

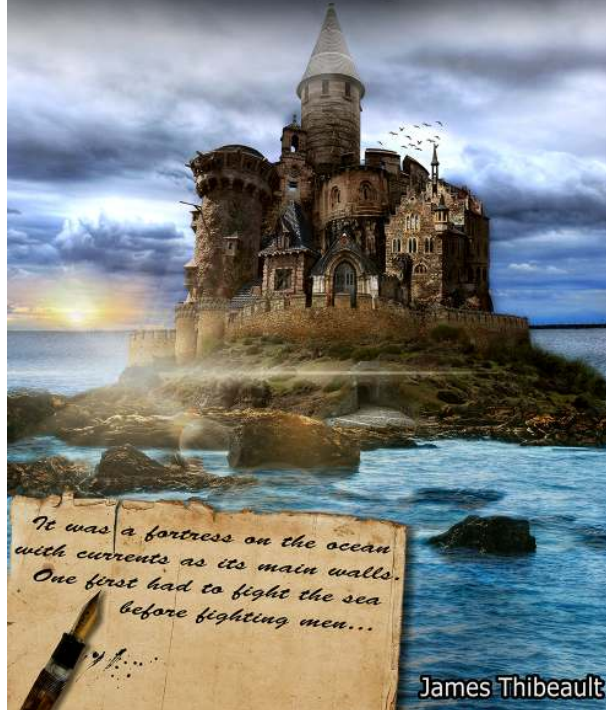
A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO STORYTELLING: HOW TO CRAFT COMPELLING NARRATIVES



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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO STORYTELLING

How to Craft Compelling Narratives



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Introduction



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Broken up into small, readable sections, this guide aims to be a general introduction to the craft of storytelling. It doesn’t matter if you have been writing for years or are just starting: this guide will be helpful to anyone interested in the art. There are dozens of excellent books on storytelling that go into far more detail, but this free guide is a primer to get you started. In addition, each section has a reading exercise that showcases the elements learned in that section. Finally, throughout the guide, there are a variety of interactive assessments to test your understanding.

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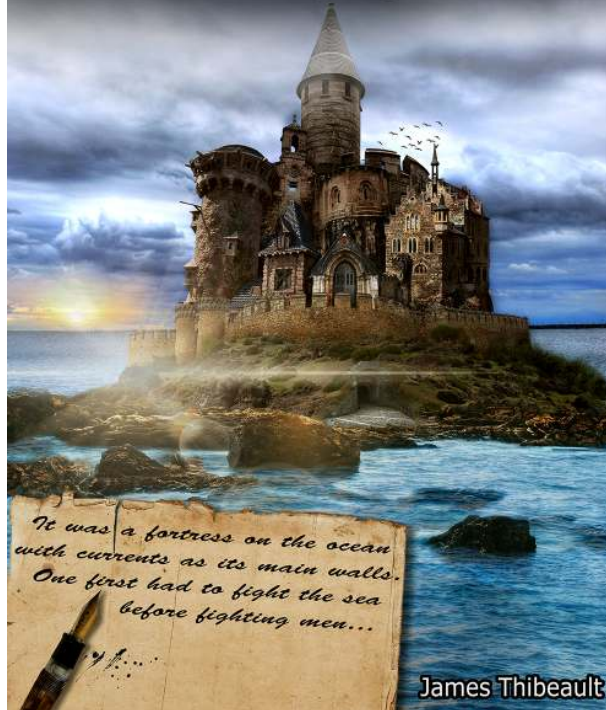
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Basic Format



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Learning Objectives

- Create a story structure using the three main components—Beginning, Middle, and End.
- Describe the inner story elements within the Beginning, Middle, and End.
- Construct a Basic Format outline using the Beginning, Middle, End and its associated elements.

1.1: What Exactly is a Beginning, Middle, and End?

If you were to ask a random person on the street to break down the parts of a story, they'd probably say three words: Beginning, Middle, End. However, if you really want to annoy this random person on the street even more, just ask them, "But what makes a beginning?" or "When does the middle start?" or "What triggers the end?" A simple response is to just say that time happens: The beginning is near the start, the middle starts somewhere in the center, and the end is at the last part. Perhaps it looks something like this:

Beginning	Middle	End
-----------	--------	-----

Most people assume a story is evenly split like this.

In the image above, the beginning, middle, and end are evenly spaced. If this story took an hour to read, then that would mean each section would take 20 minutes. However, most stories are not structured so evenly. In fact, it may look something more like this:

Beg.	Middle	End
------	--------	-----

However, many stories are structured like this.

In this image, the beginning and end are quite short, with the middle taking up most of the read time. Again, if this story were an hour, this would mean the beginning and end are around 10 minutes each and the middle is 40 minutes. However, writing a story isn't the same as a movie. How long should a beginning be? How many paragraphs, pages, or chapters are we talking about? It depends. That's a really annoying answer to give, but it depends on whether or not certain requirements have been met. These requirements are called **story elements**:

Noticeable actions or moments in the story that either set up or move the plot forward.

For example, if a character is walking down the street and then suddenly falls through a manhole, a story element has occurred. The story has now moved in a different direction, and it cannot go back to its original state. Because the character has fallen into the sewer, they now have to figure out how to escape. *Falling down a manhole* would be an element in this scenario that moves the plot forward.

Every story has certain elements in its narrative that move the story along. More importantly, there are major elements that trigger the beginning, middle, and end. Below is a collection of elements that, when strung together, create a full story. These are the most basic of elements, so let's call it **basic format**:

Definition: Basic Format

A collection of essential story elements that make up the beginning, middle, and end (BME) of a narrative.

Now, let's break down each section to its essential elements, so we can have a better sense of what is the beginning, middle, and end (BME). Please note that all of these elements could have their own separate chapters, but for this section, I'll keep it brief. However, all of these elements will occur in some way throughout the rest of the guide, so I'll provide more elaboration in later sections.

1.2: The Beginning

A beginning comprises of three essential elements:

- The setting
- The protagonist
- The problem

The beginning does not exactly push the plot forward. Instead, the beginning provides critical details for the reader to know before the plot pushes forward. Think of the beginning answering the journalistic questions of who, what, where, when, and why. It is the job of the author to supply some answers to the reader before the story can really move forward. These *answers* can be broken down into three elements: setting, protagonist, and problem.

Let's start with the setting. Often overlooked by novice writers, the **setting** is important in order to ground the reader's imagination to exactly where the story is taking place.

Definition: Setting

The location of the story, which comprises of space, time, and conditions of the area.

Stories are not often told in a spaceless void. While most readers will naturally create a setting in their head with their imagination, there still needs to be some prompt. If the setting is too vague, it may not be enough to trigger the imagination. If it is too descriptive, then it may become too tedious to read and leaves little for the reader to imagine. Designing a good setting is a bit complex, and it will be discussed in far more detail later in [Section 2 – Describing Settings and Characters](#).

Next is the **protagonist**. Also referred to as the main character, the protagonist is the person the story revolves entirely around. They are the focus of the narrative, and often their actions will have consequences—good or bad:

Definition: Protagonist

The character whose actions will push the plot until the end of the story.

In basic format, there is only one protagonist. There can be multiple characters in a story, but only one person is the main focus. This is the character that the audience will connect with throughout the story and become invested in how their story plans out.

Finally, for the beginning, there is the **problem**. The word “conflict” is sometimes used, but it essentially means the same thing. Suddenly, there is a situation that deeply affects the protagonist, and they must do something about it:

Definition: Problem

A situation that negatively affects the protagonist so much that they must come up with a solution.

The problem cannot be ignored or be pushed off for a later time. More importantly, the problem could affect multiple characters, but it is ultimately up to the protagonist to address this issue.

So now that we have a brief description of the beginning elements, let's see them in a more tangible form. Below is an outline of a story using the elements as guides. Throughout this chapter, we'll be adding to this outline and eventually map out a story from beginning to end:

Story Element	Description
<i>Setting</i>	An abandoned barn.
<i>Protagonist</i>	Susie, a timid nine-year-old.
<i>Problem</i>	Susie is dared by her friends to explore the barn.

In this outline, the setting provides just a bit of context to spark the imagination of the reader. For the outline, using a key word like *abandoned* can change the setting significantly. Just writing *barn* is too vague, so try being a bit more precise when outlining. Next, Susie, our protagonist, is described as being timid and young. This not only provides some description of the character but also connects to the problem. Finally, the problem is immediate. Susie must accept the dare and address the situation. If we were to write out these elements, it could look something like this:

With rotting planks, the barn in the distance needed a lot of repairs. Her father told her never to venture in there because some of the boards could fall without warning. The thought of being crushed to death by a piece of wood sent shivers through her fingers. However, even though her friends saw her shake, they still egged her on, whispering, "Go in there, climb to the loft and back. We dare you."

Again, nothing really has happened yet. The story is just getting started, and before the plot really moves, the reader needs to prime their imagination. Note that spending too much time on the beginning—describing the setting or the protagonist in a ton a detail—can get boring fast. While there is no exact science as to how long a beginning should be, if the reader is thinking "Let's get a move on," it's probably time to transition to the middle of the story.

1.3: The Middle

In this section, there are three more elements:

- Address the problem
- Change in the protagonist
- The point of no return

In many stories, the middle is the longest. This is because most of the plot revolves around these elements. Now that the reader understands the setting, protagonist, and problem, the author can spend some time having the protagonist move around in this world.

Once the protagonist decides to **address the problem**, it officially triggers the middle of the story. The protagonist must do something significant about the issue.

Definition: Address the Problem

When the protagonist performs a significant action in direct response to the problem that is confronting them.

It's important to note that in basic format, the protagonist needs to be the one who addresses the problem. It cannot be the protagonist's friends or family. The protagonist alone must address it. As for Susie, if she refuses, then the narrative remains

stagnant, and the story does not go anywhere. If her friends climb into the loft for her, that would be uneventful. Facing her fears, Susie, the protagonist, must go into the abandoned barn in order to address the problem.

While the protagonist is addressing the problem, it's going to have some effect on them. If the situation isn't that serious, then it wouldn't be a problem. For example, if Susie goes into the barn, climbs to the loft, and exits with no issues, then our story would be quite boring. Instead, the problem must affect the protagonist so significantly that it causes a **change in the protagonist**. This change could be either a good or bad thing. Having a character go through a rough breakup could make them more and more depressed. A character entering a dance competition could make them more and more confident about themselves. Regardless, the character needs to evolve, and when a character transitions emotionally from A to B, they are beginning to change.

Definition: Change in the Protagonist

The gradual personality change of a character that begins to appear noticeable around halfway through the story.

Often, seeing the protagonist change throughout the story can be very satisfying for the reader (I'll discuss more about this in [Character Arcs in Section 6](#)). Seeing a grumpy old man change into a caring individual is rewarding. Change is natural in the human experience, and readers want to see that. In fact, the change in the protagonist needs to be so significant that it becomes permanent. This permanence is known as **the point of no return**.

Definition: Point of No Return

A point in the story where the protagonist makes a critical decision or performs an irreversible action that significantly alters the course of the story.

By the time a character has changed this much, there needs to be a story element that seals the change in the character. If the reader has experienced growth in a character throughout the whole story, only to find that they reverted back to their old self at the end, then the story would probably feel like a giant waste of time. The point of no return is the proof that the protagonist's change is permanent. This event is so significant that once it happens, there is no going back to normal. For Susie, this is when she reaches the loft. Will she or won't she actually climb the ladder? If she climbs to the loft, then the dare is complete, and a significant change has occurred.

Let's break down how the middle story elements of Susie's story would be written out:

Story Element	Description
<i>Address the Problem</i>	Susie, despite being afraid, walks into the barn.
<i>Change in the Protagonist</i>	Even though she is scared, Susie becomes more and more brave as she ventures through the spooky barn.
<i>The Point of No Return</i>	With enough confidence, Susie climbs the creaky ladder that leads to the loft.

Susie addresses the problem by walking into the barn. The action by the protagonist doesn't need to be something huge, it just needs to be an action that indicates the protagonist is going to do something about the problem. While going through the barn, it is old and unnerving—bothering Susie. Still, she continues and gathers her confidence. However, Susie could have all the confidence in the world, but it doesn't mean anything if she fails to climb the ladder. Once she climbs the ladder, there is no going back, and the audience wants to know what will happen. The middle of Susie's story could be written out like this:

Susie sheepishly looked back at her friends. Dragging her feet along the dirt, she made her way past the red door and into the dark and musty interior. Cobwebs were everywhere. While there was still light outside, only glimmers of that light made it through the wood. Alone, Susie took one step forward then another. A bird, startled by the company, flew above her head. Screaming, Susie retreated to the entrance of the barn. She could hear her friends booing at her. No, she thought, I'm going to do this. After taking a deep breath, she went deeper into the darkness. Strange animal sounds were heard. She couldn't see

where they were located, but she tried her best to ignore them. One step at a time, she thought. Another bird flew up in the air, and while it gave Susie a jolt, she didn't run. It was only a crow. Laughing to herself, she held her head up high and walked over to the base of the loft. A ladder, about five times the size of her, seemed to go on forever. It was old, and it probably hadn't been used in years. Susie was about to turn back and tell her friends about the rickety ladder, but they would only make fun of her. No, she had to climb it. It was time for her to be brave.

To cover all the story elements in the middle, more time is needed. Notice how much longer this section is compared to the beginning of Susie's story. The middle is often the longest section. The protagonist needs space to change and rushing it will make it feel unwarranted. When she reaches the ladder, it is the way for Susie to prove she is no longer afraid of the barn. The point of no return is also a great way to build up tension, as the reader wants to know if the protagonist will succeed or not. I'll talk more about building tension in [Section 7 – Writing Tension and Suspense](#), but now it's time to wrap up the story with the end.

1.4: The End

The End only has two story elements:

- The Test
- The Conclusion

These last two elements are a chain reaction. **The Test** is what happens after the point of no return and **The Conclusion** is what happens after The Test. That's a little confusing, but it will make more sense by using Susie's story as an example.

Let's first address the Test.

Definition: The Test

The event that occurs after the protagonist performs an action that triggers **The Point of No Return**.

When Susie decides to climb up the ladder, the reader wants to know what will happen. Will she chicken out? Will she conquer her fears? Those questions will be answered during this test. Often, the Test is the most exciting part of the story because everything has been building up to this moment. If Susie climbs the ladder and easily reaches the loft, then it would be uneventful. Something notable should happen—especially to check whether the character has truly changed. In Susie's case, the event is testing her fear, so it is a good idea to create an event that is fear-inducing. Perhaps the ladder isn't stable or maybe Susie slips. In Susie's story, we'll write it so that Susie is going to succeed and reach the top.

Because she is successful, we'll have Susie look out the window of the loft and wave to her friends. Something as simple as that moment could be **The Conclusion**.

Definition: The Conclusion

The results of **The Test** that determine whether the protagonist solves the problem or not.

As the final story element, **The Conclusion** lets the reader know what the character is like now that they have changed and faced the test. When learning the basics in storytelling, it is far easier to let the protagonist succeed in the test. If they don't succeed in the test, it is known as a tragedy—which requires more sophisticated techniques to get right. For beginners in storytelling, try having the protagonist succeed when it comes to **The Test**. In Susie's case, she has emerged triumphant and performing an action like a wave to her friends shows that not only has she succeeded, but also is proud of her accomplishments. To break down the end, it would be outlined like this:

Story Element	Description
<i>The Test</i>	Susie climbs the old ladder. It almost breaks, and Susie slips a bit. However, she manages to reach the top.
<i>The Conclusion</i>	Susie reaches the window in the loft and proudly waves at her friends.

Much like the beginning, the end doesn't need to be very long. In fact, many stories have the end being short. Once **the Test** is completed, which is often the most interesting part of the story, dragging out the story any longer could make it boring. Obviously, it is good to wrap up any loose ends of your story, but you should be brief. The party's over, so don't spend another hour hanging around when the host wants you to leave. For Susie's story, the end could be written like this:

Susie tentatively stepped onto the first rung of the ladder. It bowed but did not snap. She put her hands on the rungs above. Dust clung to her palms, but she ignored the need to brush it away. She climbed. A sharp squeak erupted from every step she took. It wasn't like the metal ladders she used for her chores. This ladder hated her. It squealed around the halfway point. She froze. She listened intently for any other sounds. If the ladder snapped, so would her neck. After a moment, she climbed another rung. It squealed, but the wood remained steady. Confidently, she advanced upward a bit too hastily. Suddenly, her foot slipped and dangled in the air. Susie stifled a scream and held on to the ladder for dear life. Calmly, she placed her foot back on the ladder and reached the top of the loft. At the top, the loft was empty and deserted. Nothing remained but spiders and mouse pellets. She walked towards the bright light of the window. Her friends, losing their patience, suddenly saw her face and waved excitedly. Susie waved back—towering above them—and smiled.

And there we have it, the elements of Beginning, Middle, and End. As a recap, here are all the elements as one list:

- Beginning
 - The setting
 - The protagonist
 - The problem
- Middle
 - Attempt to solve the problem
 - Change in the protagonist
 - Point of No Return
- End
 - The Test
 - The Conclusion

It's a lot to take in at first, but with practice, remembering and utilizing these elements will come more naturally.

1.5: Is Basic Format Required?

Although many stories are written using an outline similar to this, many stories also completely abandon this formula. In fact, as you continue to improve as a writer, you may alter or deviate from this format. However, it is called **basic format** for a reason. This is the fundamental way to tell a story, and once you have mastered it, you can feel free to experiment. Veteran basketball players do all sorts of unconventional dribbling down the court, but often they can do that only because they have mastered the fundamentals first. A musician masters the scales before they can do more complex pieces. The purpose of this section is not to say that there is only one way to write. Instead, this is a great way to understand the basics of a plot, and then perhaps break it if it feels warranted.

Therefore, the next time you start a story, try outlining it with basic format. It's a great way to understand what direction the story needs to go, and it can help you stay on task. Remember that once you write it out, you can always adjust the story as it progresses. Using the basic format outline is a *tool* not a rule, and it is highly recommended for beginning and advanced writers alike.

1.6: Check In: Match the Correct Story Elements

Check In: Match the Correct Story Element to Its Basic Format Location

Beginning

Change in the Protagonist

Attempt

The Conclusion

Middle

Point of No Return

End

The Protagonist

✓ Check

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1.7: Additional Resources

1.7.1: Basic Format Blank Sheet

Beginning	
The Setting	
The Protagonist	
The Problem	
Middle	
Attempt to Solve the Problem	
Change in the Protagonist	
Point of No Return	
End	
The Test	
The Conclusion	

1.7.2: Susie's Story (Full Basic Format)

With rotting planks, the barn in the distance needed a lot of repairs. Her father told her never to venture in there because some of the boards could fall without warning. The thought of being crushed to death by a piece of wood sent shivers through her fingers. However, even though her friends saw her shake, they still egged her on, whispering, “Go in there, climb to the loft and back. We dare you.”

Susie sheepishly looked back at her friends. Dragging her feet along the dirt, she made her way past the red door and into the dark and musty interior. Cobwebs were everywhere. While there was still light outside, only glimmers of that light made it through the wood. Alone, Susie took one step forward then another. A bird, startled by the company, flew above her head. Screaming, Susie retreated to the entrance of the barn. She could hear her friends booing at her. No, she thought, I’m going to do this. After taking a deep breath, she went deeper into the darkness. Strange animal sounds were heard. She couldn’t see where they were located, but she tried her best to ignore them. One step at a time, she thought. Another bird flew up in the air, and while it gave Susie a jolt, she didn’t run. It was only a crow. Laughing to herself, she held her head up high and walked over to the base of the loft. A ladder, about five times the size of her, seemed to go on forever. It was old, and it probably hadn’t been used in years. Susie was about to turn back and tell her friends about the rickety ladder, but they would only make fun of her. No, she had to climb it. It was time for her to be brave.

Susie tentatively stepped onto the first rung of the ladder. It bowed but did not snap. She put her hands on the rungs above. Dust clung to her palms, but she ignored the need to brush it away. She climbed. A sharp squeak erupted from every step she took. It wasn’t like the metal ladders she used for her chores. This ladder hated her. It squealed around the halfway point. She froze. She listened intently for any other sounds. If the ladder snapped, so would her neck. After a moment, she climbed another rung. It squealed, but the wood remained steady. Confidently, she advanced upward a bit too hastily. Suddenly, her foot slipped and dangled in the air. Susie stifled a scream and held on to the ladder for dear life. Calmly, she placed her foot back on the ladder and reached the top of the loft. At the top, the loft was empty and deserted. Nothing remained but spiders and mouse pellets. She walked towards the bright light of the window. Her friends, losing their patience, suddenly saw her face and waved excitedly. Susie waved back—towering above them—and smiled.

1.1: Reading Exercise - The Twilight Schoolyard Warrior

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1.1: Reading Exercise - The Twilight Schoolyard Warrior



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The Twilight Schoolyard Warrior

By James Thibeault

After a whole thirty seconds had gone by, Vinh texted his mom again.

~WHERE ARE YOU?

Dusk was no longer enjoyable. The sky's soft orange glow shifted to a dark purple. There had been a few students walking around the backend of the school, but now they all had left. The headlights from the cars were beginning to look more pronounced—sharp beams stinging Vinh's eyes as the cars drove by. Within a few minutes, his only source of light would be the traffic and his phone, which only had 5% on its battery. The middle school was completely shut down, with all its lights turned off, as not even the janitor was sticking around for Thanksgiving break. There was supposed to be a lamp that stayed on all night outside, but some of the high schoolers shattered it and the town couldn't afford to replace the expensive light. Vinh wasn't exactly afraid of the dark, which would be pretty stupid. He was nervous of bored high schooler, afraid some of them might sneak afterhours—doing things that they probably ...

Someone touched him. Vinh jumped back. He poised himself to look like a skilled fighter. However, his fists were way too high in the air, and his knees were shaking. Fortunately, he didn't have to defend himself, because there was no one. He felt his thigh vibrate, the source of the startle. He plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone. Two texts:

~Sorry, running late. Need to be careful driving at this time. Lot of scary drivers.

~Be there in 15 mins. Stay there, I don't want you stolen.

15 minutes! It would be dark as a black belt by that point. Vinh looked around—hoping to find any sort of light other than relying on his phone. There was a restaurant 10 minutes away, but then he would have to text his mom to say that he was going there instead. However, by the time he walked over to the restaurant, his phone would be dead. Then, what if something happened to him? Maybe a car runs him over? A stray dog bites his leg? Some high schoolers jump him? How would he tell his mom that he was horribly hurt with no phone service? No, the only solution was to say right ...

A noise. He reached for his phone and pulled it out. Nothing. No texts. It was so dark now, even the light from the phone was blinding him. He stared at the background screen of his phone—a bear with a headband karate-chopping a table. Great, he completely forgot it was bear season! Now, he could add being mauled to death to possible things that could happen to him in 15 minutes. He glanced at his battery life: 2%. Vinh crammed the phone back into his pocket—hoping it would last just a bit longer. The noise. The one he heard a moment ago. It wasn't his phone. It was out there. The noise was coming to kill him.

Vinh pressed against the cold concrete slab of his school. The noise, mixed with the bending of tree branches, was around the corner. Be brave, he thought, be a fighter. He breathed in deep, harnessing his energy, and exhaled—channeling strength through his twiggy arms. Vinh shimmied along the wall as though he was dangling over a high-story building. When he reached the corner, he took a deep breath and exhaled. His warrior eye peeked around corner and saw flash of something move. Vinh screamed and retreated back to the safety of the wall, hugging his knees. On the ground, he peeked around the wall again only seeing a squirrel looking for a few more nuts before nightfall. Vinh looked up to the soon-to-be-seen stars and sighed with relief. Then,

embarrassment flowed through him as easily as air. He was a coward—afraid of a squirrel! Annoyed, he jumped from out of the corner and chased after it. Vinh stomped around as elegantly as Godzilla. The squirrel flew into the trees. At least something was afraid of him.

At this point, he was far away from his waiting spot. With the moon and the stars beginning to shine, he could only faintly see around. Still, it wouldn't hurt to use his phone for light. He reached into his pocket and pressed the side of his phone. Nothing happened. He pressed the button again, and a little charging button commandeered the center of the screen. Now, he was in trouble. With no communication from the world, he was all alone. No, he thought, it was time to man up. It was time to fight.

Another noise. Vinh turned to it, but this time his chest was puffed out. Intently, he focused on the source of the noise. It was too loud to be another squirrel. No, it was steps. A person. Should he call out? Of course not, he thought, why don't I just tell the murderer how I want to be killed. He crept towards the sound—careful of his own footsteps. It was coming from his previous spot, around the corner. Then, he saw a light. Vinh pressed against the concrete. This had to be a murderer. They didn't call out because they wanted to sneak up on their prey. At this point, he couldn't run away. It was too dark to see where he was going. Vinh had no choice but to fight, he had to be a warrior. Kill or be killed. There was no turning back.

