

The Essential Elements of a Story

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Disclaimers

1. In the following, when you see “story,” know that the advice applies to a short story, novella, or novel. A short story is about one event. A novella or novel is about more than one event. That’s the only difference.
2. When you read “he,” “him,” or “his,” know that those pronouns are meant to be inclusive of both genders. If you allow yourself to get wrapped around the “he or she” wheel, you will miss the point.
3. This is an awareness article. You don’t have to study this structure or even refer back to it, though you can if you want to. You should only read and understand it, [ask me any questions to gain clarity](#), and then put the whole thing out of your mind as you’re writing. The elements will come to the fore as necessary if you trust your creative subconscious.
4. Although this is designed as a primer to writing into the dark, you will use exactly the same structure if you use an outline and plot everything in advance. You’ll just have to do it at least twice.

Want to try writing into the dark? Here you go.

In the beginning,

1. You must have a character.
2. The character must have a problem. (This can be anything from an untied shoelace to an ice-covered walk to having forgotten his car keys. It doesn’t have to be [and usually isn’t] “the” problem of the story.)
3. And the character must exist within a setting.

This is not the story. This isn’t even the opening of the story. This is only a starter to get you to the keyboard to write an opening for the story.

Once you have a character with a problem in a setting, Sit down, put your fingers on the keyboard, and Go.

After that, all stories have an amazingly small number of essential elements, but they are essential regardless of what genre you're writing:

Opening

- * Hook
- * Describe the setting (all five physical senses filtered through the POV character and delivered along with his opinions of the setting) to pull the reader into the story
- * The micro-story of the opening
- * Action (in the written story, dialogue equals action because it makes the reader lean-in)
- * Cliffhanger

Every Major Scene or Chapter

- * Hook
- * Describe the setting to pull the reader into the scene
- * The micro-story of the major scene or chapter
- * Action (in action/adventure, thriller, crime etc. genres, each successive action scene should be for higher stakes)
- * Cliffhanger

Ending

- * Hook
- * Describe the setting to pull the reader into the scene
- * The micro-story leading to and including the final major climax
- * Denouement (tells the reader subliminally the story is over. For a series, the denouement of each story can contain a cliffhanger, hinting that the story continues.)

Notice the repetition of elements? That's because these are essential elements: the hook, description of the setting, the micro-story of the scene or chapter, and the cliffhanger, which leads to the next hook.

Notes

1. Any description (and in fact, every word of the story) must come through the physical and emotional senses of the POV character. The description is delivered with the POV character's opinion of the setting.

a. By "the physical senses of the POV character" I mean what he sees, hears, smells, tastes and physically feels.

b. By "the emotional senses of the POV character" I mean what he senses or how he feels mentally and emotionally.

c. By "the POV character's opinion" I mean this: If you and your significant other walk into a setting, you will each have a different opinion. To you, perhaps, the lighting is dim and warm, but to YSO, it's forboding. To you, the room is cold, but to YSO, it's comfortable or warm. To you, it smells of a sweet aroma, but to YSO, it reeks of a stench, etc. Every POV character will likewise have an opinion of the setting. In the story, the POV character's opinion matters. Yours or YSO's does not.

2. Use all five of the POV character's physical senses at least once in every major scene (again, delivered with his opinion). This alone will improve your writing dramatically. (Most writers use only the sense of sight.)

3. The hook pulls the reader into the story or major scene/chapter. The cliffhanger propels him to the next one.

4. Yes, to add suspense you can make the reader wait. For example, you can write a cliffhanger at the end of Chapter 2, then switch gears and not write the hook it leads to until Chapter 4 (or 5 or 6, etc.) But every intervening major scene or chapter should also have its own hook and cliffhanger.

5. As a general rule, always introduce a character (complete with name and physical description) the first time you introduce him. (No, withholding a character's name strictly to build suspense and absent of any necessary reason is not a good idea. All it will do is alienate the reader.)

That's it. Go forth and write.

If you feel I've omitted anything important, please read the article again to be sure the omission isn't actually included but in different words. And please remember these are bare-bones "essential" elements. However, they are also everything you need.

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