

Tell Me
<How to Write>
a Story

Good, Basic Advice for
Novices Ready To Write

E.J. Runyon

Inspired Quill Publishing

To The Novice Writer

Do you know about the Deadly Serious Writers Club?

Who are the members? Name any of your favorite writers, the ones who reach you. Name an author whose work causes you to laugh out loud in a Laundromat or swallow back a real lump in your throat as you turn that last page.

What a group to aspire to! As a Novice Writer, I was at risk of failing the admittance test.

In March of 1996 I signed up for the week-long Santa Barbara Writer's Conference, held annually each June in California. My fantasies ranged from the writing secrets I would learn through to whom I would meet and talk to, and onto the success I'd be greeted with at the end of the week when they all had a chance to see my work.

But I was the Novice Writer.

The conference coordinator said I could send in a sample of my work, it would be critiqued and returned before the conference began. I sent off nine pages. I was hesitant to hear what professionals would say. But I opened the response envelope anyway, expecting to see pages covered with polite margin notes echoing the suggestions that so many peer workshops had offered:

“Rewrite this in third person.” “That would never happen in real life.” “Your clauses are way too long.” “Pretty word pictures, but where’s the plot?” “People just aren’t allowed to get away with things like this.”

Instead I read a hand-written note that began; *“This is really good stuff. I care about the girl, want to know what happened to her, what will happen to her. . .”* finishing with the word *“Congratulations!”* I was floored. I was a Novice Writer—why was I given this great feedback? Stifling my fears, I printed out clean copies and drove up the coast to attend.

To make matters worse, after listening to ten minutes or so of a lecture early in the first morning workshop I had to pass a note to a new friend, asking ‘what’s an adjective and adverb?’ She gave me a strange look and wrote an answer to my note, adding ‘don’t ever let anyone know you had to ask this’.

Not only was I a genuine novice, without the jargon, but if I let it be known how fresh I was, I might also be scorned. Without that lingo, would I be allowed to be a part of the club?

Maybe you have this Deadly Serious Writer goal too. So you’ve selected this book. Plenty of good books sit on shelves offering advice on dialogue, point of view, conflict. In one excellent book I found at that conference, (*Writing Fiction*, by Barnaby Conrad), one chapter addressed how to handle the Obligatory Sex Scene. Everything is covered in one book or another. Except the things novices (like I was that June) might still need to ask about.

There are many novice fiction writers like you, who haven’t gotten the jargon down yet. You read the words of advice, but they don’t mean anything to you. For instance:

“Your writing should reveal the taste of a character in snippets and flashes of honesty.” If I found this in a how-to book I’d

laugh, and ask myself, “Let me see my notes, where did I put those character snippets?”

Without starting with the fundamentals, your work may feel incomplete. You may feel tongue-tied on the page. Your chapters may not shine like the works you admire, or the visuals in your own mind. The helpful members of your weekly writer’s groups may counsel that the piece seems to be missing something.

The sad fact is that there are tangible, yet basic writing principles a novice writer may not realize they need to know. Tangible skills and concerns that are the very ones they expect themselves to already understand and utilize before their first page. These page one skills are what this book is all about.

There will come a time when you are ready to learn the steps it takes to write a powerful proposal or query letter, how to go about finding an editor or publisher. The steps of self-publishing and marketing your own novel may be in your future. Even the need to read something philosophical or spiritual about the art of writing might strike you. Before you set out to submit, publish or ponder your writing, you need to begin with the lessons here at *Tell Me <How to Write> a Story*.

A Note About Using Your Own Work In This Book

Your writing can be clear and genuine. It can be a replica of the images you see in your mind. Or it can be stiff material you feel hasn’t got an honest voice of its own yet.

If you’re familiar with my coaching website, Bridge to Story, you know how I structure things. I’ll introduce a topic to help your writing get better, along with examples and exercises.

The exercises make use of your own work where they can. Whether you want to tighten up your completed short stories or

your finished novel chapters, or begin working from the writing exercises that I provide throughout the chapters, this book uses your own writing to teach these basic fiction writing skills.

