

***Dear Writers,  
We have chosen a wildly ambitious life, haven't we?***

***This handout will offer you questions and ideas to inspire you, help you put your ideas together, and embrace structure as part of your process. This is the magic side of writing—of stepping away from your manuscript and re-embracing the power of play! It allows you to reflect!***

***Use these questions to help you get unstuck. Or use them to dig deeper into your characters. Or use them to find inspiration when your revision offers you problems.***

***These questions should allow your subconscious to get re-engaged, re-energized, and refocused. -Sarah***

***“You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children.”***

***— Madeleine L'Engle***

## **Questions to jumpstart your process:**

**What do you know about yourself and your process? What do you enjoy the most? What about your story do you love the most? Are you getting the feedback that inspires you?**

When was the last time you felt inspired? What did you do when you felt this way? What can you do to welcome inspiration?

Do you know what derails you? What is your goal setting process?



Accountability matters! Who is checking in on your writing progress? What are you sharing and when?

What time does your imagination work best? Do you have writing rituals? What is working? What doesn't?

## Embrace THEME: Play with Purpose

All creative acts are a form of play. Without play, learning and evolution are impossible. Technique springs from play, because we only acquire technique through the practice of practice. -Stephen Nachmanovich

What is the story behind the story?

Do you know the WHY behind your story?

Where and when did you find your story? What was going on in your life? And the world?

What is it about this project that has kept you in the chair?

What do you hope your readers will talk about after they are done reading? What is your book about in ten words or less? 100 words? 250 words? Why is this story important to you?

Who are YOU in this story?

At the end, what do you want to say?

Write a letter to your manuscript. What if your manuscript wrote back?

FOR PICTURE BOOK WRITERS: What is the ONE TRUE THING your story is about? Why does this one true thing matter to you?



## CHARACTER QUESTIONS (there are never enough of these!)

A character can be directly revealed to [readers] through appearance, dialogue, action, and thought. If [authors] set one of these methods (most frequently thought) at odds with the others, then dramatic tension will be produced." This dramatic tension is what makes the character less predictable and causes the reader to want to keep reading. It can also cause readers to sympathize and root for a bully. - Janet Burroway

*Character is the foundation of our stories. So getting to know your characters is essential to discovering how your novel will start and end.*

First impression: what is the first thing they do, say, and think?

Last impression: what is the last thing they do, say, and think?

Mirror moment: Can you pinpoint the moment when your character turns to virtue?

Exercise: List five things your character does. What does this say about this character? The world?

What do your characters want? Why?

What do they fear? Why?

What are their misbeliefs? When did they begin? Do you know their line in the sand?

Examine your characters' final scenes. How do they change?

If they don't change, why not?

**COZY up to what makes you and your characters uncomfortable. These questions will also help you identify more beginnings that excite and endings that surprise and reward.**

Ask:

- What is the worst thing that happens in your story?
- What burdens does your character carry with her—from the beginning? Does she unload that burden? How and when? What has she done wrong?
- Does your character have a secret? Whom does it involve? Who else knows? Who CANNOT know?
- What is the biggest mistake your character has made?
- What does she avoid doing?
- What kind of compensating behaviors do we see? Does your character wear one mask around some people, and another when she is with others?
- What is your character's temperament?
- What burdens does your character carry with her—from the beginning? Does she unload that burden? How and when?
- What is the biggest mistake your character has ever made?
- What are your characters avoiding? In conversation or in action? What are the things they will not say to each other?
- Does your character wear one mask around some people, and another when she is with others? WHY?
- What must your character confront? WHY?
- What are the values your character believes in? WHY?
- What leads to catharsis? WHY?
- In the end, what does your character lose?
- Where do your characters turn toward virtue?
- What are your characters avoiding? In conversation or in action?
- What must your character confront?
- What are the values your character believes in? What are the rules? Do you want to affirm them or break them?
- What leads to catharsis? What is the most difficult thing they have to do? Who is involved? Who witnesses? Who shakes their head with disdain?

- Examine TONE. Does it match the events of your story?
- Examine PROFLUENCE.
- Examine WHITE SPACE. Are there scenes or summaries you can leave out?