Vinh, sucking in a deep and powerful breath, exhaled with ferocity. He leaped around the corner, arms wide, and screamed, "I am a warrior!"

The attempted murderer dropped their phone and ran away to the safety of their car. After his eyes adjusted, Vinh noticed that the vehicle looked similar to his mom's. "Oh no," he whispered.

"Mom, it's me!" Vinh said as he approached the car. Vinh's mother was failing to open the driver's side—pulling at it at least five times.

Pulling one more time for good luck, which resulted in it actually opening, Vinh's mom stared in disbelief at her son, the so-called warrior.

"Why did you scare me like that! I thought you were kidnapped. I texted you at least ten times when I pulled in."

"My phone died, and ... I chased a squirrel."

"Oh, I'm glad you had fun," she said sarcastically. "I was afraid of running you over in this darkness, so I decided to walk. Big mistake. I'm going to be terrified of the dark for weeks. Get in."

Vinh took a deep breath before stepping into the car. Although he had conquered the night, he would soon have to face a new fear—his mother's wrath.

Why is Vinh waiting at the beginning of the story?

☐ For his mom to pick him up.

☐ For the school bus.

☐ For the janitor to let him in.

☐ For his friends.

✓ Check



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What would be The Setting in this story?

☐ The dark woods.

☐ The parking lot of a restaurant.

☐ Outside the middle school at night.

☐ An abandoned gymnasium.

✓ Check



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Describing Setting and Characters



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Learning Objectives

- Utilize specific descriptors to vividly depict settings and characters.
- Employ techniques to hone descriptive skills and capture imagery.
- Choose certain parts of speech to create more impactful descriptions.

2.1: Developing Descriptors

Oftentimes, beginner writers will describe settings and characters like this:

A man sits on a bench in the middle of the park.

This is not a bad sentence, but it lacks a captivating setting and character. There is nothing wrong with the concept of a man (character) and a park (setting). In fact, a lot of interesting stories can be told through this opening sentence. However, the setting and character are currently quite hollow. *Man* and *park* are essentially empty vessels with nothing for the reader to interpret. For example, what type of *man* is here? Is he old, young, angry, charming? It's not clear. The same applies for *park*. Is this a playground? A public place? While these questions about the man and park could be answered in following sentences, that's extra wording that doesn't need to be added. Let's improve this one sentence so it is rich with description.

The biggest issue with this sentence is that the reader needs to imagine the entire scene on their own. The reader is substituting their own ideas of what this *man* and *park* represents and not what the writer visualized. Sometimes, this is a good thing, as vague concepts can stimulate our imagination with more vast and vivid ideas than the written word can. However, in this case, we want to orient the reader to imagine characters and settings in a particular way. We need to add **descriptors** to our characters and settings:

Definition: Descriptors

Words or phrases that assist the reader in visualizing a character or setting more succinctly.

Let's add a few more words to the sentence so there are more descriptors:

A man with aviator sunglasses sits upright on a bench in the middle of a park that's full of snow and void of people.

By adding descriptors, the sentence has completely transformed. At this point, instead of visualizing any particular man on a bench, the descriptor has forced the reader to imagine a man with sunglasses who is sitting upright. Giant aviators cover his eyes as well as his emotions. Why isn't this man relaxing on a park bench? Perhaps, he's waiting for someone, and this is a serious confrontation. While we will never know the reason why the man has glasses and is sitting upright, at least our imagination is beginning to wander. The descriptors have helped develop a unique image of a man in our mind's eye.

In addition, the reader now has a better idea of what the park looks like. Instead of the other three seasons, the reader can visualize a wintry setting. This isn't just a coating of snow, but enough accumulation to require plowing of the sidewalks. However, where are the people? The man must be only seeing a field of untouched white. This sentence allows the reader's imagination to explore more than simply *A man sits on a bench in the middle of the park*. With descriptors, we can point the reader to imagine in a certain and vivid way.

Let's try another example:

A child waits by a school bus stop.

Again, a grammatically sound sentence, but there is little to visualize. We need to add more descriptors to get a better picture of the *child* as well as the *bus stop*. Try asking yourself some basic questions like *How old is this child and what is he like?* Or *Where is this bus stop located?* How you answer those questions regarding the character and setting will help you identify some basic descriptors to incorporate into the sentence. Perhaps something like:

A middle-school aged child, sitting on a mailbox, waits by a school bus stop and breathes in the smoggy air.

We answered the first question by writing that he is a middle-schooler, and we hinted that he's a bit different from other kids by indicating he's sitting on a mailbox instead of just standing. Also, we answered the second question by suggesting this takes place in a city because of the polluted air. Granted, additional sentences would further answer these questions, but notice how just adding a few more words dramatically changes the scene? Descriptors are vital to helping the reader imagine a particular scene, so be sure to add them in.

2.2: Haiku, the Best Way to Practice Description

While most students practice writing haiku at some point in their life, they are often missing the most important point: it's a great way to practice description. Often, writers of haiku are so hyper fixated on the need to have 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables, that they completely forget that haiku also is an artform for imagination. For instance, take Matsuo Bashô, the legendary haiku writer, who wrote:

古池や 蛙飛び込む 水の音

Which roughly translates to:

There is an old pond

The sound of water

A frog jumps in

With such a limited set of syllables, Bashô provides just enough details to capture a precise image. Forget all about the syllable stuff and notice how he captures an image. Each line has a different descriptor. The first focuses on the pond, the second the water, and the third the frog. When combined, they create one lucid moment. In haiku, capturing that one moment is key, and it is a great instrument to practice describing characters and setting.

For example, let's go back to the man on the bench in the wintery park. First, let's focus on the setting and describe it in more vivid detail. Re-read this sentence below:

A man with aviator sunglasses sits upright on a bench in the middle of a park that's full of snow and void of people.

Close your eyes and imagine what else is around the snowy park. Now, pick three things from your imagination and write it into three lines. Don't worry about punctuation, just capture three things stirring in your imagination. It might look something like this:

A chilly blue sky
Frozen breath in the air
Salty slushy sidewalks

While this might work for a haiku, we want to add this back into our narrative. Let's add some punctuation and place it right after the open sentence.

A man with aviator sunglasses sits upright on a bench in the middle of a park that's full of snow and void of people. The day had a chilly blue sky with frozen breath seen in the air. The sidewalks were salty and slushy.

With these additional descriptors, the setting is beginning to be more vivid. However, while the setting is improving, the man is still vague. Let's try the same exercise again, but this time focus only on the man with the aviator glasses. Before closing your eyes, try to imagine not only what he physically looks like but also what he is doing—what actions he is performing. Write down three additional lines solely on this man. It may look something like this:

Constantly checking his watch
Shivering in his black suit
Arms tightly crossed

Now, let's add some punctuation and fit it into our paragraph. Note that there is not one way to translate this poetry into sentences, so experiment with different sentences and see which ones flow the best:

A man with aviator sunglasses sits upright on a bench in the middle of a park that's full of snow and void of people. The day has a chilly blue sky with frozen breath seen in the air. The sidewalks are salty and slushy. Shivering in his black suit, the man constantly checks his watch. His arms are tightly crossed.

With only a few sentences, we're now able to describe a character and setting with some vivid details. While it is fine to spend many sentences developing a character and setting, remember that you can capture moments with a limited number of words.

2.3: Beware the Overuse of Adjectives and Adverbs

Unfortunately, there is a ton of bad advice when it comes to describing settings and characters—with the two main culprits being adjectives and adverbs. Though there is surely a place for adjectives and adverbs in creative writing, an over reliance on them will make your settings and characters very shallow. For example, let's add some descriptors to a dog. Let's say that it's a *mean dog*. However, visualize the word *mean* for a second. Does *mean* actually invoke an image? Probably, but not in the way that you think. Maybe the word *mean* triggered the image of a dog snarling with its tailed raised. If so, then why don't we simply use that phrase instead:

The dog snarled and raised its tail.

Oddly enough, adjectives and adverbs aren't always the best way to invoke images. Instead, using **verbs** and **nouns** does a much better job. In this sentence, we used verbs like *snarled* and *raised* as well as *tail* for a noun. However, though this sentence may invoke *mean* it could also capture *defensive* as well. Let's add another sentence to capture *mean dog*:

The dog snarled and raised its tail. It moved quickly and almost bit firmly on the woman's arm.

The second sentence seems a bit off. It's a bit too wordy and doesn't capture the meanness that we have been looking for. One of the problems is the reliance on adverbs here. Since the verbs *moved* and *bite* lacked enough imagery, an easy solution is to tack on adverbs *quickly* and *firmly* at the end. However, a better solution is to simply use stronger and more imaginative verbs. Perhaps something like this:

The dog snarled and raised its tail. It lunged and almost chomped on the woman's arm.

With less words and more imagery, replacing the weak verbs with *lunged* and *chomped* adds a lot more character to the dog. Sometimes, it is better to say *the soft hand* or *he suddenly realized*. However, take some time looking over your writing and note if there are adjectives and adverbs in your sentences. If there are, see if you can substitute them for better verbs or nouns. For example, instead of *walked slowly* try *sauntered* or *creeped*—depending on the context. Instead of the *large building* try *the building towered over the trees*. It takes more work, but developing this skill will vastly improve your descriptors and paint a better picture in your reader's mind.

2.4: Check In: Description Practice

Below are ten descriptors, five for a character and five for the setting. Create a paragraph with these descriptors by adding punctuation and whatever additional sentences you wish. There is no correct way to design this paragraph, so be creative!

An energetic boy
A dimly lit bowling alley
Fidgets in his seat
Ashtrays at every lane
Struggles to lift a bowling ball
Smells of stale beer and popcorn
Coughs from the smoke
Middle-aged men in sweatpants
Forgot socks and wears sandals
Bowling pins aged yellow

✓ Check

2.5: Resources

2.5.1: Description Exercise 1

Below are ten descriptors, five for a character and five for the setting. Adding punctuation, and whatever additional sentences you want, create a paragraph or more.

Character	Setting
An energetic boy	A dimly lit bowling alley
Fidgets in his seat	Ashtrays at every lane
Struggles to lift a bowling ball	Smells of stale beer and popcorn
Coughs from the smoke	Middle-aged men in sweatpants
Forgot socks and wears sandals	Bowling pins aged yellow

2.5.2: Description Exercise 2

With a blank description sheet, creating five descriptors for a setting and five descriptors for a character. Feel free to add as many more as you like. Then, transform these descriptors into at least one full paragraph or more.

Character	Setting

2.1: Reading Exercise - Escaping the Chaos

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2.1: Reading Exercise - Escaping the Chaos



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2.1.1: Escaping the Chaos

By James Thibeault

The last thing she wanted to do on a Sunday morning was to spend it at the crowded beach. Mia covered her sun-burnt ears with her wraparound headphones to drown out the country music blasting from the bro bunch three spots down. Shirtless and drunk, they threw a frisbee back and forth over the heads of several couples baking in the sun. How these people could willingly submit themselves to sun poison was a mystery to her. The oppressive heat was already too much for Mia, and it was only going to get worse in the next couple of hours. She was fine under her umbrella—knowing too well how sharp the hot stinging sand could be on her bare feet. With her long-sleeved shirt, Mia scrolled through her feed and tried her best to ignore the festivities.

“Come on, sweetie,” said her mother. “Let’s cool off a bit and dip in the ocean.”

“No,” Mia said while scrolling, “the minute I dry off, the seaweed and salt will make me itch for the rest of the day.”

“You’re just going to sit there the whole time?”

She felt a pang in her mother’s voice. Mia wasn’t a beach person, and every year this conversation came up. Maybe as she got older, Mia would magically transform into a two-piece sun-absorbing fleshy tanning bed. But right now, she was content with her SPF 100, as her skin was caked in a white goo.

“I’m sorry,” said Mia.

“Okay. Well, I’ll get back in a minute. Don’t eat all of the pretzels.”

Mia watched as her mother gingerly stepped around the blankets, chairs, balls, umbrellas, coolers, buckets, and shovels. Instinctively, her mother ducked under the frisbee thrown by the sweaty shirtless men. Eventually, she made it to the waves and disappeared into the sea. For a moment, the thought of the cool ocean intrigued Mia, but before she could will herself to sit up, the frisbee bonked her on the side of the head.

“Sorry bro! Can you toss that back?”

“I’m not your bro!” shouted Mia as she threw the frisbee back at the glistening sack of muscles. The frisbee curved and flopped only a few feet from where she sat.

“Whoops, got to be gentle on the wrist,” said the bro. “I’ll grab it for ya.” Jogging over, the bro squatted down and grabbed the frisbee with one hand. With his other hand, he placed it over his eyes to stare at Mia. After a moment, he smiled. “Hope you feel better!” And with that, he hustled back over to his man pack.

“Did he think I was sick?” she said silently to herself. Mia looked at her long sleeves and felt the tackiness of her outfit. Maybe she should join her mother, battle the heat for a while, and get the inevitable skin damage on her body. All she wanted was to stay home

and be left alone on her computer. Now *that* was the perfect day off, she thought. Suddenly, she began to fidget in her beach chair. The pressure to rise ran through her body. Maybe she should join her mother, be a good daughter and whatnot.

Mia stood up and hit her head on the umbrella. She was about to swear but held it in for the children making sandcastles next to her. Mia took off her headphones, choosing to keep her long sleeve shirt on since it was waterproof. Before she had to chance to take a step, she looked down and saw a seagull waddling towards the bag of pretzels. Like Godzilla, she stomped around the bird until it flew away. Hurriedly, she ate three pretzels and then clipped the bag shut. The sun was already melting away her SPF, but Mia was committed to seeing this out. After taking a deep breath, she moved less elegantly than her mother through the blankets, chairs, balls, umbrellas, coolers, buckets, and shovels. The freebee coasted right at her, and she gently threw it back to the bro with some subtle wrist action. Impressed, the bro gave a thumbs up and Mia returned the gesture. Feeling good, she reached the waves and waved to her mother. Excited, her mother beckoned her into the water.

Mia took one toe into the water and shivered. Nope, she thought, way too cold! However, her mother beckoned her in. Mia couldn't hear her voice due to the crashing waves and music styles. Tensing her muscles, she placed her whole foot into the murky sand. It swallowed her heel entirely. As though she was just learning to walk for the first time, Mia tentatively inched her way into the freezing cold sea. By the time the water reached her navel, she was wincing and regretted her decision.

"Come on, you're so close!" her mother said excitedly.

Mia dunked her head into the water and felt the sheer pain of the cold. She burst through the water's surface like a deformed mermaid—flailing her arms in discomfort. After gasping for air, she fought off her body's shivers and waded closer to her mother. They held hands and looked out to the vast emptiness ahead. Except for one lone sailboat, the ocean was void of all human life. When Mia turned back around, the sharp contrast of the human zoo surprised her. How can two different things be in the same place?

"I'm pruning. Did you want to come out with me?" said her mother.

"No," said Mia, "I'll stay here for a while."

"Did you cover my pretzels?"

"Yes, but don't eat the rest."

Her mother squeezed the saltwater out of her hair and stepped back into the murky mess of muscle and mayhem. Mia chose to turn her back to the beachgoers and stare out into the vast sea. If she only had her headphones, it would be perfect.

2.1.1.1: Comprehension Questions for *Escaping the Chaos*

Why didn't Mia want to be at the beach?

- ☐ She got sunburnt easily.
- ☐ She didn't like the crowds and noise.
- ☐ She was allergic to seaweed.
- ☐ Both A and B.

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2.1.1.2: Questions on Describing Character and Settings in *Escaping the Chaos*

What sentence best describes the setting of the crowded beach?

- ☐ "Shirtless and drunk, they threw back and forth a frisbee over the heads of several couples who were baking in the sun."
- ☐ "The oppressive heat was already too much for Mia, and it was only going to get worse in the next couple of hours."
- ☐ "Mia watched as her mother gingerly stepped around the blankets, chairs, balls, umbrellas, coolers, buckets, and shovels."
- ☐ "She was fine under her umbrella—knowing too well how sharp the hot stinging sand could be on her bare feet."

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Developing Character Likeability



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Learning Objectives

- Understand the importance of developing likable characters for readers to connect with.
- Create character likeability through three methods: admiration, sympathy, and empathy.
- Use a question-and-answer approach to map out how to make characters likable.

3.1: Readers Need to “Like” a Character

The reader must care about certain characters—especially the protagonist. If your protagonist is about to fight a legendary dragon to save his homeland, but a few paragraphs prior they kicked a puppy, would you want to see them succeed? Probably not. It’s important to develop reasons for a character to be liked or disliked. If the reader is supposed to like the character, show us why. If the character is supposed to be evil, there needs to be proof of their wickedness. If you do none of these things to a character, then the reader will feel indifferent about their outcome—making them boring. Most of the time, it’s good to practice character likeability:

Definition: Character Likeability

Developing certain traits or actions in a character to make the reader develop an emotional attachment.

Likeability is crucial to whether most stories are interesting or not. If the reader does not care about the story’s characters, everything that happens in the story is irrelevant. It doesn’t matter if the protagonist jumps out of an exploding building. If they are uninteresting and the reader doesn’t care about them, then all you are left with is a boring story with explosions. When a character is first introduced, especially the protagonist, we want to make them likeable as soon as possible. The longer we wait to make them interesting, the more likely the reader will be bored and stop reading. Make your characters likeable, so the reader will like your characters. It seems obvious, but it is harder than it looks.

3.2: Three Types of Likeability

Have you ever come across a character that you just love to hate? For example, this person might have just blown up a whole village, but since they are beaming with charisma, it is hard to stay mad at them. Oddly, you may want to read more about them, maybe even root for them. In this case, that character is still likeable. Likability is less about making a character a good person and more about developing character traits that the reader can emotionally connect with. Some of the best villains are likeable, and there are even protagonists who are not good people—yet we still have a connection to them. Just remember that likeability does not always equal to something of a positive role model.

Instead of focusing on making a “good” character, let’s focus on developing three types of likability: **admiration**, **sympathy**, and **empathy**.

3.2.1: Admiration

Perhaps the simplest way to develop character likeability is to make them cool. Maybe your character is the best martial artist—skilled with both a blade and in hand-to-hand combat. Or your character relies only on their intellect, and they outsmart their opponents like a chess master. They could also be extremely kind, charitable, and willing to do anything for their friends and family. However you design your character with cool characteristics, it ultimately leads to **admiration** from the reader.

Definition: Character Admiration

Designing a character so their traits are looked up to by the reader

In order to generate admiration from the reader, it needs to be earned. That is, you can't just say "Cynthia is the greatest swordsman around." You need to prove it. Cynthia needs to demonstrate their skill, perhaps winning duel after duel without breaking a sweat. The reader needs to witness a character outsmarting their opponent instead of just hearing about it. Many beginner writers will simply mention what their character is like and assume the reader will naturally agree. Just like in real life, respect for a person does not come naturally. It is one thing to say that you are a kind person, but it is another thing to volunteer every week at a homeless shelter. It is important to prove to the reader that your character deserves their admiration. If that is established, then the reader will want to see what happens to them—good or bad.

3.2.2: Sympathy

Not all of your characters should be individuals with superhuman abilities. Instead, maybe your characters are normal and are not that particularly interesting. If that is the case, how do you make them likeable? Another method is to generate **sympathy** from the reader:

Definition: Character Sympathy

Designing a character so that their misgivings or hardships will develop compassion from the reader.

Imagine a character's house was destroyed in a horrible fire. They are left with nothing, and their insurance will not cover any of the damage. Within a week, they are left in the street with only a few dollars to their name. Homeless, they wander the streets looking for work to no success—uncertain where their next meal will be. In this description, we know very little about the character itself. While we do know what happened to their house, their personality is a complete mystery. Yet, the hardships that have fallen on this character should create some pity in the reader. Generating sympathy like this is a great way to create likeability. The reader wants to know if the character will succeed or not in turning their life around. At the same time, it is not satisfying to see a character be miserable and stay miserable, so it is important not to overdo it. If too many horrible things happen to a character, it may become unbelievable.

3.2.3: Empathy

Similar to sympathy, **empathy** creates likeability by letting the reader truly understand how the character feels.

Definition: Character Empathy

Designing a character so that the reader is able to understand how the character thinks and feels on a personal level.

Quite possibly the hardest technique to perform, empathy allows the reader a glimpse into their mind and their world. Suppose you are at a young girl's birthday party. A birthday girl gingerly opens a gift from her uncle. This is the last gift to be opened. All the other gifts are a beautiful doll, a tea set, pink scarfs, and a doll house. Looking inside for a moment, she pulls out a set of car models. The other kids and parents are shocked and confused. Silent, the young girl stares at it intently. Then, the tears come. Her mother is right about to rescue the situation when the young girl breaks out into laughter. "Finally," she smiles, "Oh, and it's the BMW 3 series too!" The young girl wipes away her tears and frantically opens the package.

In this situation, the young girl doesn't do anything cool nor does she have any hardship that falls on her. Instead, we're able to somewhat understand her background. It appears that for a while, all that she has received are stereotypical girl gifts. Her uncle was

the first to break the routine. The little girl really likes cars models, and this may be the first time that she actually gets to make one. Not everyone can relate to this young girl in terms of liking cars, but we can certainly relate to finally getting to do things we want. Building that connection between reader and character through shared emotions is what empathy does best. Sympathy is similar to empathy, and often the two terms overlap. However, building an emotional connection doesn't need to involve massive degrees of sorrow. Instead, if you can convey a deep feeling through a character, the reader will feel that emotion and bond with them.

3.3: Creating Likeability

While not required, some of the best designed characters in literature are developed using both admiration, sympathy, and empathy. Obviously, this is incredibly difficult and shouldn't be done with every character that you create. However, you can admire a character while also having sympathy for them. Or you can be sympathetic towards a character while also understanding their deep complexities empathetically. Whatever you choose, don't feel like your character must fall into one of these three possibilities. They may be a combination of some, which is perfectly fine. The important thing is to create likeability, and however you successfully design it is all that matters.

In addition, it is important to create likeability *as soon as possible* when introducing characters. The faster the reader can connect to the character, the faster the reader will be interested in whatever happens. If your character isn't likeable until halfway through the story, the audience might get bored because there is no connection. Never test the reader's patience. If it takes chapters and chapters to develop likeability with the protagonist, the reader will probably never finish the story. While likeability doesn't need to be reached within the first sentence, the sooner the better.

When designing a character, consider using a question-and-answer method to map out how to make them likable. Below is an example of three possibilities for three different characters:

Admiration – Olivia	Sympathy – Ethan	Empathy – Sophia
Why should my character be admired? Olivia is the best wrestler on her team.	Why should my character have sympathy? Ethan just lost the basketball tournament.	What emotion does my character need to convey to the reader? Sophia is nervous about her exam.
Why is this trait admirable? It's a physically demanding skill and she can perform some awesome techniques.	Why does this moment deserve sympathy? Ethan and his team trained months for this moment.	Why is this emotion so important for the reader to experience? So much is riding on Sophia to pass.
How can you prove to the reader that the character is admirable? Olivia managed to suplex another opponent who is significantly larger than her.	How can you prove to the reader that the character needs sympathy? When the their team wins, Ethan falls to the floor and starts crying.	How can you show this emotion to the reader so they can experience this empathically? Sophia sweats profusely and is constantly tapping her foot. She is also breathing rapidly.

Remember that even if you have developed a beautiful setting, an engaging plot, and an elegant type of writing, it means little if the reader hates your characters. Give reasons for the reader to be attached to these characters. Otherwise, the characters' journeys, successes, and setbacks will fail to make a connection to the reader.

3.4: Check In:

Is this character likeability Admiration, Sympathy, or Empathy?

The reader feels bad that Kelsie has to rush to complete a presentation in only twenty minutes.

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Card 1 of 6



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3.5: Additional Resources

3.5.1: Character Likeability Question-And-Answer Blank Sheet

Admiration –	Sympathy –	Empathy –
Why should my character be admired?	Why should my character have sympathy?	What emotion does my character need to convey to the reader?
Why is this trait admirable?	Why does this moment deserve sympathy?	Why is this emotion so important for the reader to experience?
How can you prove to the reader that the character is admirable?	How can you prove to the reader that the character needs sympathy?	How can you show this emotion to the reader so they can experience this empathically?

3.1: Reading Exercise - Bound

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3.1: Reading Exercise - Bound



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3.1.1: Bound

By James Thibeault

If a word cloud popped over my head as I stood outside of the family restaurant, it would probably look like this:

resentment expectations loser
disappointment fast hopeless
regret failure rejection
choice frustration freedom uncertainty
pressure judging
guilt alone future nervous
limit fear

I probably do about 40 paces in front of the door, and thankfully the only person who sees me is Stu, one of our restaurant servers. Eventually, he gingerly opens the entrance door and knocks—as though he is entering my bedroom unannounced.

