

# THE ANATOMY OF STORY

22 STEPS TO BECOMING A  
MASTER STORYTELLER

JOHN TRUBY



THE  
ANATOMY  
OF  
STORY

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**22** STEPS TO  
BECOMING A MASTER  
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John Truby

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# CHAPTER 1

## Story Space, Story Time

EVERYONE CAN TELL a story. We do it every day. “You won’t believe what happened at work.” Or “Guess what I just did!” Or “A guy goes into a bar ...” We see, hear, read, and tell thousands of stories in our lives.

The problem comes in telling a great story. If you want to become a master storyteller, and maybe even get paid to be one, you run up against tremendous obstacles. For one thing, showing the how and why of human life is a monumental job. You have to have a deep and precise understanding of the biggest, most complex subject there is. And then you have to be able to translate your understanding into a story. For most writers, that may be the biggest challenge of all.

I want to be specific about the obstacles of story technique because that’s the only way a writer can hope to overcome them. The first obstacle is the common terminology most writers use to think about story. Terms like “rising action,” “climax,” “progressive complication,” and “denouement,” terms that go as far back as Aristotle, are so broad and theoretical as to be almost meaningless. Let’s be honest: they have no practical value for storytellers. Say you are writing a scene where your hero is hanging by his fingertips, seconds from falling to his death. Is that a progressive complication, a rising action, a denouement, or the opening scene of the story? It may be none of them or all of them, but in any event, these terms don’t tell you how to write the scene or whether to write it at all.

The classic story terms suggest an even bigger obstacle to good technique: the very idea of what a story is and how it works. As a storyteller in training, the first thing you probably did was read Aristotle’s *Poetics*. I believe Aristotle was the greatest philosopher in history. But his thinking about story, while powerful, is surprisingly narrow, focused on a limited number of plots and genres. It is also extremely theoretical and difficult to put into actual practice, which is why most storytellers trying to learn the practical techniques of their craft from Aristotle leave empty-handed.

If you are a screenwriter, you probably moved from Aristotle to a much simpler understanding of story called “three-act structure.” This is also problematic, because three-act structure, albeit a lot easier to understand than Aristotle, is hopelessly simplistic and in many ways just plain wrong.

Three-act theory says that every story for the screen has three “acts”: the first act is the beginning, the second is the middle, and the third is the end. The first act is about thirty pages long. The third act is also about thirty pages long. And the second act runs to around sixty pages. And this three-act story supposedly has two or three “plot points” (whatever those are). Got that? Great. Now go and write a professional script.

I’m simplifying this theory of story, but not by much. It should be obvious that such an elementary approach has even less practical value than Aristotle. But what’s worse is that it promotes a view of story that is mechanical. The idea of an act break comes from the conventions of traditional theater, where we close the curtain to signal the end of an act. We don’t need to do that in movies, novels, or short stories or even, for that matter, in many contemporary plays.

In short, act breaks are external to the story. Three-act structure is a mechanical device superimposed on the story and has nothing to do with its internal logic—where the story should go and should not go.

A mechanical view of story, like three-act theory, inevitably leads to episodic storytelling. An episodic story is a collection of pieces, like parts stored in a box. Events in the story stand out as discrete elements and don't connect or build steadily from beginning to end. The result is a story that moves the audience sporadically, if at all.

Another obstacle to mastering storytelling has to do with the writing process. Just as many writers have a mechanical view of what a story is, they use a mechanical process for creating one. This is especially true of screenwriters whose mistaken notions of what makes a script salable lead them to write a script that is neither popular nor good. Screenwriters typically come up with a story idea that is a slight variation on a movie they saw six months previously. Then they apply a genre, like "detective," "love," or "action," and fill in the characters and plot beats (story events) that go with that form. The result: a hopelessly generic, formulaic story devoid of originality.

In this book, I want to show you a better way. My goal is to explain how a great story works, along with the techniques needed to create one, so that you will have the best chance of writing a great story of your own. Some would argue that it's impossible to teach someone how to tell a great story. I believe it can be done, but it requires that we think and talk about story differently than in the past.

In simplest terms, I'm going to lay out a practical poetics for storytellers that works whether you're writing a screenplay, a novel, a play, a teleplay, or a short story. I will

- Show that a great story is organic—not a machine but a living body that develops
- Treat storytelling as an exacting craft with precise techniques that will help you be successful regardless of the medium or genre you choose
- Work through a writing process that is also organic, meaning that we will develop characters and plot that grow naturally out of your original story idea

The main challenge facing any storyteller is overcoming the contradiction between the first and second of these tasks. You construct a story from hundreds, even thousands, of elements using a vast array of techniques. Yet the story must feel organic to the audience; it must seem like a single thing that grows and builds to a climax. If you want to become a great storyteller, you have to master the technique to such a high degree that your characters seem to be acting on their own, as *they* must, even though you are the one making them act that way.

