

Story Quest

Creative Writing Guide for Story-Writing Workshops



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INSTITUTE FOR
Excellence in Writing
An effective method for teaching writing skills

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Easy Start-Up Guide

1. Print the whole book and put it in a three-ring binder for yourself.
2. Make extra copies of the Student Handout pages for each of your students. You can make all the copies at the beginning and file them by lesson, or you can just copy the Student Handout pages you need for each lesson as you come to it. Some lessons have quite a few Student Handout pages. Your class fees should be appropriate to cover your paper and ink costs as well as your time and effort.
3. Before your first class, decide what format you want assignments in. In-class assignments of course will be handwritten, but it's up to you to decide how you want homework assignments to be done. I strongly recommend that students word-process their stories on a computer for ease in revising. Decide on a font and type size and ask your students to use it in all their assignments.
4. Be sure to read through all the introductory material before setting up your class schedule. You will need to make a decision about how long you want to spend on each lesson. It can vary from one week to one month or even longer. This material is flexible and can be adapted to suit your schedule.
5. Make sure your students know that they will need a three-ring binder for their Handouts and for their stories. Each time they come they should have their binder, some notebook paper to write on, and two writing utensils (it's always good to have backup). The binder should have dividers for Handouts, Story Planning Worksheets, Vocabulary, In-Class Assignments, and Homework Stories. Insist that they keep all class materials in the binder so they don't accidentally leave a story at home.
6. There are some charts that you may want to enlarge into posters to hang on your classroom walls, such as the **Story Sequence** chart (page 17) and the **VW Story Structure** charts (pages 54–55). It may be helpful to go ahead and make posters before you need them.

Note: You may not have room in your classroom (which may also be a dining room) to keep posters up all the time. There is an easy solution to this. If you have a nail, hook, cabinet, or bookcase to hang things from, you simply clip each of your posters onto a skirt hanger. You will need the kind with swiveling hooks if you will be hanging your posters from a shelf or cabinet. When not in use, they will hang and stay flat in any closet. When it's time for class, hang them in your classroom from whatever is handy. This way, you only have to display the posters you need for that particular class.

Introduction to This Course

This course grew out of a summer story club that I headed up for my home school group in the summer of 2009, and out of multiple story-writing workshops that I have taught over the years in conjunction with the annual story-writing contest that I was responsible for. Many people like the idea of their children writing stories, but they don't know how to teach them and furthermore, they don't always see how they can fit it into the regular school year. Therefore, this course is designed to be used either as a creative writing unit during the school year, or as a summer school course. It could also be spread out over a whole school year by alternating it with your other language arts studies.

I will be honest here. This is a *huge* amount of information to absorb, and for most kids it will involve learning many new writing skills. “School” writing skills are quite different from *creative* writing skills. Do not expect your novice writer to be a pro after completing this course. If mastery is your goal, then you have the usual choice between repetition and duration. Here are the options, all of which should work just fine:

1. Go through the entire course once a year for three years, using the alternate assignments so that the students aren't expected to rewrite the same stories every time. Each year expect them to retain and use more of the skills they've learned. In fact you will probably see a big improvement between first and third year stories.
2. Instead of taking one or two weeks per lesson, take three or four weeks. Use the alternate assignments for each lesson to enable young writers to practice writing more stories using the concepts taught in that lesson. In this case, the story-writing course would be a part of your English/Language studies for the year.
3. If you are doing this course with one or two students at home, you have the choice of staying on one lesson until you feel they have mastered it. This will enable them to work at their own pace and absorb the information over time. This might take up to two full school years, depending on the students' paces and interest levels. This is an enrichment course that would be taught in addition to your other language studies.

These materials can be used with one child or a dozen. The ideal class size would be four to six due to the time it will take for the kids to read their stories out loud to each other. If your class is larger, you could divide the students into groups of four or five, and have the groups stay together for the duration of the class. If you only have one student, he or she will be reading aloud to you and any other family members you can corral. I do think it is important for the kids to have a chance to read their stories out loud.