“Everything okay, Samira?”

“Yeah, oh, totally, just getting some steps in. You know these watches, if you don’t hit a certain amount, they just start beeping and beeping and soon it stresses you out. Then you get mad at it, but then you shouldn’t get mad at it because it’s a watch. The watch did nothing wrong! It’s not demanding that you give up your whole future because of some tradition. It just wants you to be healthy and your best self. Is that such a bad thing, Stu?”

“Uh, sure. Best to listen to Mr. Watch. Completely unrelated, do you press F5 when the screen blinks or F6?”

I feel throbbing pulsation under my eyes. My fists clench and I bite my teeth. Despite everything else, now I have to deal with this?

“You pressed F6 again, didn’t you?”

“So, that’s the bad key?”

“Yes! F5 refreshes the graphical interface. F6 is a hotkey for printing, but since our printing server broke it completely stalls the entire program. We went over this, multiple times!”

“Right ... so you can fix it.”

I look up at the sky and groan. If I still smoked cigarettes, I would take the largest drag I could and flick the butt into the street—scoring bonus points if I managed to get it into the gutter. But I finally quit because my father, my mother, my brother, and the dog

(technically by secondhand) all smoke. Every ounce of my body wanted a drag at this moment, but I wouldn't give in. I had to change. Everything had to change.

"Give me a minute, Stu. Just don't touch the computer, and write down the names of anyone reserving a table until then."

"Gotcha, you're the best, Sammy."

Breathing helps. I breathe in for four seconds, hold, and breathe out for four. Considering my lungs are that of an old man, I struggle for the first few rounds. Eventually, a cold sensation fills me. It cools down the flaming frustration that has been building inside of me. It doesn't extinguish the flame—only reducing it to a flicker. Still, the heat is manageable now. I can at least fix the system before I have to talk to my parents.

I open the front door and wander through the smokey haze. This town is notorious for ignoring smoke-free areas. Technically, our restaurant only allows smoking on the second floor, but we have never been written up by the fire marshal or the health inspector, so anyone smokes anywhere. It's one of those things where you don't notice how bad it is until you stop doing it. After a few coughs, I make my way to the glowing monitor that Stu is hovering around.

"Can you stand somewhere where you're not in throwing distance?" I ask.

"Sure thing, boss," Stu says obediently. He immediately goes to the bar and starts wiping away the crumbs on the counter.

"Wait, let me show you how to fix it."

Surprised, Stu comes back but not exactly within throwing distance.

"You want to show me?"

"Yeah, it's not that difficult."

"But your dad says any computer thingies need to go be run—"

"I don't care what *ab* says. You need to be independent, fix your own messes."

"Alright," says Stu. I guide him over to the screen and explain what the error message means. I don't bother explaining the technical issues regarding our antiquated printer servers because he just needs to learn how to do a reboot in case it freezes up. I deliberately crash the computer again, so he can fix it. After a moment, Stu presses the right keys.

"*Tuhani*, well done!"

"Wow, that's all I have to do?"

"Yup."

"So, I don't have to stress you out as much now?"

"Let's not get too excited." I smile and pat him on the back.

A large family enters through the front, so I let Stu go back to work. I walk amongst the patrons—greeting regulars and adjusting any chairs that are out of place. The rest of the family is upstairs preparing for Friday dinner. It's our tradition to eat our own food at the restaurant and make a huge show of it. My father says it's a brilliant marketing maneuver, but I think he does it so he can somehow write off a weekly dinner as a tax expense. He'll often invite friends, family, and clients to these dinners, so it's mostly a combination of business, gossip, and cumin. Thankfully, it's just the family tonight. Confronting my family is going to be relatively easier when less people are around.

I walk up the creaky stairs to the second floor. Youssef was supposed to fix the rail weeks ago but claims it's not as bad as I think it is. I tried to explain it's a lawsuit waiting to happen: a broken rail means a broken neck. Still, as I go up the stairs, I try my best not to put too much pressure on it. Tomorrow, I'll probably buy some extra dowels and drill some supports. No, I immediately tell myself, it's Youssef's responsibility, and I can't keep fixing everything. At the top of the stairs, I stop and brace myself against the rail. Thankfully, it doesn't give way. You can do this, I say to myself. I try breathing again, but the smoke is too distracting.

Upstairs is empty, except for my family at the large table in the back. In the center of the table is filled with couscous, tagine, tanjia, zaalouk, briouats, and whatever specials the head chef decided to experiment with. The whole room needs renovation—especially

air circulation—but no one seems to care. The place is old, and that’s part of the charm. At least, that’s what my family tells me. I don’t find it that charming.

“Samira, my sweet!” my father exclaims, “Come sit next to me.”

“Oh, so she has the honor?” my mother says, mockingly.

“Yes, she figured out where the missing five hundred dollars went in the spreadsheet.”

“Please don’t bring that up,” Youssef says.

“Not once did you consider adding in all the tips we give to our drivers,” my father replies in a light, scolding tone. I typically would have enjoyed this revenge, but I don’t feel anything this time around.

“It’s nothing,” I quickly add. “I added a new row called Gratuity, so it won’t happen again.”

“Well done, my sweet.”

“Did you wash your hands?” my mother asks.

“Yes, like ten minutes ago.”

“Samira! When I was your age, my parents would chastise me for not using the washing basin.”

“Well, you’re in the US now and you’ve been here for a while,” I snap. The rest of the family freezes. I didn’t expect the conversation to get this awkward this quickly, but it is probably best to get it over with.

“Is everything alright, my sweet?” my father asks, concerned.

“No,” I say. My heart pounds harder than the construction outside. For years, I’ve wanted to escape this town, and now I finally have the chance. I feel the family guilt covering and smothering me. I can’t wash it off. I chicken out.

“Sorry, I have a headache. Let’s eat.”

“I do not understand. You are never like this,” whispers my father. His eyes soften, and he looks down at his plate.

“It’s fine,” says Youssef, “she’s fine. Please, let’s eat. I need to entertain the Benalis in like forty-five minutes. Should be a good time, they always are.”

“Ah, Fatima is so lovely of a girl,” exclaims my mother, “I remember back when—”

“Samira, you will tell me what is wrong.” My father does not raise his voice. He never has to. He has always chosen his words carefully and deliberately. Each syllable has weight and by the time he finishes the sentence, I am encumbered.

I want nothing more than to run downstairs and back to the fresh air outside. For weeks, I’ve dreaded this moment, and I’ve always made excuses. But I need to respond tonight or else they would take back their offer.

“I was offered a job.” I say, eying the couscous instead of my father.

My brother erupts in laughter. “I knew it! That’s why you quit smoking. It was probably for a drug test or something.”

“Is this true?” says my mother. She puts her hand on mine.

“I don’t think they can drug test for cigarettes.”

“No, you idiot,” adds my brother. “The job offer!”

“Pay no mind to those offers,” responds my father. “I know they are tempting, but you are happy with what you have been provided.”

This sets me off. I think about the smoke-filled rooms, broken computers, busted railings, and old wood that is rebranded as *cultured*. I need something else. I need to leave.

“I start Monday.”

It does not matter that the restaurant is packed below. A deafening silence fills the room above.

“Doing what?” my brother asks, more intrigued than angry. He has a slight grin on his face.

“A manager role at Le Jardin. I’ll be responsible for overall operations as well as financial performance.”

“Le Jardin,” my mother says, feigning that she’s about to pass out. “They make terrible bread.”

“Samira, you will not leave,” orders my father, “I forbid it.”

“Oh really,” I say, standing up from the table. “Ab, you are a wonderful father, but a terrible owner. This place needs to change, and you won’t let me try.”

“Then tell me what you want changed,” my father says, his eyes hollow.

“I’ve told you for years, and the fact that you can’t remember anything says it all. I’ll write an official resignation for your records tomorrow.”

I can’t bear to look into their eyes anymore, so I rush down the stairs. Without thinking, I lean heavily on the railing. With a low groan, the railing gives way and tips slowly forward. I tumble to the ground. For a moment, I am dazed, but then Stu lightly slaps my cheek. When I come to, I see my family looking down at me from the second floor. I feel so far away from them. With no broken bones, I stand up and dash outside. Stu follows me.

In the crisp clean air, I turn to Stu and reach into his pocket. From it I pulled out his pack of smokes. I pull the butt to my lips and instinctively reach for my lighter. There is none there.

“Stu, your lighter.” I order.

“I thought you quit, I heard everything. You can’t give me orders.”

“I haven’t handed in my resignation yet, so give me your lighter or you’re fired.”

Stu laughs bitterly, “Sure thing, Sammy.”

Desperately, I grab the lighter and watch the butane fluid burn a flame. The light flickers in the wind but remains. Before I put the light to my end of the cigarette, I toss the cigarette and lighter on the ground. Am I actually going to leave my family? This restaurant? Will it even survive when I’m gone?

“You know I wouldn’t fire you, right?”

“Technically, you can’t. That’s your father’s responsibility.”

“Well, maybe I can persuade you to join Le Jardin.”

“I’ll stay here. You taught me well.”

Stu picks up his lighter, pats me on the back, and walks back into the restaurant.

Now, I am alone.

3.1.1.1: Comprehension Questions for *Bound*

Why is Samira so anxious at the beginning of the story?

- ☐ The server can't be trusted to do his job.
- ☐ Few people are going to the restaurant.
- ☐ She's nervous about confronting her family.
- ☐ The fire marshal could show up any minute.

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3.1.1.2: Questions on Character Likability in *Bound*

Having the reader experience first-hand Samira's general management of the restaurant helps improve what type of character likability?

- ☐ Admiration.
- ☐ Sympathy.
- ☐ Empathy.
- ☐ Both A and B.

✓ Check



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Writing In Different Points of View



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In this section, you'll learn how to:

- Differentiate the three main types of point of view: first person, second person, and third person.
- Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each point of view.
- Develop insights into choosing the appropriate point of view for effective storytelling and character development.

Seeing the World in a Different Perspective

One of the greatest benefits of storytelling is the ability to focus on a character's perspective. In real life, we only have one perspective: our own. However, when reading a story, we can allow ourselves to jump into the mind of another person and experience their thoughts and feelings. This can help us to look at life in a completely different way—expanding our perception of the world and the people that inhabit it. It may challenge us to rethink our own biases and preconceptions. Letting the reader see the world through the eyes of a different character can be a challenging skill to master. Therefore, let's start by understanding how and why authors use different **points of views** in their writing.

Definition: Point of View

The perspective that the reader has access to when connecting to particular characters in the story.

There are three types of point of views in writing—**first**, **second**, and **third**—that an author can use to help pick the best perspective.

First person	Second person	Third person
I went to the store	You went to the store	They went to the store

Writing in **first**, **second**, or **third** is more than just using different pronouns. Choosing a perspective drastically alters how the reader will hear and connect with the story. Each point of view has its strengths and weaknesses, and one is not exactly better than another—just different. Authors can choose to only use one point of view throughout the whole story, or they can change it up. In addition, certain authors are just more comfortable writing from one particular point of view over another. Regardless, it's a good idea to at least know the different points of view and experiment with all three.

First Person

Whenever we talk about ourselves, we often use **first person**. Using pronouns I/Me (or We/Us if are involving other people), first person represents a personal account that the character has directly experienced.

Definition: First Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented using I/Me pronouns.

This perspective is well suited for memoirs and autobiographies because the main characters in those stories are the authors themselves. Since it is their experiences, they want to provide their own personal accounts. It may look something like this:

I was born in western Pennsylvania during the early 1900s. So many changes were happening in those days. Growing up, there was only one paved road in town, and I knew very few people my own age. However, by the time I finished high school, my hometown grew larger and larger. People from New York and Boston moved their families where the land was vast and cheap. Soon more stores and roads were built, and eventually it no longer resembled the place that I remembered.

The best way to imagine the effectiveness of first person is as though the main character is right in front of you—telling their story as you, the reader, intently listen. The main character can even incorporate you into the narrative and speak to the reader:

I know that you're thinking that I should take the gentle approach. However, it is way past that. When someone goes into my house and steals things from my closet, it's personal. You need to understand the beef I have with this woman, and the nerve of her to just take what she thinks is hers. I can't just let this go. I am so furious right now! She is no longer my friend. She is my enemy, and you will understand in due time.

This person is divulging their story directly to you, and you have the privilege of hearing about their innermost thoughts, feelings, and emotions. While the other perspectives that we'll discuss can also be personal, first person generally does the best job at this because of this tête-à-tête or direct conversation. If you feel like your main character needs to tell their story directly from their mouth, consider using first person.

First Person Diary

While most first person narration is done like a conversation with the reader, it doesn't always have to be. Another way to write first person narration is to write as though it was a diary entry. While the difference is subtle, it is a clever way to get some of the benefits of third person narration while still being in first person. For example, instead of talking as though the main character is speaking to a person or an audience, they choose to tell the story to themselves. It may be written as clearly as "Dear Diary," but it doesn't have to be. This type of first person tells a story for no one, as though the diary entry has been locked away. However, the reader somehow manages to get access to it, and they are reading material that was not meant for them. This type of writing may feel distant because the main character isn't trying to connect to the reader. It may also be reflective and contemplative like the main character is sorting out their thoughts. It may read something like this:

I'm having a hard time understanding why no one will approach me. I sit at my desk and greet everyone who passes me by. There's a pleasant smile on my face, and I am sure to be the first person to comment on someone's new haircut or dress. Yet, day in and day out, I see the clicks of coworkers hanging out at lunch, chatting in their cubicles. Why won't they come talk to me? Am I that boring? Sure, I don't drink that often and usually spend the weekends petting my rabbit, but is that a social death sentence? Maybe I need to be more direct and approach these people beyond my desk. Then there's the possibility of me trying too hard, which will make everything more awkward. Maybe I should just accept that a job is a job and not a place to make new friends.

While this type of reflection and introspection can still be conveyed in regular first person, this diary style is very useful to experiment with if your character is often talking to themselves or is in deep retrospection.

Third Person

If first person is like reading a conversation that is being spoken directly to you, third person is like overhearing a conversation that you're not exactly a part of. Using the character's name, or they/them pronouns, third person is where the reader is more of an observer—watching all the events unfold in the distance.

Definition: Third Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented either through they/them pronouns or through their name.

This perspective is like someone else retelling events that occurred to a person. Imagine a person speaking around a campfire—reciting a legend of an ancient hero:

Long ago, there was a blade that was said to slide through the night. If a warrior could wield such a weapon, they could forever banish the darkness that had fallen upon the land. Aregon thought that he would be that person, the one who could hold the blade in his arms and lead his people to glory. However, while Aregon was brave, he was also brash—rushing into battle and situations without planning or thought. If he were to be successful, he must use more cunning, more wit. He would not be able to rely solely on a warrior's strength. Instead, he must change his way of thinking if he were to succeed.

This “speaker” talking to the reader is not the main character like in first person. Instead, it is someone who probably doesn't exist. The reader listens as this speaker retells how other characters interact and not their personal experiences. However, this speaker often has a special power to also get into the mind of the main character—being able to understand their thoughts and feelings. If the speaker did not have the ability to get into the mind of the character, the story might miss the character likeability discussed previously. The reader assumes that the speaker knows most of the character's inner thoughts. For example:

Harry began to sweat. He hadn't been on a date in over three years and wasn't sure if he could do it. There was something about this woman that made him want to be perfect. Nothing could go wrong, or he would lose this opportunity forever. But, of course, something would naturally go wrong, so his perfect scenario was never going to happen. Thus, he began to sweat even more. This cycle of anxiety plagued him while he sat nervously at the restaurant. Alone at the back table, he noticed that she was five minutes late. He secretly hoped that she didn't show up—avoiding Harry's predicted failure.

Third person still allows the reader to experience the character's innermost thoughts and feelings. However, there's a bit of a distance, much like first person diary. It is as though we are watching events unfold without the character knowing. Instead of experiencing the character through their eyes, it is as though we are witnessing it with front-row tickets. This perspective is useful if you want to keep some distance between the main character and the reader. First person is a direct conversation with the reader, while third is more of a passive conversation.

Third Person Open

Another useful benefit about third person is its ability to not focus on just one character. First person is told through one person's view—thus only their perspective is told throughout. Third person can also do this, focusing entirely on the perspective of just one character, and this is called **third person closed**.

Definition: Third Person Closed

Using third person to only focus on one character throughout the story.

This closed perspective is generally used in most storytelling, but because the speaker is not “locked” to one perspective, they could technically float around—jumping in and out of different characters like a possessive ghost. Moving from one character to another character is called **third person open**.

Definition: Third Person Open

Using third person to move through multiple characters throughout the story.

Open perspective is sometimes called *omniscient*, meaning that the speaker “knows all.” The speaker's ability allows them to know what all the characters are thinking:

Marrick and Tom sat across from one another—each waiting for the other person to speak. Marrick refused to be the one to break. After all, he was not the one who got them into detention. The only thing that Marrick wanted to do was play a harmless prank on Miss Brevel. It was Tom who decided to crank up the severity of the issue. Marrick wouldn't rat out his friend, but he at least wanted an apology. Meanwhile, Tom was waiting for an apology. He couldn't believe that Marrick

didn't watch Tom's back when they went into the teacher's lounge. The plan was perfect, and Tom would have been a legend for exploding the faculty fridge. However, Marrick kept begging Tom to stop and didn't pay attention to the hallway. Marrick had one job and failed it spectacularly.

In this open perspective, there are two characters present, but the speaker can weave through both of them naturally. This type of perspective is very useful if the story involves multiple characters with innermost thoughts that should be explored. However, writing multiple points of perspectives is challenging, so beginner writers should first focus on having their whole narrative in one perspective first and maybe expand to multiple perspectives after gaining some practice.

Second Person

Second person is perhaps the more unconventional of the perspectives and is the least used in storytelling. Rather than have the main character or a speaker tell the story, it is the reader themselves who are narrating the events:

Definition: Second Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented either through *you* pronouns or through the imperative tone.

This perspective is difficult to explain because it makes little sense logically. Using **you** as the character, the reader of the novel is the main character. Rather than hearing about the story through the main character or a speaker, the events unfold due to the reader's actions—even if the reader never experienced them:

You head into the convenience store to grab some money out of the ATM. Apparently, the restaurant that you were previously at does not allow credit cards and only accepts cash. There were no signs explaining this, and who still carries around cash anyway? You had to leave your driver's license with the waitress while you awkwardly walked across the street to the run-down shop that had a half-melted ATM that charges an additional \$3.50 just to use it. The man at the counter greets you, but you ignore him—annoyed at the whole situation.

Most people reading this did not experience the situation above. However, second person perspective assumes that the reader did partake in these events. In a way, second person works very similarly to role-playing games, where the participant imagines they are someone else going on an adventure. Another way to think about this is to assume that you have lost all memory and someone else is explaining what happened previously to you. The key is to not take the perspective literally; **you** are just another fictional character in the narrative.

This type of perspective is not common, and there are few books that are written entirely in this perspective. Rather, second person is very effective in short bursts—especially when the writer of the main character needs to address the reader directly:

No one should be afraid to seek help. If you feel like the situation is too complicated and overwhelming, it is okay to reach out and find a friend, a loved one, or a professional to talk to. Remember that you do not have to solve every problem on your own, and that there are others who can help with your burdens.

Second Person Imperative

Without going too much into grammar, there is a way to write entirely in second person without ever using **you**. The method to do this is through imperative tone.

Definition: Imperative Tone

A type of second person perspective in which the reader is given commands with a verb in its infinitive state.

Imperative tone relies on leading with an infinitive state of a verb. An infinitive is the verb in its natural state, without tacking on something like an -ed or -ing to the end of the word.

Infinitive Verb	A Verb With a Suffix
Reach	Reaching
Jump	Jumped
Sneeze	Sneezes

If you lead your sentence with an infinitive verb, it naturally becomes a command. If we write “Jump into the water,” it is directed at the reader. Technically, the sentence is really conveying “*You need to jump into the water.*” In this case, writing in the imperative tone hides **you** in the sentence. The imperative tone is more direct towards the reader and commands them far more aggressively:

Break through the chains that have been shackling your thoughts. Feel the freedom of clarity by focusing the mind. Breathe calmly in through your nose and out through your mouth. Repeat this sensation until your muscles relax. Find peace at this moment.

Each of those sentences were lead with an infinitive verb and created the imperative tone. This alternative way to write second person can be weaved with regular second person:

You are walking on the hot sands of the beach. The sun’s hot rays burn you. However, you must continue to travel. Endure the heat and continue your journey. Ignore the pain and focus on reaching your destination.

Check In: First, Second, or Third?

He went to the store.

☐ First

☐ Second

☐ Third

☒
☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

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4.1: Reading Exercise - Perspectives

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4.1: Reading Exercise - Perspectives



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Perspectives

General Report

At approximately 9 AM, three individuals were arrested after a discussion outside of Brooks Park that led to a violent altercation with a goose, also known as “Golden Day” in the community. Earl Deven, the leader of the group and operation, believed this would be an easy job, as holding up feathers must be easier than holding up banks. However, perfect plans are only perfect in theory. Once a mission goes live, a multitude of factors can impede even the most well-designed operations. Such is the case with Golden Day.

Deven’s two assistants, Jasmine Rodrigo and Minty Patel, were hesitant to steal a goose in the middle of the park. 9 AM was still a busy time for park dwellers to relax and enjoy the grass. The assistants also had no experience capturing birds. Overall, Jasmine and Minty were not Deven’s first picks, but with his primary movers currently in prison, he had to settle with whomever was available and would work for cheap.

Golden Day, the goose with the gold stripe down its spine, was known to brighten up the community’s day when it splashed around the cool clear waters during the early fall months—thus earning its name. Legend has it that one daring child managed to splash a streak of gold paint on the goose before sprinting away in fear. While the paint detail is certainly untrue, Golden Day’s terrifying aggression when bothered did have onlookers run away if they ventured too close to the bird. Its rare plumage had been photographed by thousands of spectators and was a bit of an anomaly.

While Deven refused to speak to the authorities, his two assistants to the crime summarized the event to the best of their abilities. Jasmine Rodrigo agreed to offer her personal narrative of the events while Minty Patel, due to his muteness, relied on his lawyer to draft a written response. Both accounts are bizarre and neither individual seems to realize that writing a summary of events in a casual format could be troublesome in the court of law. However, both assistants seemed unbothered by future events and were more interested in retelling what they believed was an entertaining story. Despite these two accounts, some details remain a mystery, and further investigations must be undertaken regarding the whereabouts of Deven and Golden Day.

Jasmine’s Account

The only bird I like is breaded, fried, and dipped in ketchup. I never worked in bird abduction before, I didn’t even know that was a thing. Most of my jobs involve sweet-talking some guard, manager, or finance bro with my dolled-up make-up kit and superpower ability to tolerate whatever they brag about to me. I’ve always been a distraction, never the one to get their hands dirty. In fact, after any of my jobs, I always make sure to aggressively hand sanitize and take two showers. It’s important to scrub off anything related to a job, and it’s better to be safe than sorry.

When Deven calls me up, I’m already pulling out the kit in the closet, but then he tells me we’re going to steal a goose, or a duck, or a pheasant—I have no idea what that thing was. He says something about it being a “collector’s item” and that some particular

people would love to have it in their own private pond. Okay, I think, so what does this have to do with me? Am I going to put on the charm to a bird? Bother it long enough so someone can put a net over it? He says it wasn't like that, and all I had to do was hold a bag and Minty would take care of the rest.

I swore to myself that I would never do another job with Minty. Nothing wrong with that guy, seems like a nice chap. But some folks will not follow directions. Let me just say that one time, Minty was told to do A, and he decides he would rather do B. Just because. All of us had to make a run for it. I know Deven is desperate if he's calling Minty for help and me as bag girl. But work's been slow lately and nabbing a bird didn't seem that challenging. Well, I was completely wrong.

So, we were all supposed to meet up at the park at like 8 in the morning. You see all these fancy-pants athletes stretching and running in their expensive track suits. If it wasn't for this job, I would be still asleep. Don't bother me until 10, that's why I always say. Anyway, ten minutes before 9, I'm on my second coffee, regretting that I chose to wear a skirt in this weather—when Minty comes down the path with a box of cereal. Minty's smiling and taps his chest, which is his way to say that he's glad to see me. I ask about the cereal, but before he can reply, Deven sneaks up from behind and spooks me. I jump and almost pop and elbow to his face. Of course, he's laughing away and throws me a burlap bag. "Ready?" he says and makes his way to the pond.