In this sense we storytellers are a lot like athletes. A great athlete makes everything look easy, as though his body just naturally moves that way. But in fact he has so mastered the techniques of his sport that his technique has simply disappeared from view, and the audience sees only beauty.

## **THE TELLER AND THE LISTENER**

Let's begin the process simply, with a one-line definition of a story:

**A speaker tells a listener what someone did to get what he wanted and why.**

Notice we have three distinct elements: the teller, the listener, and the story that is told.

The storyteller is first and foremost someone who *plays*. Stories are verbal games the author plays with the audience (they keep no score—the studios, networks, and publishing houses do that). The



storyteller makes up characters and actions. He tells what happened, laying out a set of actions that have been completed in some way. Even if he tells the story in the present tense (as in playwriting or screenwriting), the storyteller is summing up all the events, so the listener feels that this is a single unit, the full story.

But telling a story is not simply making up or remembering past events. Events are just descriptive. The storyteller is really selecting, connecting, and building a series of intense moments. The moments are so charged that the listener feels he is living them himself. Good storytelling doesn't just tell audiences what happened in a life. It gives them the experience of that life. It is the *essential* life, not just the crucial thoughts and events, but it is conveyed with such freshness and newness that it feels like part of the audience's essential life too.

Good storytelling lets the audience relive events in the present so they can understand the forces, choices, and emotions that led the character to do what he did. Stories are really giving the audience a new form of knowledge—emotional knowledge—or what used to be known as wisdom, but they do it in a new, playful, entertaining way.

As a creator of verbal games that let the audience relive a life, the storyteller is constructing a kind of puzzle about people and asking the listener to figure it out. The author creates this puzzle in two major ways: he tells the audience certain information about a made-up character, and he *withholds* certain information. Withholding, or hiding, information is crucial to the storyteller's make-believe. It forces the audience to figure out who the character is and what he is doing and so draws the audience into the story. When the audience no longer has to figure out the story, it ceases being an audience, and the story stops.

Audiences love both the feeling part (reliving the life) and the thinking part (figuring out the puzzle) of a story. Every good story has both. But you can see story forms that go to one extreme or the other, from sentimental melodrama to the most cerebral detective story.

## THE STORY

There have been thousands, if not millions, of stories. So what makes each of them a story? What do all stories do? What is the storyteller both revealing to and hiding from the audience?

*KEY POINT: All stories are a form of communication that expresses the dramatic code.*

The dramatic code, embedded deep in the human psyche, is an artistic description of how a person can grow or evolve. This code is also a process going on underneath every story. The storyteller hides this process beneath particular characters and actions. But the code of growth is what the audience ultimately takes from a good story.

Let's look at the dramatic code in its simplest form.

In the dramatic code, change is fueled by desire. The "story world" doesn't boil down to "I think, therefore I am" but rather "I want, therefore I am." Desire in all of its facets is what makes the world go around. It is what propels all conscious, living things and gives them direction. A story tracks what a person wants, what he'll do to get it, and what costs he'll have to pay along the way.

Once a character has a desire, the story "walks" on two "legs": acting and learning. A character

pursuing a desire takes actions to get what he wants, and he learns new information about better ways to get it. Whenever he learns new information, he makes a decision and changes his course of action.

All stories move in this way. But some story forms highlight one of these activities over the other. The genres that highlight taking action the most are myth and its later version, the action form. The genres that highlight learning the most are the detective story and the multiperspective drama.

Any character who goes after a desire and is impeded is forced to struggle (otherwise the story is over). And that struggle makes him change. So the ultimate goal of the dramatic code, and of the storyteller, is to present a change in a character or to illustrate why that change did not occur.

The different forms of storytelling frame human change in differing ways:

- Myth tends to show the widest character arc, from birth to death and from animal to divine.
- Plays typically focus on the main character's moment of decision.
- Film (especially American film) shows the small change a character might undergo by seeking a limited goal with great intensity.
- Classic short stories usually track a few events that lead the character to gain a single important insight.
- Serious novels typically depict how a person interacts and changes within an entire society and show the precise mental and emotional processes leading up to his change.
- Television drama shows a number of characters in a minisociety struggling to change simultaneously.

Drama is a code of maturity. The focal point is the moment of change, the *impact*, when a person breaks free of habits and weaknesses and ghosts from his past and transforms to a richer and fuller self. The dramatic code expresses the idea that human beings can become a better version of themselves, psychologically and morally. And that's why people love it.

