

How to Write a Story

A STEP-BY-STEP METHOD
FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING
BASIC STORY WRITING TECHNIQUES

By Lee Roddy

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(8th printing)

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INTRODUCTION TO SHORT STORY GUIDEBOOK

INTRODUCTION

This guidebook was written at the request of many teachers and parents who have attended my seminars over the last 20 years on *How to Teach a Child to Write a Story*. These lessons evolved from a one-page handout I used in countless workshops.

That handout is so simple that it can be used with beginning writers, so I've included it at the end of this introduction. This book is slanted for teachers dealing with younger writers. However, this same basic material, taught in my adult seminars all over the nation, has helped hundreds of aspiring writers to sell their first (or many) novels.

Those younger students who do not have sufficient experiences to write a story about something they know can be introduced to writing by using familiar stories they've read themselves or were read aloud to them.

My objective is to help teachers instruct children in how to enjoy writing a good story by learning the fundamentals of fiction as covered in eight lessons. Questions for the student plus a writing assignment are at the end of each lesson to help reinforce what has been taught.

The teacher may move from the known into the unknown by reading a story aloud to the child or having him read one by himself. Encourage him to join you in trying to discover what the author did to create the story. Have the child point out the situation the character faced at the start of the story. What problem did that cause? What goal (objective) did he want? What were some of his obstacles? How did it end (outcome?)

Incentives, as praise and little rewards, are suggested when the student has identified the main parts of a story. Encourage the child to think about writing his own story, using the basic elements he's just learned. Always try to keep the fun in learning to write a story. Avoid making it a chore. If there's a weakness, present it as question rather than criticism. "Do you think this (whatever it is) would be better if you changed it to...?" (Mention the right answer).

For those teachers whose students are ready for more advanced training, the rest of this introduction will provide what is needed. Teachers may begin with those simple nuts and bolts or story basics and move into the book's lessons as the child is able to comprehend greater details of story writing. The idea is to make the learning experience enjoyable and let the lessons grow with the child's development.

Some redundancy throughout this guidebook is deliberately included to reinforce learning by review and repetition. Also, if you are teaching a particular session, you may not have to refer back to earlier teachings on this subject except for review purposes.

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I recommend that teachers approach the students with the idea that writing is fun, not work. It's like a game because all children know those are enjoyable, and all games have certain rules to be followed. The same is true of writing a story.

Those rules are fairly simple, yet important. They should help make creative writing enjoyable, just as recreational reading is primarily for pleasure.

However, there is a serious side to being able to write well. In fact, reading and writing skills are absolutely essential for the future success of today's students. Great educational stress is currently placed on improving the nation's overall dismal academic records in reading and writing.

According to thirty years of National Assessments of Education Progress, recent measures in reading and writing showed that fifth-grade boys ranked on par with eighth-grade girls. Boys will read nonfiction or action-filled stories, so encourage them to write their own stories. That's an enjoyable way of learning to write well.

Statistically, girls seem to naturally be more inclined to read and write, so they are often open to learning to write creatively. However, it's important that both boys and girls write well, so this practical guidebook is designed to help them achieve that goal. To simplify the learning process, I have used male pronouns in this book.

Teachers are urged to limit their instruction to the child's age and learning ability. At the end of each lesson, there is a worksheet for students to help them see how well they have understood the lesson. Answers for the teacher are at the back of the book.

Teachers should first familiarize themselves with each section to better decide which increments individual students can handle, depending on age, comprehension ability and need. Feel free to adjust the lessons as students progress so that their needs are met, they enjoy the experience, and learn the contents of each lesson.

THE PROBLEM

As the author of countless short stories and nearly fifty novels for young readers, I have judged dozens of short stories by children in those age groups. I discovered that almost all have the same problem. They start writing without recognizing the critical role of properly structuring a story. Without this, the narrative elements won't work well.

Well-told stories, from the Bible to the literary classics to comic books, all have the same invisible three-part structure with specific elements within each of those parts. Without this structure, the story will collapse.

Most of the work I've judged proved this to be true. Without that knowledge, a solid narrative is virtually impossible.

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Children may be given an assignment to write a story, but without the proper awareness of structure and elements, the child often blunders into trouble.

Consequently, some children resist creative writing. Others ramble on for pages but still don't end up with a real story.

In this book, a simple short story is defined as a three-part fictitious narrative about a situation involving a character with a problem, an objective, and obstacles over which this character seeks to triumph as the outcome. Details are in the lessons.

