

# Before You Write



*A Necessary Guide to Harness the  
Power of Story & Your Role  
As the Author*

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*Author, Freelance Writer, Book Coach*

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***Welcome*** to *Writing a Novel*.

You're in the right place if you're interested in writing a novel but have never done it before or are hesitant to begin because you think you might look foolish for even trying.

Unlike most professions, writing—specifically writing a novel—is something a large percentage of the public not only assumes they could do without much training but actually dream of doing someday, if only they had the time. Nevermind the skill and discipline necessary to pull it off. Everyone it seems has a 'great idea' for a novel.

As someone who has written eleven novels and taught *Crafting the Story* for 11+ years, I can tell you that the skill, knowledge, and time that goes into writing a credible novel is considerable and not something to take lightly. After twelve years of self-publishing, I'm still learning. I often read articles on writing and attend writing summits to sharpen my skills. Authoring a novel not only demands strong writing and strong storytelling skills (none of which can be learned overnight), but a flexible and resilient ego. Because like any art form, not everyone will like what you've written.

With that said, I would never discourage anyone from writing a novel if they feel excited about a story idea. To the contrary, I'd encourage you to give it a try. It can be hugely rewarding.

That's why I've written this micro-book—to introduce you to the concept and power of story and to give you a better understanding of the writing journey that lies ahead in hopes it will increase the chances you'll actually do it. Once you've made that decision, I have other tools to help you make the journey.

*Good luck.*

***Lynn***

# **-THE CONCEPT OF STORY-**

***“Storytelling is among the oldest forms of communication. Storytelling is the commonality of all human beings, in all places, in all times.”***

**— Rives Collins**

It’s common knowledge that humans have used storytelling as an important communication tool for centuries.

In fact, before complex language, early humans used stories to preserve their culture and pass along traditions, beliefs, customs, and family history. Because our early brains were steeped in stories, our brains are now wired for stories.



It’s true! Research shows that when we read a story whose characters and storylines draw us into the narrative, our brain releases neurochemicals. Dr. Paul Zak, a neuroscientist, experimented with this and found that when subjects felt distress while reading the rising action in a story, their brains would release cortisol. When they felt empathy for characters in the story, their brains released oxytocin which has been shown to increase trust and connection between people. If the story had a happy ending, the subject got a jolt of dopamine. As an author, this is good to know.

And finally, if the book was successful in getting readers to cycle through these emotions off and on throughout the story, it’s more likely readers remained glued to the page and then tended to remember that story long after it was over.

We also know through brain-imaging research that the human brain becomes more active when we read or listen to a story. That’s because good stories engage our emotions, leaving us open to suggestion, while activating our imaginations.

Marketing and advertising professionals have known this eons, as have politicians, both of whom relentlessly manipulate our emotions so that we buy things we don’t need or act in a way that might be against our best interests.

While storytelling is used everywhere from electing politicians, to raising money for nonprofits, to teaching people through TED talks, to inspiring action, fictional books, movies, and TV shows are still king when it comes to providing entertainment.



*But what is a story?*

You may think the answer is obvious. But it's not as simple as "Guess what happened to me on the way to the store today?"

That's a loosely structured sequence of events that may or may not have a purpose or result in an ending.

According to *Stories World*, a story is "a *structured* series of events, often with characters and a plot, meant to engage or teach an audience."

There are all types of stories, including fiction and non-fiction, myths and legends, and fables or tales. There are even different categories of fictional stories, such as novels, short stories, and flash fiction.

In this book, we will deal only with fictional stories.

It's important to note that fictional stories (stories of the imagination) do more than just entertain. They often mimic current events, illustrate the impact of moral choice, teach us communication skills, help us make sense of current events, and even help us to understand our place in the world.

While story structure can vary, most often stories have a beginning, middle, and an end and are devised in a specific format to accomplish something, whether that is to entertain, educate, influence behavior, or possibly all three.

