

Skyler Madison Fontana PhD

**THE STORY**  
**ENGINE**  
**BLUEPRINT**

HOW TO FIND AND DEVELOP GREAT STORIES



# **THE STORY ENGINE BLUEPRINT**

*How to Find and Develop Great Stories*

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Writing a book is like going on a journey. It helps to know where we are going and have a guide to help us navigate the journey. It's very much like the advice the Cheshire Cat gave to Alice in Wonderland.

Cat: "Where are you going?"

Alice: "Which way should I go?"

Cat: "That depends on where you are going."

Alice: "I don't know."

Cat: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

—**Lewis Carroll**, *Alice in Wonderland*

The Story Engine Blueprint is designed to help you get where you want to go... to help you excavate and develop your stories, so that writing becomes easier and the finished product is one you may be able to get published. While many would be and writers may have a sense for an idea for their story, it is often not yet developed enough to lead them to write the story. That is why you need the Story Engine Blueprint.

## THE PROBLEM: NOT HAVING A PLAN FOR HOW TO START AND FINISH

According to a survey, eighty-one percent of Americans feel they have a book in them that they should or would like to write. In a survey of 1,006 Americans sponsored by a small Michigan publisher, an almost equal number of people said they wanted to write a novel, a nonfiction work, a self-help book or a cookbook. Considering recent trends in publishing, the fact that self-published titles have dwarfed traditionally-published works by nearly two to one, the time has never been better to write your book. Yet most people do not act on their desire to write, and ninety-seven percent of writers who start do not finish their books. That is a pretty bleak statistic, especially since only twenty percent of the people who do write a book go on to publish it. With electronic self-publishing, it has become easier than ever to be an author. If being a published author is your dream, success will include learning how to bring attention to your work. Most successful authors have some combination of talent, persistence, luck and what I am calling fire and purpose.

According to an article written by William Dietrich,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: ([https://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-dietrich/the-writers-odds-of-succe\\_b\\_2806611.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-dietrich/the-writers-odds-of-succe_b_2806611.html)):

despite these dismal trends, we have a desire to express ourselves, and the psychological rewards to doing that can be great. The research that I have done supports this as many writers say that writing helps them to find both meaning and purpose in their lives. This I would say is one of the key components to happiness and personal development. Whether you desire to write a novel, a work of narrative fiction that is typically published in book form or digitally, the tips provided here are applicable to any narrative story that you want to write.

For years I have worked as a life coach helping people achieve their life goals and create healthy habits for life. That experience, along with the research I did for my Ph.D. in Jungian and archetypal psychology, has helped me to see how writing our stories helps us psychologically, providing an outlet of personal expression that can be very therapeutic. In addition, writing creatively can be a way back to finding and cultivating our creative side. Writing is also about character development, in particular the quality of persistence. So, if you have always harbored a dream to write, or are one of those who has tried to write but not finished, I have some valuable tips for you.

First off, you must be persistent and committed to the task. Here are some stories about how persistence and talent paid off. Mystery writer Janet Evanovich, who pulled in \$33 million last year, had written for ten years before getting published. She labored first in the romance field before hitting it big with bounty hunter Stephanie Plum. Stephen King's first big novel, *Carrie*, was rejected by publishers thirty

times. He tossed it in the wastebasket, but his wife fished it out. His writing earned \$39 million in 2012. John Grisham's first novel, *A Time to Kill*, was rejected twelve times, and he unsuccessfully tried to sell copies from the trunk of his car. He earned \$26 million last year. Judy Blume, who has sold eighty million books, got nothing but rejections for two straight years. Steve Berry, who has had \$10 million in book sales, collected eighty-five rejections over twelve years before breaking through. Rex Pickett's *Sideways* was rejected sixteen times before receiving an advance of \$5,000 and being picked up for a film. J.K. Rowling, the first author billionaire, had *Harry Potter* rejected by a dozen British publishing houses and reportedly got into print for a £1,500 advance only after the eight-year-old daughter of a publisher pleaded for it. Dan Brown's three novels before *The Da Vinci Code* all had printings of fewer than 10,000 copies.

