

1. Have a purpose to your writing – a ‘theme’ or ‘moral message’

Readers like writing that has some kind of message ‘behind it’. This needn’t be anything serious or important – but it will help you structure the writing better. Each *sentence* then becomes a slowly developing *idea*. Of course, you need more than this ‘message’ – you need interest; and to create interest, you need tension. The *engaging* and *entertaining* aspect of a story is the role of the **plot** (which although people often use interchangeably with *story* – it isn’t)



And you’re in luck: what you write doesn’t have to be about something that really happened to you. If you are blessed with a vivid imagination you can... make it up. But most writers take at least the germ of what they write **about from an experience of their own lives** – or from an experience they heard or read about that happened to others. They start with a brief **snippet** or **anecdote** from life and build from it a short story.

- ▶ How can you build up a whole story from a mere snippet?

- ▶ You need to do what you do when we tell your friends of an event in your life. This ‘event’ is the heart of the story – and you will have told lots of these in your time. Real-life stories begin in the mind of the teller (you and me...) when something interesting occurs in life. This is often the **‘climax’** of the eventual story. From this ‘climax’, you need to work backwards to create the full story. Here’s an example:
 - *Imagine you are walking home and you see a fire. Someone is screaming but is, happily, eventually saved. You would tell your friends about this for sure; but you wouldn’t do so without some kind of explanation of the ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ and a build up to the ‘climax’, before finishing with a ‘resolution’, or rounding off of the story. This is how we all tell of events we experience; it’s also a good way to help plan your written story.*
- ▶ You need an **exposition**. This tells *sufficient of the plot to help the reader get ‘into’ the story*. It needs **setting** and **character**.
- ▶ You need to describe the setting in a way that is **convincing** but which also creates a useful sense of **mood**, one that will help the reader ‘feel’ involved with events being narrated.
- ▶ You need to introduce a bare minimum of **characters** – *one* only will be central to the story.
- ▶ You need to create a **conflict** that will build to the **climax**.
- ▶ You need to **hold back some information** in order to develop the **tension** the **plot** needs.
- ▶ You need to build up to the **climax**. This will be near the end of your story. This is the ‘seed’ of what started off the whole story in your mind.
- ▶ You need to give a short **resolution** when “normality” returns.
- ▶ You need to **show** key aspects rather than merely **tell** about them.
 - ▶ *This is because “showing” (using vivid “sensory” description – sights, sounds, smells, etc., along with metaphors, similes and personification) will help the reader feel as if they are “there”.*
 - ▶ *Think about it: if you tell your readers, “It was truly scary..!” they might well say to themselves, “Show me the scariness – let me decide; let me feel scared!”.*

On the surface you might write about nothing more exciting than a trip to McDonald’s for a burger; but **at a deeper level**, you’ll be expressing how you overcome **the sheer boredom of standing in yet another queue** – to you, life and queuing seem almost to go together! Or you might write about overcoming the sheer delight of being tempted by all that’s on offer in the burger bar – despite knowing your waist line is already spilling over the top of your jeans; or you might take a trip down memory lane and recount a tale of your childhood exploits: that tree you had to climb to become a member of the “gang”, or the hole you dug in the beach that just grew and grew till it almost swallowed you whole; or having to help dad push the car when the battery went flat; or... or... or...

Whatever you write about make it something you “conquered”: a fear, a trouble, a fight against the odds, an idea, a system, a person.... Something your reader will enjoy reading because they too are taken down memory lane, or they, too, are helped to see how such an obstacle can be overcome.

- ▶ *Always write about something that captures your reader’s interest and holds on to it – because they can imagine themselves facing the same challenges or enjoying the same delight and fun.*

Most people enjoy reading about the important things in life: growing up, illness, danger, fear, loneliness, friendship and so on; and most readers enjoy writing that creates a sense of excitement, tension, fear or wonder and maybe

because we are a little nosy or like to compare ourselves, we enjoy reading about interesting characters that is, we enjoy hearing what happens to others and how they overcome difficulties life brings their way.

BE PREPARED!