There are many ways to write a good story, but the system I use and teach really works well for those interested in learning how to write a concrete narrative.

PROBLEM / SOLUTION OVERVIEW

The problem of writing a well-constructed story is eliminated by a three-step method using a tangible Objective, some Obstacles and the Outcome. It's a simple blueprint that helps shape a story idea into a finished narrative. In three easy steps, the student learns what must be in the beginning, the middle and the ending of a story.

The first "O": OBJECTIVE. A story idea is developed from what's called a Setup that falls under the first "O", for objective. The beginning introduces five necessary elements: (1) A changed Situation, (2) an affected and motivated main Character, (3) his Problem, (4) the Objective of solving the problem, and (5) a Decision to go for the tangible Objective, which ends the first part of the story.

The second "O": OBSTACLES. The middle of a story begins with the character taking the first action toward achieving the objective and promptly runs into obstacles. The middle continues through the character's various efforts to overcome the obstacles until there's a crisis where it seems the character faces disaster and cannot possibly reach the objective. The middle part of a story ends on this high crisis.

The third "O": OUTCOME. The ending part of a story starts with the character making a final desperate effort to overcome this ultimate obstacle to snatch victory from defeat, and reach the objective.

See how simple it is? The story's beginning sets up the Objective. The middle deals with the Obstacles. The ending shows the Outcome.

This Triple "O" Method is a proven, practical system that really works well. I've used it in all my novels. I've taught it to myriads of teachers and to aspiring adult writers who went on to write and sell countless novels that have sold millions of copies.

Before presenting this very simplified guide for writing a story, here are a couple of important rules the teacher should instill and reinforce in each student:

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1. Good stories are not written; they're rewritten.
2. Revisions should not be allowed until the entire story is roughed out.

Let's take the second point first. Sad experience with both children and adult writers over many years has convinced me that the work is rarely completed if the author starts revising an incomplete work. Insist that the story be down in writing from beginning to end before any editing is done.

Not only are good stories rewritten, but many famous authors admit to having rewritten a novel several times. I have rewritten my own stories after they were completed, and once I revised a first page forty-two times. If I had not completed the work first, it's unlikely I'd have had the will to take the time needed to edit the opening to where it was finally the best I could make it. It's the fun of writing that makes an author try to produce the very finest work of which he's capable.

This structure system will be elaborated upon in Lesson 2 (story building) with additional elements or ingredients added that must go under each of those three parts.

For convenience, the instruction in this book is broken down into three types of stories, but only the first one should be used by beginning students.

1. The "purpose achieved" story is where the main character has a tangible objective and reaches it after hard struggles. This is the only story a young writer should attempt because it's the easiest and most satisfying.
2. The "purpose failed" story where the character does not succeed in reaching the goal. However, I heartily discourage this kind of narrative because the writer is never challenged to figure out how to have the character succeed.
3. The "purpose abandoned story" where the focal character gives up trying, or deserts his goal. This type of story should also be avoided because children's stories and writings should stress the concept that winners don't quit.

Even though the endings on the above stories are different, they all fit nicely under the Triple "O" Method because all well-told stories have the same basic structure and elements.

This method will work for your students, whose first complaint when assigned to write a story often is, "I don't know what to write about."

The learner often has no ideas, yet they are all around us every day. All stories begin with ideas, so the learner needs to first be taught how to recognize them, then what to do next. Where do these concepts come from? We'll see in the first lesson, but first, here's the simplified overview of story structure from my handout that has proven helpful for beginning students.

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From the Bible to classic literature to comics, all well-told stories have three parts with certain elements under each section. Before starting to write, the young author should plan to use all of them, including answering certain questions. Examples will be given in the lesson, but for now, here are the pertinent questions:

1. **CONCEPT OR IDEA:** In a simple sentence of a few words: what is this story about?
2. **CHARACTER:** Who is the motivated main character about whom readers will care?
3. **SITUATION:** What changed circumstance presents a problem for this character?
4. **OBJECTIVE:** What tangible goal must the main character reach in order to resolve the problem?
5. **OBSTACLES:** Who and/or what prevents the character from reaching the objective?
6. **STORY QUESTION:** Will the main character achieve his goal?
7. **OUTCOME:** How does it end, and does it answer the story question either yes or no?
8. **THEME:** What does the character learn, or what life lesson does the author show through the story, without preaching?

These questions need to be answered within the three parts of a story's structure of Beginning (Objective); the Middle (Obstacles) and Ending (Outcome).

