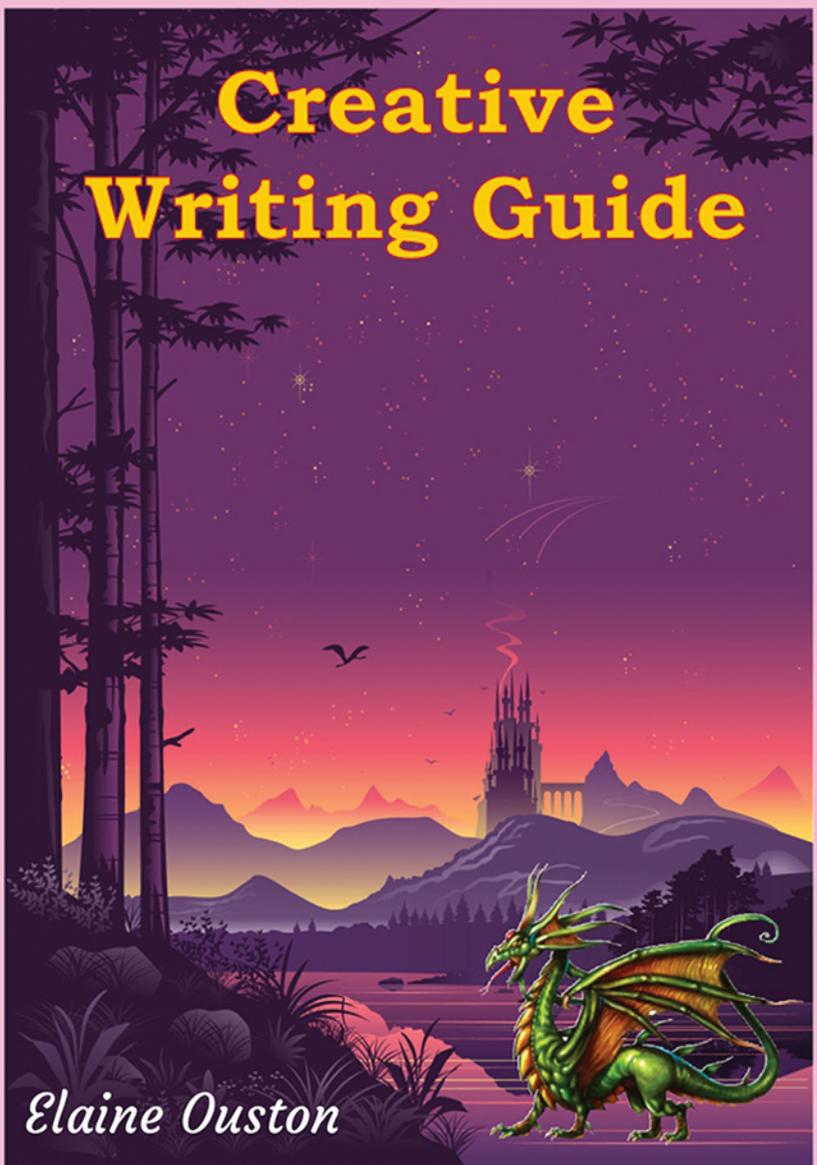


Gondor Writers' Centre

Building Blocks of Story

Creative Writing Guide

Elaine Ouston





**Gondor Writing Centre
Creative Writing Guide**

The Building Blocks of Story

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Introduction:

Many people tell me they are going to write a book one day and the idea they have will make it a best seller. Now it is great to have that kind of confidence, but when I ask them what knowledge and experience they have as a writer, they say things like, “I was top of my class in English.”

If only it was that simple. There is more to writing a best seller than knowing basic English. Having been through the journey from having ideas to turning them into popular books for children, I can tell you it is not that easy.

To me, saying you can write a best-seller without learning about ***the craft of story creation*** is like saying you are going to do brain surgery without going to medical school.

50% of writing a great work of fiction is imagination and 50% is technical skill on how to build a great story, but these skills can be learned.

Like all professions, to be the best at what you do, you have to work at it. Many people can tell a story, but if it doesn't excite and intrigue the readers on the first page they won't read on.

These skills are needed whatever you are writing – short story, picture book, chapter books for children, poems, memoirs, novels, etc.

This book and the ones that follow will help you learn those skills.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF STORY

I am often asked where writers get ideas for stories. Some tell me they come to them in a dream, others from meeting an interesting character, some from reading or listening to a real-life story, learning about something new, or just from a passion for a subject. For many fiction writers, the main character pops into their mind and demands their story be told. Mine usually come from learning something new and deciding to write a story about it.

