

# Story Building

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*“If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth writing.”*

—Benjamin Franklin

*“If you don’t see the book you want on the shelf, write it.”*

—Beverly Cleary

I have seen posts in writing forums and Facebook from new writers saying something like: I want to write a book but don’t know what to write about.

The bottom line is, it is difficult writing a story if you have nothing to say.

## Idea

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All stories begin with an idea. The idea can come from your imagination, a dream, a movie, or from an event in your life. The possibilities are endless.

A story idea is the tip of an iceberg. There is a lot of hidden information beneath the idea.

### Idea Examples:

Man and woman fall in love.

Aliens live on Earth

Poor boy becomes a gangster

An idea is vague and is not enough to build a story. You must build your idea into a story premise and more.

Once you have a story idea in your head, build on it. It is like building a house. A novel is built in stages like a house. The foundation comes before the walls and roof.

Think about your story idea and ask yourself what is the underlying message you wish to share with the reader.

### **Underlying Message Examples:**

- Love triumphs over everything.
- Crime does not pay.
- Life is not what it seems.
- From rags to riches or riches to rags.
- We are not alone in the universe.

## **The Premise**

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Expand your story idea into a premise. Know where you are going with the story (goal or destination). It is like taking a long road trip. You need to know your final destination before you leave your house.

### **Four core parts of a premise:**

1. Who is the protagonist?
2. What is the situation?
3. What is the character's objective?
4. What obstacles does the character face?

## **Premise Template:**

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### **1. Who is the protagonist?**

- Male or female

- Basic title or status.

**2. What is the situation?**

- Where is the character?
- When does the story begin?

**3. What is the character's objective?**

- Solve a crime. Get revenge. Finding true love or not.
- Survive a battle/war. Slay the dragon, monster, or the bad guy.
- Reaching a distant place (country, planet).
- Becoming a king/ruler. Finding freedom.

**4. What obstacles does the character face?**

- A brief description of the character's conflict.
- The character can also have an internal conflict.

**Filling in the template:**

1. Who is the protagonist?

He calls himself Charlie, and he's an extraterrestrial.

2. What is the situation?

He arrived on Earth in 1943.

3. What is the character's objective?

Charlie must close the last secret underground base.

4. What obstacles does the character face?

The extraction vessel has issues, and Charlie and his companions are stranded.

**The result:**

It is 1973. An extraterrestrial who calls himself Charlie arrives on Earth, tasked with closing the last remaining underground secret base. But the

extraction vessel leaves for repairs and Charlie and his companions are stranded.

## Elevator Pitch

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Your premise is the base of your story, but you cannot stop there. Develop an elevator pitch from your premise.

An elevator pitch is also known as a log-line. It is a short sentence designed to tease the reader.

When asked, “What’s your book about?”

The elevator pitch (log-line) is your response.

Keep your elevator pitch at twenty-five words or fewer. Not easy. It takes practice and many rewrites, but with practice and feedback, you will create a captivating pitch.

You can use the elevator pitch when querying literary agents. If you plan to self-publish, it is just as important. You can use it as the first sentence on your book cover blurb. Having a great pitch beforehand will aid you in writing a better book.

### Example:

In 1943 an extraterrestrial who calls himself Charlie arrives on Earth. His problems begin when the vessel leaves for repairs.

## Book Blurb

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To create your book cover blurb, use your story’s underlying message, premise, and the elevator pitch. Expand that information into a paragraph or two.

The first thing a potential reader does when buying a book is glance at the book cover. The second thing they do is read the book cover blurb.

You don't need a complete manuscript to write a book blurb. An enticing blurb is your book hook. Not easy. Expect several rewrites, but you will nail it. There are no set rules for writing a book blurb, but there are some suggestions.

