The background is a dark, textured collage of steampunk-style mechanical parts, including gears, pistons, and valves, rendered in shades of brown and black. A large, light-colored wooden letter 'X' is superimposed over the center of the image.

# THE STORY ENGINE

TM

## GUIDEBOOK



Introduction

The Story Engine™ is a deck of 180 cards for creating storytelling prompts for fiction, art, role-playing games, and more. You can use it on your own, or as a multiplayer activity (see p. 6).

The Story Engine™ has two rules:

- 1) Don't put the deck away until you create something. It can just be a word in a notebook or an idea in your head.
- 2) Ignore any card, rule, or guideline that doesn't help you create.

The deck is meant to serve your creative goals—not the other way around. Ditch the rules when they get in the way.

Five Types of Cards

The Story Engine™ deck contains five types of cards you can combine to build prompts. Prompts help you create ideas for stories, characters, conflicts, settings, magic items, adventure hooks, and more.

The five types of cards below represent five elements found in great stories.

The sets of white words on the edge of each card are called cues. When you lay out cards, the cue facing you is the one that is active in the prompt.

- 👤 **Agents**, ⚓ **Anchors**, and 🎭 **Aspects** each have four cues.
- ⚙️ **Engines** and ⚡ **Conflicts** each have two cues.

**👤 AGENTS**  
are characters who make choices in the story.

**⚙️ ENGINES**  
are motivations and relationships that drive the story.

**⚓ ANCHORS**  
are objects, locations, or events of importance.

**⚡ CONFLICTS**  
are obstacles, consequences, or dilemmas.

**🎭 ASPECTS**  
are adjectives that describe other cards.

Creating Simple Prompts

You can create simple prompts by arranging cards into patterns. There are three ways to arrange cards:

- 1) **Place:** Put a card on the table faceup. Place cards from left to right unless otherwise specified.
- 2) **Tuck:** Place a card faceup under another card so that one cue from the bottom card is visible.
- 3) **Rotate:** Turn a placed or tucked card so a new cue is facing you.

When creating a prompt, you may be instructed to draw more cards than you need. Choose the cards you want to keep and put the extras aside. These extras are called your *discards*.

You may rotate cards to use different cues at any time. You may also exchange cards from your prompt with your discards whenever you want.

Simple Prompt: Story Seed

The simplest prompt is created with one of each card type:

- A) Draw and place 👤 (1 Agent) to create a character.
- B) Draw and place ⚙️ (1 Engine) to give them a motivation.
- C) Draw and place ⚓ (1 Anchor) to create something they want.
- D) Draw and place ⚡ (1 Conflict) to create an obstacle or consequence.
- E) Draw and tuck 🎭 (1 Aspect) to add detail to a card.

When you are happy with the cards and cues you have chosen, interpret the prompt and start imagining a story. Read the cards from left to right. Remember that each cue can be interpreted literally or in an open-ended way.

Example: Story Seed

A survivor wants to expose the secret of a corrupted paradise but their community will reject them. This prompt might inspire a story about an apocalypse survivor who finds a seemingly perfect haven community with a dark secret and must decide whether to dig deeper. Or an ageing war veteran who moves into an idyllic senior's residence, only to discover it's being used to launder money.

You may want to use your prompt to:

- Write a story on the spot.
- Make notes for a future story.
- Take a picture to work from later.

You do not need to use the actual words from your cues in the story or idea you create. When you are done with a prompt, take it and your discards and put them on the bottom of the deck or shuffle them in randomly.

Optional Mechanic: Locking Cards

You may want to create a prompt that includes a story element you have already created, such as the main character from your novel or a location from your RPG campaign. This is called *locking* a card.

To do this, take the instructions for building a prompt and choose a card to replace with the pre-existing story element you want to use. When you reach that point in creating the prompt, place that card facedown.

The facedown card represents your pre-existing story element. For example, you might lock an **Agent** facedown to represent the main character of your novel. Place the rest of the prompt as usual to brainstorm a new story idea for them.

