

FROM A GREAT IDEA TO A GREAT STORY



12 Decisions to Make Before You Sit Down to Write

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“Those who tell the stories rule the world.”

- Hopi American Indian proverb



To my fellow writers.

If you're reading this book, I assume that you are sitting on an idea for a fictional story you'd like to develop one day into a short story or novel. You might be new to writing and don't know where to begin. Maybe you have writing experience but have gotten stuck before as you worked your way through the various threads of a story attempting to get to the end.

Either way, I'm here to help.

As a writing instructor, I've had many students, friends, and colleagues say to me, "I have a great idea for a story." Getting from that idea to a finished product, however, is not an easy journey. And too often, people give up or don't even try.

Why?

Writing a compelling story isn't as easy as it looks. There are not only a lot of decisions to make along the way, but countless places to get lost, stuck in a quagmire, or stopped dead in your tracks. This makes it easy to get discouraged.

In case you don't know this, there's a difference between good writing and good storytelling. In fact, they are two different things. And yet, you need to weave them together to grab and hold a reader's attention.

Like any skill, each of these disciplines takes time to master. If you get overwhelmed or discouraged in the process, you might never find out if the idea you have tucked away in your back pocket is a winner.

With that said, this book is *not* designed to help you get published. There are a gazillion resources out there that deep dive into the needed writing and storytelling skills to help you do that.

The sole purpose of this short book is to help you develop an idea into a story format that you can polish later. In fact, this book is probably the shortest and most direct route to get you through the first draft without having to create a detailed outline or without quitting before you even begin. Once there, you can decide whether your idea has the potential you thought it had and whether you choose to continue down the writing/publishing path.

If you don't know where to go once you write 'the end,' I'll have some resources to help you take the next step.

So, roll up your sleeves, grab your laptop, and let's start.

Lynn

WHAT'S IN A STORY?



It's important to understand what a story is before you attempt to write one. I know you probably think you already know this since you've been listening to, reading, and watching stories on screen for most of your life.

But you may not be aware of what makes a *good* story or why they are so powerful. Knowing the answer will help you get to the end of your first draft a little bit easier.

I'm sure you've heard it said that the human brain is wired for stories. In fact, humans have used storytelling to teach important life lessons and pass information from generation to generation for thousands of years.

Did you know that research has shown stories have the power to implant themselves into your brain faster and more permanently than merely studying a list of facts and figures. It's true and the reason why stories have become so popular now in business, marketing, and TED talks.

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

Think about your own life. Has there been a scene in a book or movie that has stayed with you for a long time? I still remember how Stephen King described the smell of the vampire's coffin in *Salem's Lot*. I also remember jumping up to leave the sanctuary of my bedroom and join my roommates in another room when I read *The Shining* because it was so spooky. I didn't want to be alone.

Stories have the power to create images in our minds. Those images create emotion. And it's the emotion that imprints the story on our brain.

Stephen King is masterful at creating visual images that evoke emotions like fear, anxiety, and tension, which then implant the story in our brains.

I tell you this so that when you begin writing, you'll have this in the back of your mind. You have the power to do the same thing. It might not happen in the first draft. But never forget that every word you lay down has a lasting potential, depending on how you use it.

To be successful, you'll need to understand the difference between telling a story and telling a good story, one that hooks the reader from the beginning and holds their attention to the end. That's not so easy a task when most novels are 80,000+ words or more. For most first-time novelists, the length alone can stop them in their tracks.

If this is your first stab at authoring a novel, then finishing it can be a long slog. And because the journey is a long one, new writers (sometimes even experienced writers) give up because they get frustrated and lost in the process.

To rectify that, I am suggesting that you answer a list of specific questions right from the beginning, which will help you create a roadmap to follow. This is not a detailed outline. Like I said, it's a roadmap designed to help you keep moving forward and get to the end of the first draft. Once you're there, you can decide if you have the time, energy, and fortitude to go back and revise it.



PLOT VS STORY

Let's clarify the difference between 'plot' and 'story,' because they are not the same thing.

A story begins with an idea, concept, or general theme (good vs evil), and the loose interpretation of the event in its entirety.

Think about the last time someone said to you, "Hey, let me tell you what happened to me on the way to the store today."

What they end up telling you is a loosely constructed sequence of events. But it does not contain a plot.

The plot is how you *choose* to tell the story.

