

# Writing Fundamentals

## The Craft Writing a Story

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### Table of Contents

<b>01. - What is a Story? .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>02. - Hooking Your Reader .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>03. - All Stories Make a Point .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>04. - Feel What the Protagonist Feels.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>05. - All Protagonists Have a Goal.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>06. - Uncovering Your Protagonist Inner Issues .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>07. - Being Specific Rather than Vague .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>08. - Suspense and Conflict .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>09. - Cause and Effect .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>10. - What can go wrong MUST .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>11. - Setups, Pay Offs &amp; the Clues in Between .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>12. - Flashbacks, Subplots and Foreshadowing.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>13. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Writing Conferences .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Writing Groups .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Writers Websites .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Writing .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Books on Writing and Publishing.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Writing Consultants .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Literary Agents .....</b>	<b>52</b>

# 01. - What is a Story?

## Explanation

Before we dive into what a story actually is, I'd like to tell you something that just might knock your socks off, because it reveals the amazing power that writers actually have. You see, although story is universal, until very recently, stories were primarily seen as just another form of entertainment. Sure, we thought they make life much more enjoyable, but they don't really play a necessary role when it comes to survival. Wrong. Turns out that story has been crucial to our survival from day one.

Story is what allowed us to envision the future and to prepare for the unexpected. As a result, story in our brain evolved in tandem. Story is how we make sense of the world. But for writers, the real breakthrough is the discovery of what triggers that sense of pleasure we feel when a story hooks us. It's not lyrical language, great characters, realistic dialogue, or even vivid images. Nope, curiosity is the trigger.

In other words, the desire to find out what happens next. That feeling of pleasure, it's actually the rush of the neurotransmitter dopamine. It's our brain's way of rewarding us for following our curiosity until we find the answer. This information is a game changer for writers, especially given how often we're led to believe that having a way with words is what hooks readers. In fact, words are the handmaiden of story. Story is what captivates the brain.

Now, I'm not saying that great writing isn't a huge plus, obviously it is. But without a story, great writing just sits there like a beautifully rendered bowl of waxed fruit. So, what are the brain's expectations when it comes to story? And how can you make sure your story delivers them? That's exactly what we will be exploring in this course, beginning right now with a definition of what exactly a story is. Here goes: a story is how what happens affects someone who is in pursuit of a difficult goal and how he or she changes as a result.

Let's take a closer look using language that you might already be familiar with. What happens, that's the plot; someone, that's the protagonist; the goal is what's known as the story problem or story question and how he or she changes as a result, that's what your story is actually about. A story is about how the plot affects the protagonist. In other words, story is internal, not external.

All the elements of a story are anchored in this very simple premise where they work together to create what it appears to the reader as reality, only sharper, clearer, and far more entertaining. This is because stories filter out everything that would distract us from the situation at hand, which is what does your protagonist have to confront and overcome in order to solve the problem you've set up for her? Is discovering what the problem is

that ignites the reader's curiosity, which means that we have to have a sense of it, beginning on the very first page.

### **Example**

Let's take a look at the kind of idea that writers often start with and I'll show you how with just a few tweaks we can take it from not so great to really stellar. It's all a matter of following our definition of story. Here's an example of the first draft of a story idea.

**My novel is about an aspiring actress who doesn't think that her father ever loved her. He was a famous actor, and all he ever cared about was his work. He was always gone throughout her childhood-- he was almost never there for birthdays or when she was in a performance herself, and worse, he started to get all these plum roles for older men, but he's made her so insecure, she can't get a job at all.**

Let's run this through our story definition to see how it holds up.

A story is how what happens. That's the plot. What's a plot? A plot is what happens in the story. And what's happening in this story? Nothing, no plot, no story. So let's check the next part of our story definition to see if that works. Even though the writer told us the actress is the protagonist, you can't be a protagonist unless you actually do something, otherwise you're just a character standing around waiting, no story in that. I think we might be in trouble. Let's check the next component.

We need a protagonist who is in pursuit of a difficult goal, that's the story problem. The trouble is the writer hasn't told us what the actress' goal is, so there is no story problem here. Sure, we could probably do our work for her and guess what the actress' goal is. To win her father's love, to land a major role, to hire a thug to break up her father's legs maybe? We don't know. And if there is no goal, there's no story problem, which means there's no story.

So when it comes to how the protagonist changes as a result, that's what the story is actually about, in other words, what the protagonist learns. Well, as far as we can see, she doesn't change at all, because so far the story isn't about anything. So, how can the writer improve this? By going back in and adding the specific motivation, details, and action that pin the story to the page. Let's give the writer another chance.

**My story is about an aspiring actress whose father, an iconic actor, has done everything he could to undermine her career. Her biggest fear is that he is right. And she really is making a fool of herself. She's about to give up when her agent sends her on one last audition: a hot young director is looking for an unknown to play the**

**lead in his next film. Believing that if she gets the role she can finally show her father that she's got what it takes, she ups her game and lands the part.**

**But she soon begins to see how life in the limelight can change a person, realizing that beneath her father's bravado, there's a fearful man who is probably just as insecure as she is**

Let's put this new version to the same test. What happens? Our aspiring actress pulls out the stops to land a lead role against all odds. But when she does, she begins to experience how different success is than how she envisioned it. Who does it happen to? An aspiring actress who find herself in the midst of actual events that we can actually envision.

What's her goal? To show her disapproving father that she really does have the chops to make it. How did she change? She realizes that making is a very different experience than she thought it would be. And that gives her something she never thought she'd feel, empathy for her father. And there you have it, with all of the elements in place; the writer has created a foundation on which you can build a very compelling story. In the next movie I'll give you a checklist of questions that you can use to make sure your story stays on track.

## **Story Check**

Now that we've established the definition of a story, here are some quick questions you can ask yourself when you begin to write or rewrite your own story. These questions will help you make sure your story stays on track.

**First**, what happens? What will actually happen in the external story? What events have to occur in order to force your protagonist to confront and overcome the thing that's holding her back? Remember, it's something she's probably spent her whole life avoiding, so the plot must really put the screws to urging her ever forward.

**Second**, who does the plot affect? It's a good idea to double check that you actually have a clear protagonist. Remember, that's the person in pursuit of a difficult goal. You'd be shocked, I mean really shocked, at how often writers overlook this.

**Third**, what is your protagonist's goal? All stories revolve around an immediate and unavoidable problem that the protagonist has no choice but to deal with now. So the question is what problem will your protagonist have to face and solve as the story unfolds?

**Finally**, how does your protagonist change? What will she realize at the end of the day that changes how she saw things when the story started? Sometimes this realization

allows her to reach her goal, and sometimes it's that moment when she realizes that her goal wasn't what she really wanted after all.

The more you know about what she'll need to learn, the easier it is to make sure that your plot will compel her to learn it.

## 02. - Hooking Your Reader

### Explanation

From the very first sentence, a story must revolve around how someone solves an unexpected problem that no matter how hard they try, they simply can't avoid. So what's not surprising at the very first question that's always in the back of our brain--whether we are aware of it or not--when we begin reading a novel or watching a movie is what rapidly escalating problem will the protagonist have to deal with? It's something the reader needs to sense from the get-go. And nothing grabs the brain quicker than a surprise.

That's what ignites our curiosity, after all. If we sense that something isn't quite right, it instantly makes us wonder what's really going on here? So the question is how do you convey this from the very beginning? The answer is by providing the three things that the reader's brain instantly hunts for. Whose story is this? What's happening here? And what is at stake? First, it's important to know from the very beginning whose story it is, because as we'll see, in a story the reader feels what the protagonist feels.

There are our points of entry, and we experience everything that happens based on how it affects them in pursuit of their goal. Are there times when the protagonist doesn't appear on the first page? Of course, but when that happens, two things are necessary. The reader still must have a sense of whose story it will be and everything that happens in those first few pages must in some way affect the protagonist the moment he or she ambles into the story. Second, the only way the reader can want to know what happens next is if something is happening in the first place.

That means you don't want to spend pages setting the stage for what's about to happen or filling us in on things we will need to know later in order for the story to make sense. Instead, you want to plunge us into something that's actually happening. This is what provides the reader with a sense of the big picture. It helps to think of the story as a single problem that gets more complicated as it progresses. Can we glimpse that problem on the first page? And finally, there needs to be something at stake.

If there is nothing at stake, we have no reason to read forward, why? Because there's nothing to be curious about, no conflict that needs to be resolved, no burning question we want answered. Having everything go according to plan is really nice in real life, but it's deadly in a story. Stories are about our expectations not being met and what that forces us to do as a result. Can all this be accomplished on the very first page? Let me give you an example of how all three questions can be answered in the first sentence.

This is the opening sentence of a novel called *What Came Before He Shot Her* by Elizabeth George. And here's the sentence: Joel Campbell, age 11 at the time, began his descent toward murder with a bus ride. Whose story is it? That's easy, Joel Campbell's.

What's happening? He is on bus which will somehow trigger his unavoidable descent into murder. What is at stake? Someone's life, not to mention Joel's future. The beauty of it is that, that single sentence then becomes the yardstick by which we can measure everything that happens in the novel. It all adds up because we know where it's going.

Knowing what's at stake allows us to ask of each event. Does this move Joel closer to murder, or does it move him further away? And the more we care about Joel, the more deeply invested we become.

### **Example**

Imagine you pick up a new novel, turn to the first page, and this is what you read:

**The day dawned clear and bright, the sun was shining, and the sky was a vivid blue. Tommy awoke and lay still for a moment. Morning was his favorite time of day, and he liked to savor it. At last, he got up and went to the window and pulled the shade. He saw kids walking to school with their big sneakers and their heavy backpacks. He saw a few energized souls riding their bikes to work, their messenger bags slung across their backs.**

**Remembering the presentation he was scheduled to give at the morning meeting, he yawned, turned from the window, and started dressing for work.**

It's not a terribly engaging story. Let's see if we can figure out why by asking whether this paragraph answers the three questions readers will have. Whose story is it? Tommy's, so far so good, but is it a story yet? What's happening? Tommy's getting up and going about his day, pretty much like we all do, which brings us to the key question, what's at stake? Absolutely nothing, there's nothing out of the ordinary here.

We have no idea what the story will be about, which means there's nothing for readers to anticipate and nothing for them to read forward to find out. No curiosity, no rush of dopamine, no reader. Let's see if we can make Tommy's story and his day just a wee bit more intriguing.

