

# Chapter 1 – What Is a Story?

## Story Check

Here are some quick questions you can ask yourself when you begin to write—or rewrite—your own story. These questions will help you make sure your story stays on track.

### Questions

1. What happens?
2. Who does the plot affect?
3. What is your protagonist's goal?
4. How does your protagonist change?

### Practice

Practice writing a strong premise.

Take a minute and make this weak example sing. Feel free to change, add or get rid of any of the particulars in this. And remember, there are no right answers; your imagination rules. Enjoy!

Here's the fledgling premise:

*Roger is a middle-aged dentist whose wife disappears. He's not sure whether she left him, or if something sinister happened to her. She was a dog groomer and insisted on working out of their apartment, even though he's severely allergic to dogs. Roger was constantly sneezing, which worried his patients, who thought he was coming down with a cold and would give it to them. Lately, he'd been losing business. His wife wanted him to take time off so they could go to Hawaii and rekindle their relationship, but thanks to his dwindling practice, he couldn't afford to take time off. Now she's gone, and he's not sure what to do.*

## Chapter 2 – Hooking Your Reader

### Story Check

When you're checking the opening paragraph or first page of your story, here are the four questions to ask to make sure you are hooking your reader.

#### Questions

1. Will the reader know whose story it is?
2. Is something happening, beginning on the first page?
3. Does something hang in the balance?
4. Is enough of the "big picture" visible, from the get-go, to give us a sense of where the story is going?

#### Practice

Now you give it a try.

Your work is cut out for you. Remember there are no right answers; let your imagination be your guide. This one is tough, because other than the fact that Francesca is probably the protagonist, there's neither hide nor hair of the other three elements anywhere on the page as yet. That's your mission, should you decide to accept it.

*Francesca was already in her pajamas when the doorbell rang, so she was curious and cautious as she opened the door. Imagine her surprise when she saw a deliveryman holding an enormous bouquet of beautiful, fragrant yellow roses. "Miss Yates?" he asked. Francesca beamed. "Yes," she said, "That's me. They're gorgeous!"*

## Chapter 3 – All Stories Make a Point

### Story Check

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

#### Questions

1. What is your story's point?
2. What is your story's theme?
3. Do the protagonist's inner issue, the theme, and the plot work together to answer the story problem?
4. Can you sum up what your story is about in a short paragraph?

#### Practice

Your goal is to dive into this series of events and give this what it's missing: a point. Good luck!

*Valerie has spent her entire life as a cyclist, riding her bike back and forth across country, raising money for the causes she believes in. Then she gets caught in a flash flood in a small Midwestern town and loses her bike, her backpack, everything. Because she has no money, she has to get a job to save up enough for a new bike. While there, she falls in love with a local cop and they have a great time for about six months, until she has enough money to buy the bike she's always dreamed of and she hits the road again.*

## Chapter 4 – Feeling What the Protagonist Feels

### Story Check

Use this handy list of questions to make sure that your reader is able to feel what your protagonist is feeling.

#### Questions

1. Is the reader aware of your protagonist's specific expectations, so we can tell whether they're being met or not?
2. Does everything that happens affect your protagonist emotionally in the moment?
3. Does your protagonist react to everything that happens?
4. Can the reader see the causal link between what happened and why your protagonist reacted the way she did?
5. If you're writing in the first person, does everything reflect your protagonist's point of view?

#### Practice

Can you improve this very rough draft by showing us how Rick, the protagonist, is reacting to what's happening? Right now, this scene is noteworthy for what it doesn't tell us. Your job is to imagine the story beneath what's written here.

Feel free to rewrite the scene from scratch, weaving in as much back story as you like, to give us a really good idea of how Rick is making sense of all the surprising things that are happening.

*Rick watched Daisy walking solemnly toward the altar. He remembered the day she was born, his first child. Now she was getting married. He'd always thought he'd walk down the aisle with her, but she'd wanted to go alone. He glanced at Tom, waiting for her in front of the justice of the peace, frowning. Out of the corner of his eye Rick saw his wife May wipe away a tear. He squeezed her hand. Then he heard a gasp from the back of the room. He turned to see a tall gaunt man standing in the doorway. Gus, Daisy's first love, who'd disappeared without a trace three years ago. "Boy, what a surprise," Rick thought.*

## Chapter 5 – All Protagonists Have a Goal

### Story Check

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

#### Questions

1. What is my protagonist's external goal?
2. What is my protagonist's internal goal?
3. Do these goals force them to face a specific longstanding problem or fear?