Can a story really do all three?



Yes it can.

Consider the movie *Spider-man* and the lead character Peter Parker. Born from a comic book, this story is designed to be uplifting and inspirational, while clearly entertaining audiences as they cheer for this nerdy young/superhuman fighting for justice in New York City.

Though not all rosy, this teen superhero's journey offers up a number of moral lessons designed to influence behavior, especially in young children. These include, "With great power comes great responsibilities, always do what is right, look out for the underdog, or sacrifice for the good of others." This means that this one story has the power to entertain, educate, and even influence behavior.

At its core, every story is a journey.

As Philip Martin said in his article *What Is Story*, "... a story goes somewhere. It follows, with purpose, one or more characters through a series of events. By the end, it arrives at a target destination, fulfilling its reason for having been told."



*What is storytelling?*

It is *how* you tell your story, how you structure your sequence of events (plot), evoke emotions through character, conflict, and resolution, and how you create visual images makes all the difference in the world.

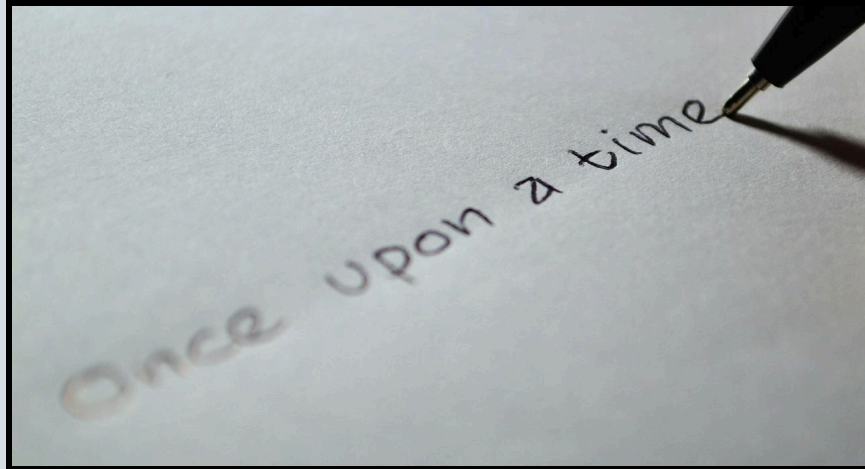
***How*** you tell and then ***share*** your story is the foundation of storytelling.

Whether ‘sharing’ the story is accomplished through the written word, film, music, comic book, or dance, the story follows a main character as they chase something important (an idea, a cure, a criminal, a personal demon) while facing a string of obstacles meant to stop them, and finally overcoming those obstacles to achieve what they set out to do (or not) and return to a new normal.

In a traditional story, it’s the tension created through shared emotions which allows readers to relate to the character. When this happens, readers often continue to reflect those feelings long after the story ends.

When writers create a positive environment in which readers are likely to immerse themselves into the story, readers experience what’s called “narrative transportation.” This means they are transported into the story as if it were happening in real time.

This is a powerful reaction and frankly what most authors strive for. In fact, it’s when you know you’ve achieved your goal.



## **-THE POWER OF STORY-**

As illustrated above, a story can be a powerful thing.

