



File management & efficient work practices

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This is an article on the importance of file management and efficient work practices, which includes a quick quiz to focus an author's needs followed by some suggested guidelines on how to improve work practices.

How do you manage the computer files for your writing projects? Complete this quiz to reveal whether you are managing your work efficiently, or flirting with danger.

- 1 Do you file all your writing documents in “My Documents” or in one “Folder” or “Directory” on your computer?
Yes No
- 2 Do you create a document for your entire novel and keep “overwriting your work as you go” until you’ve finished writing the novel?
Yes No
- 3 Do you take at least one backup copy onto diskette every time you work on your writing project?
Yes No
- 4 If you do make back-up disks, do you take them “off-site” to another residence or location every time?
Yes No
- 5 Do you print your work after every writing session?
Yes No
- 6 Have you installed an electrical circuit-breaker in your home?
Yes No Don't know
- 7 Does your house contents insurance policy include your computer equipment?
Yes No Don't know

If you've answered “Yes” to Q1, you need to learn more efficient file management techniques.

If you've answered “Yes” to Q2, you're living dangerously in more ways than one!

If you've answered “No” to Q3, it's your own fault if your computer gets stolen in a break-in or has a hard-disk crash. You're asking for trouble!

If you've answered “No” to Q4, you're only half doing your job properly.

If you've answered “No” to Q5, Q3 and Q4 (collectively), you're putting yourself in a precarious position.

If you've answered “No” or “Don't know” to Q6, you need to review your home's electrical system.

If you've answered “No” or “Don't know” to Q7, you need to review your insurance policies. Computer equipment owned by a business is not usually included in personal contents policies. You may need to arrange separate business insurance.

So, how did you go? Are you going to review your work methods so you can avoid disaster?

Organising folders or directories

It doesn't matter if you have the latest, state-of-the-art computer equipment, or one you've been using for years, it will have a file management system.

If you're working on more than one project at a time, it is vital to organize your files so you can:

- Find files quickly
- Know you're working with the correct version of a document
- Ensure you don't lose any vital information

If all your documents are in the one folder with a hotch-potch of names, you're not working efficiently and run the risk of misplacing or deleting a file you meant to keep

Here's a suggestion:

- Forget the "My Documents" folder.
- Open a new folder called "Writing" (or some appropriate name)
- Within the writing folder, open a separate folder for each writing project. I use the title of the novel.

Note *Some systems only allow you eight (8) characters, so make sure you choose something that stands out. Newer computers don't have a character limit on folder and file names, so you have more scope.*

- Within each novel folder, open these sub-folders:
 - ⇒ Admin Use this for letters to publishers, your synopsis and other general documents.
 - ⇒ Draft 1 First draft of each chapter of novel
 - ⇒ Draft 2 Second draft of each chapter of novel
 - ⇒ Draft 3 Third
 - ⇒ Draft 4 Fourth
 - ⇒ Draft 5 Fifth
 - ⇒ Draft 6 Sixth
 - ⇒ Final Submission version of full novel

If this sounds like too much bother read on for an explanation as to why you should keep every draft of every chapter of every novel.

Proof of copyright & plagiarism

If you are ever called upon to prove ownership of any piece of writing for copyright or plagiarism law suits, you need to provide the electronic files and paper copies (suitably coded with the name of the document and the date it was produced).

This is the reason your draft copies should be set up with a footer that includes the document name and file location and the date the document was last accessed.

Having a bad writing day?

If you're in the habit of keeping your novel in one big document and overwriting it every time you work on it, you risk overwriting "good" with "not so good" or "absolutely terrible" content if you're having a bad writing day. It's okay if you have backup disks, but it takes extra time to retrieve the last backup copy, and what if you botch the transfer of files (it does happen).

Advantages of keeping work in bite-sized segments

There are some advantages of keeping your novel chapters in separate documents:

- It keeps you focus on the chapter you're working on. If you have the entire novel so far in one document, you're always tempted to go back to the beginning to re-read and re-edit the whole thing again and again. This can stop your progress.
- When you complete the draft of a chapter, you will have achieved something. You've moved ahead.
- When you open a new document to start a new chapter, you're embarking on the next stage of your novel. You're moving ahead again. You're narrowing your focus to quickly get to the next goalpost.
- You're making it easier to locate files for backup purposes.
- Smaller documents are less likely to give you "electronic hassles".
- There's the psychological advantage of seeing your progress in the file manager.

How to set up a *master* document for your novel chapters

For the system I've outlined to work efficiently, you need to set up a master document for a chapter. This will always be a blank document with just the settings required for:

- Page setup (margins and paper size settings)
- Header (include the novel title on the left and the page number on the right – eg. 1-1 for Chapter 1)
- Footer (for working documents only – File name on left and date on right)
- Font type (Courier New 12 non proportional font)
- Line spacing (always double for working drafts and submissions)
- Alternatively, you can set up a Style for the Font/Line spacing

You will never “actually write” in this document. Give it a title of Master Chapter (or something similar) and use it only to copy from to a new chapter document.

How to use the *master* chapter document

- Copy the new *master* chapter document into the new folder for your writing project.
- Use this master to set up a blank document for each chapter of your book. It's a good idea to name the chapters so you can identify the book title, chapter number and draft number, eg. for a book called “The Executive's Mistress”

TEM_CH1_DR1 TEM_CH2_DR1 TEM_CH3_DR1 ETC.

If your computer only allows eight (8) characters in the document name, use the DR1 as the document extension – ie. TEM_CH1.DR1

- Now, go into the header and footer in each document and insert the details of the chapter.
- As you become more familiar with using this system, you can copy and entire “blank folder” and most of the tedious set-up work is taken care of.

Now you've set up your folders and files, there's no excuse for not getting on with the job of writing your novel ... is there?

The importance of printing your work

Print outs are important for these reasons:

- If all your electronic methods fail (because you haven't implemented them), you can always re-type a document.
- Editing is easier on paper. You'll pick up more mistakes if you proofread from a paper copy than from a computer screen. Try putting a piece of coloured paper across the page and only allow yourself to read a line at a time.
- Properly dated and titled print outs are legal proof of ownership for copyright purposes.
- A print out is physical evidence of progress with your project. It is psychologically beneficial to see a “pile of paper” rather than an electronic copy on a computer screen.

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