#### Practice

Take a minute and practice on the following rough draft. Your goal is to pinpoint what's missing here, and then let your imagination fill in the blanks. Todd's fate is in your hands. Will he get to waltz off into the sunset, or end up living in a cardboard box? It's your call!

*Todd works at a busy fast food restaurant, flipping burgers, when what he really wants to do is become a ballroom dance instructor and get to wear those shiny black dance shoes. So at night he teaches himself to waltz by watching old Fred Astaire movies, even though it really annoys his mean downstairs neighbors, who keep complaining to the landlord about the loud music and what sounds to them like elephants stomping. But mastering Astaire's moves is so important to Todd he decides that even if it gets him evicted, so be it.*

## Chapter 6 – Uncovering Your Protagonist's Inner Issue

### Story Check

Here are five key questions that will help you zero in on the root of your protagonist's desires and fears.

#### Questions

1. What is the source of the fear and the desire that the plot will force your protagonist to struggle with?
2. Has your protagonist revealed her deepest, darkest secrets to you?
3. Are your character bios specific enough?
4. Why does your story begin when it does?
5. Where is your story heading?

#### Practice

Your goal is to dig into Walter's past to find the specific moments that originally triggered his fear and his desire, the better to shape the story.

*Walter is a man who believes that if he doesn't climb Mount Everest he will break his father's heart. Trouble is, Walter doesn't really want to climb anything; he's afraid of heights. What he wants is to make his father proud. Failing his dad scares him more than Mount Everest.*

## Chapter 7 – Being Specific Rather than Vague

### Story Check

Here are three questions to ask to make sure that you've kept generalities at bay and ferreted out unnecessary details.

#### Questions

1. Have you translated every single "generic" into a "specific"?
2. Will the reader know what your protagonist's specific reactions are to everything that happens?
3. Do all your "sensory details"—that is, what something feels, looks, or tastes like—have an actual story reason to be there?

#### Practice

Okay, to help get hang of this, here is the rough draft of a scene featuring a woman named Mable. She's worried about something. Your job is to decide exactly what it is and then wrestle it onto the page, so the reader can see it, feel it, and anticipate what might happen next.

*Mable opened the delicate wrought iron door, her tousled auburn hair glimmering in the sun, knowing that in a few short moments everything she feared most would come to pass. She paused, remembering what Reggie had said the night before, burning with anger. At that very moment a one-legged dog hobbled jauntily up the street, instantly reminding her of how they'd left things, again. She took it as a sign. Sighing deeply, she savored the minty taste of her favorite mouthwash, and for the millionth time wished she could do the one thing she'd vowed she never would. It was enough to make her head for the car.*

## Chapter 8 – Suspense and Conflict

### Story Check

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

#### Questions

1. What are the specific "this versus that" sources of conflict?
2. Are the seeds of future conflict planted, beginning on page one?
3. Does the conflict force the protagonist to take action?
4. If you're withholding specific facts for a big reveal later, are you sure it actually makes the story better?

#### Practice

Now it's your turn. Add conflict to a premise that, at the moment, isn't terribly exciting. This time, it actually IS a romantic comedy. Let's be real. In a situation like the one below, there would be plenty of juicy conflict. You know it, I know it, and the audience knows it. That's what they come for. So, don't be shy about giving it to them.

Remember, the more uncomfortable you make Janice, the more intriguing it will be for the audience. They don't come for easy solutions; they come to feel what it's like to be in a really difficult make-it-or-break-it situation. So, give it to 'em!

*After five years Janice has forgiven her husband-stealing friend, Bridget. She's finally accepted that Bridget didn't intend to take Bob; it just happened, the way these things sometimes do. So she agrees to meet them for dinner. Looking great and wearing a fantastic dress, Janice sweeps into the restaurant where Bridget and Bob are waiting. Bridget thinks her old friend looks so good that she flags down a cute bartender who she knows is single and introduces them. The bartender takes Janice's number. Janice is delighted, Bridget is pleased, and Bob is simply amused.*



## Chapter 9 – Cause and Effect

### Story Check

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

#### Questions

1. Does your story follow a cause and effect path, so that each scene is triggered by the one that preceded it?
2. Do the events that take place in your story spur your protagonist's internal quest?
3. Do you always "show" your protagonist's train of thought when he's making a decision?
4. Can everything in your story withstand the "And so?" test?

#### Practice

The best way to practice the if/then/therefore logic is to pick a movie you know well and write it out with the if/then/therefore logic.

