

your characters believable, how to create a rich, detailed setting. Along the way, we'll break down a famous short story called "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by the writer Ambrose Bierce, to show you how each lesson plays out in a real piece of writing. At the end of this book, we'll give you the story in its entirety. By that point, we hope you have a complete short story of your own.

Exercises

- Take a favorite short story and make a list of the elements that are revealed in the first few paragraphs. Look for things like the narrator's identity, the time and place that the story is set, and the dilemma being faced by the main character.
- Look around your own desk or—even better—someone else's desk. Jot down the history of five of the objects, making up where they were made, who worked on them, how many others like them still exist, and how they came to rest on that particular desk.
- Take your notebook out to a public place and write brief sketches describing the people you see. At the end of each sketch, write a single sentence that states what that person wants more than anything.

Developing Your Story Idea

Few writers can just sit down and write a story from start to finish, and for a writer, nothing is worse than facing the Great White Abyss (a.k.a. the Blank Page). Before you can type a word, you have to answer a crucial question: *What should I write about?* Sometimes you'll face the abyss with an idea bursting to get out, and you'll have words on the page in no time. Other times, the urge to write might be strong—but you don't yet have an idea. To start figuring out what to write about, stop staring at the page and do some *prewriting*: that is, *developing* your story idea. Don't confuse this for writing your story! This is how you figure out what your shape your story is going to take.

Writing involves both conscious and unconscious influences, and prewriting can help you get in touch with interests, passions, emotions, and opinions that may lead to an idea for your story. Prewriting is actually a misnomer, since much of prewriting is simply deep, focused *thinking*. Prewriting is like brainstorming—getting thoughts, impressions, and random ideas down on the page. So go ahead—let yourself think freely, and story ideas will follow. By putting time and effort into developing your idea, you may find that writing your story comes a little easier.

Look for Ideas in Your Life

To start getting story ideas, ask yourself a few personal questions. Try to get a sense of what you feel passionate about and what people or events from your life might make good characters or scenes for your stories. Thinking specifically about you might spark great ideas for your story. Answer these questions in as much detail as possible:

- Who is the person who makes you the most angry? Think of a time in your life when you were angrier than you've ever been before.
- Have you ever been betrayed? Who betrayed you? How did you find out?
- What is your juiciest secret? What would happen if you told someone?
- What do you remember most vividly from the past week? Month? Year? Why does it stand out?
- What is the place you love most in the world? List ten specific things you love about it.
- What is the place you hate most in the world? List ten specific things you hate about it.
- What kind of relationship (mother/daughter, boyfriend/girlfriend, teacher/student, etc.) is most intriguing to you? Why are you so fascinated by it? What do you think is the hardest part of this relationship, the thing that leads to the most problems?
- Think about books you've read recently or films you've seen. What stands out most in your mind? What connected to you emotionally?

- What impulse is making you write? What do you feel you want to convey by writing a story?

Turning Your Answers into Ideas Chances are, some parts of your responses will stand out—you'll want to keep thinking about them, or you'll feel drawn to them in some way. Let your ideas marinate in your mind. Start thinking like a writer. Maybe you start thinking about your juiciest secret, and you wonder what would happen if a mother was keeping this secret from her daughter, and they were alone in a beach house for a weekend. Or maybe you think jealousy is the most toxic part of a romantic relationship, and you think you want to write a story about how jealousy leads someone to betray his or her best friend. Suddenly, ideas from your personal life have become ideas for a story.

Now you're ready to start enriching your idea with details that will make the story come alive.

Create Conflict

Once you have a germ of an idea for your story, you're ready to figure out what the conflict is. Conflict is the opposition of people or forces against one another. That opposition can take many forms in fiction: it can happen between people, over ideas or feelings, or from natural or manmade circumstances.

Conflict is *essential* to short stories because it will spawn your story's central problem and provide obstacles for your character to overcome before resolving that problem. Conflict activates your characters and creates the tension

that engages the reader. When you write a short story, you select and dramatize a defining moment or event in a character's life. That event creates *change*—change in the character, his or her circumstances, and/or his or her life. For that change to occur, your character will have to confront a problem or crisis. Conflict generally falls into two categories: internal and external.

Internal Conflict Also called *inner conflict*, internal conflict occurs when a character struggles with opposing influences within him- or herself. Internal conflicts produce mental and emotional barriers for your character. Characters that experience internal conflict usually face a difficult question, and the answer to that question often determines how the story is resolved. Here are some examples:

- A man feels guilty because his reckless behavior conflicts with his religious upbringing.
- A woman can't decide whether to tell her best friend that the friend's husband is having an affair.
- A young girl must decide whether to marry a man she doesn't love in order to escape her difficult family life.