BEGINNING: OBJECTIVE, OR WHAT DOES THE MAIN CHARACTER WANT?

1. **SITUATION:** Set up an opening set of circumstances that are changed by introducing an intriguing main character with action, and swat him with a story problem leading to a tangible **OBJECTIVE** and various **OBSTACLES**. Everything thereafter should be related to the character's efforts to overcome obstacles to reach this goal.

2. **MOTIVE:** Give the main character a strong reason to go for the objective.

3. **CONFLICT:** The heart of a story is conflict, including person versus person (relationships); person vs. self or person vs. environment. The latter includes everything not in the first two. Try for all three kinds of conflict in a story.

4. **ELEMENTS:** Include the stakes with dangers or risks, plus time, place, motives, descriptions, character flaws, theme, etc.

5. **STORY QUESTION:** Ask: "Will the main character achieve his goal?" The answer should always be positive (purpose achieved).

6. **DECISION:** A story's beginning ends when the focal character chooses to go

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for the goal in spite of obstacles. This decision provides a smooth transition to the middle of the story.

MIDDLE: OBSTACLES, OR WHAT PREVENTS REACHING THE OBJECTIVE?

1. The middle begins with the main character taking the first step to achieve the goal and encounters various OBSTACLES, including an adversary. This initial effort fails.
2. The main character tries again in spite of complications that increase suspense about the outcome. This second effort may seem about to succeed, but it eventually also fails, resulting in a still worse situation.
3. The middle of the story ends with a crisis where the focal character tries again, but an unexpected development (plot point) makes it seem impossible to reach the objective. A plot point is a surprise incident that dramatically worsens the main character's problem and catches readers unaware.

ENDING: OUTCOME OR HOW DOES IT TURN OUT?

The ending has three parts:

1. Crisis: In facing disaster, the main character has very limited choices to get out of his predicament. One is hard, but morally right.
2. Climax: The character makes that right moral choice and attempts one final valiant effort to resolve his problem.
3. Conclusion: the main character snatches victory from defeat and solves his problem. Someone changes (usually the main person) showing character development or that he has learned something (a moral, virtue, or theme). Loose ends are tied up, rewards and punishments are given, the outcome answers the story question either yes or no, and preferably in a way that surprises the reader.

The above simplified story basics have helped many young writers produce their first good short story. It is hoped that many more youthful authors will get their start with these fundamentals and progress through the more detailed lessons in this guidebook.

For those students who are ready to undertake more detailed study of the craft of writing, the first full lesson deals with ideas. All success begins with an idea. But where does the writer get ideas? How are they developed into stories? We'll answer those questions, and more, in Lesson 1.

IDEAS AND THE SHORT STORY

LESSON 1: IDEAS FOR STORIES

Student's Objective: Given instruction about ideas for stories, the learner will be able to identify and record good concepts and then know how to start the narrative.

Teacher's Objective: This lesson is designed to teach creative writers how to get ideas and turn them into stories. By lesson's end, the teacher will be able to properly evaluate how well the learner has followed instructions about story concepts. Begin by telling students that they are going to have fun learning how to find story ideas and what they can do with them. Suggested supplies needed: a newspaper, a magazine, access to the Internet (if available) and the names of some older adults who may have stories about their life and times. These can often be springboards to new ideas for writers.

BEGIN LESSON:

We've already seen that a short story is a fictional narrative about a situation involving a character with a tangible objective leading to a problem and his efforts to overcome obstacles, reach the objective and solve the problem (the outcome). Before that can be done, there must first be an idea or concept for what's going to happen to that character in the story.

Some story starters are included in this lesson to help the learner begin the joy of writing stories for fun.

The idea is the jumping off place that begins the story. So we'll focus on that, and then add four other elements needed to set up or start a story based on the concept.

When a learner protests, "I don't know what to write about," remind him of what professional authors usually say: "Write about what you know."

Encourage the student to recognize that ideas are all around us every day, but it takes practice to recognize and capture such ideas on paper. Concepts may be found in conversations, newspaper stories, magazine articles, on the Internet or radio, in television programs and all kinds of books. The student must learn to be aware of these and other resources, then recognize possible story ideas and jot them down.

With a little creativity, students easily could write about home, education, games, friends, camp, church and other familiar people, places and things. Those are logical settings for their stories.

Then all the child has to do is to think of ideas that could take place against the background of what he already knows and follow the story building guidance in this book. Have the student start with some right-around-home ideas that can become stories by adding some imagination.

