

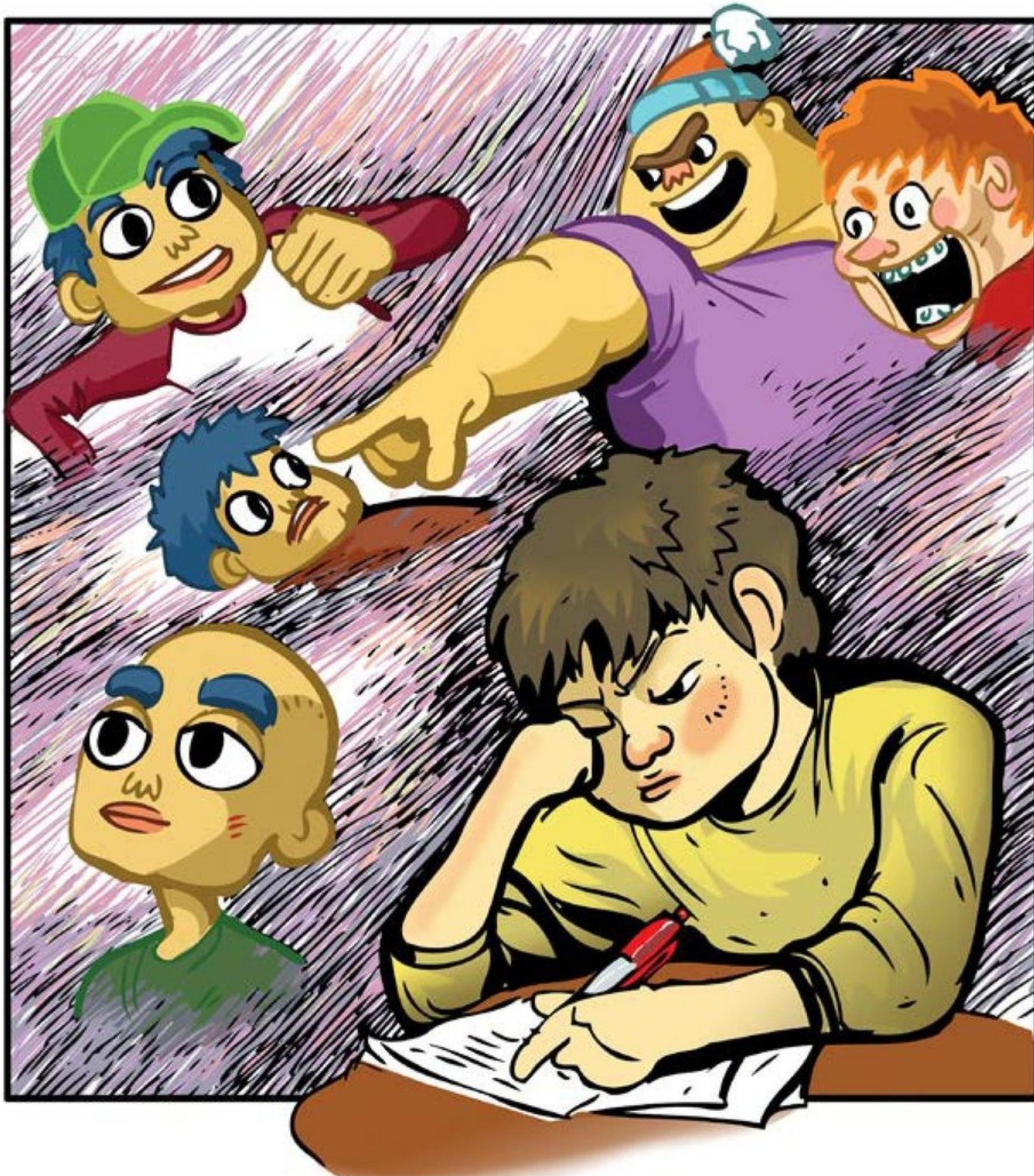
LEVELED Book • W

Scratching a Good Story



Written by Rus Buyok • Illustrated by Mike Lariccia

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Trying to Write

Tyler had been staring and frowning at his pen for so long that he started to feel as if it were staring back at him. *Write a story, write a story, write a story . . .* he kept thinking. *What do I know about writing a story?*



He raised his head from his desk and gazed out the window to see children playing in the afternoon sunlight in the park across the street. Tyler could almost hear them laughing.

