

Outlining a Big Fat Epic Fantasy (and other BFBooks) in Airtable

I love Scrivener. I couldn't live without it. But recently I found a program that's even better than Scrivener at organizing an outline for a big fat book.

The relational database Airtable www.airtable.com is easy to use and free up until a generous point. It's useful for everything from keeping track of marketing contacts to sorting your closet. It's online and its databases are shareable, so it's particularly useful if you and your friends are writing about a shared world. It even has a mobile app.

And it's invaluable when you're at the hundreds-of-incoherent-notes stage and want to get to an outline.

Here's how I used Airtable to get from chaos to a workable outline in three and a half hours.

(If you don't know much about databases, here's [a quick intro to Airtable](#). If you do, just read away.)

This example is from a work in progress, a big fat fantasy novel with multiple locations, two timelines, and lots of characters. I'll concentrate on one character, Ted Gandolfini, an academic from an imperialist country in an alternate 1946, who's writing a biography of a colonial poet, Aliveiro.

I started, Marie Kondo style, by dumping everything onto the floor—in this case, into a table in the database. Scenes, ideas, good lines, anything. I called them “Elements” because “Things” sounded a little wussy. Here's a sample:

| <input type="checkbox"/> | A Element |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1 | Sebastian sees Ted Gandolfini in the market |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ted Gandolfini sees William as he looks at Aliveiro |
| 3 | Ted Gandolfini talks with Col da Souza, who warns him against going to favelas |
| 4 | Ted Gandolfini sees the Bird, Amor |
| 5 | In 1946, there are rumors of uprisings in Icaru. |
| 6 | Marcelinho introduced |

Some aspects of the book, like characters, were special types of thing. I gave them their own tables and names. Different types of things had different attributes. Characters had nationality, descriptions, gender; scenes had locations, points of view, and so on.



Here are some of the attributes of elements. As I played around with the outline, I added and changed attributes and redefined “elements” to be more or less “things that might be in scenes.” Some of their attributes included chapter, characters involved, POV, location, character arc, and that necessary catchall, notes.

| Element | Character Arc | Notes | Chapter | Characters | POV |
|--|---------------|------------------------------|---------|------------|----------------|
| 1 Sebastian sees Ted Gandolfini in the market | | woo woo. Do we need this? | | | Sebastian |
| 2 Ted Gandolfini sees William as he looks at Alveiro | | woo woo. Do we need this? | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 3 Ted Gandolfini talks with Col da Souza, who warns him against going to favelas | | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 4 Ted Gandolfini sees the Bird, Amor | | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 5 In 1946, there are rumors of uprisings in Icaru. | | The Colonel da Souza he t... | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 6 Marcelinho introduced | | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 7 Someone betrays someone early on | | | | | |
| 8 Betrayal #2 | | | | | |
| 9 Betrayal #3 | | | | | |
| 10 No one takes uprisings in Icaru seriously. | | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 11 The place of women | | | | | |
| 12 Squatters occupy land near the airport. | | | | | |

Now I had things in a database, I wanted to start sorting them in useful ways. Many programs sort by chapter and location, but I wanted to try a sort by character arc.

Ted has a fairly simple character arc. He starts out unsympathetic and eventually changes sides. I filtered so I had a view only of elements involving him, then gave his character arc five stages, 1-5.

(Why 5? Why not 5? Airtable lets you change things on the fly, much more easily than Excel or my dear Scrivener.)

I assigned a character arc number to every element relating to Ted. If the element didn't relate to his character arc, I left it blank.

| Element | Char... | Notes | Chapter | Characters | POV |
|--|---------|------------------------------|---------|------------|----------------|
| 1 Sebastian sees Ted Gandolfini in the market | | woo woo. Do we need this? | | | Sebastian |
| 2 Ted Gandolfini sees William as he looks at Alveiro | | woo woo. Do we need this? | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 3 Ted Gandolfini talks with Col da Souza, who warns him against going to favelas | 1 | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 4 Ted Gandolfini sees the Bird, Amor | 1 | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 5 In 1946, there are rumors of uprisings in Icaru. | 1 | The Colonel da Souza he t... | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 6 Marcelinho introduced | 1 | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 7 Someone betrays someone early on | 2 | | | | |
| 8 Betrayal #2 | 3 | | | | |
| 9 Betrayal #3 | 4 | | | | |
| 10 No one takes uprisings in Icaru seriously. | 1 | | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 11 The place of native Icarans | 2 | | | | |
| 12 Squatters occupy land near the airport. | 2 | | | | |

