

3. ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL STORY

If your novel is going to work, it's going to need all the right components. Used without imagination or sensitivity, those elements may produce only formula fiction. But, like a good cook with the right materials and a good recipe, you can also create some pleasant surprises.

Many writers, like many good cooks, don't need to think consciously about what they're throwing in the pot. But as an apprentice you should probably think about how your story matches up with the following suggestions. They all have to do, essentially, with bringing your characters and readers *from a state of ignorance to a state of awareness*: Can our heroine find happiness as a journalist? We don't know, but we'll find out. Can our hero found a family dynasty in the Nevada wilderness? We don't know, but we'll find out.

1. In the opening—

Show us your main characters, or at least foreshadow them: We might see your heroine's mother getting married, for example. Or we might see a crime committed which will bring in your hero to investigate.

Show one or more characters under some kind of *appropriate stress*. For example, if the hero must perform well under enemy fire in the climax, show him being shot at in Chapter One — and performing badly. If the heroine must resist temptation at the end, show her (or someone else) succumbing to temptation in the beginning.

Show us who's the "good guy," who's the "bad guy." That is, in whom should we make an emotional investment? Whose side are we on? Even if the hero is morally repugnant (a hired killer, for example), he should display some trait or attitude we can admire and identify with. The villain can be likable but set on a course we must disapprove.

Show *what's at stake*. Editors and readers want to know this right away. (That's why the blurb on the jacket usually tells us: "Only one person can save the West/ defend the Galactic Empire/ defeat the vampires...") What does the hero stand to gain or lose? What will follow if the villain wins?

Establish the *setting* — where and when the story takes place.

Establish the *area of conflict*. If the setting is the Nanaimo coal mines at the turn of the century, the area of conflict may be relations between miners and owners, or within a family of miners, or within a single miner's personality.

Foreshadow the ending. If the hero dies in a blizzard at the end, a few flakes of snow may fall in the first chapter.

Set the tone of the story: solemn or excited, humorous or tragic.

2. In the body of the story –

Tell your story in *scenes*, not in exposition. A scene contains a purpose, an obstacle or conflict, and a resolution that tells us something new about the characters and their circumstances.

Develop your characters through action and dialogue. Show us, don't tell us, what's going on and why (*not* He was loud and rude, *but* "Get outa my way, you jerk!" he bellowed.).

Include all the elements you need for your conclusion. If everything depends on killing the victim with a shotgun, show us the shotgun long before it goes off.

Give your characters adequate motivation for their actions and words. Drama is people doing amazing things for very good reasons. Melodrama is people doing amazing things for bad or nonexistent reasons.

Develop the plot as a series of increasingly serious problems. (The heroine escapes the villain in Chapter 5 by fleeing into the snowy mountains; now in Chapter 6 she risks death in an avalanche.)

Establish suspense by making solution of the problems uncertain (How will the heroine escape the avalanche and avoid freezing to death in Chapter Seven?).

Make solutions of the problems appropriate to the characters (Good thing she took Outward Bound training in Chapter One).

3. In the conclusion –

Present a final, crucial conflict when everything gained so far is in danger and could be lost by a single word or deed: this is the climax, which reveals something to your readers (and perhaps to your characters) which has been implicit from the outset but not obvious or predictable.

4. Throughout the story –

Remember that *nothing in a story happens at random*. Why is the heroine's name Sophia? Why is she blind? Why is her seeing-eye dog a black Lab? The easy answer is that you're the God of your novel and that's the way you want things. But if you have a conscious reason for these elements, the story gains in interest because it carries more meaning: For example, "Sophia" means "wisdom" and the name can provide a cue to the reader.

Use image, metaphor and simile with a conscious purpose, not just because a phrase "sounds good." Maintain consistent style, tone, and point of view.

Know the conventions of the form you're working in, and break them only when you have a good reason to. For example, if it's conventional for the private eye to be an aggressive, hard-drinking single man, you're going to surprise the reader if your private eye is a shy, yogurt-loving mother of three school-age children. You'll surprise the reader even more if she goes around pistol-whipping people; as a private eye, her behavior will still depend on her personality and limitations.

Assignment:

Go through the first chapter of your work in progress, assessing it in the light of the suggestions for the opening. If it doesn't meet those suggestions, do you have good reasons for doing it otherwise? If so, great. If not, annotate the chapter to show where you might make changes.

You may find that this will also help you with your conclusion. If events in the first chapter should foreshadow events in the final chapter, what you've put into chapter 1 may give you good ideas for a satisfactory conclusion.

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