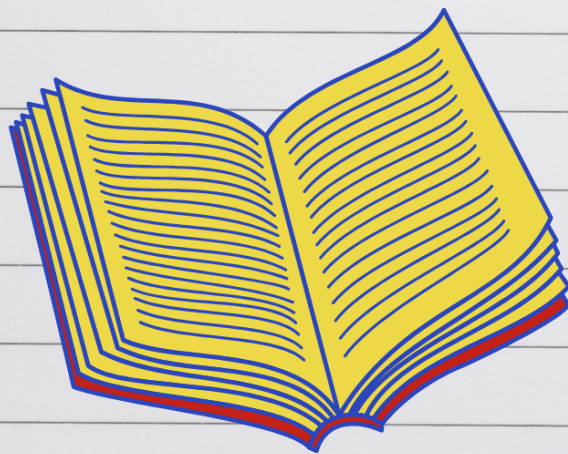# PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A compete process to create a story

By Hank Quense

Putting It All Together

A nine-step plan to create a story from initial story idea

Overview

Creating a story is a complex undertaking, no matter what type of story it is. It can be a novel, a short story, a script even a memoir. All these types of stories face the same problem: how does the writer deal with all the disparate elements? The writer has to deal with developing characters, plot events, scenes, dialog, arcs. What should she do first? When should she write the first draft?

Dealing with these problems is what this book is all about: putting it all together.

Problem: Creating a story is a complex undertaking

Problem 1

What do you with the bunch of characters who have to do stuff?

Problem 2

How do you keep track of the plot events?

Problem 3

How do you develop the storyline so you can write the first draft?

The three problems shown here are typical of the many problems and questions that crop up over the course of creating a story. It's like working on a jigsaw puzzle when you don't have a picture of the completed puzzle. This book will show you how to complete the puzzle.
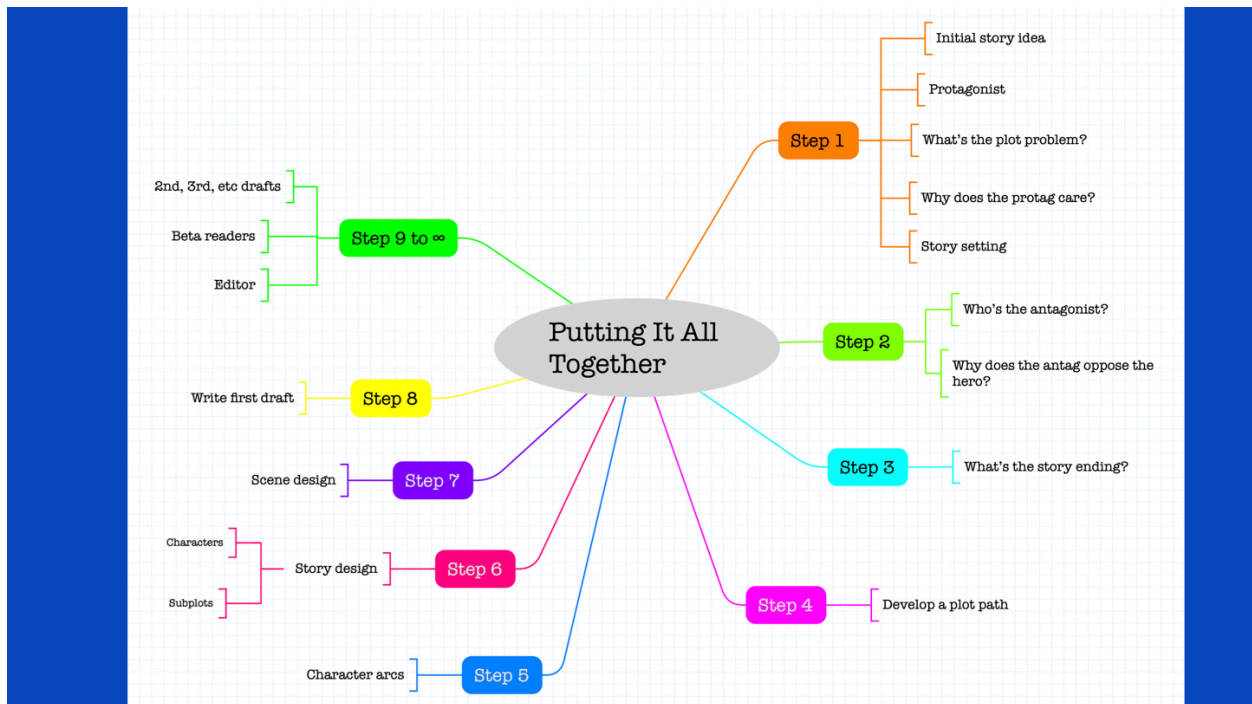
Hank Quense