Then I grouped by the stages of the character arc.

| Element | Char... | Notes | Chapter | Characters | POV |
|----------------------------------|----------------|--|------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| CHARACTER ARC 1 (Count 5) | | | | | |
| 6 | Ted Gandolfini | Ted Gandolfini talks with Col da Souza, who warns him against going to favelas | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 7 | Ted Gandolfini | Ted Gandolfini sees the Bird, Amor | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 8 | Ted Gandolfini | In 1946, there are rumors of uprisings in Icaru. | The Colonel da Souza he L... | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 9 | Ted Gandolfini | Marcelinho introduced | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| 10 | Ted Gandolfini | No one takes uprisings in Icaru seriously. | | | Ted Gandolfini |
| CHARACTER ARC 2 (Count 3) | | | | | |
| 11 | | Someone betrays someone early on | | | |
| 12 | | The place of native Icarans | | | |
| 13 | | Squatters occupy land near the airport. | | | |

Pretty thin, but more promising than hundreds of notes on the floor. I added more bits and pieces and changed others. For instance, in the first version there was a note about “the place of women” in the colonial culture. It didn’t seem to fit in. How about the place of native Icarans instead? That gave Marcelinho (Ted’s servant, a colonial character) more to do.

What could I add, purely from a plot perspective, that’d pay off later? (Ted has a typewriter and a gun.)

I divided stages of Ted’s character arc into tentative chapters.

| Element | Char... | Chapter |
|----------------------------------|----------------|--|
| CHAPTER Ted-1-1 (Count 6) | | |
| 3 | Ted Gandolfini | Ted Gandolfini sees the Bird, Amor |
| 4 | | In 1946, there are rumors of uprisings in Icaru. |
| 5 | | Marcelinho introduced |
| 6 | | Squatters occupy land near the airport. |
| 7 | | No one takes uprisings in Icaru seriously. |
| 8 | | Ted has a typewriter and a gun. |
| CHAPTER Ted-1-2 (Count 4) | | |
| 9 | | Ted Gandolfini talks with Col da Souza, who warns him against going to favelas |
| 10 | | Ted's relationship with his father |
| 11 | | Ted is going to deprive Icaru of its native culture hero |
| 12 | | What is his relationship with William and Mertola? |

Things were firming up. The first version of character arc section 2 had been tiny. I made it even smaller by moving the item about squatters into section 1.

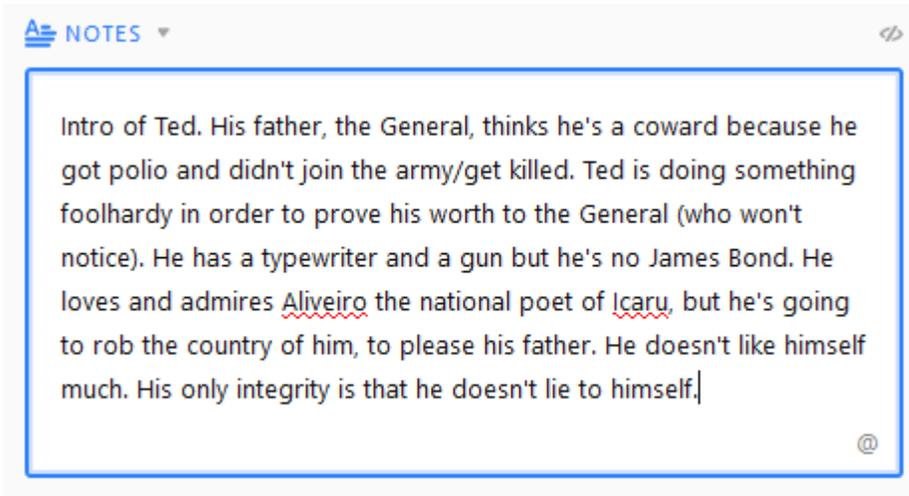
| CHARACTER ARC | | Count 4 |
|--------------------------|---|---------|
| 2 | | |
| 11 | Someone betrays someone early on | 2 |
| 12 | The place of native Icarans | 2 |
| 13 | Squatters occupy land near the airport. | 2 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | | 2 |
| + | | |

Now the other two original items were setting the theme and mood for section 2: Ted's changing attitude toward Icarans, the first betrayal, the first hints that things aren't what they seem. These gave me ideas for more elements related to his character arc.