Each week's class is divided into three parts:

1. Learning about some aspect of writing stories and assigning homework stories

2. Doing an in-class writing assignment to practice what was just learned
3. Reading aloud homework stories to each other, with time for feedback (after the first week, obviously)

Classes don't have to be held every week. If every other week works better for your schedule, that is just fine and will give the kids more time to work on their homework stories. If you are using this material to teach a class, you will probably need about two hours for each class, at least for the first few weeks. In fact you may find it works better to split the first couple of lessons into two class periods. (You may find that the later lessons are somewhat shorter.) The first part will be the actual "class" and in-class writing assignment. Then let the kids get up and run around for a few minutes (a drink and a snack are usually welcome also) before going on to the read-aloud time. In a regular school setting, lessons could be spread over several class periods, with homework due at the end of the lesson. In fact, the students could show you their progress from time to time and get some feedback on their stories in progress.

About grading: I do not put letter grades on stories, especially with young children. I do point out major grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors, though I don't make a big deal about them or mark down for them, and I praise anything that is praiseworthy, e.g., "Your choice of words here really showed what your character was feeling," or "You described this so well I felt I could see it." Then I point out one or two things that need work, e.g., "I was confused here because earlier you said she was afraid of heights," or "I would like to see a little more background information so I'll understand why your character made this choice." You may decide not to point out spelling and grammatical errors at all, especially if you are covering these subjects in a "regular" English class. I personally think kids should know what is legal even if they don't get penalized for their mistakes. If there are many errors, then I would just choose one type of error to focus on at first. If capitalization is a real issue, then deal with that before tackling other problems.

The goal is to help the children see where they can improve their writing, but not to discourage them by pointing out *everything* that is wrong. Younger children especially get discouraged if they feel their work is too full of "mistakes." This class is really about learning to tell stories, not about the mechanics of writing. The important thing is to get children writing—and writing, and writing, and writing some more. Their early stories are not going to be Pulitzer Prize worthy. However, the only way to get good at writing is to do a *lot* of it.

A wise man once told me, "You might have to write ten thousand words before you write a single *good* one." And when I was learning French, a Frenchman told me, "You have to make at least a million mistakes before you become fluent in French, so you might as well jump in and start making your mistakes as quickly as possible!" This is a very freeing mindset. Think of every story as a stepping stone on the way to the goal of masterful story writing. Mistakes will be made, but they're just rungs on the ladder you're climbing, and someday you'll reach the top.

About handwriting versus typing stories on the computer: I strongly encourage kids to write their stories on the computer if they have typing skills. Most kids nowadays are learning to type some time between the ages of 8 and 11, and this course is targeted at 10 to 14-year-olds, so there's a good chance they will already know how to type. I am a strong believer in developing handwriting skills and in keeping the skill of beautiful handwriting alive, but I don't believe a creative writing class is the place to do it. Boys especially seem to be very discouraged by the amount of time it takes to write a story out by hand, and you can forget about *rewriting* it with changes! Corrections and revisions are so much easier to do on the computer. There are also no issues with not being able to decipher someone's handwriting. I would go so far as to allow them to dictate or read their stories to a parent and have the parent type them in, if they are not really typing on their own yet.

Now at some point, someone is going to ask about talent:

“I really don't think my child has a talent for writing.”

“My child doesn't have a very good imagination.”

“My child has great ideas but can't seem to get them on to paper.”

I would be the first to admit that some people are born with an innate ability to spin a good yarn. I have given birth to several of them. They start telling stories with actions before they can even talk. They tell you their dreams every morning—in eye-glazing detail. And then there are kids who can't seem to understand the concept that something might not be “real.” They are stumped when you ask them to tell you a story, especially if you specify they have to “make it up.”

Certainly, the imaginative ones will find it easier to write stories. But the truth is, *anyone* can learn to become a competent writer/storyteller. Some might never learn to come up with original creative story ideas. But they can learn to tell Bible stories in an interesting and effective way, or to tell about things that have happened to them with such skill that people will actively look forward to receiving their annual newsletters some day. That's why this course spends quite a bit of time on *retelling*, which is much less intimidating than thinking up your own story line, while still exercising narrative skills.

A word about story length: This curriculum will work with a fairly wide range of ages. It can be used with precocious fourth graders and with eighth graders. One way to tailor it for different ages is by varying the required/suggested story length. For younger students, a story of 200–500 words is quite an achievement—maybe just one to three paragraphs long. Older students may enjoy the challenge of sustaining a story for 1500 words or more—maybe they'll be inspired to write a novella! Only you know the ability level of your students. It is up to you to settle on an appropriate story length for them to aim for—not too short, but not so long that it's overwhelming. If classes are infrequent and your students are older, it will be more realistic to aim for longer stories.