**On Tuesday Tommy woke up knowing that by noon his fate would be decided. He was either going to convince Anne that he was worth hiring as a junior graphic designer or he was going to have to move back to his parents' house in Bethesda and become just another graduate who couldn't get a job.**

**He was sure that the presentation he prepared was slick. He'd shot a video, designed an animated logo, recorded music, but as he put on**

**his best suit and tie--okay, it was his only suit and tie-- the image of his childhood bedroom crept into his mind. His baseball card collection and dusty shoeboxes under his bed, the poster of Radiohead on the wall, the old electric guitar still in its stand, and his little sister standing in the doorway telling him he was a loser. That bedroom was a graveyard of dead dreams.**

**If he had to go back now, how would he ever get out?**

Now let's see what we have. Whose story is it? Still Tommy's. What's happening? Tommy is about to make the presentation of his young life, something that clearly means a lot to him. What's at stake? His job, his home, and most importantly, his sense of self. So is this the beginning of the story? You bet. In this version we not only have a sense of who Tommy is, but of the problem he's facing and what it means to him.

As important, we're beginning to care about Tommy, at least enough to read on to find out what happens when Anne sees his presentation. A presentation we can't help suspecting might not be quite as successful as he hopes it will be. This opening paragraph has done its job. It's given us a glimpse of what the overarching story will be about, and it stands a good chance of piquing the reader's curiosity.

### **Story Check**

When you are checking the opening paragraph of your Story, here are four questions to ask.

First, will the reader know whose story it is? If the reader doesn't know who the protagonist is, there will be nothing to give meaning to the events that unfold and worse, no one to root for.

Second, is something happening, beginning on the first page? Don't spend pages setting up the scene or giving us background information that we will need later. Don't just set the ball rolling.

Leap in with the ball already careening downhill. What better way to kick-start the reader's curiosity than opening with something that has a clear impending consequence? After all, how can we wonder what happens next unless something is already happening?

Third, does something hang in the balance? Ask yourself, is the reader aware that something specific is at stake right there on the first page?

Fourth, Is enough of the "big picture" visible from the get-go to give us a sense of where the story is heading? It's the big picture that puts everything in context, supplying perspective and conveying the point of each scene.



Without it, it's like having all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle with no idea how they fit together or what the final picture might look like. Now that you've seen the incredible difference a little editing can make to an opening. Give it a try. You'll find a rough draft paragraph in your exercise files. Remember, there are no right answers. Let your imagination be your guide.

## 03. – All Stories Make a Point

### Explanation

All stories make a point beginning on Page 1, which means the reader needs to have an idea of what that point is from the get-go. It's like when your friend is rambling on about something that happened yesterday, and you nod and smile politely while a little voice in your head screams, okay, okay, but what's your point? Same with a story, if you zero in on your point before you begin writing, not only will your story be easier to craft, but you'll spend less time rewriting. If you know what your story's point is, it allows you to filter out everything that's irrelevant.

This is crucial because as far as the reader is concerned, everything in a story is there strictly on a need-to-know basis. If they didn't need to know it, you wouldn't bother telling them about it. They assume that everything you tell them will have a story consequence. So, if you include things they don't need to know, they are going to read meaning into it anyway, and it will inherently be the wrong meaning, since there isn't a right one, which means pretty soon your story will stop making sense. That's why knowing your story's point is one of the most important things to pin down before you begin writing.

Without a point, a story isn't about anything. It's just a bunch of things that happen. I can't tell you how many manuscripts I have read where if someone asks me, what's it about? I'd say it's about 300 pages, I have no idea. So, how do you zero in on your point? By focusing on three essential elements that together are the foundation that a story is built on? First, the Theme. Theme, I know can seem intimidating, but it actually boils down to something very simple.

What are you saying about human nature? In other words, the theme defines how the characters will treat each other. It's interesting to note that the theme sets the story's tone, and the tone sets the reader's mood. For instance, in a lighthearted romantic comedy, tone is bright and sunny, and we know that love not only can save the day, but it actually will. In a more Realistic universe, the tone is a little grittier, and although there will be genuine misunderstandings between the characters, love will be worth it, probably.

Second, your protagonist's inner issue, which is an internal conflict or belief that holding him back and that he must deal with and overcome in order to achieve his goal. Third is the Plot, that is the escalating cause-and-effect progression of external events constructed to force your protagonist to deal with his inner issue if he wants to solve the story problem. Once you have pinpointed your story's theme and your protagonist's inner issue, you can craft a plot that will make your story's point.

## Example

A mistake many aspiring writers make is that they only focus on the most visible part of the story, the plot. So they tell us a whole bunch of general things that happened, but it doesn't add up to anything. A summary of their overall story often goes something like this...

**My novel is about a guy who's been genetically engineered to have an amazing memory. Ever since he was a child he was groomed to become a CIA operative, so he's never had a normal life.**

**Now he's part of an elite group of spies that goes all over the world solving the toughest intelligence problems, but no one know he's been genetically altered. It all goes well--until he falls for a woman he's sent to spy on.**

Which leaves me wondering, and so what's the point? Clearly, this example doesn't focus in on our three essential elements: the Theme, the Internal Issue, and the Plot. Let's see if we can help the writer dig deep and improve her summary.

Theme, what might she be saying about human nature?

**My novel will show that our ability to genetically engineer humans has outstripped our ability to understand its ethical implications. The underlying theme is that we can't escape our humanity, because to the dismay of the scientists who created him, even a genetically engineered person will ultimately seek meaning and connection.**

This theme gives us both a clue as to how the story will end and how the world will treat her protagonist.

That's why doing your homework before you start writing is so important. Just two sentences can shape the entire story. Now let's turn to the protagonist's internal issue. What's this guy really struggling with?

**My protagonist is a CIA operative who's been genetically engineered to have an amazing memory. His issue is that because he was created to do crucial top-secret work no ordinary human could do, he doesn't believe he has the right to feel emotions ordinary humans feel, or to question his destiny.**

This is a great inner issue because it's something that the plot can then force him to deal with at every turn, causing him great internal conflict and continually compelling him to make really hard decisions.

Now that we know what his issue is and what the theme is, the writer can craft a plot in which far more interesting and important things happen. This gives us a foundation for

the story that's infinitely more likely to engage a reader than the one we started with. Here's how it looks.

**My protagonist is a CIA operative who's been genetically engineered to have an amazing memory. He's sent on a top-secret mission to spy on a young foreign woman he's told is working to overthrow the government.**

**He finds himself drawn to her in an unsettling way he doesn't understand, which causes him to question everything he's been told--ever. He soon begins to suspect that she isn't trying to overthrow his government; she's trying to prove that the CIA is working to undermine hers. Even more startling, he realizes what he's feeling for her just might be love, something his handlers told him wasn't capable of. Now he must decide whether to finish the job he was engineered to do, or leave his genetics, his training and his security behind and open the door to something much more messy, confusing and satisfying--his humanity.**

Now that sounds like an interesting story, the one I know I'd be excited to read.

## **Story Check**

Here's a checklist to help you zero in on what your story is actually about.

**First**, what's your story's point? Ask yourself what is my story leading up to? What will people walk away thinking about? Remember, writers are the most powerful people in the world because they can change how others see the world. How will your story change your readers' worldview, even if only by a smidge?

**Second**, what's your story's theme? Ask yourself what does my story say about human nature? The brain is wired to turn the story to make sense of the world, so we probe each story for useful information that will better help us understand what makes people tick? What's your story saying about what it means to be human?

**Third**, do the protagonist's inner issue, the theme, and the plot work together to answer the story problem? The story problem will always be in the back of the reader's mind, so everything in the story must revolve around how it's solved.

With that in mind, ask yourself is my theme reflected in the way people treat my protagonist? Does each plot twist force my protagonist to deal with the inner issue that's holding him back? Finally, can you sum up what your story is about in a short paragraph? Yeah, this is hard. There's an old saying that goes, if only I had more time, I could have written less. Take your time with this, because it's well worth it. If you can concisely sum

up what your story will be about so that you are aware of what its point is, it would be far easier to write.

After all, since the story is about someone solving a problem, it's best to know precisely what that problem is before you begin writing.

## 04. – Feel What the Protagonist Feels

### Explanation

A story is a simulation that allows the reader to experience what the protagonist goes through. But how do we get the reader into the protagonist's skin? By letting them feel what the protagonist feels. Why is this so important? Because neuroscience has revealed that every decision we make and every reaction we have is based on emotion. Emotion comes first and reason follows. If we're not feeling, we're not conscious, and when it comes to story, if we are not feeling, we are not going to keep reading. What do we feel? We feel what the protagonist feels.

This is why everything that happens in a story needs to affect the protagonist. In fact, everything in a story gets its emotional weight and meaning based on how it affects him in terms of his quest. If it doesn't affect him, even if we are talking about birth, death, or the fall of the Roman Empire, it's neutral, and so it has no place in the story. That's why in every scene you write, the protagonist must react in a way the reader can see and understand. This reaction must be specific, personal, and have an affect on whether or not the protagonist achieves his goal.

Sometimes the reaction is external, meaning that the protagonist actually does something, but very often a character's reaction to what happens is solely internal, be it a thought, a sudden insight, a memory, or an epiphany. And don't forget, we need to know what his expectations were to begin with, otherwise we have no way of knowing when those expectations are being met, or far more likely, not being met. So how do you clue the reader into the protagonist's thoughts and reactions? When writing in the first person, the protagonist is telling us a story, which means that these thought and expectations must be woven into absolutely everything.

He draws a conclusion about everything he mentions, down to the smallest detail, because everything he mentions inherently pertains to the story he's telling and to the point he's making. He never mentions anything just because or objectively describes what something looks like. When writing in the third person, the trick is to seamlessly slip out of the neutral narrator's voice--that's you by the way--and into the character's very subjective point of view. To do this, you don't need to use labels like he thought, or she mused, nor do you need to use quotation marks or italics.

Let me give you an example from an Elmore Leonard novel, *Freaky Deaky*. Robin watched him drink his wine and refill the glass. Poor little guy, he needed a mommy. She reached out and touched his arm. "Mark?" Felt his muscle tighten and took that as a good sign. Now there is no doubt that it's Robin rather than the author who sees Mark as a poor little guy in need of a mommy. Yet there is nothing at all in the text that flags this as

Robin's opinion. Why? Because none is needed, and notice, too, that she didn't just feel his muscle tighten, she drew a conclusion about what it meant. She saw it as a good sign.

Whether or not she was right is up for debate, and that's what keeps us reading. We want to find out. Open just about any book written in the third person and you'll find examples of this on almost every page. Done well and it's invisible, which is why even though you have probably read hundreds of such novels throughout your life, how to weave in a character's thoughts and reactions can still seem elusive. Great writers always clue us into what their characters are thinking and feeling because that's where the story lives.

