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# 3

## The Premise

### What if?

By this point, you have probably had one or more story ideas. Characters, scenes, treasure, defeating an enemy; it's all there in your head. Your first goal for outlining your novel is to choose your story idea and define your premise.

I talk to many young authors before they start this program. If one of them tells me they are already writing, or have written their own story, I always ask, "So, what's your story about?" Without fail, I get a ten-minute or longer answer that outlines all the events that happen. Although I don't correct them at the time, those who join the *180 Days program* soon understand that a story is so much more than a collection of events, no matter how exciting they are; rather, a story is an emotional journey with a character who must overcome something and be better for it. So, when someone asks what your story is about, the correct answer is usually your premise.

**A premise is a sentence that conveys a plot or theme.** That may seem like asking a lot right from the start, but don't worry; your premise can change as your story evolves. It

is important to work on this first because it will help you identify your story so you can begin the outlining process. **Your premise should identify the character, conflict, and story goal in one or two sentences.** We go further into these elements of the story in the next unit, but we will work through your ideas now.

Not everyone starting this course will have their story idea yet. There are many ways to generate ideas. A very popular method, and one I like, is to begin with "what if?"

- **What if** siblings must race around the world, gathering clues, to inherit something they are told is the most important thing in the world? (*39 Clues* multiple authors.)
- **What if** rabbit siblings' family are kidnapped by wolves and they must embark on a terrifying journey of family legacy and lost heirs (*The Green Ember* by S.D. Smith.)
- **What if** an ordinary kid becomes a secret agent by night, thwarting evil all over the world as he searches for his missing brother? (*Secret Agent Jack Stalwart* by Elizabeth Singer Hunt.)
- **What if** two best friends must embark on a dangerous quest to find a potion that will save their pet dragon? (*The Kingdom of Wrenly: The Scarlet Dragon* by Jordan Quin.)

The power of “what if?” has inspired thousands of the most cherished stories. Many writers use it as the starting point for every great story, but not that many really get the full potential out of it. In her book *Outlining Your Novel*, author K.M. Weiland says that it’s simply because people don’t make a conscious effort to answer the “what if?” Meaning **people find a great “what if?” but they never work through all the possible answers to choose the best story and premise.**

Let’s try this process together. I will use one of my middle-grade novels. I had an idea to write a cool “save the world” series involving a bunch of young teens who are all descendants of famous scientists, so they happen to be geniuses. They are recruited to work at the Prodigal Industries research facility on remote Scape Island.

When I started brainstorming for this series, I began with a simple step. I took out a notebook and wrote “what if?” and then wrote every single question that popped into my mind. Here are some of them:

- What if a secret WWII project was still active and threatened the United States?
- What if the only hope for science and technology lay with kids?
- What if drilling for minerals set off supersonic tremors that destroyed our resources?
- What if Earth’s layers were tampered with, causing catastrophic circumstances?
- What if all clean drinking water sources were being destroyed?
- What if electromagnetic forces were affected and all of Earth’s habitation was in danger?
- What if a foreign country attacked the US, and the kids on Scape Island were the only hope?
- What if an EMP cut out all electronics in North America?
- What if the Earth’s total destruction prophecy was written in a computer file the teens found?
- What if science experiments by the government (adults) were going to destroy half of all mankind?

Many of these ideas were totally useless to me in the end, but the important thing is that they opened the floodgates of my imagination and caused me to think about my story in ways I hadn’t previously considered.

Giving yourself space to write down every idea, no matter how “dumb” it may seem, allows you to find the true gems that may end up becoming the greatest story ever written (could happen with your first novel, right?). Ready to brainstorm “what if?”

Keep in mind your audience is younger readers, generally aged from 7 to 9.



# Critical Thinking

You have considered the methods behind story plots and developed your own premise. Let's take a moment to consider what other authors might have considered when they wrote their book. Using the book that you read and summarized on pages 22-23, complete the following book report:

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Genre: \_\_\_\_\_

Summary: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Why would  
you suggest  
this book? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



# Grammar Games

## Homophones: Their / There / They're

Homophones sound the same, but have different meanings.