External Conflict External conflict can involve a character who struggles against another character, or a character who struggles against an external force, such as nature, fate, destiny, or even God. External conflict creates tangible obstacles for your character to overcome. Here are some examples:

- A hero with a mission must fight against a villain who tries to keep him from completing that mission.
- An adventurous sailor must fight for survival when a storm traps her at sea for three nights.
- A young boy born into poverty struggles to escape his circumstances.

Choose Your Conflict Type

Internal and external conflicts are not necessarily exclusive. For example, a rock climber might have to scale a steep, treacherous mountain (external conflict). After falling on a previous climb, however, she questions her own abilities and judgment. The character must then not only overcome the mountain's terrain but also the fear and self-doubt in her mind (internal conflict). You don't have to choose one type of conflict over the other. Many great stories utilize both kinds of conflict to heighten the tension. Here are some questions to consider when choosing conflicts for your story:

- What kind of conflict do you want to highlight in the story? Will it be an internal conflict or an external conflict—or both?
- Which conflict is appropriate for your characters' desires and actions?
- Which conflict is appropriate for the setting?
- Does the conflict offer a difficult struggle for your character?

If your story idea is vivid in your mind, you may find that you have easy answers to these questions. If your idea is still

sketchy, then thinking carefully about conflict will help you fill out some of the details. This is all part of the process of prewriting, of developing your story idea.

Ask the MDQ

Embedded in every story is a big question that's begging to be answered—the “What happens?” question. Will the hero succeed or will the villain stop him? Will the girl get the guy? Who killed the teacher? This is called the *Major Dramatic Question* (MDQ), and it represents the gap between the story's problem and its resolution.

The MDQ serves as a compass for every story because it points to the story's defining event or climax. Short stories demand precision, and if you know your story's MDQ from the very beginning, you'll write a story with more specific direction and have a better understanding of what needs to happen at the climax. To figure out the MDQ for your story, consider the following questions:

- What, if anything, does my character want?
- What action does he or she take to get what he or she desires?
- What, if anything, keeps my character from getting what he or she wants?
- Who succeeds? Who fails?

Answer the MDQ

As the author of your story, you not only get to ask the MDQ, you get to answer it. Your answer will determine how the story is resolved. Keep in mind that even if your character succeeds in getting what he or she wants, the story's resolution might not necessarily be a happy one. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's story “The Birthmark,” for example, a scientist succeeds in removing a birthmark from his wife's otherwise perfect face, only to see the process take her life. He gets his wish but loses something far more valuable. The way you resolve the central conflict or problem in your story will not only determine how the story unfolds but also shape the change in your character and his or her circumstances. It will also affect the theme of your story.

Expand Your Story Idea

You've come up with an idea for your story, and you've thought about conflict and the MDQ. But it's not time to write yet! First, you need to fill in more of your story's details. You may have a specific vision for your story already, or you may just have shadowy characters and a tentative idea of what their conflict is. Either way, considering details carefully and committing them to paper is an important step in developing your story idea. You should make your idea as lively, layered, and detailed as possible before you start writing.

Earlier, you asked yourself questions about *you* to come up with some ideas for your story. Now you need to ask yourself some questions about your *story*, including the characters, conflict, and resolution. Not all of it may make it into the story itself—but some of it will, so make your answers as detailed as possible.

Character

1. Who is my main character?
2. What does my main character look like?
3. How old is he or she?
4. What makes him or her angry? Happy? Sad?
5. What's his or her family like?
6. How does he or she get along with peers? Does he or she have friends?
7. What events in his or her life led him or her to the main event in the story?
8. Who are some of the other characters? How do they relate to the main character?

We'll talk in more detail about creating characters in Chapter 3.

Conflict

1. What does the main character want?
2. How does he or she try to get what he or she wants?
3. How do his or her actions affect the other characters?
4. How do his or her actions affect the setting?

5. What obstacles keep my character from getting what he or she wants?
6. What does the character do to overcome those obstacles?

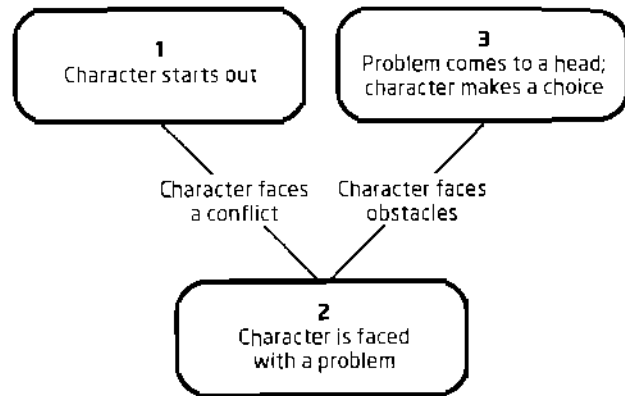
Resolution

1. Does my character succeed in getting what he or she wants?
2. What, if any, consequences are there for the main character's actions?
3. How does he or she change because of his or her actions?
4. Is the character better or worse off when the central problem is resolved?