Writing is such a waste of time, he thought as he started idly tapping his pen.

"That's very annoying," said a voice, "and it gives me an awful headache."

Tyler glanced around his room but didn't see anyone. "Who said that?"

"I did," the voice came again. "It was bad enough when you were merely staring and frowning at me, but tapping me against this desk is too much."

Tyler eyed his pen. *I must have really gone crazy.*

“What are you working on, anyway?” the pen asked.

This isn’t happening, Tyler thought. Should I answer?

“It’s extremely rude not to reply when you are asked a question,” the pen grumbled.

“I . . . I have to write a story for English class,” he answered shyly, “though I don’t really know how.”

“A story! Hmm.” The pen paused. Tyler could tell the pen was trying to restrain its excitement. “I know a bit about stories—I was designed as a writer’s tool. Nothing like the scratching of a good story, I must confess. You could **compose** a tale about a rude boy who stares and frowns at others and is generally annoying.”

“Would you help me?” Tyler asked. “I’m very sorry for staring and frowning at you.”

The pen seemed to think for a moment, and then it said, “Since you put it that way, I will happily assist you.”

The Beginning

“Fantastic!” Tyler said. “Where do we start?”

“You already have,” the pen told him. Tyler must have seemed confused because the pen sighed and said, “Close your eyes and remember. I gave you a perfectly magnificent place to start.”

Tyler did as he was told and said, “A rude boy who stares and frowns at others?”

“Exactly. Congratulations, you have a main **character**, and that character has **traits**, or characteristics, that make him interesting. Does this special character have a name?”

“Jackson. I’ve always enjoyed the name Jackson,” Tyler said.

“Jackson it is, then. Now your character, Jackson, stares and frowns at others. These are decent traits, but what other characteristics could he have? Think about his appearance.”

Tyler started to imagine: “He’s small—smaller than everyone else—and he constantly wears a bright green cap. People tease him for wearing it, but he doesn’t let it bother him. He stares at people and frowns if they come too close because he’s scared they might steal his cap. The cap covers his blue hair.”



"You're shockingly talented," the pen said.
"Are all of these characteristics coming from your imagination?"

"Nope. One of my friends dyed her hair blue, and it looked really amazing—until it started to fade. She wore a green cap to hide her hair until the color washed out. Also, my best friend is the smallest guy in school, but he's the best at almost every sport."

"I sensed you were a natural. When writing a story, you can sometimes benefit from drawing on the people and things surrounding you and giving them a little twist before you put them down on the page. Jackson sounds like a fascinating character, but we need more than a character—something needs to happen to him."

Tyler considered this for a minute before saying, "The school bully steals his cap, of course! The bully is gigantic, like a mountain—in fact, that's his nickname: Mountain the Gigantic Bully. It's the first day of school . . . no, it's Jackson's first day of middle school, and Mountain, who is older, sees Jackson's green cap during lunch. Green is Mountain's favorite color, so he walks over, lifts Jackson off the ground, and snatches the cap. Jackson stares at him and frowns as hard as he can, but he can't stop Mountain."

The Parts

"Wait a second!" the pen interrupted. "Whew, you're whizzing ahead. Do you know what you've accomplished?"

Without opening his eyes, Tyler shook his head.

"You've invented a **setting**! That's where the character is—where the story happens. I should say characters now because Mountain is one, too."

"I had no idea writing was this exciting," Tyler said.

"You also created a **conflict**," the pen continued, "and every great story has a conflict. A conflict comes from a character, Jackson, wanting something, in this case his green cap; but something else has to stand in the way of Jackson getting what he wants, and that's our massive Mountain."

Main character



"I just started writing, and I already have all that?" asked Tyler.

