

CREATIVE WRITING

Story Steps

Story steps & templates to brainstorm
12 different writing genres



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Character Sketch

To write convincing characters, you need to know more about them than anyone else knows, including your reader. You need to know the details of your character's past in order to make them behave in believable and consistent ways. You do not have to share all these details in your story. As a matter of fact, it's almost always a bad idea to even try. But think through these questions and any others you can think of for your protagonist, antagonist, and other major characters.

Personality

Is he quiet, outspoken, shy, brash, encouraging, hurtful, careless, etc.?

Education

What educational background does he have?

Habits

Does he have a habit he is trying to break? Does he have idiosyncrasies that could help the story (like twiddling his thumbs, playing with his car keys, etc.)?

Family

Is he married or single? Has he ever been married or divorced? Does he have children? Who are his parents? What did they do for a living? Are they still alive? Does he have any siblings? Is he the oldest, youngest, or something else?

Physical Description

What is the height and weight of your character? What shape is his face? What color hair and eyes does he have? Does he have any distinguishing features that set him apart (birthmark, scar, etc.)? How old is he?

Daily Life

Where does he live? What does he do for a living? Does he like or hate his job? Who does he work with? What kind of neighborhood does he live in? Does he have neighbors? Does he get along with them or are there tensions?

More Details...

What other details can you think of when you picture your character?

Antagonists & Conflict

When you are brainstorming your story, it's important to think of who your antagonist is going to be. This is the character who most opposes your hero. But you also need to remember that your antagonist isn't always a single person. There are many ways to weave conflict into your story. Conflict can be broken down into various categories.

For example, one of the most common types of conflict to find in a story is man against man. This is where one person opposes another. The good guy and the bad guy. I'm sure you can think of many stories where this is the case.

But what if the real antagonist isn't a single person? What if it's really an entire town or political system? Maybe you are writing a Western, and your hero is a young lawmaker who is trying to bring law and justice to a community. The antagonist might be embodied by a crooked sheriff, but the real antagonist might be the entire political structure that allows him to control the town, the people who keep him in power, and the ones who refuse to act and right the wrongs. You can also see this in a story about a revolutionary who is fighting Communism in his or her country, etc. This type of conflict is called man vs. society.

Sometimes, nature is the primary antagonist. Imagine your hero is lost in a desert. In this case, the desert and nature itself (the hot sun, the lack of water, etc.) is the real antagonist. This is called man vs. nature.

Another source of conflict is man vs. self. Maybe your character is the one who stands in his own way. Maybe it's a trauma from his past or a fear of something that tries to keep him from reaching his goal. Maybe it's an addiction or a part of his life he is unwilling to let go of.

Whatever your sources of conflict, it's vital that your story has conflict. It doesn't have to be a major gunfight or battle, but the hero must have to risk a lot to face the enemy so that he can grow and be changed by the experience. This allows your reader to feel as if he or she has been part of something special and powerful.

Fiction: Novel

A novel is usually a long work that has one main plot and one or more subplots. It generally needs a medium or large cast of characters to accomplish this. Some will appear briefly (such as a cab driver), while others will be critical to the plot. A novel must have something the hero wants, obstacles that stand in his way, and a conclusion. The hero should also change in some way as he attempts to reach his goal.

When

is your story set?

Where

is your story set?

Who

is your hero?

Who

is your antagonist?

Who

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

What

obstacles or challenges will your hero face?

What

other characters are needed to tell your story?

How

will the hero ultimately succeed?
What will this success cost him?

How

will the hero's journey change him?

Fiction: Short Story

Unlike a novel, a short story generally has one main plot but no (or extremely limited) subplots. This means your story has to be sharply focused. Everything that happens must move toward that single goal. You will need a hero and an antagonist. Often, your additional cast of characters will be limited. As with a novel, the hero must have something he wants, obstacles that stand in his way, and a conclusion, and the hero's journey should change him in some way.

When

is your story set?

Where

is your story set?

Who

is your hero?

Who

is your antagonist?

What

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

What

obstacles or challenges will your hero face?

What

other characters are needed to tell your story?

How

will the hero ultimately succeed?
What will this success cost him?

How

will the hero's journey change him?

Fiction: Mystery

To be a mystery, a story has to include something that needs solved, someone to solve it, and the person responsible. Your setting will have a tremendous impact on what the situation can be and who both your hero and your villain are.

When

is your story set?