If you prefer to measure story length by paragraphs instead of words, here are some guidelines. A fifth grader should be able to handle a three- to five-paragraph story. By the end of the course, he or she should be able to handle a seven-paragraph story, which is very handy because he can use the **Story Planning Worksheet** and just write one paragraph for each step instead of one sentence. A sixth grader should be able to write a seven- to nine-paragraph story, and a seventh grader might be able to manage a ten- to twelve-paragraph story. Eighth graders may well be able to sustain a story for fifteen paragraphs or more. But please note that in narrative writing, a paragraph is not simply a unit with “x” number of “facts” like it is in expository writing. A paragraph is more a unit of “action,” and as such might be only one sentence long or ten.

Before the first lesson, I have included a note for parents of young writers. If you are doing this in your home school, it is for you. And if you are teaching other children in addition to or instead of your own, make sure their parents all get a copy when they bring their children for the first lesson. There is also a handout for the students titled “Three Things You Should Know,” which you should go over with them before starting Lesson One.

All the students’ handouts and assignment sheets in this e-book are reproducible, and you have permission to copy them for the children you are teaching. The only additional materials you will need apart from notebooks, paper, and writing implements are:

- Some pictures pulled from magazines or catalogs for Lesson 5 (at least one per student)
- The Pictures for Unit 5 e-book from the Institute for Excellence in Writing (Download this product from their website; see the copyright page in this e-book for instructions.)

A Note to Parents of Young Writers

Dear Parent of an aspiring writer:

This might seem self-evident, but I'll say it anyway. One of the best ways to help your kids with their writing is to surround them with well-written stories. Read them good stories before they can read them on their own. Continue to read them stories that are above their reading level as they get older. In my opinion, there is no age at which a child is "too old" to be read to. My high school and college students still often come running when they hear me reading to their younger siblings! And my grown daughter gets together with friends regularly so they can read aloud to each other. I can't possibly stress enough the importance of reading aloud. Let me say that again: **I can't possibly stress enough the importance of reading aloud to your child.***

Help them pick out great library books, and after they have read them, talk to them about what they liked and didn't like about the story. This will help them recognize what makes a story interesting to read. If it was a short book, ask them to tell you the story in their own words. Telling back a story they already know is an excellent way to practice narration skills.

Another thing you can do is to help your child practice telling stories orally. By this I mean telling about something that happened in a sequential way. For instance, if your child went on an outing of some kind during the day, ask him to tell you about it at the supper table. Prompt him, if necessary, by saying, "What was the first thing you did?" "What happened next?" "What did you think about that?" And prepare to listen patiently to some meandering narratives that seem to go on forever! Bible stories and familiar stories from books or movies make great practice material also. Remember, your child is *practicing* narration skills, and the only way to become skilled is to practice repeatedly over a long period of time. Your ears will survive!

*For more encouragement on the topic of reading aloud to your children, you can download a lecture entitled *Nurturing Competent Communicators* for only \$3 from the Institute for Excellence in Writing. (<http://www.excellenceinwriting.com/ncc-e>)

