Researched, Compiled, and Written
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Setting

Setting locates your story in time and space. It helps the reader “See” where and when the story is taking place. Setting sometimes helps the reader learn the atmosphere of the story; for example, a story set in a graveyard or haunted house will most likely turn out to be scary. Sometimes setting plays a crucial role in the story, almost becoming a character itself as in Jack London’s *White Fang*. However, some stories could take place anywhere. If this is the case with your story, you should limit the description of the setting.

Think about some of your favorite stories. Where did the story happen? When did the story happen? Think about how much the story would change if it took place in another place or another time.

In short stories, setting usually does not play a prominent role. When writing short stories, try to keep the description of setting to a minimum and instead focus on more important elements of the story such as character or plot. However, setting is still important but should be used briefly.

*Example of Setting*

Note how Edgar Allan Poe uses setting in his short story “The Cask of Amontillado”:

At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use within itself, but formed merely the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, and was backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite.

Where does this paragraph take place?
What are some examples of setting used in this paragraph?
Picture Exercise

Find a picture that stimulates or excites your imagination.

Study it for no longer than 5 minutes.

Start to write about the picture. Think about the scenery depicted in the picture. Describe that setting. What lies outside of the edge of the picture? Use your imagination. Are there people portrayed in the picture? Who are they and what are they doing? Write about why they may be performing certain actions or what they may be thinking. Describe them. What do they look like? What are they wearing? What are their names? What are they frowning/smiling at?

Keep writing. Don’t stop to think about what you are writing, but let the words flow out of you. It doesn’t matter what you write at this stage; the idea is to just write. Don’t worry about editing, structure, spelling, or grammar. Don’t wait until you know what you are going to say about the picture. Look at the picture closely, and mentally note the smallest details, then write. Don’t be afraid to start while your mind is still blank – it is the act of writing that generates ideas.

Usually after about 15 minutes you will find ideas and thoughts coming out that you didn’t know you had. This is the magic starting to work. Don’t stop. Keep writing and enjoy!
All stories have at least one character. A character can be a person, an animal, or even an inanimate object. Characters for stories can be found anywhere. You can create characters out of your own imagination or base a character on someone you know in real life. When you use a person from real life, only use that person as a starting point and then use your imagination to further develop that character. You can even create a character based on some of your own personality traits. Or better yet, create a character that’s the exact opposite of you.

Dialogue

Oftentimes, dialogue tells a lot about a character. Through dialogue, the reader is introduced to the character’s thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and mannerisms. However, dialogue can be deceiving. Just like real people, characters can lie. This is one of many ways to further develop the plot of a story.

Dialogue is not mandatory in all stories. Many stories use narration alone to tell a story without any spoken interaction between characters. It is up to the author whether or not he/she chooses to use dialogue.

*See dialogue handout.
Choose a picture of someone you have never met or know nothing about. Look for interesting portraits, paintings, advertisements, etc.

Study the picture for no longer than 5 minutes.

Begin writing about the person in the picture. Think about the person depicted. Describe that person. What are they wearing? Is there a particular emotion that person is conveying? Who are they and what are they doing? Write about why they may be performing certain actions or what they may be thinking. What would that person’s name be? What is their occupation?

Keep writing. Don’t stop to think about what you are writing, but let the words flow out of you. It doesn’t matter what you write at this stage; the idea is to just write. Don’t worry about editing, structure, spelling, or grammar. Don’t wait until you know what you are going to say about the picture. Look at the picture closely, and mentally note the smallest details, then write. Don’t be afraid to start while your mind is still blank – it is the act of writing that generates ideas.

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Characterization

Answer the following questions in order to gain insight into your characters. While much of the information may not be incorporated into the story, the answers to these questions will help flesh out your characters and provide a useful sketch that you can draw from when writing.

1. Name
2. Nickname
3. Gender
4. Age
5. Physical Appearance
6. Birth place and date
7. Hometown
8. Education
9. Occupation
10. Marital Status
11. Family (parents, siblings, spouse, children)
12. Other Important Relatives (Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins)
13. Ethnicity
14. Favorite Places
15. Most Prized Possessions
16. Hobbies
17. Ambitions
18. Religious Affiliation
19. Biggest Fears
20. Character Flaws
21. Character Strengths
22. Pets
23. Favorite Books, Music, Movies, Foods
24. Astrological sign
25. Special talents
26. Biggest secret
27. Most Embarrassing Moment
28. What does he/she do when angry, happy, or depressed?
29. What are his/her fondest memories of childhood?
30. What are his/her worst memories of childhood?
31. What is his/her fantasy job?
32. What is something he/she wishes could be changed about him/herself?
Plot

Basically, the plot of any story is the conflict or problem that the characters are faced with and how the characters go about solving the conflict. Stories are made of tough things in life – changes, betrayals, losses, misfortunes, etc. If there were no obstacles, then there would be no story. Think of the obstacles in your own life and see how they could fit into a story. If you weren’t faced with any obstacles, what kind of a story would you have to tell? A story’s conflict may sometimes appear small, but even small problems can become large depending on what the characters choose to do or not do.