This is done in an ongoing manner, using the same pieces throughout the book, growing them into sharp, focused, honest work that you can be proud of. I hate to sound like I'm giving orders, but throughout these chapters I'll be using 'I' and 'You' a lot. Think of You and I working in a partnership to make your writing the best it can be.

I ask you to use your own work in all exercises and keep using the same pieces, exercise after exercise, to build up something new from your first drafts. I don't want you to end up with a file full of exercises that you never look at again.

What You're In For Here

I'm going to make you think a lot. And I'll ask you to put the concepts you're introduced to into action. Yes, I've built my own way of coaching and writing. It's not based solely on writing theory & jargon; I'll discuss the Whys and Hows. You'll be shown examples and exercises. I'm not saying that this is the only way to learn about writing fiction. It is one way that works for a lot of novices who are just starting.

If you have something already written I'll expect (and encourage) you to use the tools, as they are given in the exercises, on your existing work.

But, IF you are the newest of novices, don't worry. All the talk 'about writing' is up front; there are examples too. No pressure. Use this book the way you need to; I offer suggestions and encouragements along the way.

If you are a very new beginner you can take your work through any one of these paths:

- Read all the way through the book *first*
- Read from section to section and exercise along with *my examples*
- Read and try the exercises with *your own work*

Part 1

Thinking About Building A Story

YOU MIGHT BEGIN WRITING STRAIGHT FROM YOUR MIND. SOMETHING YOU'VE ENVISIONED OR DREAMT. BUT A GREAT STORY REQUIRES MORE THAN THE GIFT OF IDEAS. THIS SECTION WILL TAKE YOU THROUGH THE FIRST STEPS FOR UNDERSTANDING WHAT A STORY NEEDS IN ORDER TO BE COMPLETE. YOU'LL LEARN ABOUT PREMISE, PLOT, AND THE 'WHAT IF?' QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ASK TO MAKE ORIGINAL IDEAS INTO FULLY FORMED STORY PLANS. EACH SECTION GIVES THE *HOWS* AND *WHYS* OF WHAT I SHOW YOU; YOU'RE NEVER JUST *TOLD WHAT TO DO*. WRITING EXAMPLES FROM REAL NOVICES ARE GIVEN, IN BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER VERSIONS, TO HELP YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN FOR MOST TOPICS. FINALLY, THIS SECTION WILL SHOW YOU THREE SNEAKY WAYS TO KEEP THINKING OF GOOD STORY IDEAS.

From Premise To Story And Into Plot

There is a difference between Premise, Story, and Plot. You can find this info in many How To books and all over the Internet, but here it is again, as E.M. Forster writes:

*A **story** is a series of events recorded in their chronological order.*

*A **plot** is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance.*

Maybe those definitions don't work for you. So, here's another way to look at it:

You start with **theme** (I want to explore what poverty can do to a person)

You move onto **premise** (What if Joey's world of poverty warps him?)

You then plan what will be written in the **story** (I'll write about what happened to Joey & Alice the summer their son is born)

You go through planning a **plot** (Here's how Joey's fall will happen, chapter by chapter)

If you just want to show how someone IS in a particular moment, you can paint or sculpt. But with words, we're allowed to show how someone CHANGES. The best short stories are about choice, and the best novels about change. A premise or a theme is not an action on the page – they are the ideas that lie under the actions and motivations you give your characters.

If you can think of every chapter as a short story, use the choices made in each chapter to build a fuller, more developed character by your novel's end.

Talking about your **Premise** is like saying ‘What if a married couple, a real guy and a cartoon girl, had to work through their personal problems one summer?’

Telling us about your **Story** is like saying ‘This story’s about the summer that Geoff Peterson and Winnie the Wombat learned to let go of preconceived notions and love each other.’

Outlining your **Plot** is about setting up scenes for your reader; scenes that show how these characters evolve during your story. Your story isn’t your plot: you should have two ideas about what you want to write. Story is one, plot the other.