When drawing cards to place next to locked cards, you may draw an extra card so you have more choice in creating a good match with your story element. You do not need to tuck **Aspects** under locked cards unless you would like to brainstorm additional descriptive details for your pre-existing story element.

Example: Locking



The player in the previous example might lock the **Anchor** in Step C to represent their main character's hometown, a seaside village called Gullport. Now, a new character (a **ghostly survivor**) wants to expose the secret of Gullport but their community will reject them. This might inspire a story about a lingering ghost haunting the main character's community in an attempt to reveal how they died.

Simple Prompt: Character Concept

These instructions help create an idea for a complex character and a starting point for their character arc.

- A) Draw **Agents** and place 1 as the character.
- B) Draw **Effects** and place 1 as their motivation.
- C) Draw **Anchor** and **Agent** and choose 1 to place as the object of the character's desire.
- D) Draw and place **Obstacle** to create an obstacle.
- E) (Optional) Draw **Anchor** and tuck it under the card from Step A or C to provide a distinctive location or possession.
- F) Draw **Aspects** and tuck any number of them.

Example: Character Concept



A **decrepit prophet** with a **fiery shield** wants to steal from an **impulsive rival** but it will mean breaking a promise.

Tip for RPG players: Lock the card in Step C to represent a party member or something they love. Now you have an adventure hook: an interesting NPC whose agenda involves the party.

When tucking **Agents**, **Anchors**, and **Aspects** in a single stack, think of each **Agent** or **Anchor** as the start of a sub-unit within the stack. You can place each sub-unit further right within the stack to make the relationship between the related cards easier to identify.

Keep **Aspects** tucked at the bottom of the sub-unit of cards they apply to.

Simple Prompt: Item/Setting-Driven Story

This prompt creates an idea for an interesting prop and setting that will be the heart of a story.

- A) Draw **Anchors** and place 1 as an object. Tuck the other under as a setting for it.
- B) Draw **Effects** and place 1 as the effect the object will have on the story. It may help to ignore the phrasing of "wants to" and use "will" instead.
- C) Draw **Anchor** and **Agent** and choose 1 to place as a story element affected by the setting.
- D) Draw **Agents** and choose 1 to tuck under any **Anchor** to establish a character who owns it.
- E) (Optional) Draw **Obstacle** and place or discard it to create an obstacle or consequence for one of the characters.
- F) Draw **Aspects** and tuck any number of them.

Example: Item/Setting-Driven Story



A **long-lost book** in a **cave** owned by a **private witch** will end the power of a **besieged city** but it will cost their (the witch's) self-respect.


Tip for RPG players: Lock the card in Step C to represent the first party member to touch the object or enter the setting. Then, skip Steps D and E. Now you have an item and/or location that is sentient, haunted, or cursed, and has an agenda involving the party.
















## Changing a Prompt

Stuck with a prompt? Bored with a format? Remix your prompts to bust writer's block or train new creative muscles.



Reconsider your choices:

- **Rotate:** Rotate a card to a new cue and try re-interpreting the cards. Does it help to think of the cues more, or less, literally?
- **Relocate:** Move an  **Aspect** to a different card and optionally rotate it. Do you see that card in a new light?
- **Salvage:** Take a card from your discards and use it as a substitute for a card in the prompt. Does it help?





Tuck more story details:

- **Describe:** Draw and tuck . Do new details help?
- **Furnish:** Draw and tuck  under an existing  **Anchor** or  **Agent**. Does adding a location, prop, or personal possession to the existing card help bring the prompt into focus?
- **Bestow:** Draw and tuck  under an existing  **Anchor** to suggest an owner for it. Do story opportunities emerge if a character is connected to the object?
- **Specify:** If a  **Conflict** or  **Engine** leaves something open-ended (like referring to a "secret" or an "enemy"), draw and tuck  or  or  to fill in that detail. Is the prompt clearer?
- **Diversify:** Draw and tuck  under an existing  **Agent** to add a new dimension to their character. How does this change their options or role in the story?

Replace or remove cards:

- **Replace:** Remove a card and draw and replace it with a card of the same type. You may choose to replace an  **Anchor** with a new  **Agent**, or vice versa. Any better?
- **Simplify:** Remove a tucked card. Does this give you more room to interpret?

