

Writing Stories

Writing about your own experiences is fairly easy, and so is writing about people that you know well. You simply tap into your memory and write. However, writing made-up stories is another matter. While the starting point for a story may be a real experience, the end result should be something new and imaginative.

To write effective stories, you must understand how stories develop. Usually, there is a main character doing some activity, and a problem, or conflict, occurs. The story then unfolds around the main character's attempts to solve the problem. You will begin to understand basic story structure if you read a variety of short stories and novels. The information in this chapter will get you started on your own story writing.

Writing Guidelines

Subject: Getting to know someone

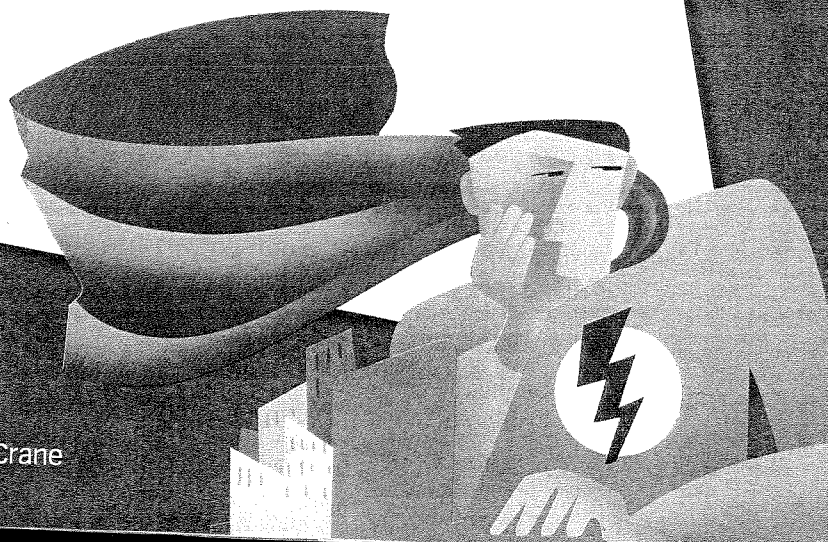
Form: Short story

Purpose: To engage and entertain

Audience: Classmates

"I try to give the readers
a slice out of life."

—Stephen Crane

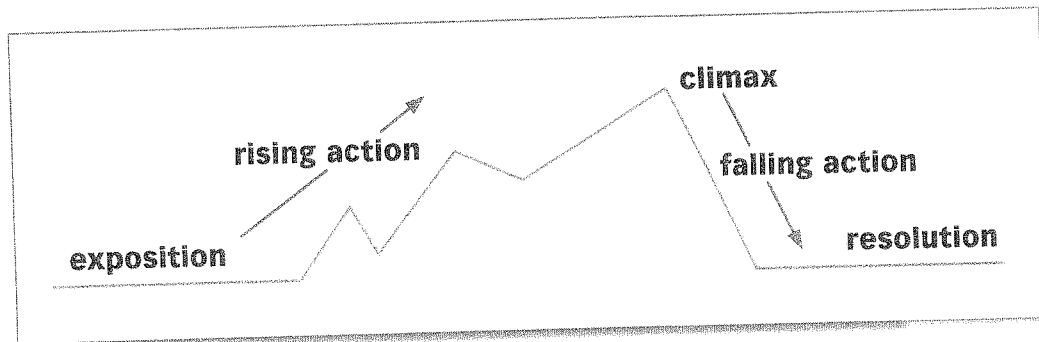


The Shape of Stories

Think of a special experience in your life: a concert, family trip, school play, championship game, or some other event. The best experiences gradually build in excitement to a high point—a big payoff—that really makes the event memorable. The best fictional stories do the same thing; they follow a classic plot line that builds to a climax.

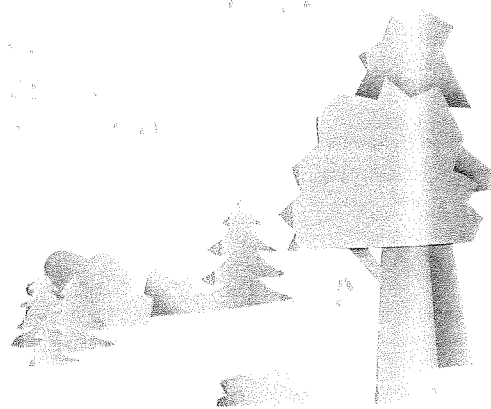
Begin with the plot.