**Their:** Possessive, belonging to them

**There:** An adverb, a location

**They're:** A contraction of they and are

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**Directions:** Write their, there, or they're in the spaces below.

1. "\_\_\_\_\_ up first," I told the team. Everyone ran out to \_\_\_\_\_ places on the field. I walked to the mound. It was my first time pitching.
2. The air was perfectly still. \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't the slightest breeze. I wound up, then gave the pitch all I had. "Ball!" the umpire called.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ were still three more balls to go. I took a deep breath and concentrated.
4. From the stands, I heard chanting: "\_\_\_\_\_ gonna lose! We're gonna win! \_\_\_\_\_ gonna lose! We're gonna win!"
5. I tuned out the chanting. I thought only of the baseball in my hand and the pitcher's glove. This one would be a strike, I thought to myself. \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't going to be another ball.
6. I looked at the opposite team leaning against the chain link fence. \_\_\_\_\_ faces were tense with determination. I threw. "Ball!" called the umpire.
7. For a moment, I closed my eyes. Then I wound up for my third pitch. I threw hard and fast. With a loud crack, the bat hit the ball, which flew toward me. \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't a moment to think. I lifted my glove and caught the ball.
8. "Out!" yelled the umpire. I turned to my team and saw smiles on \_\_\_\_\_ faces. Only two more outs to go.



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# Elements of Story

There are five elements to every story and you are going to work on them before you ever write a single page of your chapter book. The elements are commonly known as setting, character, plot, conflict, and theme. And while tradition holds that these are present in every story, we are going to look at these a bit differently.

Just knowing you need a character will not give you that interesting character, like Junie B. Jones who we covered in the previous unit. You must create a *real* human being. The reader then likes him and even identifies with him. He is someone we can care about.

This way of identifying the five elements in a more personal way comes from author Daniel Schwabauer. Mr. Schwabauer has done an excellent job at helping young authors relate to these elements and create better stories as a result. He defines these elements by identifying the reader's interests.

Let's talk about the five elements. From previous lessons, you will understand that a plot is basically a blueprint for your story. It is what organizes the action and resolution. The plot tells us what to include in the book but not why a reader would care. The real

story is in why the hero wants to save the village. Therefore, we will discuss the third element of our list, the plot, in terms of a story goal or something we want.

Taking this approach will allow you to stop just *thinking* about a character and instead become the character. The elements of your story need to be personal. Let's look at the five elements from this motivational viewpoint:

## Setting - The world we live in

The setting is not just the location and time of your story. Those are only a fraction of the value of this element because the setting encompasses the entire storyworld. The setting helps us understand your characters, their lives, culture, and history, how they dress and speak, and what motivates them.

## Character - A hero we care about

Often referred to as the protagonist or main character, your character is a hero of his own story. He is a human being with habits, needs, fears, quirks, weaknesses, strengths, etc., all the things that make readers identify with him and, therefore, care about him. If readers don't care about your character, they won't care about any of the story.



### Story Goal - Something we want

What does your character want? This is referred to as the story goal. The story goal is what the hero wants to happen in the end. Perhaps it's what he wants to change or gain or, as in many cases, to take back. It is the driving force behind everything he does, and what the reader expects to happen in the end. Achieving a story goal is what completes a heroic quest.

### Conflict - The ways we suffer

Conflict is a part of every story because it is a part of life. Without conflict, your story goal doesn't have value. It can't be too easy. In fact, there should be many conflicts. Conflict causes suffering. The hero must suffer, and then the reader will suffer right along with him. Why? Because there must be a cost to reaching the story goal, or it has no value.

### Theme - The lesson we learn

The lesson the hero learns may seem unimportant when weighed against the other elements. However, just like in life, the lessons learned are what gives a story meaning.

Now you understand the five elements a bit more, let's explore each one as we dig deeper into our story and develop more of the outline.





# 1

## The Others



The world is full of people. Almost eight billion people. Yes, I said Billion! That's a lot of other people besides you. Your storyworld may be full of animals, magical creatures, or maybe even aliens, but typically, it will include people. Even if all your characters are animals, they will sound and act a lot like people. Human or animal, these are your secondary characters, aka... the others.