Reformat your prompt:






















- **Combine:** Turn an  **Engine** or  **Conflict** sideways to indicate that both cues apply. Your character now feels two conflicting motivations toward the same thing, or must choose between two obstacles/consequences. Does this make your character's desire more complex? What are they willing to do to get what they want?
- **Reverse:** Reverse the placement of two cards on either side of an  **Engine**, and consider interpreting that  **Engine**'s cues as "will" statements instead of "wants to" statements. How does the dynamic change? Can you tell the story this way?

And if a prompt just isn't working for you, don't be afraid to scrap it and start again.

## Complex Prompts








Complex prompts are made of one or more simple prompts arranged in a multi-directional structure. The prompts cannot be read from left to right, and instead are interpreted as a map of motivations and desires tying together the elements of a larger story web.

In a complex prompt:

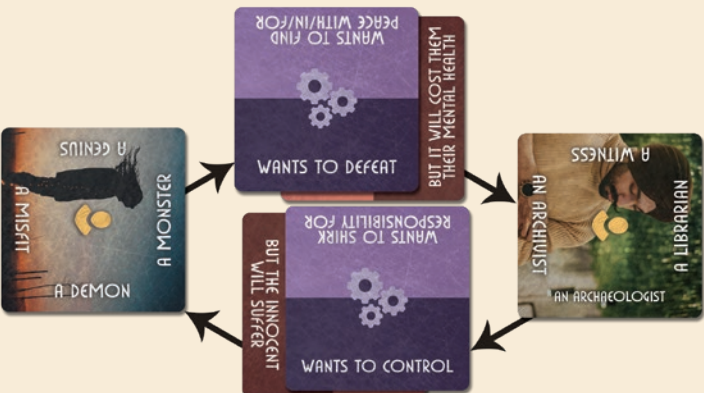
-  **Engines** and  **Conflicts** are always placed in tucked pairs, with the  **Conflict** tucked under the  **Engine**.
- - **Engine-Conflict** pairs have an orientation, meaning they originate from an  **Agent** or  **Anchor** (which wants something) and are oriented toward another  **Agent** or  **Anchor** (the object of its motivation).
- The orientation of an - **Engine-Conflict** pair is indicated by the side of the  **Engine** that the  **Conflict** is tucked on.
- Two - **Engine-Conflict** pairs can exist between the same two cards as long as they are oriented in opposite directions.
- You may ignore the cues on a  **Conflict** and use it simply for orientation if the cue overcomplicates your prompt.
- You may interpret an  **Engine** cue as beginning with "will" instead of "wants to" when an - **Engine-Conflict** pair belongs to an  **Anchor** and is oriented toward another card.

### Complex Prompt: Circle of Fate

This prompt ties two characters together in a dynamic two-way relationship. Position the cards at each step as shown so it can be interpreted as a circle.

- Draw and place  to create character #1.
- Draw  and . Choose 1 of each to create a tucked pair and place it, oriented right, to give character #1 a motivation (and optional obstacle) related to character #2.
- Draw and place  to create character #2.
- Draw  and . Choose 1 of each to create a tucked pair and place it, oriented left. This will be character #2's motivation (and optional obstacle) regarding character #1.
- Draw  and tuck any number of them.

#### Example: A Circle of Fate



A demon wants to defeat an archaeologist but it will cost them (the demon) their mental health. The archaeologist wants to control the demon but the innocent will suffer.

Complex Prompt: A Clash of Wills

In this prompt, two characters (usually rivals) want the same thing for different reasons.

Tip for RPG players: Turn one of the ☹️ Agents into an NPC and have them approach the party for help as an adventure hook. Now the party must either take a side or form their own.