The Why:

Plot is the progression your **story** will make as the reader moves through various scenes, from the opening line to the last page.

A story will have a Beginning, Middle, and End. A plot can have those three things in any order, plus all the steps it takes to get from one scene to another.

A plot doesn’t have to give the reader those three things in any particular arrangement. Holding back some information for a storytelling reason, giving some details out of sequence, or mixing those three things up on purpose can be used to heighten drama and tension.

Think of a detective mystery that begins with the line, “*If I’d only known danger could show up at my door wrapped in silk stockings, I’d be a free man today.*” This is definitely not an author starting at the beginning.

The How:

Premise dreams up a ‘what if?’ question. It poses a

question that's so interesting you want to tackle it and start writing. A premise has to have a drive to it, so that you'll want to work at telling the story.

A **Story** idea answers the premise's 'What if?' question. It brings it into a situation that you can plan, follow, and then write a short story, novel, or script about.

Plot tells your reader why stuff happened the way it did, step by step. Think of plot-builder words like: *because*, *and so*, *meanwhile*, and *that's why*.

Premise ↓ *What if* cartoons could really interact with people?
leads to...

Story idea ↓ Who killed Jessica Wombat? Or: A real guy with a cartoon Wombat wife is crushed when she leaves him for a handsomely drawn Roadrunner. Or: Winnie Wombat's head is turned by suave Ricky Roadrunner when Winnie's workaholic husband, Geoff, spends too much time at the bank.
leads to...

Plot Points ↓ How would you set up a **beginning**, **middle**, and **end** for one of these story ideas? Try it now; list these three story elements.

Notes ↓ When it comes to **Plot** consider starting small and growing it out from the basic: Beginning, Middle, and End.

Those three points need the most attention. Stringing them together with other lesser plot points is easier, if these first three points already exist.

Other storyline ideas might be:

What happens to a returning war vet who loses his son to gang violence?

Where can a young spy turn once he's drummed out of Spy School?

When the war of the robots took its turn for the worst
mankind stood and fought; this is their tale.

Why some good people turn their backs on the daily
evil they see.

How I lost my innocence at band camp.

Plot, Beginnings, And Backstory

Knowing where to begin a story is not easy for novices. If you're working with a character and you want to send them through a set of situations (plot points), think about where you want the first plot point to begin. Go ahead and write from where you feel comfortable beginning. But after your first draft is done you may find as you re-read it that you've got a lot of pages that aren't needed to tell your story after all.

A useful writing term to understand is *In Media Res* (Latin for 'in the middle'). Think of it this way:

You tripped in the parking lot and it was funny. You want to tell your friends about it. Are you going to tell them about you driving from the freeway off-ramp into the lot? About what was on your mind when you ate breakfast, before getting into your car? How about why you had a dentist's appointment today? Why wouldn't you tell them that stuff? It all happened this morning, right?

You might say: But that stuff doesn't have anything to do with my tripping!

Exactly. It may have happened earlier, but it doesn't have anything to do with the story.

You only want the events that are significant for the story's plot points. Everything else can be edited out or turned into backstory, trimmed and used in small doses. The events that push the character to *action*

|| are the ones to focus on using.

||

Once you have your first draft there is nothing wrong with shifting stuff around. Find, highlight, and move the extra stuff; turn that draft into a revision list.

In order to create a great plot when you are writing a character-driven story, begin with a list of three stages for your character: beginning, middle, and end. What is your character like at the start of your story? Where is she mid-novel (her change point)? And where does she end up (newer state of being)?

Now, run an inventory on your character's attributes/characteristics/traits. For example: *stingy, brave, sad, inarticulate, lonely, scared.*

These are the things about your character that have potential to change over the length of a novel.

If no significant action or thing begins your story in media res (in the middle of things), if it's 20 pages of explaining backstory or character setup, then you have a chapter that is a candidate for revision. Something significant should happen in those opening pages. Each chapter needs to have a character's state-of-being, but that's best shown via the actions she takes. You can weave the backstory, bit by small bit, into the actions she's taking in each chapter.