You take your gem of an idea you have and then deliberately arrange characters and time into an organized sequence of events that takes the reader on a journey, where your lead character (the protagonist) battles some sort of conflict, overcomes obstacles, and endures the consequences of his/her decisions until there is a resolution, satisfactory or not.

And it is the plot which often stumps new writers. They believe they have a great idea but have no idea how to organize the necessary story elements into a satisfactory plot.

Part of the problem is that there are so many ways to tell a story.

Consider *Gone Girl* written by Gillian Flynn, told through alternating points-of-view (wife and husband). The movie *Princess Bride*, on the other hand, plays out as a fairytale read to a young boy. The story alternates back and forth between real time and the grandfather as he reads the story to his grandson. Two totally different ways to tell a story.

I write murder mysteries and often begin with the murder. In fact, in the second book in my Detective Giorgio Savatori mysteries, *Murder in the Past Tense*, I began with a short chapter forty years in the past showing two men dumping the body of a young girl into an abandoned well. In chapter two, the story switches immediately to the present time when excavators find the girl's body.

There are a million ways to 'tell' a story, and no one way is necessarily better than the other. As the author, it's your job to decide the best way to tell your story.

The good news is that to initially map your story out you don't need to make those monumental decisions. Sometimes it's good to just get the story laid out in chronological time to see if it has lasting power. Then, you can look at the various components of the story and decide if there is a better and/or more creative way to tell it.

Now that we have a mutual understanding of what a story is and what makes a story good, let's answer the 12 critical questions that will keep you grounded and moving forward as you write your first draft.

12 CRITICAL DECISIONS



As you work through these 12 questions, you're going to brainstorm with yourself (and others you trust) to make some important choices. It doesn't mean you can't change your mind on certain points as you lay out your story, but it will make a significant difference in your 'staying' power if you've thought these through before you begin.

1) WHAT IS THE PREMISE OF YOUR STORY?

The first thing you'll do is to flesh out the idea you have into a story premise that makes sense and will serve as your foundation as you move forward. If you can't do this from the get-go, you will likely get stuck in your storytelling.

According to StudioBinder: *A premise is the central concept of a story expressed as simply as possible.*

A premise does not answer every question. *It does, however, present the main ideas of a story, the central character, their motivation/goal, the world they live in, and the obstacles they face before reaching an endpoint.*

Yes, you read that right. Your story premise should at least suggest an endpoint. This is critical to keep you from getting lost along the way. Let's face it, when you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there, right?



You don't want any road, though. You want the right road that will roll out your story exactly how you want.

It's when writers get to a fork in the road and don't know which direction to take that they often get lost. I don't want that to be you.

So, let's figure out what your story premise is.

Let's say your idea is that a man (Jake) is having an affair with a married woman. After leaving the hotel where the two have been together, Jake gets into a horrible car accident with the woman's husband, who he's never met. To make matters worse, the husband and wife share different last names, so neither man knows who the other man is.

Interesting idea. But not yet a story. And there isn't quite enough there for a story premise.

Creating a premise forces you to capsulize your story into a couple of sentences. Here are two examples:

- *The Godfather*: The youngest son of a Mafia family takes revenge on the men who shot his father and becomes the new Godfather.
- *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.

BASIC PREMISE FORMULA

Not all authors will write the premise for *The Wizard of Oz* exactly like this, but this will give you a decent formula/path to craft your own.

Something or someone constrains or inhibits your protagonist (Miss Gulch threatens to have Toto removed from Dorothy's care), **which triggers an action** (Dorothy runs away with Toto), **which then puts them in direct conflict with something or someone** (being carried away by the tornado and stuck in Oz). **An opposing force** (Wicked Witch of the West) **pushes your character to do something dramatic** (kill the witch) **before the story dynamics change, and the world returns to a new normal** (Dorothy returns to the farm in Kansas).

Let's take our idea about the accident and see if we can create a reasonable story premise.

When a man who is having an affair with a married woman puts her husband in a wheelchair for life because of a car accident, he is forced to not only face the guilt of having caused the accident but potentially losing the woman he loves.

There. We have fleshed out the idea a bit more to include the major conflict and a possible endpoint.

Take several minutes now and see if you can create a story premise that you're happy with.

2) WHO IS YOUR PROTAGONIST?

You might already have an idea of who your main character will be, but I encourage you to do more than just give him/her a name and a few defining characteristics. The more you 'know' about your character, the easier it will be to chart their path through the story and give them reasons for why they do what they do.