### **Example**

Okay, now let's try it together. We'll start with a rough draft of a scene about a hockey game. (male speaker: It was the seventh game of the championship and the Stanley Cup was on the line--the biggest prize in hockey. Fans were crammed into the arena, hooting and hollering. Goalie Joe Williams looked at Larry Barnes, his childhood rival, who was playing for the opposing team. Boy, they sure had come a long way. Larry had the puck and was about to try to score, so Joe crouched in front of the goal--his few feet of ice--and waited to do his job.) That wasn't a very exciting scene, which is odd.

After all, it's the seventh game of the Stanley Cup. The reason it falls flat is because we have no one to root for. Sure we figured Joe probably wants to win the game, but it doesn't seem to matter to him. In fact, nothing seems to mean much to him, not the screaming fans, not that his team made it to the finals, not the fact that his life-long rival is about to slam the puck into the goal he's guarding. So why would a writer forget to let us know how Joe feels? What most likely happened is that the writer believed the situation is so incredibly exciting that we will inherently know how Joe feels, so he decided not to waste time telling us about it.

This is a very common mistake. Your job is to help the reader feel what the protagonist feels. To make that happen, this writer would need to do two things. First, he needs to let us know what Joe feels. Second, he needs to let us know why Joe feels that way. Let's look at the improved version below, so you can see exactly how it's done. Note that this time the writer lets us into Joe's feelings at every turn and has crafted a why that's specific, clear, and present.

Also note that the writer didn't accomplish this simply by tweaking the bad version of the scene. Instead, he completely reimagined and rewrote it. As we'll discuss throughout, the willingness to re-write is what separates those who are successful from those who never quite get there. Here we go. (male speaker: When the puck skidded across the ice, careened off the boards, and landed right on Larry's stick with six seconds remaining on the clock, Joe had to laugh. Of course Larry would maneuver to take the last shot.

Of course Larry would race up the ice and stare him in the eye as if he wanted to kill him, not shoot the puck past him and into the goal. It was Larry pitted against Joe, one more time--although this time, they weren't just a couple of ten year olds playing in their first game, or a couple of high school kids playing for the league title. This time they were facing off for the Stanley Cup--the biggest prize in hockey--and the whole world was watching. With a grim smile, Joe crouched, every muscle tense.

He was a machine finely tuned to do just one thing: this time, he'd stop Larry Barnes from scoring.) Now I am dying to know what happened. Did Larry score this time? Did Joe stop the shot? How did Joe feel at the end of the day? And hey, what's behind their rivalry anyway? It sure sounds like stopping Larry shot means more to Joe than just winning the game, and that my friends is what keeps me reading.

### **Story Check**

Now for a handy list of questions to make sure that your reader is able to feel what your protagonist is feeling.

**First**, is the reader aware of your protagonist's specific expectations so we can tell whether they are being met or not? This is something that writers very often forget to tell us, why? They assume that the reader knows what the protagonist expects, or just as common, they assume that a general answer will suffice. James going to a party and Jane expects to have a good time, but that's a general and a given.

Who wouldn't want to have a good time? The real question is what specifically would have to happen at the party in order for Jane to have that good time?

**Second**, does everything that happens affect your protagonist emotionally in the moment? This doesn't mean that the protagonist has to get all emotional and weep or laugh or go nuts and slug someone. It means that the reader must know what emotion the protagonist is feeling, especially when that emotion is at odds with what he is saying.

**Third**, does your protagonist react to everything that happens? Sometimes this is a physical reaction. Sometimes it's what the protagonist thinks or feels. Remember, a story isn't about what happens on the surface, it's about how what happens affects your protagonist.

**Fourth**, can the reader see the causal link between what happened and why your protagonist reacted the way she did? This comes back to making sure that the reader knows what the protagonist's expectations were.

If they know what she expected, chances are they will understand why she's reacting the way she does. Not only that, but they will be able to anticipate what she might do as a result.



**Finally**, if you're writing in the first person, does everything reflect to protagonist's point of view? Remember, in a first-person account, nothing is ever neutral, even for a moment. This means the narrator will never tell us about anything that doesn't affect him in some way.

Think of the narrator as a narcissist, but in a good way. Everything in the story relates to him, which is why he's telling us about it in the first place.

## 05. – All Protagonists Have a Goal

### Explanation

Everyone has an agenda, you, me, and every protagonist worth their salt. That's because we're wired to be goal-driven, the better to achieve our primary objective, physical, and social survival. As far as our brain is concerned, without a goal everything is meaningless. That's why in a story, the reader immediately needs to know what the protagonist's agenda is, since that's what gives meaning to every single thing that happens. So the first question you need to ask is: what does my protagonist want? Surprisingly, this is something that writers often miss.

So I want to say it strongly, every story begins with a protagonist who wants something very, very badly, even if what they want is to stay exactly the same, like Bilbo Baggins in the Hobbit. Remember what we said about the readers slipping into the protagonist's skin and feeling what the protagonist feels. Well, those feelings all stem from the protagonist's driving desire and what he has to overcome to achieve his goal. We then gauge everything based on whether it brings him closer to his goal or puts him further away.

Without a goal, there is no yardstick by which to measure your pilgrim's progress and no context to give it meaning. But there is a bit more to it than that. Because the protagonist actually has two goals: one is external, and the other is internal. What does he want? That's the external goal. Why does he want it? That's the internal goal. The external goal is the actual plot level thing he wants, a million dollars or the love of a beautiful woman or not to change an iota.

Protagonists tend to believe that by getting their external goal, their internal goal will be met, the money will make you feel like a success, her love will make him feel worthy, and not changing an iota will make him feel safe. Often the protagonist's internal goal is a secret, sometimes from everyone else in the story, sometimes even from himself, but never from the reader, because it's the protagonist's internal goal that gives meaning to what he does. The reader must be aware of it.

Once you have a solid understanding of what your protagonist wants, what it means to him, and what long-standing fear he has to overcome to have a shot of success, your story has a shot of giving readers what they come for.

### Example

We know that the protagonist must have a very clear goal at the start of the story, something he or she desperately wants but can't yet reach. Here is an example of the kind of external goal a writer might create during the development stage of a story.

**Dan ditched a promising career as an environmental lawyer to take a lucrative job at an investment company that specializes in oil futures. He made his move even though he knows the guys at the top of firm are shady, because he just turned 29 and his goal is to make ten million by the time he's thirty.**

Do we know what Dan's goal is? You bet, he wants to make \$10 million.

That is pretty darn clear. What's missing is the why. We have no idea why he wants the \$10 million other than a rhetorical, hey, who wouldn't? But we don't turn to stories to tell us what we already know. We turn the stories to tell us what we don't know and are dying to figure out. And what we don't know here is why Dan wants \$10 million. One answer could be that he wanted to buy a lot of expensive stuff. The only problem is it that still leaves us thinking, yeah, but who wouldn't? What's your point? The trouble is right now the answer to why does Dan want the money is basically just because.

And in story, you never want the answer to anything to be just because. So how do we find the real answer? By asking what does having a lot of money mean to Dan. In other words, we're looking for his internal goal. So let's figure it out. And notice that once we do, it completely changes and deepens the plot, including shifting his external goal.

**Dan spent his life dedicated to helping humanity.**

**He's worked long hours, and along the way he neglected his wife, his friends, even his own health. Just as his environmental law firm scores a major victory against a big oil company, he discovers that his little girl had a rare and deadly blood disorder and he realizes how much his family means to him. The doctors tell him they've found a cure, but they need ten million dollars to implement it. Torn between his drive to help humanity and his desire to save his daughter, he quits his job and goes to work for the very oil company he's on the verge of putting out of business.**

**His goal: to make enough money to save his daughter. The cost? He must help overthrow the victory his law firm just spent years securing.**

Hey, turns out Dan's real goal was to save his daughter's life. The money is just a means to that end. And his internal goal is to prove to his wife and daughter that he loves them so much he'll do anything for them, which sets up an excellent internal struggle. Which is more important to Dan? Helping humanity or saving his beloved daughter? And is there a way he can do both? That's the kind of premise that really hooks a reader.

## **Story Check**

Here are few questions to help you make sure that your protagonist has a goal worthy of an entire story.

**First**, ask yourself what is my protagonist's external goal? What does he want more than anything? What's his reason for living? Everyone has an agenda, what's his? And remember, saying he wants \$10 million isn't enough, it's general, and besides, who doesn't want \$10 million? The point is be specific.

**Second**, what is my protagonist's internal goal? What will achieving his external goal mean to him? Why does he want it? What does he think getting it will say about him? How will that affect his self-image? And as important, is he right?

**Third**, do these goals force him to face a specific long-standing problem or fear? What secret fear must he confront if he is going to have a shot at his goal? What hidden truth has he spent his whole life avoiding that he's now forced to look straight in the eye or give up and go home?

## 06. – Uncovering Your Protagonist Inner Issues

### Explanation

We've been talking about how important it is that the reader immediately gets a sense of your protagonist's agenda, what she wants, why she wants it, and a long-standing fear that she'll have to overcome to get it. Question is, how the heck do you know what those things actually are? The answer is by digging in your protagonist's backstory. After all, you can't filter everything that happens through your protagonist's worldview unless you know what her worldview is. While writers often balk at the idea of outlining or developing their characters before they begin writing, this is the key thing that can cut down on rewriting time.

But this kind of preparation doesn't have to put a crimp in your creativity, and it definitely doesn't have to include one of those long births to death character bios. Here's the secret: you're only looking for information that affects the story you're telling. If a story is about the protagonist facing a specific long-standing problem or fear in order to get what she wants, then what you're looking for is the root of that problem. You want to pin-point two things. First, what specific event caused her problem or fear in the first place? Second, what event triggered her desire for the goal itself? The trick is to then trace how these two competing forces shaped her life up to the moment that the story begins.

That's what makes digging into your character's past so essential. Truth is, everything a character does is based on their interpretation of the events. After all, we don't see the world as it is, we see the world as we are. For instance, Olive thinks that everyone is only in it for themselves, thus the nicer people are to her, the more she is sure they're only out to con her. So, knowing how your protagonist sees the world and where and why her interpretation is off is what allows you to create a compelling plot that will force her to come to grips with her mistaken end belief.

Remember, a story is about change, things start out one way and end up another. The information you'll unearth is the protagonist's before, which you can then weave into the story so the reader understands what she's changing from. The beauty of knowing these things is that it will also reveal something that writers often struggle to nail down: when exactly did your story start? The answer is it starts the moment life will no longer let the protagonist avoid her fear, not if she wants to achieve her goal, that is.

And this is the brilliant thing, unearthing the root of your protagonist's inner issue will tell you what she has to learn at the end of the story in order to succeed. Now let's go to the next movie to see how it's done.