Minty and Deven make their way to the pond, and I'm just staring at them with a bag in my hand. What's the plan? Yeah, grab the duck-thing, but how? Minty turns back to me and beckons me over with his cereal box hand. Cautiously, I go over to the water, and before I know it, Minty opens the box. This goose from hell goes nuts. It flaps its wings and splashes water everywhere to get closer to that cardboard. I never thought a bird could be so intimidating, so I'm just standing there in shock. At this point the bird is out of the water and in the grass—only a few feet from Minty and Deven. I'm thinking that this might not be so difficult, but then Minty throws the box right at me. The last thing I remember is the bird flapping its wings, feathers blocking out the sky, and going right for my face.

Minty's Account

Minty is a man who goes on instinct. He doesn't spend his time on logic and more on what his gut feels. When Deven texted him regarding a new job, his brain told him that it was a bad idea. Who steals a goose? However, his gut told him that whether or not this job was successful, it was going to be an interesting story, nevertheless. Sure enough, he was right.

After Minty texted back that he was available, Deven told him the details and wrote in all caps: BRING CRUNCHY COCA'S CEREAL. The boss is the boss, he thinks to himself, and walked on down to the convenience store before heading to the park. At his age, doing work like this was getting riskier and riskier, but what was his alternative? A gray-haired man working fast food wasn't going to pay the bills, and he can't exactly go back to being an accountant. He's probably still blackballed from any firm in the city. It's not his fault that his gut told him to double check the spreadsheet. How would he know that the higher ups were pulling a fast one? Sure, his parents are disappointed with their crooked son, but there're crooks everywhere—no matter what building they work at!

At the park, Minty sees Jasmine shivering in her skirt. She's probably still sore at him for ruining that one job. Minty was told to use a crowbar on the cash register, but his gut told him to blow it up instead. There was no way that the new register would break that easily, so he set his pocket charges and told everyone to duck. Well, they got the money in the end. Some of them couldn't escape the cops, but that's part of the job.

Minty tapped his chest to Jasmine as a way to apologize for the last time they worked together. She seems to accept the apology and is more confused about the box of cereal. Apparently, Deven found out that this bird belongs to a rich breeder. It escaped a few months ago but was living in captivity for most of its life. Its favorite snack was this cereal, and Minty realizes that Jasmine has no idea about the plan. Did Deven not clue her in on what was about to happen? Minty was about to text the details to Jasmine when Deven jumped her from behind. Deven throws her a bag and points to Minty to get moving.

Near the water, Deven points to Minty to open the box. Just opening the tab gets the bird interested. At this moment, Minty's gut is telling him that his bird will come at him at full force just to get this chocolatey treat. He's too old to get assaulted by a goose, so he looks around and sees Jasmine holding the bag. Perhaps if he can throw the box at the last minute, it will go right into the bag and save everyone the trouble. As the goose is flapping its wings and accelerating, Minty tosses the box to Jasmine. With a perfect shot, Minty throws it directly inside the bag. However, Jasmine panics and raises her hands. Now the goose flies right at her head and knocks her out.

Deven glares at Minty, but it is not his fault that Jasmine got so startled. Cautiously, Deven approaches the bird as it is digging through the burlap bag. Lots of voices are talking around Minty, and he's a bit concerned about all the attention. "That man's trying to steal Golden Day!" a little boy shouted. The tiny child points directly at Minty. Looking around, Minty notices how large of a gathering there is. Dozens of mothers, children, and walkers are starting to wonder what the commotion is. Minty points at Deven while he wrestles with the burlap bag. Hoping that everyone will assume he's not in on it, Minty slowly backs into the crowd while keeping his finger on the bird napper. However, the little boy isn't fooled. "This one threw Crunchy Coca at Golden Day—he's a bad man!" With that, Minty ran. He only got a few yards before two patrolmen stopped him.

You are a magnificent creature. A feathered beauty with immaculate golden hues. Once, there were cool waters and peace. Then, people arrived and admired you in the middle of the lake. On the water, a rope snared you and you could not escape—even with your beautiful wings. For years, you were held in the confines of a large cage—only to be freed periodically by the whims of your master. How he gawked at you, gesturing to his guests about his living trophy. All you could do was swim in small circles, waiting for a moment to escape.

Freedom came when the cage opened. People with gloves poked and prodded you. They held you down so you could not fly. Then you saw a shiny object, sharp and precise. You were unsure of what it was, but you knew that it would be inflicted on yourself. With hidden strength, you flap your wings and startle the people. Quickly, you dash into the air. The room was sterile, with concrete walls, but high above you see an opening. It is small, but you are just small enough to fit through. You feel the cool air and it reminds you of the past, of waters and peace.

Flying around, you see other concrete wonders. Nothing reminds you of the past, until you see a stretch of green and water below. You gracefully land and see others like you. They are not as pristine, but you gladly welcome any comradery after years of isolation. What amazes you is how these others welcome the people. They swim up to them and beg for food. Content, they stay and swim. Perhaps you too will stay for a while.

Peace had finally come. However, there came a man who held a box. You remember the box, the food that was given to you. It was not the past, a plant from the waters. Instead, it was rough and hollow. No, you would not go back to these people. They tricked you before, so you will trick them. Let them believe you will come back. Swim up to them and wait for the moment to strike. Swiftly, you dive at one, who falls to the ground immediately. Good. Another ran. The only one left stared in horror. You flap your wings and show off your golden hue to the other people. You advance, and the man retreats bizarrely into the water. The people clap for you. They cheer.

You are Golden Day, and you are finally free.

Comprehension Questions for *Perspectives*

Why is the goose called Golden Day?

- ☐ The goose is known for its good luck.
- ☐ It has a golden stripe on its back
- ☐ Its body is yellow and round like the sun.
- ☐ The goose is worth a lot of money.

✓ Check



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Questions on Points of View for *Perspectives*

Which point of view is used in Jasmine's account of the goose incident?

- ☐ First person.
- ☐ Second person.
- ☐ Third person closed.
- ☐ Third person open.

✓ Check



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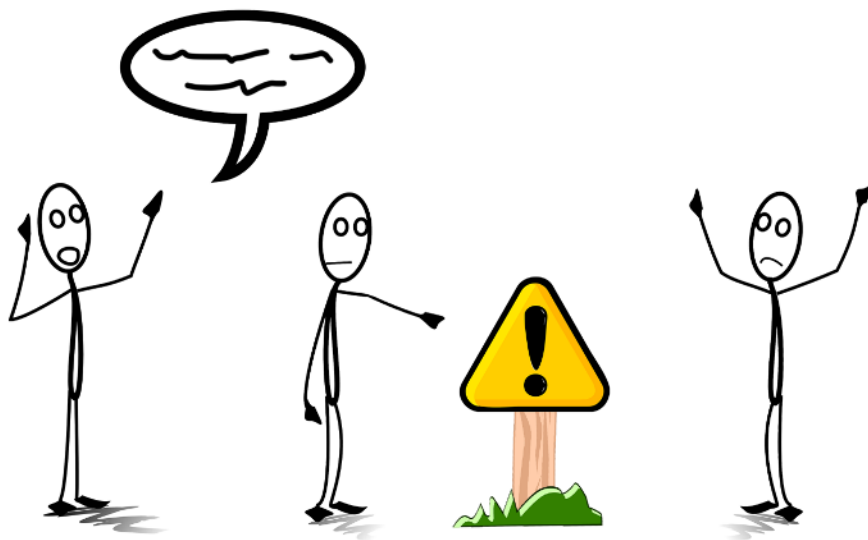
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Show vs. Tell



Learning Objectives

- Understand the differences between Show and Tell as narrative techniques.
- Recognize the benefits and drawbacks of each Show and Tell.
- Effectively blend Show and Tell within a single narrative.

5.1: Ying and Yang



Much like Show and Tell, Yin and Yang are two opposing forces that also work together to create harmony.

When writing a story, there is a delicate balance between two forces: Show and Tell. These forces, like Ying and Yang, will constantly fight for control of the narrative. You'll often hear critics say "Show don't Tell," but that mistakenly ignores that all stories have a mixture of the two. It is unlikely that a story will have a perfect split between Show and Tell. Rather, a story may be more reliant on Tell and less on Show or vice versa. The problem occurs when the author fails to strike a balance that best fits the narrative of the story. Rather than being critical of one vs. the other, it is instead important to look at the strength and weakness of both forces and determine how best to implement them into your narrative.

5.2: Writing with Tell

When you "Tell" in a story, you are summarizing or narrating events straightforwardly. The author might be providing all the essential details that need to be told or simply explaining the exact emotions the characters are feeling.

 Definition: Tell

Providing direct information to the reader rather than having them infer the information on their own.

5.2.1: The Benefits of Tell

Tell is very effective at being direct. If you need to explain a setting quickly, even in one sentence, Tell can be very helpful:

The condo is on the 34th floor in Chicago. It was owned by the crime lord, but since his arrest last year, it has recently been sold. Even though it sold for way above the asking price, the new owner decided to turn it into a mini museum. The owner knew he had a golden opportunity and decided to capitalize on his fortune. While he was nervous about potentially angering the crime syndicate, it was realized that there was nothing even remotely incriminating about the condo itself. With permission from the building, he opened the condo for select viewing and was immensely pleased with the turnout.

This paragraph above provided a ton of information regarding the condo, its history, and the owner's motivation. Compacted into that paragraph are many important details that are needed by the reader. If the story started out with the owner welcoming people into the condo, it would be confusing:

"Welcome!" the owner shouted. "Come see where the crime lord lives." Dozens of people waited outside of the condo, their wallets open, waiting to get a peek inside.

While the section above is not a bad section, it makes little sense without context. Tell is a great way to provide that information quickly so the audience does not have to piece together what is happening themselves. In fact, Tell is very useful at the beginning of a story or a particular new section of a story so the reader can understand the situation as soon as possible. This type of technique is called **exposition**, and it is useful if the reader needs to understand all the beginning details of an event in a condensed version.

 Definition: Exposition

A **Tell** technique that explains the background information about the setting, characters, and problem of a story.

The paragraph below provides enough **exposition** for the reader to understand the situation and the immediate problem:

The chief officer spoke to the people crowded in the office room. "I understand you are all nervous," said the officer calmly. "But we need to have your patience while we sort this issue out. We received a report that one of the rooms may have a chemical substance that was not stored properly. If people are exposed to the chemical, it may cause respiratory problems. Therefore, until the cleanup team arrives, everyone is to stay put for their safety."

Overall, Tell is like an instruction manual for a complicated piece of furniture that requires assembly. While it is possible for the person to figure out how to piece everything together on their own, it is significantly easier if they are just told how to do it.

5.2.2: The Drawbacks of Tell

At the same time, telling the reader everything about the story can be a problem. When you overdo exposition, or tell too much of a situation, it leaves little for the reader to discover on their own:

There were three doors that Michael could choose. Michael was nervous and didn't know which one to pick. He thought about all of the possibilities for a long time. Then, he decided on an answer. He chose the first door. It was the wrong choice.

This section tells the reader exactly what Michael is thinking as well as the result of the wrong decision. Not everything has to be explicitly explained to the reader. Instead, it can be written not so blatantly, so the reader needs to figure out what is going on. For example, *Michael was nervous* is written entirely in Tell, but if we change it to *Sweat drips down Michael's face*, it doesn't tell the

reader that he is nervous, but the reader can figure out what emotion he is experiencing. The same can be done with *It was the wrong choice*. Writing instead, *When he opened the door, a terrible sound emanated from the darkness*, implies that Michael made some sort of error. These alternatives, written in **Show**, allow the reader to think instead of being told.

5.3: Writing With Show

When you write in Show, you are asking the reader to discern what is happening in the moment.

Definition: Show

Providing indirect information so the reader must piece together what the author is trying to convey.

The main criticism with Tell is it can feel too commanding if overdone. Sometimes, the reader does not want to be told what the character is feeling, but instead wants to experience it firsthand. It is one thing to tell that a character is walking in a bad neighborhood, but it is another experience when the reader is shown it is a bad neighborhood.

5.3.1: The Benefits of Show

Compare the two sentences below:

- It was a bad neighborhood.
- The neighborhood was covered in junk and squatters claimed abandoned homes.

The first sentence is in Tell and makes it clear that it is a bad neighborhood. However, what really does “bad” mean? We like to assume that everyone understands “bad,” but it is a subjective term that could be interpreted in a variety of ways. The second sentence uses Show to demonstrate why it is bad without explicitly saying it. The amount of junk and abandoned houses helps the reader piece together that there were probably no taxes to clean the streets and people could no longer afford to live in the area. More importantly, the reader can visualize the scene more clearly than “bad.” Show, quite literally, shows what is being described—allowing the reader to paint a mental image in their head. While there are times to simply say that a character is happy or sad, it is also important to demonstrate why or how the character is sad through Show:

Tell	Show
The man is happy.	The man jumped up and down and laughed.
The woman is sad.	The woman tucked her knees together and sobbed.
The dog is confused.	The dog tilted his head and stopped wagging his tail.

Generally, humans are visual learners, and being able to visualize something helps them understand the situation much better. It can be one thing to explain that a situation is dangerous, but for better retention, it will be far more memorable for the author to show why it is dangerous. Rather than having a character say, “The situation in the building is dangerous,” try showing the danger by writing something like, “An explosion erupted from inside the building—causing all the outsiders to back up for safety.” Give the reader a chance to experience the moment rather than just telling them what happened.

5.3.2: The Drawbacks of Show

Because Show is a passive technique where the reader needs to piece together what happened, you may not convey the moment correctly through Show. For example:

When the air conditioner turned on, the man crossed his arms and huffed.

What is being conveyed here? Does it mean that the man is cold and that’s why he’s crossing his arms and huffing? Could it mean that he never wanted the air conditioner on in the first place, and he’s crossing his arms in frustration? Either option could be correct since the author did not directly explain what the man’s disposition is. Sometimes, a character’s emotions or feelings are too complex for the reader to figure out on their own. Showing that a character has mixed emotions about walking their dog in the rain

is hard to pull off. Though it is possible to show that sentiment, it will probably take several sentences and will be rather wordy. Instead, writing, “Susan had mixed feelings about walking her dog in the rain,” is perfectly fine. Not everything should be figured out by the reader. Too much reliance on Show can cause the reader to be irritable if they are not sure exactly what is happening. Forcing the reader to “figure it out” for everything can be mentally taxing and they could ultimately misinterpret what the author intended.

5.4: Weaving Show and Tell

The phrases “Show, don’t Tell” and “Show vs. Tell” can be misleading because both Show and Tell should be working together, not against. Having a story slant aggressively to either Show or Tell will cause problems with the narrative, so striking a balance is key. Take, for example, this scene:

Outside, the lawn was an immaculate green. Fred had been working on cultivating a perfect lawn for almost a decade and during the spring, when the heavy rains fell, what remained was a soil-soaked ground ripe for fresh grass. For years, he tried to grow a backyard that was identical to his father’s—his childhood home. Unfortunately, he could never quite get it right. Yet, on that spring morning, when the dew still dangled on the blades, Fred saw it. Tears ran down Fred’s face. He struggled to breathe. He imagined his father standing next to him, a callous farmer’s hand fondly patting his son’s back.

The scene above blends in both Show and Tell when appropriate. The last three sentences are mainly in Show while the rest of the paragraph is in Tell. It is not so much having a 50/50 combination of Show and Tell but leveling out the narrative depending on the circumstances. Think of balancing a seesaw: it would probably take one child to balance another child, but it may take three children to balance one adult. Sometimes, a scene may only require a bit of Tell with a heavy dose of Show. In some cases, like the example above, only a sentence or two of Show is required. There is no exact formula for what is appropriate. After all, writing is more of an art than a science, and it is up to the author to feel and seek the balance.



Balancing does not always mean being equal.

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5.5: Check In: Show or Tell?

Is this statement written in Show or Tell?

Tiffany hated the idea of leaving.

Turn

Card 1 of 8



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[5.1: Reading Exercise – The Gifts of the Warriors](#)

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5.1: Reading Exercise – The Gifts of the Warriors



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5.1.1: The Gifts of the Warriors

By James Thibeault

Several warriors made camp just as the stars above were beginning to shine. Because the enemy was located somewhere on the other side of the valley, fires were to be kept low—with only embers faintly glowing. Though it was difficult to mask the impending army that was to be invading in the morning, the captain ordered to be as much cloaked as possible. The warriors obliged, even if they were chilled by the night air.

One gray warrior, known as Dead Eyes, rested his shield and lance by the dull fire. The others instantly made room for him on the log that they hauled from the woods. It was too damp to sit on the soil, but many warriors still sat anyway. Only three of them had the privilege to be sitting on a log, and one even gave up their spot so that Dead Eyes could sit. This angered one particular warrior, known as Sharp Beak, who voiced his concern.

“We are to tolerate this?” he said in whispered tones.

The other warriors did not address his concerns. Instead, they stared up and looked at the stars. Sharp Beak stood up and walked over to the ones on the log.

“Comrades, tell me, why are only these few the ones who will sit? We have all marched through swamps, forests, and sand. Yet when it comes to the night, these are the few who are pampered with sturdy spots. Each night, I must settle amongst the snakes and scorpions. Tell me, why can I not sit?”

Silence and darkness blanketed the conversation. No one spoke. Before Sharp Beak could speak, one of the men on the log answered his query.

“I, Bringer of Stone, have earned my spot here. You, Sharp Beak, have only been on a few campaigns and do not deserve my attention.”

Sharp Beak roared in laughter, but then he immediately hushed himself. He looked far away to see if anything stirred from the captain’s tent. Once he noticed that none of the flaps had moved, he scoffed at Bringer of Stone’s words.

“I, Sharp Beak, have fought well throughout this journey. For not one fool has bested me in combat.”

“It only takes one fool,” whispered a voice in the dark.

Sharp Beak ignored the comment and inched closer to Bringer of Stone.

“Ah, so you have bested more fools than me? But if our opponents are all fools, this does not impress me. Why do you deserve this log?”

Annoyed, Bringer of Stone stood up and approached Sharp Beak. Sharp Beak sized up the man and was ready for a brawl. However, Bringer of Stone walked past him and knelt down to the embers. After a moment, he delicately picked one glowing

ember the size of an eye and grasped it in his hands. Sharp Beak smelt burning flesh, but Bringer of Stone kept his eyes steady on the ember in his hand. Bringer of Stone breathed out then crushed the ember by making a fist. He did not wince nor emit a cry. When he released his hand, his palm was red and swollen. Bringer of Stone showed the palm to Sharp Beak then returned to his bench.

“Alright, you have earned your spot on the log, but these two must not have the same tolerance as you,” proclaimed Sharp Beak. “Are all these men on this log able to endure flames through callouses? Is this the metric in which we determine the right to sit?”

Sharp Beak approached the second man on the log. Before Sharp Beak had a chance to speak, he was interrupted, “I am Soft Feathers.” Sharp Beak laughed, but Soft Feathers was unamused. “Perhaps your beak may try to peck through my softness?”

Soft Feathers eyed the collection of swords that were properly sheathed. Sharp Beak looked at them, and it took him a moment to realize what Soft Feathers wanted. Afraid to look weak, Sharp Beak unsheathed one of the swords and pointed it at Soft Feathers. “Go on,” said Soft Feathers, “earn your spot to sit.” Angry, Sharp Beak slashed at his opponent’s head. Like playing with a child, Soft Feathers flew around the blade as though a gust appeared. Wherever Sharp Beak struck, Soft Feathers glided to another location. The warriors began to laugh, prompting Sharp Beak to swing with pure ferocity. Still, Soft Feathers remained untensed and floated around the fire like the ashes in the air. Finally, exhausted, Sharp Beak conceded and sheathed the blade.

“Fine,” Sharp Beak declared. “Some of these warriors have unmatched strength and skill. I will admit when I am bested, but *this* warrior!” He pointed to the elderly man on the log. “I cannot fathom his skill. He should not be guaranteed a spot because he has seen more moons than me. Why is he called Dead Eyes? Is it because he has died already, and it is merely a corpse we prompt up for laughs?” Sharp Beak expected laughter, perhaps even some smirks. However, none were amused. He seemed to have triggered a different emotion from the men. Even Soft Feathers and Bringer of Stone averted their gaze. “Ah,” said Sharp Beak, “I have found the fools. They are among us! You take pity on the old. Well, will the ones we fight at dawn take pity! I certainly do not. Come, Dead Eyes, give up your seat to the ones who are still living.”

Dead Eyes wearily rose. He braced an arm on Bringer of Stone to rise. Bringer of Stone obliged and assisted Dead Eyes’ ascension. Sharp Beak, with a face full of victory, brushed off his legs and was prepared to sit on the log with his comrades. However, the boney hand of Dead Eyes touched Sharp Beak. As pale as the moon, the hand seemed to dig through Sharp Beak’s skin and bone—touching his mind and soul. Sharp Beak fell to his knees, his eyes wide with horror. He clung tightly to Dead Eyes’s boney hand—desperately trying to pry it free. However, Dead Eyes continued to look at Sharp Beak passively, as though Dead Eyes was simply lost in thought. Then, Sharp Beak screamed—startling the warriors as well as the camp. Warriors from different fires came to aid but stood in awe as they watched Dead Eyes. No one intervened, not even the captain who eventually arrived. Finally, Dead Eyes removed his hand, and hobbled back to the log. Soft Feathers and Bringer of Stone eased him down on the log.

The captain signaled his men to return to their posts. Then, he approached Sharp Beak who was still silently shaking.

“He has seen what others care not. He has seen what others dare not. A warrior he is. Rest, young one, you received a gift this evening.”

With that, the captain walked away. The fires would continue to lightly glow. Darkness would endure until it could not. Then, the light would signal the dawn of battle.

5.1.1.1: Comprehension Questions for *The Gifts of the Warriors*

Sharp Beak was initially upset because:

- ☐ He had to sit on the ground while others sat on a log.
- ☐ The log was too damp to sit on.
- ☐ He didn't like the nicknames of the other warriors.
- ☐ His feet were tired from marching.

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5.1.1.2: Questions on Show vs Tell for *The Gifts of the Warriors*

The opening paragraph is mostly written in:

- ☐ Exposition.
- ☐ Tell.
- ☐ Show.
- ☐ Both A and C.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Developing Character Arcs

Learning Objectives

- Understand the importance of developing character arcs for characters' personalities.
- Recognize how the Dawn, Dusk, and High Noon traits contribute to designing a character arc.
- Map out a character's transformation from beginning to end.

6.1: Change is Constant

Nothing stays the same. Life and death are a never-ending cycle, and the universe is constantly expanding. The idea of something being “static” is a misconception, as everything is moving and evolving from one state to the next. However, in some cases, the progression is so minor or indiscernible that we tend to believe it is motionless when that is not the case. In terms of characters and people, we sometimes believe that certain individuals have remained the same their whole lives, but that is not true. People, like all things in the universe, are constantly changing—being big or small. As an author, it is important to have your characters change throughout your story, but to do it in a way that seems natural.

6.2: Dawn and Dusk

As mentioned in [Basic Format](#), the most important character that experiences change is the Protagonist. If that particular character does not change, the static appearance will make the audience bored and disappointed. When I mentioned that in the Middle of the story that Change should occur directly in the Middle, I was being a bit misleading. Instead, because characters are constantly changing, it should be a gradual progression instead of an instant flip. The best way to describe this is called a Character Arc:

Definition: Character Arc

The gradual change of a character that occurs from the Beginning and concludes at the End.



A character should transform, just like how the day moves from dawn to dusk.

Think of a character arc as the cycle from day to night. Daytime does not occur automatically. Instead, the sun rises gradually with gentle rays of dawn, shines brightly during the day, and dusk slowly invites darkness until the world becomes black. Imagine your characters like the arc of the sun—at first their personalities are in their “Dawn” stage, but by the end they have entered their “Dusk” stage.

Definition: Dawn Traits

The personality traits of a character toward the beginning of the story.

Definition: Dusk Traits

The personality traits of a character toward the end of the story.

Take for example the character's arc in this paragraph:

Even though Canary was jamming to her playlist on her headphones, she still managed to hear the audible ding alerting her that she had an email. She dialed down the music and clicked on her email tab. Canary froze when she saw the message that popped up on her screen. She stared at the computer screen—focusing intently on the bold, unread message. It was from her mother with the subject title: We Need To Talk. She dragged her mouse to the trash icon and hovered her finger over the left button. No, she could not come back into her life. It was over. No forgiveness should be given to this monster. However, instead of clicking the mouse, Canary lifted her hand and pounded on the desk instead. Her body tensed, and all she wanted to do was break everything around her—just like her mother had done. Canary grabbed the tiny trash barrel next to her desk and threw it across the room. The barrel made a loud sound but did not dent the wall. This angered Canary even more, so she grabbed her stapler and chucked it. The stapler dented the drywall, but she needed something larger to destroy it. She lifted her wooden chair and threw it with all her might. The drywall exploded, leaving behind dust and exposed insulation. She screamed.

