

How to Write a Story

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If you're wondering how to write a story, consider using this simple recipe. After all, every story requires the same ingredients; they're just applied in different measures.

Begin with a solid base, which is the plot. No amount of seasoning will dress up a rotten plot. The plot consists of the beginning, the main conflict, the middle, the confrontation, the climax and the end. Here is what you need to know about each of these elements:

The beginning of the story should be the moment a change or conflict occurs. There is no need to take the reader through a typical day and then introduce turmoil in Chapter 2. You'll lose readers long before you have a chance to dazzle and delight them. Instead, put 80% of your effort into hooking the reader from the very first line. Don't hold back to build interest. If the interest isn't there from the first sentence the reader won't buy the book. Notice I didn't say to give 100% to the first sentence, because if what follows that first sentence doesn't live up to its promise, you're doomed when your second book appears on book store shelves. You have to follow a great hook with a good (hopefully great) story.

Which brings us to the conflict. You should introduce the main conflict of the story from the beginning. The main conflict is the problem to be solved or the question to be answered. There must be sufficient obstacles along the way, so the conflict isn't easily resolved. For example, assume the main conflict of your story is a student who must get an A on the final exam in order to graduate high school. A story about a kid studying all night would receive low marks. Instead create obstacles your character must overcome: the house burns down; the dog eats his study guide; he's abducted by aliens. Now he has to find a way to learn the material and make it back to Earth in time for the test.

The obstacles, the struggle and rising stakes occur in the middle. Keep the pressure on or the middle of your story will sag. While this is a great time to develop characters, build back story and even take on subplots, don't let up on your character. They're tough, they can take the pressure. My favorite stories are those that put characters in seemingly impossible situations. I know they have to get out of the stickiest situations (an implied promise) so I keep turning pages to discover how. Don't make the obstacles too easy to hurdle, but don't cheat on the resolution either. It's a very fine line that you'll need to walk to write a top notch story.

The confrontation occurs when the character meets the conflict head on. Finally, it's test day and it all comes down to a sharpened # 2 pencil and multiple choice answer sheet. There's still an element of suspense and the reader's invested in the outcome.

The climax is when we learn whether the character has succeeded or failed. Usually readers expect and writers deliver a successful outcome, however failure can have its own rewards. The student doesn't get an A on his exam after all, but he's recruited by NASA after his close encounter.

The ending may be a few sentences or an entire chapter. This is your opportunity to wrap up any loose ends and give the reader a glimpse into the future of your characters. I've written clever short stories that leave the ending open for interpretation and all the feedback I've received was from readers who were A) Annoyed or B) Confused. I stopped trying to be clever and just offered a great story with a clear conclusion. If your reader has hung in there to the final pages, reward them with a great ending. It's what they'll remember next time they see your name on the spine of a book. Make a positive impression, because you never get a second chance to make a last impression either.

Once you have the plot in place, you can spice up your story with characters and setting. Characters can breathe life into a story or suck the joy right out of it. Good characters are "real" meaning they have several aspects to their personality. They aren't just a cardboard cut out of a "Good Guy" or "Bad Guy." The best characters have traits that are good and bad, they have regrets, sorrows, joys and redeeming qualities. They are real because we can relate to their complexity and vulnerability. They may be funny, shy, intelligent and deceptive – or they may be aggressive, honest, sentimental and dumb as a rock. Mix things up to avoid stereotypes. The seasoned cop may like opera, cry like a baby at weddings and cheat on his taxes. The soccer mom may be a sex phone operator by day and book club president by night.

You can also get creative with settings, exploring time periods and unexpected places to create a unique story.

This is how to write a story . Mix it up, add a splash of suspense, a dash of humor and a smidgen of sex. I hope the results are delicious.