The plot refers to the events or actions that move a story along from start to finish. A plot has five parts: *exposition*, *rising action*, *climax*, *falling action*, and *resolution*. The plot line below shows how these parts work together.



Exposition

The *exposition* is the beginning part of a story in which the main character, conflict, and setting are introduced. The conflict is the problem that the main character faces. The setting is where and when the action takes place.



Rising Action

In a short story, the *rising action* usually includes at least two or three important actions involving the main character and his or her problem. This builds suspense into the story.

First Action: Juan finishes *The Light in the Forest*, the story of a young man in Colonial America who is torn between two cultures. Juan, who recently moved to the United States from Puerto Rico, understands that feeling.

Second Action: Juan remembers hearing about a vision quest, in which a young Native American leaves his family and travels into the wilderness to discover his guardian spirit. (*Guardian* means "one who protects.")

Third Action: Juan looks for a guardian spirit. He sees a squirrel looking for food, and wishes he weren't stuck here, cold and hungry, on the park bench. He sees geese flying south and wishes he could fly to Puerto Rico.

Climax

The *climax* is the moment of truth or the most exciting action, when the character confronts her or his problem head-on. All the action leads up to the climax. In the best stories, the main character is changed by the climax.

A crow lands in front of Juan. The big, strong bird stares at him with calm confidence. The crow nods at Juan and then flies off, leaving a black feather. Juan has just found his guardian.

Falling Action

The *falling action* involves the main character as he or she learns how to deal with life after the moment of truth.

Juan walks home through the cold, dark streets and knows that he, like the crow, will overcome this harsh northern place. He'll show his principal, his father, and himself that he can succeed.

Resolution

The *resolution* brings the story to a natural, thought-provoking, or surprising conclusion. (In some stories, it's hard to tell the difference between the falling action and resolution because they are so closely related.)

Juan arrives home, and his father meets him at the door. "Where have you been?" Juan holds up the suspension slip and says, "I've been in a bad place, but I'm not there anymore. And it's more important where I'm going."

Sample Story

Read and enjoy the sample story by Gabe Roberts. The side notes indicate how the story develops from the exposition to the resolution.

Exposition

The writer identifies the characters, setting, and conflict.

Rising Action

Dialogue and details add to the suspense of the story.

Jack and Jill

"This creative writing?"

Jill looked up from the poem she had been laboring over. Looming in the classroom doorway was a tall, unkempt boy swathed in a dingy green military coat. A set of earphones embraced his neck, which showed hints of shaving stubble and grime.

"Yes, it is," replied Mrs. Hawkins, reading the crumpled slip he thrust at her. "John Powers."

"Jack," the boy mumbled, his eyes lowered beneath a shock of black hair.

"Jack," repeated Mrs. Hawkins with a smile. "Why don't you take that empty seat next to Jill there?"

The boy flopped into the seat, sending an unpleasant mix of stale smoke and body odor wafting across the aisle. Jill wrinkled her nose in distaste, then forced a weak smile. She was about to speak when the boy flipped up his coat collar and sank down, his long legs stretching to hook under the desk in front of him. *Fine*, thought Jill, shrugging slightly. *You don't want to be friendly, it's okay with me*. She turned her attention to wrestling with the poem once more.

A few days later, Jill got to class early and noticed Jack hunched over behind Mrs. Hawkins's desk, reading one of the teacher's poetry books. He looked different—his face seemed softer somehow, and his lips moved as he read. He chuckled softly, and she heard him murmur the word "quoth" once out loud, then again. "Quoth." Like he was tasting a new flavor. He looked up quickly and saw her.

"Whatcha starin' at?"

"N-nothing!" His face had fallen back to the old menacing hardness, and Jill backed out of the room, deciding to wait until the others got there.

After class, she approached Mrs. Hawkins to talk about Jack.

"He doesn't belong in creative writing," Jill complained.

"He never writes anything, never talks in class, and in workshops he's absolutely useless. He never even smiles!"