Theme	Premise	Story	Plot	Notes
Alienation in a time/place when all good things should be happening.	What if a damaged young woman fails at everything she tries as she makes her way through her first year at college?	Britt's living on campus and even though she tries, a series of mishaps will happen because she has a profound sense of paranoia and	Britt gets locked out of her room and has to go for help in just her towel. She brings a beef stew	Sure, you wrote up all about the time she was seven and got hurt, and that's led her to be so

		no friends.	dish to the Dwaili Festival potluck. That faux pas alienated the one friend she might make.	worried all the time. But look at Premise and Story: you're writing about now, not then. So begin with the now.
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Plot And Middles

Now make up your own chart or just take notes using the headings above. A good place to begin a revision of your first draft is to check if it has the following plot points, as they are usually in most stories.

Revelations — remember that revelation is different from explanation. A revelation comes from withholding a plot point from your reader and delivering it at a later point in your novel, out of its chronological order in the story.

Remember: **Story** is a series of events recorded in their chronological order. **Plot** is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance.

Explanation is giving your reader more information about something you've already shown them, usually during some backstory.

A **Revelation** can also be about hidden motivations; mystery writers often use it that way. If you add a revelation to your work, write it as an action not as a narrated explanation for your reader.

Reversals — If we use the example in the earlier grid, our college student, what types of reversals can you imagine for her? We ran that inventory on her attributes/characteristics/traits: *Stingy, sad, inarticulate, lonely, scared*. What actions could reverse one of these character traits?

If you realize a reversal somewhere in your own work would make your story stronger, begin brainstorming ways the character can change and write that as an early scene. But don't make up a reversal just to add one.

The Breaking Point — This is also called the turning point. And yes, as above, a breaking point for your character ought not be put in explanatory narration about their state-of-being or change of mind. That can be part of what is happening, but it has to be shown in an action they take, not just talked about as a decision or realization they come to.

The Choice or the Change — I've talked about choice/change a lot here. For a good reason. They both mean that something moves from states-of-being. Movement is the key. Readers want to see movement — in a character's growth, in a story's trajectory. Without a choice, a change can't be made. Without a change, nothing moves. Short stories work well with just a choice. Novels are better suited — because they take longer — for showing a change in a character.

The Climax — Think of this as the final action point of your story, where things absolutely cannot get any worse. What? You didn't have a point in your story where things got even a little worse? Don't worry, that's what first drafts are for. Your revisions are where you can correct this problem.

Plot And Ends

The Denouement — this is the area of the story where things are wrapped up, or looked back on, after the problem or goal has

been set to rights, or overcome. Some novices think that their climax plot point (the action point of your story where things absolutely cannot get any worse) is the end of the story. But it doesn't have to be. Yes, you can end abruptly at that point. Or you can take a final chapter, or scene, and write a denouement.

What Do You Plan On Writing?

When thinking of what to write, if you have already begun from a premise's 'What if?' question, then you're ready for the story and plot work: remember...

Story asks the broader question and explains what happened. Although, not in the order of events as you arrange them. That's the plot's job. Think of your own life. Birth to death is your chronological *story*. The time you went to college and remembered back to being a 10-year old is also your *story*. But, you can present it out of sequence, and leave hunks of it out of your plot.

Plot is the reasons the characters are doing what they are doing. Plot is driven by *motivation*. The 'why' of 'Why will events happen this way?' Plus the actions that lead to consequences and reactions.

Plot is the thing that cares about what the action, reaction, consequence, or motivation will be, when moving us from scene to scene.

Plot cares about *why* things are moving the way they are, and 'what' will show up 'when' in the story's telling.

Are you great at making lists of 'What if?' questions for premises, but not so much at turning a premise into a story idea? Are story ideas easy to get down on paper, but then wither when you want to get some plot points from them?