

# Elements of a Story: 12 Central Foundations of Storytelling

Stories are gloriously, beautifully unique; there are as many of them in our world as there have been storytellers, multifaceted individuals each with their own perspective and their own messages to share. Although many stories follow [classic story archetypes](#), each one is its own distinctive act of creation.

But even though every story is one of a kind, we can still see patterns in what makes our favourite stories engaging and memorable. These patterns are where we find our elements of a story.

## What are the elements of a story?

The elements of a story are the core building blocks that every great work of fiction will have, whether it's a short story or a series of novels, a literary coming-of-age saga or a science fiction epic. It's these literary building blocks that make us care deeply for the characters, their journey, and the lessons they learn along the way. They're what make us take the journey and learn those lessons right beside them.

Let's take a look at the elements of a story you'll see again and again in the stories we love, as well as how to use those story elements when writing your own original tales.

## 12 elements of a story you'll find in all great literature

All great stories can be broken down into twelve essential elements. Here's a closer look at each one and at why they're so integral to crafting a powerful story.

### A protagonist

A protagonist is the central character within a work of literature. They are the beating heart to which all roads lead, the one whose choices power the events of the plot. In a great story, all other literary elements and devices including the antagonist (which we'll look at next), the supporting characters, the setting, and the rising conflicts will in some way support the protagonist's journey.

These things might help them along their way, they might become an obstacle that the protagonist needs to overcome, they might function to shape who the protagonist is and their relationship with the world around them, or they might serve to challenge that relationship and teach the protagonist a new perspective. No matter what, everything in your story should in some way be connected to your central guiding character.

A great protagonist is particularly important because they are the lens through which your reader will see the world of your story. It's through their triumphs, losses, joys, passions, and agonies that we live within your story world and come away from it slightly changed — with a new perspective or a new understanding about what it is to be human.

### **An antagonist**

In order for your protagonist to go on a journey — which may of course be a physical journey, or it may be an emotional or spiritual one — they need someone or something to challenge them into action. An antagonist is a character whose goals stand in direct opposition with the goals of the protagonist. They want something, and the protagonist wants something, and those desires cannot exist within the world at the same time.

Most classic villains are antagonists, but an antagonist can also be an otherwise good person whose circumstances have put them in conflict with the central character. They may even be a friend or loved one who has made different choices or has a contrasting view of the world. This could be someone like a parent who can't agree with their child's plans for the future, even though the choices they make come from a place of love.

An antagonist can also be more than one person — for instance, a collective group, society, government, or culture. The protagonist's primary conflict could also be something impersonal, such as a force of nature; or it might even come from within, like a mental illness or a major weakness such as addiction. [Conflict can come in many forms](#). What matters is that the trajectory the antagonist or conflicting force takes is something that forces the protagonist into action and carries the plot forward.

### **Setting**

Setting is the time and place where your story happens. It is also the effects that the time and place has on the characters in your story: their cultural environment, their relationship with the natural world, the way they speak, what sort of social and political events are

happening around them that affect the way they see the world. All of these things are a part of setting, and a part of how your characters formed as people.

In a story, setting can play a major role in the action of the plot. If, for example, your story is a horror that takes place in a haunted house, the setting becomes the crux of every choice that your characters make. If your story takes place during the gilded prohibition age of the American 1920s, the time period and its predominant cultural values will play a huge part in how your characters react to the world around them, what their limitations are, and the way in which they challenge those limitations.

Choosing the right setting and bringing it to life gives your story a whole new dynamic. It is where character, choice, and action all begin.

### **Perspective**

Closely tied to setting is perspective, or the way your characters see the world. Every one of us brings our own unique filter to the relationship we have with the world around us, built out of our cultural biases, class, social interactions, level of education, upbringing, belief system, and experiences.

If you're writing a work of mediaeval historical fiction, for example, the perspective from which the story is told can vary enormously from one character to another. You could show your reader the same single scene from the point of view of a queen, a servant, a young child, a landowner, and a knight and produce a very different story within every single one.

When used correctly, perspective is a marvellous literary device for bringing depth and suspense into your story. It's through clever use of perspective that we get things like the unreliable narrator, in which the writer deliberately misleads the reader's expectations by writing from a skewed or uninformed point of view.

### **Something to fight for**

When we looked at protagonists and antagonists we saw how these two central characters always have opposing goals. When forming the core of your story, it's essential that your characters have something to work towards. These are the things that will power your story from beginning to end.

This might be a tangible objective, such as the quest for the holy grail; or it might be something more internal, like repairing a damaged relationship. In a good story, every single character should want something or be striving for something all the time — however, it's the goal of your protagonist that is going to drive the story forward. Their choices, the consequences of those choices, and the protagonist's reaction to those consequences will all be connected to their primary objective: the thing they have been fighting to reach all along.

### **Something to lose**

Here's where your story begins to develop its layers. Your protagonist needs something to fight for, but they also need something that's at risk. Something they stand to lose if they fail in reaching their goal.

Let's say your main character really, really wants a new car. That's an objective — something to fight for. But what happens if he doesn't get it? Probably not much. He'll have to keep taking the bus to work, and he might sigh longingly as he passes by the auto dealer on his way home, but life will more or less go on the way it always has. That's not enough to create a compelling story.

