

# Telling a Story: Narrative Writing

A story recreates an experience; real or imagined. Well crafted stories unravel in a purposeful fashion, resolving a conflict, tracing the path of important change, solving a mystery, or building to a discovery. Each event in the story has meaning or significance relative to this turning point; thus, it is easy, upon rereading, to trace the pattern of meaning through the story's internal structure—that is, through the way the story unfolds.

Four elements are usually key:

1. the characters who people the story
2. the place where it all happens
3. the events big and small that are central to the plot
4. the conflict, problem, or question that provides a reason for telling the tale

The skillful story teller weaves a tale in which real people struggle, grow, change, or make things happen; time and place add depth or meaning to the plot; significant events dominate; and some central conflict or question holds all other elements together—and sets a tone of wonder or mystery that keeps the reader wanting to learn what happens next.

## Parts of a Narrative

- ❖ A TALE YOU CAN RETELL
- ❖ CONFLICT/PROBLEM/QUESTION:  
*The heart of the story*
- ❖ SENSE OF TIME, PLACE
- ❖ WELL-DEVELOPED PLOT:  
*Important events*
- ❖ CHARACTERS GROW, CHANGE, DISCOVER
- ❖ PURPOSEFUL SEQUENCE
- ❖ TURNING POINT

❖ CONFLICT RESOLUTION:

*Wraps it all up*

## QUICK CHECK FOR THE WRITER

### DID YOU

- \_\_\_ figure out where/how your story really begins?
- \_\_\_ open with a real lead that makes your reader want to keep reading?
- \_\_\_ center your story around a conflict, problem, or question?
- \_\_\_ figure out how (or whether) you will resolve the conflict, solve the problem, or answer the question? (HINT: You do not HAVE to have a HAPPY ending—but you do need to tie up the loose ends!)
- \_\_\_ let your reader know when and where your story takes place?
- \_\_\_ make your characters seem real, not like cardboard cutouts without feelings or thoughts?
- \_\_\_ give your characters interesting things to say?
- \_\_\_ show your characters doing things that reveal what they are like?
- \_\_\_ tell things in an order that makes sense and keeps the reader wanting to find out what happens next?
- \_\_\_ skip over (or leave out) little boring details that do not matter?
- \_\_\_ tell the reader everything he/she needs to know to get the point of your story?
- \_\_\_ end your story in a good spot (showing how everything came out, but not going on too long)?

*Do you have a good plot?  
Could someone turn your story into a movie?  
Are your characters like live people?  
Do they show their real feelings?  
Would you read your story if someone else wrote it?*

## **NARRATIVE WRITING TIPS**

1. **START WITH A CONFLICT.** Every good story has a center, a plot. It's usually a conflict of some sort, or a problem to be solved. Maybe there's a mystery, a question to answer. Maybe two characters don't know how to get along and have to learn how. Maybe the main character has a wish or goal or dream that looks hopeless—but something will happen to make things look different. What's the conflict/problem/ question in your story?
2. **DECIDE WHAT HAPPENS.** Sketch out the main events of your story (HINT: Some writers find it helpful to draw pictures of main events). Where does it start? How far back do you have to go? What is the very first thing you need to tell the reader? When or how does the story end? How do you know that's the ending? When do you SENSE that a story is over?
3. **WRITE A REAL LEAD.** Get the reader hooked with the first line. Don't announce that you are telling a story about a dog. Say, "When I first met Rex, I thought he was the ugliest dog alive." Get the reader's attention—and put in enough surprises to hold it.
4. **MAKE THE CHARACTERS REAL.** Live with your characters for a day or two. Let them grow and change in your mind. Think about them as if they were people you were talking to and having dinner with. What do they like or dislike? What are they afraid of? What do they love? How do they live? Are they mean, jealous, compassionate, daring, comical, thoughtless, inventive, silly? How do you know? How will you show the reader these things?
5. **THINK OF TIME AND PLACE.** When does your story take place? Now? Long ago? In the future? Where? Describe the place. Imagine that you live there. Live inside your story for awhile.

6. **SURPRISE YOURSELF.** Stories often change as they go. You might think your story will end one way, and surprise! It goes off in another direction as you write. Let your creativity take you where it will. Keep writing. Have fun with your discoveries. Readers like surprises. If they can guess what's coming next, they'll probably get bored. Wouldn't you?
  
7. **WORK IT OUT—THEN STOP.** Resolve the conflict. Solve the problem. Get your characters out of trouble. OR—if you want—show why things can't be resolved or why they won't get better. Stories do not have to have happy endings. But once things are over, get yourself and your characters out of the picture pretty quickly. Nothing is duller than a story that drags on and on after the good part is over. Wrap it up. Leave the other ideas for the next story.