There are many forms of story: short stories, novels, novellas, poems and more. And many genres; memoir, non-fiction, contemporary fiction, historic, romantic, fantasy, humour, thriller, crime etc. It doesn't matter what you are writing, the information that you will be given, will help you develop your story.

This guide will introduce you to the building blocks of a great story. And I encourage you to use your idea to do the exercises that are a part of the lesson.

You need to have each one of these building blocks clear in your mind before you start writing. In this book, I can only touch on each of the subjects I will cover. The guides that follow will cover them in more detail.

Once you have an idea, you have to come up with the best way to tell the story. A good story follows a set pattern or a story arc.

Following are the 9 building blocks of story. But before we get to them, we need to know who the main character is.

Character: Every story needs a main character; this is the person whose story you will tell. Depending on the type of story and the audience, this can of course be an animal or an imaginary creature.

Many people develop their character first and make the mistake of starting their story with a whole chapter on the character, where he lives, works, what he looks like etc. You will lose your reader before they get to the story if you do this.

While it is vital for **you** to know all of those things and more about your character, all of those details should be revealed to the reader through the story. While I usually have a character in mind before I start planning, I have learnt not to develop him/her too much before the story is clear in my mind. I believe the character has to fit the story, not the story fit the character.

So, if I have a fully developed character and then I work on the story, I often have to go back and change the personality of my character to make him/her fit.

We'll talk more about character later. **For now, if you have a character in mind, write his/her name in your note pad or computer file.**

Now we are going to develop or plot our story by looking at the building blocks that I mentioned. I will list them and then explain each one.

- 1. Inciting incident**
- 2. Goal or Quest**
- 3. Motivation**
- 4. Primary action**
- 5. Primary Conflict or Obstacles**
- 6. Secondary obstacles**
- 7. Point of no return**
- 8. Climax**

9. Resolution

Plotting: If followed, these BUILDING BLOCKS WILL GET A WRITER FROM BEGINNING TO END, SMOOTHLY. Let's look more closely at them.

1. Inciting incident:

A story should start with an inciting incident: Something out of the ordinary that happens to change your character's life. Many books spend the first few pages setting up the story: who the main characters are, where they live, what their life is like now etc, but this is not necessary and will bore your reader. This information should be woven into the story after you reveal the purpose of the story.

If you start with the inciting incident, you will hook the reader. This should be an event beyond the control of the protagonist, which turns things from average to exceptional. It can be huge or tiny, pleasant, or unpleasant, it may not even be recognised as significant at the time, but this is the point where the character's life changes.

For instance, for the plot for the first book in my Mystery of Nida Valley series, I wrote, 'Meg comes home from school and finds a note that says Amanda is missing.'

Write in the inciting incident for your story.

2. Goal or Quest:

The effect of the inciting incident is to generate the need for a goal or quest. **The quest or goal is important** – it's the whole reason for your story.

The protagonist now is forced to seek something or change something to get things back on track. When people hear the word quest, they assume you mean something like an adventure to get back the sacred chalice.

But a quest can be an emotional one. In romantic fiction, it could be to pursue the love of your life, in contemporary fiction it could be to pass an exam or get a degree, get a promotion or a new job, be chosen for the Olympics, beat a disease. Or in crime it could be to catch a killer, find a lost loved one or any number of things. The success of your narrative hangs on whether your reader thinks it is an interesting goal or quest. With a short story or a picture book, it can be simple, but it still must be life-changing or lifesaving.

With a novel, there is usually one huge life-changing or saving goal and several minor ones along the way that your hero has to achieve to reach the ultimate goal. This major goal should be very clear in your mind and must be clear to your reader early in the book.

Write in your character's major goal.

As you break down the story into scenes the other goals will become clear. The goal in the first chapter can be a simple one.

In a murder mystery it could be the search for a missing person. After the body is found, the major goal would be to catch the killer.

The major goal in Mystery of Nida Valley is to save from extinction the last remaining Australian megafauna that are in a hidden valley protected by a magic order.

Meg's first goal was to find Amanda. It is during this search that she learns about the major goal.

3. Motivation: Why does your main character want to achieve the goal?

Your character's MOTIVATION is the reason most people read on from this point. It must be strong and easy to relate to from a readers' point of view. If they relate to it, they will become emotionally involved and that will hook them.