Scope and Sequence Chart

Lesson	Class Periods	Topics Covered	Materials Required
Lesson 1	1–3, depending on length of class	Story Writing: a learned skill Narrative structure Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs Vocabulary words Planning/Writing a 7-sentence story	Three Things You Should Know . . . Narrative Writing handout Story Sequence Chart Three Kinds of Words handout Story Planning worksheets Setting the Scene handout Vocabulary/Assignment handout
Lesson 2	1–2	Vocabulary words Telling back a short story Rewriting a fable in their own words	Aesop’s Fables (included) Ass & Lapdog/Androcles handout Vocabulary/Assignment handout Guidelines for Read-Aloud Time Key Word Outline review (optional)
Lesson 3	1–2	Vocabulary words Describing a picture Using pictures to tell a story Using pictures to write a story	Pictures from magazines/catalogs Describing Game handout Vocabulary/Assignment handout Downloaded pictures from IEW Writing From Pictures worksheets
Lesson 4	1	Vocabulary words Point of view Omniscient and Limited POV	Point of View handout Vocabulary/Assignment handout Fairy tale/Bible story handouts Fairy Tale story book (optional)
Lesson 5	1–2	Vocabulary words Creating memorable characters Inciting incident The character’s journey	Writing About People handout VW story structure handout Character worksheets Vocabulary/Assignment handout
Lesson 6	1–2	Vocabulary words Quotation marks rules Writing dialogue Making dialogue a crucial story element Interspersing beats with dialogue Dialogue tag dos and don’ts	Dialogue Basics handout Quotation Marks Rules handout Quotation Marks/Punctuation worksheet Synonyms for <i>said</i> handout Take-Home Dialogue Worksheet Vocabulary/Assignment handout
Lesson 7	1–2	Vocabulary words Writing scenes Some stylistic devices Showing versus telling	Cliché handout Showing? Yes! Telling? No! handout Vocabulary/Assignment handout
Lesson 8	1–2	Vocabulary Words Importance of antagonist Creating an antagonist Creating conflict	You’ll Never See Your Little Girl Again! Character worksheets Vocabulary/Assignment handout
Lesson 9	1	Vocabulary Words The concept of denouement Recognizing satisfactory endings “New normal” at end of story	Finish Strong handout Title Time handout Vocabulary/Assignment handout
Lesson 10	1–2	Vocabulary Words Starting with a “hook” Importance of consistent tense Revising your writing Vocabulary Quiz (optional)	Tinkering and Revising handout Vocabulary/Resource handout Vocabulary Word List (optional) Vocabulary Quiz (optional)

Lesson One: Introduction to Narrative Writing

Goals for Lesson One:

1. To introduce the concept that storytelling/writing is a skill that can be learned.
2. To make sure students understand the basic structure of a narrative.
3. To introduce students to the power of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.
4. To teach students the meaning of the words *character*, *genre*, *plot*, and *setting*.
5. For students to learn how to plan a seven-sentence story and then write it.
6. For students to participate in writing a story together as a group.

Materials Needed for Lesson One:

- **Three Things You Should Know About Writing Stories** handout
- **Narrative Writing** handout and examples
- **Story Sequence Chart** (either use as a handout or make a poster to hang on classroom wall)
- **Vocabulary/Assignment** sheets for the students
- Vocabulary words for this week: *character*, *genre*, *plot*, *setting*. Students should have a section in their notebooks for writing-related vocabulary.
- The **Three Kinds of Words** Handout
- Two **Story Planning Worksheets** for each of your students
- **Setting the Scene** handout

Teaching Procedure for Lesson One:

This lesson may take two or more class periods, depending on how long your classes are and how much discussion you incorporate.

First of all, here's a suggestion for a little friendly competition. If you've read the *Note to Parents of Young Writers*, you know that reading aloud to children is very important. I would go so far as to say that it is *crucial* in developing a child's storytelling skills. To encourage this, you could start off the first class by saying that you're going to have a contest to see who can accumulate the most minutes of being read to by a parent or other family member. I have included a sheet at the end of this lesson which your students can take home to their parents, explaining how it works. Each class, ask students bring a signed note from the parent saying how many minutes were spent reading aloud since the last class. A poster with a bar graph would be a good way to track everyone's totals. At the end of the class, there should be some kind of prize or recognition not just for the student, but for the parent who did all the reading!

Please note: This activity is optional but encouraged.

Start this and every class period by going over the week's vocabulary words, all of which are writing-related. This week's words are *character*, *genre*, *plot*, and *setting*. Have each student name a favorite character from a book they have read. Plot and setting will obviously get more

attention later on, but they just need to be familiar with the terms now and what they mean. Then let the students help you compile a list of books (and movies if they draw a blank) in different genres, to help them understand the concept. Some genres you can mention are historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy, contemporary, romance, suspense, and mystery.

Now on to the “meat” of the lesson: A narrative is a story, and a story is simply something that happened, or that *could* have happened and that somebody made up. Explain to your students that we tell and hear stories every day of our life. Here are some examples:

- A newscaster reports on a political or economic summit.
- A feature story in the newspaper tells about a lost dog which was returned to its owner.
- A young boy explains to his mother why he was late to supper.
- A father tells his children about a fondly-remembered childhood escapade.
- A Sunday School teacher tells her class the story of Ruth and Boaz.

Prompt your students to think of other examples. All of these examples are stories. So you see, there is no such thing as someone who is unable to write stories. Our lives are full of stories, and we all tell them and hear them every day. Learning to write them down is not very difficult, and learning to write them *well* is a skill that everyone can learn. Like every skill, the more it is practiced, the better your writing will become.