"You sure do—plus one additional thing: the beginning of your **plot**," answered the pen. "The plot is what happens in the story—the events. Every story has a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is where you create your characters, setting, and conflict, and where you begin your plot. The middle is where things become interesting. What happens after Mountain steals Jackson's cap?"

"I don't know," Tyler said. His head spun with plots and settings and characters and conflicts. *What if I make a mistake? What if I write the story wrong?* he thought. "It seemed so easy a second ago, and now my mind is blank. I can't imagine a thing!"

"Writer's block!" blurted the pen. "The worst foe of every author. You can only battle this monster with writing. Write through it, brave **scribe!** The pen is mightier than the sword!"

"You just got really weird," said Tyler.

"I'm attempting to keep your spirits up," the pen replied.

"What about the setting? Do I describe it more? Do I need more characters? Is the conflict enough?" The questions spilled out, and if the pen had eyes, Tyler felt as if it might have rolled them.

"I understand now—you're thinking too much," the pen explained. "Most of these concerns take care of themselves when you start writing—trust me. Now close your eyes and place yourself in Jackson's shoes. That beast of a Mountain has stolen your favorite green cap, and you're standing in the lunchroom in front of everyone. They can all see your blue hair. What would you do?"





The Middle

"I'd take my cap back," said Tyler. He began to imagine himself in Jackson's place. He felt the embarrassment, the people staring at him, at his blue hair. It felt horrible, and suddenly Tyler knew what needed to happen. "Since staring and frowning didn't work, Jackson doesn't know what else to do. He thinks everyone is staring at him and laughing at his blue hair, so he runs to the bathroom and hides in a stall."

"Maybe you should start writing this down so you don't forget anything," the pen suggested.

Tyler began to write, and the words flowed onto the page. He could hear the pen sighing, “There’s nothing like the scratching of a good story, I must confess.” When Tyler finished what he had already imagined, the story continued easily. Revisiting what he’d written helped to spark new ideas.

“Jackson stays in the stall for the rest of the lunch recess, feeling humiliated and sorry for himself. Then the bell rings, and he has to return to class. Because he has always stared at people and frowned, he doesn’t have any friends, but without his cap, he doesn’t stare or frown at anyone. He becomes really uncomfortable when people start to notice his blue hair. When they tell Jackson how cool his hair is, he doesn’t believe them. He thinks they’re making fun of him.”

“What lovely, depressing details,” said the pen.



“After school, Jackson sees Mountain waiting for the bus, wearing his green cap. Everyone is laughing, and Jackson thinks they’re laughing at his blue hair, even though they tell him it’s so cool. He wants to get his cap back, but he can’t imagine how because Mountain is so enormous.”

“You’re an impressive writer,” said the pen. “You’re building the **tension** in the conflict as the plot continues moving forward, just like a professional. That’s what’s supposed to happen in the middle of the plot.”

“Wait,” Tyler interrupted, “I’m confused about tension. Tension can happen when something gets stretched, but I don’t understand how a conflict can be stretched.”

“I can see how that might not make much sense,” replied the pen. “Tension is what happens when the conflict becomes more intense. In this example, Jackson’s desire for his cap has increased because of his embarrassment, but the thing standing in his way—Mountain—also seems stronger, as if he’s almost impossible to overcome. The strain, or pull, between Jackson wanting his cap and Mountain standing in his way is called tension.”

“Oh, I think I understand now. Making things more difficult for my character to get what he or she wants increases the tension.”

“You learn so quickly. Please, continue with your story.”

“At home,” Tyler began, “Jackson rummages through all the hats in his house. Because he’s so small, he can’t find one that fits—except for a winter hat that his grandma made for him. It has a giant pom-pom on the top, but Jackson figures wearing a pom-pom is less embarrassing than letting people see his blue hair.”

The pen giggled to itself, and Tyler had to wait for it to finish before continuing.