has had over 40 short stories published and is the author of 15 novels.
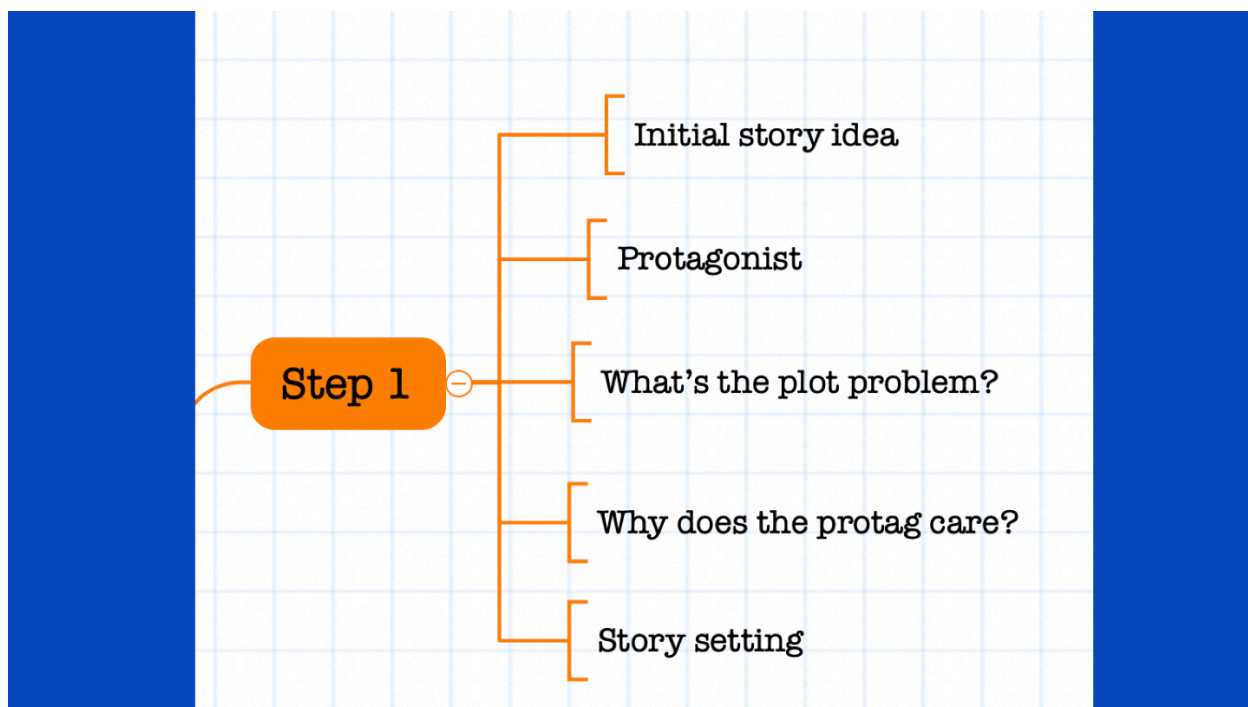
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I'm an author and a lecturer. I've been writing stories for over 20 years. During that time, I've developed a method of proceeding with the story development. I'll share that process with you by going over it one step at a time.