In this first lesson we will cover the basic parts of every narrative. No doubt you have heard that every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is true, but it is also not much help! So we will start by talking about the four parts of a story, *after* going over the **Three Things You Should Know** handout. Discuss the two-page **Narrative Writing** handout with your students *before* handing it out. Afterwards, go over the **Story Sequence Chart** with them also. This should be familiar to students who are already using Excellence in Writing materials. This is something that would make a great poster for your classroom wall.

Next, go over the **Three Kinds of Words** handout. Explain that you will be talking a lot more about all three kinds of words in the future. When trying to make your writing more interesting, picking a stronger verb should always be the first choice.

Now it’s time for a few words about how boys and girls are often quite different when it comes to their approach to writing. Girls tend to write lots of description with no conflict, because girls hate conflict and love happy endings. Boys write all action! Read aloud the **How Not To Do It** page with the sample “boy” and “girl” stories to show what you mean. Girls need to add conflict and boys need to add characterization. Everyone should understand more about this by the end of this course, but for now it’s enough that they can recognize that neither extreme is ideal.

Take a few minutes to go over the **Setting the Scene** handout. Explain that setting the scene should be a very short part of the story. There should be just enough details for the reader to be able to understand the action of the story. In a seven-sentence story, you only get one sentence for setting the scene.

In-Class Assignment:

Sometimes it is fun to write a story as a group. This works quite well for writing a seven-sentence story. You will need a blackboard or whiteboard to write the story on so your students can see it as it is written. (They can copy it down if they like, or you can type it up after class and give them each a copy at your next class.) Before starting your story, hand out the Setting the Scene papers and go over them with the students. Explain that in a very short story like the one you are about to write, you only have one sentence to set the scene. In longer stories, you have a little more space, but not much—because the story is about what *happens*, not about describing the scene.

- Have one student choose a name for the protagonist (and whether it is a girl or boy).
- Have another student pick the setting for the story, including time period, location, etc.
- Have another student pick the “problem” in the story.
- Now when everyone has these details in their heads, have another student make up the first sentence of the story, which sets the scene. If he or she gets stuck, go ahead and hint.
- The next student composes sentence two. Be sure to keep the story on “track.” Sentence two should just be starting the action, but not arrive at the problem yet.
- Have students take turns composing sentences—with your guidance—until your seven-sentence story is complete. If a student seems stumped when it’s her turn, let others offer suggestions.
- Read the story out loud and explain what each sentence contributes to the story.

Now have the students get out some paper and write their own seven-sentence story. Go ahead and give them a **Story Planning Worksheet** to help them remember each part of the story, but ask them to first tell their story out loud to a classmate. Telling the story before writing it can be very helpful for young writers. Pick one of the prompts on the assignment sheet for them to use. The others are alternate assignments. Remember, each story can only be seven sentences for this lesson. Depending on the length of the sentences, this may end up being two or three paragraphs.

Before they leave, be sure to give them a second Story Planning Worksheet and another story prompt. The prompts are short so the kids could just copy them down on to their Vocabulary/Assignment sheets. Explain that they will be writing another seven-sentence story from the prompt you have selected. They may also have the option of writing about a true-life event if you like. Give them the choice of which story they will bring to read aloud in class next time. Be sure they know they are expected to finish both stories and to bring at least one of them back to the next class.

Welcome to Story Quest!

Three Things You Should Know About Writing Stories

1. **It is a learned skill.** *Anyone* can learn to write a story. Some people learn more quickly or easily than others, but everyone can learn to do it and even get good at it.
2. **The only way to get good at writing stories is to write a lot.** If the actual process of writing them down is too hard for you at first then start by *telling* stories. If you can't think of anything, tell someone the plot of a book you read, making sure to include all the important points. This is good practice! Sooner or later, though, you'll have to write and write and keep writing. Then you should write some more.
3. **No story is ever finished until it has been published.** The perfect story has never been written. You can go back and revise and improve and change things as many times as you want. *Nothing is permanent!* You can go back *years* later and rewrite it if you want to.

Narrative Writing

The Four Parts of a Story

1. **The Setting:**

Where does this story take place?

What does the place look like, smell like, feel like, sound like?

When does this story happen—in the past, future, present? Morning, afternoon, or evening?