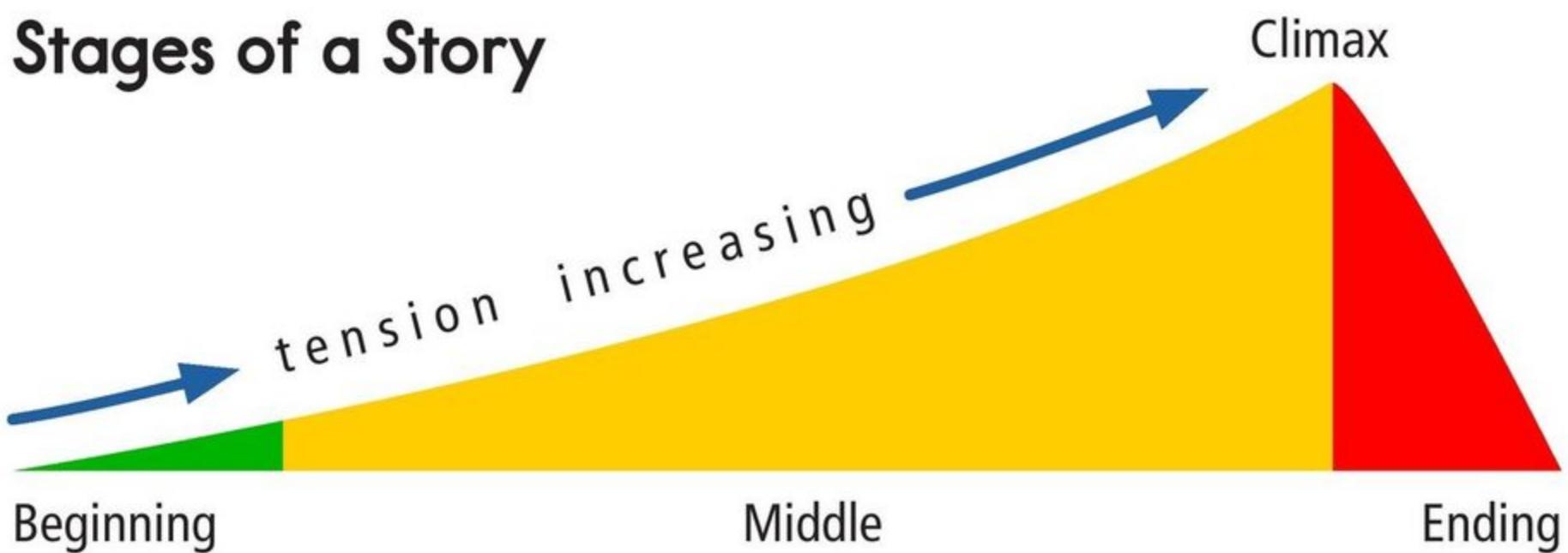


The Beginning of the End

"Now that he has something to cover his hair, he starts to plan how to get his green cap back from Mountain. He imagines crazy ideas like creating a pair of wings and swooping down to steal it back. He thinks of building a tank out of soup cans that shoots sticky chewing gum. He pictures ways to give himself superpowers, such as being bitten by an alien cat or being struck by lightning. He doesn't really have enough supplies or time to make any of these ideas work, so he finally decides on a simpler plan."

"It sounds as though we're barreling toward the ending of the plot," said the pen. "That's when you've built the tension to the point that the conflict is about to explode. Then you have an important event near the end of a story, called the **climax**, in which we discover whether the main character, Jackson, gets—or doesn't get—what he wants and what happens afterward. Hurry and finish it! You can't leave me hanging in suspense."

Stages of a Story





“The next day,” Tyler said, “Jackson slinks to school wearing the hat with the giant pom-pom on the top to cover his blue hair. Everyone at school laughs at him because the hat looks ridiculous, and it’s also really warm outside. His teachers force him to take off the hat in class because the people behind Jackson can’t see the board. He’s more and more embarrassed, but he can handle it because he has a plan to get his green cap back. Finally, during lunchtime, Jackson can put his plan into action.”

“Very interesting,” the pen interrupted. “I can feel the tension building.”



“Jackson sneaks into the lunchroom, trying not to be noticed, which is pretty difficult with a giant pom-pom on top of his head. He doesn’t stare at anyone or frown in the slightest. Mountain sits at a table in the center of the room, and everyone around him is laughing. Even though they’re not even looking at Jackson, he thinks they’re laughing at him. Anger sweeps over Jackson, which gives him the courage to set his plan in motion.”