Be warned! I'm a planner. Most pansters I know think I'm crazy because I do all this planning. To be fair, I think pansters are crazy because they don't do any planning. So in the end, we planners and pansters are all equally crazy.

Putting It All Together

Step 1
- Initial story idea
- Protagonist
- What's the plot problem?
- Why does the protag care?
- Story setting

Step 2
- Who's the antagonist?
- Why does the antag oppose the hero?

Step 3
- What's the story ending?

Step 4
- Develop a plot path

Step 5
- Character arcs

Step 6 — Story design
- Characters
- Subplots

Step 7
- Scene design

Step 8
- Write first draft

Step 9 to ∞
- 2nd, 3rd, etc drafts
- Beta readers
- Editor

This mind-map depicts my process in glorious colors, all nine steps of it. But don't panic at the sheer size and apparent complexity of it. Breaking it up into steps makes it easy to explain.

Keep in mind that my exact process may not work for you, but it may give you ideas on how to develop your own process. In that case, take what works from my process and incorporate it into your own process.

Step 1
- Initial story idea
- Protagonist
- What's the plot problem?
- Why does the protag care?
- Story setting

This is where the initial story idea pops into my mind. For unknown reasons, this initial idea is always about a character. And that character is the protagonist of this new potential story. Since I write fantasy and sci-fi stories, my protag is frequently a dwarf or an elf or an alien and sometimes a human.

Next I come up with a problem that this character has, a big problem. And now I have to figure out why the character (still unnamed at this point) has to work on the problem. What's the character's motivation in other words. Finally, I need to figure out where the story tales place. Usually it will be a fantasy or alien world, but if the character is a human it may take place in Manhattan.

At the conclusion of this step, the story is looking good. Maybe there is something I can work with here. But that isn't a lock. This story idea is still speculation.

Step 2

Who's the antagonist?

Why does the antag oppose the hero?
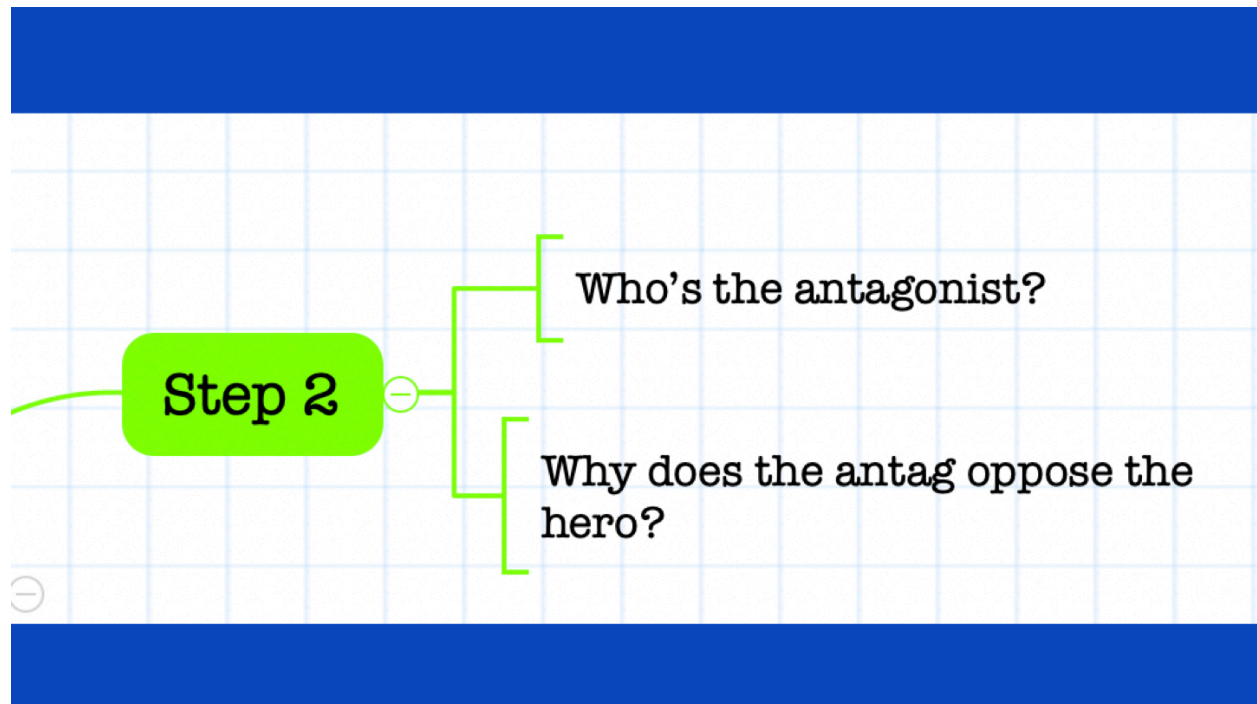
Now it's time to come up with a bad guy or bad gal. An antagonist in other words. Who will challenge my new hero? And equally important, why does the antag want the hero to fail?   What is this character's motivation? A word of caution, the antagonists motivation must be equal in strength to the protagonist's motivation. If the hero has to risk her life to fix the plot problem, then the bad guy must also be risking his life.