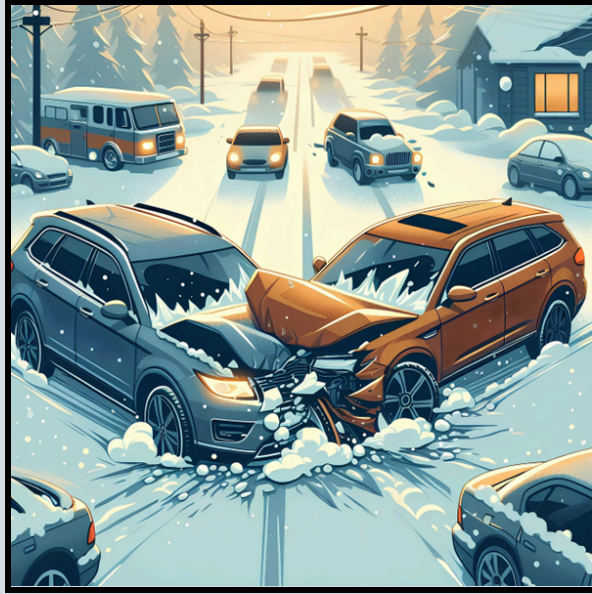
Stories are so powerful they can bypass our belief system and tap into our imagination and emotions, influencing our behavior. Research has even shown that good stories are retained in our brains more than facts or figures. Once again, something the marketing world has known for a long time. It is much easier for them to motivate us to buy something when they appeal to our emotions than when they merely tell us how effective it is.

To our brains, a story is like a virtual reality machine. In fact, the brain will gloss over repetitive or boring experiences and reach for stories because the mind wants new experiences, even if lived through fictional characters.

As Karen Eber says in her book *The Perfect Story*, “The brain responds more dynamically to a story than to information.” Something authors might want to remember when they’re filling pages with background information about their lead character or endless description about the setting.

Why is it more impactful to tell a story than to just relate the facts?

I am sure your parents told you to wear your seatbelt a thousand times as you learned to drive. Like most teenagers, your response was probably something like, “Yeah, yeah, Mom, I will.”



But, if you pass an accident on the freeway and see the broken windshield where someone's head went through, that image will be forever imprinted on your brain, and you'll probably wear a seatbelt as a result.

**Stories do the same thing because stories create images in our minds. Those images create emotion. And it's the emotion that imprints the story in our brain.**

When you understand the full power of story, you know that:

- Stories grab people's attention more than a recitation of facts and information.
- When an audience's attention begins to fade, a story can help to refocus their attention.
- Stories make connections in our brains in a way that can influence decisions, whether that's to buy something, donate, or take action.
- Stories can help to reframe something negative so that it seems more appealing.

- Stories can help create a connection with the audience where there wasn't one before because you have created a feeling of common ground.
- Stories make people think differently about a subject because stories help them visualize it.
- Stories influence people's opinions because stories feel more authentic and have a higher trust value.
- And most importantly, stories can help to overcome someone's objections and inspire them to act.

As a new author, it's important to understand the power you have when you sit down to write. But that's only if you have the skill necessary to do it. Authors who have mastered the art of storytelling, have the power to not only entertain and enthrall an entire audience of readers, but reflect the times, influence belief and behavior, and bring about change.

Yes! Authors have the power to do all of that. Remember that when you sit down to write, or when you consider how to begin a chapter or reveal information about your lead character. It's not just a matter of writing whatever comes into your head. When you organize your thoughts and the story elements properly, you will tap into that power and be more successful in growing an audience.



## **-UNDERSTANDING THE AUTHOR'S JOB-**

Understanding what a story is, how powerful it is, and what your job is as the author will help you craft a better story.

At their core, stories are about how and why life changes, whether that's for good or bad. Consider *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, which follows the life of Kya as one by one her family leaves her alone in the marshes of North Carolina. This best-selling book is not only about how Kya survives alone in the marsh, but how much she feels at one with the marsh, how she experiences love and death, and the harshness of a murder trial.

The way in which stories infiltrate our minds is created by you, the author, effectively incorporating conflict and emotion into the storyline, because it's conflict and emotion that fuel the narrative of every good story.

In turn, these two elements link the audience to the characters, encourage the reader to follow their journey, and make the reader interested in the outcomes.

*What is the plot?*

Plot is the purposeful organizing of the characters and events that take place in the story.

Typically, a story begins when the world in which the story takes place is in what we call stasis, when life is in relative balance.

Something happens to disrupt that balance. We call this the trigger or inciting incident. Whatever it is, it forces the main character to make a difficult choice, which will move things in a different direction towards restored balance.