What Happens?

“What’s his **scheme**? What’s he planning?” the pen hissed.

“I don’t know,” Tyler said. “Maybe Jackson could steal his cap back and run away. Maybe Mountain swats him away, and Jackson has to wear the pom-pom hat forever. Maybe Jackson shaves his head. Maybe someone else steals his pom-pom hat and he has to create a plan to steal both hats back. This story has too many endings.”

“Deciding on an ending is difficult, I admit,” said the pen. “However, most stories have only one ending, and it’s your duty to find the one that finishes the story you’re telling. It’s not easy, but I never said writing a story would be simple.”

“How do I choose the right one?” Tyler asked.

“Close your eyes, imagine each one, and ask yourself if this is the story you’re telling. You might attempt to write a few down to see where they end up. You’re not carving things in stone here. You can always go back and **revise**, or make changes. Revision is very important in storytelling.”



Tyler went through the endings in his mind, but none of them seemed quite right. He even scribbled down a few ideas but quickly crossed them out. The ideas were boring, or silly, or didn't make any sense. He sat there for a long time—so long that he heard the gentle snores of the pen from his desk. Then, with a jolt, he exclaimed, "I've got it!"

"Huh, what?" asked the pen, waking. "Oh, the story. Please, continue."



The End

“During a big outburst of laughter, Jackson quickly climbs onto the table, runs to the middle, and snatches his cap right off Mountain’s giant head! What he sees, however, stops him cold: Mountain has dyed his hair green.”

“Jackson asks Mountain what’s happening with his hair, and Mountain, who looks pretty embarrassed, explains that after he stole the cap, he saw Jackson’s blue hair and thought it looked really cool. Since his favorite color was green, he decided to color his hair green instead of blue. He kept it under the cap because he wasn’t sure if the other people at school would think it was cool, too.”

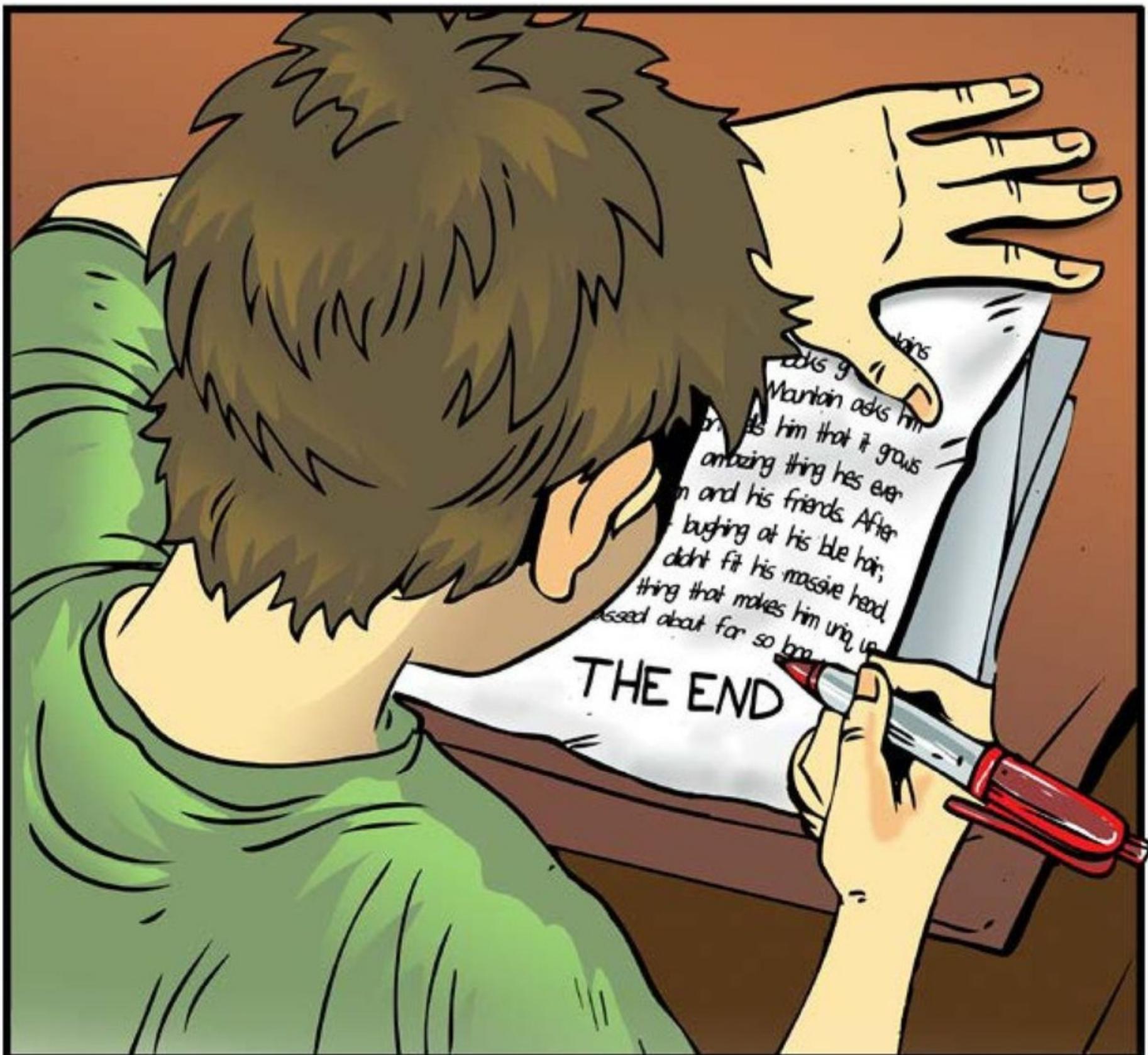
“Excellent writing,” said the pen. “When you have two characters talking to each other, it’s called **dialogue**.”