The supporting characters are important to the story. These characters do not have to be forgettable. They can entertain the reader as richly as the hero does. As an author, you need to find ways to make them dimensional as well. Give them a personality.

When choosing which secondary characters to add to your story, ask yourself how they relate to your character and the story goal. Your hero will have a different relationship with each of the other characters. Be careful not to introduce too many additional characters. You don't want to overwhelm readers.

Try to avoid letting your supporting characters be too cliché. For example, the girl-next-door best friend who is a brainy geek with no idea how beautiful or funny she is, or the orphan sidekick with a thick hide and sarcastic wit.

Author Andrew Harwell talks about a cliché secondary character in what is known as the Hermione Complex. This is a secondary character with endless knowledge, or who is always there to get our hero out of a bind when his charming stubbornness prevents him from doing so himself. These are cliché characters. It does not mean that you CANNOT use them, but just be mindful of mixing it up.

Here is a list of typical supporting characters in an adventure early reader story: The Villain, The Mentor, The Sidekick, The Family, and The Gang.

Make a list of some of your favorite supporting characters from books or movies and what you like about them specifically:

## The Villain

Perhaps the most important character after the hero is the villain. Why? Because he is the anti-hero. He brings conflict and, therefore, balances your story. It's not enough just to say the villain is bad; the reader must fear him.

To create a believable villain, you must make him "human." This does not mean he cannot be a different species, but he must be motivated by desires the reader can understand. In Unit 3, we talked about motivation being the foundation of behavior. In the same way, the reader can kind of sympathize with the villain's motivations and still fear and despise his methods.

What I mean is, for a villain to be really scary and feared, there must be something readers can relate to about him. Otherwise, he's just not real and, therefore, not scary.

This means that you should develop your villain in much the same way you developed your hero. The primary difference is that the villain's negative ideals will strongly outweigh his positive ones.

To create a memorable villain, you must appreciate that although he might try to blow up the castle or hijack the school bus full of kids, when you look beneath the surface, you will see someone who may not be as different from you as you might think.

Most people, despite their actions, believe they are right or good, and often that they are justified. It is important to look at the villain's motivations for his actions. This will help ensure the villain is a dimensional character. Villains must have their own motivations, fears, desires, and story goal. Remember, they are the anti-heroes. Don't wait until the end to reveal this. Sprinkle the entire story with the villain's strong need to win.



Here are some examples of famous villains in kids books:

The White Witch. *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*.

Shere Khan. *The Jungle Book*.

Count Olaf. *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

The Wicked Witch of the West. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Captain Hook. *Peter Pan*.

For your assignment, take the time to do a modified character sketch of your villain. Do just enough to make sure he is a developed character. If your villain is not human, then some of this will not apply and you can leave it blank.

## The Sidekick

As an adult with grown kids, my days of cartoons and teen flicks are over. I did my rounds of the Lion King and High School Musical. Most were innocently entertaining when I was with my kids, but at my age, there is definitely less appeal.

That being said, there are a few exceptions. One such example is the 2005 movie *Sky High* with Kurt Russell and Kelly Preston. I love that movie! I have watched it multiple times. *Sky High* is a superhero parody, which means it exaggerates certain aspects for comedic effect.

*Sky High* follows the adventures of Will Stronghold, the only son of The Commander (Russell) and Jetstream (Preston), two of the most famed heroes of their day. Will begins 9th grade at Sky High, a special high school for superhero kids. Students' superpowers are tested during their first few days at Sky High, and they are then classified as hero or sidekick.

Will, despite his amazing parents, has no evidence of any heroic powers. Reluctantly, he joins his classmates in a showcase, and, one-by-one, the students demonstrate their powers in front of everyone and the gym coach shouts their "hero" or "sidekick" title. One title leads to high school fame and popularity, while the other ... let's just say one kid's power was to glow. That's it. Just glow.

Will demonstrated nothing that day and was designated a sidekick and, of course, sat at the "nerd" table at lunch.

Eventually, and to his father's overwhelming joy, he found his superpowers. Young Will got an instant promotion to hero status at school, and went on to fight the evil villain, Lord Payne, to save Sky High. It was ONLY with the help of the sidekicks that he prevailed. In fact, it was more of a montage of nerdy sidekicks turned fighting heroes in the epic showdown. And guess what? The glowing kid really helped save the team.

