

HOW TO WRITE A STORY

Idea, Premise and Ending

by Anton C. Mueller

Two Kinds of Writers

You've thought of a great idea for a story and now you decide to sit down and write it up. But if you're like many first time writers, you will probably make one of two mistakes that will hurt your story. Many novice writers either do little or no preparation or they over prepare.

In the first case, they face the blank page with fiery enthusiasm, firm in the faith that a best seller is just at their fingertips. They have an idea, write what comes to mind and hope for the best. Some are convinced that their innate talents will help them prevail while others put their faith in some higher power in hopes that it will guide their hand. The result, in any case, is all too often a disjointed and rambling narrative that has no clear direction or center and a weak ending. In addition, by depending so heavily on inspiration or revelation to carry them forward, such writers will find it hard to repeat any success they might achieve.

On the other extreme are the writers who fill stacks of note cards with scene ideas, write extensive back stories for their characters, enroll in creative writing courses and cram their

bookshelves with the latest "how to" books hoping somehow to discover the arcane secrets of the craft. And all this before they even commit a single word to paper or screen. Because they are overwhelmed with all the information they have assembled and often confused by the conflicting advice from books and tend to meander and lose their focus under the sheer weight of all that preparation. And, unlike their free-wheeling underprepared counterparts, these writers are in danger of losing their spontaneity and freshness because they waited so long to begin.


Every story begins with an idea. In the case of fiction, this idea usually comes in the form of a "what if" proposition.


The problem with both kinds of writers is that neither focuses on the necessary components of good story writing. The spontaneous writer is convinced that these components will magically appear in the course of the writing and the over prepared writer will most likely lose them among all that unnecessary preparation. This is not to say that writing does not require preparation, only that too much can be as dangerous as too little. Experienced story analysts and editors at publishing houses and production companies will spot these problems immediately and the submitted work will most likely be rejected. Yes, there are a few exceptional writers for whom one or the other of these procedures may work but for most they will not. Luckily, there is a better way.

Three Things You Need To Know Before Writing a Story

In order to avoid the problems discussed above, there are three basic things that need to be specified before one even begins to write. Without these, the story will have problems. These three things are an idea, a premise and an ending. An idea is a situation and a setting, a premise

is a statement about the nature of the world in which the idea occurs, and the ending is just that, the resolution of the story. All three must work together to create an effective narrative. To make this clear, let's look at these three components in detail.

What if you wake up one morning and no one knows who you are? What if you and your friends find a cache of stolen money? What if you begin to remember things that never happened? What if you meet the love of your life on your wedding day and it isn't the bride? What if you lose your job and can't find another? The possibilities are endless. One special type of "what if" idea is the "meet-cute." This sets up a situation in which two unlikely characters meet and change their destinies. For instance, what if a reclusive writer and a socially outgoing waitress live in the same apartment building and their mail is constantly mixed up? These are two people who would never cross paths but are forced now to meet regularly to straighten out their mail. It's a meet-cute and a perfect set-up for a romantic comedy. But it has nowhere to go because there is nothing in the idea that tells us how it should develop.

The important point to remember here is that all story ideas are incomplete. They don't say anything about the way they will develop and how they will end. Let's take a specific example. A group of friends finds a stash of hidden money. Now what? Will they try to find the person who lost it? Will they keep it for themselves? What if they find out the money was stolen? Will they be able to keep their secret? Will they try to cheat each other? In other words, an idea only provides a springboard for a story but no direction or destination.

And that's where the premise comes in. A premise is a philosophical statement about the world such as "crime doesn't pay," "no kind deed goes unpunished" or "love conquers all." Each of these premises says something deeper about the way our world functions. For instance, "crime doesn't pay" implies that the world is just and fair while "no kind deed goes unpunished" suggests that the world is cruel and malicious. Thus, if we are writing a story about a man who commits a crime and our premise is that "crime doesn't pay," then we know what can happen and how the story should end. If, on the other hand, we hold the premise that "it's only a crime if you get caught," then the story will take an entirely different turn. In the first case, our hero will get caught or be made to pay, in the second case, our hero "will get away with it."

In other words, a premise helps define the world of our story and tells us 1) what is **possible**, 2) what is **probable** and 3) what is **inevitable** in it. Unless we know those things, we don't know where our story can go or must go. And if we don't know that, we don't know what scenes are compatible and needed and which scenes are irrelevant or out of place. A premise is different from an idea in that it gives the story direction. An idea only sets up a situation but a premise moves it forward towards a necessary conclusion. An idea is usually what inspires us to sit down and write a story but a premise tells us how to write it. An idea can be an opening, a setting, a character or a plot twist but without a premise it has no place to go. The purpose of a good story is to prove its premise and to do that, all aspects of the story must lead the audience to that conclusion.



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*...what makes a story work
is different from what
inspires us to write it...*



Before you begin writing, you need to know how the story ends so that you know where you are going. The idea gives you the situation, the premise gives you the direction but the ending gives you the destination. In many ways, writing a story is like taking a journey. The idea is the reason for the journey, the premise gives you the direction to go and the ending gives you the destination. Once you have your story's journey clearly in mind, then you are ready for the next step. But if you do not know your ending, you will not know where to go with the story. The ending is as crucial as the idea and the premise and all three must be known before the first word is put on paper. Like a journey, a good story needs a plan or an itinerary with a beginning, middle and end. These are the three acts of storytelling and they will be the subject of the next article.

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