*KEY POINT: Stories don't show the audience the "real world"; they show the story world. The story world isn't a copy of life as it is. It's life as human beings imagine it could be. It is human life condensed and heightened so that the audience can gain a better understanding of how life itself works.*

## **THE STORY BODY**

A great story describes human beings going through an organic process. But it is also a living body unto itself. Even the simplest children's story is made up of many parts, or subsystems, that connect with and feed off one another. Just as the human body is made up of the nervous system, the circulatory system, the skeleton, and so on, a story is made of subsystems like the characters, the plot, the revelations sequence, the story world, the moral argument, the symbol web, the scene weave, and the symphonic dialogue (all of which will be explained in upcoming chapters).

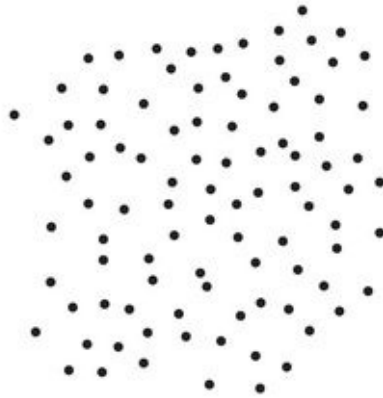
We might say that theme, or what I call moral argument, is the brain of the story. Character is the heart and circulation system. Revelations are the nervous system. Story structure is the skeleton. Scenes are the skin.

*KEY POINT: Each subsystem of the story consists of a web of elements that help define and differentiate the other elements.*

No individual element in your story, including the hero, will work unless you first create it and define it in relation to all the other elements.

## **STORY MOVEMENT**

To see how an organic story moves, let's look at nature. Like the storyteller, nature often connects elements in some kind of sequence. The following diagram shows a number of distinct elements that must be connected in time.



Nature uses a few basic patterns (and a number of variations) to connect elements in a sequence, including linear, meandering, spiral, branching, and explosive.<sup>1</sup> Storytellers use these same patterns individually and in combination, to connect story events over time. The linear and explosive patterns are at the opposite extremes. The linear pattern has one thing happening after another on a straight line path. Explosion has everything happening simultaneously. The meandering, spiral, and branching patterns are combinations of the linear and the explosive. Here's how these patterns work in stories.

### **Linear Story**

The linear story tracks a single main character from beginning to end, like this:



It implies a historical or biological explanation for what happens. Most Hollywood films are linear. They focus on a single hero who pursues a particular desire with great intensity. The audience witnesses the history of how the hero goes after his desire and is changed as a result.

## Meandering Story

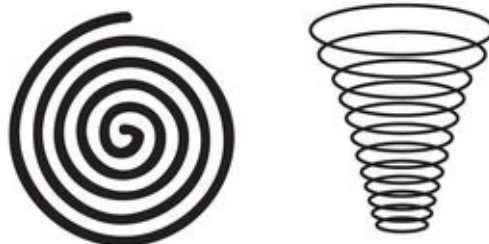
The meandering story follows a winding path without apparent direction. In nature, the meander is the form of rivers, snakes, and the brain:



Myths like the *Odyssey*; comic journey stories like *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Big Man*, and *Flirting with Disaster*; and many of Dickens's stories, such as *David Copperfield*, take the meandering form. The hero has a desire, but it is not intense; he covers a great deal of territory in a haphazard way; and he encounters a number of characters from different levels of society.

## Spiral Story

A spiral is a path that circles inward to the center:



In nature, spirals occur in cyclones, horns, and seashells.

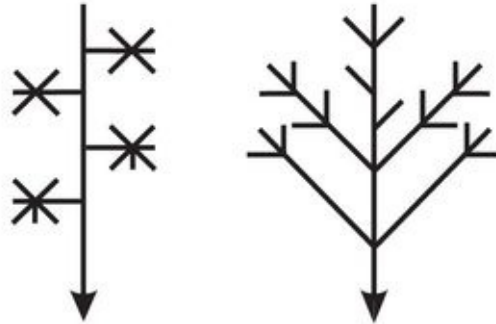
Thrillers like *Vertigo*, *Blow-Up*, *The Conversation*, and *Memento* typically favor the spiral, in which

a character keeps returning to a single event or memory and explores it at progressively deeper levels.

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## Branching Story

Branching is a system of paths that extend from a few central points by splitting and adding small and smaller parts, as shown here:

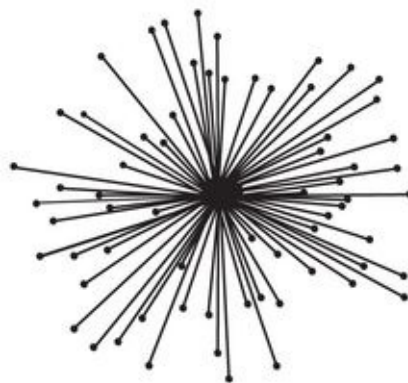


In nature, branching occurs in trees, leaves, and river basins.

In storytelling, each branch usually represents a complete society in detail or a detailed stage of the same society that the hero explores. The branching form is found in more advanced fiction, such as social fantasies like *Gulliver's Travels* and *It's a Wonderful Life* or in multiple-hero stories like *Nashville*, *American Graffiti*, and *Traffic*.