## **Example**

The way to pin-point the specific event that caused the problem or fear that the protagonist must overcome is to relentlessly ask why of everything until you hit pay dirt. Here's how such a conversation between two writers might go.

**“Thank you for going over my script with me and helping me with this,” she said.**

**“Sure!” He said.**

**“ So, it's about a woman named Olive, and she cannot make any relationship work,” she said.**

**“ Okay, why not?” he asks.**

**“She sabotages every relationship she gets into.)**

**“Why?” he asks.**

**“Um, she starts to fall in love with a guy, and then she pushes them away emotionally,” she said.**

**“And why is she doing that?” he asks.**

**“ Because she doesn't feel worthy, she doesn't want to be hurt, um, she doesn't want to be manipulated?” she asked.**

**“Okay, so is there a specific incident in her past that makes her feel this way now?” he asks.**

**“ I don't know. I guess that's where I'm blocked,” she said.”**

**“Um, okay, so when Olive was thirteen she had a huge crush on her older brother's best friend, Brad, and would do his homework for him, make him snacks, um, and one day she came home, and she overheard her brother and Brad making fun of her, and she was totally heartbroken, really sad, really devastated, and every relationship after that, she put up walls 'cause she didn't want to be hurt,” she said.**

**“Okay, good. So we know what started it all,” he said. “ The question I have for you is what's the issue in Olive's life right now that's forcing her to deal with that?”**

**“I know the answer to that one! Okay, so she just me the first man who made her feel the same way that Brad does. It totally feels like love now, and this time she's really desperate to break that pattern. And she's totally terrified, like can she do it?” female said.**

Bingo! Specific fear versus specific desire. What a better place for a story to start? And you know what else? Asking why can be a great antidote to writer's block.

You can brainstorm like this with a friend, or you even by yourself.

### **Story Check**

The root of your entire protagonist's desires and fears are buried in their backstory, which is exactly where you'll find the answers to these questions.

**First**, what's the source of the fear and of the desire that the plot will force your protagonist to struggle with? Can you trace her inner issue back to specific events in her past? Do you know how her inner issue has stopped her from fulfilling her desire right up to the moment the story begins? Ask yourself how have these things shaped how she sees the world and herself?

**Second**, has your protagonist revealed her deepest, darkest secrets to you? Writers often shy away from uncomfortable truths because they are hard to admit.

Just talking about them can be unnerving, but unless you're planning to write a story with the depth of a greeting card, you really need to explore the messy stuff.

**Third**, are your character bios specific enough? When you close your eyes, can you envision it, picture it, see it, or is it conceptual? If it's conceptual keep asking what happened exactly? For every answer your protagonist gives you, ask her why. And never underestimate the value of the therapist tried-and-true question: now how do you feel about that?

**Fourth**, why does your story begin when it does? Can you answer the question? Why now as opposed to yesterday, tomorrow, or when Aunt Bertha gets back from bingo? What started the clock ticking? What unavoidable event is compelling your protagonist to act now, whether she wants to or not?

**Fifth**, where is your story heading? This isn't to say you need to know how it ends when you right word one, but it sure helps.

Ask yourself what will my protagonist have to come to grips with at the end? The more you know exactly what she has to learn, the more likely it is you will write a story that teaches her that exact lesson.

## 07. – Being Specific Rather than Vague

### Explanation

Here's something interesting: we are not wired to think in the abstract. We think in specific images. Concepts, generics, generalizations can't engage us emotionally. If we can't visualize it, we can't feel it. For something to really penetrate, it needs to be put into context that allows us to vicariously experience it. It's the difference between talking about life on the Mississippi or seeing it through the eyes of Huck Finn.

It may sound counterintuitive, but universal theme or emotion is only accessible through a very specific story that focuses on how it specifically affects one person. For instance, when you think of love, you don't envision a concept, you envision images that for you invoke the concept of love, which is why I'm overly fond of saying the story is in the specifics. Yet writers often write in vague generalities without even knowing they're doing it.

Take a simple sentence like Jake had a hard day at work. It's a fine sentence, except we have no idea what Jake considers a hard day or what actually happened, so we have no idea what might happen as a result. For instance, he could have goofed off all day and been caught, that would sure be a bad day, or he could have worked insanely hard only to have his rival take the credit for it. That would be a bad day too. Both paint a very different picture with very different outcomes.

Be specific, use the eyes wide shut test. If you shut your eyes, can you see it? If not, then neither can the reader. With that in mind, let's look at the six places where the specific has a tendency to go missing.

**First**, the specific reason a character does something. Remember, we don't care what a character does, per se. What we care about is why they do it, because often the reason someone does something is the opposite of what it seems like on the surface, and that of course is the interesting part.

**Second**, the specific thing a metaphor is meant to illuminate. Readers must know exactly what the metaphor refers to in the story itself, or else they're left with the feeling that the writer is saying something really, really, important, but we don't know what it is.

**Third**, the specific memory an event evokes in the protagonist. Often writers will say something like it reminded her of what her mother said when her sister was born, and that gave her the strength to carry on. Without telling us what exactly her mother said, it's like saying I'm going to make a point, but I'm not going to tell you what it is, tell us.

**Fourth**, the specific reaction a character has to a significant event. Writers often go vague here because they assume that the reader will know exactly how the character feels, so why waste time telling us about it? The answer is because if the character doesn't



react, we won't supply the emotion they are feeling. We will simply assume that they aren't feeling anything at all.

**Fifth**, the specific possibilities that run through a character's mind as she tries to figure something out. Even if the character will end by saying, "I don't know what the answer is, "hearing what she thought it might be gives us insight into who she is, how she sees the world, and often very helpful snippets of backstory. It's an opportunity you do not want to miss.

**Sixth**, the specific reason a character changes their mind. One of the most interesting things in a story is why someone would suddenly decide to do something they have vowed they would never ever do. We want to be privy to the raging internal debate and what it is that ultimately tips the scales. Finally, the last thing to keep in mind is that each and every specific must be relevant to the story you're telling, and that includes the one specific that writers are often encouraged to use with abandon: Sensory details.

Sensory details we're told are what bring a story to life, and that's very true. That's why it's easy to lose sight of the fact that the real goal of sensory details is to give us insight into the story itself, so we experience it emotionally. The real world is chock full of relevancies, chaos, and the delightful vagaries of life. Stories let us slip out to this surface confusion and into something just as real but deeper, which is precisely why every sensory detail you choose must in some way give us insight into that world.

After all, the reader knows what the world looks like. What they are dying for is a glimpse of your world.

### **Example**

You'd be surprised how easy it is for a writer to think they're being specific, when in fact they're firmly stuck in the general realm. For instance...

**Max walked slowly across the carefully manicured lawn thinking about that day so long ago when everything changed. Did everyone else who'd come here today to honor the dead remember the same kind of horror he did? Or was their loss somehow simpler? Somehow easier to live with? He didn't know.**

**He stopped, looking across the expanse of graves until he was jolted from his reverie by a little boy who ran up and saluted him. Rather than return the salute, Max turned and walked away, certain the kid got the message.**

Having read this passage, two things are abundantly clear. One, the writer is trying to communicate something he believes is very important. Two, we have no idea what it is.

What went wrong? The writer couldn't tell the difference between the story he was seeing in his head and the one he had actually written on the page.

He knew exactly what each generality really referred to. For instance, he knew what had changed on that day so very long ago. He knew what Max is remembering with horror. He knew what losses Max is referring to. He knew why Max didn't return that boy's salute, and he knew what message Max was certain the kid got. Trouble is, he knows all these things so well that he didn't realize they are not on the page. Here's the story he thought he'd written...

**Max walked slowly across the carefully manicured lawn thinking about that day so long ago when everything was lost. Ten men had been in his squad, each as young and scared as he was, but only he'd survived the blast. He blinked and saw it for the thousandth time-- Billy falling through the sky; Al vaporized in an instant; Joe, slipping beneath the waves. Did everyone who came out on the Veteran's Day to honor their dead remember them with the same kind of horror he did? Or was their loss somehow simpler, easier to live with because they hadn't been there at the end? It had to be, or they'd look as haunted as he felt.**

**He stopped, staring across the expanse of graves until he was jolted from his reverie by an eager little boy who ran up and saluted him. The kid was staring at Max's medals, grinning. Max smiled ruefully, shaking his head; "There's no glory in it, son," he said, "and little good, either. "He turned and walked away without saluting, hoping that maybe one day that kid would cast a vote that kept the country out of war altogether.**

This time the story is on the page where we can experience firsthand what Max is feeling.

Of course, you can't go too far with specifics, especially sensory details, adding too many or adding the wrong ones at the wrong time. The thing to remember is that since specifics are where your stories live and breathes, every specific must pertain to the story. It not only has to tell us something we don't know, but something we need to know right now. Speaking of which, let's go to the next movie, where I'll give you a checklist to help you root out all those generalities lurking in your story and translate them into specifics.

### **Story Check**

If you want to be sure your story is grounded in specifics, what the reader not only needs but really wants to know, ask yourself the following questions--and be ruthless.

**First**, have you translated every single generic into a specific? You want to make sure that everything on the page is so specific that as far as the reader is concerned, your story is virtual reality.

**Second**, will the reader know what your protagonist's specific reactions are? Remember, the reader isn't simply interested in what happens, what they really want to know is how what happens is affecting your protagonist.

Don't forget to let us in on what she's really thinking. Third, do all your sensory details--that is what something looks like, feels like, tastes like--have an actual story reason to be there? You want to be sure each sensory detail is strategically placed to give us insight into your characters, your story, and perhaps even your theme. Remember, the reader expects that everything you tell them is there strictly on a need-to-know basis. That includes how delicious the strawberry taste, how stunning the sunset looks, and how excruciating the pointy-toed high-heels were.

## 08. – Suspense and Conflict

### Explanation

We've seen that story is about how someone solves a problem and how they change as a result. But here's the fine print, change only results from unavoidable conflict, because no one-- you, me, or the guy next-door-- changes unless we're forced to. The story's job is to shove the protagonist into the fray where he or she finds out what they are really made of. It's like that great JFK story. When asked what made him a war hero, he replied, "I didn't have a choice.

They sank my boat." The problem is we don't like conflict in real life that is. Ever since kindergarten, our goal is been to work well with others, so it's no surprise that conflict can make us uncomfortable. As a result, we writers are often way too nice to our protagonist. Instead of plugging them into a really thorny situation, we tiptoe up to it and then deftly rescue them in the nick of time before anything really bad happens. Resist this urge.

It's conflict that readers come for, so they can vicariously experience the risks they tend to avoid in real life. They're dying to know what it would cost emotionally to take those risks, and ultimately, what they might gain by it. But does that mean the characters must constantly be fighting, arguing, and bashing each other over the head? Of course not, such moments of bare-knuckled conflict are few and far between. The goal is to let us in on where impending conflict is lurking just beneath the surface, so you can build a sense of ongoing suspense as we get closer and closer to it.

