The Snowflake Method
By Randy Ingermanson

**Story**
- 1 sentence
  - protagonist
  - issue
- 5 sentences
  - setup
  - 3 major disasters
  - ending
- 5 paragraphs
  - 1 paragraph for each of the 5 sentences
- 5 pages
  - 1 page for each of the 5 paragraphs
- List of scenes
  - list scenes required for each of the 5 pages

**Main Characters**
- 1 page each
  - 1 sentence summary of character’s storyline
  - essentials:
    - motivation (abstract)
    - goal (concrete)
    - conflict (what prevents them from reaching their goal?)
    - epiphany (what do they learn? how do they change? Character should be different at the end of the book from the way they were at the beginning.)
  - 1 paragraph summary of the character’s storyline
- secondary characters
  - ½ page each
  - traits & story from their pov
- expand into a full-fledged chart detailing everything above

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INTRO
There are thousands of different methods to write a novel and this is just one of them. It’s here for you to take a look through, pick out whatever helps and ignore the rest.

A few important points before we start:
Quick note from me:

Everything here is extracted from Ingermanson’s article—the idea and sometimes even entire sentences. It’s plagiarism to the extreme. So all credit goes to him.

In the Snowflake Method, Ingermanson jumps repeatedly from plot to character. This is because he believes intertwining elements helps the creative process. That is, working on characters may provide insights into plot and vice versa. To help center you (and myself), I have labelled the element in focus for each step.

Notes regarding the method:
As you go through this process, you may find that you need to go back and revise your answer to earlier steps. This is expected and in fact, encouraged.

Or in explicit terms: nothing here has to be perfect. Purpose of each step is to advance you to the next step. Keep your momentum. You can always go back and fix things when you understand your story better.

How to escape a snowflake:
That’s exactly how you design a novel—start small and build up.

The 10-Step Design Process
WHY DESIGN?
Why outline, plot or plan? Because your memory is fallible, and your creativity has probably left a lot of holes in your story—holes you need to fill before you start writing your novel.

Step 1:
DURATION: 1 hour
ACTIVITY/ACTION: Write a one-sentence summary of your novel.

EXAMPLE:
“A rogue physicist travels back in time to kill the apostle Paul.” (The summary of Ingermanson’s first novel, Transgression.)

TIPS on what makes a good sentence:
• Shorter is better. Try for fewer than 15 words.
• No character names! Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe”.

Step 2:
DURATION: 1 hour
ACTIVITY/ACTION: Expand that sentence to a full paragraph describing:
1. the story setup
3. major disasters (each disaster equals a quarter of the book)
   i. Disaster 1: external circumstances
   ii. Disaster 2: protagonist’s attempts to “fix things”
   iii. Disaster 3: protagonist’s attempts to “fix things” (things just get worse and worse)
3. the ending (last quarter of the book)

NOTE: Do not confine this paragraph with the back-cover copy of your book. This paragraph summarizes the whole story. Your back-cover copy should summarize only about the first quarter of the story (i.e., only the first disaster that gets the story going).

Step 3:
DURATION: 1 hour (per character)
ACTIVITY/ACTION: For each of your major characters, write a one-page summary sheet that includes:
• Name
• A one-sentence summary of the character’s storyline
• Motivation (what does he/she want abstractly?)
• Goal (what does he/she want concretely?)
• Conflict (what prevents him/her from reaching this goal?)
• Epiphany (what will he/she learn, how will he/she change?)
• A one-paragraph summary of the character’s storyline (i.e., the story through your character’s eyes.)

Step 4:
DURATION: Several hours
ACTIVITY/ACTION: By this stage, you should have a good idea of the large-scale structure of your novel, and you may have spent as much as a week on it. If the story is broken, you know it now, rather than after investing 500 hours in a rambling first draft.

Now just keep growing the story.

Step 5:
DURATION: 1-2 days
ACTIVITY/ACTION: Expand the one-page plot synopsis of the novel to a four-page synopsis (i.e., expand each paragraph from step 4 into a full page).

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

Step 6:
By now, you have a solid story and several story-threads, one for each character.

Step 7:
DURATION: 1-4 weeks
ACTIVITY/ACTION: Expand the character descriptions into full-fledged character charts detailing everything there is to know about each character:
• the standard stuff: birthdate, description, history, motivation, goal, etc.
• most importantly: how will this character change by the end of the novel?

NOTES:
• Expansion of your work in step 3
• You can go back and revise steps 1-4 as your characters become “real” to you and begin making pertinent demands on the story.
• Take as much time as you need to do this, because you’re saving time downstream. It may take a full month of solid effort to finish this step.

Step 8:
DURATION: 1 week
ACTIVITY/ACTION: Take the four-page synopsis and make a list of all the scenes that you’ll need to turn the story into a novel.

