

HOW TO WRITE A STORY

Everyone loves stories! From the simplest picture book to the most exciting blockbuster movie, stories are great fun.

But how to write them?

Is there a formula for writing stories? Are there short cuts and tricks? **Yes.**

In this lesson, we take a crash course in 'narrative' – the art of telling stories.

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Before we go on, we recommend you look at another 'Write Time' lesson: 'Deconstructing a story'.

'Deconstructing a story' features a full length story – 'Paddy saves the day' - broken down and analysed so you can see just how it works.

We will make reference to 'Paddy saves the day' in the lesson that follows.

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THE THREE Ps OF NARRATIVE

Do stories happen by accident, or are there rules?

Yes, there **are** rules. Stories all have the same key components.

Most stories have a very clear pattern. What is it? We're going to call them the '3 P's'.

'PEOPLE TRY TO SOLVE PROBLEM = PLOT'

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A PEOPLE

Obviously, stories must be about people.

In the world of narrative, people are called '**characters**'.

RULE 1 Whoever they are, characters should act as real people do. Mum should act like a Mum. Paddy should act like a dog. And so on. This is called '**believability**' – and it's really important. If your character does something that is **un**believable – 'out of character' – the reader will lose faith in you.

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What do we want to know about characters?

Appearance and clothing aren't really that important for most stories. But readers **do** want to know what your characters are like, and what they want.

This is called 'motivation'.

Motivation is very important. It is what **drives** the characters to act. And these actions are the story itself.

RULE 2: Characters must have **motivation** – needs or fears or issues of some kind. These are what cause things to happen.

HINT: Don't try to make your characters too nice, or too nasty. If Paddy had been a perfect dog, there wouldn't have been a problem – and without a problem there wouldn't be a story. If Tom and Megan had been little angels and just accepted what Dad said, there would have been no island adventure – and therefore no story.

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B PROBLEMS

Characters are important. But you need more.

On their own, characters are just still people – without a story.

Add in a **problem**, and suddenly the story begins!

Because now the characters **have to act**. Their **motivation makes** them do things, to try and solve the problem.

RULE 3: Every story must have a problem that needs solving. The more challenges you set your characters, the more interesting it is to watch as they try to solve the problems.

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The problem can be anything at all.

'A comic problem – the pet rat escapes in class...what to do next?'

'A scary or mystery problem – a strange person appears on the ghost train ride – then disappears...who is he?'

'A dramatic problem – the dragon has stolen the necklace...how to get it back?'

HINT: Writers are **not** trying to make things easy for their characters – but to make things **hard**. They know that they have to give their people problems to deal with, or nothing happens.

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C PLOT

What happens when you have people (or characters) with a problem? They **do** something about it. The actions that follow are called the story's **plot**.

Remember 'Paddy saves the day'? The plot is like this:

- (1) Dad says 'Paddy must go'**
- (2) To avoid his ruling, Tom and Megan hide Paddy on the island**
- (3) A storm causes the river to rise – endangering Tom and Megan**
- (4) Tom sends Paddy for help**
- (5) Mum realises that something is wrong**
- (6) Tom and Megan are saved from drowning**

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One last thing. Writers have found that it helps to have characters **think** they have solved their problems – **then** to add another complication. The pattern can be repeated. Another problem – apparent solution – new problem.

HINT: Be a **nasty** author. Keep throwing complications in front of your characters – until you think you've made the story as exciting as possible. Then resolve all the problems and finish.

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2 THE THREE Ss OF EXCITING STORYTELLING

Those 'three Ps' are the basics of **all** storytelling.

Let's finish with three all-time favourite 'add on' tricks – guaranteed to please.

- A SHOW IT
- B SPEAK IT
- C SURPRISE THEM

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A SHOW IT

In 'Subway Hero', a little girl falls onto the railway tracks just as a train is coming into the station. Readers want to know the detail of what was happening.

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Concentrate on detail. Keep it simple. **Don't** use lots of big words. For example:

HINT: Don't overdo the use of adjectives ('scary', 'massive' 'frightening') and adverbs ('fearsomely', 'dramatically', 'heroically') – just show **what** is happening.

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B SPEAK IT

People love to know what was said. This is called **dialogue**. Imagine if the Beauty and the Beast scene read like this:

A 'reported' conversation is awfully dull compared to **dialogue** (what people actually say). Dialogue in a story is one of the most powerful tools of all. It is also, fortunately, very easy to use well.

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"Paddy saved us, Dad."

"Are you still going to send him away?"

"Send away such a good dog? He's a hero. No. I've changed my mind. Paddy can stay with us forever."

"Woof, woof."

HINT: You **can't** overdo dialogue. It is an excellent way to 'carry' the story – having characters describe what is going on in their words. It is excellent for 'exposition' – letting the reader know about things you haven't time to show (eg past events). Practise your dialogue writing skills. They are central to storytelling.

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C SURPRISE THEM

In 'The Eye of the Idol', Lucky Luke thinks he has escaped danger, but without anything to show for it. Then he discovers that he has accidentally got the diamond itself.

Readers *love* being surprised. One of these devices is so famous it has a name: the 'final twist'. Stories often have a surprise ending. It adds excitement just before the end – to finish the narrative with a bang.

HINT: The surprises *must* be believable. Saving your hero by having an alien fly down from the sky is *not* believable. But having the situation saved when someone done a kindness earlier repays it at the end ('The Lion and the Mouse' plot line) *is* believable – and works brilliantly as a final twist.

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SUMMING UP

What have we learnt about writing effective stories?

That all stories are built on 'three Ps':

- 1 PEOPLE (characters) who must be **believable**
- 2 PROBLEMS (or challenges) facing those people
- 3 PLOT – what happens when the people try to solve their problems

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That all stories can be made more interesting by the use of the 'three Ss':

- 1 SHOW IT – use **details** so the reader can see what is happening
- 2 SPEAK IT – use **dialogue** so the reader can hear the characters talking
- 3 SURPRISE THEM – introduce **unexpected** developments which will keep the reader interested

If you do all these things, your stories will always work.

Happy storytelling!