A Fairly Creative Guide to Telling Tales

An Introduction to Creative Writing

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Introduction

Once upon a time, someone wanted to write a story. Or maybe he didn't really want to write a story, but it was assigned for school, and so he faced the assignment like a pair of stinky socks: he stuffed them under the bed, in the back of the closet, at the bottom of his backpack, where the assignment lay forgotten like a great treasure until, *lo!*, the story was eventually due. So a quest ensued, but by that time a host of terrible monsters had come to guard the creative writing assignment, berating the hero with their technical names, from Plot to Characterization to Setting. I will pause while you shudder.

The bad news: You're the hero. Those monsters are there for you to deal with, and English teachers will only put up with Grendel-style warfare in *Beowulf*. You're going to have to get even more creative to do the assignment.

The good news: Lucky heroes get wizards to take along on their quests, and you get me. That is, you get my magic book. (It does not write stories for you, though. It contains fussy magic—more like a fairy godmother who insists on a curfew.)

Here's the thing about wizards: they're not the heroes. Their role in a story is to help some shaggy kid who thinks he has no business fighting monsters to become a hero.

Like that shaggy kid who finds heroic courage inside himself, you have incredible stories to tell, and thanks to the magic of the printing press, I can talk you through your quest to tell them. (And yes, that's the only actual magic involved in this magic book, but magic is awesome, so be glad to find it where you can.)

Part One:
Plot

1. Introduction: The Skeleton of the Story

The plot is the skeleton of your story, the summary that allows someone to say, "Oh, yeah, I know that story!" or "Hmm…I think I'd like to read that book."

A scientist can tell whether a skeleton belonged to a dog or a cat, a man or a woman. He or she can deduce something about a skeleton's access to dental care and good nutrition. The basics—that's all a skeleton has to offer. Alone, it will never tell a scientist whether its owner was a philanthropist, liked the color blue, or was loved. A skeleton will never tell a scientist its name.

A story needs a plot like a person needs a skeleton, but plot alone no more tells a story than an x-ray will tell you someone's name. As readers, we are drawn to familiar plots. We like to know just enough of what's coming to focus on other details of the story. Compare the following:

> A lonely old woodcutter lives alone in a forest and finds a pot of gold, which he uses to buy a bigger ax. When the ax proves too heavy for him to lift, he trades it for a side of bacon. The end.

and:

> A poor girl works hard for an evil person until one day she finds true love and great wealth. The end.

The first story doesn't make sense to us. We have certain expectations of a tale: problem, complication, resolution. The first story seems to present a problem—the woodcutter's loneliness—but moves on arbitrarily to solutions that become less and less satisfying to the trained expectations of the reader, finally leaving us feeling cheated by an author who doesn't seem to play by the rules.

The second story is *Cinderella*, pared down so that the employer could be a wicked boss or an evil stepmother, and her resolution could be Prince Charming or an MBA. Over and over again, the *Cinderella* plot satisfies. A person who lacks X—in this case, love and money—gets X through some result of good nature. Don't believe me? Try this one:

> A young painter longed to paint beautiful pictures of the sea but had no paints. She cheerfully turned to the nature around her that she loved, using blueberries to dye her canvases blue, soot from the fireplace for storm clouds, and bits of crushed wildflowers for sunlight and ships on the distant horizon.
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> Her evil sister, fearing that the blueberry and soot paintings were more beautiful than her own, locked the girl up and fed her only bread and water so that even her palette from nature was lost.
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> An art dealer came upon one of the girl's paintings and was so moved by its beauty that he would not rest until he'd found the artist. He succeeded at last in his quest, freed the girl, and gave her all the paints, canvases, blueberries, and soot she could want. The girl lived happily ever after in a

studio of her own, overlooking the ocean she loved.

How about a man who wants to read, and his only book is burned because books are banned? Maybe an undercover agent from another country rescues him, and he becomes a famous author with all the books he could want and libraries named after him. But if he loves to read and has no books, we are not prepared to want him to live happily ever after with a side of bacon. That doesn't make sense, and it offers no hope, no promises of happily ever after or gained insight. At best, we're disappointed. At worst, we get angry and rant for a half hour about people who can't write.