Who is in the story? **What** does he/she need or want? Setting may also include introduction of characters, especially in a short story.

2. **The Problem:** Something must happen that requires a solution. A mistake is made, perhaps, or something important is lost, or someone finds himself faced with excitement or danger of some kind. Usually this means that something happens to stop the character from getting what he/she wants. Somehow your main character must end up in a predicament or situation from which he must be extricated. It doesn't have to be a life-or-death situation, but it does have to be enough of a problem to make the story interesting to read!

3. **The Solution:** The problem is solved. Someone saves the day. The hero kills the dragon. The long-lost money is discovered. The lovers are reunited. You get the picture.

4. **The Conclusion/Resolution:** All the loose ends get tied up, and things return to “normal.” Did the characters learn anything? How did they feel about what happened? If it happened in the past, how do they feel about it now?

It might sound like fitting all four parts into a story would take a lot of words, but this is not necessarily true. A good way to practice recognizing and writing the four parts of a story is to write short stories that are only four to seven sentences long. To start with, write about some event that actually happened to you. On the next page are two examples of true stories, both of which can be told in seven sentences.

Two Seven-Sentence Stories Using All Four Parts

Footsteps in the Night

1. **Setting / Introduction:** Janet was fast asleep in her bed when a noise woke her up.
2. **Details/starting the action:** She heard footsteps crunching on the gravel as someone walked past her window.
3. **Problem:** She was sure someone was trying to break into the house.
4. **More detail:** She quietly got out of bed and scratched on her parents' door, and then told them what was happening, even as she heard someone trying to open the front door.
5. **Solution:** Janet's dad came to her room with his gun and stuck it out the window, waiting for the prowler to come around again.
6. **Conclusion:** After walking all the way around the house, the prowler turned the corner, saw the gun, and took off running.
7. **Resolution:** Janet went back to bed but found it difficult to sleep because she kept listening for the sound of footsteps.

A Hairy Problem

1. **Setting / Introduction:** Nine-year-old Peggy hated to brush and comb her long, thick, blonde hair.
2. **Details/starting the action:** Often, she would allow her hair to get so tangled that it took her mother more than an hour to comb it out.
3. **Problem:** After she had repeatedly wasted her mother's time in this way, her mother said that if it happened again, Peggy would have to have her beautiful, long hair cut short.
4. **More detail:** She loved her long hair, but she hated taking care of it, so after a few weeks she became careless and allowed it to get very tangled again.
5. **Solution:** Y j gp'uj g'cungf "j gt'o qvj gt"vq"eqo d"qw'vj g'cpi ngu."j gt'o qvj gt'f kf "uq'y kj qw'eqo o gpv."dw rvtgt"vj cv'gxgpkpi "j gt'rcvj gt"gzr rclpgf "vj cv'uj g'y qwf "j cxg"vq"j cxg"j gt"j ckt"ew'uj qtv'cu'ci tggf "qp0
6. **Conclusion:** Peggy was horrified and dismayed when she saw her shorn locks in the mirror, and she finally realized that if she wanted to have long hair, she would have to learn to take care of it.
7. **Resolution:** She took very good care of her hair as it slowly grew longer, and her mother never had to comb it for her again.

Another Way to Look at Story Structure

The Story Sequence Chart

I. WHO is in the story? (What are they like?)

When does it happen?

Where do they live or go?

II. WHAT do they need or want?

What do they think?

What do they say and do?

III. HOW is the need resolved?

What happens after?

What is learned?

Final clincher repeats/reflects title.

Two Extremes: How Not to Do It

Typical “Boy” Story: William’s Adventure

William ran into the burning building. His sister was screaming for help! William ran up the flaming stairs. They collapsed behind him! He reached his sister’s bedroom. “I have to throw you out the window,” he said. “It’s the only way.” His sister was scared but she had no choice. He dropped her out of the window into the arms of their Mom and Dad. Then the floor collapsed! He fell into the living room. He was attacked by a man with a sword! He grabbed a poker to defend himself. The poker was so hot he burned his hand! The man with the sword chased him as he ran for the front door. He tripped and fell! The man fell on top of him! William grabbed the sword and wiggled away from the man. The man was burning! William grabbed the man’s boot and dragged him out the door. They were hit by a blast of water from the firemen’s hoses! William nearly drowned! Then a helicopter came and lifted him to safety! But then he realized that he wasn’t safe after all. The helicopter was really a UFO and there were aliens inside! William fainted.

