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Outlining Non-Fiction Vs. Not Outlining Fiction

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away (back in junior high school circa 1984) I started writing poetry then about three years later I moved into fiction, mainly novels and screenplays. The only non-fiction I wrote back then when I was in high school were essays and articles for my school newspaper. And I stayed away from non-fiction until I discovered blogging in the 2000's and now I write fiction and non-fiction both short and long.

Yet I approach both of them very differently. Back in high school I was taught how to outline in great detail so that I would know exactly what I needed to write. I didn't always write perfectly well to that outline so when I had the opportunity to get away from it after high school, well I ran like hell. Because as I got into fiction writing I saw that people outlined their stories and some with insane levels of details. But when I tried to outline my stories and do all the detailed work it didn't go so well for me. In fact, I killed a couple of stories by outlining them all out so I haven't outlined any fiction in twenty years and I have no intention of doing so.

When I started my non-fiction book projects I thought I could use that same laissez-faire approach that I use for my fiction. But I discovered that wouldn't work because it made my non-fiction projects too unwieldy. In fiction, I can write and revise because even though I have the basic story in my head, I don't know all the details until I sit down and write them. With fiction, my mind needs the freedom to write those details and twists as they come to me.

But I seem to be maturing a little in my writing mind at least when it comes to non-fiction because I've begun to outline my non-fiction book projects. Now these aren't super-detailed outlines with multiple sub-headings or anything like that. But the headings are enough to give me a good starting points. The big question I've asked myself is why doesn't this type of outlining kill these non-fiction projects like it did with my fiction?

With non-fiction, my writing-mind feels like I can have a more detailed map of where I'm going with the book and doesn't freak out because of it. I can write fiction from a prompt or a single idea and my non-fiction outlines are like single ideas or prompts to my way of thinking which is why I think they're working for

me now.

When I sit down to write to fiction, I start out with an idea or a thought about where I'm at in the story. I find that starting point then go from there. Now with both fiction and non-fiction I do revise and edit as I go, like I did with this piece because I felt like it was running away from me. So my approach to writing overall could be slightly-outlined like this:

- 1) Start with an idea or a thought then let it run for a while.
- 2) If it feels like it's starting to run away from me, stop, back up, edit and revise what I have written so far.
- 3) Starting writing again, stop/edit/revise if needed, reach the end.
- 4) Let it sit for a while.
- 5) Next day (or whenever I get back to something), read over what I wrote previously, edit and revise, find the next starting point.

With those non-fiction outlines, all I have are starting points. I don't have the individual stopping points and I don't need them. I've been writing for so long I can run on instinct and go back over something multiple times and make whole cuts if I have to.

I would just say to anyone wanting to write: your approach is probably not going to be the same for everything you do. Keep adapting it and if anyone mouths off at you about it, tell them to stuff it. I've never had anything against outlining per se. It's just it works for me in one area of my writing where it doesn't work in another. The most important thing is to keep at it until you find something that works.