- A) Draw and place ☹️ to create character #1.
- B) Draw 🌀🌀 and 🔴🔴. Choose 1 of each to create a tucked pair and place it, oriented right, to give character #1 a motivation (and optional obstacle).
- C) Draw ☹️ and ⚓ and place 1 as the person or thing motivating both characters.
- D) Draw 🌀🌀 and 🔴🔴. Choose 1 of each to create a tucked pair and place it, oriented left, to give character #2 a motivation (and optional obstacle).
- E) Draw ☹️☹️ and place 1 as character #2.
- F) Draw 🧠🧠🧠🧠 and tuck any number of them.

Example: A Clash of Wills



A bloody god wants to destroy the world with a dire contagion but they must face their deepest fear. A wounded villain wants to find redemption in the dire contagion but they may lose their life.

Complex Prompt: A Soul Divided

In this prompt, one character faces a choice between two things they care about and must choose only one.

- E) Draw ☹️ and ⚓ and choose 1 to place as the second object of desire.
- F) Draw 🧠🧠🧠🧠 and tuck any number of them.

With this prompt, you may ignore 🔴 Conflict cues and instead treat the character's choice between the two 🌀 Engines as their conflict.

Tip for RPG players: Lock the card in Step A or E to represent a party member or something they love. Now you have an adventure hook where an NPC (the ☹️ Agent in Step C) wants something from the party but has a second motivation that gives the party leverage.

- A) Draw ☹️ and ⚓ and choose 1 to place as the first object of desire.
- B) Draw 🌀🌀 and 🔴🔴. Choose 1 of each to create a tucked pair and place it, oriented left.
- C) Draw ☹️☹️ and place 1 as the main character.
- D) Draw 🌀🌀 and 🔴🔴. Choose 1 of each to create a tucked pair and place it, oriented right. This is the main character's competing motivation.

Example: A Soul Divided



An honest criminal wants to upstage a rival with a passionate letter but also wants to find a way back to their twin.

Expanding a Complex Prompt

When expanding a complex prompt (whether on your own or for a multiplayer prompt), it may help to play with the top card of each deck revealed. Every time you or another player draws a card, they may draw the revealed card or the card below it. This lets you look for opportunities to expand your story with greater intention and less random chance.

- **Create a story branch:** Draw 🌀 and 🔴, create a tucked pair, and place it oriented either toward or away from an existing ☹️ Agent or ⚓ Anchor. Then draw an ☹️ and ⚓ and choose 1 to place on the other end of that 🌀-🔴 Engine-Conflict pair.
- **Reciprocate:** Draw 🌀🌀 and 🔴🔴. Choose 1 of each to create a tucked pair and place in parallel to an existing 🌀-🔴 Engine-Conflict pair, but with the reverse orientation. How does the dynamic between ☹️ Agents and ⚓ Anchors change if the motivation/relationship is two-way?



Think of complex prompts as toy train set, mapping out stories with growing branches and intersections:

- **Agents** and **Anchors** are stations where multiple tracks intersect.
- **Engines** are the pieces of track connecting those stations.
- **Conflicts** are the tollbooths along the track. They are obstacles/costs for the characters that pass them, and they keep trains flowing in the right direction.
- **Aspects** are bits of scenery that make each route or station interesting and unique.

### Converting From Simple to Complex Prompts

You can convert any simple prompt into a complex one by moving any untucked **Conflict** so it is tucked under its corresponding **Engine**, oriented right. Then take any **Engine** that does not yet have a **Conflict** tucked under it, and draw and tuck a new **Conflict** under it, oriented right.

### Modifying Prompt Patterns

The prompts in *The Story Engine*™ deck are like recipes in your kitchen. You'll find that by changing measurements, making substitutions, and seasoning the final dish to taste, you'll not only get better results, but you'll learn more about the chemistry that makes your creation engaging.

Here are some ways you can change how you create the prompt patterns:

- **Draw additional cards to make your prompt more intentional.** This helps when you have a sense of where you are going with a prompt, or need to use **Anchors** in restricted ways (for example, you only need an item cue, and not a cue for a setting/event).
- **Draw fewer cards to make your prompt more challenging.** If you like the puzzle of making sense of a difficult prompt, draw fewer cards, or limit the number of rotations you can use.
- **Change the order of placement.** You may find you conceive of stories better when you place all **Agents** and **Anchors** first, and then **Engines** and **Conflicts** once you know more about those characters. You may prefer to place **Aspects** between steps, rather than placing them all at the end.