Think of *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) and the Shire where the hobbits live peacefully until Bilbo Baggins disappears and leaves the magical ring to his nephew, Frodo.

The sudden appearance of the ring changes the dynamics of the story, forcing Frodo to leave the Shire to get rid of it.

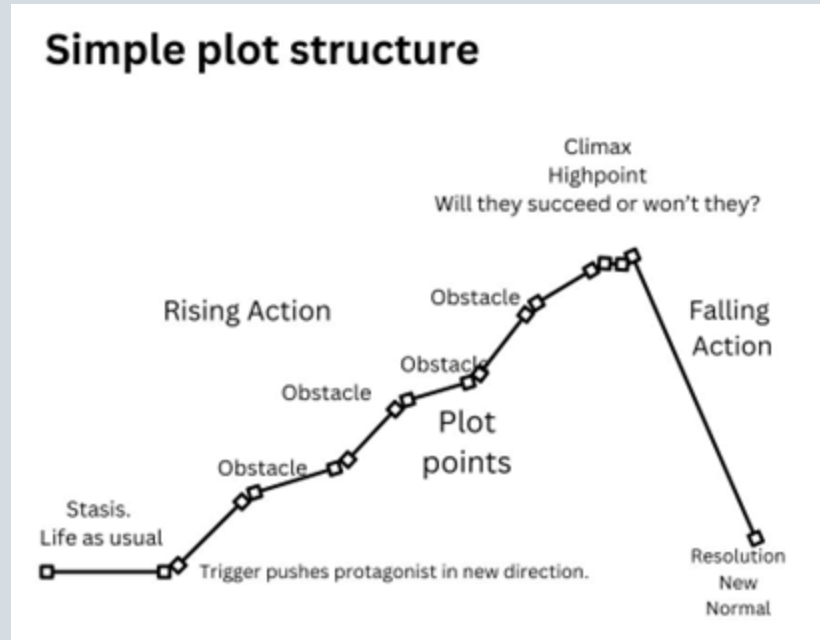
In any good story, once the main character makes a move in the new direction, opposing forces will also appear to stop him or slow him down.

Stakes will be raised with this new conflict, placing the main character in a position where he must dig deep, take greater risks, and make ever more difficult decisions to find his way to a new balance.

It's the tension created by this conflict this keeps us glued to the page. And it's the author's job to find the perfect balance between the elements of exposition (necessary information to frame the story), action, suspense, and tension to do that.

Writing a novel is a formidable job. Not only does the author have to create three-dimensional characters readers will follow but complex plots that deliver on the promise of a good story.

Whether that's through the three act structure, the hero's journey, the seven-point structure, *Save the Cat* Beat structure, or the classic (Freytag's) pyramid structure, or something completely new, the author needs to weave the threads of her story together in a format that will hook readers' interest and keep them invested in the story's outcome.



People often *stop* reading a story because the author has failed to do this. Perhaps the questions raised in the beginning of the story aren't compelling, or whatever the main character is chasing is of no consequence, or readers just don't care enough about what happens to the main character to continue. And once they give up, you rarely get them back.

This is where knowledge and training come in so that authors not only understand what their job is but how to use the writing and storytelling tools at their disposal to achieve the results they desire.

While authors always have ownership over their story and how they choose to tell it, storytelling is an art form. Like any skill or discipline, it requires a certain level of understanding and application to achieve maximum success.

For instance, great stories generally focus on one aspect of the human condition (birth, death, love, loss) or a universal theme (good vs evil, forbidden love, coming of age). These themes play out by pitting the lead character against something or someone (conflict) that creates a win-lose scenario where the stakes are high enough to cause real pain if all is lost.

The dance the main character does with the obstacle in his way creates tension, which in turn creates emotion. And it's the emotion readers relate to and what

captures and sustains their attention. **If tension is absent, or it waxes and wanes too easily, emotion is lost and chances are that readers will abort the journey.**

What gets in the way of telling a good story?