"But he never disrupts class, either," the teacher smiled. "And he is listening. Does anyone ever talk to him? Jill,

Rising Action

Additional action builds excitement and keeps the reader engaged.

you're a writer. The most important thing a writer can learn is how to see beneath the surface. Jack didn't just appear on this earth sullen and alone. Don't you wonder what's behind that mask?"

Jill thought of Jack, shuffling down the hallway, his headphones firmly in place as though to drown out the world around him. She wondered if there could be more to him than she realized.

She watched Jack on the bus after school, his ever-present headphones plugged into his MP3 player. His hands made tiny flickers against the books on his lap, tapping a rhythm that Jill couldn't hear. His eyes, half closed, seemed focused on something only he could see.

Suddenly, she heard a shriek from a few seats back, where some younger students were sitting. A couple of bullies had grabbed a smaller child's stuffed animal and were tossing it around in a game of keep-away.

The toy was flying through the air, when a long arm in a green sleeve shot out and snagged it. Holding the toy, Jack swung himself up, his head nearly touching the top of the bus as he headed toward the back.

"Siddown!" yelled the bus driver, and Jack slid into the seat behind Jill, turning to face the kids in the back.

"Knock it off, you jerks," Jack growled, and at his dark look the bullies cowered into the back of their seats. "This yours?" he softly asked the crying child, who nodded. "Nice," Jack said, stroking the soft golden lion. "He got a name?"

"Simba," the child said softly, wiping his eyes.

"Good name. I had a tiger called Kiko." He handed the stuffed animal back to the child. "You hold onto Simba real tight, okay?" Jack whispered.

"Kay."

Jack smiled then, and with a jolt, Jill saw that he had a big gap where a tooth was missing. Jack turned and saw her looking at him, and his smile quickly closed.

"I'm Jill," she said. "From creative writing class?"

"I know," he said, starting to pull his earphones up into place. Jill's hand flashed out to stop him.

"Hey, do you like poetry? Maybe you could help me figure out what to do with this poem I'm trying to write for class." Jill reached for her backpack and shifted back to sit next to Jack. When she looked up again, she smiled at him.

After the smallest hesitation, he smiled back.

Climax

Jill finally discovers the truth about Jack.

Falling Action & Resolution

The story comes to a satisfying end.

Prewriting ■ Plan your writing.

Professor John Tolkien was grading exams when he scribbled a now-famous line: “In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit.” Tolkien didn’t know what a Hobbit was or why it lived in the ground. Even so, a single character in a setting inspired him to write *The Hobbit* and a series of other fantastic stories.

Remember that most short stories start with a main character doing some activity, and a conflict occurs. As you start planning your story, identify at least the main character and her or his problem.

■ Create characters.

Your story should be about getting to know someone. So think of two characters: a main character plus someone he or she learns about. Remember, though, not to embarrass anyone by making any of your characters too much like actual people.

The best stories have characters that you enjoy reading about and grow to care about. Don’t, however, include so many characters that the reader becomes confused.

■ Develop a conflict.

Your main character can be in conflict with another person, with him- or herself, with nature, with society, or with fate. The main character in the sample story on pages 316–317 is primarily in conflict with herself: Jill is having a hard time dealing with a new student in her creative writing class.

■ Establish a setting.

The *Hobbit* was set in “a hole in the ground” long ago. Your setting can be any place that allows your main character to deal with the conflict. Limit yourself, though, to one main location and a brief span of time.

■ Consider the action.

The conflict requires the main character to act, so list two or three actions that could move your story along. Also consider the climax, or moment of truth.



Plan your story. Think of at least two characters for your story, a conflict, and a setting. You could also list one or two actions that result from the conflict.

Writing ■ Create your first draft.

Build your story with a few interesting characters, realistic dialogue, and believable action. Also consider the following points about story writing.

■ Start your story.

To get the reader's attention, try starting your story in one of the following ways: (The sample story begins with dialogue.)

■ Start with an exciting action.

The dog lunged at Ming, and she climbed higher in the tree.

■ Begin with dialogue.

"I need to see some I.D.," said the security guard.

■ Make a surprising statement.

David wasn't worried about the trees along the ski trail;
it was the bear that concerned him.

As you develop the beginning of your story, you should name the setting, introduce the main character, and identify the conflict.

■ Develop the action.

Place your characters in the first challenging action. Then build suspense with each new action or struggle, leading up to the climax.

