

# **The Snowflake Method**

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While accurate information about the originator of the Snowflake Method is hard to pin down, Randy Ingermanson is the person who popularised it. The method is an iterative process that helps a writer develop a story of the scale that a novel represents in a way that matches the natural flow of a writer's ideas about story and character.

In this explanatory piece that outlines the steps of the method, we've also included samples of what the first few steps would look like, just so you can see it with some content.



## Step 1

Take an hour and write a one-sentence summary of your novel. Something like this: **“A self-described loser finds that his real strength is in making other people powerful—very powerful.”**

The sentence will serve you forever as a ten-second selling tool, but, more importantly, it is your touchstone as you build outward from it. It is the big picture—the analog of that big starting triangle in the centre of a snowflake.

Some hints on what makes a good sentence:

- Shorter is better. Try for fewer than 20 words.
- No character names, please! Better to say “a tiny trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe.”
- Tie together the big picture and the personal picture. Which character has the most to lose in this story? Now tell me what he or she wants to win.

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## Step 2

Take about another hour and expand that sentence to a full paragraph describing the story setup, major disasters, and ending of the novel. This is the analog of the second stage of the snowflake.

A good structure for new writers, FYI, is “three disasters plus an ending.” Each of the disasters takes a quarter of the book to develop and the ending takes the final quarter.

If you believe in the Three-Act structure, then the first disaster corresponds to the end of Act 1. The second disaster is the mid-point of Act 2. The third disaster is the end of Act 2, and forces Act 3 which wraps things up. It is OK to have the first disaster be caused by external circumstances, but better when the second and third disasters are caused by the protagonist's attempts to "fix things." Things just get worse and worse.

Ideally, your paragraph will have about five sentences. One sentence to give me the backdrop and story setup. Then one sentence each for your three disasters. Then one more sentence to tell the ending. This paragraph should summarize the whole story.

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### Step 3

The first two steps give you a high-level view of your novel. Now you need something similar for the storylines of each of your characters. Characters are the most important part of any novel, and the time you invest in designing them up front will pay off ten-fold when you start writing. Most novels that fail, fail because this step is missing. For each of your major characters, take about an hour and write a one-page summary sheet that tells:

- The character's name
- A one-sentence summary of the character's storyline
- The character's motivation (what does he/she want abstractly?)
- The character's goal (what does he/she want concretely?)
- The character's conflict (what prevents him/her from reaching this goal?)
- The character's epiphany (what will he/she learn, how will he/she change?)
- A one-paragraph summary of the character's storyline

**An important point:** You may find that you need to go back and revise your one-sentence summary and/or your one-paragraph summary. Go ahead! This is good—it means your characters are teaching you things about your story. It's always okay at any stage of the design process to go back and revise earlier stages. In fact, it's not just okay—it's inevitable. And it's good. Any revisions you make now are revisions you won't need to make later on in a clunky 400-page manuscript.

**Another important point:** It doesn't have to be perfect. The purpose of each step in the design process is to advance you to the next step. Keep your forward momentum. ( $p=mv$ ) You can always come back later and fix it when you understand the story better.

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### Step 4

By this stage, you should have a good idea of the large-scale structure of your novel, and you have only spent a day or two. Well, truthfully, you may have spent as much as a week, but it doesn't matter.

So now just keep growing the story. Take several hours and expand each sentence of your summary paragraph into a full paragraph of its own. All but the last paragraph should end in a disaster. The final paragraph should tell how the book ends.

This is a lot of fun, and at the end of the exercise, you have a pretty decent one-page skeleton of your novel. What matters here is that you are growing the ideas that will go into your story. You are expanding the conflict.

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## **Step 5**

Take a day or two and write up a one-page description of each major character and a half-page description of the other important characters. These "character synopses" should tell the story from the point of view of each character. As always, feel free to cycle back to the earlier steps and make revisions as you learn cool stuff about your characters.

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## **Step 6**

By now, you have a solid story and several story-threads, one for each character. Now take a week and expand the one-page plot synopsis of the novel to a four-page synopsis. Basically, you will again be expanding each paragraph from Step 4 into a full page. This is a lot of fun, because you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. Here, you will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier steps as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

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## **Step 7**

Take another week and expand your character descriptions into full-fledged character charts detailing everything there is to know about each character. The standard stuff such as birthdate, description, history, motivation, goal, etc. Most importantly, how will this character change by the end of the novel? This is an expansion of your work in Step 3, and it will teach you a lot about your characters.

You will probably go back and revise steps 1-6 as your characters become "real" to you and begin making demands on the story. This is good — great fiction is character-driven. Take as much time as you need to do this, because you're just saving time downstream.

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## Step 8

Take that four-page synopsis and make a list of all the scenes that you'll need to turn the story into a novel. The easiest way to make that list is with a spreadsheet.

For some reason, this is scary to a lot of writers. *Oh the horror!* Deal with it.

Make a spreadsheet detailing the scenes that emerge from your four-page plot outline. Make just one line for each scene. In one column, list the POV character. In another (wide) column, tell what happens. If you want to get fancy, add more columns that tell you how many pages you expect to write for the scene. A spreadsheet is ideal, because you can see the whole storyline at a glance, and it's easy to move scenes around to reorder things. Number your scenes to identify them, but don't let the numbers trap you in a sequence. It will very likely change a lot. Something like this...

Scene	What Happens?	POV character
1		
2		

It can take a week to make a good spreadsheet. When you are done, you can add a new column for chapter numbers and assign a chapter to each scene.

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## Step 9

At this point, just sit down and start pounding out the real first draft of the novel. You will be astounded at how fast the story flies out of your fingers at this stage.

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. How does hero get out of that tree surrounded by alligators and rescue the person who's in the burning rowboat? This is the time to figure it out, and 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.

This stage is incredibly fun and exciting.

## The Catalyst

Step One: A self-described loser finds that his real strength is in making other people powerful – very powerful.

Step Two: Nathan Symes was a little overweight, a little underpaid, and pretty tired of life keeping him down. He resented seeing success land on people around him, perplexed by the observation that good fortune seemed to touch those in the closest proximity to him, while passing him over, making it feel all the more cruel. After a chance encounter with a mysterious homeless woman in the hospital, Nathan came to realize that it was not a coincidence that people close to him were experiencing success. He was actually causing it. Over several weeks, he realizes that only certain people are helped by him, and that the kind of powers with which they are endowed differs from person to person. He also learns that there are other people in the world who act as power catalysts, but very few. When he is abducted right off the street one day, he finds an underground network of the “empowered” who are trying to round up all the catalysts to keep them close and to concentrate the resulting power only among the members of their network. The network is engaged in an age-old battle against another group of the empowered who believe the catalysts should remain free, offering strength to the empowered only at random and not by force. Nathan slowly comes to grip with his new reality, learning to see that his ability to empower others is powerful in and of itself. He develops a plan with a long-time friend (who he learns is one of the non-network empowered) to free those catalysts who have been enslaved, including some who believe they are better off with the network -- the devil they know. The plan goes awry, and it seems that all is lost, until Nathan inadvertently empowers a young girl who, in her ability to believe she can do anything, ends the war in an unexpected and dramatic way.