
Improvisation--Twelve Steps for putting your planning to work, and letting your creativity thrive.

Join Best-selling, Romantic Times award-winning author Anna DeStefano as she discusses a Twelve-Step plan for leaving good preparation behind and finishing your first draft.

1. Planning is key. Revisions will come. But nothing happens until something happens
 - I'm a big planner, but... Planning, unfortunately, ISN'T doing.
 - Revisions (rewriting) are where I do my best work, but... If there's nothing to revise, I'm hosed!
 - Over-planning and revising are gateway symptoms of a writer's dirtiest secret: **We thrive on procrastination.**
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2. Is there a method to being spontaneous?

You bet!

- "Book in a Week?" What a great idea. Sign me up!

For the uninitiated, that's hard-core procrastinator-speak for, "Where's the twelve-step program?" (See Item #3 Below)

- The concept of "Book in a Week" was custom built for an over-planning, over-revising junkie like me. Procrastination, be-gone! Who knew it could be this easy!

Okay, back to the real world.

Don't get me started on the gruesome details of what BIAW looked like my first time out.

- BIAWK carnage can be avoided with a minimum of planning--combined with a maximum of self-confidence--as you dip your toes outside the comfort of what you know and what you can control.

Improvisation only works if you're willing to let go and let the first draft happen.

Which leads us to...

3. Twelve EASY steps through procrastination to "effortless" improvisation

Step #1--Accept your fear of the unknown

Improvising your way through the first draft of a new story takes guts.

(BTW, I'm avoiding finishing a book now, as I write this outline ;O)

- "Conquer your fear," my senior editor says (waving at Harlequin Superromance's Laura Shin).
- "Ignore it," is more my mantra, when I sit down to improv.

The word "conquer" gives the fear too much importance.

- **Fear is a way of life in our business. So is writing through it.**
- **Expect the fear, understand its symptoms and the tools you need to work through it, then give a no-big-deal shrug and move on.**

Step #2--Childhood flashback... It feels good to play!

When we weren't picked to be on the team as kids, we couldn't wait for our chance to get out there and show them our stuff. It felt better to play, than it did to watch.

When everyone around you is producing, but you can't finish your draft, don't pout. Want what your fellow writers have badly enough to get out there and play!

Harness that niggle of envy. You're the only one who can make yourself get to work. **Motivation to FINISH the draft is everything.**

Step #3--More kid's stuff... No rules are the best rules!

Free play is the best way, we've been told, for children to learn.

We as writers learn the most from our characters and first draft process, when we don't tie our hands with rules. Let your planning guide you, but let it go when your story or your characters start talking to you.

Practice writing with direction, but without limitations. You're still exploring your story and what you have to say--brainstorming, if you will. **Trust the process of improvisation... trust your creative gift.**

Step #4--Remember, this is supposed to be fun.

If you hate the drafting process, you're going to end up hating what you write. Don't do that to your story or yourself.

If writing is something you want to do for a living, you can't hate the process. **Don't worry about results at this point. Rediscover your joy in the process, and fall in love with your new story.**

Step #5--Flashing back again. Get dirty... It's fun!

Write junk. Remember, nothing happens until something happens. It's going to be rough, and you'd rather die than let someone else read it. But it's the dirty beginning to something fabulous...

Get the dirty stuff down, so you've got something to rewrite to perfection!!!

Step #6--Find your groove. Momentum is your friend.

When you hit your stride while you're drafting, when you start to dance, drop everything else and ride the wave. Let whatever story spark catches your interest take the lead, and see where it takes you.

This is where your preparation and knowledge of craft will kick in. You've done all the work... Now it's time to play!!

Whatever you do, don't let the momentum spook you. Don't quit, even if you think you're writing gibberish.

Improvisation often sounds like gibberish to the untrained ear.

Step #7--When one week turns into two...

The timeframe isn't important. Stay focused on the process, be realistic, and the output will happen.

The more drafts you write, the better you'll learn your own pace.
Whatever you do, don't compare your output to someone else's!

Step #8--Let your characters surprise you.

That's improvisation. That's the good stuff.

Congratulations, you're getting the hang of it!! Make notes, keep track of what you're learning, but don't dare tell the characters you know better.

Trust the creativity inside you to fill your first draft with color and **depth and complexity you couldn't have known about in the planning stage.**

You're only goal at this point is to get to The End so you can see how it all plays out!

Step #9--Don't look back until you get to Step 12.

You don't want to miss what comes next. It's the chic in the horror film who looks behind her, who misses the importance of the scary guy with the knife looming in the next doorway.

Spend your energies on pushing forward. Looking back will consume you once you reach the rewriting stage.

Don't miss your cliff-hanger because you've caved into the fear of what you've already survived.

Step #10--Don't quit now!

Don't you dare ask, "Are we there yet?" Don't make me come back there!

Improvisation is exhausting, both emotionally and creatively. Harder than planning or rewriting, because you're taking a leap of faith that you can finish this *\$#\$%! manuscript.

Keep going, because that's what writers do!

Step #11--Don't look down!

The downside of writing ugly, is knowing you're going to have to come back and pretty this mess up.

Revisions are a given. Devotion to writing the most creative, true-to-your-characters first draft produces the material you'll use to rewrite.

Stay focused on improvisation. You'll be glad you did ;O)

Step #12--THE END!!!!

Celebrate. Take a peak. Enjoy what you've discovered. Then head straight back to the beginning.

Time to put your planning and story draft to work, and rewrite your project into a masterpiece.

8. Questions and answers

Bio

Anna DeStefano

Nationally best-selling, award-winning romance author Anna DeStefano (www.annawrites.com) is the president of Georgia Romance Writers (GRW), a group of over 300 published authors and aspiring writers that meets monthly in Atlanta.

Anna has successfully channeled her skills as a Senior Tech Writer into the more creative field of writing contemporary fiction. A GA Tech honors graduate with 10 years of experience working in Corporate IT, Anna applies the more analytical side of her personality to the study of the craft of storytelling, but her imagination rules when it's time to let the planning go and write.

The result—four award-winning novels published since 2004, with three more to be released in 2007, and nearly half a million copies of her books in print in over 6 different languages. Her interactive workshops on the writing process—plotting through character, improvisation, and rewriting—regularly attract standing-room-only crowds wherever she speaks.

Visit Anna at www.annawrites.com for more information about her emotional, heartwarming books—she has three out this year and is launching a new Superromance series, Atlanta Heroes, in October. She's constantly giving away fun prizes—purses!—on her website and her blog, www.annadestefano.blogspot.com.