Remember that it's emotion that imprints the story on our brain, so flesh out your character, adding in more than their strengths and weaknesses. Include quirks, things they love or might fear, and personality traits such as an inability to say thank you or admit that they're wrong.

One of the biggest things you need to know about your protagonist is how they will meet and overcome the challenges they face. You won't need a six-page character trait chart to begin, but starting with a cardboard cutout of a character will most likely let you down when your character is under tension to perform, even in the first draft.

3) WHERE WILL YOUR STORY BE SET?

The overall setting for your story can be a key component and serve many roles, including as the backdrop or frame for the action in your story. The setting can also serve as the major conflict, as it does in the movie *The Mountain Between Us*, where the lead characters must survive a harsh winter in the mountains after a plane crash.

Something like a raging forest fire, erupting volcano, or tsunami could be the inciting incident that forces your characters into action. And, depending on your story, the setting could even become a secondary character. In *Mass Murder*, the first book of my Detective Salvatori books, a big Catholic monastery hides clues to the murder, forcing the detective to find ways to interpret its secrets. In that way it becomes an opposing figure in the book.

How you utilize your setting is a decision you should make up front. Most of the action in *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) takes place in multiple places within Middle Earth. But Tolkien purposely allows us to see the Shire, home to the Hobbits, before Frodo is forced to leave it. Even though only small parts of the story take place in the Shire, we know and understand what Frodo desires most, because more than anything else he wants to go home.

While settings often change throughout the story, decide first on the overall, main setting for your story and what role it will play as your story unfolds. Then, like Tolkien, decide if there are other settings that could play a strong role.

4) WHAT IS YOUR LEAD CHARACTER CHASING AND WHY?



The most critical component in any story is what the lead character is chasing in the story and why. What overwhelming desire or driving need pushes them forward?

As I mentioned, Frodo's driving need in LOTR is the desire to go home. In the movie *Die Hard* with Bruce Willis, John McClane is a police officer and takes on a group of terrorists, something he would do as a cop.

However, McClane's wife is held hostage along with a couple hundred other people, so his driving narrative becomes more than just stopping the terrorists. It's saving his wife.

Now, think about your main character. Is their driving need...

1. To achieve an important personal goal?
2. To overcome a personal shortcoming?

3. To stop someone from doing something?
4. To hide something?
5. To escape or survive something?
6. To retrieve/find something that will change the trajectory of the story?

Once again, in *LOTR*, Frodo wants to go home more than anything else. But he knows that if the ring is not destroyed, the Shire may not survive, and he won't have a home to go to. This drives him forward, past obstacle after obstacle, until the ring itself nearly destroys him in the process.

Sam, on the other hand, Frodo's constant companion, is driven forward in the story to protect Frodo. He has no other reason to be there, and that driving need dominates every decision he makes.

Figure out what overpowering need or desire your lead character is chasing and why, and you'll have a much easier time in reaching your endpoint.

5) WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY OF THE PROTAGONIST GETTING WHAT THEY WANT?

The only reason we read a story is to follow the main character(s) as he conquers conflict. The conflict is what gives the story depth and meaning.



Until the conflict is revealed, the reader will search for why the story was written in the first place. And if you wait too long to reveal the conflict, readers might give up.

There are three broad categories that most conflicts will fall within.

Man vs Man (entity) (*Silence of the Lambs, War of the Worlds, ET*)

Man vs Himself (*Castaway, The King's Speech*)

Man vs God/Nature/Supernatural (*Outbreak, The Perfect Storm*)

Most likely your conflict will fall into one of these broad categories. As you clarify your story's main conflict, however, be sure to consider whether the conflict is external or internal.

In *The King's Speech*, Colin Firth's character, King George VI, struggles with his inability to speak without stuttering. That's an internal conflict. An external conflict for that story is the date on which the king must make a radio address to the entire nation. He needs to deliver the speech in a way that inspires his subjects during wartime. That date puts tremendous pressure on him to master his ability to speak properly so that he doesn't make a fool of himself and can be seen as a confident ruler.

Please don't gloss over conflict. Conflict creates tension in a story and is one of the main things that will keep readers glued to the page.

6) WHO OR WHAT IS YOUR ANTAGONIST?



Depending on your story, the antagonist does not have to be another person. It can be a group of people (the Illuminati in Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons*) or the

presiding culture (the racist mindset of middle-class women in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1960s in *The Help*), or a spreading deadly virus (*Outbreak*).