Step 3 — What's the story ending?
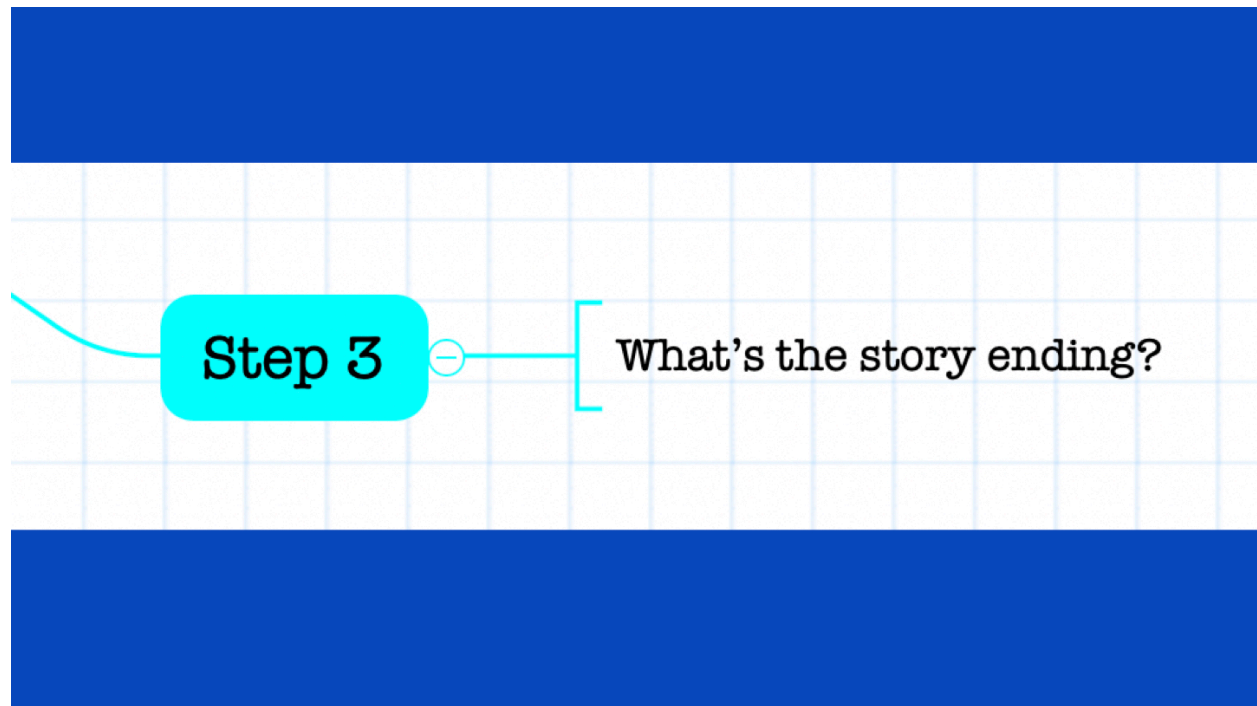
Story ideas are a dime a dozen. If you know how to look for them, these ideas are all around you. However, a story idea with an ending is priceless. This step is a make or break step. If I can't develop a story ending then the story idea is worthless and I abandon it. The ending, once I get one, has to be one I think will work within the context of the characters and the setting. Sometimes it takes me quite a while to come up with the ending. Until I get this ending and complete step 4 I do no further work on the story's development. Why? Because if I can't get an ending, the story is a non-starter so any development work will be wasted when I abandon the story. Normally, while searching for the ending, I'll be working on a different story. The new story idea possibly will be the next story I write.