While developing character arcs make far more sense in long-term creative writing, in this paragraph we witnessed the character transition from relaxed at the beginning to completely unhinged at the end. If we continue with the sun example, the Dawn of her personality is relaxed and calm, but as the story progresses, she gradually becomes more and more stressed. The Dusk of her personality is a wild and dangerous persona who clearly has some unresolved issues regarding her mother. While designing characters, try imagining how they will evolve, what are their Dawn traits at the beginning and what might be their Dusk traits at the end. Here is a breakdown sheet that may help:

Character Name	Dawn Trait	Dusk Trait
Santiago	Uncomfortable speaking at parties and often hides in the crowd.	Becomes more sociable and confident when interacting with strangers.
Zara	Disinterested in politics and often changes the topic whenever controversial issues are discussed.	Proactive and concerned citizen who runs for a position in her local government.
Michelle	Overly generous and always wants to see the good in people.	Less open toward strangers and is defensive when in public.

Character arcs do not need to go from Bad to Good or Good to Bad. Instead, they are a transition from one personality, trait, or viewpoint to another. Instead of focusing on Good or Bad, focus on determining whether this transition is realistic and suitable for the character that you designed.

6.3: Creating a Catalyst

People rarely change overnight. Change occurs gradually and it may not be noticeable in a person until much time has passed. Continuing with the Dawn/Dusk analogy, if you took two pictures of your backyard, one at 10:00 AM and another at 10:30 AM, would anyone be able to spot the difference in time? Probably not. However, if you took a picture at 10:00 AM and then another at 7:00 PM, the differences would be quite noticeable. Think of your character arcs as people who transition so slightly that it may not be noticeable from page to page, but it is somewhat evident from chapter to chapter, and it is obvious from beginning to end.

But how do we start changing a character? What motivates a character to start changing in the first place? To start, we need to develop a **catalyst** for the character:

Definition: Catalyst

A significant event or moment that directly impacts the character—resulting in some sort of change.

When discussing [The Middle in Basic Format](#), we talked about [The Problem](#), which is just another way to say a catalyst for the protagonist. In the story example, Susie is dared by her friends to explore the barn. That is a catalyst because it is a movement that forces that character to change throughout the story. At the beginning, Susie is scared and timid, but at the end of the story, she has conquered her fears and climbed to the top of the loft. Earlier in this section, we focused on Canary undergoing a significant transformation from calm to frantic. What triggered the change? The catalyst was receiving the email from her mother.

Read the example below and try to spot what the catalyst is for Marcus:

Marcus sat down on his desk, raised his arms, and gave himself a deep stretch. Everyone else in the classroom was scrambling to cram any last-minute information before the exam. He tried not to laugh. Everyone was taking this way too seriously. After all, didn't Ms. Stewart say that it was only 5% of their grade? Even if Marcus scored a perfect zero, that would mean he would still get a 95% in the class. That's still an A. He'd ended up playing video games late into the night instead. Sure, he was still a bit groggy, but with such little consequences, it didn't matter.

"All right everyone," said Ms. Stewart, "you have fifty minutes to complete the exam. Good luck, and remember this is twenty percent of your grade, so take your time and double check everything."

A tinge of panic rose inside Marcus. He calmly raised his hand.

"Ms. Stewart, I thought you said this was five percent of our grade."

The class laughed, and Ms. Stewart gave him a smirk.

"Nice try, Marcus. But you know that was for class participation."

Marcus weakly smiled back and tensed tightly on his pencil.

The catalyst is Ms. Stewart clarifying that class participation was 5%, which triggers a change in Marcus. In this example, Marcus is calm and cocky. He doesn't study the night before because he's a straight A student and realized that mathematically it's irrelevant whether he does well or not. However, the moment he realizes that the class participation was 5% and not the exam, change begins. It's not a sudden shift in mood, but if this story were to continue, it's likely that Marcus would become more and more panicked as the exam continued—being woefully unprepared for the exam.

Building off of the character arc chart we made previously, we can add a new section that explains the catalyst:

Character Name	Dawn Trait	Dusk Trait	Catalyst
Santiago	Uncomfortable speaking at parties and often hides in the crowd.	Becomes more sociable and confident when interacting with strangers.	Joins a tabletop gaming community and develops confidence through a fictional character.
Zara	Disinterested in politics and often changes the topic whenever controversial issues are discussed.	Proactive and concerned citizen who runs for a position in her local government.	Directly impacted by programs that were cut by the government and struggles financially with these new hardships.
Michelle	Overly generous and always wants to see the good in people.	Less open towards strangers and is defensive when in public.	Was robbed one night and never managed to bring the person to justice.

6.4: Reaching High Noon

In Basic Format, we mentioned how somewhere around the half-way point of the story, the protagonist should experience [Change](#). This doesn't mean that the protagonist suddenly changes immediately in the Middle, but rather that by the time the halfway point is established, there is a clear and noticeable difference in the character compared to the beginning. After the catalyst has been established, the character must gradually be affected by it. Over the span of the story, the effects of the catalyst have caused the character to change. It may not be immediate, but at least by the halfway point, it is at least evident that something new is appearing from the character. This change midpoint is not their inevitable Dusk trait, but is a hybrid of the Dawn qualities that were previously established and the Dusk traits that will inevitably become the character. Continuing with the sun analogy, we'll call this the High Noon.

Definition: High Noon Traits

Somewhere in the middle of the story where a character has transitioned away from their Dawn traits but has not reached their Dusk traits—creating a hybrid mixture of the two.

Dawn Trait	High Noon (A mixture of Dawn and Dusk)	Dusk Trait
Mei is deathly afraid of spiders and runs immediately when seeing them.	Mei stares at a spider for a few seconds before finally running away.	Mei is nervous around spiders but will no longer flee when seeing them.
Aisha eats nothing but junk food	Aisha tries a salad but struggles to finish it.	Aisha is more mindful of what she eats.
Diego never disobeys his parents.	Diego talks back to his parents but immediately apologizes	Diego sneaks out of the house to see some friends.

Again, there is no exact science when determining High Noon, and it is unrealistic to assume that it will always be a 50/50 split between Dawn and Dusk. Percentage wise, your character could be 40% Dawn and 60% Dusk at the halfway point. Imagine some sort of middle ground that best reflects how your characters are evolving. Just try to avoid zero change or instant change. A gradual transition from beginning to end is very satisfying for the reader to experience.

6.5: Point of No Return

As mentioned in Basic Format, there needs to be an event in the story that showcases that the protagonist's change is permanent and will simply not revert to normal. We previously labeled this change as [The Point of No Return](#). In High Noon, there is a hybrid of Dawn and Dusk traits, but in the reader's perspective, there is no evidence yet to show that this change to Dusk is permanent. By establishing a clear Point of No Return for the character, it signals that they have officially transitioned to Dusk and will not be reverting.

Read the example below and spot where the Point of No Return is located:

Robert tailed the lady for two blocks. On the crowded sidewalks, it was easy to avoid detection. She lazily wore a golden handbag on her shoulder with a very thin strap. If he was going to do it, this would be the best target. Time was running out, and he needed the cash by 7 PM. The designer handbag was worth something and who knew what was inside. His fingers tingled in excitement, but he smacked his thigh to regain his focus. This was stupid, he thought, he could get the money elsewhere. He could call his father, make amends, and get bailed out of this whole mess. Robert slowed, letting the possibility sink in. No, his father wouldn't take him back—especially not after Robert pawned off the basement TV. Robert hustled to gain ground on the woman. In a few steps, she would reach a crossroads—a perfect opportunity to grab the bag and run down the alley. Emboldened, Robert brushed right up behind her. His hands shook violently. He couldn't control them. This was a mistake. He could find another way. No, he ordered himself. Robert smacked his thigh, grabbed the handbag, and ran down the alley amidst the screaming.

Robert has put himself into some sort of compromising situation. Whatever it is, he needs money fast. Based on his demeanor, his Dawn traits were probably one who never steals and never breaks the law. However, once we read that Robert sold the family TV, that is the High Noon moment, where he didn't exactly break the law, but he did it without his parents' permission. At any moment, Robert could simply turn around and not steal this woman's handbag. He could ask his father for forgiveness and revert back to his Dawn traits. However, once he grabs the bag and runs, it is the Point of No Return. There's no going back now. Robert has fully transitioned to his Dusk trait and is a criminal.

If we were to map out Robert's character arc using the character sheet, it may look something like this:

Character Name	Dawn Trait	Catalyst	High Noon	Point of No Return	Dusk Trait
Robert	A person who never steals or breaks the law.	Robert gets involved in some sort of shady situation and needs money quickly.	Robert pawns his family's TV and gets kicked out of the house.	Robert resorts to stealing a bag from a woman.	Robert has stolen an item and is now a criminal.

The importance of the Point of No Return is to leave no room for doubt that this character has now completed their arc. If High Noon was a 50/50 split between Dawn and Dusk, the Point of No Return has a 10/90 or a 0/100 slant towards Dusk. The transformation of the character is complete.

6.6: Does Every Character Need an Arc?

While I highly recommended that the protagonist has some sort of character arc, it isn't required for every character to undergo some sort of transition. First, it would take a considerable amount of time to develop arcs for every character—especially if the story is limited in length. Second, some minor characters simply do not need to be fleshed out to have arcs. Finally, forcing a character to change for the sake of change may come off as insincere and fake. If you believe that a particular character needs or will benefit from change throughout your story, then consider developing arcs. Otherwise, it is fine to have characters remain static.

At the same time, having too many characters who do not evolve their personalities—especially if they are integral to the story—might drag the story down. The more interesting the character, the more likely the reader will be interested in seeing how they influence the world and how the world influences them. If their personality is impervious to the events that unfold, it may leave the reader dissatisfied. Therefore, make sure to analyze all your characters and see who would best benefit from change.

6.7: Check In: Put The Following Story Beats In Their Correct Sequence

Check In: Put The Following Story Beats In Their Correct Sequence - Drag and Drop

Dawn Trait

Catalyst

High Noon

Point of No Return

Aisha decides to bake a complex banana date cake for the family reunion.

Aisha bakes a cake without burning it.

Aisha is a terrible baker who constantly burns her cakes.

Aisha is a skilled baker who showcases her work online.

✓ Check

6.8: Resources – Full Blank Character Arc Sheet

Character Name	Dawn Trait	Catalyst	High Noon	Point of No Return	Dusk Trait

6.1: Reading Exercise – Dancing with Silverware

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6.1: Reading Exercise – Dancing with Silverware



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6.1.1: Dancing with Silverware

By James Thibeault

Maya sat upright and could feel her entire spine align along the blue-painted concrete wall in the school gymnasium. Pressed against the wall, with a flat soda in hand, she visualized herself surgically fused to the concrete. Then she imagined the horrifying scenario in which someone didn't mind she was a wall monster and proceeded to talk to her away. That thought scared her even more. Perhaps if she messed up her hair, spilled soda on her sweater, and snarled at anyone nearby, that would keep her safe from conversation. But the whole reason for her being here was to actually talk to people. Why was this so difficult?

She sat on the top bleachers, looking down at all the other students. The school didn't have a large budget for a dance, so they dimmed the lights, put up recycled streamers, bought off-brand soda and snacks, and convinced Mr. Patel, the history teacher, to DJ the event with his own equipment.

"Alllllright ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Patel. He wore sunglasses in a barely lit gymnasium and wore a baseball cap slightly to the side. "I want to see y'all go wild on the dance floor with this one. Grab your partner and let's grind this one out!" Mr. Patel turned up the music. The bass was so menacing, it vibrated the bleachers that Maya sat on. Surprised, the students were quick to oblige and moved into provocative pulsations. On the other side of the gym, Principal Rodriguez put her hands on her hips and glared back at Mr. Patel. He, regrettably, lowered the music a tad.

"I mean, dance with consented approval and keep your hands at a safe distance!" Mr. Patel roared. The students roared back. Principal Rodriguez, still wearing her daytime business suit, tapped the backs of some students who were a bit too excited, to say the least, and managed to home in on a few. However, Mr. Patel, swooned by the power of dance music, kept playing jam after jam. Soon, despite the mediocre décor, the students were having a blast. Maya watched the transformation in disgust.

She wanted this to be a flop. It was the perfect counter to her mother's forced requirement to "dance the night away." Friday night was usually when she focused on her silverware sculpture art. By now, she would already have purchased a ton of silverware from a secondhand store and sorted it out in the basement. Then, she placed her favorite cutlery in the center and talked to them. Eventually, with the help of pilers, vices, and some torch work, her conversations with inanimate objects would create some masterpieces. However, her mother forced her to dress up and head to the dance. "You can't keep talking to forks," Maya's mother told her. Therefore, Maya went to the dance reluctantly, and she expected to come home triumphant, explaining how disastrous and boring it was. However, Mr. Patel was not relenting with the beats.

She rose, descending each bleacher with a decisive thump. The noise was deafening to her, but for the others, it was drowned out by the cacophony of Mr. Patel's unrelenting grooves. When she reached the final step, she could feel the body heat and perspiration from the dancers. A part of her wanted to swan dive into the crowd and lose herself like the others. They moved and swayed like heated aluminum with infinite possibilities. Just as she was about to step off the final riser, Mr. Patel spotted her. He instantly

grabbed the mic and shouted, “Oh you know we got a party now! Metal Maya just entered the floor.” Mr. Patel pointed to her and the whole crowd collectively turned to her. They roared with approval, chanting “Metal Maya! Metal Maya!” Startled, she ran away from the crowd and sought solace elsewhere.

Outside, the music was only a dull beat muffled by the cold concrete. She rested her body against the wall and tried to slow down her breathing. Is that what they called her? How did they even know? Maya reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. She was about to text her mom to pick her up when Principal Rodriguez opened the exit door and spotted Maya. Without a word, she leaned against the wall, and together they looked up at the night sky.

“Some dance, huh?” said Principal Rodriguez.

“I’m surprised you let it get that wild.”

“Oh, they definitely toned it down now. I insisted. No more out-of-control party animals on my watch.”

“Thanks. Now Metal Maya is now Metal ‘No Fun’ Maya.”

“Why do they call you that?”

“I thought everyone knew, apparently.”

“When you’re a principal, you do all the managerial and political stuff. You don’t actually get to know the students, which is kind of weird when you think about it.”

“I craft art out of silverware.”

“Wow, I thought they called you that because you were too punk rock or something. I don’t know if that’s the right word anymore. Too cool to dance, you know.”

Maya sarcastically laughed, “No, just about the opposite.” She scrolled through her phone and found a photo. “I was supposed to finish this piece tonight.”

“That’s *not* finished?”

“Almost, I like to polish the metal, so it feels more like one unit.”

“It seems like you have a lot of fun with it.”

“I do.”

“So why did you come here tonight?”

Maya tried to voice her feelings, but she couldn’t choose her words like knives from her stock box. What was scary about people is that they were even more malleable than the metal. At least with silverware, you knew their breaking points. Sure, it took some effort to coerce metal to move, but once you had control, it was very clear how it could move and to what limit. People bend, but to what degree? At what point do they snap? She had no idea how they would react, and she had no idea how they would react to her.

“My mom thinks I talk to forks more than I talk to people.”

Principal Rodriguez laughed. Embarrassed, Maya walked away from the wall and dialed her mother.

“No, no, no,” said Principal Rodriguez. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine. I’m having my mom pick me up.”

“You’re different. I’m different. And I laugh when things are different. I didn’t mean anything negative. You have a really special talent.”

Maya lowered her phone.

“How do I know what’s a good laugh and a bad laugh?”

“Talking? Listening?”

“Do those people even like me in there?”

“I don’t know. I like you, but I had to get to know you first.”

Maya squeezed hard on her phone, then she sighed and placed it back into her pocket.

“Can we go back in?”

“Sure, but give me a head start, okay?”

Principal Rodriguez walked back inside and left Maya alone. Maya felt a sudden rush of comfort with the solitude. However, her high school experience couldn't be just spoons, knives, and forks. After a deep breath, she reentered the gym.

Inside, the music was lame. A mediocre melody with no rhythm caused the students to dance lethargically. Mr. Patel, head down, lazily adjusted some knobs on his sound board. Students dawdled and were pulling out their phones. Maya was about to go and hide again when Principal Rodriguez grabbed the mic. “Gentleman and laaaaaaaadies, we need to return some excitement here.” Mr. Patel eagerly looked at her for official approval. He hovered his finger over one mysterious button. “When I say ‘dance’ you say ‘respectfully!’”

“That’s a little too much there, boss.”

“Whatever, have fun!” she turned to Mr. Patel and gave a nod. With a squeal, he pressed the button and the music instantly changed. The bombastic bass had returned, and students went wild. Maya walked closer to the center mass, her heart racing. When she reached the perimeter, she felt thuds of people jumping up and down. She looked up and saw Principal Rodriguez smiling at her, but that caused some students to turn back. Again, students stared at Maya. She froze. Then, she jumped really high and came back down. The students cheered, “Metal Maya! Metal Maya!”

Maya danced with the other spoons, knives, and forks for the rest of the night.

6.1.2: Comprehension Questions for *Dancing with Silverware*

Why is Maya sitting on the top of the bleachers at the beginning of the story?

- ☐ She is taking a break from dancing.
- ☐ She is trying to talk to someone without the loud noises.
- ☐ She is trying to clean up the soda spill she made on her sweater.
- ☐ She is somewhat hiding from the rest of the students.

✓ Check



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6.1.3: Questions on Character Arcs for *Dancing with Silverware*

Maya's "Dawn Trait" was being shy and introverted.

☐ True

☐ False

☒ Check



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Writing Tension and Suspense



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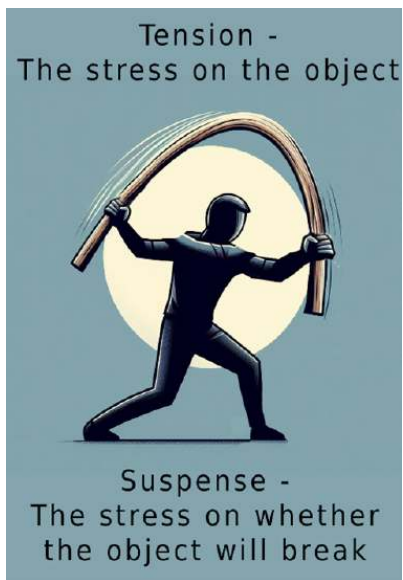
Learning Objectives

- Understand the differences between tension and suspense.
- Observe how tension and suspense interact with one another.
- Gradually apply tension and suspense in a story.

7.1: Bending the Stick

Imagine you are attempting to break a large stick. It's relatively thick, but as you apply pressure on each side, it eventually begins to bend. Your muscles begin to strain as the stick is no longer straight. While you have managed to curve the stick using considerable effort, you cannot bend it enough to your will. You place the stick on the center of your knee, and with a newfound effort, the stick bends even more. Soon, you hear the slight cracking of bark and fibers as your wrists turn tomato red. Breathing heavily, you don't know how much longer you can squeeze this piece of wood. By now, your muscles are vibrating in agony, but you will not relent. With hidden strength, you grunt and press with all of your might. The stick shatters, with bits of wood flying in the air. Your hands managed to strike themselves in the process. Exhausted, you stare triumphantly at your two prizes.

The previous paragraph is an example of tension and suspense in action. While both terms are similar, and it is understandable to confuse the two, they have slight differences. In a metaphorical sense, **tension** is the bending of the stick and **suspense** is the unanswered question of whether that stick will break or not.



Think of tension and suspense like bending a stick and being unsure if it will break.

7.2: Understanding Tension

In order to “bend” that stick, it requires a ton of force from both the left and right hand. Those two forces are the essence of **tension**.

Definition: Tension

The stress felt by the audience as two forces exert pressure on one another.

To continue with this analogy, imagine that the left and right hand are actually two people in a heated exchange. Both people are metaphorically pushing on that stick—causing an immense amount of stress:

Elijah barges into the office and slams his fist on the receptionist’s desk.

“Where is he?” he shouts. The receptionist is frozen in fear—unsure what to do. “Call him, now.”

Silently, she presses a button. Oliver opens the door with a bright smile.

“Bella, I’m sorry, I can’t take any new—” Oliver stares down Elijah. “You have a lot of nerve to come back here.”

Elijah walks right up to Oliver, nostrils flaring, eyes bulging. “I’m not leaving until you make this right.”

“You had your chance to take the deal. It’s not my fault you walked away.”

“I lost everything! You did this.”

“That’s a strong accusation—I wonder if it will hold up in court.”

“It won’t go to court, because we’re going to resolve this right now.”

Oliver presents a sly smile. “Bella, notify security.”

She presses another button.

The exchange between Elijah and Oliver is heated. There is a clear history between them and it must not have been pleasant. Elijah wants to exact revenge on Oliver for something he did, but Oliver is undeterred. Both men are exerting force, but in two different ways. Elijah is threatening and demands action. Meanwhile, Oliver has practically baited Elijah to follow through with his threats.

These opposing forces are what tension is all about. The audience, much like Bella, is watching this unfold and is experiencing the byproduct of tension: anxiety and stress.

It's very odd to deliberately want to make the audience stressed and anxious—especially since we would want to avoid doing that to someone in real life. However, stress and anxiety, in small, controlled situations can be an enjoyable experience for the audience. Stress and anxiety can heighten our senses and give an adrenaline rush—which can feel invigorating. This is especially true in fictitious situations, much like storytelling, where the audience is never in danger. The audience can feel these emotions, but they also have the reassurance that they are not going to be impacted by the effects. In Bella's case, she is not enjoying her rush of stress and anxiety. She could potentially be hurt in the exchange between these two men. Fortunately, as the audience, we are safely watching from a distance.

For a scene to be tense, it must have two opposing forces. If one side is not opposing, then the scene will become far less tense. For example, let's alter the scene a bit:

Elijah barges into the office and slams his fist on the receptionist's desk.

"Where is he?" he shouts.

Bella laughs. "Can you not ruin the woodwork?"

"Call him, now."

Oliver opens the door with a bright smile.

"Bella, I'm sorry, I can't take any new—" Oliver looks at Elijah. "Oh, hello Elijah."

Elijah walks right up to Oliver, nostrils flaring, eyes bulging. "I'm not leaving until you make this right."

"Oh, I think I know what this is about. Sure thing, let's talk about this in my office."

Oliver slightly bows and extends his arm towards his office. Elijah enters the room.

This scene did not change Elijah's opening, but the reactions from Bella and Oliver were altered. Because Bella and Oliver do not take Elijah's threat seriously, nor do they do anything to counter his threats, the tension has completely evaporated. This isn't to say that this alternate version is of lesser quality, it simply lacks tension. Instead, it feels eerie and awkward, as though Oliver and Bella are leading Elijah into a trap. Regardless, it lacks a feeling of stress and anxiety from the audience.

The stick cannot bend if only one side is bearing down on it. For tension to be felt, it is important that two forces are applying pressure.

7.3: Understanding Suspense

When applying force on the stick, it's unknown at what point that stick is going to break—or even if the stick will break at all. That uncertainty is the essence of suspense:

Definition: Suspense

The stress felt by the audience on whether the tension in the moment will result in a significant consequence.

Tension and suspense work together in creating anxiety and stress. The stick cannot break if there is no tension applied to it. At the same time, if the stick is clearly never going to break, then why apply tension in the first place? In the previous section, Elijah's and Oliver's anger toward each other has created a decent amount of tension. The audience is wondering: is Elijah actually going to attack Oliver? That questioning is what generates suspense. On top of the intensity that tension brings, there is an additional layer of uncertainty suspense can bring. In a boxing match, the tension is obvious: two fighters attacking one another. However, the suspense in the boxing match is not knowing who is going to win the match.

Suspense is challenging to pull off in storytelling. If the audience already knows the outcome of the event, then the feeling of suspense completely evaporates. If one professional boxer challenges a complete amateur, it probably won't be that suspenseful, as

the professional boxer has a clear advantage. However, two boxers, with the same level of skill, will result in more suspense because it would be unclear who would actually win the bout. Uncertainty typically breeds suspense.

At this point, I've discussed tension and suspense in terms of violence and confrontation. While this is the easiest way to explain tension and suspense, these elements can be represented through other opposing forces.

Take for example this scene with Luna:

Looming over Luna was a large, untouched oak door. Dust and grime coated the wood, and the knob was rusted and black. She was afraid to touch it. For not only would the ancient film stain her fingers, but its abandoned age signaled that it should never be touched. Gently, Luna took a step back and then turned around. After a few steps down the hall, she heard a knock. She looked around, expecting the maid to order Luna to her evening bath. Yet there was no one around. The walls were old, she thought, and perhaps they were just creaking from the cold. She continued to walk away. Then there was another knock. Luna turned around to look at the oak door. Like a hawk, she focused on the faraway object. It was the maid playing a trick, Luna told herself. A single thud emitted from the forbidden door. Luna turned to run, but the door gave a single pound again. How could this be? No one could have opened the door. Unless, no one ever did ... she stepped closer.