| CHAPTER | | 4 | |
|---------|--|---|---------|
| Ted-2-1 | | | |
| 13 | Ted is shown a manuscript that Aliveiro used. Sebastian owned it? | 2 | Ted-2-1 |
| 14 | Ted realizes the fragility of history in Icaru; insects eat books and MSS. | 2 | Ted-2-1 |
| 15 | Marcelinho invites Ted to see a performance of an Aliveiro play | 2 | Ted-2-1 |
| 16 | Ted is no adventurer. But he goes. Why? | 2 | Ted-2-1 |
| + | | | |
| CHAPTER | | 3 | |
| Ted-2-2 | | | |
| 17 | The play takes place in the jungle near the airport. Back a hundred years... | 2 | Ted-2-2 |
| 18 | Marcelinho's family--wife and kids--in the favela near the airport | 2 | Ted-2-2 |
| 19 | The play that the Icarans put on is not the same one Ted has always known. | 2 | Ted-2-2 |
| + | | | |
| CHAPTER | | 3 | |
| Ted-2-3 | | | |
| 20 | Someone betrays someone early on | 2 | Ted-2-3 |
| 21 | The Librarian betrays Ted's undue interest in Aliveiro's life | 2 | Ted-2-3 |
| 22 | The manuscript Aliveiro used, and Sebastian owned, has had some material removed | 2 | Ted-2-3 |

Thinking in terms of character arc automatically made me think about character emotions. Ted's more complex a character than he gives himself credit for. He's a sad little stick of a man who's writing the biography of a wild, vivid poet-politician, in order to discredit the man. But Aliveiro is the fire where Ted warms himself, and eventually Ted's going to let himself burn. That makes his inner life key. By thinking about something other than chapters, I could foreground Ted's development. What does he have at stake in each chapter? What happens in him, not just to him?

I could spot problems as well. Here are the notes for Ted, character arc stage 1, chapter 1:



The notes showed a potential problem: we were seeing Ted's background but not yet seeing him develop. Maybe that was OK—it's his intro—but it wasn't as strong as it could be.

Clearly I could sort by other features as well.

- Who's the character with the most at stake in each chapter?
- Is the character with the most at stake the one with the POV? (After doing this as an exercise, I changed the POV of the first chapter of another book. It worked so much better.)
- Where in the book do specific locations appear? How do they change from 1849 to 1946?
- How much of the book is told by women? By "colonial" characters vs "imperialist" characters?
- How often do specific characters appear? Do they hog parts of the book or disappear in others?

I could also link between things:

- Characters in scenes
- Locations for scenes
- POV in scenes (including its gender and national identity)
- Scenes within a section of the book
- ...and so on, and so on

And that gave me more information. For instance, linking characters to scenes automatically gave me a list of every scene where a particular character appeared. Linking characters to POV gave me a list of everyone's POV scenes. Linking POV scenes to character arc...but you get the idea.

Scrivener is still the basic tool that every writer needs. But Airtable gives you additional ways to sort, query, and examine what's in your book.

Highly recommended.

A quick intro to Airtable

Airtable is the Good Parts version of a relational database, very easy to use. (Honestly. If you've ever struggled through using another relational database, you'll be delighted.) There are lots of examples at their Web site, www.airtable.com.

In Airtable...

A **table** is a list of information about some group of objects of the same type, for instance

- Elements
- People, such as characters

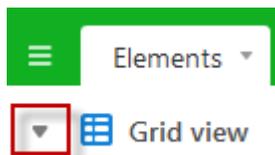
A **base** is a group of tables that can be linked to each other.

In a table, the name of the object always appears in the leftmost column. Many databases require you to have unique names for objects. Airtable doesn't.

You can define the type of an object however you please, and change it when you want to. In our example, "chapters" could be part of "elements"; it was just handier to give chapters their own table.

Any object can have attributes. Characters can have physical description, gender, nationality, history...anything you please. Locations can have timelines and buildings.

You can create multiple **views** of any table. You can *set up a new view* of any table, *filter* it so only some information shows in that view, *sort* that information, and *hide* what you don't need. Now your information is more usable. Add new views and switch views using the downward-facing arrow next to "Grid view."



You can link tables from a single base together and see them in a single view. Elements and chapters; chapters and characters; characters and nationalities. Once you link tables, you can look up any element of one table and see it in the other table.

Updating information anywhere it appears updates it everywhere.

Try it out: www.airtable.com

Here's the link to the published sample Airtable base. Grab a copy and use it to design your own:

<https://airtable.com/universe/expJWm4cemgOeWZy8/outlining-a-big-fat-epic-fantasy-with-airtable>