Before you put pen to paper, decide on the key aspects of your story: **who**, **where** and **when** – and its **theme**. Plan the **sequence** to give events a connected 'beginning-middle-end', with each idea adding to what came before.

- ▶ **Are you preparing for an exam? Go into the exam room with four complete short stories in your head – you're almost bound to be able to use one or adapt it to suit whatever the exam question asks.**

DIALOGUE

Characters will always have to speak in a story and when they do, you show this by giving each speaker a new line and placing all they say inside speech marks, like this:

"It won't be long now," thought Harry. "All hell is about to break loose."
Almost before he had finished saying those words, a voice boomed over the intercom, "All units to Precinct 5 all units to precinct 5!"
It had begun.

The key to gaining marks from **dialogue** – as with **description** – if it adds nothing useful to the story, **leave it out!**

A GRADE A* SHORT STORY

Cities on a Saturday are often such interesting places: full of people, full of cars, full of the hustle and bustle of modern life. And Leicester is no exception. I was born there so I can speak from personal experience. But something was different last Saturday. There were more people, more cars and much more hustle and bustle than I had ever seen or heard before.

I'd gone into town with my mates that Saturday - as we always do. We caught the same No. 149 bus from Oadby – that's a small town south of Leicester. Nothing unusual in that. The journey was as predictable as ever – I'm so used to it. I can't even remember getting on the bus; but I can certainly remember getting off...

By the time we did get off we were all pretty fed up. We were as hot as the proverbial Sahara and as bothered as a bumble bee trapped in a beer bottle. The usual breezy fifteen minutes' journey had taken us over an hour. We hadn't noticed to start with. You know what it's like chatting about this and that. And Big Brother had been pretty crazy last night, so that had kept us more than a little occupied. But you know what it's like on a hot, packed bus crawling through traffic that's more like thick porridge than jam? Pretty awful once you realise what's happening. And what was happening? Not a lot.

Looking out onto the London Road to see what was going on – that was after wiping away mist as thick as a cotton sheet from the steamed up window – it looked as if someone had said to the whole of Leicestershire, "Get yourself to Leicester today; there's a million quid going free under the Clock Tower!" The road looked more like the packed car park at an N.E.C. pop concert than a city road; and as for the numbers of people...

Anyway to cut a long story short, we did eventually climb – well tumble – off the bus. We'd have headed straight for our usual glass of cool Coke at Brucciani's but we were more interested to know what was going on. The crowds were incredible. It was as if every nation, every age, everybody was there! The noise hit us next – shouting, screaming, oohing and aahing. Then something else struck me. Was it my imagination, or was it darker than usual? There was something about the quality of the light that made us all stop and look at each other. We didn't have to ask the question, for we knew we all had the same thought in our minds. There was something odd about the sky... You know that feeling you have just before a really bad thunder storm, when the sky turns inky and the air feels oddly cool and fresh? Well the sky had certainly turned inky, but there was no freshness. It was weird.

It was then that we noticed that what we had thought was a grey cloud was moving and swirling a whole lot more quickly than any cloud we had ever seen move before. We suddenly realised, it wasn't a cloud. It was smoke: thick, dark, haunting smoke. There was a fire somewhere – surely a huge fire. And everyone was pushing and shoving to get a closer look at what was going on.

As we managed to push further through the crowd the air began to feel electric. Ahead the piercing flick, flick, flick of blue lights were visible all around and we felt that strange mixture of wanting to see and yet being too frightened to look. And there it was – the new Highcross shopping centre. Ablaze. The smoke was like a wall of solid black, and the action unbelievable – fire-fighters, hoses, water jets and a crowd of faces looking on just like they would at a fireworks display, just looking and wondering.

If you saw the news last night, you'll know the rest. Not a lot to tell you if you missed it. Unbelievably, no one was badly hurt and the fire-fighters had it all under control pretty quickly. By the time I got that Coke, I can tell you it was cooler and longer than any Coke I'd had before or I've had since. But we didn't get it from Brucciani's. Their Highcross branch wasn't selling Coke any longer...