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STEP 1: Train the imagination to see story possibilities in ideas that are all around every day.

Writing can be another way of playing “let’s pretend.” All children like to dress up or play with toys that let them be anything they want. It is not unusual for young authors to write about places and characters that exist only in a child’s mind. That’s fun, but it also places an extra burden on the writer because he not only has to create alien creatures, but an imaginary world where unbelievable things happen – yet are logical to a human mind. Students should first be encouraged to write only about what they know. If they still want to write fantasy, let it be done, but only after they have mastered the real world of story writing.

If a child persists in creating fantasy worlds where the imagination can run freely, suggest to him to pretend that such a universe exists, but he must make the characters and environment logical to a human mind. That’s what I did as a boy before my first stories were published about people and places I knew about.

We lived on a farm where I had no toys except rocks with interesting shapes, but neighbors gave us the “funny papers,” as today’s comics were called. One of those strips was about “Buck Rogers in the 25th Century.” Adding imagination to my rock toys, these became rocket ships filled with people from five hundred years in the future. Naturally, I had to make up stories about who those future people were, where they went in their rocket ships, and what kinds of troubles they encountered.

However, it wasn’t until I wrote about what I knew best – the rural life around me – that my first short stories were published when I was fourteen. At the time, I didn’t know anything about how a story was created, but I had read so much that I may have subconsciously sensed what had to go into a narrative. This led to a professional writing career that continues to this day.

Ideas are seeds, much like an acorn that can grow into an oak tree with the proper conditions. Ideas are as plentiful as acorns in autumn, but story ideas are often unrecognized. So, before turning to the newspapers, magazines, or books, tell the learner that you and he are going on a quest to find something that is as elusive as a butterfly that quickly flits away. Alert the student to the fact that it takes a sharp eye and quick reflexes to capture what they’re after even though they’re all around every day. The hunt is for a story idea; just one, but others may be captured if found. Here are some suggestions for how to start the search.

From now on, a student should carry a notebook and pencil to daily practice jotting down ideas that could become stories. A realistic goal is to think of at least one story idea to be recorded every day for possible future development.

(The lesson continues for several pages. The next page is the student worksheet)

IDEAS AND THE SHORT STORY

QUESTIONS FOR THE STUDENT ON STORY IDEAS. (ANSWERS FOR TEACHER ARE AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK.)

Question 1: All stories start with an idea, so list five sources for possible story concepts.

Student's answers:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Question 2: What are the five necessary elements needed to start a story?

Student's answer:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Question 3: What do most professional writers tell others they should write about?

Student's answer:

Question 4: If only a fragment of an idea is recognized, what can the writer ask himself to possibly turn concept into a good story idea?

Student's answer:

Question 5: What is the first thing a writer should do when encountering a possible story idea, even if it's only a fragment?

Student's answer:

STUDENT'S PRACTICE ON IDEAS

Part 1: Instruct the learner to think of an idea and write it down in a single sentence starting with: "This is a story about...."

Part 2: Then have the student write a short summary that includes the four other elements needed to begin a story. The last necessary ingredient may be implied but it must be clear enough that the teacher will know what that goal is going to be.

END LESSON 1 ON IDEAS

How to Write a Story About the Author

Best selling author Lee Roddy's credits include 55 published novels (45 juvenile and 10 adult) that have sold millions of copies here and in 22 foreign countries. Six of these became films or television programs, including "Grizzly Adams." The first of Lee Roddy's short stories were published when he was 14. He began his professional writing career in Hollywood, California.

Before his books sold well enough that he could devote full time to that career, he was a staff writer for a motion picture and television production company, a staff novelist, a newspaper editor-publisher, a radio station manager and advertising agency executive.

He taught fiction writing for Writer's Digest across the United States and into Canada. For more than 20 years, he has been a seminar leader at countless colleges and writers' conferences. He annually speaks to standing-room-only audiences at teachers' and home school conventions on how to teach students to write a story.

Teachers and parents who attended Lee Roddy's writing workshops have reported great improvement with their students after using a one-page handout version of the author's material. Following years of innumerable requests, this guidebook was prepared to give instructors greater details than were possible in the handout.

Hundreds of aspiring adult fiction writers who took Lee Roddy's practical seminars went on to use his proven system to sell their first short stories or novels. Some of these students have since sold millions of copies of their novels. Current bookracks at drug, grocery and other stores include titles by some of these previously unpublished writers.

The author and his wife live in California's historic Mother Lode Gold Country. The couple has a grown son, daughter and two grandsons.