"Hello?" she politely asked. "I ask of you to reveal yourself."

The door's answer was another knock.

In this example, while there was no violent confrontation, there were two opposing forces. One force was Luna, who was curious about the door. The other force was the door itself. Like a game of tug-o-war, Luna is trying to pull herself away and the door is enticing her in. The tension is that metaphorical tug-o-war between Luna and the mysterious door. The suspense is the uncertainty: what is making that noise? Is there someone or something behind it? The audience is captivated and wants to know the truth. Once the truth is revealed, the suspense is lifted, the tension released, and the audience can relax.

7.4: Slow, Gradual Steps

Suspense needs to be slowly teased out of a scene. That feeling of stress and anxiety the audience experiences can't be rushed, or else they won't fully experience the emotion. The emotion of uncertainty needs to stay in the audience's mind for a certain amount of time. Therefore, when developing suspense, it is a balance of applying the right amount of tension—enough, but not too much.

For example, if we were to develop a romantic tension between Emily and Alex—teasing the audience whether they will kiss or not—it's not very suspenseful if we write it like this:

At the party, Emily and Alex sat on the couch together while the music played. Alex looked at Emily and sheepishly smiled. Emily smiled back. The music continued to drown any other sound. Both of them awkwardly looked around, not sure what to do. Then, they leaned in for a kiss.

The scene starts out strong with some tension between Emily and Alex. Both are very shy and are unsure of how to go about kissing one another. However, the last sentence shatters the suspense as they immediately kiss. It's not very captivating, and it would be a much more suspenseful and interesting scene if we draw out the uncertainty a bit more:

At the party, Emily and Alex sat on the couch together while the music played. Alex looked at Emily and sheepishly smiled. Emily smiled back.

"This music. It's good," yelled Alex.

"What?"

Alex leaned in to get closer to Emily's ear.

"Music's good."

Once Emily heard Alex, she nodded. They were inches from one another. Alex could feel the heat from Emily's red cheeks. He looked into her eyes, a soft hazel. She maintained her smile, and all he had to do was lean in just a bit more. Instead, he settled back into the large leather couch. Both of them looked awkwardly around, not sure what to do. Alex looked at Emily from the corner of his eye. This time, she was looking away, probably towards the kitchen to get another drink. Deep down, he knew that if she stood up, the moment would never happen. He tried again. Alex gently tapped her on the shoulder. Emily turned to him and resumed her smile.

"So ... um ... would you like to ..."

Emily cheeks turned even redder and she nodded.

Then, they leaned in for a kiss.

Here, the moment is drawn out. Not only does this enhance the suspense, but it also allows the reader to take in the character and the moment a bit more.

Depending on the story, drawing out suspense could take a paragraph, a chapter, or even a whole section. There's no exact formula to determine how much tension should happen in a scene nor when the suspense should be released. The only way to determine what would be the appropriate amount of tension and suspense is to experiment with these elements in a scene and calibrate their levels like a machine.

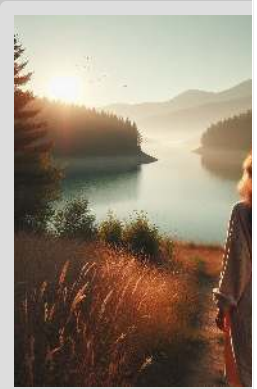
Just remember to write like you are bending a stick: too little tension won't bend the stick and too much tension will break it instantly.

7.5: Check In: Which Images Have Tension or Suspense?

Check in: Drag and Drop the Images That Have Tension or Suspense



Images with Tension or Suspense.



 Check

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[7.1: Reading Exercise – Longing for the Night](#)

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7.1: Reading Exercise – Longing for the Night



Image by Jeremy Bishop on Unsplash

7.1.1: Longing for the Night

By James Thibeault

Diego was in the apartment and scrolling through his phone when Ethan came rushing down the stairs.

“Your car here?” asked Ethan.

“Yeah, where else would it—”

“Good, let’s go.” Ethan hastily reached for the door.

Diego dropped his phone on the table and stood up. “Go where? It’s like 10:30. Nothing’s open on a Thursday night in this dead-quiet town.”

Ethan turned around to stare his roommate down. His shirt was oddly buttoned, and his unkept hair desperately needed a combing.

“I’ll tell you in the car.” Ethan tugged at Diego’s shirt and guided him to the door. Diego was just able to grab his keys before being escorted down the stairs. By the time he reached the driveway, Ethan was waiting for him on the passenger side of the car, like a dog. “Come on, come on,” he said while tapping the hood.

Diego walked around Ethan to get to the driver’s side. They rarely hung out, and even when they did, it was on a Saturday night to pick up some tacos down the road. Most of the time, Ethan was out at night. Sometimes, he would sporadically be gone for a couple of days—only to arrive disheveled and not wanting to be asked questions. Still, Diego unlocked the door with his key fob. Ethan scurried in and hastily buckled his seatbelt. Tightly grasping the fob, Ethan hesitated to get in. Maybe Ethan was just hungry. When Diego looked in the window, Ethan beckoned him with his hand to start the car. With a shrug, Diego entered the car, turned on the ignition, and backed out of the driveway.

“Thanks man,” said Ethan, eagerly slapping the dashboard. “Usually, you’re pretty lame, so I appreciate you doing this for me.”

“Doing what?”

Ethan groaned. “Why you got to be like that? See, this is your problem. The world has given you an opportunity to go on an unprompted adventure, and you’re afraid. You’re afraid of everything, so you stay safe in your apartment. Do me a favor and don’t think. Just drive.”

Diego gripped the steering wheel, “I want to know where we are going.”

“Just to the mall.”

“The mall closed last year.”

“Yeah.” Ethan rolled down the window and stuck his arm out. He slapped the side of the car. They both went to school in a quiet country town, where the college was the only building that wasn’t a farm. Outside of campus, the only things around were fields,

cows, and trees.

“Can you please tell me—”

Ethan turned on the radio and cranked the volume up. “Woo! Woo! Woo!” he cried in three even screams. The roads were deserted with nothing but trees on both sides. Using his high beams, Diego focused on driving. Maybe Ethan was right. Diego rarely left the apartment, and it was his senior year. He heard wild stories of his father partying in an abandoned pool or setting a minivan on fire. The only exciting thing Diego had done this year was crack the top ten in his video game Speedrunning. He turned to Ethan who was looking out the window—bobbing his head to the beat.

“Woo!” Diego shouted, gently patting the steering wheel.

“Turn!”

“What?”

“Turn!” Ethan pulled hard on the steering wheel, and the car jerked to the right. They went down a dirt road with loose rocks and bumps. Desperately trying to regain control of the car, he couldn’t turn off the music. “You said the mall!” Diego shouted over the sound.

“The mall closed last year!”

“I know, so where are we—”

“Look out!”

The headlights spotted the gaping hole in the road—the size of his whole car. Diego veered the car to the left and just barely avoided a disaster.

The trees thinned out, and they entered a grass clearing. Diego finally felt safe to pull over.

“Ethan, where are we going?”

“Here.” Ethan went to open the door, but Diego pulled at his sleeve.

“Where is here?”

Ethan, almost disgusted by Diego touching his unwashed shirt, swatted it away. “Come with me and find out.” With a slam of the door, Ethan exited the car and walked to the top of the grassy hill—the moonlight guiding him. Stunned, Diego gripped tight on the steering wheel until his knuckles were red. “No,” he told himself, “see it through, could be something. Could be something.” Diego locked the car and jogged to catch up with Ethan. By the time they reached one another, they were atop a grassy hill. The stars and moon were out, and far off in the distance were the small, flickering lights of the highway.

“Alright, cut this out,” shouted Diego. “You’re going to tell me right now what you’re excited about.”

Ethan smiled, but he showed too much of his teeth. “I’m excited about this moment—woo!” He threw his arms up in the air and tried to embrace the sky. “I don’t get a whole lot of moments like this. You see,” he pointed up to the sky. “People who are in the sun ... they don’t burn ... never burn.” Ethan jumped up and down—smacking his head to pump himself up. “You need to *really* bake in the sun ... perfect conditions ... to get that burn. You got to bask, but what if there’re clouds? What if you are surrounded by shade? What if something is blocking the source of the burning?”

“Ethan, are you okay?”

“Oh man, I’m the best right now. It’s clear, cloudless, and there is nothing in the way. Woo! Woo! Woo!”

He ripped off his poorly buttoned shirt. Although Ethan had seen him without his shirt as he roamed around the apartment, he didn’t remember him being this hairy. Diego pulled the keys out of his pocket.

“This is crazy, I’m going home.”

Before Diego could unlock his car, Ethan lashed out and grabbed the fob. Stunned, Diego watched as Ethan squeezed the keys until they were a mess of metal and plastic. Diego took a few steps back. Ethan advanced, matching his pace.

“Every time ... conditions ... too cloudy ... not enough time from the last incident ... suspicious ... no conditions, ideal.” Ethan turned his back to Diego and looked up at the sky. The full moon glowed aggressively. Horror flowed through Diego’s spine. He couldn’t move. His feet clung to the grass. Even a cry for help could not escape his lips. Ethan turned back to face Diego. Now, his eyes were yellow as sickness and his skin was rough as leather. Fur covered all but his eyes, which stared at Diego eagerly.

“Run, run, run ... Let me enjoy this! Woooooo!” the beast howled.

Unstuck from the earth, Diego ran down the hill. He stumbled, rolling through the wild grass until he hit the flat surface. Up top, a silhouette with a tail and mane stared down at Diego. The moon’s white light glowed behind it. Diego reached for his phone. He patted his left and right leg, then scrambled to pat anywhere on his body to find it. Groping around on the ground for his phone, he suddenly realized that Ethan had pulled him away before he could grab it off the table. Panicked, Diego fumbled to stand and ran to his car. He desperately pulled at the handle, swearing and screaming for it to open.

When he looked back at the top of the hill, only the moon remained. There was silence, except for the drone of trucks from the highway. Diego sprinted to the forest, toward the path of the motors and asphalt. Perhaps if he made it to lights and sound, that thing wouldn’t pursue him. A howl broke through the still night. Diego refused to look behind him. He dashed down the dirt road and into the dark rows of trees. It didn’t matter that he was blindly running into the night. All that mattered was distance from the howl, from the beast that was once his roommate. Diego’s breathing somehow echoed in the night—a loud, piecing cry that could only alert the beast of his location. Uncontrollably, his lungs sought and rejected air. With wide, terrified eyes, Diego could not see in front of him. He listened closely for cars in the distance but heard none. He was so preoccupied with the hope of sound, he lost his footing and tripped on a rock.

On the ground, his ankle throbbed in pain. He tried to rise, but any pressure sent him back down. No longer did he hear traffic. The wind moved the trees above, and that was all. Diego reached for anything nearby, looking for a rock or something to defend himself. Instead, his hand plunged into nothing. Surprised, he waved his hand around and remembered the large ditch that the car had almost crashed into. Crawling, digging his hands into the dirt, he managed to push his body around to the other side of the hole. Fighting through the pain, he cried for the wolf, “Woo!”

He waited. Then, a response emerged through the black. The howl was not stationary, it was getting louder by the second. Diego cried again, louder and more confident this time. This time, Diego heard a snarl and saw the shifting of shadows in the distance. He heard the aggressive steps edging closer to him. One last time, Diego howled and closed his eyes—ready to embrace whatever happened next. A splash of dirt hit his face, and then Diego heard another howl. This one sad, defeated.

Diego opened his eyes and looked down. Yellow eyes darted back and forth. Down below, the beast was trapped and breathing heavily. With the last bit of his strength, Diego snarled back at the beast. He crawled a few feet away from the hole before passing out.

When the sunlight finally managed to hit Diego’s face, he bolted awake. Instantly, his foot reminded him of the pain. Then another thought hit him. Carefully, he edged closer to the hole and looked down. Ethan looked up at him with his arms crossed.

“Bout time you woke up.”

7.1.1.1: Comprehension Questions for *Longing for the Night*

What did Ethan say was the reason they had to leave right away?

- ☐ He didn't provide a reason.
- ☐ He was hungry and wanted food.
- ☐ He said it was an unprompted adventure.
- ☐ He was being chased by someone.

✓ Check



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7.1.1.2: Questions on Writing Tension and Suspense for *Longing for the Night*

What creates tension between Diego and Ethan early in the story?

- ☐ Their opposing desires - Diego wanting to stay in, Ethan wanting adventure.
- ☐ Ethan's increasingly erratic and strange behavior.
- ☐ Diego wishing to be more adventurous.
- ☐ The town not having a lot of people.

✓ Check



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Writing Dialogue



Image by Matthew Henry from Burst

Learning Objectives

- Understand how dialogue can give characters a distinct voice and representation.
- Recognize why dialogue does not need to follow strict grammar rules.
- Develop dialogue through distinct personalities rather than stereotypes.

8.1: The Voice of the People

Good dialogue elevates a story to a completely different level. It is one thing to narrate a story, but having fictional characters speak as if it is their own words is magical. These characters have now been given a distinct voice, which is a far better representation of who they truly are. It is easy for an author to write that their character has anger issues, but to have a character shout “I’m going to set my couch on fire if the Solar Sparks lose tonight!” makes it feel more real. Speech coming directly out of the mouths of characters will exude more personality—highlighting their wants, their desires, and their souls.

Definition: Dialogue

When a character speaks either to themselves or to another character in which their voice is present in the text.

However, writing good dialogue takes practice and observation. Like poetry, dialogue doesn’t often follow the same rules as traditional writing. It works off of its own logic, and once that logic is understood, there is a boundless amount of creativity to explore.

8.2: Creating “Realistic” Dialogue with a Voice

Sometimes, critics will say something like “people don’t talk like that” or “their dialogue isn’t realistic.” When readers expect “realistic” dialogue, they often do not mean it literally. Surprisingly, recording people talking to one another and then transcribing that onto text doesn’t often produce realistic dialogue. Take this exchange between two teenage boys ordering a pizza:

Harry: Hey.

Steve: Hey.

Steve: Um, you want to get a pizza?

Harry: Alright, what do you want?

Steve: You pick.

Harry: Uh, I don't know. Uh, pepperoni?

Steve: Sounds good.

This is, technically, realistic dialogue. However, it's boring. In real life, people often have mundane conversations with no significance whatsoever. When we mean realistic dialogue in writing, we mean what would appear natural with that particular character's personality. It's more trying to capture the essence of that character and less of what they would say in the real world. After all, all of this is fiction, so it doesn't need to be 100 percent accurate to real life.

Instead, what is more important is making sure that both characters have a clear voice established, and it is reflected in their dialogue.

Definition: Voice

The character's personality that is reflected through the dialogue the character speaks with.

Realistic dialogue is making sure that the character's personality is accurately reflected via their voice. Let's rewrite this scene and try to better capture the voices of the two teenage boys ordering a pizza.

Harry: Let's get a pizza, I'm starving.

Steve: You have money?

Harry: Can you spot me?

Steve: Really?

Harry: Whatever, guess I'll grab some cereal or something.

Steve: Fine, I'll pay. But I get six slices and you get four.

Harry: Alright, what do you want?

Steve: Pepperoni.

Harry: No—

Steve: I'm paying, so I'm choosing.

Harry: Ugh, fine.

In the previous scene, we knew nothing about the personalities of Harry and Steve. We could have flipped their dialogue, and it wouldn't have made a difference. However, in this scene, Harry's personality comes out a bit more: he doesn't have money on him and often takes advantage of his cash-carrying friend. Meanwhile, Steve is well aware of Harry taking advantage of him but is still willing to pay, after adding strict conditions in exchange.

In the previous chapters, I talked about the importance of [Developing Character Traits](#) and [Character Likeability](#). It's important to remember what traits and personality you design with your character because the character's voice needs to represent that. For example, if a character is nervous about asking someone out and that nervousness leads to rambling, the character's voice needs to feel nervous to the reader. Take Flynn for instance:

Flynn: Excuse me.

Marylynn: Yes?

Flynn: I was wondering if you were interested in possibly hoping that I could ask you about a request?

Maryllynn: What?

Flynn: I'm sorry, sometimes I say stuff that doesn't make any sense, and when I don't make sense I try and correct it, but how much correcting is correcting before it is incorrect?

Maryllynn: Are you trying to ask me out?

Flynn: Yes, but only if it is an option and I don't want to pry on anything because I don't know you and if you don't know me and that could be weird, but if you know me, I think it wouldn't be weird because I think we—

Maryllynn: Slow down. It's okay. Let's have a drink.

Is Flynn's dialogue something you would find in real life? Probably not, but the concept of a person being nervous about asking someone out is. If you can symbolically represent that in a character's voice, then that's the realistic tone people seek.

8.3: Breaking The Rules

When it comes to dialogue and grammar, dialogue does not follow the rules of the English language, but the soul of the character it represents. This guide you're reading mostly follows the traditional rules of English grammar: complete sentences, proper syntax, and correct spelling. However, when it comes to developing dialogue, those rules often don't apply. In fact, good dialogue will often break these rules in order to represent the character more accurately. This is not to say that dialogue needs to be an unintelligible mess, but it is more important to focus on what the character wants to say as opposed to what the English teacher *expects* you to say.

For example, imagine if this section appeared in your math textbook:

All them rectangles got four sides. Count them: one, two, three, four. Do the same with a square. One, two, three, four. It ain't hard. Both the rectangles and squares are family, one in the same.

While understandable, the lack of complete sentences, the use of *ain't*, and other improper grammar, doesn't make this suitable for a textbook. However, if you are developing a character who is going over his daughter's homework, but has no formal education, then this section is far more suitable:

Kyle pulled up a chair and sat down next to his daughter. Even though it was a 2nd grade geometry textbook, most of the math looked fuzzy to him. However, once he saw the rectangle and square, he knew what to say:

"All them rectangles got four sides. Count them: one, two, three, four. Do the same with a square. One, two, three, four. It ain't hard. Both the rectangles and squares are family, one in the same."

However, let's see what happens if we change the dialogue here to be more accurate to proper grammar:

Kyle pulled up a chair and sat down next to his daughter. Even though it was a 2nd grade geometry textbook, most of the math looked fuzzy to him. However, once he saw the rectangle and square, he knew what to say:

"A rectangle has four sides. Make sure to count them: one, two, three, four. Now, let's do the same with a square. One, two, three, four. It is not that hard to spot the similarities. You see, both rectangles and squares belong in the same family."

While this is more grammatically correct, the dialogue conflicts with Kyle's representation. If Kyle has had no formal education, some of his syntax may break from traditional wording. In this context, having Kyle speak with perfect grammar makes no sense in the scene because it does a disservice to his voice.

Therefore, it's important to understand your character's background, desires, and emotions when writing dialogue. These elements of your character are far more important than being grammatically correct. In most cases, saying *got* in academic writing is

discouraged, but if your character would say *got*, then it is important to use that word. Inversely, if your character graduated from a prodigious university, then they might rarely use the word *got*.

We could even take a step further and completely use incomplete and fake words. For example, Aya has just woken up from a deep sleep. Her speech is mumbled, and she isn't fully awake:

Her sister tried nudging Aya awake, but she wouldn't move. Finally, Aya spoke, "I-o wan'do ... le'me ... chicken 'n the cheese shop."

In this context, the dialogue needs to represent Aya and her being barely awake. Because her lips are barely moving, the hard D's or T's were removed. In addition, to increase the mumbling, the words were combined or abbreviated using apostrophes. Finally, since she is still in a semi-dream state, a nonsensical phrase like "chicken in the cheese shop" was added. Again, in proper writing, this is forbidden, but when writing dialogue, breaking the rules to better fit the character's voice is strongly encouraged.

8.4: Learning To "Hear" Voices

One of the biggest mistakes that leads to bad dialogue is that writers will borrow words, vernacular, and slang but not try to understand the voice of the character. That is, writers will be too preoccupied with *how* a person talks as opposed to *why* a person talks. Simply inserting words into a character without generating an authentic personality can lead to stereotypes, caricatures, and offensive content.

For example, let's say that two characters who are both very wealthy are going over a business deal:

Aisha: Ahmed, I must say, after reviewing the proposal, I see great potential in collaborating on this project.

Ahmed: I wholeheartedly agree. More wine?

Aisha: Certainly. This red is impeccable.

Ahmed: My sommelier selected it a fortnight ago; remind me to commend him.

Aisha: Oh, I would be most pleased to be acquainted with him.

Ahmed: That can be arranged, after my jet excursion.

This interaction seems almost comical because of how disingenuous the wording is. The scene uses words that rich people may use like *sommelier* as well as a very sophisticated vocabulary. However, what are Aisha's and Ahmed's personalities? What are their traits as people? Other than rich, they are empty characters with no voice. Let's rewrite the scene with better voices:

Aisha: Ahmed, I must say, after reviewing the proposal, I see great potential in collaborating on this project.

Ahmed: Of course, I wholeheartedly agree. After all, I wrote it. More wine?

Aisha: Certainly. This red is impeccable. Is this a Grenache? Wait, no it's a Priorat.

Ahmed: I don't know. My sommelier selected it. He is, after all, the best.

Aisha: I would be most pleased to be acquainted with him. I prefer someone with taste.

Ahmed: That can't be arranged, due to my jet excursion.

In this revision, the scene is essentially the same, as well as some of the key phrases. However, what I amended this time were the personalities of Ahmed and Aisha. Ahmed is arrogant and full of himself. In his mind, the only reason why Aisha agreed to the proposal was because he wrote it. However, Aisha is annoyed by the arrogance, but she needs to be tactful—as this is her potential business partner. When pressing him on the wine, he isn't that smart on the subject, but still boasts about his amazing wine expert. She particularly embarrasses him with the smart reply, "I prefer someone with taste." This pun suggests that Ahmed lacks a taste for wine and is also not her type. The point is, by focusing on developing personalities with these two characters, their voices don't

feel nearly as fake. As demonstrated, all the sophisticated wording can still be in their scene, but without underlying voices, the interaction will feel shallow.

To put it another way, when designing a cake, you can put all the nice decorations and frosting on the top to make it look like a fantastic cake. However, if the cake batter is runny and undercooked, all the decorations won't save the cake from being inedible.

Focus on developing a strong character first, one who possesses a unique and interesting voice, and better dialogue will naturally emerge.

8.5: Check In: Writing Dialogue Exercise



Write a short dialogue (around 7 - 10 lines) between the characters based on the given image. There is no right interpretation, so be creative.

✓ Check

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8.1: Reading Exercise – Empty

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8.1: Reading Exercise – Empty



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8.1.1: Empty

By James Thibeault

Mateo paced back and forth outside of the empty classroom before taking a deep breath and entering. Lelia sat on windowsill, looking out at the deserted parking lot. She heard him enter, but she kept her attention on the asphalt below. School had long since ended, and only the cleaning staff were walking the halls.

“I have your cat,” said Mateo, gently patting his bag.

“I don’t care,” Lelia replied, not bothering to look back.

“You need it right now.”

“What I need is for you to turn around and go home.”

“Well,” said Mateo defeated, “I’ll just leave him with you.” Mateo gingerly stepped closer to Lelia. She continued to ignore him. Out from his bag, Mateo pulled out a stuffed animal. He placed the gray furball a few inches from her hand. She did not pick it up. Mateo turned around to leave, but just as he reached the threshold, he turned around and said, “At least try talking to him?”

Lelia turned to face Mateo, her makeup smeared from crying.

“You want me to talk to a stuffed cat?”

“It helped ... when ... ”

Lelia choked the cat with her hand and dangled it in front of Mateo.

“Am I still five to you? Are you going to bring my dolls too? Are we going to have them fill up all of these seats, have a little group session?”

“Please, Lelia, I didn’t –”

“No, you’re right. Let me talk to a stuffed animal all about my feelings. That’s what you think of me.” She slammed the cat on the teacher’s desk, then briskly walked to the back of the classroom. Politely, she raised her hand. “Excuse me, Miss Calico, I have a bit of a hairball you see. Mateo here thinks that talking to you is the best way to avoid being suspended.”

“Grow up.”

"I'm sorry, was it your idea for me to talk to my imaginary cat friend?"

"I just thought it would help. I'm not your enemy here."

"If you want to help, then tell Principal Hayes that Jessica is lying."

Mateo rubbed his face to sooth his head from strain. "I can't cover for you again." A flash of anger glinted in his eyes. "Really? Out of all the ways ..." Mateo paused to collect himself. "Out of all the ways you could have screwed up, you brought Jessica back into this? Just let that freshman be."

"She asked for it. No. Strike that. She forgot how gravity worked, and that's why her laptop is broken. Just tell Principal Hayes that. Miss Calico will back you up, she heard it all."

