

HOW TO BUILD A **STORY**

Five Tips for Writing a Short Story

1 Make sure your story idea isn't too big.

Want to write about aliens invading the northern hemisphere? Great! Except for the fact that the northern hemisphere is ginormous. No doubt you could come up with an action-packed opening scene (see Tip #2), but after that, chances are high you'd run out of steam. Let's narrow down the scope of your story. Instead of writing about the Northern Hemisphere under attack by aliens, maybe you could focus on one kid and how his life is affected by the alien invasion. And to focus your story even more, let's give this kid a really specific problem to solve (more on problems in Tip #3). Maybe there's one pesky alien trying to bust through the backdoor—how does the kid stop Mr. Alien from getting in?

2 Start your story with an action scene.

What do I mean by action scene? It's a scene where something dramatic happens, with very little explanation for where it's happening, why it's happening, who's making it happen or who it's happening to. For example ...

Jenny pushed into the woods behind her house, tripping over vines and pushing branches out of her way as she stumbled down the overgrown path. Brambles scratched at her arms and tiny insects buzzed around her ears. Only a little ways more to go and she'd be on the other side. Faster, faster, she urged herself on, but with her next step, her foot struck a rock, and Jenny went flying into the trunk of a tree.

When she woke up, she had no idea where—or who—she was.



3 Give your main character a problem he or she has to solve.

It's a rare story where the main character's not in a jam of one kind or another. Sometimes it's life-threatening (Sydney is camping alone in the mountains when a blizzard blows in—how will she survive?), sometimes it's silly (Jackson has pledged to eat a hundred hot dogs in under two minutes to win big money for charity—but he really hates hot dogs!), but whatever kind of problem your protagonist has, it's got to be solved by the end of the story. Don't make it easy—easily-solved problems make for boring stories

4 Think about your story in terms of scenes.

Scenes are the building blocks of your story—of any story really. A scene is a unit of action that takes place in a specific location and time. In every scene, something has to happen, and something has to change.

Helena is walking down the street when a dog runs out into the road and gets hit by a car. She runs over to the dog, who is stunned, but okay. She helps him get back on the sidewalk, tells him to go home, but the dog follows her. Helena keeps looking back, and the dog keeps giving her hopeful looks. Finally, she sighs, picks the dog up, and carries him back to her house. When she opens the front door, she calls out, "Mom, you know how we've been talking about getting a puppy?"

Cut! When you think of your story in terms of scenes, it helps you move the story forward (which every scene should do). All you have to do is ask yourself, "What happens next? What changes as a result?"

5 Always remember that your protagonist is on a journey.

The journey starts with a problem and ends with the problem being solved. What's the first thing that your protagonist does to try to solve the problem? When that doesn't work (and it shouldn't work or else your story is over), what's the next thing he tries? And then third thing? What gets in his way of solving his problem? What final obstacle does he have to overcome to finally win the day? Write your story one scene at a time, one obstacle at a time, and you can make it through the horrible middle part and emerge victorious!

written by **Frances O'Roark Dowell**

About the Author

While Frances is best known for her "beloved books for tweens and teenagers" (New York Times Sunday Book Review), in 2020 she formalized more than a decade working privately with writing students with the publication of a writing guide for young writers. Kirkus Reviews calls **How to Build a Story, or The Big What If...** "fresh, interesting, and unique" while Booklist says it is "inspirational for budding authors." Frances lives in Durham, North Carolina, her husband, two sons, and a dog named Travis.

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