

The Short Story Writer's Planning Scaffold



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It starts with an idea.

This could be a problem (e.g. I'm being made homeless) or a possibility (e.g. there are secretly fairies living among us) or a question (e.g. who are my biological parents?). But before you can plan a story, you must have some idea of what the story is going to be about. Brainstorm some possibilities, then choose the one that appeals to you most.

If you're really struggling to pluck an idea from the air, try an improv generator. You might have used these in drama classes, because they're a great starting point for acting scenes too. Writing is acting on paper. The online generator www.can-i-get-a.com can provide you with a location for your story, a word to spark the imagination, or a relationship between two characters to use as a starting point. The generator at www.englishprompts.com/improv/ gives you an opening sentence and an emotion, then you can imagine the scene that might result.

Write down your idea in just one or two sentences.



Break it down: goal, stakes, obstacle(s)

Three key things that your story will need are a goal, something at stake, and something to overcome. Take your idea and think about it a little more until you can answer me these three questions:

- What does your main character want? (story goal)
- Why does it matter? What happens if they don't achieve it? (stakes)
- What obstacles are in their way?



Write down your answers to the three questions.

Goal	Stakes	Obstacles



Meet the main players

For a short story, you only want a handful of characters. Even if your setting is somewhere busy, like a classroom, the focus will be on just two or three of the people there. As a general rule, the shorter the story, the fewer the characters. For this story, I suggest you pick three.

You might have done character profiles before, with lots of information about eye colour and hobbies and whatnot. Not today. To get to the heart of your characters, answer

me this:

What do they want? For your main character or protagonist, this is probably going to be the same as your story goal, above. But for your other characters, their wants might be different: an antagonist wants to stop the main character from being successful. Someone might want to impress the main character. Someone might want to steal an important item for their own selfish purposes. Someone might want to date the same person the main character is attracted to (a classic love triangle). Someone might accidentally get in the way, when all they want is to take a nap on the park bench where the action is happening.

What is their best feature? This could be something like a superpower, or a skill that they are particularly good at. It could be something external, like money or beauty, that helps them to manipulate others and reach their goals. But most likely it will be something to do with their personality: bravery, compassion, resilience, determination.

What is their biggest flaw? Again, it could be a practical flaw like having never learned to swim or needing blueberries in order to activate their superpower. Maybe they're lonely and can't do anything that requires co-operation with a second person. Or it could be a personality flaw like

closed-mindedness or selfishness. Even the best characters have flaws. And even the worst characters have things that make them relatable or redeemable.

Who do they care about? This is important because if you have more than one character, their relationship to one another will be crucial to how the story plays out. Hating someone is still caring about them (though you should know why they hate the other person). Or maybe your character cares deeply about someone else who doesn't feature strongly in the story - e.g. Katniss Everdeen is initially motivated by saving her sister, but once she travels to the Capitol to compete, her relationship with Prim can neither help nor hinder her.

Character name: _____

What do they want? _____

Best feature: _____

Biggest flaw: _____

Who do they care about? _____



The Inciting Incident

Okay, you've got your characters and they've got a goal. Now it's time to bring them together and write your first scene. You need to work out what prompts your character to act. For example, in Harry Potter, the arrival of his Hogwarts letter is the incident that brings our main character (Harry) to the heart and goal of the story (learn wizarding skills necessary to defeat Voldemort). In this particular case, the big overall goal isn't reached for many hundreds (thousands) of pages in a seven book series, but you're only writing a short story. So don't be deterred by the fact that Harry doesn't read his letter until 40 pages in. For you, those 40 pages equates to just a paragraph or two.

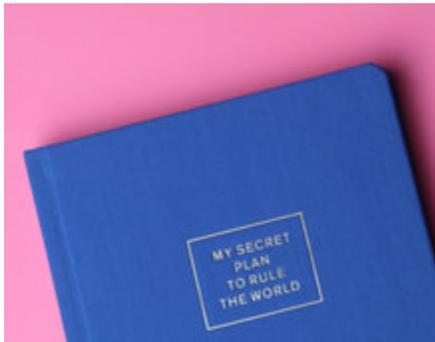


Figuring out the inciting incident means going back to that core story idea. Your idea gives you a good sense of where your story begins:

- **a discovery** (e.g. protagonist meets a fairy and learns there are many in the world)
- **a problem** (e.g. protagonist arrives home from school and is told that his family has no money and the bank is kicking them out of their house)
- **a question** (e.g. protagonist decides to find her biological father after her mother dies)

A discovery leads to the story goal because the new information or relationship forces a reaction from the character. A problem leads to the story goal because the character is immediately faced with something to overcome (and successfully overcoming it/restoring normal IS the goal). A question leads to the story goal because it demands an answer.

What is your inciting incident?



The Plan

I'm going to give you a cloze passage, except you don't have a word bank for this, you have your ideas and your imagination. If you've done all the steps above, this part is just filling in the blanks with information you already know.

While ____ [character] is at ____ [place], ____ [inciting incident happens]. They realise/decide that they need to ____ [story goal] and set off to do so. But they encounter a problem when ____ [obstacle] and they have to ____ [overcome obstacle]. With the obstacle cleared, the character is able to ____ [story goal] and ____ [reward].

Congratulations! You have a plan for your story. Next up, you need to write it...



The First Scene

Look at your plan above (or in your notebook). Notice how it's split into four sentences? Think of each of those sentences as scenes in your story. A scene might only take a couple of paragraphs, and you don't necessarily need a marker between scenes, especially if they happen immediately after one another. Think of a scene as something that involves a *character* performing an *action*. It's now time to write your first scene.



How do you turn a single sentence idea into a whole scene? Remember earlier I said writing is acting on paper? What you're going to do now is imagine you are your main character. Then start writing down what you (as your character) see, say, do and feel. Start simple, maybe by describing an object they see or a person they're talking to. Then add in bits of detail and steer them towards the actions or thoughts you need them to take.



The First Draft

Keep writing! Go through the remaining scenes in the same way: imagine what your character sees and experiences, and how s/he reacts and feels. Try to use all of your senses: think about what they can hear, the temperature, whether they are hungry or in pain. But don't worry about your word count, or if you've chosen a boring word, or used "said" too much, or been "telling" where you should "show". This is the first draft; it doesn't have to be perfect, so keep going!



The Revision

Once you have a first draft, it's time to edit. This is where your word count will change a *lot*. Editing is not about spelling mistakes and punctuation, although you should fix those too. Editing is where you look for things like:



- is there a better word I could use? (e.g. replace "said angrily" with "snarled")
- have I included enough description of the places and characters in this scene?
- could I show the emotions of this character through their actions, word choices, or observations?
- could I choose more interesting details?
- have I got a good balance of action, dialogue and internal thoughts?

Check out my student writers' guide to editing for a thorough and detailed approach.



Congratulations, what was once just a little idea in your head is now a whole story!