Step 4 ⊖ Develop a plot path
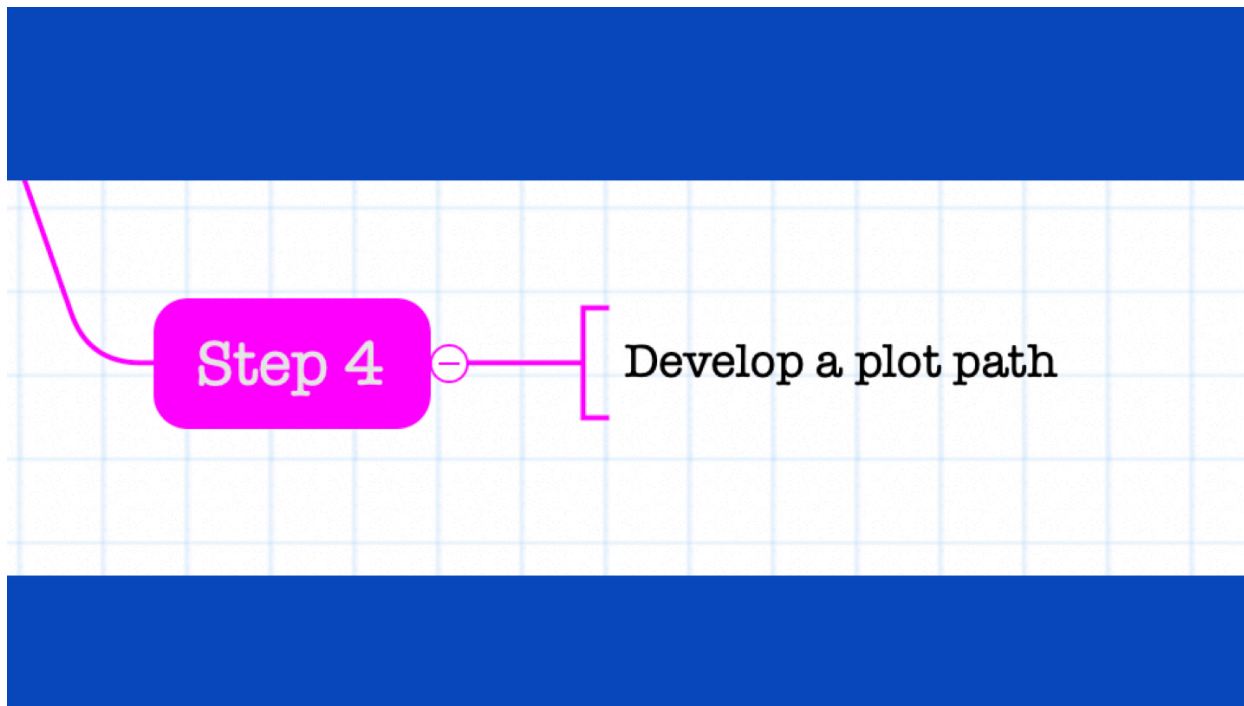
Another tough step and a critically important one in the development process. In this step, I build a series of logical events that will connect the story's beginning to the ending. The first item here is the inciting event: how does the hero find out he has the problem. Succeeding plot events will lead the character deeper into the plot and will result in failures until at last, the story reaches its climax

Once a plot path is completed, I test it. Do I really think I can write a story with this plot path? Do I really believe I can convince the reader that the plot path is realistic and could happen. If the answer to either question is no, I scrap the plot path and start over.