*Sky High* was a great example of how a sidekick can be THE character who helps the hero achieve the story goal. He can be a lifelong friend or an unwitting acquaintance. He can even be a total stranger at the beginning who gets pulled into the adventure even though he might not want to be.

Some famous sidekicks are Tinker Bell from *Peter Pan*, Huckleberry Finn from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Claudia from *The Babysitter's Club*, and Grover Underwood from *Percy Jackson & The Olympians*. The sidekick should not be confused with other supporting characters; those will be covered later.



# 2

## Three Modes of Fiction

Fiction has three primary types or modes of writing: Summary, Detail, and Dialogue.

Summary Mode is a way of giving facts to the reader that are necessary to relay information and move the story forward. Summary mode usually appears near the beginning of a novel to fill in the backstory for readers. There are a few rules to follow, which will be discussed later. It's also used in transitions between scenes to get readers up to speed when time passes or if the new scene takes place in a different location to the previous scene. This is known as "telling."

Detail Mode describes a scene or person to the reader. It will include parts of your story that will create a bigger emotional response in the reader. When you are showing the reader a part of the story, you are giving them the opportunity to see what you are seeing and to emotionally step into your story world. This is referred to as "showing."

Here is a quick example of Showing vs. Telling:

*Showing - His dad switched off the light and left the room. Antoine tensed and huddled further under the blankets. He gripped the sheets to his neck and held his breath as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the abyss. The darkness was for nightmares.*

*Telling - Antoine was terribly afraid of the dark.*

Dialogue Mode is pretty easy to understand. It's when people talk to one another or even to themselves (inner dialogue). You can use dialogue to reveal a lot about your story or characters. Dialogue is a powerful tool when used correctly and realistically.

Let's look at each of these modes in more detail.

### Tell it like it is – Summary

When it comes to creative writing, most teachers will say, "Show, don't tell." We will get to that part in the next section, but I want to say that it's not always better. Telling, also called Summary Mode, is necessary to give the reader important information without losing their interest through a super long paragraph about your character riding a bike across town to the movie theater. The journey takes about 20 minutes. Just say it, there is no need to describe it. Say it and move on to the good stuff.



Here is a little secret new authors really need to hear. Too much detail can be boring! It's true. Not always, but sometimes. Summary Mode is most useful when you want to skip excessive details while still giving useful information about a scene.

Let's say, for example, your character gets on his bike to ride to the movie theater so he can warn his best friend that the school bully is going there with his friends to play a mean prank on him. You could write this:

*Mike hopped on his bike and rode as fast as he could. He beat his best time of 19 minutes.*

That is all it takes. We don't need the details of the bike ride, the weather, or who he sees along the way. We get it.

Not that you can't give any details at all in Summary Mode. You can disguise summary sentences with a few details to add interest while staying in Summary Mode. For example:

*He jumped on his bike and tore out of the yard, nearly hitting the trash cans he forgot to bring in this morning. He could not help it. He had to get to the theatre. Mike double-timed it and beat his own personal record of 19 minutes.*

Adding those details tells the reader a lot about the situation and about Mike's feelings. You decide which facts are necessary and which are not. Don't stress too much about it. Even some seasoned KidLit authors slip into detail mode when they should be in summary mode. Too many facts and details distract the reader, while not enough might cause the reader to disconnect from the story, so use Summary Mode to move things forward or deliver important information.

Last rule, Summary Mode should never make its way onto the first page or two of your story. Outside of perhaps a few details, the beginning of a story is not the time to give an information dump. An "info dump" is a large amount of information given to the reader at one time, and it can be overwhelming.