As we move through this book, at the end of each chapter, you'll have an assignment that you must complete, and since you've learned the most essential points of story-writing and reading in this introduction, it's fitting that you demonstrate that knowledge with a short assignment to get you officially started.

Assignment #1:

Write a one- to three-sentence summary of *Cinderella*. (I know that's dry. I promise it will get better.)

2. Plot Diagram, Part One: Exposition

Since the plot of a story is like its skeleton—the basic structure that gives a thing its shape—then a plot diagram is like an x-ray. It's a visual representation of the bones of your story, but while there are more than 200 bones in the human body, there are only five basic parts to the plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

Exposition is the point in a story at which you give the reader the background.

> After long awaiting a child, the king and queen gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

What do we know? The king and queen are older. The whole kingdom probably has worried about an heir to the throne to keep the kingdom intact and to keep the peace. We know that this baby girl is everything—the sum of her parents' hopes for the family name, the kingdom, parenthood. Here's another example:

> Once upon a time, there was a miller who was always boasting about his daughter.

So the exposition? It's the beginning, and in fairy tales, that's easy.

Once upon a time, there lived....you pick. A fox? A tree? A girl with buck teeth? Or we could just go with the usual: ...a beautiful young girl with some sort of terrible hardship, ranging from parents who want to kill her to stepparents, witches, or fairies who want to kill her. (The terrible hardship counts as background, so that goes here, too.)

Why does the background matter? Think about the relative you avoid at family functions, the one who corners you and talks to you for hours about things you don't care about and people you've never met. How is Uncle Ralph

with his double-jointed left elbow and mind-numbing stories about his old buddies different from the Grimm brothers? When they tell you about some poor backwoods fellow with an ax who they heard about from a toothless old woman who just might pass for a witch, they give you a bit of background. The poor guy's on his second wife, a real harpy, has a couple of kids he can't feed, and a mortgage.

As a reader you are drawn into the story at first because of the back story. You have an idea of what happens to men who marry women like this; you can imagine what it must be like to be unable to provide for your kids. There's some glimmer of a connection between you and the subject of the story, something woefully familiar in his back story, and even if it's just for a moment, the story has caught your attention.

How important is the back story? Think about this:

> Once upon a time, there was a boy, and during the night, something very mysterious happened. On a bench, there was a side of bacon. . . .

Unless he's a wolf, unless he's a poor cobbler, and the bacon is really a pair of Reeboks, this story is building nothing but a frustrated reader. You could achieve the same effect by shaking up a soda bottle. We don't care about just "a boy"; we care about people. "A boy" is a stick figure in a math book. "A boy has five marbles. He gives two to a friend. How many does he have left?" Are you dying to see how story problems turn out? Do you wish they'd make them into movies? No? That's partly because there's no exposition, no back story.

Assignment #2:

Take the beginning of one fairy tale—everything up to "And then an amazing/awful/crazy thing happened...." Now take the "amazing thing" from another fairy tale, and stick them together. What happens next? (If you'd like, you can copy the chart on page 9 and cut it apart. Mix the pieces from each column up, put them into two separate piles, and draw one from each pile. Add your own ending.)

Example:

> Once upon a time, a king and queen wanted a baby. After many years, the queen gave birth to a beautiful girl and planned a grand christening with the entire kingdom and seven fairies. The baby was playing with a golden ball when it rolled away and splashed into a deep pool outside the castle.
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> The baby princess began to cry, but the voice of a frog was heard above her wailing and sobs.
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> "CROAK! Why are you crying?" asked the frog.
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> The king and queen looked at each other, distraught.

What does this illustrate? The back story matters. In *The Frog Prince*, ultimately the princess is convinced to kiss the frog because she's lost her *favorite* golden ball. If I accidentally knock my kids' two-dollar ball into the neighbor's pool, I am *not* kissing a frog to get it back. I'll get another one, or we'll do without.