The key issue here is this: Just because you can develop a plot path doesn't men you should use it.

Character arcs — Step 5

If step 4 is successful, then the story is a go. I know I can write it and it's time to invest time in developing the rest of the story design. This step concentrates on the character arcs. What great lesson did the hero and bad guy learn as a result of the events in the story? Or what changed in their lives?

Why spend time on this issue? Because it's important and the character arc can become a-story-within-a-story. Not a subplot, but an embedded story that will intrigue the readers and keep them hooked.

At this point I develop the cast of characters for the story. For a short story, it'll be three characters, four at the most. For a novel the cast may have a dozen main, POV characters. For each, I develop a biography, a set of mental attributes including a mental flaw and a list of physical attributes.

While I'm developing this material, one or more subplots will occur to me from the material and I'll spend some time coming up with a storyline for each subplot.

Scene design ── Step 7

This is where the real work of writing the story begins. Stories consist of scenes, not paragraphs, not sentences, not chapters, scenes. You write the story one scene at a time. But scenes aren't something just holding a bunch of words. Scenes have to be designed to fit into the story and scenes have mandatory requirements. One of these requirements is that the scene should have an emotional change. The main character's emotion at the end of the scene should be different from the starting emotion. The second requirement is that the scene must have a goal and that goal must move the story closer to the climax. A scene goal can be to find someone, to uncover a clue, to reach a destination. It's permissible to require a few scenes to reach the goal.

Let's take a short diversion to talk about how scene goals mesh with the story goals. Most stories have three acts. Act 1 is the opening, act 2 is the

Depicting the relationship between story goals and scene goals
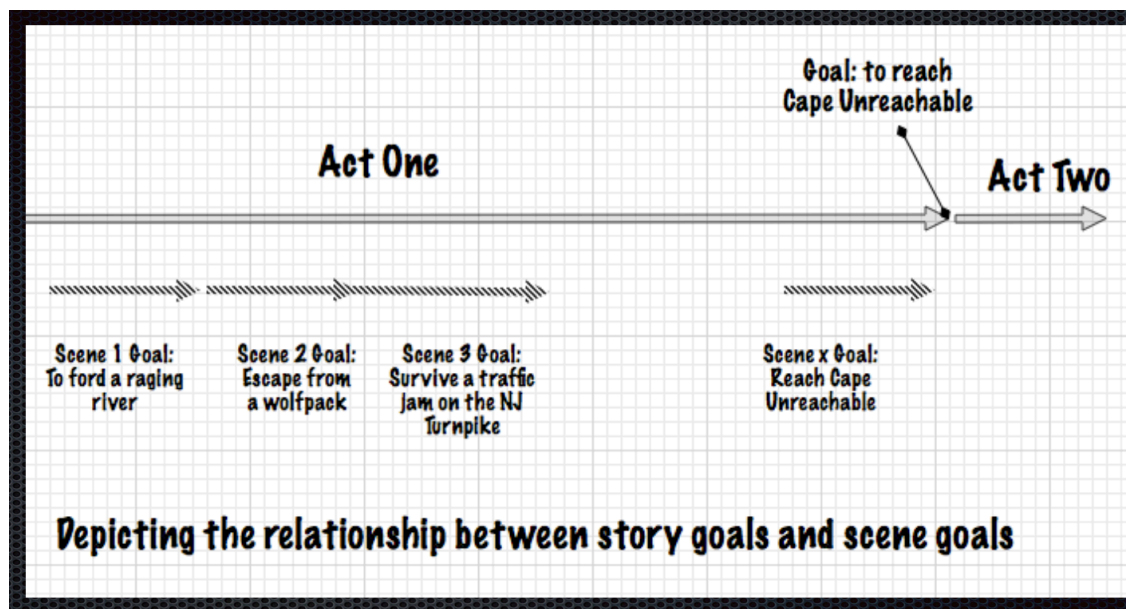
middle and act 3 is the climax. The climax is the story's goal. Act 1 will have a goal. Act 2 is 50% of the story and will have several goals. Each of these goals in acts 1 & 2 must move the story closer to the climax. Within each act there are a series of scenes and each of them, in turn, must move the story closer to the act goal.