Here is an example of an info dump in Summary Mode:

*Melanie was her best friend. They met in fourth grade in Mrs. Bingham's class and since then, they have spent every day together. They both loved to dance and signed up for the same ballet class. Even though they pretended that the class was kind of lame, they tap danced their way into class every week. Melanie was the tallest girl in the class, and the way her blond hair was neatly tucked into a bun made her look almost like the dance teacher rather than a student. They laughed together about how goofy the boys looked dancing, especially on dress rehearsal days when they were in tights. There were no cute boys in that class and they both talked about how much more fun it would have been with some cute boys to dance with. Melanie was taller than most of the boys anyway, so there was not much hope of that happening. They still had fun in class and decided to become ballerinas when they grew up. Melanie would be a great ballerina; she was tall and graceful. Melanie was so friendly that both kids and adults liked her instantly. She was the popular one.*

This gives a lot of information in a short time. Don't get caught up in giving too many details as most of them really don't matter. Just stick to what is important to the story.



## Show Don't Tell – Detail

Detail Mode (show) is used often and is very significant to the reader's experience. When you want your reader to not just see a scene in their head but also to hear, touch, and even feel what is happening, use Detail Mode. It is important to distinguish Detail from Summary Mode. Detail Mode is about showing the reader what is going on in the scene by using descriptions.

One important lesson I want to spend some time on is that Detail mode is not about showing ALL the details. You need to show your readers what is happening without telling them too much. This is especially true about how the character is feeling.

We touched on this in Unit 2 with emotional suffering. You cannot expect readers to feel something simply because you tell them that your character feels it. In fact, if you always write what a character feels then, most often, the opposite will happen. The reader will probably not feel any emotion.

Unfortunately, too many authors have used sentences like, "She was so embarrassed her stomach was in knots and she could not breathe. Her head was spinning and she couldn't even think," or, "When he heard the news, he felt so bad, like someone had punched him in the stomach and he had so much pain he wanted to lay down and curl up in a ball." It's not that you don't ever directly tell people how a character feels, it's just that you should do it very seldom (not often).

It is better to learn early in your writing experience how to get readers to feel the emotions a character is feeling. It can be done by their reaction, in other words, in things they say and do. I will explain more about this.

People's feelings can be complex and they have emotions at various levels. Some are on the surface, meaning they show and others can tell, but some feelings run much deeper, and everyone is different so how they feel about things is different.

As an author, you cannot expect to know how every reader will respond to each situation. Therefore, it is better to create the scene in such a way as to provoke the reader's own emotions naturally.

Let's look at an example of directly telling the reader the character's emotions:

*I heard the shocking noise rip through the peaceful afternoon. I watched in horror as the walls in the monstrous cave we were exploring suddenly exploded inward and I was so scared that I ducked down fast and tried not to cry. Everything was happening so fast! Rocks were flying everywhere, and I was worried that one of them would hit me in the head so I covered it with my arms. My heart was beating so fast I thought I would die. I tried to back deeper into the cave, but it*



*was so dark in there I was even more afraid. My brain was frantic. I told myself I should just act and not think. I ran back deeper into the cave and screamed for the others to follow me. As bad as it was, at least I was not alone. Feeling alarm rising in me, I turned back and looked for my friends. I could not see anyone and I was so scared. I felt alone. My heart was beating so hard in my chest. I felt like I would have a heart attack. I wondered where everyone had gone?*

Do you see what is happening in this paragraph? Practically every sentence is telling readers what the character is seeing, hearing, and feeling instead of just showing them and letting readers feel it for themselves. Every time you tell a reader what a character saw, smelled, heard, or felt, reword the sentence to show the reader from a closer perspective. The difference is often just changing a few words, but it can produce powerful results, as follows:

*The shocking noise ripped through the peaceful afternoon. The walls in the monstrous cave we were exploring suddenly exploded inward, and I ducked down fast. Everything was happening so fast! I covered my head with my arms to protect it from flying rocks. I tried to back deeper into the cave, but the darkness threatened to swallow me. I knew I should just act and not think. I bolted deeper into the cave and yelled for the others to follow me. At least I was not alone. I raced through the dark and then stopped. I turned back and looked for my friends, but could not see them. There was only the sound of falling rocks. Where was everyone?*

This may seem like I am being picky, but I believe it is good to teach strong writing habits so you establish these habits from the start. You will only get better from here. Learning how to show without giving lots of internal reactions is important to the reader's journey with your story.

In the following exercise, practice taking a Detail Mode paragraph and rewriting it so it improves. You will still show what is going on with details, but try to stay away from showing how the character is feeling too much.