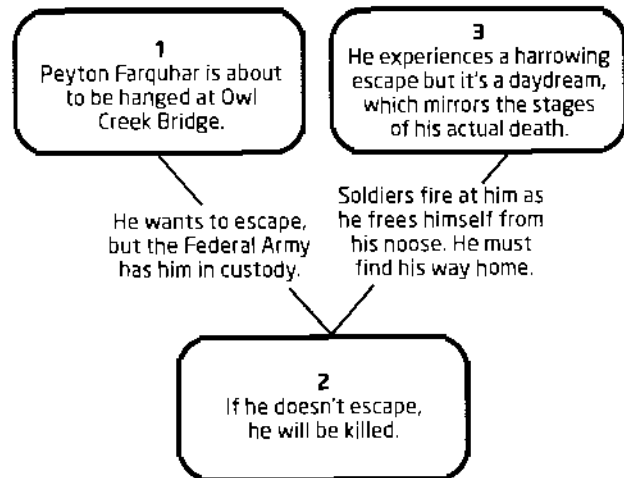
Diagram Your Story

Before you start writing your story, consider diagramming it. Creating a diagram can give you a clearer idea of your story's movement—where the character starts, the problems he or she faces, and the resolution. When you eventually do start writing, you won't be writing into an abyss; you'll know where your story is going.

Making a "V" Creating a "V" diagram is an easy and effective way of sketching out the movement of your story. Identify the three most important points in your story's beginning, middle, and end, and write them into a "V" diagram like the one on the next page. As your story takes shape, you may want to fill in additional details, such as the conflict that leads the character to the story's central problem and the obstacles that he or she must overcome before the problem is resolved:



Diagramming in Action Let's make a "V" diagram for our model story, Amhrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."



Sum It Up

At this point, you should have enough details about your story to be able to write one clear, concise paragraph that sums it up. This is called a *synopsis*. Briefly introduce your main character and the setting of the story. Then describe the conflict that the character encounters and what actions he or she takes to overcome it. Tell what, if anything, changes in the life of the character when the crisis is resolved.

Now go crazy: try to do all that in one clear, concise sentence. Distilling your story down to its essence will help you get a clear picture of exactly what you're writing.

Summing It Up in Action Let's see what a synopsis looks like for our model story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge":

Peyton Farquhar, a well-to-do Southern planter, is to be hanged by the Federal Army in Civil War-era Alabama. A Federal scout posing as a Confederate soldier tricks him into tampering with Owl Creek Bridge, and the punishment is death. While being hanged, Farquhar escapes his noose and swims away from his captors amid gunfire. The sensations he experiences during his escape mirror the physical effects of asphyxiation. After a harrowing journey, Farquhar returns home. However, as Farquhar sees his wife emerge, we learn that his escape was imagined—a final daydream before dying of a broken neck from hanging.

After writing a story paragraph, it's easier to distill the story into one sentence:

A Southern planter avoids hanging at the hands of the Federal Army, only to realize his harrowing escape was a final daydream before dying of a broken neck.

Exercises

- Reread one of your favorite short stories. Identify the main character, the main conflict or crisis, and how the character resolves it. Sketch a "V" diagram for the story.
- Think of three of your favorite movies. Write down the MDQ for each movie.
- Write a one-paragraph description of your favorite short story. Be sure to include details about the character, the problem or conflict, how it is resolved and how the main character changes at the conclusion of the story.

Characters

Once you've spent some time thinking about and developing your story idea, you'll most likely know what characters you're going to be moving through your fictional world. The question you must answer now is one of the most exciting of the story-writing process: *Who*, exactly, are these characters? When you write a short story, you need to know your characters—every one of them—as deeply as you know your best friend. In a sense, you're like Dr. Frankenstein, creating his monster. Every aspect of your character is yours to create.

A great short story has compelling, *believable* characters who are complex and interesting. There may be just one main character, or there may be a whole crew; but each and every character in your story must take on a life of his or her own. Figuring out the basics, such as name and hair color, isn't enough. You need to think deeply about what makes your characters tick and how they will operate in the world of your story.

Know the Types

There are three types of characters that will populate your short story:

- Protagonist
- Antagonist
- Supporting characters