### **Blurb Elements**

- Where and when does it happen?
- Who is your main character?
- What problem does the character face
- Why your reader might care
- How the story will unfold
- End with a question, or a hook

### **Tips:**

- For fiction, aim for around 150 words or fewer. For a children's book, use less than 90 words.
- Write the book blurb in the present tense
- End on a high note, peaking the reader's curiosity
- Avoid filter words, weak verbs, adverbs, and adjectives
- Edit, edit, and re-edit

### **Example: (Word count: 137)**

In 1943, Qumt, an extraterrestrial who calls himself Charlie, arrives on Earth, tasked with closing the last secret underground base. His people have lived on Earth undetected for over three-hundred-fifty years, but their mission is over and they must leave. At the last base closure near Socorro, New Mexico, the extraction vessel encounters mechanical issues and leaves for repairs. Charlie and his four companions are stranded with no supplies. Charlie ventures out to the small town in search of food. His short height and albino hairless appearance gets the town's

people's attention, but he manages. He exchanges cold for money and goes to a grocery store. There he meets eighteen-year-old Margaret Hoffman, who falls in love with him and his problems begin. Besides violating a mission directive, the FBI discovers his presence and comes looking for him.

**Example: (Word count: 71)**

In 1970 in Monclova, Mexico, eight-year-old Lorenzo suffers a shattering blow. His father's death forces him to mature fast. He takes on the responsibility of the man of the house helping his mother, younger brother, and sister. School and work drains him. He dreams of financial stability for his family and confronts every challenge life throws at him. At a young age he learns the meaning of sacrifice, violence, and death.

**More Examples:**

**A Time to Kill by John Grisham (Word count: 87)**

The life of a ten-year-old black girl is shattered by two drunken and remorseless white men. The mostly white town of Clanton in Ford County, Mississippi, reacts with shock and horror at the inhuman crime—until the girl's father acquires an assault rifle and takes justice into his own hands.

For ten days, as burning crosses and the crack of sniper fire spread through the streets of Clanton, the nation sits spellbound as defense attorney Jake Brigance struggles to save his client's life—and then his own.

**The Testament by John Grisham (Word count: 152)**

In a plush Virginia office, a rich, angry old man is furiously rewriting his will. With his death just hours away, Troy Phelan wants to send a

message to his children, his ex-wives, and his minions—a message that will touch off a vicious legal battle and transform dozens of lives.

Because Troy Phelan’s new will names a sole surprise heir to his eleven-billion-dollar fortune: a mysterious woman named Rachel Lane, a missionary living deep in the jungles of Brazil.

Enter the lawyers. Nate O’Riley is fresh out of rehab, a disgraced corporate attorney handpicked for his last job: to find Rachel Lane at any cost. As Phelan’s family circles like vultures in D.C., Nate goes crashing through the Brazilian jungle, entering a world where money means nothing, where death is just one misstep away, and where a woman—pursued by enemies and friends alike—holds a stunning surprise of her own.

**The Hunt for Red October by Tom Clancy (Word count: 96)**

Somewhere under the freezing Atlantic, a Soviet sub commander has just made a fateful decision. The Red October is heading west. The Americans want her. The Russians want her back. The chase for the highly advanced nuclear submarine is on—and there’s only one man who can find her...

Brilliant CIA analyst Jack Ryan has little interest in fieldwork, but when covert photographs of Red October land on his desk, Ryan soon finds himself in the middle of a high-stakes game of hide-and-seek played by two world powers—a game that could end in all-out war.

**Shelter in Place by Nora Roberts (Word count: 166)**

It was a typical evening at a mall outside Portland, Maine. Three teenage friends waited for the movie to start. A boy flirted with the girl selling sunglasses. Mothers and children shopped together, and the manager at video game store tended to customers. Then the shooters arrived.

The chaos and carnage lasted only eight minutes before the killers were taken down. But for those who lived through it, the effects would last forever. In the years that followed, one would dedicate himself to a law enforcement career. Another would close herself off, trying to bury the memory of huddling in a ladies' room, helplessly clutching her cell phone--until she finally found a way to pour her emotions into her art.

But one person wasn't satisfied with the shockingly high death toll at the DownEast Mall. And as the survivors slowly heal, find shelter, and rebuild, they will discover that another conspirator is lying in wait--and this time, there might be nowhere safe to hide.