Tyler nodded and continued, “Jackson stands on the table for a minute, examining Mountain’s hair, and then he declares that Mountain’s hair looks great. When he says this, he takes off the pom-pom hat.”

“Mountain asks him how he gets his hair so blue, and Jackson tells him that it grows that way. Mountain says that’s the most amazing thing he’s ever heard and invites Jackson to sit with him and his friends.”

“After lunch, Jackson realizes that people weren’t laughing at his blue hair, but at Mountain for wearing a hat that didn’t fit his massive head. He also realizes that his blue hair, the thing that makes him unique, the thing that he has been embarrassed about for so long, was the key to making friends.”





"That's wonderful," said the pen. "An exceptional ending. I kind of want to cry, but I don't want my ink to run."

"Thank you," said Tyler. "I guess writing isn't such a waste of time."

"I should hope not!" said the pen. "Without story writing, my talents would be wasted on doodling and scribbling out notes. I must confess—"

Tyler interrupted by saying, "There's nothing like the scratching of a good story."

Glossary

character (<i>n.</i>)	someone who appears in a book, play, movie, or other story (p. 6)
climax (<i>n.</i>)	the turning point in a story, at which the central conflict reaches the highest point (p. 16)
compose (<i>v.</i>)	to create something through mental or artistic effort (p. 5)
conflict (<i>n.</i>)	a problem faced by the character or characters in a story (p. 9)
dialogue (<i>n.</i>)	a conversation between two or more people in a book, play, movie, or other story (p. 21)
plot (<i>n.</i>)	the sequence of events in a story (p. 10)
revise (<i>v.</i>)	to rewrite or reorganize something in order to correct, update, or improve it (p. 19)
scheme (<i>n.</i>)	a plan of action (p. 19)
scribe (<i>n.</i>)	a person who copies handwritten texts or records information in writing; a writer (p. 10)
setting (<i>n.</i>)	the time and place in which the action in a book, play, movie, or other story takes place (p. 9)
tension (<i>n.</i>)	a kind of stress or suspense in a book, play, movie, or other story that keeps the audience interested (p. 14)
traits (<i>n.</i>)	features or qualities of an animal, plant, thing, or group (p. 6)

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