## Explosive Story

An explosion has multiple paths that extend simultaneously; in nature, the explosive pattern is found in volcanoes and dandelions.



In a story, you can't show the audience a number of elements all at once, even for a single scene because you have to tell one thing after another; so, strictly speaking, there are no explosive stories. But you can give the *appearance* of simultaneity. In film, this is done with the technique of the crosscut.

Stories that show (the appearance of) simultaneous action imply a comparative explanation for what happens. By seeing a number of elements all at once, the audience grasps the key idea embedded

each element. These stories also put more emphasis on exploring the story world, showing the connections between the various elements there and how everyone fits, or doesn't fit, within the whole.

Stories that emphasize simultaneous action tend to use a branching structure and include *American Graffiti*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Traffic*, *Syriana*, *Crash*, *Nashville*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Ulysses*, *Last Year in Marienbad*, *Ragtime*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Each represents a different combination of linear and simultaneous storytelling, but each emphasizes characters existing together in the story world as opposed to a single character developing from beginning to end.

## WRITING YOUR STORY

So let's get practical: What writing process will give you the best chance of creating a great story?

Most writers don't use the best process for creating a story. They use the easiest one. We could describe it in four words: external, mechanical, piecemeal, generic. Of course, there are lots of variations on this process, but they all work something like this.

The writer comes up with a generic premise, or story idea, that is a vague copy of one that already exists. Or it's a combination of two stories that he has creatively (he thinks) stuck together. Knowing the importance of a strong main character, our writer focuses almost all of his attention on the hero. He "fleshes out" this character mechanically, by tacking on as many traits as possible, and figuring he'll make the hero change in the last scene. He thinks of the opponent and minor characters separate from and less important than the hero. So they are almost always weak, poorly defined characters.

When it comes to theme, our writer avoids it entirely so that no one can accuse him of "sending a message." Or he expresses it strictly in the dialogue. He sets the story in whatever world seems normal for that character, most likely a major city, since that's where most people in his audience live. He doesn't bother using symbols because that would be obvious and pretentious.

He comes up with a plot and a scene sequence based on one question: What happens next? Often he sends his hero on a physical journey. He organizes his plot using the three-act structure, an external imprint that divides the story into three pieces but doesn't link the events under the surface. As a result, the plot is episodic, with each event or scene standing alone. He complains that he has "second act problems" and can't understand why the story doesn't build to a climactic punch that moves the audience deeply. Finally, he writes dialogue that simply pushes the plot along, with all conflict focused on what is happening. If he is ambitious, he has his hero state the theme directly in dialogue near the end of the story.

If most writers use an approach that is external, mechanical, piecemeal, and generic, the writing process we will work through might be described as internal, organic, interconnected, and original. I must warn you right up front: this process isn't easy. But I believe that this approach, or some variation of it, is the only one that really works. And it can be learned. Here's the writing process we're going to use in this book: We will work through the techniques of great storytelling in the same order that you will construct your story. Most important, you will construct your story from the *inside out*. That means two things: (1) making the story personal and unique to you and (2) finding and developing what is original within your story idea. With each chapter, your story will grow and become more detailed, with each part connected to every other part.

- **Premise** We begin with the premise, which is your entire story condensed to a single sentence.

That premise will suggest the essence of the story, and we will use that to figure out how to develop it so as to get the most out of the idea.

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- **Seven Key Story Structure Steps** The seven key story structure steps are the major stages of your story's development and of the dramatic code hidden under its surface. Think of the seven structure steps as your story's DNA. Determining the seven key steps will give your story a solid, stable foundation.
- **Character** Next, we will create the characters, not by pulling them out of thin air but by drawing them out of your original story idea. We will connect and compare each character to every other character so that each one is strong and well defined. Then we'll figure out the function each must perform in helping your hero develop.
- **Theme (Moral Argument)** The theme is your moral vision, your view of how people should act in the world. But instead of making the characters a mouthpiece for a message, we will express the theme that is inherent in the story idea. And we'll express the theme through the story structure so that it both surprises and moves the audience.
- **Story World** Next, we'll create the world of the story as an outgrowth of your hero. The story world will help you define your hero and show the audience a physical expression of his growth.
- **Symbol Web** Symbols are packets of highly compressed meaning. We'll figure out a web of symbols that highlight and communicate different aspects of the characters, the story world, and the plot.
- **Plot** From the characters we will discover the right story form; the plot will grow from your unique characters. Using the twenty-two story structure steps (the seven key steps plus fifteen more), we will design a plot in which all the events are connected under the surface and build to a surprising but logically necessary ending.
- **Scene Weave** In the last step before writing scenes, we'll come up with a list of every scene in the story, with all the plotlines and themes woven into a tapestry.
- **Scene Construction and Symphonic Dialogue** Finally we'll write the story, constructing each scene so that it furthers the development of your hero. We'll write dialogue that doesn't just push the plot but has a symphonic quality, blending many "instruments" and levels at one time.

