Step 1 — Choose the Project

What's the purpose of the project? (i.e., get an agent, mass sales, self-satisfaction, writing development, expand a series) This will determine your voice, your style, and any limitations imposed by the purpose. It will also help keep you on track during the slumps.

Does this project interest and excite you enough to get you through the entire process from first draft to final promotion?

Step 2 — Get Down What You Think You Know

Jot down any ideas, characters, scenes, situations, themes, elements of the world or setting, or other aspects of the concept. This might include things like political, social, or magical systems; locations or character traits; rough ideas of the things that made you excited about the concept.

Step 3 — Define the Conflict(s)

There are usually several conflicts within a novel, but there is always one central or core conflict. **There are a number of techniques for defining your core conflict**. Best-selling author Bob Mayers uses a 2 x 2 grid, one column for the protagonist and one for the antagonist (or the two lead characters in a romance) for his genre novels. Row #1 in the grid is each character's goal and row #2 is the obstacle. The obstacle of Character 1 (or the protagonist) is the goal of Character 2 (or antagonists) and vice versa. For example, John's goal is to turn an scenic valley into a golf resort which is the obstacle to the Mary's goal of having the area declared a national park.

Writing coach and author Holly Lisle warns against using big generalities like "John wants to be rich", but to break it down into how or why he expects to achieve the larger goal. This gives you stronger insight into the conflict and the obstacles that the character may face in the journey.

Conflict Grid

John	Mary
Goal: Get rich by building golf resort	**Goal:** Wants land turned into national park
Obstacle: Environmentalist want it a national park	**Obstacle:** Developer wants to build a resort there

Step
4

Rough Out the Basics

Characters:

List:

- **Main Characters** (protagonists, antagonists)(e.g., Harry Potter, Voldemort),
- **Secondary Leads or Primary Supporting Characters** (e.g., Ron Weasley, Snape).
- names,
- what they want (goal),
- what they generally do in the story (e.g., help Harry fight Voldemort),
- anything that defines or distinguishes them (e.g., Hermione is a very quick study & smart),
- how does the character relate to the story (e.g., Ron supports the theme of friendship & family)

Plot:

- **Write a brief statement about what kind of story** (adventure, love, coming of age, thriller, cozy, et al). This determines the tone and emphasis of the novel.
- **Is this a stand alone novel or part of a series?** If part of a series, work out the larger plot and where this book fits into the overall series plot.

- **The End** — you need to know where you are going to avoid wasted time and energy lost in the woods);

- **The Beginning** — this often changes in the process of writing or editing; but for now it's what you think is the beginning of the story);

- **Major Plot Complications/Twists/Scenes/Turning Points/Climaxes** — don't worry about the order or connection of these scenes; you are just jotting down those moments that are in your head and you believe belong in the story at some point; you can organize them later.

Setting and/or World Building

What milieu or sphere does this story take place in? Even in contemporary novels, the environment is different between a story set largely among fifty-somethings in New York and twenty-somethings in Yakima, Washington. Who has the power? What's the cultural or sociological base? Work out your systems: political, science/magic/technology, culture, power structure, sociology, basic climate and geography, basic history (how roughly did this community get to its current state at the start of the novel?) Holly Lisle advocates seeing your world through the eyes of an innocent "asking a million silly questions." "The act of learning these details will make them part of your thoughts, and your mind will know they exist… as a result, the book you write will live within a whole world, and not a Hollywood set…"

Rachel Aaron notes that if you aren't having fun with this, you may want to consider if this is the right book for you to work on right now.

Step 5 Fleshing Out the Plot

Rachel Aaron calls this "filling in the holes." **Begin breaking things down.** You know how the story starts and ends and the highlight (or big) scenes. **Start at the beginning and ask yourself, "What happens next?"**

If you get stuck, jump to the end or a highlight scene, and ask yourself, "How did this happen?" You can then work backwards to where you got stuck before.

If you feel you're in quicksand and can't get out (or figure out how two scenes are connected), you need to figure out why it isn't working. Often it's because you don't know something. Figure out what it is that you don't know and it will pull you out of the quicksand and on into the journey. Rachel Aaron says it's a trade secret that "there's no such thing as an unfixable plot."

When Aaron gets seriously stuck, she works on things other than plot such as characters and world building. **Often focusing on what the villains are doing will get you unstuck.**

Try not to overwork this stage. You want to retain your excitement and enthusiasm. Work until you feel the story and characters have come together for you.

Creating a Foundation Document

Rachel Aaron has found that she can write much faster if she takes time between filling in the holes of plot and character, to create several documents that she can refer to while actually preparing to write each scene. And while Randy Ingermanson and several other authors and writing teachers like Bob Mayer approach plotting a little differently, **everyone recommends writing down some "cheat sheets" to keep handy.**

Consider reviewing your fleshed out plot outline against a tried-and-true structure like John Truby's Building Blocks, Save the Cat!, or even the traditional 20-chapter novel arc. You may spot something that you're missing in your structure that can make all the difference.

Create a timeline of events. This is especially critical in a series where something that happened in an earlier novel affects the current one. It can also show you if there is a pacing problem. Perhaps you may need to add or edit some of the scenes between two highlights to prevent sagging or a rushed feel.

Draw a map or maps of the world in which your story takes place whether it be a small town, an office building, or the Middle Earth. This makes it much easier to know how long does it take to get from point a to point b. Is there a

window there that the protagonist can use to see the killer approach, and if so, can the killer see the protagonist? How many stoplights does the heroine have to consider a marriage proposal? These don't have to be perfect, but roughing out all of the critical locations and space, help you write faster and better.

Rough out who knows what when. These maybe a second timeline on your primary timeline or you may want to do one for each character or critical piece of information. You don't want characters making decisions or acting on information they don't actually have yet.

You should create a chapter by chapter scenes list (unless, like Sir Terry Pratchett, your novels have no chapters, in which case just start writing a very long scenes list). **Rachel Aaron considers this key to writing fast.** She knows what she needs to write next and how it connects. It will also allow identifying any remaining plot holes.

Rachel Aaron recommends doing a "boredom check" at this point. Go through the roughed out scenes list and ask "Does the action lag anywhere? Are there sections or scenes that you can't really see in your mind? Does anything seem missing? Or is anything unnecessary?" Fix dragging scenes and eliminate unnecessary ones.

Step
7

Start Writing Now

But keep in mind that things may still change with your plot or your characters. That's what makes writing so much fun — the adventure of discovery!