

105. Story Writing: Developing the Conflict

Lesson Survey

- The **conflict** of a story must portray the main character in conflict with another person, with his circumstances, or with his own self.
- The conflict of a story does not need to be something spectacular.
- The conflict should be introduced early in the story, it should build up in intensity as the story develops, and it should lead to a climax near the end of the story.
- When the conflict is over, the story should end with a brief, pointed conclusion.

In Lesson 102 you learned that a short story usually revolves around one main character. A worthwhile, interesting story tells about a *conflict* or problem that the main character faces. Without a conflict, the “story” merely reports an incident. Conflict is what holds the reader’s interest. He reads on to see what the main character does next, how he solves his problem, and what the final outcome is.

There are three main kinds of conflict in short stories.

1. *The main character may be in conflict with another person.* He may be resisting the good influence of his parents, his teacher, or some other person. Or he may be resisting the wrong influence of someone. This kind of conflict also occurs when the main character must endure the ill will or unkindness of another.

The stories of David killing Goliath and of Jeremiah being persecuted are examples of this kind of conflict. Other examples are a young person who struggles to accept his parents’ advice, or a student who struggles to get along with a fellow student at school.

2. *The main character may be in conflict with his circumstances.* This kind of conflict occurs when a character must deal with circumstances rather than with another person.

If the cherished plans of the main character are changed because of the weather or someone else’s sickness, he is in conflict with his circumstances. If the character must learn to accept the braces in his mouth or the wheelchair to which he is confined, he also faces this kind of conflict.

3. *The main character may be in conflict with his own self.* This kind

of conflict occurs when the main character must deal with his own conscience, feelings, and desires.

He may be trying to overcome a bad habit, like complaining too much, or a wrong attitude, like disrespect or jealousy. He may have a guilty conscience because of some wrong he has done or something he should have done and failed to do. Any time the main character knows what is right but finds it hard to do right, he is facing this kind of conflict.

In trying to plan a story, have you ever felt that nothing great or unusual happens to you? "What can *I* write about?" you may have asked. Remember that the conflict of a story does not need to be something spectacular. Look for the three kinds of conflict in the simple happenings of a normal day. The examples given under the previous three points are conflicts that you or your friends have probably faced a number of times.

In Lesson 102 you learned that the main character should be introduced at the very beginning of a story. The conflict is the reason that the main character is in the story. It is what holds the reader's interest and makes him want to read on. Of course, the conflict is not fully explained at the beginning of the story; only a hint is given. Read the following story beginnings. Both of them hint at a conflict but do not state it directly.

"I can hardly wait to play ball again."

"Softball is so much fun!"

David listened to the excited talk of his classmates while he slowly chewed his sandwich. "I don't know why they think playing ball is so much fun," he thought miserably. "Maybe if I could bat as well as the other boys . . . but I can't even hit the ball."

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"I don't care," Thelma blurted as she entered the kitchen door. "It's not one bit fair."

"I don't think so either." And Kathy set her lunch box on the counter with a clatter.


Mother looked up in surprise from her ironing.

The conflict should build up in intensity as the story develops. Unless the story is very short, the main character often faces his conflict two or more times before it is settled. The very fact that the same problem arises a second or third time increases the reader's interest in how the main character will finally settle the issue. Moreover, each new incident often involves stronger emotion than the previous incident.


Think back to the story "Pitch or Patch?" in Lesson 102. The first incident of the conflict is near the beginning, when Evelyn realizes that she will need to wear the patched dress to school. The second incident occurs when



she sees Mother patching Ronald's trousers, and the point is reemphasized that patches do not look terrible. The third incident is when Evelyn puts on the dress and has a sickening feeling of dread about wearing a patched dress to school. Especially in this third incident, Evelyn's feelings about wearing a patched dress are more intense than they were in the previous incidents.




The conflict should lead to a climax. The climax is actually the last and most intense incident in the conflict. At this point in the story, the main character's response brings either victory or defeat.



In the story "Pitch or Patch?" the fourth and climaxing incident in the conflict occurs when Evelyn sees the patch on Brother Vernon's shirtsleeve. Reread the following paragraph, which shows the intensity of her feelings at this point as well as her right response that brings victory.


Evelyn was startled. Brother Vernon was wearing a patched shirt in school! A patch! Maybe she was being overly sensitive about such things. It did not look bad at all, that little patch on Brother Vernon's shirtsleeve. Maybe Mother was wiser than Evelyn had thought.



When the conflict is over, the story should end with a brief, pointed conclusion. It should be short because the conflict is over and the reader's curiosity is satisfied. The conclusion should show rather than tell the lesson of the story. In the example story, this is done by describing the glow of happiness that Evelyn felt and the renewed appreciation she had for her mother.



Class Practice



A. Tell which story beginning better introduces a conflict.

1. a. "Do you know the Rhodes family that is moving here?" Barbara asked her friend Joan after prayer meeting.



"I don't really know them," Joan replied. "But from what I've seen and heard, it seems like they are a nice family. Do you know them?"

"No, I just wondered if you knew anything about them," replied Barbara.

- b. "What do you think of the Rhodes family that is moving here?" Barbara asked her friend Joan after prayer meeting.

"I don't really know them," Joan replied. "But from what I've seen and heard, it seems like they are a nice family."

"Well, I heard some things about Cynthia," stated Barbara. She lowered her voice as several ladies passed close by.