1. If you merely relate the story as an episodic narrative by going from point A to point B to point C. There is no true beginning or end, and the stakes are minimal.
2. You fail to create a strong protagonist goal, giving your main character something important to pursue. There must be a reason we follow the main character.
3. You fail to add conflict or opposition to the goal, which adds the necessary tension. At no point does the reader wonder “Will the protagonist succeed, or won’t he?” Even worse, they don’t care.
4. You add conflict in multiple places, but the main character overcomes each situation too easily before moving on. As a result, there is so little tension that it creates a flat plot line.
5. You cram too much information and detail into one story, overshadowing or diminishing the emotion your characters experience. Emotion creates empathy and allows readers to live vicariously through your characters. Without it, readers don’t become invested in the outcomes.
6. You talk about concepts rather than sharing emotions.
7. You forget what your purpose was in writing the story and ignore how you want readers to feel at the end.

When you can tap into your readers’ emotions, you will ignite their imaginations and immerse them in the story.



In the end, good storytelling begins with the promise that something interesting will happen that takes your protagonist on a journey worth following. Readers will judge you on whether you delivered on that promise.

Part of your job then as the author is to manage readers' expectations.

Yes. Whether you like it or not, good storytelling is a type of subtle and not-so-subtle manipulation of your readers.

But good stories don't just appear out of thin air. Authors and screenplay writers carefully craft every step the protagonist takes in a fictional journey. They 'plot' every obstacle, every decision, every potential risk, every failure, and every success the character encounters.

### *Plotters vs Pantsers*

In the writing world there are two types of authors: plotters and pantsers. I would argue there is also a third category, which I fall into, which is a hybrid of the two. The plotter will take weeks, even months, mapping out every detail of the book into an outline before they ever sit down to write.

On the other hand, pantsers have a general idea of where they're going and a good enough grasp of the necessary storytelling components to just begin writing.

As a hybrid writer, I make a few decisions before I begin, such as where and how the story will end, and then allow the creative process to flow as I move through the story. As I write, I listen to my characters and follow their lead, but I also allow myself to change my mind when the story warrants it.

Once I'm almost done with the first draft, I create a grid, mapping out each chapter by identifying what happens in that chapter to move the story forward. This takes on the rough appearance of an outline but with much less detail. And it gives me the ability to 'see' the story components so that I can move things around or change them if necessary.

That's what authors do. Take all the necessary ingredients of a good story and move them around, massage them, or even cut them to create a finished product. Authors are constantly making strategic decisions throughout the story to *maintain a reader's attention*.

***"The narrative is the most powerful weapon of a writer's arsenal."***

**–M. J. Rose**

Probably the number one thing to focus on is to develop the story's narrative drive. The narrative drive is what pushes your story forward, and without it, your story will run out of gas and die.

Think of narrative drive as the core of your story. It is central to whatever your lead character wants, desires, and/or needs at this moment. There would be no story without it.

In LOTR, Frodo needs to destroy the ring by taking it to the fires of Mordor. But it could have been taken by any one of a number of other, more qualified, characters.

Why Frodo?

When Bilbo Baggins leaves the ring in Frodo's care, Frodo immediately feels the heavy weight of that responsibility. He knows that in the wrong hands, the ring has the power to destroy Middle Earth. But all Frodo wants (more than anything else in the world) is to go home to the Shire and to reclaim the life he's left behind. That's his driving narrative. Every time he's challenged or feels he can't go on, the deep need to save his home pushes him forward.

That means the first job you have as an author is to figure out what your lead character is chasing in the story and why (the narrative drive).