In a short story or picture book, the main motivation will be apparent from the first page, but in a novel, it is common that the primary goal, and the motivation behind it, is not evident in the first chapter. But, right from page one there must be some goal and a motivation for achieving it.

In the Mystery of Nida Valley, Meg's motivation for the major goal is that she is to be the next leader of the magic order that protects the animals, and it is her job to save them.

Meg's motivation for her first goal is her friendship with Amanda.

Fill in your character's motivation to achieve the major goal. If you know what the first goal will be, put it in.

4. Primary Action:

The primary action is how your protagonists will achieve the major goal? This is a very important part of the story.

It can be as simple as a journey, as complex as fighting a battle, outsmarting an enemy, or it could be overcoming some inner-conflict like shyness or lack of confidence or even an illness. It might involve a criminal act or learning new skills. Whatever it is, it must be interesting, start at the beginning of the book, and continue to the climactic scene.

In the Mystery of Nida Valley, Meg's primary action to achieve her major goal is to develop her magic powers and fight the evil wizard who wants to exploit the animals for financial gain.

Meg's first action is to go to the haunted manor where Amanda went missing and look for her friend.

Fill in your character's primary action.

5. Primary Conflict or Obstacles: Who or what blocks the way.

A story without conflict is dull and boring; in fact, without conflict there is no story. It can be internal or external conflict. But it must be strong enough to block the way. Most people think of conflict as negative – a fight etc, but in a story, it can simply be a problem that needs to be solved or tension to resolve. It can be internal conflict – a feeling of not being good enough; not up to the challenge faced. It can also be much more of course, it could be a bad guy to defeat, a mountain to climb, or a rival to eliminate. It all depends on the genre of the story.

Remember, if the goal is easily achieved, the story is boring. So, the characters need to encounter real obstacles on their quest. To keep tension through the story and keep the reader guessing, the unexpected must happen. A poorly constructed incident is often predictable, foreseen ten pages back and boring when it occurs.

Fill in the primary conflict or obstacle.

Meg's primary conflict is the evil wizard, but many secondary conflicts occur before she finally faces him.

6. SECONDARY CONFLICTS OR OBSTACLES:

Before our protagonist reaches the final destination, the final confrontation, and the achievement of the Big Goal, we need a few escalating action scenes involving obstacles to raise the tension. Sometimes these only become evident as we plot the story further, or as we write.

In a short story or picture book, the secondary obstacles are minor and easily overcome, but they still must be there – to slowly increase the tension.

In a novel, they must be much more complex. To keep the tension mounting, they must be life threatening, or life changing, and escalating towards the climax. Once again, they can be physical or emotional.

Meg faces many obstacles in her quest. She is chased by the marsupial lion, trapped in a cave with a dragon, hunted by the evil wizard, and much more.

Fill in at least one of the secondary conflicts or obstacles if you know one.

7. Point of No Return: Before your hero reaches the climactic scene, we throw in a point of no return. This is when the protagonist realises that it is now 'do or die'. There is no going back. Up to this point, the character could have decided to pull out of the quest. The character may, at this point, be compulsive and driven, but feeling inadequate, and deluded and feel like giving up. He/she will of course carry on, but letting the reader see that your character is human and has self-doubts is important.

Something should happen that takes away the character's choice and makes him/her press on; make them realise that there is no turning back.

It can be a physical barrier behind him/her: a rockslide, a collapsed bridge, flooded river, snowstorm etc. In battle, it could be a large force of the enemy coming up behind. Or it could be an emotional one, a decision that his/her life must change, he/she must save a loved one in danger etc.

If the character comes to a stop, the story is over. If they are to continue the quest, they will have to change course, change tactic, and that means making a difficult decision to overcome this primary obstacle.

Once again, sometimes this point only becomes evident as we plot the story further or as we write.

If you know what will cause your character to hesitate, and what will make them change their mind, fill it in.

After Meg faced the many obstacles in her quest, she declared that she didn't want to be leader and decided to quit, but then she learnt that one of the animals was in danger and only her newly acquired magic skills could save it.

8. CLIMAX: After the point of no return, the final climactic scene is usually the overcoming of the major obstacle.

But it could be as the result of an accumulation of further events. This is where your hero will either win or lose. The critical choices he made on the journey come to a head in the climactic scene. It need not be spectacular, but it must be the high point of the drama in the story. In a physical or emotional journey, it is where the hero stands up against the thing he fears most and wins ... or loses. Whatever you decide. You are the God of your created world.