### Multiplayer Prompt: Comparative Storytelling

Simple and complex prompts can become multiplayer activities with a few adjustments.

The simplest version has two participants.

- 1) **Determine roles:** Players sit on the same side of the table. The player who most recently read a book starts in the role of *placer* and the other is the *rotator*. Every time the rotator completes a step of a prompt's instructions, they swap roles with the placer.
- 2) **Place cards and choose cues:** The placer draws 1 more card than indicated in the prompt instructions, and then places or tucks the correct number, discarding the rest. The rotator rotates the cards and chooses the cues on each card.

- 3) **Write:** When the prompt is complete, the players spend 5 minutes (or a set amount of time) writing a story or story notes.
- 4) **Compare:** Players compare and discuss how they used the prompt differently.

Larger groups can be accommodated as well:

- **3 players:** Choose a player to go first and have them start as placer. The player to their left takes a turn as rotator. Play continues in this direction with the active role of placer or rotator switching every time a player finishes their turn.
- **4 players:** Divide into teams of 2. Follow the rules for 2 players, with each team discussing options and operating as a unit when placing cards or rotating cues.

### Multiplayer Prompt: Collaborative Storytelling

Players begin by following the instructions for "Comparative Storytelling." When they complete Step 2, they begin to take turns fleshing out the details of the story together. On a player's turn, they may do one of the following:

- **Interpret:** Point to a card or set of tucked cards that has not yet been interpreted and explain its meaning in the story. This is now a shared element of the story players are building together.

*Example: "This A GUARDIAN Agent with a FIERY Aspect is Captain Connption, a superhero with an anger problem."*

- **Change:** Use one technique from "Changing a Prompt," as long as you do not move, replace, or remove any card that has already been interpreted.
- **Expand:** Use one technique from "Expanding a Complex Prompt" to add a new element to the story. You may add elements to cards that have already been interpreted.

### Multiplayer Prompt: Competitive Storytelling

Follow the instructions for "Comparative Storytelling" for any simple prompt, except have players seated on opposite sides of the table. When you tuck cards, tuck them to the side of the top card so both players can read it with equal ease.

When the prompt is finished, each player writes using only the cues facing them (i.e., each player reads the cue on their side of the card). Both players share use of the same tucked cards.

The player who began as rotator will have to reverse the order of cards while interpreting the prompt.

#### Example: Competitive Storytelling

*Rotator's prompt: An artisan wants to find an unlucky boat but it will mean forgiving family.*



*Placer's prompt: An architect wants to escape an unlucky village but it will mean betraying family.*

**Use this space to write down notes, story ideas, and instructions for your own prompt patterns.**

[illegible]This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Get expansions and booster sets from [STORYENGINEDECK.COM](http://STORYENGINEDECK.COM)

Take your storytelling to new worlds with genre expansions for *The Story Engine*™. Each expansion deck contains 60 brand-new cards featuring the best of the genres of fantasy, science fiction, or horror.

Each booster set contains 18 brand-new cards focused on popular subgenres: eldritch horror, steampunk, cyberpunk, post-apocalyptic, mythology, and dystopian.



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**Special thanks to:** The 3,590 Kickstarter backers who brought this project to life, as well as Aaron Lenk, Amo Wong and Dave Snyder at Gameland, Antoaneta Tarpanova, Benoit Chartier, Brett M. Bernstein at Precis Intermedia, Cintain M. Quintana, Darryl Whetter, Derek Chung, Eric Weiss, Francelina Perdomo, Gaelen Izatt-Galloway, Isaac Fine, James J. Stevenson, Jason Wiseman, John Lyndon, Karen and Greg Chiykowski, Kathleen Lane-Smith, Mathias Semmann, Pedro Galicia, Shiv MacFarlane, Tanya Chiykowski-Rathke, Valerie Chiykowski

**And to my beloved:** Jasmine Minoza—every story worth telling begins and ends with you

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