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2. a. Thirteen-year-old Marlene stepped back and critically surveyed the wet kitchen floor. Yes, it was spotless, she was certain. Now her work was done and she could read. Picking up the bucket of dirty water, she went to empty it.
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In earlier lessons of this chapter, you studied two important things that make a good story—the way the main character is portrayed and the way the conflict is developed. This lesson will show you how to write stories with an interesting, readable style. Your stories should *show* details rather than merely *telling* about them. Your readers should feel as if they can hear the conversations and see the activities in your story.

Natural Dialogue

One of the most important ways to show the details of a story is to use plenty of *dialogue* (written conversation) and to make sure it sounds natural. Dialogue helps to make the characters and events seem real. Compare the following two story beginnings. Notice how much more natural the dialogue is in the second one than in the first one.

"We have so many beans. I am tired of snapping all these beans," sighed ten-year-old Denise.

"We have finished over half the job." Her older sister Danelle tried to give some encouragement. "Denise, would you like to hang out the laundry? The washer just stopped."

"Certainly, I would like that," Denise replied, eager to take a break from doing beans. Quickly she went to get the laundry basket.

Coming back through the kitchen, she overheard some of what Danelle was saying to Darla and Daryl, the younger helpers.

"Maybe we can do that," she ended.

"Maybe you can do what?" Denise asked with interest.

"Maybe we can do something," answered Darla.

"You will find out later," added Danelle.

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"Beans, beans, beans. I'm tired of snapping all these beans," sighed ten-year-old Denise.

"We've finished over half the job." Her older sister Danelle tried to give some encouragement. "Denise, would you like to hang out the laundry? The washer just stopped."

"Certainly," Denise replied, eager to take a break from doing beans. Quickly she went to get the laundry basket.

Coming back through the kitchen, she overheard some of what Danelle was saying to Darla and Daryl, the younger helpers.

"Maybe we can," she ended.

"Can what?" Denise asked with interest.

"Something," answered Darla abruptly.

"You'll find out later," added Danelle.

Look again at the second sample above. There are several things that

especially help to make the conversation sound natural. First, *the speakers use contractions* as we often do in real life. Second, *the speakers use incomplete sentences*. Although these things are not acceptable in formal writing, they do contribute to natural dialogue. Third, *the speakers change frequently* from one to another. There should not be many long quotations in a story.

In dialogue, be careful to put quotation marks only where they belong. If a speaker says several sentences together, do not put quotation marks around every sentence. Put them only at the beginning and end of the whole quotation. The words that simply tell the story should not be inside quotation marks.

Begin a new paragraph in your story each time you begin a new topic. Also begin a new paragraph each time a different person begins to speak.

Another way to write dialogue that shows rather than tells is to use descriptive explanatory words. *Said* is a good word; you should not be afraid to use it sometimes. But it is not very descriptive. Characters should *ask, whisper, shout, complain, demand, and suggest* some of their words. Try to think of words that describe exactly *how* the speakers talk.

Sometimes writers think that natural-sounding dialogue should include poor grammar and slang. Although some people do use such expressions in their conversations, they are not necessary to make natural conversations. Such expressions are unsuitable for Christian writing.

Lively Action Verbs

Another way to show the details of the story is to use lively action verbs as much as possible. If you use too many linking verbs and use the passive voice too freely, your characters will seem motionless. Even verbs in the active voice can be used in a way that dulls the action of the story. But if you use lively, active verbs, your story will seem real—as if it were happening right before your reader's eyes.

In each pair of examples, notice how much more effective the second example is than the first.

Charlene's face was full of smiles again.

Charlene smiled freely again.

Later in the evening Mary Louise was reminded of her fault.

Later in the evening Mother reminded Mary Louise of her fault.

The wind grew strong. Soon the windows were rattling and the tree branches were tossing in the storm.

The wind increased in strength. Soon the storm rattled the windows and tossed the tree branches.

Exact, Descriptive Words

Still another help for showing rather than merely telling the story is to use specific words instead of general ones. Use words that paint definite, concrete word pictures. Specific words help your reader to know exactly what is happening in the story. They add color and interest. Do not write *building* if *woodshed* or *two-car garage* would give the reader a better picture. Do not write *walk* if *trudge*, *hike*, or *stroll* would show the story better.

Poor: Too general

The animals in their pen had eaten all their food.
Nevin went into the room, picked something up, and went out to the van in a hurry.

Better: More specific

The rabbits in their hutch had eaten all their clover.
Nevin dashed into the kitchen, grabbed his books from the table, and hurried out to the school van.

Merely tells:

As Philip lay on the grass, he saw the clouds moving across the sky.
Nancy felt the cold coming through her coat.

Shows descriptively:

Philip lay on the warm grass. Above him large cumulus clouds floated across the sky.
Nancy shivered in the bitter cold, which crept through her thin coat.

In some cases you do not need to state the character's relationship to a scene. If the preceding sentences clarify what that relationship is, simply describe the scene. Compare the following examples.

Weak: Too much emphasis on character's relationship to the scene

Lowell parked his wheelchair before the large family room window. Suddenly he saw a large buck stepping out of the woods. He watched as it bounded across the narrow, rock-strewn meadow and leaped over the board fence.

Better: Proper emphasis on the scene itself

Lowell parked his wheelchair before the large family room window. Suddenly a large buck stepped out of the woods. It bounded across the narrow, rock-strewn meadow and leaped over the board fence.