Despite these fabulous success stories, I am not suggesting you write to be rich and famous as that motivation alone would be antithetical to the secrets I am going to reveal to you. But these stories should encourage you to persevere.

## MY STORY

Storytelling, playacting and reading fiction have been my passions from a very young age. The research I did for my Ph.D. spoke directly to my calling, which is that of being a healer-communicator and teacher who uses storytelling and creativity for transforming lives. As is often the case, when it came time to pursue my career in acting, I allowed myself to

get talked out of it by comments like: “Hope you like waiting on tables,” and “What makes you think you can make it?” The career path I chose to pursue was Wall Street, which was more in line with culturally defined values and not my true passion or vocation.

The persona is a term that C.G. Jung put forth that can helpfully be viewed as a mask we put on, such as a character in a story, as we play a part that for the outside world masks or covers who we are on the inside. We do this in order to fit in and be accepted. It can serve the purpose of masking a wound, and be viewed as a cover-up of sorts. I saw that I formed my persona out of fear, but doing so caused my creativity to be stifled and blocked. In my case, although as an undergraduate I was an English literature and theater major, I had developed a mental block toward my capacity to be creative, especially toward my ability to write. The research I did for my doctorate allowed me to pick up my desire to write creatively and to engage in the formation of stories from where they had been lying dormant for some time.

My dissertation helped me to recover my creative side and write a novella that used tenets from Jungian psychology to help me overcome my inner critic. It helped me to find, develop and actually finish the story. This included the dissertation which, like writing a book, is an enormous task. In fact, fifty percent of doctoral candidates never complete their dissertations.

Stifled creativity can be problematic. According to Michael Ray and Rochelle Myers, who have written on creativity, the starting point for stifled creativity is self-consciousness. This



gets personified as the inner critic, or what they called the “Voice of Judgment.” It is well known that many people suffer from creative blocks—even those who consider themselves to be creative. I have found a way to address and transcend this, which can be invaluable given the fall-out rate for those who feel blocked from writing and finishing their novel. Most importantly, I have discovered a process that helps to find and develop the story idea/concept that makes writing flow naturally.

## THE SOLUTION: CULTIVATING FIRE AND PURPOSE

In doing the research for my dissertation, I discovered what I consider to be the secret to creating and manifesting what we desire, especially as it applies to writing. I call it fire and purpose. This is a concept that goes back to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who wrote about what he called *fire and telos*. By fire he meant the source of the action or power and, as Richard Geldard, who wrote *Remembering Heraclitus*, says, “fire as a transforming energy.”<sup>2</sup> Fire is a metaphor for passion, having what the alchemists later called a *burning desire*. That, in addition to the *telos*, which means the focusing on the end purpose with intense concentration, is the royal road to creating anything we want. In this case, we will be focusing on how fire and purpose applies to writing our stories. We will be cultivating what William Blake, an English poet who was part of the Romantic movement, called the creative will. This is similar to what Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, called willed introversion, an intense focus inward that activates the unconscious part of the creative process.

Many writers report that it is easy to be swayed by doubt,

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Geldard, *Remembering Heraclitus* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 2000) 11

which can cause them to get lost, abandon the pursuit and give up. Following the initial excitement of embarking on a new quest, we can, as I experienced when I was writing my dissertation, end up in a space of uncertainty. What many do not understand is that it is a natural stage in the writing process. John Keats, also a Romantic poet, referred to this as having the capacity to tolerate negative capability. By this he meant being able to stay with our effort even when we do not necessarily know where it is we are going. The uncertainty of not knowing where we are going and staying with it anyway requires having trust in the process. Keats explained negative capability as those times “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”<sup>3</sup> In that sense, the creative process requires character, having a process to guide us, help in tolerating the negative emotions, remaining hopeful, not giving up and a creative way to handle doubt. The creative process can be a spiral of excitement and disillusionment filled with elation and self-doubt that we need to learn how to tolerate so that we can stay the course and trust the power of imagination that works behind the scenes. Creating and bringing forth our stories includes developing, shaping and recombining, but it is also about destruction, letting go and persevering, all of which can be transformational.