Unless... unless he lives in a rural area where there isn't any public transport, and he's looking to buy a new car because his has broken down. If he can't replace his car quickly he won't be able to keep going to his job. What happens if he can't go to work? He probably won't be able to keep supporting his family and he might even lose his home. Suddenly wanting a new car is a much more urgent and complex issue. Your characters need a reason to want the things they do, and to be aware of consequences (real or imagined) if they aren't able to get them in time.

### **Rising action**

When we get into the structure of our plot, the rising action is the escalating cause and effect that comes from the characters' choices. Every time your protagonist does something in pursuit of their goal, their action will trigger effects in the world around them — some anticipated, some not. At the same time, your antagonist or antagonists will also be pursuing their own, conflicting goals and making their own choices and sending even more effects out into the world. It's this interplay of choices, consequences, and reactions, growing greater in urgency and intensity, that builds the events of our story.

## **Falling action**

Once your rising action has reached its pinnacle climax, and your protagonist has finally obtained their goal (or not), and the antagonist has been defeated (or not), and the world as it was has crumbled and been rebuilt into something new, it's time for your falling action. Many writers make the mistake of ending their story too quickly, but your readers need time to see the new landscape as it comes together and to say goodbye to your characters.

Your falling action won't take up a huge amount of real estate — usually about ten percent of your story at most. This is where you take a little bit of time to explore what it means to your protagonist to have reached this place in their journey, how the other characters in the story are affected by it, and — this is important — where they're heading next. This gives your reader time to absorb the messages in your story and the lessons they have learned.

## **Symbolism**

Symbolism is using an object, place, person, or element in your story to represent something other than its literal meaning. In a story, symbolism can be a recognizable universal symbol or it can be a symbol that's developed within the context of your story's world.

Using symbolism gives depth to your story and helps support the theme (we'll talk about theme a little farther below). Contextual symbols, in particular, help convey the message that you're trying to send through your writing. For example, if you're exploring a theme of enduring love through times of great hardship, you could work symbolism into your story by using a fragile object such as a teacup, a vase, or a figurine which manages to stay intact despite being dropped or knocked around. This then becomes a symbol of a relationship that is more durable than it would appear in spite of the dangers it might face.

Very often readers will absorb symbolism in your story without consciously realising it. They may not see right away that the object was a cleverly placed literary device, but they will feel the tension and tone it creates in parallel with the plot.

## **Language**

In writing, language is the tone, mood, word choice, sentence structure, and unique author's voice that pulls the story together. Some writers, like Ernest Hemingway, are famous for short, clean lines with simple words and no ornamentation. Others, like Joanne

Harris, favour more languid sentences full of delicate flowering words and sensual imagery. Edgar Allen Poe is famous for his dark, velvety wording that brings to mind gothic castles and stormy nights, while writers like Jane Austen use light, approachable sentences peppered with sardonic undertones that go on for half a page.

While many writers will grow to develop a distinctive voice of their own, they may also adjust their rhythm and tone to fit the mood of the type of story they're writing. In general, shorter, more monosyllabic sentences will speed up the pacing of the story while longer sentences slow it down. Quick beach reads and thrillers tend to rely more on the former while historical and literary fiction often use more complex sentences. A mix of both is best — too much of either one gets difficult to read for very long.

When writing your own story, think about the mood and images you want to convey with each given scene. Then see if you can choose the lengths of your sentences and the types of words you use to match.

## **Theme**

Theme is the *point* of your story. It's the message that you're trying to send your readers through the filter of a fictional world. This can be something like the unbreakable bonds of family, the ravaging landscape of social media, or the destructive seduction of avarice. You may think of a theme that you want to explore and build a story around it, or you may begin writing a story and uncover its theme as you go along.

Once you know what the theme of your story is, you can emphasise it further using a range of [literary devices including symbolism, metaphor, and allegory](#) as well as your cast of characters and the types of conflicts that they face. Each element of your story should support the central message in some way. By showing the power of this message and the effect it has on the characters and the world, you can make the theme real for the reader and inspire a very real change. That is the mindboggling power of storytelling.

## **Verisimilitude**

Verisimilitude comes from a word that means “truth” and is essentially the truth within a fictional context. All powerful stories come from a true place — from real human needs, strengths, weaknesses, and experiences. This is equally true, if not more so, in fantastical work. If you're writing a story about a man who gets exposed to gamma radiation and

becomes a big green smashing machine, you're then asking your reader to accept that this is the truth of your story: stay away from gamma radiation. It will Jekyll-and-Hyde you up. Even when you and your reader both know, deep down, that this isn't actually what gamma radiation does in the slightest, they accept it as the basis of this particular reality.

This comes down to verisimilitude. Even though you're showing the character in a fantastical and frankly ridiculous context, what stays with us as readers are the deep, sometimes uncomfortable truths: don't we all have polarities inside of us that make us question who we are? Does Bruce Banner secretly *want* to be a stronger, braver, more unfeeling version of himself? Wouldn't you? It's these intimately resonant connections, more than an iconic pair of tattered purple shorts, that form the heart of this story.

When telling a story, no matter how absurdist or unrealistic or removed from our world it may be — *especially* then — figure out how to offer it to your readers from a place of honesty and truth.

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