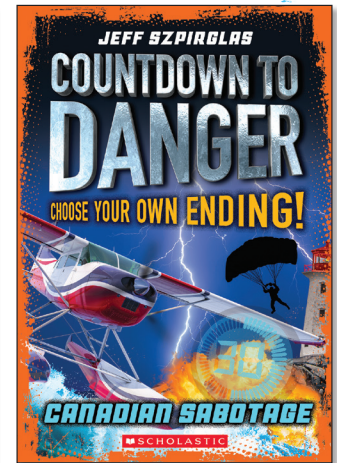


# ***COUNTDOWN TO DANGER*** **WITH JEFF SZPIRGLAS**

## How to Write YOUR OWN Multiple-Ending Adventure



### ***WILL YOU SURVIVE, OR WILL YOU DIE?***

Whenever I tell somebody that I'm writing a Countdown to Danger story, I inevitably get asked: How do you do it?

(Really, it's more like, how do I do it while also being a teacher and a dad too? The answer involves a cloning machine and the ability to bend time...)

Though creating a multiple-ending adventure can seem complicated, it's pretty easy once you organize yourself. And Scholastic Canada has graciously allowed me to teach YOU how to WRITE YOUR OWN COUNTDOWN-STYLE STORY!

### ***1. PICK ONE SETTING***

The trick to the Countdown to Danger books is that there is always a clock running. That means you don't have a lot of time to travel a vast distance, unless the story includes teleportation. (Wait! I'm reserving that for a future Countdown to Danger book...) So, when I start writing an adventure, I think about WHERE it's going to take place, then stick to that one location.

In the Countdown books, I chose typically Canadian locations (the Rocky Mountains, the Atlantic coast), but there's an entire universe you can use for crafting your story. You can literally choose any place you want. My advice: choose a dramatic location where there is opportunity to explore, and a lot of potential peril.

#### **Some ideas might include:**

- A volcanic island
- A haunted house
- The surface of a never-explored planet
- The downtown area of a large city
- A secret spy base in the jungle
- Jeff's garage full of mystery machines and secret stuff

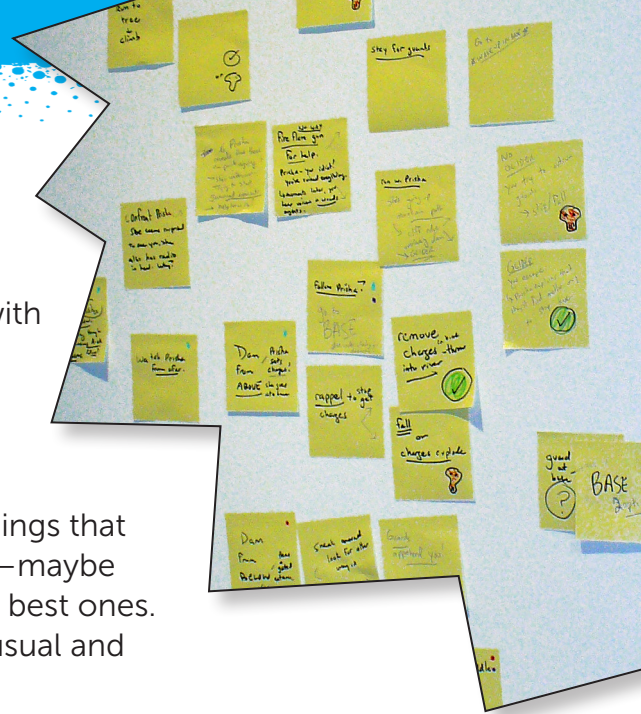
Once you've picked a place, the next step is to MAP IT OUT. Pick up a pencil and try to visualize the world where your story is set. As you do this, think of different situations you could get into. (Also, I'm curious how messy you think my garage is.)

## 2. BRAINSTORM YOUR IDEAS

The great thing about making a multiple-ending adventure is that there are no wrong decisions. If the story isn't going the way you like, you can always end it, either with a satisfying conclusion or a horrible, hilarious ending.

When I write these books, the most fun I have is mapping out all the different ways to either survive...or not. I use sticky notes on a wall, but jotting your ideas down on a piece of paper will work too. Try making a t-chart with endings that are positive and successful, and ones that have you failing—maybe even in deadly ways. Sometimes the weirdest ideas are the best ones. Let your imagination run wild and try to think of all the unusual and funny ways you could die or be trapped in your story.

Right now, your only goal is to come up with as many ideas as you can. Don't hold yourself back. The wilder, the better!



## 3. PLOT OUT THE OPENING

One of the tricks to the Countdown to Danger books is keeping the main premise of the story simple. My editor and I worked hard with the opening of *Canadian Sabotage* so that it gives the bare bones of the setup (stuck in the ocean with a treasure map, but having lost your memory), and just enough details to get the story rolling. It's okay if your opening takes a few drafts too! Your setup doesn't need to be long, but it should give your character a GOAL.

### Good goals might include:

- Searching for something (treasure, your family, etc.)
- Escaping from something (evil pirates, monsters, etc.)
- Uncovering a mystery (What IS in Jeff's garage? Why does he keep talking about it in this writer's guide?)

There should definitely be something PUSHING you forward. In Countdown to Danger, there's always an element of ACTUAL DANGER that moves the story ahead. Maybe there's someone on your tail. Maybe there's an event happening in the near future that you need to get to—or stop—before time runs out.

## 4. PLOT OUT THE STORY BRANCHES

This is where the story starts to take shape. It's not always as easy as it sounds. Try to pick two or three main branches where the story could go.

For instance, in *Canadian Sabotage*, there are three main branches. After you start in open water, you have to quickly make one of three choices:



- A:** Swim to a lighthouse in the distance.
- B:** Swim to an abandoned dive boat.
- C:** Wait for the speedboat heading your way.

Each of these choices then branches off in different directions. Before I do any of the actual writing, I spend a lot of time simply figuring out where each main branch will go. I use ideas from my brainstorm list to see what works and what doesn't. I come up with a lot of new ideas along the way too.

Not every idea is going to work out, and that's okay—I always end up with way more ideas than I can use. As you map out how your adventure can branch off in different directions, and look for a good element of danger for each one, you'll probably think of lots of awesome new ideas.

## 5. **WRITE THE STORY**

Once you've mapped out the different parts of the adventure, you can start to write. I give every segment a code. "A1" means that it's branch A (swim to the lighthouse), and segment 1 in that branch. The numbers aren't as important as my ability to give each segment a special code, so I can order them, or reorder them, and keep track of what other segments they connect to. In the end, the story segments get mixed up by my amazing editors Erin and Erin (yes, Scholastic has two Erins—very confusing!) and renumbered with the page numbers from the book.

## 6. **HAVE FUN**

This might sound kind of trite, but it's true: the fun of these books is that they allow you to play with ideas, almost like you're a juggler tossing different objects in the air, seemingly all at once. When the story gets too serious, I like to throw jokes into the mix. When it's getting too silly, I make sure to stick to something dangerous—like jumbo lobsters or a rampaging sea monster—so that the action keeps getting pushed along.

## 7. **STAY AWAY FROM JEFF'S GARAGE**

Seriously. Where do you think I keep the cloning machi—  
Whoops! NOW YOU KNOW MY SECRET!