As you watch your story grow before your eyes, I can promise you one thing: you will enjoy the creation. So let's begin.



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# CHAPTER 2

## Premise

**MICHAEL CRICHTON** doesn't have the deep human characters of a Chekhov or the brilliant plots of a Dickens. He just happens to be the best premise writer in Hollywood. Take *Jurassic Park*, for example. Crichton's story might have come from this designing principle: "What if you took the two greatest heavyweights of evolution—dinosaurs and humans—and forced them to fight to the death in the same ring?" Now that's a story I want to see.

There are many ways to start the writing process. Some writers prefer to begin by breaking the story into its seven primary steps, which we will explore in the next chapter. But most begin with the shortest expression of the story as a whole, the premise line.

## WHAT IS THE PREMISE?

The premise is your story stated in one sentence. It is the simplest combination of character and plot and typically consists of some event that starts the action, some sense of the main character, and some sense of the outcome of the story.

Some examples:

- *The Godfather*: The youngest son of a Mafia family takes revenge on the men who shot his father and becomes the new Godfather.
- *Moonstruck*: While her fiancé visits his mother in Italy, a woman falls in love with the man's brother.
- *Casablanca*: A tough American expatriate rediscovers an old flame only to give her up so that he can fight the Nazis.
- *A Streetcar Named Desire*: An aging beauty tries to get a man to marry her while under constant attack from her sister's brutish husband.
- *Star Wars*: When a princess falls into mortal danger, a young man uses his skills as a fighter to save her and defeat the evil forces of a galactic empire.

There are all kinds of practical reasons why a good premise is so crucial to your success. First, Hollywood is in the business of selling movies worldwide, with a big chunk of the revenue coming from the opening weekend. So producers look for a premise that is "high concept"—meaning that the film can be reduced to a catchy one-line description that audiences will understand instantly and come rushing to the theater to see.

Second, your premise is your inspiration. It's the "lightbulb" moment when you say, "Now this would make a terrific story," and that excitement gives you the perseverance to go through months or even years, of hard writing.

This leads to another important point: for better or worse, the premise is also your prison. As soon as you decide to pursue one idea, there are potentially thousands of ideas that you won't be writing about. So you'd better be happy with the special world you've chosen.



*KEY POINT: What you choose to write about is far more important than any decision you make about how to write it.*

One last reason you must have a good premise is that it's the one decision on which every other decision you make during the writing process is based. Character, plot, theme, symbol—it all comes out of this story idea. If you fail at the premise, nothing else will help. If a building's foundation is flawed, no amount of work on the floors above will make the building stable. You may be terrific at character, a master at plot, or a genius at dialogue. But if your premise is weak, there is nothing you can do to save the story.

*KEY POINT: Nine out of ten writers fail at the premise.*

The big reason so many writers fail here is that they don't know how to develop the idea, how to dig out the gold that's buried within it. They don't realize that the great value of a premise is that it allows you to explore the full story, and the many forms it might take, before you actually write it.

Premise is a classic example of where a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Most screenwriters know the importance Hollywood places on having a high-concept premise. What they don't know is that this marketing pitch is never going to tell them what the organic story demands.

They also don't know the inherent structural weakness found in any high-concept premise: it gives you only two or three scenes. These are the scenes just before and after the twist that makes your premise unique. The average feature film has forty to seventy scenes. A novel may have double or triple that number. Only by knowing the full craft of storytelling can you overcome the limitations of the high concept and tell the whole story successfully.

The first technique for finding the gold in an idea is time. Take a lot of it at the beginning of the writing process. I'm not talking about hours or even days. I'm talking about weeks. Don't make the amateurish mistake of getting a hot premise and immediately running off to write scenes. You'll get twenty to thirty pages into the story and run into a dead end you can't escape.

The premise stage of the writing process is where you explore your story's grand strategy—seeing the big picture and figuring out the story's general shape and development. You start out with almost nothing to go on. That's why the premise stage is the most tentative of the entire writing process. You are putting out feelers in the dark, exploring possibilities to see what works and what doesn't, what forms an organic whole and what falls apart.

That means you have to remain flexible, open to all possibilities. For the same reason, this is where using an organic creative method as your guide is most important.

## **DEVELOPING YOUR PREMISE**

In the weeks you take to explore your premise, use these steps to come up with a premise line you can turn into a great story.

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## **Step 1: Write Something That May Change Your Life**

This is a very high standard, but it may be the most valuable piece of advice you'll ever get as a writer. I've never seen a writer go wrong following it. Why? Because if a story is that important to you, it may be that important to a lot of people in the audience. And when you're done writing the story, no matter what else happens, you've changed your life.