The beginning is intrinsically tied into the end. If Sleeping Beauty meets a frog prince instead of a wicked old fairy, she doesn't spend 100 years trapped in a magical dreamscape. If Jack hadn't been so poor and stupid, he would never have ended up with magic beans. You can't plant an apple seed and expect to get a cherry tree. Beginnings matter.

Table of Beginnings and Amazing Things

Expositions	Amazing Things
A miller dies, leaving his oldest son the mill, his second son the donkey, and his youngest son nothing but a cat.	The cat asks for some boots and a pouch.
An emperor loves clothes so much that he spends all of his time, care, and money on them.	Two swindlers promise the most beautiful costume imaginable, which will become invisible to the unworthy and the stupid.
A childless couple, expecting their first baby at last, lose the child to a witch in exchange for some lettuce. The witch raises the baby.	The baby becomes very beautiful, so the witch locks her in a tower.
An orphan is being raised by her stepmother as a servant.	The king gives a ball, to which all are invited.
A princess loses her golden ball in a deep pond.	A talking frog retrieves the ball for her in exchange for a place at her table and on her pillow.
A poor widow sends her son to sell their cow to save them from starvation. He exchanges the cow for a few magic beans.	A magic beanstalk grows outside the cottage up into an unknown land in the sky.
A little girl is sent to take a meal to her ailing grandmother.	She meets a wolf who wants to know her plans.

3. Plot Diagram, Part Two: Rising Action

So far, all we have is back story. If it's Uncle Ralph's story, we're looking for an escape route because even if he did catch our interest for a second, we know he can't follow through.

That's the danger with Uncle Ralph: one way or another, he catches your attention, and then you're stuck looking at his freaky elbow and wishing desperately for the end of the story.

Unfortunately, Uncle Ralph hasn't read my book and doesn't know that one story doesn't naturally flow into another endlessly. And he thinks you like to watch him bend his elbow backwards. If it's the Grimm brothers or Hans Christian Andersen, you know that something's about to happen. Something amazing. Or something awful. You're going to get a story, not a monologue, because a good storyteller knows that you can't have a chipper young boy who lived on a mountaintop unless you add, "Until one day…. "

After the back story, there has to be a problem because without some kind of problem, you haven't got a story. You've maybe got a lab report for an education class, but remember, there's no section of the library devoted to lab reports. That's because lab reports are boring; they're not stories.

It's like this: Once upon a time [back story], UNTIL [exciting/interesting/awful event that changes the boring trajectory of the back story]. Think about these examples.

A baby girl was born to childless royalty, and all the fairies of the land were invited, except for one who was so old she'd been forgotten. Or perhaps she was so dark and evil, her presence had been feared. Or perhaps she was so

ugly, nobody wanted to have to look at her. One way or another, she was not invited, BUT SHE SHOWED UP. This is a problem.

There was a poor miller who liked to boast, and he had a beautiful daughter. THEN ONE DAY, THE KING RODE BY, AND THE MILLER EXCLAIMED, "MY DAUGHTER CAN SPIN STRAW INTO GOLD."

Something happens, and the miller, with his mundane life and ridiculous boasting, is no longer just a joke down at the local pub. He's finally gotten himself into real trouble, just like everybody always told him he would. Now the miller has a problem.

Actually, he had a problem all along: his tendency to brag, to exaggerate the truth…a smidge. The background problem that the story is introduced with, though, is not the main problem of the story. It simply leads toward or contributes to the main problem, but by itself, it's still not a story.

A poor, lonely washerwoman living alone on a mountaintop is tragic and all, but what we as readers want to know is: What inspired somebody to start writing about her? If she was there yesterday and she'll be there tomorrow, sad as her life is, what drew the author to it?

The answer is some kind of change. Before the king rode into town, everybody just rolled their eyes and shrugged every time the miller opened his mouth. He would have grown old and died like every other miller and braggart who ever lived, without a single story being written about him.

Before Maleficent showed up, Sleeping Beauty's christening was just a high point in the lives of some rich people who lived long ago in a land far away. Her birth was a miracle, perhaps, but to make a story, we require much

more than that. We want the miracle child to then grow up and create miracles, encounter obstacles, *do* something other than just have been born to a previously infertile couple who happens to own a matching set of crowns.