The climax must change the status of the character. If it does not result in a reversal of your protagonist's situation, which began with the inciting incident, then it begs the question if the climax was there solely for spectacle. If you have planted enough clues on the way, the reversal may have been expected, but you can always trot out a twist that changes your reader's expectation.

For the story to work well, we need to balance two things: unexpectedness and plausibility. Remember, it must be within the bounds of credibility. Even in fantasy or science fiction, credibility is expected.

This scene is virtually the reason for the story. If you don't have this firmly in your mind before you start, you can't plan the scenes that lead your character to this point.

Fill in the climactic scene

9. RESOLUTION:

The very last section is the resolution. This is sometimes a whole chapter. Sometimes it is just a couple of pages. This is where, in the

murder mysteries, the killer reveals why he did it – or our hero tells us – and he is carted off to jail. In all stories, it is where we tie up any loose ends and trot out any twists. It's the 'then they rode off into the sunset and lived happily ever after' scene.

Fill in the resolution. Where does your character go from here?

But these building blocks don't just apply to the story, they should be used in every paragraph.

Let's look at a scene from my novel *The Mystery of Nida Valley*: Listen for the mix of action, description, and emotion that is needed to keep the reader engaged.

INCITING INCIDENT: An ear-piercing scream filled the air. Meg turned. Amanda stood frozen to the spot, looking up. Following her gaze, Meg yelped with fear. A snake like the one that had attacked Meg in the rainforest, coiled around the branch above Amanda's head.

RISING ACTION: It had been so close last time that Meg had no chance to take in its appearance. Now she gaped in wonder. It must be at least six metres long. Its striped, bright red body is as thick as a man's thigh. No wonder it was so strong, she thought. The rash on her arms prickled as she watched in horror. It uncoiled and dropped down towards Amanda.

POINT OF NO RETURN: 'Run, Amanda! Get away from it,' Meg shouted, edging away. But Amanda stood glued to the spot, shaking her head from side to side in fear, unable to move her legs.

CLIMAX: Jaiden quickly took out the stun gun and loaded a dart. Racing to Amanda's side, he pointed the gun at the snake and fired. But, although the dart sank deep into the flesh of the snake, it still kept coming towards them.

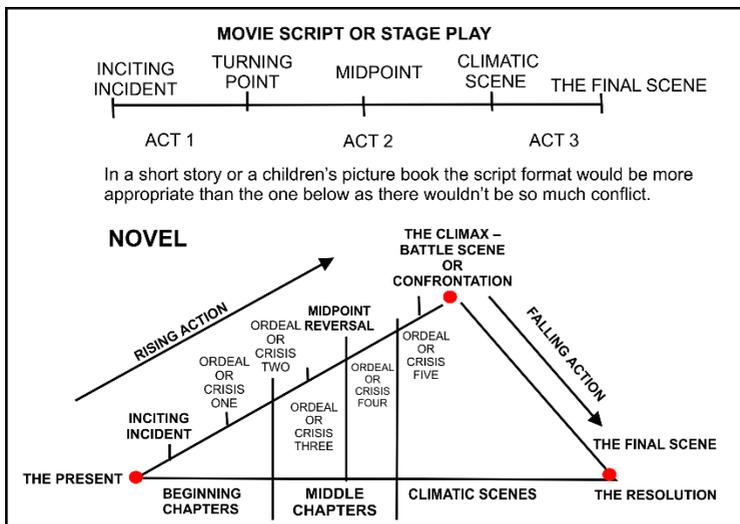
Meg rushed over and grabbed Amanda by the arm. 'Let's get out of here!' she cried. They pushed the buttons on their watches and landed at the base of the tree.

FALLING ACTION: The snake hissed fiercely in protest at its meal escaping once again. Legs trembling, the friends sank to the ground, and gasped to catch their breath.

RESOLUTION: Meg looked up and sighed with relief; there was no sign of the snake following them. But their relief was short-lived. A shiver of warning passed through Meg's body, and she knelt to look around.

From the basic story outline you created you will be able to develop the plot for your story. The next book in this series will cover plotting in more detail.

This graph will help you with plotting the scenes along the way.



To make our story great, what else do we need to do?

DEVELOP STRONG CHARACTERS

CHOOSE POINT OF VIEW

CREATE THE BEST SETTING

These subjects are covered in the next book in the series: **Turning your idea into a story.**