of ups and downs, and staying focused was never easy. In the beginning the challenge is daunting and seems impossible, but instead of dreading my time at the computer every day, I began to look forward to it. What was hard for me was not editing. NaNo is designed for writers to write and not get bogged down by the editing process—or even much plotting, for that matter. It's writing by the seat of your pants. You attempt it with little or no plot in mind. You sit down, you write. It's that simple. It's all about the word count. It's about getting out that novel in you. The contest forces you to stick with your story no matter what, as there are many daily interruptions that can easily take you off course. But it's more than just piling up words on a page every day and sticking to a routine, as I discovered in the first week. Oh, I must admit there were days when I was riding a wave of excitement. Scenes played out and characters sprang to life, building suspense and intrigue until the wave finally crested as yet another wave formed on the horizon. So, too, were there days when the waves lacked energy and barely swelled, leaving the story line and characters flat. Many times I wanted to give up, but something kept pushing me forward. Maybe it was the millions of writers across the planet frantically typing away, sweating out the hours and days in order to reach a common goal. It seemed as if we were all joined as one, running a

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sound therapy—function to heal us. I like to think of that inner ear as metaphorical as well as physical; as a gateway, not just to physical healing and well-being but as a portal to our perception of the world around us.

Sight is so often given dominance over sound. “Don’t believe anything you hear and only half of what you see,” we’re cautioned, then told, “When you teach, use visual aids because people remember what they see, not what they hear.” People also say, “I see what you mean” to indicate that they understand what you’re saying.

I’d like to suggest just the opposite, that it is sound (in the case of human interaction, voice) that is more important. Our earliest “literary” traditions were oral. Our storytellers (note the concept of *telling* stories) recited stories before we wrote them down. Babies hear, even in the womb, long before they can see and read, and they learn from that hearing.

Think back to the lead of this article. It began as a scene, a brief conversation, a dialogue, an exchange of spoken words between two people. You knew that through visual cues—quote marks, attribution, and a narrator that provided a framework.

If that dialogue had any impact, aside from its meaning, it was because you, as a reader, eavesdropped on a conversation, much as you might eavesdrop on a scene in a stage play or screenplay. If this article caught your attention, it was partly through that lead, which contained three separate voices, mine as a writer-narrator, mine as a speaking participant in the conversation, and my former boss’s as a speaker in the same conversation.

The lead was concrete—real, physical, and sensory—because it contained real voices that appealed to the reader’s ear as well as to his or her eye. We’re told to always “show, not tell,” to bring as many sensations as possible into a piece of writing. What better way to reach the whole person than by appealing to both the sense of sight and the sense of sound?

A few paragraphs above this sentence, I placed two of what I believe are fallacies about the dominance of *seeing* in quotation marks, indicating that someone had said them. Actually, I’ve read and heard that advice dozens of times in dozens of contexts, and you probably have, too. They stood out, not because of the quotation marks, but because of the switch in speakers, the introduction of other voices that those quotation marks signaled. Going back more than fifty years, I can actually see and hear an old high school English teacher of mine saying the one and my father saying the other.

And rather than just producing voice, you have to produce and reproduce a variety of real voices.

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marathon of sorts, trying to get to the finish line. I don’t know what drove me, but I do know that once I was in the throes of it, all I really cared about was the story.

In the end, I uploaded the novel two days early and exceeded the 50,000 words. I made it through the contest, but the story didn’t end there. It took thirty days to write, and I’m sure it will take the better part of a year to edit and turn it into something I hope will be marketable. Thanks to NaNo, I now have something I can work with, something I can salvage from the wreck of writing at such a fast pace. And that was the point.

“You will write a lot of crap,” the instructor told us. “From that pile you will find something salvageable.” It is that something you take to the editing table, where the hard work really begins. Will I do it again this November? I hope so, if I can tear myself away from the rewrite. In the meantime, I hope to savor the effects. I want to recall that freeing experience I had and give myself permission to just let go whenever the editing wears me down. I want to feel I can write with such abandon again while constructing a story I believe in and enjoy the process of watching my characters change and grow. I need to be reminded that I can look at things differently by stepping outside of myself for a while, for that is the real joy of this or any writing project. It’s the creative part, where the writer’s own heart beats upon the page as the souls of the characters carry the reader away. That is what remains when the month is over.

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WRITERS'
Journal



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March 30, annually

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1st Prize \$250.00
2nd Prize \$100.00
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