When it comes to picking a movie, believe it or not, Disney and Pixar films work very well. Try *The Little Mermaid*, *Finding Nemo*, or my personal favorite, *Toy Story*. If you prefer movies with actual flesh-and-blood actors, you might try *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Die Hard*. Once you get the swing of it, it'll be surprisingly easy to apply it to your own work.

## Chapter 10 – What Can Go Wrong, Must

### Story Check

To make sure that your story builds, and the tension escalates, ask yourself these questions.

#### Questions

1. Has everything that can go wrong, gone wrong?
2. Have you exposed your protagonist's deepest secrets and most guarded flaws?
3. Does your protagonist earn everything she gets, and pay for everything she loses?
4. Does everything your protagonist tries to do to make the situation better actually make it worse?
5. Is the force of opposition personified, present, and active?

#### Practice

Now it's your turn. Jed has it pretty easy here. As a result, there's no tension, no conflict, and so no story. It's time to make things difficult for Jed so we can find out he's really made of.

Remember, making Jed earn what he gets and pay for what he loses is what makes him interesting. So don't hold back. Hit him with your best shot. Or two, or three, or four!

*Jed is a scrappy boy, who lives on a sprawling ranch in a little town in east Texas, in the midst of the Civil War. Women are holding down the home front, because all the men have gone off to fight the Yankees—and many of them don't come home. Under the care of these brave women, Jed has learned how to care for horses: how to feed them, groom them, train them. As time passes, all of Jed's friends enlist and proudly march off to fight alongside their fathers and uncles— but Jed fails the physical exam and can't go to war. So he stays behind, where his special talent for horse-whispering blossoms into a legend, and people come from all over the South for his expertise.*

# Chapter 11 – Setups, Payoffs, and the Clues in Between

## Story Check

We know that every setup must have a corresponding, well-earned payoff. As you comb through your story to make sure that they do, here are a few handy questions to ask.

### Questions

1. Are there any inadvertent setups hiding in your story?
2. Is there a road from your setup to your payoff?
3. Are there clues along the road from setup to payoff?
4. Do your clues build?

### Practice

It's hard to practice setups and payoffs since they happen over the course of a story. But in the following short scene, see if you can spot exactly where two setups lurk. Then finish the story, building a breadcrumb trail toward a satisfying payoff.

*Alonzo raced out the door, snatched the keys that the valet held out, threw him a twenty, and leapt into the vintage black Lamborghini. He turned the key... and there was silence. He checked that the stick shift was in park, then turned the key again. Silence. "Come on, come on," he yelled, glancing over his shoulder at the hotel door. The valet suddenly appeared, holding out Alonzo's actual key. "I'm terribly sorry, sir," the valet said, "Wrong key." Grabbing it, Alonzo jammed it into the ignition and the car roared to life. He floored it just as Pete burst out of the hotel, as always, a second too late.*

## Chapter 12 – Flashbacks, Subplots, and Foreshadowing

### Story Check

The writer's job is to weave in subplots, flashbacks, and foreshadowing so the reader sees them for what they are (necessary information) rather than what they're not (deadly digressions).

Here are questions to ask of your story to make sure you've done just that.

### Questions

1. Does each subplot or flashback in some way affect the main storyline?
2. Does the reader need to know the information at this very moment?
3. When you return to the main storyline, will your reader see things with new eyes from that moment on?
4. If the protagonist does something out of character, have you foreshadowed it?

### Practice

Now you try. The following scene is about Mona, a young woman who's just earned her first paycheck. Although Mona's family is doing well now, she grew up poor. Her mother had to hold down three minimum wage jobs just to make ends meet. But until today, Mona has never earned any money of her own, and so she's justifiably thrilled.

Your job is to choose where to stop the scene and write a flashback that gives it meaning.

*Mona rushed from work directly to the bank on the corner. Beaming, she approached the teller and slid over her check.*

*"Pay day, is it?" the teller asked.*

*"My first one, actually," Mona said. "I'm going to cash it out and go celebrate!"*

*"Congratulations," the teller said, "This is a big milestone."*

*"Thanks," Mona said, taking the cash and slipping it into her wallet. "My friend and I are going out for sushi. I'm going to treat her to every special roll on the menu."*

*The cashier laughed. "Have a good time!"*

*Mona left the bank, walked around the corner and came to a sudden stop. There, leaning against the wall, was a homeless woman. She was painfully thin, stooped and pale. "Hungry," her cardboard sign read.*

*Mona paused, then pulled her wallet from her back pocket, took out the cash and handed all of it to the woman.*