This is what keeps the reader hooked. They're dying to know what will happen when that conflict erupts and forces the protagonist to take action, preferably action she'd really rather not take. Such conflict tends to spring from two opposing forces. I like to think of these battling forces as this versus that. Keeping in mind that every story has more than one source of conflict, here are the most common, the protagonist versus the antagonist, AKA the force of opposition, Luke Skywalker versus Darth Vader.

What the protagonist believes is true versus what is actually true. Jane believes her mean demanding boss hates her. In reality, he's hard on her because he's grooming her for success, what the protagonist wants versus what the protagonist actually has. Ted wants to be quarterback; instead he is a water boy. What the protagonist wants versus what's expected of her. Jennifer wants to be a writer; her parents expect her to go to medical school.

The protagonist versus him or herself. Jim wants to make a million dollars, but to do it he has to sell out his core beliefs. The protagonist's fear versus the protagonist's goal. Joe is terrified of admitting to his humble beginnings, but if he lies about his past and is discovered, he will lose the girl of his dreams. Remember, in literature as in life, change

only results from unavoidable conflict. By identifying where the conflict in your story will come from, you can then build toward it creating suspense and suspense is what hooks the readers.

### **Example**

What grabs the reader is a sense of impending conflict, which means the writer's goal is to create an ongoing air of suspense. With that in mind, imagine you're reading a crime thriller; you're a chapter or two into it when you come across this scene...

**Val is searching for her roommate Enid who's hours late coming home. After canvassing the neighborhood, she reluctantly knocks on the door of her new neighbor, Homer, shows him a photo of Enid, and asks if he's seen her.**

**He says no, but seeing how worried Val is, he invites her in for a soothing cup of herbal tea. Realizing she's probably blowing the whole thing out of proportion, and that Homer's really cute, Val accepts. Over two steaming mugs, Homer reassures Val, suggesting that Enid probably just decided to visit a friend, nothing worry about. Half an hour later Val leaves, feeling relieved and wondering whether Homer is single.**

Val's mood arcs during the scene, she goes in worried and comes out happy.

We know why her mood changed. She realized that Enid was probably okay and Homer is really cute. It leaves us with something to anticipate, will Val and Homer get together? Does the scene need to suggest more than that? Well, if this were a lighthearted romance novel, probably not. But it's not, it's a crime thriller and guess what. There was a crime being committed in that very scene. It was just very well hidden because since the writer didn't want to give it all away, she kept the most heart-pounding part of the scene a big fat secret.

She thought she'd reveal it all later and really surprise the reader. But she did such a good job of hiding it that we had no idea there even was a secret. If we don't know there is intrigue afoot, then there is no intrigue afoot. So let's imagine the exact same scene, except this time the writer has let us know that...

**Enid struggled with the duct tape binding her arms to the chair in the basement below. "I'm down here!" she wanted to scream, but the t-shirt stuffed in her mouth muffled the sound.**

This time we're riveted, rooting for Enid, and praying Homer hasn't slipped a roofie into Val's tea.

It's a far superior scene. But what if the writer really doesn't want to let us in on exactly what's happening yet? Does she absolutely have to tell us? No, but what she does have to do is give us hints that will both add suspense in the moment, by letting us know that all was not as it seems and will also make the truth believable when it's revealed. How? Let's see what the writer comes up with...

**"At the moment my time is taken," the man replied.**

**"Please, just see if you recognize her," Val said and thrust out the photo from their trip. "Really, I have no." he trailed off in his words. "Wait, she does look a little familiar... Would you like to come in for a cup of tea? I find that a nice cup of Earl Grey always jogs my memory." "I'm not sure if I should, I'd like to continue canvassing the neighborhood." "Well, I do think..." The man's jaw tightened and he looked annoyingly at his feet.**

**"The rats are always gnawing at the floorboards." Val hadn't noticed before but there was a faint scraping sound coming from below. That's odd. The whole neighborhood was fumigated just last month.**

Things like that stoke suspense by implying that someone is probably lying, which in turn triggers a dopamine-fueled rush of curiosity as the reader tries to figure out what's really going on. I can't say this often enough, a story is not about what happens on the surface; it's about what's really going on beneath it.

The writer's job is to let us see enough of what's underneath to care about what's on the surface.

### **Story Check**

In order to give your readers the thrill of anticipation, you've got to give them a taste of the conflict that's at the heart of your story. Here are the questions to ask to be sure you're on the right track.

**First**, what are the specific this versus that sources of conflict? Can we anticipate what the protagonist will have to battle in order to achieve his goal? Can we begin to calculate the emotional cost he will have to pay?

**Second**, are the seeds of future conflict planted right there beginning on page 1? Readers love being a step ahead of the protagonist.

Have you given them enough hints so they can anticipate the problems that the protagonist might not yet be aware of?

**Third**, does the conflict force the protagonist to take action? The one thing you don't want your protagonist to be is passive, so no matter how much you'd really rather sit this one out, don't let him. Make sure the story forces him to take action.

**Fourth**, if you're withholding specific facts for a big reveal later, are you sure it actually makes your story better? Don't be afraid of giving too much away as you write, because you can always pare back later when you're editing.

Besides, showing your hand is often a very good thing.

## 09. – Cause and Effect

### Explanation

Story, like life, is driven by emotion, but it's ordered by logic. The brain analyzes everything in terms of cause and effect. If this happens, it will cause that to happen. What makes us different from all other species is that we are wired to take it one step further by trying to understand why this caused that, and better, not only anticipate what might happen next, but to figure out how to change it to our advantage. Stories allow us to test drive those possibilities without having to actually take the risk.

It's as close as we can get to having our cake and eating it too. When a story doesn't follow a clear cause and effect trajectory, the brain doesn't know what to make of it because we have no idea what things are meant to add up to. This can result in a feeling of physical distress, not to mention the very real desire to chuck the book at the window. The good news is that story-wise, cause and effect boils down to a simple mantra of if-then-therefore.

It's what drives the story forward. If I call in sick one more time, then I'll get fired, therefore I better get up out of this cozy bed. If you think of your story's cause and effect trajectory as a row of dominoes, you'll see that once one falls, the others will naturally follow. The thing to keep in mind when crafting your story's trajectory is that there are two levels of cause and effect, which always work in tandem. Plot-wise, cause and effect plays out on the surface level.

One event logistically triggers the next. This is the what. For example, Betty was late for work on her first day; therefore Betty was fired. Story-wise, cause and effect plays out on a deeper internal level that of meaning this is the why. It reveals why Betty was late for work even though she desperately needs that job. Since stories are about how what happens affects someone, it's knowing the why that allows you to figure out the what.

The key thing to remember--and something that writers really often forget--is that simply seeing the surface cause and effect isn't all that interesting. What makes it interesting is how it's affecting your protagonist, which means we need to know the internal effect it's having on her in the moment. This is what “*show, don't tell*” actually means. That is, don't tell me the protagonist is sad, show me why is she sad? Very often that means show us her train of thought in the moment, especially when her expectations aren't being met.

And hey, that's what stories are about, what we do when our expectations aren't met. The beauty of mapping out your story's cause and effect trajectory is that it helps you identify deadly digressions that can derail your story. What's a digression? It's anything we don't need to know for the story to make sense. That is, anything that's not part of the cause



and effect trajectory. One way to root out digressions is by using what I like to call the "And so" test.

You can use it when you're writing, after each paragraph, each page, each chapter, whenever. Simply ask yourself, and so, why does the reader need to know this? What's the point? How does it further the story? If I cut it out, is there anything in the story that wouldn't make sense? If the answer is no, out it goes. It's as simple as that. After all, the reader is wired to hunt for causal connections. And when there aren't any to be made, we tend to hunt for another book to read.

### **Example**

Let's see how this works with a story we probably all know, Romeo and Juliet. First, what do they want? They want to be together, preferably out in the open. Every decision they make is based on that one single overarching objective. Think of their internal mantra as if I do this, then I'll overcome the obstacle that's keeping us apart; therefore we'll be together. The external if-then-therefore logic plays out against this internal logic all the way through.

The thing is we humans are wired to assume that each little thing we do will solve the big problem. And how often does that really happen? Usually never, particularly not in a good story, which of course means the therefore we get is almost always something other than what we expect. The more things get messed up, the harder Romeo and Juliet try to bend the external world to their internal desire. With that in mind, let's see what's going on in Verona.

Romeo meets Juliet, and they fall in love. Because of the internal logic we discussed, they instantly understand the external cause and effect equation that now governs them. If they can figure out a way for their families to reconcile, then they can be together; therefore they hatch a plan to wage peace. All this sounds good, except for the fact that the therefore isn't going to turn out exactly as they hope. It begins like this.

If Romeo refuses to fight Juliet's kinsman, who has challenged him to a duel, then the family feud will end, therefore everyone will kiss and make up and be delighted that Romeo and Juliet already got secretly married. What actually happens is that Romeo ends up killing Juliet's kinsman, and the best-laid plan ends up becoming the worst possible nightmare. Now the equation looks like this. If Romeo stays in Verona with Juliet's family hungry for his blood, then he will be killed himself; therefore he has to flee the city.

More complications ensue as each therefore catapults them into another gut-wrenching decision, especially when Juliet's parents suddenly betroth her to Paris. If Juliet doesn't act fast, she will end up officially married to Paris, then she'll never be allowed to see Romeo again, therefore she hatches a plan to thwart the marriage

and reunite with Romeo. What's the plan? If Juliet pretends to die, then she will get out of the whole Paris marriage thing, therefore with a little help from the Friar, she can rendezvous with Romeo in the family crypt and they will find a way to live happily ever after.

This is when things take a genuinely tragic turn because there was one bit of if-then-therefore logic that no one contemplated. If Romeo doesn't get the letter the Friar sent telling him about Juliet's plan to fake her death, then when he finds out she is dead, he will believe it's true. Therefore, he will lose his desire to live, and after smooching her still warm lips chug-a-lug a vial of poison, this if-then-therefore logic-- even though it's based on facts that are dead wrong-- propels the story to its tragic end.

If Juliet wakes up and sees Romeo dead, then she will want to die herself, therefore she will take the happy dagger from his belt and do herself in. And finally, if-then-therefore logic propels the bittersweet resolution of their families. If our children could love each other this much, then maybe we should stop this bloodshed, therefore we'll reconcile. Better late than never I guess. But for writers, what's so exhilarating about looking at story this way is that you soon begin to recognize the if-then-therefore pattern all over, and things begin to fall into place naturally.