**Six of Crows by Leigh Bardugo (Word count: 54)**

Ketterdam: a bustling hub of international trade where anything can be had for the right price—and no one knows that better than criminal prodigy Kaz Brekker. Kaz is offered a chance at a deadly heist that could make him rich beyond his wildest dreams. But he can't pull it off alone . . .

**Tripwire by Lee Child (Word count: 65)**

Ex military policeman Jack Reacher is enjoying the lazy anonymity of Key West when a stranger shows up asking for him. He's got a lot of questions. Reacher does too, especially after the guy turns up dead. The answers lead Reacher on a cold trail back to New York, to the tenuous confidence of an alluring woman, and the dangerous corners of his own past.

**Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens (Word count: 108)**

For years, rumors of the "Marsh Girl" have haunted Barkley Cove, a quiet town on the North Carolina coast. So in late 1969, when handsome Chase Andrews is found dead, the locals immediately suspect Kya Clark, the so-called Marsh Girl. But Kya is not what they say. Sensitive and



intelligent, she has survived for years alone in the marsh that she calls home, finding friends in the gulls and lessons in the sand. Then the time comes when she yearns to be touched and loved. When two young men from town become intrigued by her wild beauty, Kya opens herself to a new life—until the unthinkable happens.

## Author Book Bio

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Whether you go traditional or self-publish you need an author book bio. You can work on your book bio any time but the sooner you write it the better. Chances are you will do many rewrites.

### Tips:

- Write in the third person.
- State relevant achievements specific to the book, but do not brag. Add a little humility as well.
- Keep your author bio short. Aim for 60-90 words.
- Use the bio like a business card. Give readers a way to interact with you by adding your website or social media info. At the very least, they'll be able to find out more about you and explore your other works. Adding this info at the end is the most common call to action in author bios.

### Example: (Word count: 71)

Amilcar is a retired computer systems engineer. He stopped writing programming code and began a new chapter in his life as a writer and storyteller. He discovered that everyone has a story to tell. Some of those stories have hidden mysteries. He likes looking beyond the obvious. Life is not always what it seems. When he is not writing, he enjoys fishing, target shooting, and always searching for a new story.

## To plot or not to plot?

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In many writing forums, I've seen this topic get hot and heavy.

Steven King coined the phrase, "Pantsers fly by the seat of their pants." Pantsers do not plot or outline. They sail into the dark, figuring things out as they go along. Most new writers are pantsers. They pound on the keyboard, hoping for a rush of inspiration.

Plotters like J. K. Rowling are the opposite. Plotters believe in preparation, research, and outlining a story before writing it.

Pantsering and plotting also happens in the non-writing world. At work, at school, at home, and in one's daily life.

Many years ago I built a tool shed pantser style. I lost track of the times I visited the building materials store to buy the tools and materials I needed. During the building process, there were a lot of head-scratching moments, mistakes, and redoes.

Years later, I moved to another house and built another tool shed, but that time plotter style. I researched and researched and sketched out a floor plan. I calculated a list of tools and materials needed down to the last nail and screw. One trip to the store. I also had example drawings on measuring and cutting. No errors or redoes.

I associate building a tool shed with writing a short story and building a five-bedroom house with two and a half bathrooms and a three-car garage to a novel.

The question is. Would you build your dream home like a pantser without a set of floor plans, doing a lot of guesswork as you go and trial and error?

So back to the question. To plot or not to plot? Everyone's brain is wired differently. I am not going to convince you of what you should do. What

I will say is what I have learned from my writing journey.

I suggest you try it both ways and see what works best for you. You might end up doing a little of both.

If you are interested in my learning experience on plotting, read my notes on **Plotting and Outlining** in the **Resource** section.

## In summary

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- A good premise can be expressed in one or two sentences.
- Keep your elevator pitch at twenty-five words or fewer.
- The book blurb is a great way to hook the reader, so make it count.
- Decide for yourself if you are a pantser or a plotter.