- Create dialogue that sounds real and natural. Let the words reflect what the characters think and feel.
- Include sensory details. What do the characters see, hear, smell, taste, or feel?
- *Show* instead of *tell* what is happening. For example, instead of writing "Joe was happy," write "Joe's face split into a grin." Instead of writing "The boat was in trouble," write "A wave crashed over the side and swamped the boat."

■ Bring the story to a close.

After the climax, work quickly through the rest of the story. Show how the climax has changed your main character, and tell how she or he will act or live from now on. The ending of your story will fall into place if the other parts of your story work well together.



Write your first draft. Use your planning from page 318 plus the information above as a general guide for your writing.

Improve your story.

Ask yourself the following questions when you review and revise your first draft. (Also see page 322.)

Story Checklist

- _____ Do my characters talk and act like real people?
- _____ Does the conflict really test my main character?
- _____ Do all the actions build toward the climax?
- _____ Does the main character learn about another person?

Revising in Action
 An unneeded idea is deleted, and a new idea is added.

"N-nothing!" His face had fallen back to the old menacing hardness when he saw her, and Jill backed out of the room, deciding to wait until the others got there

Editing ■ Check for style and accuracy.

When you edit your revised story, check for capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and spelling errors.

Editing in Action
 A spelling error is fixed.
 Punctuation is corrected.

A set of earphones embraced his neck, which showed hints of shaving stubble and grime.
 "Yes, it is," replied Mrs. Hawkins, reading the crumpled slip he thrust at her. John Powers."



Revise and edit your story. Use the information above to help you revise and edit the first draft of your story.

Story Patterns

Many short stories follow a basic pattern. Here are brief descriptions of some popular short-story patterns.

The Quest

The main character goes on a journey into the unknown, overcomes a number of obstacles, and returns either victorious or wiser. Heroic myths follow this pattern, but so do many modern stories.

A young woman fights for the right to join an all-male sports team.

The Discovery

The main character follows a trail of clues to discover an amazing secret. Mystery and suspense novels use this pattern.

A curious young man discovers that the bully at school is . . .

The Rite of Passage

A difficult experience changes the main character in a significant and lasting way. These stories are also called *Coming of Age* stories.

A young soldier learns about responsibility while on the battlefield.

The Choice

The focus in this type of story is a decision the main character must make. Tension builds as the decision approaches.

A young adult must decide to follow the crowd or follow her own conscience.

The Union

Two people fall in love, but they are held apart by a number of obstacles. Their struggle to come together only causes their love to grow stronger. Sometimes they succeed, and sometimes they fail.

A young deaf man falls in love with a gifted violinist and then struggles to understand the music he can't hear.

The Reversal

In this pattern, the main character follows one course of action until something causes him or her to think or act in a different way.

A young woman quits school, but then discovers her true love is painting and enrolls in an art school.

Elements of Fiction

The following terms describe elements of literature. This information will help you discuss and write about novels, poetry, essays, and other literary works.

Antagonist The person or force that works against the hero of the story (See *protagonist*.)

Character A person or an animal in a story

Conflict A problem or clash between two forces in a story

- **Person vs. person** A problem between characters
- **Person vs. himself or herself** A problem within a character's own mind
- **Person vs. society** A problem between a character and society, the law, or some tradition
- **Person vs. nature** A problem with an element of nature, such as a blizzard or a hurricane
- **Person vs. destiny** A problem or struggle that appears to be beyond a character's control

Mood The feeling a piece of literature creates in a reader

Narrator The person or character who tells the story, gives background information, and fills in details between dialogue

Plot, Plot Line See pages 314–315.

Point of View The angle from which a story is told

- In **first-person point of view**, one character is telling the story.
- In **third-person point of view**, someone outside the story is telling it.
- In **omniscient point of view**, the narrator tells the thoughts and feelings of all the characters.
- In **limited omniscient point of view**, the narrator tells the thoughts of one character at a time.
- In **camera view** (objective), the narrator records the action from his or her own point of view without any other characters' thoughts.

Protagonist The main character or hero in a story (See *antagonist*.)

Setting The place and time period in which a story takes place

Theme The author's message about life or human nature

Tone The writer's attitude toward his or her subject (*angry*, *humorous*, and so on)