### **Story Check**

Here are a few questions that will help you make sure your story stays on an if-then-therefore trajectory all the way through.

**First**, does your story follow a cause and effect path so that each scene is triggered by the one that preceded it? What you want is an if-then-therefore pattern all the way through. It's like the one-two-three of a waltz. Get that rhythm stuck in your head, if-then-therefore, and use it to build momentum.

**Second**, do the events that take place in your story spur the protagonist's internal quest? We don't care about a hurricane, a stock market crash, or even aliens taking over downtown Cleveland, unless it somehow directly affects your protagonist's pursuit of his internal goal.

**Third**, do you always show your protagonist's train of thought when he's making a decision? The reader wants to know how what happens affects the protagonist, so we understand why he makes the decisions he does. Don't forget, just because you know what your protagonist is thinking, doesn't mean your reader will.

**Finally**, can everything in your story withstand the "And so" test? This is another way of asking what's the point? Why does the reader need to know this? How does it further the story? Ask it relentlessly, and the minute you can't answer, know that you're in the

company of what's likely a deadly digression which will bring your story's momentum to a screeching halt.

So, boot it out before it does. The best way to practice the if-then-therefore logic is to pick a movie you know well and write it out the way we just did with Romeo and Juliet. Movies are much easier to do this with than books, because it's a simpler, more straightforward medium, not to mention the fact that it's easier to watch a 2-hour movie than to read a 400-page novel. When it comes to picking a movie, believe it or not, Disney and Pixar films work really, really well. Try The Little Mermaid, Finding Nemo, or my personal favorites, Toy story.

If you prefer movies with actual flesh-and-blood actors, you might try It's a Wonderful Life, or Die Hard. Once you get the swing of it, it will be surprisingly easy to apply it to your own work.

## 10. - What can go wrong MUST

### Explanation

There's an old saying: Good judgment comes from experience, experience comes from bad judgment. But since bad judgment can be deadly, scientists believe that the reason the brain allows us to get lost in a good story is because sometimes the best experience to learn from is someone else's, for instance, your protagonist. That's why when you're writing a story, everything that can go wrong must go wrong and then some. Your protagonist has to work hard to earn her victory.

And the only way she can do that is if you construct a plot that forces her to face things she has probably spent her whole life trying to avoid. This means that everything she tries to do to solve the problem is only going to make it worse. That's how the stakes escalate and the story builds. Your goal, therefore, is to undermine your protagonist's best laid plans at every turn, forcing her to dig deep and discover what she is really made of.

Anyone can say they're a hero; your story will force your protagonist to prove it. With that in mind, here are six ways to ensure that your story will make your protagonist earn her hero status.

**First**, don't let your characters admit anything they aren't forced to, even to themselves. Information is currency, and the only way anyone ever admits to anything is because they've been backed into a corner.

**Second**, let your protagonist lie and have secrets so the story can force him to divulge things he really doesn't want to.

Story often comes to life in the space between what a character says out loud and what they're really thinking. But remember, unless the reader knows what those secrets and lies are, they won't know the real why behind the character's actions. So, don't keep secrets secret from the reader.

**Third**, let your character start out betting small, and end up betting it all. When faced with a big problem we can't avoid, it is human nature to do as little as possible and hope to heck that, that solves it; fat chance, almost always, that only makes it worse.

The same is true of your protagonist, which is bad for him but good for the reader. The other quirk of human nature to keep in mind is as Aesop so astutely said: Men often bear little grievances with less courage than they do large misfortunes. Thus, by the end, when your protagonist has to give up everything in order to solve the problem, chances are he will do it far more willingly than when he parted with that first measly dollar.

**Fourth**, make sure there is a clear, present, and escalating danger.

A story needs a force of opposition. Without one, the protagonist has no reason to get up out of his easy chair. The only way he can prove his worth is if the force of opposition is well-defined, present, and growing. It can't be a hazy threat that never really materializes, no matter how potentially dangerous. It's not always a person, but it's always personified. Think of the force of opposition as a rapidly ticking clock that not only forces the protagonist to take action, but that constantly ups the game, so the protagonist must do likewise.

**Fifth**, make your protagonist earn everything. Never give him the benefit of the doubt, or let anything come to him easily. Remember, there's no such thing as a free lunch, unless of course, it's poisoned.

**Sixth**, do expose your character's flaws, demons, and insecurities. Flaws aren't just what makes characters interesting, they are what make them accessible. Writers often think their characters have to be likable, meaning they can never do anything wrong or think a bad thought.

But often what makes a character likable are his flaws and insecurities. They would allow us to identify with them, and so root for them. What's more, stories are about how the protagonist overcomes his deepest fear, his most closely held misbelief. A character who has no flaws has nothing to learn, and so nothing to teach us, which brings us back to where we began. Since the best experience to learn from is someone else's bad experience, be mean to your protagonist.

After all, as Emily Dickinson said: A wounded deer leaps the highest.

## **Examples**

We know that in a story, what can go wrong must go wrong. And then some. It's how the suspense escalates, forcing your protagonist to deal with things she'd really rather not. That's why one of the biggest things that can go wrong with this story is when nothing goes wrong in it. Here is what such a story might look like. It's 1872 and Rose, a headstrong 21-year-old, lives in Rochester, New York, just as the fight for a woman's right to vote is gaining steam.

Her father is a prominent banker, and her mother is active in social causes, starting a library, and raising money to help children with polio. Unbeknownst to them, Rose has been avidly following the work of Susan B. Anthony, so when she learns that Anthony is going to try to vote in an upcoming election, she announces she is going along. Her parents forbid it. They're worried about what their friends will think, and besides, what if something happens and Rose is arrested? But Rose sneaks off anyway and joins the crowd supporting Anthony as she goes into the polling place.

Rose has a glorious day and comes away with renewed commitment to the cause. Her parents, though--disappointed by her disobedience--re relieved that none of their friends found out she was there and that no real harm came to her. By the time women get the right to vote in 1920, Rose is an old woman herself, her parents long gone. Remembering the good times of her youth, she's filled with pride as she cast her first vote. Oh, that's a sweet story, not to mention boring, why? Because nothing ever went wrong. What did Rose struggle with? Nothing.

What did her actions cost her? Nothing. What did Rose learn? Say it with me, nothing. The stakes don't mount because there are no stakes. So let's poke around in the story, pinpointing where the writer missed opportunities to set Rose up for a fall. As we do, notice how it's only when things go wrong for her that she's forced to tap into strengths she probably didn't even know she had. Also, notice how easy it is to make changes when the story is only one paragraph long, as supposed to waiting until 300 pages. First off, let's look at Rose's first action.

If she is going to sneak out, we want her not only to be caught, but maybe even get arrested. Everything that happens must spur an unexpected and hopefully unwelcome consequence. Never let your protagonist off the hook unless doing so will land her in even bigger trouble. Then there's her dad's occupation. He's a banker, and so instead, why not make him a judge who will be directly involved in thwarting Anthony's crusade? That would make Rose's actions much worse for him, and by extension worse for her.

Plus, it gives her a very personal cost for standing up for her beliefs. And what about her mother situation? Here is a thought. Maybe Rose's mom is in the midst of a huge fundraising campaign, and her biggest donor threatens to pull out if Rose continues to publicly support women's rights. This gives Rose's actions another very personal consequence. Most important, what about Rose's action in the heat of the moment? Let's have the writer take it from here.

After vowing to herself that she won't do anything to attract attention, Rose gets so inspired that she tries to vote. When officials turn her away, she fights back and is arrested. Once in jail, things get even worse. Her parents won't bail her out, hoping to teach her a lesson. But instead of breaking her spirit, she sees how horribly the downtrodden are treated, and it doubles her commitment. Then Rose faces her own father in court, and standing before him, she realizes that if he acquits her, he'll lose the trust of his colleagues, so she makes an impassioned speech admitting her guilt.

But it isn't enough. Seeing her beloved parents shunned for her beliefs, she begs them to disown her and is a little stunned when they tearfully agree. Then even with all that, Rose still comes away with a renewed dedication to a cause that she believes is bigger than their own lives. Decades later, on the day she votes for the first time, she feels a deep

sadness at the pain she caused her family, a sadness tempered by a deeper sense of pride for what she helped accomplish.

This time because what could go wrong for Rose did go wrong. She found out what she was really made of, which makes for a great story.

## Story Check

To make sure that your story builds and attention escalates, ask yourself: first, has everything that can go wrong gone wrong? Don't be nice to your protagonist, even a little bit. Take the gloves off and throw social conventions out the window. Make sure your plot continually forces her to rise to the occasion. Second, have you exposed your protagonist's deepest secrets and most guarded flaws? No matter how embarrassing or painful the revelation, have you forced her to fess up? Have you made her confront her demons? After all, how could she possibly overcome them or realize they aren't so bad after all unless your story forces her to.

Third, does your protagonist earn everything she gets and pay for everything she loses? This is another way of saying that there must be a consequence to everything that happens. Ideally, a consequence that forces your protagonist to take an action she'd really rather not. Fourth, does everything your protagonist tries to do to make the situation better actually make it worse? Good. The worse things get for your protagonist, the better it gets for your story by making sure that things go from bad to worse.

You keep your story's pacing on track as the tension and the stakes ratchet ever upward. Finally, is the force of opposition personified, present, and active? It doesn't always have to be a giant raging gorilla or a gun-toting psychopath, but readers want someone or something to root against. This means that vague threats, generalized evil, or unspecified possible disastrous events don't cut it.

The danger needs to be specific and wired to a rapidly ticking clock. Now it's your turn to take a potentially dramatic but currently humdrum story and throw in a monkey wrench or two of your own. So turn to the example in your exercise files and get started.



# 11. - Setups, Pay Offs & the Clues in Between

## Explanation

In a previous movie, we talked about how the brain analyzes everything in terms of cause and effect, if/this, then/that, because we're hardwired to see causality as the cement of the universe. The brain detests randomness. As a result, it's constantly converting raw data into meaningful patterns, the better to figure out what's safe, what isn't, and what the heck to do about it. So it's no surprise that as readers we're always on the look out for patterns.

To the reader, everything is either a setup, a payoff or the road in between. Once readers spot a setup, they immediately start hunting for the breadcrumb trail that will lead to the payoff. Another words, a setup is anything that implies further action. Like when a guy throws a banana peel over his shoulder and we immediately start wondering, oh, who is going to trip? A big part of the pleasure of reading is recognizing, interpreting, and then connecting the dots as the pattern emerges.

After all, it's curiosity that keeps us turning those pages. That means you want to make sure every setup actually has a payoff and that there aren't any inadvertent setups leading nowhere. This is crucial since as we know readers assume that everything in a story is there on a need-to-know basis, which means they take it for granted that everything you tell them is part of a pattern. They believe that each fact, each event, each action will have story significance.