Where

is your story set?

Who

is your hero?

Who

is guilty?

What

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

What

obstacles will your hero face in solving the mystery?

What

will the key piece of the mystery be?

How

will your hero find it?

What

additional characters can be potential suspects?

How

will he finally overcome?

Fiction: Fable

A fable is usually written in narrative form where the author is the narrator sharing the events that unfold. Its characters are generally animals who have human characteristics, and the story usually teaches a moral lesson.

Where

is your story set? Is it set in the forest, the desert, the swamp, etc.?

What

is the moral lesson you want to convey?

Who

is your hero that shows positive behavior?

Who

is your antagonist that shows negative behavior?

What

does the hero want?

How

does your antagonist try to prevent your hero from succeeding?

Who

are other characters needed to tell your story?

How

will the hero ultimately teach the antagonist a lesson?

Will

the antagonist be changed by what has happened, or will he continue to behave as he did before?

Fiction: Fantasy

A fantasy story involves people, places, and events that are unexplainable. It usually includes elements such as fantastic creatures or people with extraordinary abilities. It does not generally attempt to explain these things but simply presents them. Writing a fantasy story requires the author to create his or her own world (including the natural laws that govern it). For example, maybe your world does not have the same kind of gravity as we have on Earth. One important thing to keep in mind when creating this world, however, is to keep it consistent. If characters are floating through the air with no gravity in one chapter, they cannot be sitting in chairs in the next chapter—unless you give a very convincing reason.

Who

is your hero?

Who

is your antagonist?

What

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

What

obstacles or challenges will your hero face?

How

will the hero ultimately succeed? What will this success cost him?

How

will the hero's journey change him?

What

are some of the elements you will need in your fantasy world?

Fiction: Science Fiction

Science fiction seems similar to fantasy at first, but one of the main differences is that you must give more of an explanation when you have something unbelievable. The explanation should involve science or what could be science someday. For example, if having a blue sun is important to your story, that's fine. But you will need to give some explanation as to why the sun is blue (and why that's important). Does it have to do with chemical composition, rotation, a failed experiment by the people in the story, etc.? You do not have to explain every element, but as with fantasy, keeping the elements consistent is key.

Who

is your hero?

Who

is your antagonist?

What

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

What

obstacles or challenges will your hero face?

How

will the hero ultimately succeed? What will this success cost him?

How

will the hero's journey change him?

What

are some of the elements you will need in your fictitious world? How will you explain them?

Fiction: Suspense

In suspense, it's all about making your reader hold his or her breath. Something bad always has to be just around the corner. Your hero's goal will be to keep that awful thing from happening and maybe protect other characters in the process. But just because your story is about something scary does not mean you can ignore the other parts of a good story. Your hero needs to face challenges and ultimately grow as he seeks to survive and even overcome.

When

is your story set?

Where

is your story set?

Who

is your hero?

Who

is your antagonist? What is the threat that constantly hangs over your hero's head?

What

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

What

obstacles or challenges will your hero face?

What

other characters are needed to tell your story?

How

will the hero ultimately succeed?
What will this success cost him?

How

will the hero's journey change him?

Fiction: Western

A good Western has all the elements of a good story, but the setting is more limited. A Western can't be set in Chicago during the 1920s. It has to be on the American frontier, usually in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Because of this, there are many inventions and discoveries your characters will not have access to. You have to plan your story with those limitations in mind. There are other elements that are also often included in a Western, such as cowboys, a gun fight, and often times, a romance.

When

is your story set?

Where

is your story set?

Who

is your hero?

Who

is your antagonist?

What

obstacles or challenges will your hero face?

What

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

How

will being set in the American West influence your story?

What

other characters are needed to tell your story?

How

will the hero ultimately succeed?
What will this success cost him?

How

will the hero's journey change him?

Fiction: Fan Fiction

Fan fiction is a fun way to write what you think should have happened, or wish would have happened, in your favorite TV show, movie, or book. Is there an adventure someone never got to have? Is there someone you wish your favorite characters could meet? Do you want to know what happens after “The End”? Fan fiction is writing a story that continues the story you have read or watched. It can be great fun to let your imagination run away with you as you continue a favorite story. It is important to keep in mind, however, that there are many rules about whether you are allowed to publish fan fiction or share it with others. The characters you are writing about all belong to other authors. So go ahead and enjoy writing your story, but be sure to do your homework on the rules before you share it online or publish it for others to read.