"Is this what you want? For me to bail you out? Because it looks like you just want to keep torpedoing any chance of a future."

Lelia stood up and gave a commanding round of applause. "Great job, Mateo. You've finally done it. You now sound like Dad."

"I've made my mistakes since—"

"Don't. I don't want to hear it from the perfect student who will go to the perfect school and marry a perfect wife and have stupid perfect kids with perfect teeth because you'll feed them the perfect portions of fruit and vegetables." She walked up to him and poked him in the chest. "Go on, tell me how I am wasting my life away. Tell me how you would do it better, golden child."

"Please, stop calling me that."

"Oh no, this is my gift. This is what I excel at. I'm good at pissing people off."

"Lelia, you don't have to prove—"

"Little golden boy gets to do whatever he wants." She walked back to the window and pointed to the empty parking lot. "You see that out there? I bet you see that empty, scalding hot asphalt as opportunity. There's nothing there, so you can fill it with whatever you want. Buy the lot, charge for premium parking, and make a fortune. I see a flat wasteland where things go to die. Life being cooked by the harsh and indifferent world—like eggs in the sun. I'm not like you, I'm not like Dad, I can't just flourish off of pain and suffering. I miss her." Lelia looked back out the window. "I used to wait in this classroom, wait for her to pick me up. I keep hoping that I'm wrong."

"She's gone. It's been a year. At some point you have to move on."

"Some nerve. You treat her like she's some expired cans in the fridge. She was our mom, Mateo. How can you be so cold? How can you just stand there, hand me a stuffed cat, and think that my feelings for her will just evaporate? Fine. I'll be more like you. I'll be as soulless as Miss Calico. You, me, and Dad can just sit in silence at the dinner table—devoid of any sensation."

Mateo clenched his fists and chose his words carefully. "You need to watch what you say."

"I wonder if she cursed both of us. I feel her warmth every day, but I'm cursed with these feelings of hate. Meanwhile, you excel at everything in exchange for barely remembering her at all."

"Lelia. Stop."

"The Golden Boy has to—"

"I SAID STOP IT!"

Mateo picked up a chair and threw it to the other side of the room. As it hit the wall, papers and pictures fell to the ground. He advanced upon Lelia, who retreated to the windows. There was nowhere for her to go. Now, she was silent.

"This is what you think of me? I have to keep it in, you get it? You think months of hospital visits are wiped from my head? Hours moderating pills and cleaning up messes? That's burnt into my body, a permanent scar. Trust me, I would love to forget, but I have to keep it in for you and Dad."

Tears formed in Mateo's eyes, but he aggressively blinked them away. His eyes were bloodshot and weary.

"Mateo, I didn't—"

“Who do you think keeps Dad from living out his dark thoughts? Who do you think shines a light on him? I pushed him to hold it in. Be a man. Someone has to hold this family together.”

Lelia put a hand on her brother’s arm, but he pulled it away. She struggled to speak.

“I thought. That. Look. I didn’t know. Okay? Thought you were ... “

“That I was what?”

“A jerk.”

Mateo tried to breathe, to slow down his breath, but the tears continued. He gritted his teeth, then turned around. As he made his way to the exit, Lelia followed. When he reached the door, Lelia grabbed him by the shoulder.

“I’m here. You don’t have to hold anything.”

Mateo turned around. “I miss her. Everyday.”

He began to sob. Lelia wrapped her arms around him. She felt the hot tears melt into her shirt.

“Me too.”

They stood, suspended in time, holding one another until a honk shook them out of a trance. They looked out the window. Their father, annoyed, waved toward the window, beckoning them to come down.

“Ugh, he looks mad,” said Lelia.

“You did get suspended.”

“Oh yeah, sort of forgot.”

“Come on, let’s not keep him waiting.”

Mateo wiped away his tears, took a couple of deep breaths, and tried his best to regain his cool. Not looking behind, he again made his way to the door. However, he paused when Lelia called out, “Mateo?”

He turned. “Yeah?” He saw Lelia holding the stuffed cat to her chest.

“Thanks for bringing Miss Calico.”

“Anytime.”

They walked out of the school together and toward their impatient father in the parking lot.

8.1.1.1: Comprehension Questions for *Empty*

Lelia was eager to talk to Mateo when he entered the classroom.

☐ True

☐ False

✓ Check



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8.1.1.2: Questions on Writing Dialogue for *Empty*

To make this dialogue more realistic, the beginning of the story should have the characters saying “Hello” to one another.

☐ True☐ False☒ Check Reuse Rights of use Embed

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Writing With Limitations



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Learning Objectives

- Understand why limitations can help spark creativity.
- Use self-imposed limitations to improve as a writer.
- Experiment with play writing that may sometimes lead to failure.

9.1: Limitation Can Lead to More Results

Creativity can spark from limitations. If you were asked to write *any* sentence, out of thin air with no restrictions, how creative would it be? Overwhelmed with an infinite number of possibilities, you may become frozen in thought—unsure of what even to write. However, if you were asked to complete this sentence:

When he opened the door ...

Technically, this prompt should be harder than the first one. Instead of selecting from an infinite number of choices, there are much fewer options to choose from that could theoretically work. However, it is surprising how quickly your brain can fill in the sentence. In fact, if you were asked to complete this sentence ten times, you could probably do it quite easily.

Constraints pressure our minds to think. For many, this type of challenge can be invigorating, like solving a puzzle. In order to solve the puzzle, we may have to discover new perspectives, techniques, or resources to find the solution. This type of thinking can broaden our mind, expanding our writing skills in the process. Writing in the same style, format, or genre, may reduce the challenge of writing—resulting in repetitive or uninspiring works. Sometimes, it is great to experiment with self-imposed limitations to spark imaginative results. Not all of these results will be successful, but some results could lead to new avenues on your journey as a storyteller.

9.2: Writing With Prompts

The easiest way to write with limitations is to assign a **prompt** to yourself.

 Definition: Prompt

Technical limitation, such as a word, phrase, or question designed to inspire a creative response.

The previous section used a prompt, whereas you were asked to complete the second half of the sentence. While there is no correct answer for a prompt, some responses would simply not work. If I were to write, “When he opened the door, twelve plus two equals fourteen,” that sentence makes no logical sense. There needs to be a logical solution to the prompt, but that solution still has many options to choose from. In short, creating one answer out of a possible thousand is far easier than choosing one out of a billion.

A prompt can range from being less restrictive to extremely restrictive. For example, a less restrictive prompt would be “Write about a cowboy.” While the story needs to have an element of a *cowboy* in it, you could write millions of stories about a cowboy in the wild west. Even more, nothing in the prompt mentioned that it had to be in the wild west. It could be about cowboys in space or about anthropomorphic rabbits acting as cowboys. Technically, you could write about a *cow-boy*: half cow, half boy. While a prompt like this may seem limiting, it really isn’t if you are creative enough.

An extremely restrictive prompt would be more of a challenge. While prompts like these may be more frustrating than enriching, they can improve upon a person’s skill and force unexpected creativity. For example, the prompt could be “Write a paragraph with no adjectives.” This is challenging but can force the writer to be creative in what they write. In addition, it can teach the skill that adjectives are not always needed to tell a story:

“No,” said Pedro. He rose from the couch and walked upstairs. He would not hear his sister’s sobbing. She failed to save her money, so she couldn’t ask him for cash. She followed him and pleaded with him to reconsider. However, Pedro did not listen and slammed his door. This decision hurt Pedro, but she needed to hear “no.” She needed to experience loss.

While this is not the most dynamic paragraph, the example above was challenging to write. Originally, one sentence was written as “This decision hurt Pedro, but it was necessary.” However, because *necessary* is an adjective, it had to be removed. Instead, the new line “she needed to hear ‘no,’” removes the adjective and is more impactful in the process. That act of replacing the line required creativity, and forcing authors into predicaments like this can vastly improve their creative skills.

Prompts like these can also help generate new ideas. If you are stuck and are unsure as to what to write, try designing and or searching for a prompt and see what comes out of it (you can also use AI to generate a list of prompts as well). The prompt could ultimately lead to one of your best pieces.

9.3: Digging A Hole

Prompts are great, but they are typically best when developing something from scratch or you are working on a brand-new scene. If you are already in the process of developing a story, another limitation you can try is deliberately putting your narrative into a difficult state by **digging a hole**.

 Definition: Digging a Hole

A narrative limitation where characters are put into a puzzle in which the author must develop a creative solution.

While some authors like to plan out their narrative from beginning to end, sometimes it is better to put the characters into unknown territory and figure out how they would act. For example, how would you solve this following problem regarding these three children?

The three children were now deep into the forest. At this point, they were miles away from their parents, and there was no way they could call for help. Even their phones had no service. What was supposed to be a ten-minute walk turned into desperate hours trying to find their path home. The sun was beginning to set and soon it would be dark.

The situation has a significant problem for the children. What will happen to them? Will they starve? Will they be saved? This situation was originally written with no set solution. While this is fiction and technically anything could happen (we could write

“And then a dragon flew them back to their parents”), a realistic scenario should call for a realistic solution. This limitation is a problem not only for the child but for the author themselves. It is like the author dug a deep hole and is unsure how to climb out. However, this type of limitation forces the author to come up with solutions for how to escape this literary hole. Perhaps the solution could be this:

One of the children realized that since they were staring at the setting sun, they were looking west. He remembered looking at the map his father gave him, showing how the campsite had a far stretch of woods with the highway to the right of it. That meant that if they continued to go west, they may stumble upon the highway. The children ran, chasing after the setting sun. Soon, they heard the dull sound of trucks and horns. By the time the sun set, the children were on the road—flagging down headlights.

Originally, there were a couple of options I thought of to solve the problem. First, was for the children to scream really loud and draw attention to some people near a campsite. That sounded a bit too convenient and relied more on luck. Then, I imagined that one of the children had a hidden compass somewhere in their bag. Again, it felt unrealistic, and even if they had a compass, what would they do with it without a map? Finally, thinking from the previous idea, I imagined one of the children looking at a map previously and relying on nature for navigation.

Next time you are unsure how to progress a story, ask yourself, “How would my character react if _____ happened to them? What would they do?” Certain answers may surprise you, and it could lead you to craft a much different plot than you intended.

9.4: Forcing New Experiences

Another type of limitation is attempting something outside of your comfort zone. A significant limitation is trying to write a genre, character, or setting you have never worked with before. Perhaps you are comfortable writing only Young Adult fiction. Why not try writing Adult Fiction or even something completely different, like poetry? Even in the realm of poetry, for example, you could try writing a different type of poetry, like an Italian sonnet or free verse.

For characters, perhaps you have only written about teenage problems and never considered the viewpoint of the elderly. You could also try writing about characters that are completely unlike you demographically, physically, or ethnically. This is immensely challenging because if you only have experiences regarding yourself and the people around you, it can be difficult to write about others that we know very little about. This limitation of knowledge requires research, interaction, and simply getting out of your comfort zone to explore new viewpoints and see how others live, think, and love.

Finally for setting, try writing about a location unlike anything you have experienced. What would it be like for your character to be in Indonesia, Lesotho, or The Netherlands? Like the previous paragraph, research is required, and it may have to involve actually visiting these locations to get a better sense of their culture and presence. These settings do not have to be geographical; they could be something like a library, a bowling alley, or a run-down bar. However, in order to capture these types of settings, try directly visiting these spots to find particular details—like how the run-down bars have decades-old water stains or how the bowling alley has loose ceiling wires that the manager doesn’t care about.

Unlike the other types of limitations, in which the end results forces creativity, these types of limitations force the author to live life in new ways. The author must now interact with different people, places, and things in order to discover new ways to talk about the world. This type of challenge can be intimidating but immensely rewarding—forcing ourselves to leave our computers, desks, and rooms to see firsthand the intricacies of what life has to offer.

9.5: Writing as Play

Not all of these limitations are going to result in good writing. A lot of the time, they may end up terrible. Some prompts result in mediocre writing and have little value. Certain plots with complicated problems may simply not have a satisfying solution. Exploring and researching the world may only end up with an awkward interaction at the post office. In the end, these limitations were just playing with alternatives and enjoying the process. Writing with limitations is supposed to be difficult, but it also has no serious repercussions. The worst-case scenario is you simply delete what you wrote. This is not a high-stakes performance, where you are writing live on stage for everyone to see. Instead, limitations are supposed to enact the feeling of play.

 Definition: Play writing

Not to be confused with playwriting, play writing is experimenting with limitations that are more than likely to fail, but its low-stakes allow for fun exploration that will ultimately improve the author long-term.

Humans are exceptional at learning when there is little stress involved. While challenging moments may create tense or riveting experiences, significant stress has little benefits for an author—especially in terms of creativity. It is okay to fail with limitations that you set for yourself. Instead of being frustrated, focus on why certain “solutions” you designed do not seem to work. In addition, appreciate that you are having fun—playing with different things to see what best works for you. Don’t let failure set you back; let failure be a learning experience that will improve your ability to tell a good story.

9.6: Check in: Complete the Writing Prompt



In **30 words or less**, write a story that involves the following words: chair, whisper, bright.
There is no correct answer, so be creative!

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9.1: Reading Exercise – Emojis

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9.1: Reading Exercise – Emojis



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9.1.1: Emojis

By James Thibeault

Emma: You up? I finally got back from practice.

Liam: 

Emma: Please don't be like that. You know how important this is to me.

Liam:  

Emma: That's fine if you don't like it, but let me have this please? It's only once a week.

Liam:   

Emma: I can like both things you know. It's not a competition.

Liam: 

Emma: Sorry, I'm exhausted. Can't.

Liam:  

Emma: I appreciate the offer, but it's getting late. The doctor said you have to hold off on starches for a while, remember? I should just head to bed.

Liam:  

Emma: Yes, I'll be there bright and early. You don't need to remind me.

Liam:     

Emma: You need to quit being a condescending jerk. We don't have to like the same things. Yeah, I like art and music, deal with it.

Liam: 

Emma: Yes, we are still together.

Liam: 

Emma: You're really going to guilt trip me now? I'm too tired to fight you on this.

Liam:    

Emma: We are more than that! We can be more than our past. I want to explore, try new things, grow as a person. And you won't let me be that person. I hate it. Just stop it.

Liam:      

Emma: You're a child.

Liam:     

Emma: Cut it out, Liam.

Liam:             
         

Emma: Maybe you're just jealous because you can't even play. Grow back some of those fingers, then.

Liam: 

Emma: I'm sorry.

Liam: 

Emma: I'm sorry, Liam. I didn't mean it.

Liam:  

Emma: It's been hard, okay? Since the accident, all of this ... it's been hard.

Liam:  

Emma: And you've done such a great job. So much progress. I'm so proud of you! But this has been hard on me too.

Liam:  

Emma: Yes, I know. You had it worse, but it's not always about you.

Liam:    

Emma: And that's great. It's wonderful that you've been able to do something again. The technology has really improved the past few months. There were so many days when I thought ...

Liam:    

Emma: Not as dramatically, but yes. Look, I'm here, but I also want to be me too, you know? There's more to me than you.

Liam:  

Emma: It would be the treble clef, I play violin, but that's still very sweet.

Liam:  

Emma: Come on, it's not like that. It's more like this.

Liam:  

Emma: I know, but it's going to take time. You've made so much progress. Just don't give up. Soon.

Liam:  

Emma: Love you too. I need to go to bed.

Liam:  

Emma:  

Liam: 

9.1.1.1: Comprehension Questions for *Emojis*

Emma can fully comprehend Liam even though he is only responding in emojis.

☐ True☐ False☒ Check Reuse Rights of use Embed

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9.1.1.2: Questions on Writing with Limitations for *Emojis*

What was the main limitation imposed on this short story?

☐ Only dialogue can be used.☐ One character can only use emojis.☐ One character had to go through a hardship.☐ Several types of smiley face emojis had to be used.☒ Check Reuse Rights of use Embed

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Developing a Theme



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Learning Objectives

- Understand the importance of the "So What?" clause in writing and how it helps determine the purpose or theme of a piece.
- Recognize the role of a theme in a story and how it provides an overarching purpose and direction.
- Utilize strategies for designing a good, clear, and engaging theme statement.

10.1: So What?

Whenever you are prepping, in the process of, or finishing your piece, a constant question to ask is "So what?" The '**So What?**' clause is a very useful tool for determining the point of the whole piece that you are writing.

Definition: 'So What?' Clause

A rhetorical question(s) to ask oneself when writing in order to determine whether a character, chapter, setting, or other element is actually needed in a story.

If you wanted to write a story about your summer vacation, you should start with a 'So What?' clause. That is, you should ask yourself why you should even write this in the first place. If you can't come up with a good answer, then maybe you should come up with a better answer or reconsider if it is worth telling at all. Let's look at some bad answers, some mediocre answers, and some great answers to this question:

So What?: Why Should You Write About Your Summer Vacation?		
Bad Answer	Mediocre Answer	Great Answer
It was fun.	I want to show others how fun it was.	I want to show others how fun can happen in unexpected places.
I met someone there.	I met someone there who is interesting.	I met someone who made me rethink how I view life.
Something dangerous happened.	Something dangerous happened when I went swimming.	I learned the importance of swimming with a friend.

Imagine these questions and answers as a conversation with a real person. If someone were to ask you “Why should I listen to you about your summer vacation?” it would be difficult to engage interest with them if you replied “Because it was fun,” or “I met someone there,” or “something dangerous happened.” These replies are vague and may not be enough to ask for you to continue. However, if you were to revise your answers with “I want to tell you how fun it was,” or “I met an interesting person,” or “Something dangerous happened when I went swimming,” this may pique their interest. The best response is to provide clear and interesting statements like “I want to tell you how fun can happen in unexpected places,” or “I met someone who made me rethink how I view life,” or “I learned the importance of swimming with a friend.”

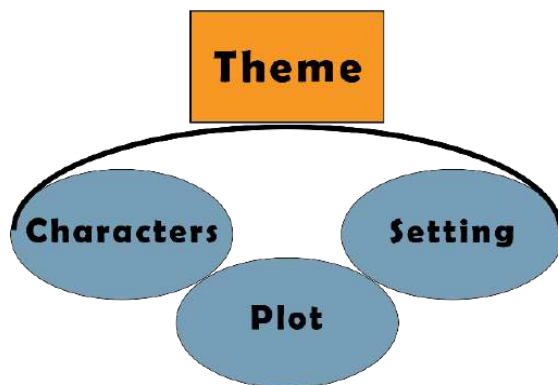
This question-and-answer method is very useful in determining the **theme** of your story or a section of your story. How you answer the “So What?” clause will more than likely determine how you are going to theme your story:

Definition: Theme

A central idea or resonating message that emerges from story elements like characters, setting, and plot—often reflecting on some insight about being human.

A theme is an overarching way to connect everything that you have written. It’s a clear answer to the question: why are you even writing this? Surprisingly, this section was placed at the very end of this guide because it is perhaps one of the hardest things to do when writing. Anyone can write a story, but it is much harder to write a story with a clear purpose, and it is even harder to write a story with a clear purpose that is interesting and engaging.

10.2: Designing a Good Theme



A good theme is overarching, connecting other parts of a story to one unifying purpose.

You should be able to express a good theme in roughly one sentence. If you cannot answer the “So What?” clause in a clear sentence, it will have cascading effects on the story as a whole. Keep in mind that a theme is not a plot or a summary of the story, but the central focus of *why* it is even written in the first place. Again, this seems easy, but can be difficult when actually trying to design one. However, once you are satisfied with a selected theme, it can be a lot easier writing the story because there is one driving force that is pushing you in a direction.

Let’s design a scene with a purpose first. Suppose there’s a woman waiting for a subway. Let’s avoid thinking plot questions for now, like why she is there, and instead ask **So What?:** *Why are we writing about a woman waiting for a subway?* There can be a thousand different responses to this question—some good, some bad— but let’s respond with, *I want to write about loneliness.* Now, this is a good start, but this is still a bit too vague. Instead, we’ll rework it to be more precise and clearer. Perhaps, *Loneliness is an intense emotion that can appear out of nowhere.* While this is better, let’s try to tie it to humanity somehow—a statement on what it’s like to be human. Let’s tweak it a bit more so it reads, *Loneliness is an intense emotion that can appear out of nowhere, which often forces people to confront it or to be consumed by it.*

Let’s see all versions of developing that theme side-by-side:

Designing a Theme		
Needs Improvement	Needs Adjusting	Well Developed
Loneliness	Loneliness is an intense emotion that can appear out of nowhere.	Loneliness is an intense emotion that can appear out of nowhere, which often forces people to confront it or to be consumed by it.

Our well-developed theme is not only clear but also an interesting and engaging statement. People reading that statement may be inclined to ask, “**How so? How is loneliness an intense emotion that can appear out of nowhere, which often forces people to confront it or to be consumed by it?**”

Let’s respond by writing a story about it:

Jessica waited for the subway in a dark, dank subway station at 3 in the morning. The drunks had already left on the last train, and all that remained was a homeless man sleeping by a pillar. The silence was broken by intermittent drops of water that was dripping from a metal grid above her. She clutched her bag tighter. The leather she held lacked warmth, a tingling sensation of skin. Jessica missed the tight embrace of her, how she squeezed firmly to her back. If she was here, the silence would not matter. The smell of her lavender hair would be enough. Jessica hummed to the bag, like she used to do with her. It wasn’t enough. Jessica held back her tears as the subway’s bright lights pulled into the station.

This example was easy to write because our theme was present in the moment. The paragraph, as well as each sentence, somehow connected to that theme. Oftentimes, people who claim that they “found their purpose or calling in life” have a sense of energy and drive about them. Instead of dawdling about what to do, they now know what is needed and seek to accomplish it. That is the same with developing a good theme—it is a way for the author to orient themselves into what needs to be written.

10.3: Don’t Worry About Perfecting the Theme Yet, Just Write

While coming up with a powerful theme utilized throughout your story will ultimately make it a better piece, it is also difficult to do. For many, coming up with a theme out of thin air is hard. Asking yourself “Why should I write about X” could lead to existential questions, and you could question why you are writing at all in the first place. The point is you don’t need a good answer immediately. Instead, it is important to work off ideas and concepts and see if it is interesting. For example, suppose you wanted to write on an idea about a librarian who was too afraid to tell someone to be quiet in the library. This isn’t a good theme, but it’s an interesting concept. You could spend time trying to come up with a theme regarding a shy librarian, but unless a good theme emerges naturally, that valuable time could just be spent writing. Let’s develop the concept and see if a theme naturally emerges by crafting a rough concept:

Dale was organizing the periodicals when he heard some laughter from across the library. Three students were play-pushing one another and being obnoxious. Other students slowly turned their heads to Dale. Silently, they judged him—demanding that he do something about their behavior. How come they couldn’t do it? They also had mouths; they could speak up. Yet, he knew the reason: he was the librarian, and it was his responsibility.

Out of this free writing, I was able to develop Dale: a timid librarian clearly not interested in addressing the students. Here, I can apply the “So What?” clause to see if we can get some interesting answers when brainstorming responses:

Question: So What? Why should I care about Dale, the timid librarian?

- Possible Answers:
 - Dale needs to stand up for himself.
 - Someone needs to be the responsible one.
 - Obnoxious students need to be held accountable

Out of the responses, a theme appears to naturally emerge: responsibility. A theme about responsibility is a good start, but it is a bit too vague. Perhaps I can develop it to be, *everyone needs to be responsible*, or something better like *people must be responsible in the roles they represent*. Let's go setting with something more refined like: *People must be responsible in the roles they represent, because neglecting these roles and lead to consequences*. With that, let's metaphorically tape it in front of our keyboard. Now, with our theme present, let's rework our story with our overarching theme:

Dale was organizing the periodicals when he heard some laughter from across the library. Three students were play-pushing one another and being obnoxious. Silent they were not, and they were climbing the tables and chairs like it was a jungle gym. Dale's badge, marked as LIBRARIAN, was clearly showing on his chest. Other students slowly turned their heads to Dale. Silently, they judged him—demanding that he do something about their behavior. How come they couldn't do it? They also had mouths; they could speak up. Yet, he knew the reason: he was the librarian, and it was his responsibility.

With a heavy sigh, he walked up to the three students and stared at them. *Please stop*, he thought to himself. He hoped sincerely that his command would telepathically enter their brains. Unfortunately, they ignored him and played tag between the stacks. Perhaps he should call his director. She had a booming voice, and everyone respected her. He turned around and walked briskly to her office. However, after a few steps, he heard a loud thud. He turned to see some of the books on the ground. The three students were too preoccupied with their game to notice. More students turned to look at Dale—perplexed that nothing was being done. Clenching his fists to foster some courage, he approached the three students.

"Excuse me," he said timidly. The three students danced around him. He spoke more loudly. "Enough!" The three stopped. He now had their attention. "Please respect the library."

"My mom works at town hall," said one of the students. "Do you like your job?"