Think carefully about who or what your antagonist will be and then make the conflict worthy of your protagonist. Cliché antagonists are as boring as cliché protagonists and do little to inspire readers to keep reading. In fact, some of the best antagonists are people who don't know they are the antagonist, because whatever they're doing to stop or hinder the main character is, in their mind, the right thing to do.

Even if your antagonist is a paid assassin, make that individual interesting or even sympathetic. Consider the movie *Three Days of the Condor* starring Robert Redford. The assassin in the film, played by Max von Sydow, does his job and then goes home to have a bourbon and listen to classical music. That little bit of character information makes him feel so normal.

7) ARE THERE SUPPORTING CHARACTERS THAT MIGHT HELP TO AMPLIFY YOUR STORY?

Consider this carefully. Other characters in your story can play important roles, such as providing much-needed comic relief, the challenge that forces your main character to do something they don't want to do, a change in the trajectory of the story, or even to reveal important aspects of your main character.

In LOTR, Samwise Gamgee sticks to Frodo like glue, inspiring him, rescuing him, even stepping in for him in the end when Frodo can't bring himself to destroy the ring. The Riley Poole character in the *National Treasure* movies serves as the comic relief, as does the character of Jonathon in the movie franchise *The Mummy*. And, of course, Sherlock Holmes would be nothing without Dr. Watson, who often helps us make sense of Mr. Holmes.

In my book *Mass Murder*, Detective Giorgio Salvatori's brother Rocky helps to provide insight into Giorgio's character because he knows him so well. Additionally, Rocky's excessive drinking allowed me to set up scenes where Giorgio could play 'big brother,' helping to get him into rehab.

In my Old Maids of Mercer Island books, the main character Julia is flanked by three best friends that do everything from serving up humor to challenging Julia's decisions to adding tension and excitement in the story.

When you decide on your supporting characters, do yourself a favor and immediately think about ways you can use them to deepen your storyline. Otherwise, you should ask yourself why they're even there.

8) WHAT WILL BE YOUR NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW (POV)?

Who is telling your story? Is it told from your main character's point of view? Is it told through the eyes of another character? Once you decide who your narrator is, you'll need to pinpoint your POV.

The three main POVs are:

1st person present/past

Told as if the story is happening to that character. The story can unfold in present or past tense, using the pronouns I, me, or my.

3rd person limited

Third person allows you to see the story unfold through a single character's eyes. The difference is in distance. With first person POV, you are inside the character's mind. There is no distance. In third person, the character is acting more like a camera through which you are watching the story unfold. You'll use the pronouns he, she, they.

Omniscient

This is the God perspective, which means the narrator can enter any character's POV, whether human or animal. In this way, you can know what many characters are thinking or feeling.

Choosing your POV is a major component in how you tell your story. If you're unclear what the difference is and how POV impacts a story, go back to a few of your favorite books and identify what the POV is and how it's used.

Remember! POV is the perspective from which the story is told. POV in *The Lord of the Rings* is omniscient, meaning that we see the story unfold from a variety of character perspectives. *Hunger Games* is written in first person present tense, so we are up close and personal with Katniss as she struggles through the game.

Third person limited POV is probably the most popular, which means we can only see what that character sees as the story unfolds. I wrote my Detective Giorgio Salvatori series in third person. Then I switched to first person past tense for my

Old Maids of Mercer Island books, as if the main character is relating the story to an audience. Personal story: I had become adept at writing in the third person, so that when I changed POV for the Old Maids series, my writing initially felt very clunky. I momentarily switched back to third person limited, but didn't like it as well. It just wasn't right for that story. So, I went back to first person. But to make it work, I had to practice.

This will be one of the most important choices you will make, so study up on it. Even try out the different POVs so that you can make an educated decision.

9) WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO TELL YOUR STORY AND HOW WILL THE STORY OPEN?

I mentioned earlier that there are a multitude of ways to roll out a story. Chronologically? Using flashbacks? Through letters? Through a secondary character's POV. Using alternate POVs for each chapter.

The point is to think about what it is you are trying to accomplish or emphasize in *your* story.

Part of this process includes deciding how to open your story. As a mystery writer, I often open with a dead body or the murder in progress. Look at Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, and you'll find the curator of the Louvre in Paris chased through the museum by an albino with a gun. The second chapter immediately switches POV to that of Robert Langdon, the protagonist.