Within any given story the plot usually consists of three things:

1. **Rising Action**
2. **Climax**
3. **Resolution/Conclusion**

1. The **Rising Action** is what sets up the story. It can be the “Calm before the storm” or the foreshadowing of an event. The rising action tells what the problem is most likely going to be and sets the characters in motion.
2. The **Climax** is the main event. It is where the major action takes place. In the climax, characters face major obstacles and are force to deal with them.
3. The **Resolution or Conclusion** is where the obstacle is overcome. This does not mean there has to be a happy ending. It simply means that some kind of resolution for better or worse, has come about.
Plot Exercise

This exercise will help you learn to recognize and work in the three main sections of a story: the Rising Action, the Climax, and the Resolution or Conclusion. Remember that the rising action is what sets the story up and leads to the climax. The climax is the main event in the story and where the major action takes place. The resolution or conclusion is where loose ends are tied up and major obstacles are overcome.

1. Write the rising action to a story.
2. Pass what you’ve written to your neighbor. Next read the rising action that you now have, and based on that write the climax of the story.
3. Pass what you’ve written again and read the rising action and the climax. Now write the resolution based on the above.

Note the parts of each section that should not appear in the other sections: rising action should not include the major conflict or the outcome, climax should not include the outcome of the story, the resolution should not include additional conflict.
Ghost Stories

Ghost stories have been around as long as people have been telling stories. Their only true requirements are an eerie atmosphere and some experience that cannot be accounted for in the ordinary world. Don’t overlook the possibility of ghosts that aren’t necessarily people. Buildings, animals, and other non-human ghosts also make appearances in fiction.

Test your imagination on the following plot ideas.

Ghost Story Plots

1. A bell that sounded a warning for a New England town during the American Revolution has hung silent for more than two centuries. Making a nighttime visit to fulfill a dare, a student enters the museum that houses the bell. To prove he or she has been inside, the student must ring the bell long enough for his or her friends to hear it outside. The tolling of the long-silent bell brings back an army of British soldiers. What happens to the student and the student’s friends?

2. An old mirror bought at a pawnshop reflects scenes from the past whenever it’s exposed to candlelight. What is seen in the mirror? What happens to the family or individual who has bought the mirror?

3. While remodeling an old house, the Morgan family uncovers a sealed-up fireplace. The mantle as well as other parts of the fireplace is made of marble, and the family is proud of the discovery until they find that the fireplace is haunted. How and why would a ghost be associated with a fireplace?

4. Spending the night in an old inn, the main character wakes up and wanders into a long, candlelit wing of the house where he or she sees a strange collection of guests. At last, the main character finds his or her assigned bedroom and falls asleep again until morning. The next day the guest learns that the wing, which opened off the end of his or her own hallway, did once exist but was destroyed many years ago. What is the secret of the haunted inn?

5. A house appears to be haunted by a cat that gets in and out even when all the doors are locked and the windows closed. The cat causes no disturbance except for its habit of sitting halfway up the stairs. Can you explain the cat?

Exercises

Title
Titles can suggest stories to us. They can also give important insight as to what the story is about. Many stories or novels have the same or similar titles but the stories themselves are vastly different. Many authors start with a title. Other times, the title comes during the process of writing or after the story is written. For this exercise, let’s start with a title.

Choose a title from the following list. Pick one that interests you or brings certain images or ideas to your imagination. Once you’ve decided on a title, briefly explain what your story would be about if you were to write one using one of these titles. Give characters, setting, and plot that may appear in your story.

“Lake Midnight”  “After Dusk”  “Last Night on Earth”
“The Intruder”  “Pirate Ship”  “The Hanging Tree”
“Voodoo Swamp”  “Trapped”  “Dead in the Library”
“Last Call”  “Campfire”  “Dark Skies”

Beginnings
The beginning of a story is what catches the reader’s attention. If the first few lines aren’t interesting a reader is not likely to continue. Make the first lines count!
Begin a story using one of the following lines:
“I thought I saw…”
“The hallway was silent…”
“Behind her, the noise escalated.”
“The glowing coals languished long after midnight.”
“The muddy footprints led away from the pond.”
“The gnarled oak was as frightening as the house.”
“The ship looked ominous as it approached the shore.”
“Once she began screaming, she couldn’t stop.”