What

is your story based on?

Where & When

is your story set?

Who

is your hero?

Who

is your antagonist?

What

is the inciting incident, the event that starts your hero on his journey?

What

obstacles or challenges will your hero face?

How

will the hero ultimately succeed? What will this success cost him?

Nonfiction: Biography

A biography tells the story of a person's life. If you are telling your own story, it's a memoir or an autobiography. Biographies do more than just list facts about a person. They draw the reader in so they experience the life of the person. In writing a biography, it's important to know what the overall theme of the biography is going to be. You will need to use that as a filter when choosing what events to highlight. For example, is the biography about overcoming great obstacles or difficulties? When you choose stories from the person's childhood to share, it will be important to look for ones that show them developing an overcoming attitude. You could also share times when they failed to overcome but learned from that failure.

Who

is your biography going to be about?

How

will you obtain the information needed to write the biography?

What

is the theme of the biography?

What

aspects of your subject's personality do you want to highlight?

What

are some events from your subject's life that you know you want to share?

What

are some questions you will need to have answered in order to tell the story?

Are there...

historical events or specific time periods you need to learn more about to accurately tell the person's story?

Nonfiction: Do-it-Yourself & Self Help

The goal of do-it-yourself (DIY) books and self-help books is to show the reader how to accomplish something. If it's a project like building a chicken coop or a skill like crocheting, you would write a DIY book. If it's something like learning to control your temper, you would write a self-help book. To write a DIY book, you need to have a lot of knowledge about the subject. DIY books also generally require a great deal of photos or illustrations. When writing a self-help book, it's more acceptable for you as the author to admit that you don't know everything but are going to share what you've learned and struggled with.

What

will your DIY or self-help book teach?

What

experience do you have with this topic? If you do not have experience, what expert(s) will you work with on this project?

If

you are writing a DIY book, what steps will you need to show to complete your project?

If

you are writing a DIY book, how will you create the photographs or illustrations needed?

If

you are writing a self-help book, what parts of your journey will be important to share?

If

you are writing a self-help book, are there other people you can talk to for permission to share their stories or insights that pertain to your journey?

Nonfiction: Essay

There are many different types of essays. The exact format and style of your essay will be determined by what type of essay it is, who it is being written for, and what it needs to accomplish. However, there are some elements that are common to many types of essays.

The introductory paragraph needs to get your reader's attention, state the point you are going to elaborate on or prove in your essay (your thesis statement), and explain why this topic is important.

What

are you going to prove in your essay?

Why

is it important?

How

are you going to get the reader's attention?

The body paragraphs are going to expand on your topic, persuade your readers to see your point if you are writing a persuasive essay, or provide supporting facts related to your topic. For example, if you are writing about why dogs make good pets, you could explain each reason in a separate body paragraph. If you are presenting a point of view or an argument, clearly make one point in each paragraph. If you are writing about space exploration, include material related to the facts and events in each paragraph.

What

points do you need to make in your essay or what information do you need to share?

How

many paragraphs does this require?

The concluding paragraph briefly summarizes your essay and wraps up all that you've said in a concise way that supports your thesis statement.

How

will you tie all of the essay together?

Fiction: Putting it all Together

There are many methods for putting the pieces of your story together. Some people write ideas for scenes on index cards and organize them sequentially so they flow through the story. Some use sticky notes on a whiteboard in the same way. Other people prefer to write an outline, while others just sit down and type the story in whatever way it comes to mind. There are also a number of apps and online tools to help you organize your thoughts for writing a story.

While there is no wrong way to plan your story, there are rules you need to learn in order to write well. Learning the rules and following them while you are learning to write will help you gain experience and understand when it is OK to stretch or break the rules later.

One thing you will hear repeated over and over again as you study writing fiction is, “Show, don’t tell.” What that means is that you should usually show the reader what is happening rather than simply telling them about it. Which is more memorable? Telling your reader that a character is evil or showing how he does something despicable?

There is a caution in writing scenes full of description. Description is wonderful and is vital to good writing. You have to create a world real and vivid enough for the reader to see it in his or her own mind. But don’t write beautiful paragraphs simply because they are beautiful. Describing the breeze floating through a field of daisies is fine—if it moves your story forward or is important to set a mood. But don’t take a page to describe the field if the next thing that happens in the story has nothing to do with the field, flowers, relaxing in the sunshine, etc. If you do, you will leave your reader feeling confused and actually take them out of the story you are sharing.