You might say, "I'd love to write a story that changes my life, but how do I know it will change my life before I've written it?" Simple: do some self-exploration, something most writers, incredibly enough, never do. Most writers are content to think of a premise that's a loose copy of someone else's movie, book, or play. It seems to have commercial appeal, but it's not personal to the writer in any way. This story will never rise above the generic, and so it is bound to fail.

To explore yourself, to have a chance to write something that may change your life, you have to get some data on who you are. And you have to get it outside of you, in front of you, so you can study yourself from a distance.

Two exercises can help you do this. First, write down your wish list, a list of everything you would like to see up on the screen, in a book, or at the theater. It's what you are passionately interested in and it's what entertains you. You might jot down characters you have imagined, cool plot twists, or great lines of dialogue that have popped into your head. You might list themes that you care about or certain genres that always attract you.

Write them all down on as many sheets of paper as you need. This is your own personal wish list, so don't reject anything. Banish thoughts like "That would cost too much money." And don't organize them while you write. Let one idea trigger another.

The second exercise is to write a premise list. This is a list of every premise you've ever thought of. That might be five, twenty, fifty, or more. Again, take as many sheets of paper as you need. The key requirement of the exercise is that you express each premise in one sentence. This forces you to be very clear about each idea. And it allows you to see all your premises together in one place.

Once you have completed both your wish list and your premise list, lay them out before you and study them. Look for core elements that repeat themselves on both lists. Certain characters and character types may recur, a quality of voice may seep through the lines of dialogue, one or two kinds of stories (genres) may repeat, or there may be a theme or subject matter or time period that you keep going back to.

As you study, key patterns will start to emerge about what you love. This, in the rawest form possible, is your vision. It's who you are, as a writer and as a human being, on paper in front of you. Go back to it often.

Notice that these two exercises are designed to open you up and to integrate what is already deep within you. They won't guarantee that you write a story that changes your life. Nothing can do that. But once you've done this essential bit of self-exploration, any premise you come up with is likely to be more personal and original.

## **Step 2: Look for What's Possible**

One of the biggest reasons writers fail at the premise stage is that they don't know how to spot the story's true potential. This takes experience as well as technique. What you're looking for here is where the idea might go, how it might blossom. Don't jump on a single possibility right away, even if it looks really good.

*KEY POINT: Explore your options. The intent here is to brainstorm the many different paths the idea can take and then to choose the best one.*

One technique for exploring possibilities is to see if anything is promised by the idea. Some ideas generate certain expectations, things that must happen to satisfy the audience if this idea were to play out in a full story. These "promises" can lead you to the best option for developing the idea.

A more valuable technique for seeing what's possible in the idea is to ask yourself, "What if ... ?" The "what if" question leads to two places: your story idea and your own mind. It helps you define what is allowed in the story world and what is not. It also helps you explore your mind as it plays out in this make-believe landscape. The more often you ask "What if ... ?" the more fully you can inhabit this landscape, flesh out its details, and make it compelling for an audience.

The point here is to let your mind go free. Don't censor or judge yourself. Don't ever tell yourself that any idea you come up with is stupid. "Stupid" ideas often lead to creative breakthroughs.

To understand this process better, let's look at some stories that have already been written and played around with what the authors might have been thinking as they explored the deeper possibilities of their premise ideas.

## **WITNESS**

*(by Earl W. Wallace & William Kelley, story by William Kelley, 1985)*

A boy who witnesses a crime is a classic setup for a thriller. It promises nail-biting jeopardy, intense action, and violence. But what if you push the story much further, to explore violence in America? What if you show the two extremes of the use of force—violence and pacifism—by having the boy travel from the peaceful Amish world to the violent city? What if you then force a good man of violence, the cop hero, to enter the Amish world and fall in love? And then what if you bring violence into the heart of pacifism?

## **TOOTSIE**

*(by Larry Gelbart and Murray Schisgal, story by Don McGuire and Larry Gelbart, 1982)*

The promise that immediately comes to the audience's mind for this idea is the fun of seeing a man dressed as a woman. And you know they will want to see this character in as many difficult situations as possible. But what if you go beyond these useful but obvious expectations? What if you play up the hero's strategizing to show how men play the game of love from the inside? What if you make the

hero a chauvinist who is forced to take on the one disguise—that of a woman—that he least wants but most needs to take on in order to grow? What if you heighten the pace and the plot by pushing the story toward farce, showing a lot of men and women chasing after each other at the same time?

### **CHINATOWN**

*(by Robert Towne, 1974)*

A man who investigates a murder in 1930s Los Angeles promises all the revelations, twists, and surprises of a good whodunit. But what if the crime just keeps getting bigger? What if the detective starts investigating the smallest “crime” possible, adultery, and ends up finding out that the entire city has been built on murder? Then you could make the revelations bigger and bigger until you reveal to the audience the deepest, darkest secrets of American life.