I believe the three main decisions you must make as an author are these:

1. What does my protagonist want in this story? What's so important that they will move in a new direction and risk everything to get it?
2. What's holding them back or prohibiting them from getting it? What internal and/or external obstacles or conflicts must they overcome and how does that affect them emotionally?
3. What are they willing to sacrifice to get what they want, desire, or need? What personal risks are they willing to take? What's at stake?

Regardless of how you choose to tell your story (what structural format), these questions demand thoughtful answers. Your readers will look for them, and without them, you risk losing readers, or at the very least, disappointing them.

*Something else to think about...*

As you choose your protagonist's goal and conflict, it's important to consider both internal and external conflicts.

Why is this important?

Because it's your character's inner conflict that will most likely resonate with the reader, maybe even before the external problem.

An example would be a raging forest fire. Most of us haven't lived through something like this (although it's becoming more common). Although we can imagine the fear of getting caught by the fire, we can't really relate to it.

What do you do as the author?

No doubt you can paint a truly scary situation where embers have set the surrounding area on fire, or your character can feel the searing heat as they attempt to flee.

But if you add an internal conflict your protagonist must overcome to survive, you'll bring the reader into your character's consciousness and multiply the tension and the emotion they feel.

For instance, perhaps you've established that your main character had a life-altering car accident when she was young. Perhaps someone was killed, and she has been terrified to drive ever since. She just can't bring herself to get behind the wheel.

She's relaxing in a cabin alone, her family miles away in town, when lightning shatters a nearby tree and starts a fire. Within minutes, the fire quickly spreads in the dry underbrush, and before she can escape, it has surrounded the cabin. Only the road to town is partially clear.



Since we already know your protagonist hasn't driven in fifteen years and melts down emotionally every time she's faced with the prospect, we can already feel the tension build within her as she's faced with a difficult decision. Does she attempt to outrun the fire or get into the car and drive away?

The inner conflict she's forced to deal with coupled with the real-world life or death conflict of the fire will immediately connect your readers to your character because of her emotional turmoil. Readers will practically scream at the page, telling her to "Get into the damn car!"

Let's use LOTR as another example.

In this story, Frodo must take the ring to the fires of Mordor and destroy it. All through the story he is met with monsters and evil doers who want to stop him, but he perseveres.

Is that the story of LOTR, though? Frodo taking the ring to the fires of Mordor?

If so, it doesn't feel as if there is much depth to the story. The conflict he faces are obstacles to overcome. And like a video game, they could snuff him out at any point, and the story would be over.

But the real story of LOTR lies much deeper than the Orcs or Trolls that Frodo encounters.

It's centered in the fight between good versus evil, with the most unlikely hero, Frodo, overcoming his own shortcomings (lack of courage, naivete, lack of fighting skills) to succeed. It also portrays the growth of Frodo from a small, not-so-brave individual to a now wise champion of the light.

That's the real story. Frodo overcoming his internal conflicts.

Once again, both the external and internal conflicts add tension to the story and are the reasons we keep reading.

Remember! The conflict in any story arises when someone or something stands in the way of the main character achieving their goal. It is the emotion that arises *from* that conflict that binds the reader to the story.

So, yes, your job as an author is to tell your story in a way that draws your readers in to feel a part of the story. When you can do that, they will not only stick with you but become fans for life.



## **-WRITING A NOVEL-**

*“There’s always room for a story that can transport people to another place.”*

**— J.K. Rowling**

The sad truth is that 97% of the people who start a novel never finish it.

Why?

Frankly, there is a lot to know and numerous skills to master. It can be a long and frustrating journey.

And most people who think they could write a novel, but have never done it, don’t have a clue as to what is involved in crafting a story that runs upwards of 80-100,000 words. Things like exposition, pacing, character development, voice, setting, building conflict and tension, plot twists, scene structure, and more are enough to stop them in their tracks.

There’s also the writing aspect: avoiding passive verbs and sentences; understanding show-don’t tell; using similes and metaphors; incorporating the five senses; writing a hook, creating cliff hangers, drafting realistic dialogue, and using proper formatting.