Lists
Making lists is a good way to brainstorm or gain ideas from stories. You can make up a list of anything to get an idea for a story. Listing names is an easy way to come up with the right name for a character. A list of places can be referred to when you are choosing a setting. For this exercise, make a list of twenty things you are afraid of. Do any of your fears stand out as an interesting element to a story? Pick one of your fears and begin writing.
Creating Well-Developed Characters

Most people think that an intriguing plot is what makes a story good, but the truth is that exciting plots are made up of original and well-developed characters.

Flat Characters vs. Well-Developed Characters

**Flat character:** Steve was a good kid. He got good grades and was never late to class.

**Original, well-developed character:** Steve Goodhold was a good kid. He got good grades and was never late to class. Little did everyone know that he spent his nights working as an internet hacker for a crime boss who he met through his older cousin, Peter. Steve didn’t need much sleep, which was a good thing. He slept maybe two hours a night, and spent the rest of his time stealing identities, wiring funds, and making more money than both his parents combined. He told himself he was saving for college, but the thrill of his secret life of crime was steadily eroding his interest in an Ivy League education.

Not only are characters with hidden depths and secrets more fun to read about, they’re also more fun to write about. Though you’ll end up writing about a bunch of different people in your novel next month, all of them will fall into one of three categories: the protagonist, the supporting characters, and the antagonist.

**The Protagonist**

The **protagonist** is the character with the starring role in your book. In most novels, the protagonist is on a journey to get what they want more than anything else in the world, whether it’s fame, revenge, reuniting with a long-lost sibling, or something much more elusive, like overcoming poverty or cancer.

**The Supporting Characters**

**Supporting characters** are characters in a novel that have an important role in your protagonist’s life. Some may be around for the protagonist’s entire journey, some for only part. Supporting characters can be friends, close relatives, love interests, you name it. These characters also have dreams of their own, and their adventures will add even more excitement to your novel.
The Physical Antagonist

A physical antagonist is a living, breathing character in a novel that is standing in the way of the protagonist achieving their goal. This does not mean that all physical antagonists are evil monsters. Some antagonists stand in the way simply through jealousy, or misunderstanding, or by having a set of goals that differs from that of the protagonist’s. If Julia is your protagonist and she wants to take Malcolm to the dance, but Helen asks him first, this doesn’t mean Helen is bad. She’s just another person who likes the same guy. Then again, there are those antagonists that are just plain evil. It’s up to you to decide who’s going to stand in your protagonist’s way, and how they’re going to do it.

OR

The Abstract Antagonist

Though a lot of antagonists are living, breathing beings, some are not. Some protagonists face off against illness, or grief, or the powers of a corrupt government. We like to call these kinds of antagonists abstract antagonists because they don’t take actual physical form. If your novel’s antagonist is not a living person/animal/entity, you have an abstract antagonist. It may be easier think of it this way: if your protagonist cannot physically kick your antagonist in the knee, they’re probably abstract.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Antagonist</th>
<th>Abstract Antagonist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A racist or intolerant character</td>
<td>Racism/ intolerance in a community or in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A character who is working to make sure your protagonist lives a poverty-stricken life</td>
<td>Poverty or the economy in a community or in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A character who is forcing your character to struggle against nature (e.g. someone who has left your character stranded in Antarctica)</td>
<td>Nature as an entity (e.g. a natural disaster or an extreme climate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A character whose religious beliefs oppress your protagonist</td>
<td>A religion or all religions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A government official such as a dictator who has it in for your protagonist</td>
<td>A corrupt government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your protagonist’s evil boss</td>
<td>A corporation/ company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A character whose sole mission is to make sure your protagonist becomes ill (e.g. though poisoning or exposure to a deadly disease)</td>
<td>Disease/illness in general</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It’s a great idea for you, the author, to try and get to know your characters before you begin writing. We asked a team of scientists, mathematicians, and creative writing gurus from around the world: "What’s the easiest way for writers to get to know their characters?" Hands down, the experts all agreed the single best way is to fill out a Character Questionnaire for all your characters.
On a separate sheet of paper, fill out these questionnaires about your characters. We have four different sets of them.

Section One: Questions for All Characters
Try to complete this section for every important character in your book, but definitely for your protagonist. Feel free to skip questions that don't make sense for a character, or don't help you get insight into them.

Section Two: Questions for Supporting Characters
Complete this section just for your supporting characters.

Section Three: Questions for Physical Antagonist
Complete this section if you have a physical antagonist.

OR

Section Four: Questions for Abstract Antagonist
Complete this section if you have an abstract antagonist.