What allowed me to go from mental block to breakthrough was having the focus, trusting in the process, not giving up and refraining from trying to force it. Often, all I

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<sup>3</sup> John, Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1899) 2

had to do was ask myself before I went to sleep for an answer to come in a dream. Sometimes it came in a daydream, or even when I first woke up. I would go for a walk, or take a shower, and oftentimes the answer I was looking for in terms of how the story should unfold would just be there so long as I did not give up and I kept trusting in my muse.

In terms of writing a story or novel, we must find an irresistible or compelling idea which captures and arrests our attention that can be developed into a concept for a story. The definition of a story according to dictionary.com is: “a narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse or instruct the hearer or reader.” Notice the keywords: interest, amuse or instruct.

## FINDING AND DEVELOPING YOUR STORY ENGINE

To get the fire going, we need to find the telos or the purpose, which means identifying the story engine that will emerge from the story's core fascination to us and ultimately to others. Stories start to write themselves when we approach the mission in the right way. In order to do that, and before we begin writing, there are some key questions we must identify that become the premise or engine of the story. The story engine flows first from a concept or big idea that then leads to the story premise and a preliminary outline to help you make sense of where you are going.

### STEP 1: THE CONCEPT

Concept is the central idea that creates the framework for a story without actually identifying the story per se. This should be inherently interesting and provocative, one that makes the reader instantly want to know more. It may not yet include the actual protagonist or character(s). This can be a proposition and/or situation. The concept will then drive and provide fire for the premise. Ultimately, we are looking for a high-concept that will include what's at stake for the

protagonist or society at large. Often a concept begins with a “what if.” Here are some great examples you will recognize:

1. What if you could go back in time and reinvent your life?
2. What if the world’s largest spiritual belief system is based on a lie?
3. What if a paranormally gifted child is sent to a secret/ special school for kids just like him?
4. What if an alien child was set adrift because his race was expiring? He is sent to Earth, raised by human parents and grows up with super powers to help humans.
5. What if a dystopian society uses a form of entertainment to control the masses?

## STEP 2: THE PREMISE

The premise is a word that comes from a Latin word that means to send forward from before or to put before. In terms of a story, the premise is the single-core statement of what, according to James N. Frey who wrote *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, said is what happens to the characters as a result of the actions. The premise is more specific than the concept in terms of character(s), including the central conflict and problem that sets up the structure or spine of the story.

A premise is best developed by answering a series of questions. Here are the key questions to answer: POCS

1. **Protagonist:** a compelling main character
2. **Objective:** What does your character want? (Problem, the driving goal or desire)
3. **Conflict:** What's standing in the way? The inner and outer conflict.
4. **Stakes:** What happens if the character does not succeed, both personally and perhaps for the world at large?

The premise is similar to what in the industry is called the pitch, what we say to someone that causes him to get excited about the story. When we get to this point, we have also settled on the genre of the story which will affect how we write and tell the story. Genre has to do with who you view as your audience and how the story will be written to fit within the genre. That's why, before you move forward and you identify your genre, you also imagine an avatar, the person for whom you are writing the story.

We will find that when we approach writing the story this way, it starts to fire up our imagination that has been helping us behind the scenes in coming up with our idea(s). Eventually we will also flesh out how the story gets resolved and what the character learns by which he is transformed. Having these elements in place enables us to then go about developing the plot, which will help us to more easily write the story. In summary, the premise becomes our driving purpose that is fired by a powerful concept that we cannot resist.

It is fueled by fire that comes from our absorption and attraction to the story.

If you have a story brewing, write down your premise here in two to three sentences. Eventually, the premise becomes the pitch, what you say about the story that intrigues and causes people to want to buy the book or go see the movie. Here are some examples of pitches that were announced in Publishers Marketplace, a database for deals that have been made. These examples are based on high concepts and well-crafted story premises:

1. *Girl on the Train*: A psychological thriller about a woman who becomes personally and emotionally entangled in a murder investigation because of her observations of one household along her daily commute.
2. *The Martian*: *Apollo 13* meets *Cast Away*, featuring a lone astronaut marooned on the surface of Mars.
3. *The Wrath and the Dawn*: A reimagining of the *Arabian Nights* where the wits of one girl are the only thing standing between a vulnerable kingdom and its ruthless boy king.