### **THE GODFATHER**

*(novel by Mario Puzo, screenplay by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, 1972)*

A story about a Mafia family promises ruthless killers and violent crime. But what if you make the head of the family much bigger, make him a kind of king in America? What if he is the head of the dark side of America, just as powerful in the underworld as the president is in official America? Because this man is a king, you could create grand tragedy, a Shakespearean fall and rise where one king dies and another takes his place. What if you turn a simple crime story into a dark American epic?

### **MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS**

*(novel by Agatha Christie, screenplay by Paul Dehn, 1974)*

A man killed in a train compartment right next door to where a brilliant detective is sleeping promises to be an ingenious detective story. But what if you want to take the idea of justice beyond the typical capture of the murderer? What if you want to show the ultimate poetic justice? What if the murderer man deserves to die, and a natural jury of twelve men and women serves as both his judge and his executioner?

### **BIG**

*(by Gary Ross & Anne Spielberg, 1988)*

A boy who suddenly wakes up to find he is a full-grown man promises to be a fun comedic fantasy. But what if you write a fantasy not set in some far-off, bizarre world but in a world an average kid would recognize? What if you send him to a real boy’s utopia, a toy company, and let him go out with a pretty, sexy woman? And what if the story isn’t just about a boy getting big physically but one that shows the ideal blend of man and boy for living a happy adult life?

## **Step 3: Identify the Story Challenges and Problems**

There are rules of construction that apply to all stories. But each story has its own unique set

rules, or challenges, as well. These are particular problems that are deeply embedded in the idea, and you cannot escape them. Nor do you want to. These problems are signposts for finding your true story. You must confront these problems head-on and solve them if you are to execute your story well. Most writers, if they identify the problems at all, do so after they've written the complete story. That's far too late.

The trick is to learn how to spot inherent problems right at the premise line. Of course, even the best writers can't spot all the problems this soon in the process. But as you master the key techniques of character, plot, theme, story world, symbol, and dialogue, you will be pleasantly surprised at how well you can dig out the difficulties in any idea. Here are just a few of the challenges and problems inherent to the following story ideas.

## **STAR WARS**

*(by George Lucas, 1977)*

In any epic, but especially a space epic like *Star Wars*, you must introduce a wide range of characters quickly and then keep them interacting over vast space and time. You must make the futuristic story believable and recognizable in the present. And you must find a way to create character change in a hero who is morally good from the beginning.

## **FORREST GUMP**

*(novel by Winston Groom, screenplay by Eric Roth, 1994)*

How do you turn forty years of historical moments into a cohesive, organic, personal story? Problems include creating a mentally challenged hero who is able to drive the plot, have believably deep insights, and experience character change while balancing whimsy with genuine sentiment.

## **BELOVED**

*(by Toni Morrison, 1988)*

The main challenge for Toni Morrison is to write a tale of slavery in which the hero is not portrayed as a victim. An ambitious story like this has numerous problems that must be solved: keeping narrative drive in spite of constant jumps between past and present, making events in the distant past seem meaningful to an audience today, driving the plot with reactive characters, showing the effects of slavery on the minds of the people who lived it, and demonstrating how its effects continue to punish years after the slavery is over.

## **JAWS**

*(novel by Peter Benchley, screenplay by Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb, 1975)*

Writing a "realistic" horror story—in which characters fight one of man's natural predators—poses many problems: creating a fair fight with an opponent that has limited intelligence, setting up a situation where the shark can attack often, and ending the story with the hero going mano a mano with the shark.

## **ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN**

*(by Mark Twain, 1885)*

The main challenge facing the writer of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is huge: How do you show the moral—or more precisely, immoral—fabric of an entire nation in fictional terms? This brilliant story idea carries with it some major problems: using a boy to drive the action; maintaining story momentum and strong opposition in a traveling, episodic structure; and believably showing a simple and not entirely admirable boy gaining great moral insight.

## THE GREAT GATSBY

(by F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925)

Fitzgerald's challenge is to show the American dream corrupted and reduced to a competition for fame and money. His problems are just as daunting. He must create narrative drive when the hero is someone else's helper, make the audience care about shallow people, and somehow turn a small love story into a metaphor for America.

## DEATH OF A SALESMAN

(by Arthur Miller, 1949)

The central challenge for Arthur Miller is to turn the life of a small man into a grand tragedy. Problems he must solve include mixing past and present events without confusing the audience, maintaining narrative drive, and providing hope in a desperate and violent conclusion.

## Step 4: Find the Designing Principle

Given the problems and the promises inherent in your idea, you must now come up with an overall strategy for how you will tell your story. Your overall story strategy, stated in one line, is the designing principle of your story. The designing principle helps you extend the premise into detailed structure.