That's why it's incredibly easy for them to mistake a random unnecessary fact for a setup. To make matters worse, because its relevance to what's happening now isn't clear, readers assume it'll have even more significance later. So it becomes part of the filter that they run the meaning of everything through from that moment on. Naturally, this undermines the assumptions that you do want them to make. If for example, no one immediately slips on that banana peel, your reader will spend the entire story expecting someone sometime to take the fall.

In order to make sure you don't lead your readers astray, follow these two major rules of the road to get from setup to payoff. Rule 1, the setup must come long before the payoff. Telling us about a problem at the very moment it's being solved robs the story of suspense and of those specifics we were talking about earlier. We don't just want to know that the problem was solved; we want to know how with the protagonists solved it and what she went through to do it.

This means that the clues escalate as we go from setup to payoff because solving a problem is almost always harder than it seems at first. Rule 2, the reader must be able to actually see the problem unfold. Writers often believe that once the reader knows that the

protagonist is dealing with the problem, they'll automatically imagine how that problem is affecting the protagonists, not so. It's the writer's job to make sure that each clue along the way is there in plain view so the reader can see it.

Writers tend to hold back because since they know what each hint and each clue actually means, they certainly will be completely obvious to the reader too, it's not. What the writer fears as a dead giveaway is actually a tantalizing clue to the reader who is counting on these clues to be able to anticipate what might happen next and do what readers love best, try to figure out what's really going on. Remember, by creating engaging setups, you'll trigger the reader's curiosity, and by giving them intriguing clues that they lead toward the payoff, you'll keep them reading.

So when you find something random, irrelevant, or neutral in your story, boot it out. Lest it become the banana peel that causes your reader's curiosity to slip and fall.

### **Examples**

Let's look at a rough draft that doesn't follow the two rules for setups and payoffs. Imagine you're reading a novel and the protagonist, Louisa, is on her way home from work when you come across this paragraph. (male speaker: Ahead a doorman whisked open a glittering glass door and a harried man dressed in black stepped out onto the sidewalk leading a sleek black Doberman Pinscher. The dog's mouth was secured by a leather muzzle, but as soon as Louisa stepped under the awning, it began to growl--a horrible low rumble.

She froze in her tracks. She hated dogs, and clearly this dog knew it. She flicked wide eyes toward the dog's amused owner. "He won't bite as long as I'm holding the leash," the man said. "The hold on really tight, please," Louisa whispered, walking away as quickly as she could in stilettos. That paragraph would trigger a reader's story radar because it's a perfect setup. We instantly assume that there is something about that encounter that's important. After all, the author took the time to describe it.

I mean, there is even dialogue. But since we have no idea what the scene's significance is, from that moment on, we're on the lookout for its real meaning. Because one thing is for sure, Louisa's fear of dogs is going to come into play later-- at least that's what the writer has implied. Trouble is, the writer didn't actually intend for the dog story to mean anything. He just thought to add a nice intensity to a story and enlighten Louisa's otherwise boring walk home.

He has no intention of returning to it now or later. But we don't know that, so we are anticipating that the whole dog thing will come up again, and we're actively trying to figure out when. So what should the writer do about it? Well, unless he is going to rewrite the entire story so that the random dog scene has an actual story reason to be

there, he'll have to steel himself and cut the scene, even though it's well written, even though by itself it's kind of exciting, because we know that the sooner a writer learns to kill their darlings, the better.

But what if the writer has the opposite problem? What if there is a payoff at the end of the story that doesn't have a corresponding setup? This time imagine there's been no sign whatsoever that Louisa is afraid of dogs. This, then, is the novel's last paragraph. (male speaker: Louisa had to get to Nick before the reporters did. She was innocent, but it didn't matter. He'd confess just to keep her out of jail. She was hardly breathing as the cab screeched to a halt outside the building.

She leapt out and then she heard it, the low growl of a wary dog, coming right toward her. She froze. Surely the animal sensed her terror and would do what all creatures do in the face of someone else's fear: attack. It's a dog eat do world. Who needs kindness? And then she thought of Nick and what he was about to do for her. Trembling, she held out her hand, closing her eyes. She felt the dog's warm muzzle in her palm, and then a tentative lick.

Opening her eyes she saw he was wagging his tail, but he wasn't looking at her. He was staring into the building, as if he was urging her on. She patted his head and ran. But as Louisa raced up to Nick's penthouse, her anxiety evaporated. Somehow she knew she'd get there in time.) That was a great scene, except since it wasn't set up earlier in the story, we'd be thinking, wait a minute, Louisa is scared of dogs? When did that happen? And what's that thing about people attacking you when you're scared? Did I miss something? Maybe I should go back and reread.

So, does the writer have to cut this payoff the way he had to cut the stand-alone setup? No, truth is, he probably couldn't because this time it isn't just a random addition, it's something that's integral to the story he is telling. It's an important moment. He just forgot to let the reader in on it. So what he needs to do is go back into the beginning of the story and give us a setup. Maybe even that formerly random scene with a muzzled Doberman and the man in black.

But this time he needs to lace in the why behind Louisa's fear of dogs, the same way he did in the payoff when he told us that Louisa believes that showing her fear provokes attack. Then throughout the story, there will be moments when things would happen that would reference her fear, so we're continually aware of how it's holding her back and what she's doing to overcome it. These events then become that breadcrumb trail leading from setup to payoff.

They're what allow the reader to experience that delicious feeling of satisfaction when it all comes together in the end.

## **Store Checks**

We know that every setup must have a corresponding well-earned payoff. So as you comb through your story, here are a few handy questions to ask.

**First**, are there any inadvertent setups hiding in your story? Are you sure nothing whispers, implies, or suggests setup without actually meaning it? If there is, cut it out. Remember, an 'if' without a 'then' becomes an elephant roaming the halls of your story, diverting attention from what's the really important.

**Second**, is there a road from your setup to your payoff? Are you absolutely sure you never tell us about the problem at the very instant it's being solved? Remember, the reader won't care it's been solved unless they know what it cost the protagonists both emotionally and logistically to arrive at the solution, because that's where the attention, anticipation, and suspense comes from.

**Third**, are there clues along the road from setup to payoff? Make sure you aren't assuming that the reader will intuit unwritten clues.

Readers love connecting the dots, but they don't want to have to invent them first.

**Fourth**, do your clues build? When taken together, do the clues form an escalating pattern from which the reader can draw conclusions and anticipate what might happen next. Speaking of what's going to happen next, now it's time for you to go to your exercise files where we have set you up with an example. It's your job to pay it off.

## 12. - Flashbacks, Subplots and Foreshadowing

### Explanation

It's always amazed me that although paintings are flat, they can suggest the physical and emotional depth of reality. The same is true of stories. After all, stories are merely words on a page, completely linear, and yet they're capable of creating the experience of life's multilayered three-dimensional richness in the reader's mind. How does the writer accomplish this? By weaving ongoing subplots, relevant flashbacks, and hints of the future-- that is, foreshadowing-- into what's happening in the moment.

This is crucial since subplots give prospective, foreshadowing helps shape the readers expectations, and information culled from backstory and flashbacks help the protagonist decide what to do next. It's just like in real life. We are wired to use both the past and any auxiliary info we can summon to evaluate the present. Your goal as a writer is to be sure your story has these multiple layers and then to make sure the information you're weaving in comes at the exact right moment.

So the reader sees it as necessary, rather than as one of those deadly digressions. Let's start with subplots. Subplots flesh out the story in countless ways. They can complicate the main storyline, provide the why behind the protagonist's action, plug up any other ways of gaping plot holes, introduce characters that will soon play a pivotal role, and show us things that are happening concurrently. But all subplots have three things in common.

One, they all arc, meaning they have a resolution. Everything they set up pays off. Two, they all impact on the main storyline in some way. Three, they all dovetail back into the main storyline, moving it forward. In short, a subplot's reason for being is always to serve the main storyline. The same is true of flashbacks and backstory, which are both cut from the same cloth, things that happened before the story began. What's the difference between them? A flashback stops the story and is a scene itself, usually complete with dialogue.

On the other hand, bits of backstory are woven into the present. They tend to be mere snippets, fragments of memory that run through the protagonist's mind as he experiences and evaluates what's happening in the moment. The key question is how do you know exactly when to weave in flashbacks and subplots? Luckily, there's a simple set of clear cause and effect guidelines.

**First**, there's a specific need or cause that triggers the flashback.

The only reason to go into a flashback or subplot scene is that without it what happens next in the main storyline won't quite make sense.

**Second**, that cause needs to be clear from the moment you ease into the scene, so the reader knows why it's relevant. Third, when the scene ends, the information it provided must immediately affect-- that is, change--how the reader sees the story from that point on.

**Finally**, let's talk about foreshadowing. Foreshadowing hints at what's to come, which is often what pulls the reader in. Instead of squashing suspense, foreshadowing often spurs it. For instance, starting a chapter with, "Tonight was the night I would be fired," gives the reader a yardstick by which they then evaluate everything that happens as they eagerly await what it is that will actually get the protagonist fired.

Foreshadowing is also an incredibly useful tool when you know that your protagonist will soon be doing something that's out of the ordinary, either because it's something that you would never do, or because it's physically impossible. You can use foreshadowing to make just about anything believable. Here's how: long before the story demands your protagonist do something they otherwise wouldn't or couldn't, like fly or speak ancient Aramaic, you need to let us know that they have that ability by either showing them doing it long before the story actually hinges on it, or by giving us enough clues along the way so that when they do it it's not only believable, but satisfying.

It's mastering the art of weaving in and out of subplots, flashbacks, and foreshadowing that enables you to give perspective to the story you're telling. This is a big part of what makes stories feel just like life.

## **Examples**

The goal is to slip into the flashback or subplot at the precise moment we need to know the information it conveys so that when a scene ends and we re-enter the story, we have a new insight into what's happening and often into what's actually at stake. With that in mind, let's take a look at this passage from the novel about Emma, a violinist about to give her very first recital.

**As soon as they announced my name, I walked to center stage.**

**I couldn't see past the brightness of the footlights, but I knew there were hundreds of Paganini devotees waiting to hear me play, to hear precisely how I would interpret one of the greatest works ever written for violin. I paused and an image flashed through my mind. It was my eighth birthday, and I'd just started taking violin lessons. I was at school, hoping no one knew it was my birthday, because most kids' moms brought in cupcakes, and I knew mine wouldn't.**

**I was mortified when the teacher announced to the whole class that it was my birthday, but before I could take cover in the cloakroom, my best friend's mom came in carrying the most beautiful homemade birthday cake I'd ever seen. She told the teacher my mom had made it and asked her to**

**deliver it. I was so relieved I wanted to hug her, especially since I knew she'd baked it herself-- my mom couldn't even boil water. I shook off the memory, glanced at my mom in the audience, lifted my instrument, and began to play.**

My guess is you're wondering what the birthday flashback has to do with violin concert.