Having a high concept and an intriguing premise not only makes your story easier to sell, but also easier to write. Once we have the concept we can also start to do some research that will provide and lead to ideas for the story's plotline.



## STEP 3: THE ONE PAGE OUTLINE AND STORY ARC

There is a lot of discussion between writers who like to plot out their stories before they write and those who like to fly by the seat of their pants, aka *pansters*. Other techniques I have found that drive the story's engine is to really flesh out the characters in depth and work with a one-page outline based on the classic three-act structure. In doing this, here is the classic advice that has guided many writers: "In the first act get your character up a tree; in the second act, throw stones at him; in the third act, get him down gracefully."<sup>4</sup> Dean Koontz's advice also helps: "Once you have introduced a likeable lead character, keeping your readers worried about the character's fate is one of the best ways to keep them reading."<sup>5</sup> Here is a simple way to outline your story based on the three-act structure model that will help you give power to your story engine. You will see that it connects back to the premise you have identified and establishes the dramatic arc of the story.

### ACT I: Set-up

- 1. The Setup: Who is your main character?** What is the world or setting in which the story takes place and why should we care?
- 2. The problem:** What does your character want and what is the problem? Why does it have to be solved now?

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/09/05/up-tree/>

<sup>5</sup> Dean R. Koontz, *How to Write Best Selling Fiction* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1972) 86

## **ACT II: Conflict and Solution**

1. Why is this problem so hard to solve?
2. What are the stakes (internal and external)? What does the character stand to lose?
3. What is the solution?

## **ACT III: Resolution**

1. Why does it matter that this problem is solved?
2. What did the characters learn and how did they change?

Powerful stories hook readers so that they can begin to connect emotionally with the main character(s) and experience the story vicariously in their imagination. The story unfolds in a way where we are fed just enough so that we then want to know what will happen next. In order to do this, we as the writer must lose ourselves in it and in effect become the story and the characters, in the world we have created.

## **NOW SET YOUR GOAL(S) AND GET SUPPORT**

When you are ready to start writing, it helps to set a daily word count or goal and or time frame that you devote to writing. Writing ten pages a day or 2000 words is a helpful rule of thumb. When you focus and commit, writing every day, you fuel the fire. This gets your partner in creating the unconscious aspects of the process activated. It is also helpful

to set appropriate goals and get support. That is why I developed *The Creative Writer's Way*. It is designed to take writers on the heroic journey of writing their stories based on a modified version of the hero's-journey model outlined by Joseph Campbell coupled with the classic three-act structure story model. The book is designed as a course, includes helping you to meet your muse, to deal with your antagonist, that inner voice of judgment that creates writer's block, as you develop the spinal column to a well-told story and then write it. This makes writing the story a natural process that is, of course, powered by fire and purpose. Having a process like this behind you drives and powers your writing so that you will be able to start and finish as opposed to one who either does not act or lacks the persistence to finish and gives up.

What is your goal? Do you have a plan? While there is no single road map to writing a novel, without a plan and having ongoing support, getting started can be daunting. Writing for our enjoyment is, of course, the ultimate reason. But if you cultivate the persistence, perhaps your goal can be to get published and even become a *NY Times* best seller five years from now— why not? Unlike with non-fiction, fiction writers do not need a platform. What they need is a great story: an intriguing narrative voice, a compelling protagonist and a gripping plot. It all starts with finding the story idea/concept that excites you that provides a purposeful plan for an intriguing story. From there it's about cultivating the fire, absorbing yourself in the story and writing it a way where readers will want to read and know more. If you want to be guided on this journey to find, develop and write your stories,

*The Creative Writer's Way* is the way to go. You can visit my website [www.skylermadisonfontana.com](http://www.skylermadisonfontana.com) to find out about workshops you can attend that are both in person and online take you through the process. Individual coaching is also available to help support you. If you would like more support, feel free to follow my blog and receive powerful and useful tips that will also help you on your journey.

# THE STORY ENGINE BLUEPRINT

The Story Engine Blueprint is designed to help you get where you want to go... to help you excavate, develop and write your stories, so that writing the story becomes easier and the finished product is one you may be able to get published.

