A friend of mine is in prison for not paying federal payroll taxes. To cheer him up while he’s serving his sentence, I’ve been writing a crime novel for him. Every one or two days, he receives a fresh chapter via CorrLinks, the proprietary email messaging system favored by the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The three-part story concerns a conspiracy, hatched by the execs of a prison services contractor, to distribute an addictive and violence-inducing drug called blaze. Why would they do that? To boost the prison population and make more money. The first part of the story covers the conspiracy and its undoing. The second part follows the career of the one conspirator who evaded arrest. The third part, which I’ve outlined but not yet started, will culminate in the conspirator’s final reckoning.

Writing the novel is great fun. I devise the plotlines and conceive the characters on long walks in Washington, DC, with my Airedale terrier, Echo. What is also fun, surprisingly, is doing the research—and for that, the Internet has been invaluable.

Some of the research wasn’t especially taxing. When I sought the name of the founder of my story’s prison services company, LIBERAS, I consulted a Wikipedia list of Confederate Army commanders. The name I chose, Ashby Turner, is based on cavalry commander Turner Ashby, who was killed in action in 1862 near Harrisonburg, Virginia.

But other research demonstrated just how powerful the Internet has become as a multimedia encyclopedia. When the novel begins, the chemist who goes on to synthesize blaze is in a federal prison, United States Penitentiary, Allenwood, to be officially precise. I chose the Pennsylvania prison because it’s within driving distance of Washington. Thanks to satellite imagery in Google Maps, I could trace how visitors would make their way through the visitor center and into the prison itself.

The Internet also helped me choose a murderer’s compact semiautomatic pistol, explore the environs of Interpol’s headquarters in Lyon, France, and determine how long it takes to drive from Lyon to Zürich, Switzerland. Perhaps most remarkably, with a few clicks of the mouse and a few taps of the keyboard, I discovered how my heroine could fell an assailant with a single blow.

If I decide to publish the novel, the Internet could help again. Amazon has an online service, Kindle Direct Publishing, that enables writers to upload and market their works for sale to the public. The author of bondage blockbuster Fifty Shades of Grey, E.L. James, published her first fiction on the platform.

But what of the writing itself? Can the Internet—or, more generally, computer technology—help? It turns out there is software (online and standalone) for outlining and organizing novels, cataloging your research notes, and eliminating distractions while you write. If you write screenplays for TV or film, there is even software that will recast your work in the rigid format the studios use and expect.

I didn’t use any software to help me write and organize my novel. Deliberately. Unlike a collection of short stories or poems, a novel is a single work. If it’s to succeed as such, then the novelist should be able to hold all of its plot and characters in his or her head, not hard drive. At least, that’s my possibly old-fashioned view.

Charles Day is Physics Today’s editor in chief. The views in this column are his own and not necessarily those of either Physics Today or its publisher, the American Institute of Physics.