Honestly, it’s enough to overwhelm anyone who doesn’t already love the craft of writing.

What I often see are many new writers who decide to just begin writing. After all, they probably think, “I’m good at sentence structure and grammar, so let’s get this show on the road.”

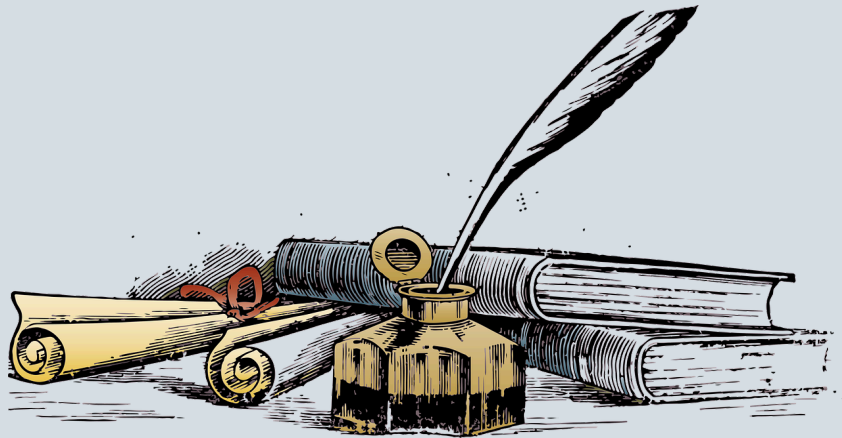
But then, they are faced with how to begin.

Should the story unfold chronologically or through flashbacks? Where should the story open? Who is the best character to tell the story?

Even if they get past the first few opening chapters, new writers often get stuck mid way through because they don’t know where the story is going. They haven’t thought through how to maintain interest in the story or how the problem presented in the beginning will be resolved. And so they give up.

It’s critical that authors understand what constitutes a good story. Otherwise, there are just too many decisions to make and too much blood, sweat, and tears left on the page before a book is finished.

*So, what makes a good story?*



Good stories must grab a reader’s attention and engage their emotions. And that requires the use of conflict and tension. (Sorry to be repetitive, but I want this to stay with you.)

After all, reading allows us to engage safely with new experiences, dangerous situations, and even alien worlds. Stories give us the opportunity to explore situations outside of our normal lives.

Unlike a travelogue through a new land, however, a story creates a deeper experience. Hopefully, one that we will remember long after the story ends.

Here are ten necessary elements to keep readers glued to the page:

- 1) A three-dimensional and engaging protagonist.
- 2) An interesting and equally engaging antagonist.
- 3) A strong narrative drive that forces your main character out of their comfort zone and forward through the story.
- 4) Strong internal and/or external conflict that creates obstacles the protagonist must overcome to achieve their goal.
- 5) Easily identifiable stakes (loss) your protagonist risks by taking this journey.
- 6) Burning questions about your lead character, antagonist, or world at large that must be answered by the end.
- 7) Unyielding pressure on your protagonist to succeed.
- 8) A story arc that leads to a climax (highpoint) and drops off to a believable and satisfying resolution.
- 9) Strong scene structure that keeps the story moving forward.
- 10) A strong, underlying reason for telling the story.

While I haven't explored all of the elements necessary in a good novel, there are plenty of resources out there for you to study on your own.

For now, think about what this short book has shown you in terms of the power you have in your hands when you choose to tell a story. Then, brainstorm with yourself how you can apply some of these things to your own compelling story idea.



## **-THE NEXT STEPS-**

*“Storytelling is ultimately a creative act of pattern recognition. Through characters, plot and setting, a writer creates places where previously invisible truths become visible. Or the storyteller posits a series of dots that the reader can connect.”*

**–Douglas Coupland**

Now that you have a better understanding of the concept and power of a story and your role as the author, it’s time to evaluate a) whether the idea you have is worth the time and effort to flesh out, and b) what additional information/training you might need to get you there.