Whether the life is happy or sad, something changes to draw the author's attention and to make him or her want to write the story. It may at first seem small, but this small change, be it a dinner of stolen rampion or a simple meal taken to an ill grandmother, will set off a chain of events that will lead to a bigger change—some great, exciting, interesting calamity that will hold us in the story, breathless, until it is resolved.

The little change contributes to the story's rising action. It causes the events that follow. In the case of the miller, it's his boast to the king that provokes the king's decision to take the daughter and lock her up instead of marrying her, which leads to Rumpelstiltskin's timely arrival.

Rising action is actually a series of actions or events that lead up to something big—hence, they are rising. Think of a thermometer gauge rising as the temperature outside warms up; the rising action heats up the story. Unfortunately, though, on plot diagram worksheets, "rising action" is usually a single box to be filled in, and the implication is that there is one single-most-important event that brings the reader from the beginning of the story to the middle.

But what is it, really, that leads up to the wolf trying to eat Little Red Riding Hood? Is it her mother's meal? Her walk through the forest? Her bright red cloak? Her refusal to be lured into the forest by the wily wolf who always tries to sidetrack our fairy-tale heroes? Or maybe it's his upbringing or his relationship with his mother.

The rising action can be confusing because it's not a single box on one side of an arrow pointing upward on a

worksheet; it's really a series of events. Acknowledging that fact, other educational entities have created alternate, equally confusing worksheets that sport multiple empty boxes into which you're supposed to write each of the rising actions of the story. But they have broken the rising actions into, say, seven box-events, and it looks to you like there are six or eight in the actual story, so you spend twenty minutes sweating over whether the fairy godmother's arrival is actually a separate event from Cinderella's going to the ball or not. Let me help: IT DOESN'T MATTER.

As long as you realize that the fairy godmother isn't the main event in the story and just a nice little detail that helps us get to the main event, you're fine. Call it six events in the rising action box. Call it eight. Whatever. The point is that there are a few smallish things that happen that help move the main character toward a single, awe-inspiring, jaw-dropping climax. The prince has to kneel before Cinderella and slip the glass slipper on her foot. He also has to wake Sleeping Beauty, resuscitate Snow White, and rescue Rapunzel. But we'll talk more about climax in a few chapters. For now, just know that the rising actions are the steps that get us there.

You can't turn a maid who sleeps in the cinders into a queen without some explanation. There has to be a ball, an invitation, a demand that all women attend. There has to be a dress, a carriage, and if natural means can't provide these, then there has to be something supernatural—a fairy godmother to intervene. There has to be an encounter with the prince, a night of dancing, chemistry. These things rush the princess to the prince, past all obstacles, to her happily ever after, castle, crown, and fairy-tale fame.

We don't, however, want to read stories about nice people who have great luck and happy endings.

Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful princess who had everything money could buy, a sweet nature, and an excellent wit. Everybody who knew her loved her; she was generous, kind, funny, and talented at everything she tried. She married her prince at a beautiful wedding and lived happily ever after. The End.

Yuck. We don't want to read a story with such lack of conflict. Maybe it's jealousy, but the same way you shouldn't brag about wearing a size 3 or getting a perfect score on the SAT, you shouldn't write a story about somebody who achieves a climax without conflict, without delay, without a character flaw or family problems or poverty or *something*!

It's weakness that humanizes us, and we're only interested in reading about people like ourselves—people who struggle with anger, laziness, bad circumstances, and warts.

Conflict is a part of the rising action. The stepsisters aren't going to watch glibly as Cinderella turns their cast-offs into something beautiful. The stepmother isn't going to stand by while Cinderella wins the crown. The fireplace is no less dirty because Cinderella has a ball to get to. The rising action goes one way, but it's working against a current, and that current is conflict.

Assignment #3:

Choose a fairy tale, and write the exposition at the top of a piece of paper. Keep it simple! At the bottom of the paper, write the happy ending. Next, draw a line (any kind: straight, swirly, forest path-shaped, etc.), and connect the two parts of the story with it. Now list the events that get the characters from one box to another on the line, like a dot-to-dot exercise.