Section One: All Characters

1. Name:

2. Age:

3. Height:

4. Eye color:

5. Physical appearance:

6. Strange or unique physical attributes:

7. Favorite clothing style/outfit:

8. Where do they live? What is it like there?

9. Defining gestures/movements (i.e., curling their lip when they speak, always keeping their eyes on the ground, etc.):

10. Things about their appearance they would most like to change:

11. Speaking style (fast, talkative, monotone, etc.):
12. Pet peeves:
13. Fondest memory:
14. Hobbies/interests:
15. Special skills/abilities:
16. Insecurities:
17. Quirks/eccentricities:
18. Temperament (easygoing, easily angered, etc.):
19. Negative traits:
20. Things that upset them:
21. Things that embarrass them:
22. This character is highly opinionated about:
23. Any phobias?
24. Things that make them happy:
25. Family (describe):
26. Deepest, darkest secret:
27. Reason they kept this secret for so long:
28. Other people's opinions of this character (What do people like about this character? What do they dislike about this character?):
29. Favorite bands/songs/type of music:
30. Favorite movies:
31. Favorite TV shows:
32. Favorite books:
33. Favorite foods:
34. Favorite sports/sports teams:
35. Political views:
36. Religion/philosophy of life:
37. Physical health:
38. Dream vacation:
39. Description of their house:
40. Description of their bedroom:
41. Any pets?
42. Best thing that has ever happened to this character:
43. Worst thing that has ever happened to this character:
44. Superstitions:
45. Three words to describe this character:
46. If a song played every time this character walked into the room, what song would it be?

Section Two: Supporting Characters
1. Relationship to the protagonist:
2. Favorite thing about the protagonist:
3. Similarities to protagonist:
4. Differences from protagonist:

Section Three: Physical Antagonist
1. Why are they facing off against the protagonist?
2. Any likeable traits?
3. Weaknesses:

Section Four: Abstract Antagonist
1. What is your abstract antagonist? Is it a disease like cancer, a social ill like poverty, or something larger than life, like grief?
2. How is this antagonist affecting the protagonist?
3. Do other characters notice? How does this antagonist affect the other people in your novel?
Creating Conflict

Okay, so you know who your characters are. Excellent. Now it is time to figure out what your characters are going to do. Most stories are ultimately about the same thing—the journey a protagonist goes on to get what they want. Whether their goal is to win a trophy or cure cancer, the journey is never easy, and your character will encounter many setbacks along the way. Though they’re painful for your protagonist, these obstacles are what will make your novel exciting to read.

Imagine a story about someone named Jay who wants a sandwich more than anything in the world. How boring would the story be if all Jay had to do was walk from their bedroom to the kitchen and eat a sandwich? That story is so uneventful it can be told in one sentence. But what if Jay is seriously afraid of the dark, the power is out in their house, and they have to walk down a dark hallway to get to the kitchen? And once there, they have to fight their bratty younger sister, Helga, for the last two pieces of bread?

Though it may be simple, this story has both external conflict and internal conflict.

External Conflict

The external conflict is the one between a protagonist and antagonist. In the above story, the protagonist (Jay) has a goal (to eat a sandwich), but a motivated antagonist (Helga) has her own agenda (to also eat a sandwich). The struggle between Jay and Helga over the last slice of roast beef is the external conflict in this story.

Internal Conflict

The internal conflicts are the fears and insecurities that a protagonist has to overcome in order to get what they want. In the story above, Jay has to overcome their fear of the dark in order to get the sandwich they want so badly.
If you have completed your character questionnaires, you already know a good amount about the major players in your novel. Now it’s time to answer some deeper questions about your characters’ hopes and fears in order to create the conflicts that will make your novel interesting.

Take out and review your character questionnaires, then fill in the blanks below.

**Your Protagonist**

What does your protagonist want more than anything in the world?

What are all the things that might block your character from getting what they want?

Do they have any weaknesses, fears, or faults that will also get in the way of their goal?
Physical Antagonist

Complete this section if you have a physical antagonist.

What does your antagonist want more than anything in the world? This can be as simple as defeating the protagonist, or something more ambitious like world domination.

What is your antagonist’s issue or problem with the protagonist?

What is your antagonist afraid of? (Kittens? Fire?) Why?
Does your antagonist have a hidden weakness or flaw? What is it?

Abstract Antagonist

Complete this section if you have an abstract antagonist.

The antagonist in my novel is not a living, breathing being. It is __________________________

If my protagonist does not battle against this antagonist, it will eventually (ruin their life? cause death?)

My protagonist is battling against this antagonist by:

Congratulations! You now have the two basic ingredients for an excellent story: external conflict and internal conflict. Know that your internal and external conflicts will overlap throughout your novel. Once your characters find out about each others’ fears and weaknesses, you better believe they will use them against each other mercilessly as they fight to make their dreams come true.