Let's look at different ways to open a story. For instance, perhaps you're telling the story of how a brutal rape in college nearly destroyed a young woman's life and how she rose above the pain, fear, and humiliation to become a mentor and business superstar. What's the best way to open that story?

Here are examples. Consider the benefits of each choice:

- Begin with her childhood, showing how her family loved and cared for her. This is a story of contrasts—between the idyllic life of her childhood and the horror of what was to come. It can emphasize what the woman has lost.
- Begin with her in college, on the cusp of graduating and getting married soon. This shows the pain of having a promising future ripped

away from her. It could also show the difficulty of navigating a newly defined relationship with her fiancé.

- Begin with the assault and the immediate aftermath, showing the absolute horror her world has become, interweaving other parts of her life as flashbacks. This choice shows the pounding brutality of the rape, giving the reader real insight into the cacophony of emotions a woman goes through and how she might find her way out.
- Begin with her as an older woman who has lived through the pain of the attack and now faces a younger woman who, like herself, suffers from a brutal attack and is thinking of ending her life. This choice is more reflective, allowing the story to unfold (sometimes gently, sometimes not so gently) as she helps the younger woman navigate the same path forward that she did.

Your choice depends on what you want the focus to be or what emotion you're going for in the story. Think about what will grab a reader's attention, while drawing them into the story.

Personal note: This is one decision you can make later in case you get stuck on how you want to open the story. Get your first draft done and then go back and ask yourself if there is a more dramatic way to begin. When writing *Murder in the Past Tense*, I initially opened the book when the excavator's crew found the skeleton of the teenage girl at the bottom of the old well. Later, I decided to add a short opening chapter from forty years earlier when the girl is killed on prom night. That not only served as a better hook for readers, but allowed me to weave in important clues readers would recognize later in the story.

10) WHAT IS THE TRIGGER THAT TAKES YOUR CHARACTER FROM STASIS TO THE NEED TO MOVE FORWARD? (The Inciting Moment)

The inciting moment (or trigger) in a story is when something happens to force your protagonist to make a choice and then move in a different direction.

In mysteries, the inciting moment is usually the murder itself. As I said before, that can happen on the first page or a couple of chapters in. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the trigger happens when Dorothy runs away from home. If she had stayed put, she

would have made it into the storm cellar with everyone else when the tornado hit, and there would have been no trip to Oz.

In *The King's Speech*, the future King George VI is already using a speech therapist to help him with his stutter. However, when George's brother abdicates the throne, thrusting George into the top position, he must make a speech to the entire nation as Britain enters the war with Germany. That trigger forces George to master his stutter or risk losing the confidence of an entire nation.

Decide what one thing takes place to force your protagonist to make a decision that will take him/her in a new and potentially difficult or dangerous direction.

11) WHAT ARE THREE OBSTACLES YOUR PROTAGONIST MUST OVERCOME BEFORE THE CLIMAX?

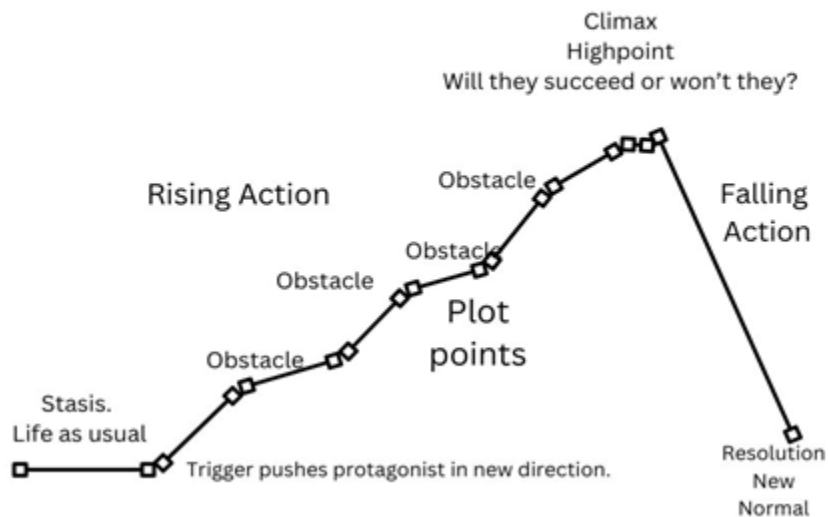
I am purposely not delving much into story structure here because it can get complicated (there are multiple types of structure), and there are many resources out there for you to study. From *Save the Cat's* story beats to the 8-point story structure, you can access multiple books, online classes, and articles written to help you.