So, in the diagram, the goal for act 1 is for the characters to get to Point Unreachable. Each scene in the act should take the reader and the characters closer to Point Unreachable. Unless there is a temporary setback in which case Point Unreachable is further away.

In Scene 1, the goal is to cross a river. In scene 2, to escape from a wolf pack, scene 3 survive a traffic jam. Eventually, in scene X, the characters arrive at Point Unreachable.

This graph and the explanation illustrates how the scene goals nest into the act's goal which in turn nest's into the story's goal.

The major take-away from all this is to reinforce the concept that scenes have to be designed to fit into the story.

Finally! Time to start on the first draft. My way of approaching this is to combine steps 7 and 8 together. That is, I figure out the scenes necessary to get the main character to the end of Act 1 and then I'll write them one after the other. Often, while writing scene 5, I'll realize I can't logically get from scene 5 to scene 6. I need a scene to bridge the two. For that, I'll come up with scene 5A. Or I'll decide that scene 9 is redundant and I'll eliminate it.
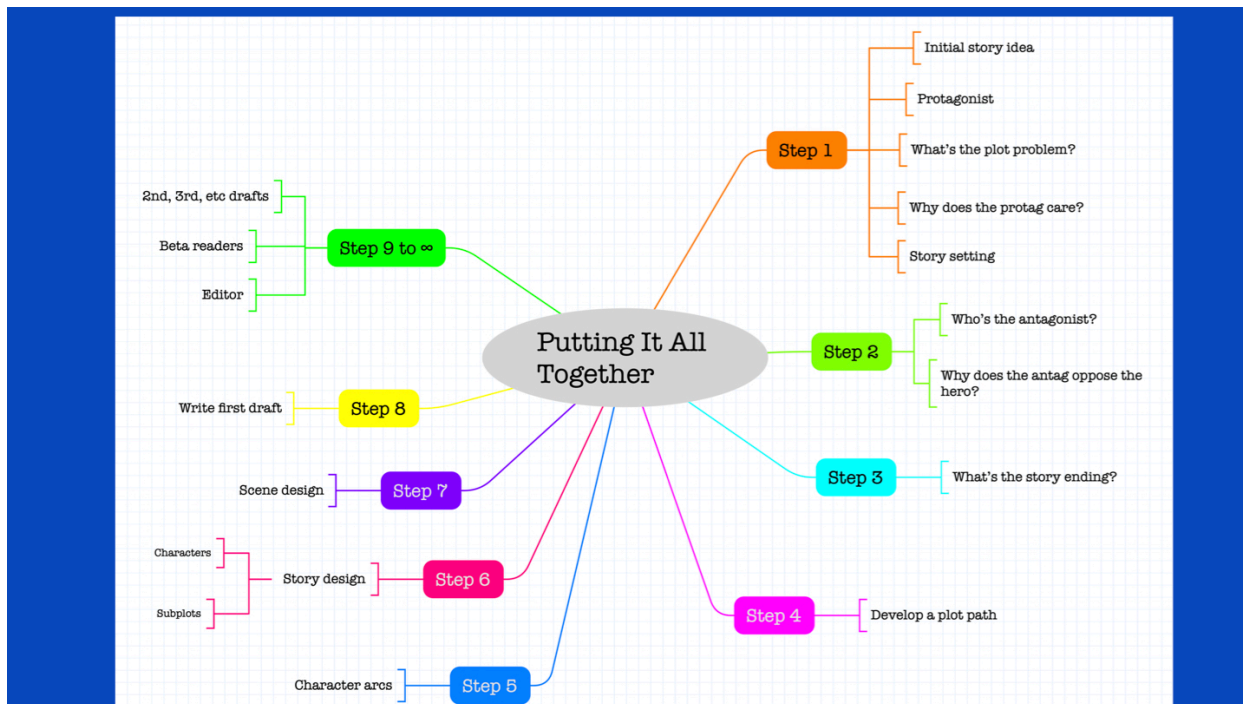
When I'm finished getting the hero to the end of Act 1, I'll go back and figure out the scenes I need to get the bad guy to that point and I'll write those scenes. Then I'll come up with scenes required for any other characters.