Another key to putting your story together is to keep your character’s motivation in mind and make sure there is a reason for them being in the story and a reason for them acting the way they do. I once wrote a novel-length story where the villain simply shows up one day. An editor who was helping me prepare the first draft asked me why he was there. All I could think of is, “Because he’s the bad guy and is about to do something bad.” That’s really not a great answer. I needed to back up and give him a reason for suddenly becoming part of my heroine’s story. I also needed to give him a reason for why he acted the way he did.

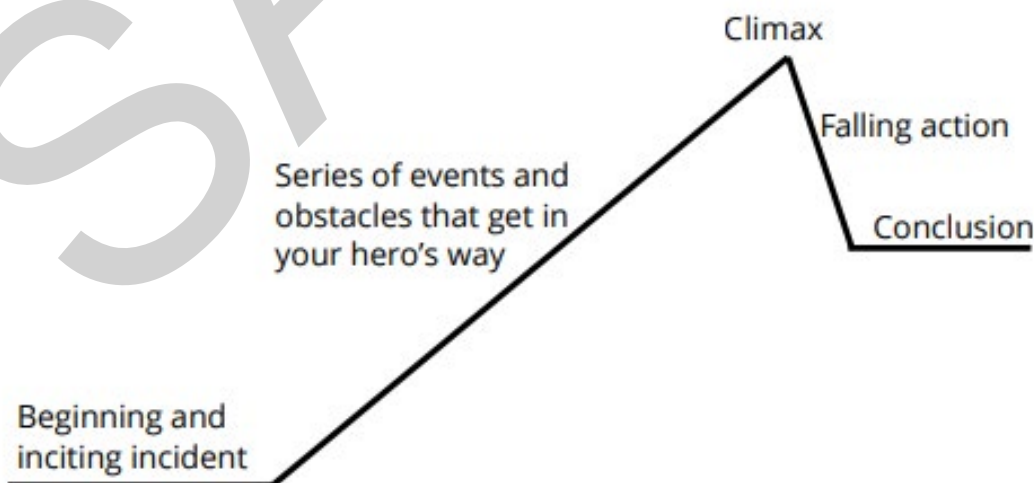
Fiction: Putting it all Together

However you go about assembling your story ideas, it's a good idea to take the time to make sure everything in your story serves a purpose and stays consistent. Does a character have brown eyes early in the story? He cannot have blue eyes later (unless he's wearing contacts you have told the reader about). Is your heroine afraid of the water? She cannot enjoy a dip in the pool later unless you've helped her overcome her fear of the water.

One other element is important to keep in mind. When you write the first draft of the story, it's perfectly fine to just write it. If you try to keep track of all the rules as you write, you'll cut off your creativity and make writing a chore. But once you've written your story, you have to rewrite and edit it many times before it is finished. As you edit and revise it, look for how the five senses are involved. We generally write a lot about what we see—the sunshine, the color of things, etc. Sometimes we write about sounds, like a phone ringing. But as you revise, try to incorporate as many of the senses as you can throughout the story. Don't miss opportunities for your characters to taste, smell, and touch things as well.

If you know the purpose of your story, have characters who act because of who they are and what motivates them, have conflicts and obstacles for your hero to overcome, and use good description in ways that keep your story moving forward, you will be well on your way to having a great story!

Let's take a look at this another way. One way of picturing your story is to see it in a diagram like this:



Fiction: Putting it all Together

Beginning and Inciting Incident

What is normal life, and what happens to disrupt everything?

Body of the Story

What key events need to happen, and what obstacles will your hero face?

Climax

What is the crisis point your hero faces, and how does the conflict between your hero and antagonist come to its most serious point?

Falling Action

This is the part where you give your characters room to breathe and regroup after the climax and to respond to what has happened

Conclusion

Make sure you tie up all loose ends.

Nonfiction: Putting it all Together

They key to nonfiction writing is logical organization. The material has to stay focused on your main point and flow from one thought to the next. Here's an example for an essay.

Introductory Paragraph

What is your hook to get the reader's attention? What is important about what you have to say? What is your thesis statement?

Body Paragraph

What is something that supports and develops your thesis statement?

Body Paragraph

What is something that supports and develops your thesis statement?

Body Paragraph

What is something that supports and develops your thesis statement?

Concluding Paragraph

Wrap up all you've said in a concise way that supports your thesis statement.