*KEY POINT: The designing principle is what organizes the story as a whole. It is the internal logic of the story, what makes the parts hang together organically so that the story becomes greater than the sum of its parts. It is what makes the story original.*

In short, the designing principle is the seed of the story. And it is the single most important factor making your story original and effective. Sometimes this principle is a symbol or a metaphor (known as the central symbol, the grand metaphor, or the root metaphor). But it is often larger than that. The designing principle tracks the fundamental process that will unfold over the course of the story.

The designing principle is difficult to see. And in truth, most stories don't have one. They are standard stories, told generically. That's the difference between a premise, which all stories have, and a designing principle—which only good stories have. The premise is concrete; it's what actually happens. The designing principle is abstract; it is the deeper process going on in the story, told in an original way. Stated in one line:

*Designing principle = story process + original execution*

Let's say you are a writer who wants to show the intimate workings of the Mafia in America, and

literally hundreds of screenwriters and novelists have done. If you were really good, you might come up with this designing principle (for *The Godfather*):

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**Use the classic fairy-tale strategy of showing how the youngest of three sons becomes the new “king.”**

What’s important is that the designing principle is the “synthesizing idea,” the “shaping cause”<sup>1</sup> of the story; it’s what internally makes the story a single unit and what makes it different from all other stories.

*KEY POINT: Find the designing principle, and stick to it. Be diligent in discovering this principle, and never take your eye off it during the long writing process.*

Let’s take a look at *Tootsie* to see how the difference between the premise and the designing principle plays out in an actual story.

- **Premise** When an actor can’t get work, he disguises himself as a woman and gets a role in a TV series, only to fall in love with one of the female members of the cast.
- **Designing Principle** Force a male chauvinist to live as a woman.

How do you find the designing principle in your premise? Don’t make the mistake most writers make at this point. Instead of coming up with a unique designing principle, they pick a genre and impose it on the premise and then force the story to hit the beats (events) typical of that genre. The result is mechanical, generic, unoriginal fiction.

You find the designing principle by teasing it out of the simple one-line premise you have before you. Like a detective, you “induce” the form of the story from the premise.

This doesn’t mean that there is only one designing principle per idea or that it’s fixed or predetermined. There are many possible designing principles or forms that you can glean from your premise and by which you can develop your story. Each gives you different possibilities of what to say, and each brings inherent problems that you must solve. Again, let your technique help you out.

One way of coming up with a designing principle is to use a journey or similar traveling metaphor. Huck Finn’s raft trip down the Mississippi River with Jim, Marlow’s boat trip up the river into the “heart of darkness,” Leopold Bloom’s travels through Dublin in *Ulysses*, Alice’s fall down the rabbit hole into the upside-down world of Wonderland—each of these uses a traveling metaphor to organize the deeper process of the story.

Notice how the use of a journey in *Heart of Darkness* provides the designing principle for a very complex work of fiction:

A storyteller’s trip upriver into the jungle is the line to three different locations

simultaneously: to the truth about a mysterious and apparently immoral man; to the truth about the storyteller himself; and backward in civilization to the barbaric moral heart of darkness in all humans.

Sometimes a single symbol can serve as the designing principle, as with the red letter *A* in *The Scarlet Letter*, the island in *The Tempest*, the whale in *Moby-Dick*, or the mountain in *The Magician's Mountain*. Or you can connect two grand symbols in a process, like the green nature and black slag in *How Green Was My Valley*. Other designing principles include units of time (day, night, four seasons), the unique use of a storyteller, or a special way the story unfolds.

Here are some designing principles in books, films, and plays, from the Bible all the way to the Harry Potter books, and how they differ from the premise line.

### MOSES, IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS

- **Premise** When an Egyptian prince discovers that he is a Hebrew, he leads his people out of slavery.
- **Designing Principle** A man who does not know who he is struggles to lead his people to freedom and receives the new moral laws that will define him and his people.

### ULYSSES

- **Premise** Track a day in the life of a common man in Dublin.
- **Designing Principle** In a modern odyssey through the city, over the course of a single day, one man finds a father and the other man finds a son.

### FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL

- **Premise** A man falls in love with a woman, but first one and then the other is engaged to someone else.
- **Designing Principle** A group of friends experiences four utopias (weddings) and a moment of hell (funeral) as they all look for their right partner in marriage.

### HARRY POTTER BOOKS

- **Premise** A boy discovers he has magical powers and attends a school for magicians.
- **Designing Principle** A magician prince learns to be a man and a king by attending a boarding school for sorcerers over the course of seven school years.

### THE STING

- **Premise** Two con artists swindle a rich man who killed one of their friends.
- **Designing Principle** Tell the story of a sting in the form of a sting, and con both the opponent and the audience.

### LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

- **Premise** A family deals with the mother's addiction.
- **Designing Principle** As a family moves from day into night, its members are confronted with the sins and ghosts of their past.

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