After that, it's on to Act 2.
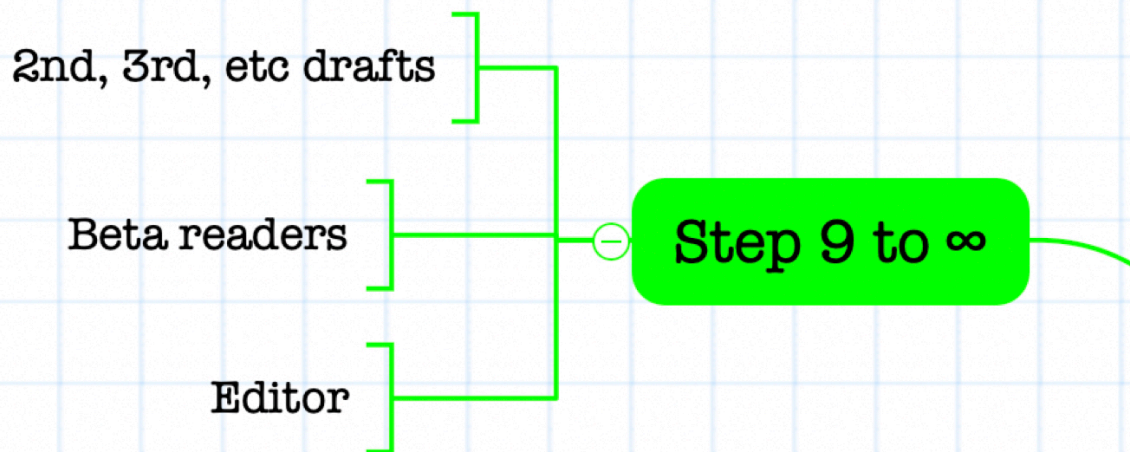
Once you finish the first draft, I have to tell you, after all your efforts, you just created a piece of crap. All first drafts are a piece of garbage, but they are a necessary step in creating a good story. Once you have the first draft, you can shape it and mold it into something worth reading. Turn your story into something glorious. If the completed story is a butterfly, the first draft is a larva.

This step can take months to complete, but it's important.

Mind-map: "Putting It All Together"

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And that's how you do it. I suggest you print out this mind-map and keep it some place where you can quickly refer to it.

My exact process is probably used by no other author in this galaxy. However, ALL authors do ALL of these steps in one form or another before the story is completed.

Links

Fiction Writing Workshop: https://padlet.com/hanque/fiction-workshop-overview-hj2wo3mvxx9e2rjv

Fiction writing articles: https://padlet.com/hanque/fiction-writing-articles-6qigq1ct6zg5k481

I'm sure my way won't fit exactly into your mental processes. Some of it may fit and some of it won't. Now that you have an understanding of what is required, take what you want and develop your own process.

If you have any questions or if you wish to discuss an issue, email me at Strangeworlds (at) hankquense (dot) org.