Shocked, Dale fumbled with what to say. Before he had a chance to speak, a student who was watching idly replied, "You heard the librarian, cut it out." A few more students chimed in. Now, all stared at the three students. In silence, the three troublemakers walked out of the library.

Once the theme was established, it was not only easier to visualize the plot but also the roles of the protagonist and the additional characters. In this scenario, the theme extended beyond Dale and to the three students as well as the rest of the students. Dale wanted to defer responsibility to his boss, but ultimately took responsibility. The students who stood idly by also realized that they too had a responsibility to support the librarian. Finally, the three students begrudgingly complied with the rules. In some way, the theme is pervasive throughout.

However, what's important to note is that my "Well Developed" theme wasn't established at first. Instead, it eventually emerged by just some freestyle writing. It's perfectly acceptable to even write a first or second draft before finally crafting a solid theme. Sometimes, it takes a while to figure out exactly what the whole point of your story is. That's okay. However, once you have developed a good theme, be sure to focus on developing and reinforcing it in subsequent drafts (we'll talk more about that in [Drafting and Revising](#)).

Remember, completing a story without a good theme will eventually have the readers asking: "So what?"

10.4: Check In: Selecting the Right Theme

Check In: Developing a Theme - Drag and Drop

Needs Improvement

The only v
people is to
ourselves v
g

Needs Adjusting

Love is
important

Well Developed

War is bad

Fa

✓ Check

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H-P

10.1: Reading Exercise – Validation

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10.1: Reading Exercise – Validation



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10.1.1: Validation

By James Thibeault

Jessica looked into the kitchen and saw the burnt toast, the unwashed dishes, the spilt jar of strawberry jam, the empty dog dish, the sad dog staring up at Jessica because of the empty dog dish, and the five-year-old at the kitchen table who refused to finish their cereal. She wanted to scream, but good mothers don't scream. Instead, they hold it all together and clean up the messes. Jessica bit her lip and tried to break down the tasks in a clear and functional way. If she could manage an office, she could manage her own kitchen.

First, breathe. Instead of yelling like she used to, she closed her eyes, breathed in deep through her nose, and trapped the air in her lungs. Once she controlled the air, she could control the moment. However, when she inhaled, all she smelled was strawberries and smoke. She quickly exhaled with a mixture of groans. When she opened her eyes, she saw a few more problems. Jorge had left his phone on the counter, and the TV was still on—blasting an ad for a new miracle drug. She felt the urge to burst but decided to breathe one more time. She inhaled.

"Woof" went Jasper. It was a simple request, translating to "Hey, I'm hungry." When Jessica did not reply, Jasper tried again. "Woof," he went, a bit harder of the F sound. This change in tone implied "You're killing me, Jessica, I'm a growing boy." Gritting her teeth, she tried one last time to breathe. She hastily sucked in air and held it captive. One ... two ... three ... before she had a chance to count to four, Jasper barked.

"Alright!" she whisper-yelled to Jasper. Part snarl, part smile, Jessica shouted to the dog without opening her mouth. She marched over to the cabinet and lugged out the giant bag of kibble. With a heavy grunt, she lifted the bag and tilted it over so Jasper could have his breakfast. When she put the bag away, Jasper still wouldn't eat. "I'm busy, Jasper," she said and went back to assessing how to tackle the kitchen. Still, Jasper stared her down. Feeling Jasper's pathetic eyes bore into her soul, she begrudgingly bent down and scratched his ears. "You are a good boy," she said with little enthusiasm. Finally receiving what he wanted, Jasper began to eat.

A phone rang. Instinctively, Jessica patted her pockets. It wasn't hers, so whose was it? Was it the TV? Annoyed, she ran across the kitchen to turn it off—tripping over one of Mason's building blocks. She almost swore, but immediately corrected to "Sheesh." Jessica looked down and saw a destroyed village on the kitchen tile. She bent down to pick up some of the blocks when the phone rang again.

"Phone, Mommy." Mason tapped his spoon to the bowl.

"Thanks, baby," she said, exhaustedly. "Can you please pick up your blocks?"

"But Daddy knocked them over."

"I know, but—"

"He said you burnt his toast."

"What?" she said a bit too loud.

"He didn't pick them up because he had to get new toast."

"Oh. Really?" Jessica grabbed her husband's phone, and briefly walked just outside of the kitchen. When her mouth was hidden from Mason, she answered the phone.

"Good morning, husband. Forget your phone?"

"Yeah, I was in a rush today. Can you drop it off later after daycare?"

"Sure, right after I burn a few more things in this kitchen."

"What are you talking about?"

"You told Mason I burnt the toast?"

"You're the one who pushed it down."

"I didn't set the setting to five," she resumed her whisper yelling. "You put it back to five when I told you three is the best number."

"But three makes it too soft."

"So use four!" Jessica shouted but sucked in the noise immediately. Mason peered up from his cereal, and Jessica happily waved to her son. She went back to her conversation. "I have to go. I'll drop it off when I can."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Bye."

"Wait."

"What?"

"You forgot to say it."

Jessica groaned, "I love you."

"I love you ..." He dangled the last word, waiting for something else to be said.

"Please don't, it's been a rough morning."

"I love you ..."

"Ugh. I love you too, snuggle bear."

"I love you, too. Have a great day."

Jessica hung up and put the phone in her pocket. She leaned against the door frame and tried to breathe. Mason was still tapping on his spoon, so trying to meditate away the stress was out of the question. Annoyed, Jessica sucked in a huge gust of air and ventured back into the kitchen. All that remained was the jam mess and the unwashed dishes. Jessica's body went toward the jam, but her head stared at the messy dishes. Then, her head and body positions reversed. Her hands mimicked handwashing while her head swiveled to see the jam. She oscillated back and forth—unsure what to do. Her breath accelerated, and she felt her chest tighten. Jam or dish, jam or dish. It wasn't a hard decision, she thought, but she remained dawdling in indecision. Jessica put her hands down, then clamped them into her chest.

There is too much, this is always too much.

One thing fixed and another thing broken.

Always going, always moving. Never stopping.

Jam or dish. Jam or dish.

Stop or go. Stop or die.

Need to hold it in.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Please breathe.

Her thoughts were shattered when a tiny hand pulled at Jessica.

“You okay, Mommy?”

“Yeah, sweetie,” she forced a smile. “I’m fine.”

“Do you want me to watch me finish my cereal? I’m just need to slurp the milk.”

“Okay, baby. Just give me a minute.”

Jessica braced her hands on the counter. Finally, she breathed in deep and controlled her breath. Swiftly, she cleaned up the mess with the jam and decided to do the dishes after she dropped Mason and the phone off. Exhausted, she collapsed onto one of the kitchen chairs.

“Mommy, look!” Mason was smiling with an empty bowl.

“Great job, Mason.” She feigned excitement. Mason smiled back.

She closed her eyes and rested her head on the table. After a moment, she felt a soft tap on her head.

“You’re a good Mommy,” said Mason.

Jessica smiled sincerely, and she did not fight back the tears that came down her face.

10.1.1.1: [Comprehension Questions for Validation](#)

Which of these things did Jessica not see when she looked into the kitchen?

☐ Burnt toast.

☐ Unwashed dishes.

☐ Spilled strawberry jam.

☐ Her credit card.

✓ Check



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Which one of these themes would best fit the opening paragraph:

- ☐ For some people, day-to-day life can be overwhelming at times.
- ☐ It's always important to feed the dog.
- ☐ Women can both manage an office and the home at the same time.
- ☐ Young children can be a handful.

✓ Check



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11: Drafting and Revising



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Learning Objectives

- Recognize the value of reading and studying various forms of stories to enhance writing abilities.
- Learn the process of writing multiple drafts and how each draft contributes to improving the final story.
- Understand the significance of accepting and utilizing constructive criticism to enhance storytelling.

So you finished reading all the sections. Now what?

The simple answer is to just start writing. The only way to improve as a storyteller is to practice. Not everything that you create will be good, and that's okay. In fact, that's expected. Just like any skill, no one will be proficient instantly. There will always be a cycle of creating a work, noticing flaws, and fixing those mistakes. That process can be agonizingly slow, frustrating, and demoralizing. However, you will get better, you will improve, and soon you will create stories that are engaging, riveting, and thought-provoking. Just write.

However, here is some more tangible advice to improve as a writer:

11.1: Read More Stories and Study Them

The best way to improve is to read as many stories as you can and appreciate what makes them special. The classic response is to read more books, but you can also find stories in films, shows, video games, and by simply listening to other people. However you choose to read more stories, it's important to read and absorb a lot of them. Each story is a unique experience, filled with different interpretations and viewpoints of life. The more stories you read, the more experiences you obtain.

On top of reading more, find the stories you like the best and study them. Ask yourself, "What makes them so good?" Perhaps you can read more from that author or read works from critics who study that author. More importantly, understand what core aspects you enjoy from these stories and see if you can incorporate them into your own writing. This does not mean plagiarizing but learning certain techniques that the author used and creating new works using those techniques. How does the author develop their characters? How exactly is their plot paced? Learning the answers to these questions not only makes you appreciate the difficult task it is to create a story, but it will also improve your skills as a writer.

11.2: Read More Books on Storytelling

There are so many great works on storytelling, and it would be a disservice not to mention at least a few of them in this guide. If you are interested in learning more about this craft, consider purchasing these books or borrowing them from your local library:

- Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting — Robert McKee
- Dialogue: The Art of Verbal Action for Page, Stage, and Screen — Robert McKee

- Save The Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need — Blake Snyder
- Your Screenplay Sucks!: 100 Ways to Make It Great — William M Akers
- Playwriting: How to Write for the Theater —Bernard Grebanier
- On Writing Well — William Zinsser

11.3: Write Multiple Drafts

It is absolutely unrealistic to think that your first draft of a story will be your best draft. Oftentimes, it is the weakest, and that's a good thing. That's because with each new draft, your story should improve. Every time you go back and modify your work, the end result will be a much stronger piece. Imagine the process like chiseling marble to make a statue. The sculptor cannot make a realistic figure on their first go-around. Instead, the first draft is a bulky representation of the final product. However, with each new draft, the sculptor will move away from the large chisels and more toward precise and intimate ones. The final draft may only consist of polishes and light touch-ups.



Marble statue of the Greek God Hermes - Public Domain. This statue wasn't completed in its first draft.

Writing drafts in storytelling works in a similar way. The first draft is rough, unpolished, and is simply a concept, not the finished product. The hardest part of writing a story is completing the first draft. If you manage to do that, congratulations, you have completed something that most people in the world struggle to accomplish. However, your work is not done yet. Your second and third drafts may involve significant alterations, but they should ultimately improve the piece. The following drafts will become less time consuming because they should require less modifications. The final draft should be like a tiny chisel to a statue—only minor adjustments.

Below is an example of how your draft schedule may look. It could take more drafts than this, but the point here is to explain how each new draft should progress from big to smaller changes:

- **First Draft** – Focus on just finishing the story. Don't look back and make adjustments (you can do that later).
- **Second Draft** – Take a short break, almost forgetting what you originally wrote. With a new set of eyes, reread your work. Focus on making sure the plot is cohesive, expanding sections that need more clarification, and shortening parts that are too bloated.
- **Third Draft** – Focus on the flow and essence of the piece. Is the theme present? Do you think the message is getting across yet? How does it sound when read aloud? Do you think the audience will be able to follow your theme?
- **Fourth Draft** – Focus more on the word choice and technical issues. It is only at this draft should you focus on whether that “comma is in the right place” or something like that. Sure, you can fix obvious mistakes as you go, but don't fixate on grammar in previous drafts if you are just going to make corrections to that part anyway.
- **Fifth Draft** – Polish the work, tidy up minor mistakes, and revel in your success. You completed a story. That alone is an accomplishment—whether or not anyone reads it.

11.4: Take Criticism

The worst type of author is one who refuses to listen to criticism from others. These authors have an arrogance about them, and their stories will naturally have flaws as a result. An attack on their work is like an attack on them. They may choose to completely ignore the criticism or aggressively defend their decisions. However they proceed, their stories rarely elevate to good works. Even if an author is talented, their refusal to listen to good criticism will often hold them back from making spectacular stories.

Receiving criticism is hard at first. For some, their stories may have taken months or years to write. Then, a person may come along to say that they must completely change some sections, or maybe hint that the story isn't quite good. This can be incredibly discouraging, and for many, it is simply easier to ignore these points. However, most people who critique stories have your best interest in heart. They are reading it without a deep attachment, and they can provide fresh perspectives that you may have never noticed. Granted, not all criticism from others is useful, but most of it will be of value. These critics may tell you exactly how to make your piece better, so why are you refusing to listen? Which is more important, to improve the story or to preserve your ego?

The more you listen to feedback from others, the easier it will be to accept these notes—however harsh they may be. Eventually, you may look forward to criticism like a long-awaited package arriving at your door. Be sure to thank those who have taken their valuable time to read your stories. Professional editors can be expensive, so often your first critics will be your friends and family who do so out of pure generosity. Thank them for their time.

11.5: Writing with AI

Perhaps the most controversial piece of advice, which I deliberately saved for last, is to work with AI to improve your writing. The key phrase is *working with* AI, not having AI write your entire story for you and claiming it as your own. A calculator is a useful tool to crunch numbers, and it can be pigheaded to refuse assistance from a calculator for solving very complex equations. AI tools can aid in generating new ideas, offering feedback, checking for errors, and helping overall to improve your piece. In addition, the responses from AI tools are near instant. Human feedback will often provide more personable criticism and notes, and that can be an invaluable resource. However, ignoring the convenience and strengths of AI when it comes to writing can also be a missed opportunity.

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Conclusion



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Conclusion

Just like a conclusion of a story, I'll keep this brief.

Like any artform, there are two things that emerge when you create something: the product and your experience when making the product. In our world, we're often so focused on creating something for the result of the product. When we create this product—say a book or a play—we may believe we will be rewarded with millions of dollars, movie rights, interviews, and fame beyond our imagination. For some, the works that authors produce will do just that. However, and I hate to be realistic, the work that you produce is unlikely to be the next great novel. You may complete your piece only to have a few people read it. It may only sell a few dozen copies. This can be demoralizing, but if you are only creating art to be famous, then you are missing the point of art in general.

Art and writing changes us as people. When you write, you are taking the essence of your soul—composed of memories, feelings, and thoughts—and putting them onto paper. Your writing is you in words. It is a chance to let you be you in a creative form. For me, writing has always been a safe place to process my emotions. It has been a refuge to explore my mind and try to understand this crazy and complex world we live in. When my mother died unexpectedly, writing helped me overcome my grief. Let your writing represent you and less on a product for people to consume. While easier said than done, be less interested in book sales and prouder of the fact that you can put meaningful art out to the world for people to experience.

When you write only for the dream of fame, you forget the other thoughts that you have dreamt. There are many important stories that are left to be told, and you have the chance to make them happen. The legendary author Kurt Vonnegut once wrote: "Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia." If you can write a story that can move the soul of one person, even if that is yourself, then that is a success—regardless of sales.

So go out and write.

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Glossary

Definition: Address the Problem

When the protagonist performs a significant action in direct response to the problem that is confronting them.

Definition: Basic Format

A collection of essential story elements that make up the beginning, middle, and end (BME) of a narrative.

Definition: Catalyst

A significant event or moment that directly impacts the character—resulting in some sort of change.

Definition: Change in the Protagonist

The gradual personality change of a character that begins to appear noticeable around halfway through the story.

Definition: Character Admiration

Designing a character so their traits are looked up to by the reader

Definition: Character Arc

The gradual change of a character that occurs from the Beginning and concludes at the End.

Definition: Character Empathy

Designing a character so that the reader is able to understand how the character thinks and feels on a personal level.

Definition: Character Likeability

Developing certain traits or actions in a character to make the reader develop an emotional attachment.

Definition: Character Sympathy

Designing a character so that their misgivings or hardships will develop compassion from the reader.

Definition: Conclusion

The results of **The Test** that determine whether the protagonist solves the problem or not.

Definition: Dawn Traits

The personality traits of a character toward the beginning of the story.

Definition: Descriptors

Words or phrases that assist the reader in visualizing a character or setting more succinctly.

Definition: Dialogue

When a character speaks either to themselves or to another character in which their voice is present in the text.

 Definition: Digging a Hole

A narrative limitation where characters are put into a puzzle in which the author must develop a creative solution.

 Definition: Dusk Traits

The personality traits of a character toward the end of the story.

 Definition: Exposition

A **Tell** technique that explains the background information about the setting, characters, and problem of a story.

 Definition: First Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented using I/Me pronouns.

 Definition: High Noon Traits

Somewhere in the middle of the story where a character has transitioned away from their Dawn traits but has not reached their Dusk traits—creating a hybrid mixture of the two.

 Definition: Imperative Tone

A type of second person perspective in which the reader is given commands with a verb in its infinitive state.

 Definition: Play writing

Not to be confused with playwriting, play writing is experimenting with limitations that are more than likely to fail, but its low-stakes allow for fun exploration that will ultimately improve the author long-term.

 Definition: Point of No Return

A point in the story where the protagonist makes a critical decision or performs an irreversible action that significantly alters the course of the story.

 Definition: Point of View

The perspective that the reader has access to when connecting to particular characters in the story.

 Definition: Problem

A situation that negatively affects the protagonist so much that they must come up with a solution.

 Definition: Prompt

Technical limitation, such as a word, phrase, or question designed to inspire a creative response.

 Definition: Protagonist

The character whose actions will push the plot until the end of the story.

 Definition: Second Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented either through *you* pronouns or through the imperative tone.

 Definition: Setting

The location of the story, which comprises of space, time, and conditions of the area.

 Definition: Show

Providing indirect information so the reader must piece together what the author is trying to convey.

 Definition: 'So What?' Clause

A rhetorical question(s) to ask oneself when writing in order to determine whether a character, chapter, setting, or other element is actually needed in a story.

 Definition: Story Elements

Noticeable actions or moments in the story that either set up or move the plot forward.

 Definition: Suspense

The stress felt by the audience on whether the tension in the moment will result in a significant consequence.

 Definition: Tell

Providing direct information to the reader rather than having them infer the information on their own.

 Definition: Tension

The stress felt by the audience as two forces exert pressure on one another.

 Definition: Test

The event that occurs after the protagonist performs an action that triggers **The Point of No Return**.

 Definition: Theme

A central idea or resonating message that emerges from story elements like characters, setting, and plot—often reflecting on some insight about being human.

 Definition: Third Person Closed

Using third person to only focus on one character throughout the story.

 Definition: Third Person Open

Using third person to move through multiple characters throughout the story.

 Definition: Third Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented either through they/them pronouns or through their name.



Definition: Voice

The character's personality that is reflected through the dialogue the character speaks with.

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AI Disclosure

AI Disclosure

The majority of this guide was written solely by the author. In some instances, generative AI tools were utilized to:

Claude 3 Sonnet assisted with:

- Generating some of the assessment questions throughout the guide.
- Generating some of the learning objectives throughout this guide.

Copilot assisted with:

- Generating initial “Bending the Stick” graphic found in Section 7’s [Bending the Stick](#)
 - Image was heavily altered by the author using Adobe Photoshop.

OpenAI assisted with:

- General brainstorming on certain topics.

About the Author + A Special Thank You

About the Author

James Thibeault is an Open Educational Resources Librarian at Bentley University.

This guide was a passion project combining his love for both writing and OER. While this guide is completely free, consider supporting him by purchasing some of his previous books or renting them at your local library:

Deacon's Folly – James Thibeault – 978-1941644737

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A Special Thank You

Kelly Buffum – Reviewer

Randy Rosenthal – Editor

Rick DC – Cover Art

Conclusion



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Conclusion

Just like a conclusion of a story, I'll keep this brief.

Like any artform, there are two things that emerge when you create something: the product and your experience when making the product. In our world, we're often so focused on creating something for the result of the product. When we create this product—say a book or a play—we may believe we will be rewarded with millions of dollars, movie rights, interviews, and fame beyond our imagination. For some, the works that authors produce will do just that. However, and I hate to be realistic, the work that you produce is unlikely to be the next great novel. You may complete your piece only to have a few people read it. It may only sell a few dozen copies. This can be demoralizing, but if you are only creating art to be famous, then you are missing the point of art in general.

Art and writing changes us as people. When you write, you are taking the essence of your soul—composed of memories, feelings, and thoughts—and putting them onto paper. Your writing is you in words. It is a chance to let you be you in a creative form. For me, writing has always been a safe place to process my emotions. It has been a refuge to explore my mind and try to understand this crazy and complex world we live in. When my mother died unexpectedly, writing helped me overcome my grief. Let your writing represent you and less on a product for people to consume. While easier said than done, be less interested in book sales and prouder of the fact that you can put meaningful art out to the world for people to experience.

When you write only for the dream of fame, you forget the other thoughts that you have dreamt. There are many important stories that are left to be told, and you have the chance to make them happen. The legendary author Kurt Vonnegut once wrote: "Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia." If you can write a story that can move the soul of one person, even if that is yourself, then that is a success—regardless of sales.

So go out and write.

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Glossary

Definition: Address the Problem

When the protagonist performs a significant action in direct response to the problem that is confronting them.

Definition: Basic Format

A collection of essential story elements that make up the beginning, middle, and end (BME) of a narrative.

Definition: Catalyst

A significant event or moment that directly impacts the character—resulting in some sort of change.

Definition: Change in the Protagonist

The gradual personality change of a character that begins to appear noticeable around halfway through the story.

Definition: Character Admiration

Designing a character so their traits are looked up to by the reader

Definition: Character Arc

The gradual change of a character that occurs from the Beginning and concludes at the End.

Definition: Character Empathy

Designing a character so that the reader is able to understand how the character thinks and feels on a personal level.

Definition: Character Likeability

Developing certain traits or actions in a character to make the reader develop an emotional attachment.

Definition: Character Sympathy

Designing a character so that their misgivings or hardships will develop compassion from the reader.

Definition: Conclusion

The results of **The Test** that determine whether the protagonist solves the problem or not.

Definition: Dawn Traits

The personality traits of a character toward the beginning of the story.

Definition: Descriptors

Words or phrases that assist the reader in visualizing a character or setting more succinctly.

Definition: Dialogue

When a character speaks either to themselves or to another character in which their voice is present in the text.

 Definition: Digging a Hole

A narrative limitation where characters are put into a puzzle in which the author must develop a creative solution.

 Definition: Dusk Traits

The personality traits of a character toward the end of the story.

 Definition: Exposition

A **Tell** technique that explains the background information about the setting, characters, and problem of a story.

 Definition: First Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented using I/Me pronouns.

 Definition: High Noon Traits

Somewhere in the middle of the story where a character has transitioned away from their Dawn traits but has not reached their Dusk traits—creating a hybrid mixture of the two.

 Definition: Imperative Tone

A type of second person perspective in which the reader is given commands with a verb in its infinitive state.

 Definition: Play writing

Not to be confused with playwriting, play writing is experimenting with limitations that are more than likely to fail, but its low-stakes allow for fun exploration that will ultimately improve the author long-term.

 Definition: Point of No Return

A point in the story where the protagonist makes a critical decision or performs an irreversible action that significantly alters the course of the story.

 Definition: Point of View

The perspective that the reader has access to when connecting to particular characters in the story.

 Definition: Problem

A situation that negatively affects the protagonist so much that they must come up with a solution.

 Definition: Prompt

Technical limitation, such as a word, phrase, or question designed to inspire a creative response.

 Definition: Protagonist

The character whose actions will push the plot until the end of the story.

 Definition: Second Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented either through *you* pronouns or through the imperative tone.

 Definition: Setting

The location of the story, which comprises of space, time, and conditions of the area.

 Definition: Show

Providing indirect information so the reader must piece together what the author is trying to convey.

 Definition: 'So What?' Clause

A rhetorical question(s) to ask oneself when writing in order to determine whether a character, chapter, setting, or other element is actually needed in a story.

 Definition: Story Elements

Noticeable actions or moments in the story that either set up or move the plot forward.

 Definition: Suspense

The stress felt by the audience on whether the tension in the moment will result in a significant consequence.

 Definition: Tell

Providing direct information to the reader rather than having them infer the information on their own.

 Definition: Tension

The stress felt by the audience as two forces exert pressure on one another.

 Definition: Test

The event that occurs after the protagonist performs an action that triggers **The Point of No Return**.

 Definition: Theme

A central idea or resonating message that emerges from story elements like characters, setting, and plot—often reflecting on some insight about being human.

 Definition: Third Person Closed

Using third person to only focus on one character throughout the story.

 Definition: Third Person Open

Using third person to move through multiple characters throughout the story.

 Definition: Third Person Perspective

Written works in which the main character is represented either through they/them pronouns or through their name.



Definition: Voice

The character's personality that is reflected through the dialogue the character speaks with.

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