The story is at such a crucial moment, we figure the writer wouldn't interrupt it unless there is something we really need to know before Emma begins playing. So we're busily trying to find something that isn't there, a connection between the two events. There are two reasons a writer would do this. One, since the recital is such a big moment, she wanted to milk it for all its worth so she decided to prolong it by hitting the pause button, which isn't a bad idea.

Two, since at some point we'll need to know about the birthday cake incident, she figured now was as good a time as any--which is a bad idea-- and that's where her story went off the rails. Introducing information before readers have any idea that will have significance, let alone what that significance might be, only confuses them. Ironically, these transform information that would shed light on something important if it appeared at the right time into something that stops the story cold instead.

The key to writing a good flashback is to make sure it conveys information necessary in the moment. So let's imagine the same opening paragraph as we slip into a flashback that does tell us something we need to know before Emma begins to play.

**I paused, recalling the first time my parents brought me to this theater. I was eight years old. I sat on the edge of my velvet seat, and when the violinist appeared, I felt the energy in the room change.**

**It was as if everyone opened a little door in their hearts for her, even my parents. As she started to play, I glanced at my mother, her eyes were closed and she was smiling. I'd never seen her smile before. I didn't know she could. I ached to be able to make her smile like that. Maybe if I mastered the violin, she'd open her heart to me. I knew one thing: I had to try. Now, just nine years later, I was the musician on that stage.**

**I was the one the audience was opening their hearts to. Still, I didn't dare glance at my mother as I lifted my instrument, tucked it under my chin and began to play.**

This time the flashback informs what's happening in the moment by giving us a glimpse of what underlies Emma's desire to play and what she hopes the concert will bring her. She doesn't want into everyone's heart, she wants her mother's smile, and knowing that changes everything.

## **Story Checks**

The writer's job is to weave in subplots, flashbacks, and foreshadowing, so the reader sees them for what they are, necessary information, rather than what they are not, deadly digressions. Here are questions to ask of your story to be sure you've done just that.

**First**, does each subplot or flashback in some way affect the main storyline? What specific information does it give that the reader needs to know? It might be factual information, it might give us insight into the protagonist, or both, but whatever it is, it must be relevant.

**Second**, does the reader need to know the information at this very moment? Make sure the logic is on the page and not just in your head.

When you leave the main storyline, you want the reader to follow you willingly, not kicking and screaming.

**Third**, when you return to the main storyline, will your readers see things with new eyes from that moment on? You want readers to come back to the main storyline feeling as though they have new insight. Ask yourself, what has the reader learned that changes how they'll see things from here on out? The only wrong answer is nothing.

**Fourth**, if a protagonist does something out of character, have you foreshadowed it? This is a bona fide get out of jail free card.

Otherwise, when the protagonist does something out of the blue that he or she would never do, it's to groaner, but if you set it up in advance, it's a delight because you've surprised us with something you've allowed us to suspect. Now you try, the example in your exercise files is about Mona, a young woman who's just earned her first paycheck. Your job is to choose where to stop the scene and write a flashback that gives it meaning



## 13. Conclusion

And there you have it, what we are wired to expect in every story and the tools to make sure your story meets those expectations every time. So, what are the next steps?

**First**, write every single day, even if it's just a little. The more you get into the habit, the easier it will become.

**Second**, join a local writers group. Just having a deadline can be incredibly motivating. The thing you want to keep in mind is that writing is a process, one that takes time. And while finishing your first draft will be thrilling, exhilarating, utterly fabulous, that's also when the work really begins.

When you get to that stage, hire a professional editorial consultant. Look for someone who's been an agent, an editor, or a writing instructor at a reputable institution. You want an objective pro that can help guide you through the revision process. But that doesn't mean you didn't get it right. If there's one thing every successful writers process includes, it's rewriting.

Talent aside, in my experience what really separates the writers who make it from those who don't is perseverance along with a wholehearted desire to zero in on what isn't working and fix it. The good news is that the writing community is supportive, caring, and friendly. To help you get acquainted with it, I've put together a list of resources, websites, and books that you might find helpful. Here is my parting advice, be kind to yourself when you write and be mean to yourself when you don't.

Writing is by definition a solitary endeavor, but that doesn't mean you're in it alone. Here's a list of resources that will help you every step of the way – whether you're looking for writing tips, information on the publishing world, the support of a writing group, or expert editorial feedback.

## Writing Conferences

Writing conferences are a great place to get feedback on your work, make connections with agents and editors, pick up inside writing tips, meet other writers, and come away inspired, rejuvenated, and ready to write. For a comprehensive list of national and international writing conferences, with links to each, check out:  
<http://www.newpages.com/writing-conferences/>

## Writing Groups

It can be enormously rewarding to be part of a writing group that meets regularly, if for no other reason than that nothing focuses the mind quite like a rapidly approaching deadline. While it's important to find the right group for you, the benefit of getting feedback and encouragement from a group of dedicated, supportive, and insightful fellow writers is enormous. If you're in the U.S., here's a great place to start your search – it's a list of more than 300 writers groups, organizations and associations by state:  
<http://www.squidoo.com/localwritersassociationsbystate>

## Writers Websites

The Internet is a writers' dream – endless information, thriving communities, and a gazillion blogs. Start poking around and see what's out there that captures your interest (But be advised: it can be addictive.) Some of my favorite writing destinations include:  
Publishing:

- **Publishers Weekly** – The seminal magazine of the publishing trade.  
<http://publishersweekly.com/>
- **GalleyCat** – News, gossip and insight about the ever-evolving publishing industry.  
<http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/>
- **Publishers Marketplace** – A fabulous resource for information on what's happening in the publishing world. Also, a terrific source when you begin your agent search.  
[Publishersmarketplace.com](http://Publishersmarketplace.com)

## Writing

- **Writer Unboxed** – Essays on the craft and business of writing by contributors from all walks, from the not-yet-published to bestselling authors and industry leaders.  
<http://writerunboxed.com/>
- **Jane Friedman** – From the former publisher of Writer’s Digest and current web editor of the Virginia Quarterly Review, Jane’s easy to navigate site covers everything you need to know about writing, reading, and publishing in the digital age.  
<http://janefriedman.com/>
- **Writer’s Digest** – One of the best resources for writers on the web, and publisher of the one of the most respected writing magazines – Writer’s Digest.  
<http://www.writersdigest.com/>
- **Miss Snark** – Okay, yes, this one ceased way back in 2007, but it remains one of the most savvy, entertaining, and informative writing blogs out there. Run by an anonymous agent – aka Miss Snark – it’s heartbreakingly funny, and utterly spot on.  
<http://misssnark.blogspot.com/>

## Books on Writing and Publishing

There are hundreds of books on writing out there. Here are a few that you might find especially helpful, whether you’re trying to hone your craft, looking for a publisher, or struggling with writer’s block.

- **Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life** by Anne Lamott  
<http://amzn.to/WbKbAF>
- **On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft** by Stephen King <http://amzn.to/UtuUgV>
- **Nail Your Novel: Why Writers Abandon Books and How You Can Draft, Fix and Finish With Confidence** by Roz Morris  
[bit.ly/hdv4zo](http://bit.ly/hdv4zo)
- **The Art and Craft of Fiction: A Practitioner’s Manual** by Victoria Mixon  
<http://victoriamixon.com/books/>
- **The Emotion Thesaurus: A Writer’s Guide To Character Expression** by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi  
<http://amzn.to/TzXb6x>

- **The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published** by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry  
<http://amzn.to/10Wtykb>
- **The War of Art: Break Through** the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles by Steven Pressfield <http://amzn.to/RyWnzU>
- **Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers From the Very First Sentence** by Lisa Cron <http://amzn.to/xKZzHr>

## Writing Consultants

At a certain point, every writer needs an expert eye on their manuscript. It's never too early to bring in a seasoned pro to help you make sure your story is on track and stays there. I do story consulting myself and would love to hear from you. I also recommend the following four top notch consultants.

- **Caroline Leavitt** – Author of nine novels and instructor in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program and Stanford's Online Writer's Studio, Caroline works with novelists and memoirists.  
<http://www.carolineleavitt.com/home.htm>
- **Elisabeth Lyon** – Author of six books on writing, Elizabeth offers guidance, editing, and in-depth feedback on novels, query letters, nonfiction books, and proposals.  
<http://elizabethlyon.com/>
- **Victoria Mixon** – Author of two books on writing, Victoria works with writers working on novels, short stories, poetry, narrative nonfiction, memoir, autobiography, trade nonfiction, textbooks, articles, and essays.  
<http://victoriamixon.com/>
- **Jennie Nash** – Author of three novels and three memoirs and instructor at the UCLA Extension Writer's Program, Jennie coaches writers at all stages of development, whether working on novels, memoirs, nonfiction books, proposals, self publishing, or marketing.  
<http://jennienash.com/>

## Literary Agents

If you are interested in landing a traditional publishing deal, you'll need an agent to get in the door. In order to pitch an agent, you write what's known as a query letter and if they like the sound of your novel, they'll ask to read it. If upon reading it, they think they can sell it to a publisher, they will offer to represent you – for a percentage of the proceeds of

the book.

Note that reputable agents never request a fee for evaluating a manuscript. Also note that the time to look for an agent is when you have a finished, polished manuscript that's as perfect as you can make it. When you're ready, here are a few incredibly helpful resources:

- **The Guide to Literary Agents Blog**, one of the biggest blogs in publishing, is run by Chuck Sambuchino, an editor and published author who works for Writer's Digest Books.

The site has instruction and information on literary agents, literary agencies, query letters, submissions, publishing, author platform, book marketing, and more.

<http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents>

- **AgentQuery.com** is a database that lets you search for agents by keyword, so you can pinpoint agents who represent the kind of work you do. There is an excellent description of how to write a query letter in their informational pages.

<http://www.agentquery.com/>

- **AgentTracker.com** is a similar database with the added benefit of allowing you to track your submissions. You can also search specifically for agents who are accepting new clients.

<http://querytracker.net/>

- **PublishersMarketplace.com** – Browsing their information laden agent's pages can be incredibly fruitful – take it from me. I found my fabulous agent, Laurie Abkemeier, that way.

<http://publishersmarketplace.com/browse.html>

- **Predators and Editors.** And finally, just to be sure you're on the right track, use this site to double check whether or not the agent you have selected is, in fact, reputable.

<http://pred-ed.com/>