Regardless of how you structure your story, however, you will need to create obstacles for your lead character to overcome. These obstacles must grow in intensity before the story reaches the high point or climax.

If you make it too easy for your protagonist to get what they want, you will disappoint your reader. Once again, look to *The Lord of the Rings* for a masterclass in creating obstacles for your protagonist to overcome.

The graphic below shows four obstacles leading to the climax. I would say that four is the minimum for a full-length novel, but I suggest you begin with three. You can always go back once your first draft is complete and add things that will ratchet up the tension and put more pressure on your lead character.

Simple plot structure



12) HOW WILL YOU END THE STORY? WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR PROTAGONIST?

Ask yourself how you want your readers to feel at the end. Happy. Relieved. Sad. Horrified. In other words, what's the emotional payoff?

At the end of *LOTR*, Tolkien could have ended it by having the Hobbits merely return to the Shire, relieved and ready to resume their lives. Instead, he spends time giving us insight into how the adventure has dramatically changed Frodo, so much so that he leaves the Shire to go live with the elves.

The ending is sad and nostalgic at the same time.

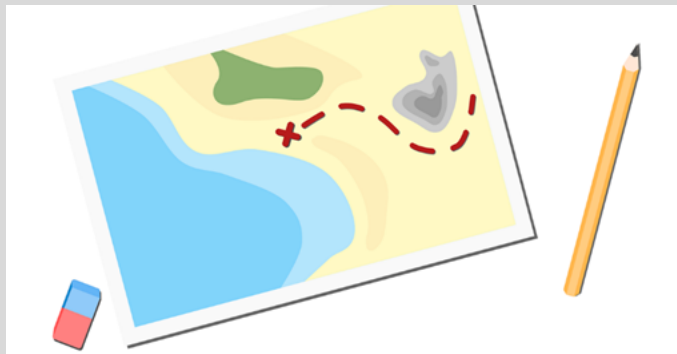
Clarify how you want your readers to feel. In my Old Maids mysteries, I often go for a bit of humor because humor plays such a strong role in my lead character. In my Detective Giorgio Salvatori series, I go for the deep satisfaction of finding justice, along with an emotional connection to the lead character because sometimes he seems distant.

As an example, in *The Essence of Murder*, a pit bull that has escaped a dog fighting ring attaches herself to Giorgio and ends up dying at the end of the book saving his life. It's an incredibly sad moment. But all my books involve the paranormal, and

since this series includes the ghost of Christian Maynard, a young boy who often helps Giorgio, I added a final scene where Giorgio sees Shadow across the street standing with Christian. Giorgio immediately feels Shadow is in good company, and readers feel a sense of relief. The sadness is lifted.

As you think about your ending, consider how your story has changed your lead character and what the new normal is that he/she faces. Then clarify how you want your readers to feel and write toward that.

13) HOW SERIOUS ARE YOU ABOUT FINISHING THIS NOVEL?



I promised only 12 questions, so think of this as a bonus question, especially because it's possibly the most important one.

I've seen too many of my students bail the moment they realize how much work it takes to write a short story or a novel.

These 12 questions don't cover even half of what you'll need to learn and/or focus on as you polish your story. You'll need to become proficient in pacing, exposition, dialogue, show-don't tell, passive vs active sentences, and much more.

So, ask yourself if you're really prepared to spend the time and effort in at least getting the first draft done. Because I honestly believe if you flesh out these 12 questions, it will give you enough of a roadmap to finish the first draft.

At that point, you can evaluate what you've achieved and whether the story is worth pursuing further, even to the publishing phase.

FINAL THOUGHTS



I encourage you to take the time over the next couple of days or couple of weeks to thoughtfully answer these 12 questions. It doesn't mean you can't change your mind later, but this will get you moving in the right direction.

As you work through the questions, try out your answers on friends and family members. Do some brainstorming to clarify your ideas. When you're done, you should have the makings of that roadmap I mentioned to finish your first draft.

Then, sit down to write.

If you do get stuck, go back to your questions to identify what answers you might tweak to get you going again.

Don't give up. You can do this. And you might just have a story that the world is waiting to read.

Thank you so much for sticking with me. I wish you the best of luck. Let me know if you have any questions or might be interested in book coaching.

You can email me at Lildog67@icloud.com or contact me through either one of my websites. Be sure to mention this little eBook so that I know your frame of reference.

Happy writing!

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