The End

Typical “Girl” Story: Princess Annabella

Annabella looked out her window and sighed. She liked being a princess, but sometimes she got bored. She had a beautiful view from the window of her tower in the castle. Down below she could see miles and miles of beautiful green fields and pastures. There was a huge dark forest to the east, and in the south the Silver Lake gleamed and glittered. The red roofs of the village nestled between the fields and the forest. From her other window, she could look down into the castle courtyard and see the stables where her horse Windflower was waiting for her. She saw her brother practicing his fencing with the swordmaster, and she saw smoke coming from the smithy where Cedric was working on a new suit of armor for her father. As she watched, a group of richly dressed horsemen rode up the causeway and through the open gate of the courtyard. Even from this height, she could see that one of them was Prince Alfred! That afternoon he asked her to marry him, and Annabella said yes. Now she would go to live with Prince Alfred and she would never be bored again. They lived happily ever after.

The End

Three Kinds of Words You Need to Know

Think of these words as your secret weapons. You will use these weapons to kill boring language. Just like real weapons, some are sharper and more effective than others.

Sharpest: Verbs

Verbs are action words. Good verbs make a sentence much more interesting. Here are some examples:

Okay: He swung his sword.

Better: He *brandished* his sword.

Okay: She told him to stop.

Better: “Stop!” she *shrieked*.

Okay: He walked over to the sink.

Better: He *stomped* over to the sink.

Sharper: Adjectives

Adjectives are describing words. Adjectives help your readers to “see” the story in their heads. Adjectives should be vivid, not dull. Just remember, *too many* adjectives result in what is called “purple prose.” Here are some examples:

Okay: She picked a flower.

Better: She picked a *vivid red* geranium.

Okay: She had a daughter.

Better: She had a *bewitching, blonde* pixie of a daughter.

Okay: He was a musician.

Better: He was a *head-nodding, piano-banging* ragtime pianist who looked like something out of an Old West saloon.

Sharp: Adverbs

Adverbs are like salt. A few adverbs can make a story better, but too many make a salty mess. Adverbs describe a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. They often end with the letters “ly.” However, not every word that ends in “ly” is an adverb. Use adverbs with discretion. Two are three per page is plenty. Examples:

Describing a verb: He brandished the bat *menacingly*.

Describing an adjective: The lake was *gloriously* blue and inviting.

Describing another adverb: He ran *amazingly* fast in spite of his injury.

Setting the Scene

Every story takes place somewhere, some time in the past, present, or future. If you want your readers to really get into your story, you have to help them “see” the time and place in their heads as they’re reading. This means you have to describe the setting in a way that is vivid, yet doesn’t get in the way of the story.

Does your story happen in the past? How can you show this?

Jennifer arrived home just in time to watch Neil Armstrong’s landing on the moon with her family.

Anne saw the Viking ships enter the harbor and ran screaming to warn the village.

Marcus ran past the Forum on the way to the baths to take a message to his father.

Does your story happen in the present? How can you show this?

Derek yelled at Amy, but she didn’t hear him because she had the volume cranked up on her iPod.

He fell asleep listening to his parents discuss the policies of President Barack Obama.

He couldn’t wait for his favorite movie to come out on Blu-ray.

Does your story happen in the future? How can you show this?

Flynn escaped the traffic and the high cost of real estate by living in a zeppelin.

She heard the announcer make the boarding call for the next flight to Mars.

Life on Titan was harsh, but the view of Saturn’s rings was out of this world.

Time of day: Can you show it without saying, “It was late afternoon?”

The moonlight was so bright that she didn’t need a flashlight.

The birds were singing, but the sun was not up yet when he slipped from the house with his fishing rod.

She squinted in the bright noonday sun and almost immediately began sweating.

Where does your story take place? How can you show this?

The coarse sand of the beach crunched under her bare feet as she walked to the dock.

The green light of the forest made it look like everything was under water.

The thin mountain air made him feel a little lightheaded as he hiked through the snow on his way to the cabin.

He looked out over a sea of traffic that belched smoke and filled the air with honking horns, and turned gratefully back to his air conditioned office.

The neighborhood kids were playing a spirited game of “capture the flag” while their parents sat on porches and visited over tall glasses of iced tea.