If you are new to storytelling, I don’t recommend you sit down and begin writing. It’s too easy to get frustrated and lost in the process, which is complicated and demands a commitment to develop the skills necessary to pull it off.

Rather, I suggest you invest in some training and look for support in the writing community. There is a plethora of good writing books, online classes, webinars, and writing summits to help you learn what you need to know. I offer free writing tools on my website ([www.lynnbohmart-author.com](http://www.lynnbohmart-author.com)).

Hopefully, you'll also join groups of writers on Facebook and other places to give you the kind of personal support you'll need to keep going when you do get frustrated.

If you're chomping at the bit to get started, however, I'd recommend going to my website to purchase my micro-book "*From a Great Idea to a Great Story*," for only \$7.

This short eBook is based on a popular talk I've given at various writing summits and will walk you through 12 decisions to make before you sit down to write.

If you are thoughtful about your answers, it is designed to get you through your first draft without having to create a detailed outline or getting stuck halfway through.

By the end, you should have a good feeling as to whether your idea is worth polishing and how to move forward to get the information/skills necessary to achieve your goal.

***"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."***  
**— Maya Angelou**



## **-IN CONCLUSION-**

Writing a novel is no small feat, and the list of necessary storytelling components and techniques can quickly overwhelm you. And writing classes, books, and webinars are littered with students who have given up and abandoned their great ideas.

Don't be one of those.

You're here for a reason. You must have an idea you feel readers would enjoy. My guess is that you're probably right.

Give your idea a chance and take the next step on your storytelling journey with my help. Grab "*From a Great Idea to a Great Story*" by clicking below. For less than \$10, you can become a storyteller and maybe join the ranks of published authors.

*The world is waiting.*



## LYNN BOHART

### Author, Freelance Writer, Story Coach

Lynn Bohart has eleven paranormal mystery novels, two short story books, and three nonfiction books on Amazon. The first book in her popular Old Maids of Mercer Island series, *Inn Keeping with Murder*, remained in the top 100 ghost stories list on Amazon for ten months. She has also published several nonfiction books, including *Unconventional Marketing Ideas for Self-published Authors* and *Raise More Money Through Better Messaging* to help nonprofit professionals be more successful.

After retiring from a 35+ year career as a nonprofit executive, Ms. Bohart launched her own freelance writing company—Lil Dog Communications—and now writes for clients all over the world. She holds a master’s degree in theater, has taught ‘Crafting the Story’ through Green River College for 10+ years, and has also written for both Patch.com and the Renton Reporter. She has been a featured speaker at online writing summits.

Interested in some help with your book? Sometimes an extra pair of trained eyes can keep you on track with less frustration. Check out my coaching sessions and packages on my author website at [www.lynnbohart-author.com](http://www.lynnbohart-author.com)

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*Mass Murder*

*Murder in the Past Tense*

*The Essence of Murder*

***Old Maids of Mercer Island Series***

*Inn Keeping with Murder*

*A Candidate for Murder*

*A History of Murder*

*All Roads Lead to Murder*

*The Key to Murder*

*No Place Like Home for a Murder*

***The Unstoppables***

*Case of the Missing Will (YA book)*

***Stand-Alone Books***

*Grave Doubts*

*Stand-alone mystery novel*

*Your Worst Nightmare*

*Anthology of short stories*

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*When Hope is Not Enough*

*The Little Book of Unconventional Marketing Ideas*

*Raise More Money Through Better Messaging*

**Books on Writing**

**Before You Write**

**Show Don't Tell**

**From a Great Idea to a Great Story**

**SETTING: It's More Than a Location**

**Creating Characters Readers Can't Quit**

**How to Grab & Hold a Reader's Attention**

**Narrative Drive: The Engine That Fuels Your Story**

***Coming Soon: Creating Authentic Dialogue***