One line for each scene, with the following suggested column headings:
• POV character
• Scene description

After you’re done listing all the scenes:
• Chapters

NOTES:
Can be as large as 100 lines (i.e., scenes) long. You can save different versions of the story. Incredibly valuable for analysing a story.

Step 9:
OPTIONAL (Ingermanson no longer does this step)

Step 10:
ACTIVITY/ACTION: You can now sit down and start pounding out the first draft of your novel.

Midway through, fix the broken parts of your design documents. (Remember, they’re fluid structures, they weren’t meant to be perfect on the first go. They are a living set of documents that changes and grows as you develop your novel. If you’ve done your job right, at the end of the first draft you will laugh at what an amateurish piece of junk your original design documents were. And you’ll be thrilled at how deep your story has become.)

NOTES:
You might think that all the creativity is chewed out of the story by this time. Well, no, not unless you overdid your analysis when you wrote your Snowflake. This is supposed to be the fun part, because there are many small-scale logic problems to work out here. None does hero get out of that tree surrounded by alligators and rescue heroine who’s in the burning rowboat? This is the time to figure it out! But it’s fun because you already know that the large-scale structure of the novel works. So you only have to solve a limited set of problems, and so you can write relatively fast.
# The Snowflake Method

By Randy Ingermanson

## Activity: Write a one-sentence summary of your novel.

### Example:

“A rogue physicist travels back in time to kill the apostle Paul.”

(From Ingermanson’s novel, Transgression.)

### Tips on what makes a good sentence:

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 15 words.
- **No character names!** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Do not confuse this paragraph with the back-cover copy of your book. This paragraph summarizes the whole story. Your back-cover copy should summarize only about the first quarter of the story (i.e., only the first disaster that gets the story going).

## Activity: Expand that sentence to a full paragraph describing:

### Example:

1. **the story setup**
   - Disaster #1: external circumstances
   - Disaster #2: protagonist’s attempts to “fix things”
   - Disaster #3: protagonist’s attempts to “fix things” (things just get worse and worse)
   - the ending (last quarter of the book)

(From Ingermanson’s novel, Transgression.)

### Tips on what makes a good paragraph:

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 25 words.
- **No character names.** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Now just keep growing the story.

## Activity: For each of your major characters, write a one-page summary sheet that includes:

### Example:

- **Character Name: **
- **Plot summary of the character’s storyline:**
  - how will this character change by the end of the novel?

(From Ingermanson’s novel, Transgression.)

### Tips on what makes a good one-page summary sheet:

- The Snowflake Method is designed to capture the essence of your story in a single page. You may find it helpful to start with a rough draft and then refine it over time.

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

## Activity: Expand each sentence of your summary paragraph into a full paragraph.

### Example:

- **Assume you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions.**

### Tips on what makes a good full paragraph:

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 25 words.
- **No character names.** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

## Activity: Expand the one-page summary sheet of the novel to a four-page synopsis (i.e., expand each paragraph from step 4 into a full page).

### Example:

- **Assume you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions.**

### Tips on what makes a good four-page synopsis:

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 25 words.
- **No character names.** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

## Activity: Expand your character descriptions into full-fledged character charts detailing everything there is to know about each character:

### Example:

- **Assume you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions.**

### Tips on what makes a good full-fledged character chart:

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 25 words.
- **No character names.** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

## Activity: Take the four-page synopsis and make a list of all the scenes that you’ll need to turn the story into a novel.

### Example:

- **Assume you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions.**

### Tips on what makes a good list of scenes:

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 25 words.
- **No character names.** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

## Activity: You can now sit down and start pouring out the first draft of your novel.

### Example:

- **Assume you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions.**

### Tips on what makes a good first draft:

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 25 words.
- **No character names.** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

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**About the Author:**

Randy Ingermanson is the author of Transgression, a novel based on the Snowflake Method. He is a retired professor of psychology and a writing coach for NanoWrimo. His other works include Transgression Translated and The Snowflake Method: Writing a Novel in a Weekend. Ingermanson has written about the craft of writing since 1983. He is a member of the National Writers Union and the Mystery Writers of America. His work has been published in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Washington Post. He has also written for the Wall Street Journal and Forbes. Ingermanson has been a guest on NPR and has appeared on CNN and MSNBC. He is the author of more than a dozen books on writing, including the Snowflake Method: Writing a Novel in a Weekend. Ingermanson is a member of the National Writers Union and the Mystery Writers of America. He has written about the craft of writing since 1983. His work has been published in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Washington Post. He has also written for the Wall Street Journal and Forbes. Ingermanson has been a guest on NPR and has appeared on CNN and MSNBC. He is the author of more than a dozen books on writing, including the Snowflake Method: Writing a Novel in a Weekend.

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**Notes:**

- **Shorter is better.** Try for fewer than 25 words.
- **No character names.** Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”

Now you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. You will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier stages as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

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