## HOOK YOUR READER with a GREAT BEGINNING

- In the beginning: what does your character want? Fear? What are their misbeliefs? When did these misbeliefs begin?
- Reimagine your opening in a different point of view. What have you been missing?
- How will your character CHANGE during the story?
- Who is your ideal reader?
- Look at ten great first pages. Type them out. Examine them. Think about what YOU love about them.
- Draw your character. What do they look like? Who are they at the start of the story?

## SIDE WRITING to get your subconscious excited

- • Write a letter from your main character to you. Where have you let them off easy?
- • Write a letter to your manuscript.
- • Write an epilogue. Where will the characters be ten years from the end of the book?
- • Ask your characters WHO ARE YOU? Answer this question at least 15 times. But maybe even more. (By the time I press SEND, I am usually up to 75 for all my main characters.)

**In the end, what would your character say to you: where have you let them off easy??**

What is the most difficult choice you have ever made?

What is the most difficult choice your MC makes?

How does this choice reflect on the beginning and middle? Make a list of first and last lines



## YOUR INEVITABLE SURPRISING ENDING:

“Creativity is sacred, and it is not sacred. What we make matters enormously, and it doesn’t matter at all. We toil alone, and we are accompanied by spirits. We are terrified, and we are brave. Art is a crushing chore and a wonderful privilege. Only when we are at our most playful can divinity finally get serious with us. Make space for all these paradoxes to be equally true inside your soul, and I promise— you can make anything. So please calm down now and get

back to work, okay? The treasures that are hidden inside you are hoping you will say yes.” - Elizabeth Gilbert

### Questions to ask:

- What is your ending asking you to do?
- What is your ending pushing you to do more of?
- What does your ending say to the world? Have you pulled it out of the hat? Have you stepped in for your characters? Have you not honored your readers?
- In the end, what does your character lose?
- At the end of each chapter, what does your reader hope or dread will happen next?
- Where in the story do your characters turn toward virtue?
- What forces them to change? If they do not change, what emotions are you leaving your reader to grapple with?
- Examine the mirror moment for insight into your ending
- How are you leaving your reader with hope?

## Explore STRUCTURE

“One of the things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.” -Annie Dillard

### Questions to ask:

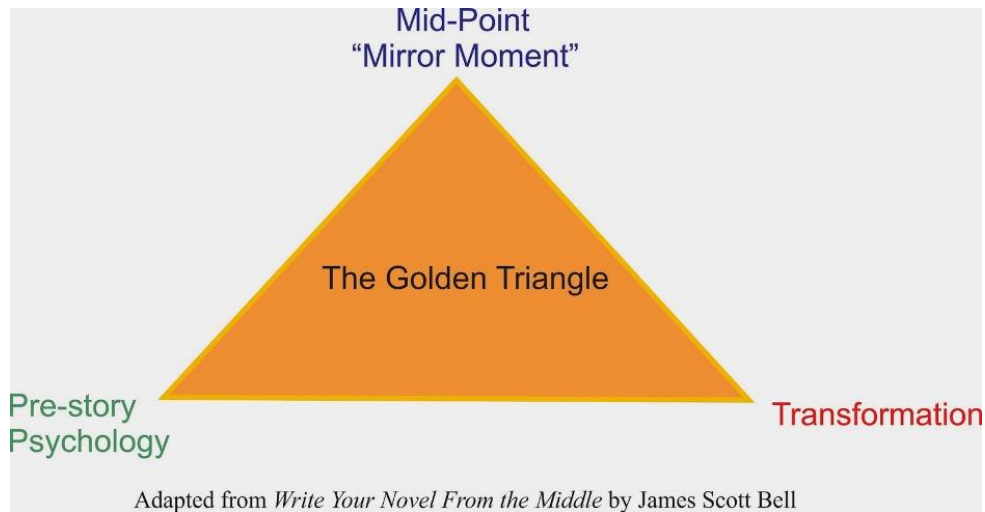
- What is the point of each scene? What happens in each scene?
- What subtext is being communicated in gestures and narrative?

In DIALOGUE: What is said? What is unsaid? What is unsayable?

- Are the most important characters in every scene?
- Are your characters responding to the actions of others?
- Consider SETTING. Where does your story take place? Is your setting authentically diverse?
- Examine the main plot turns. Does your viewpoint character have agency? Are the obstacles adding tension?
- Write a log line. Write one for the book you write. Now revise it for the book you want to write. What differs? Pinpoint missing scenes and emotions.

- What is your story about in ten words or less? Why is this theme important to you? Where do the characters illuminate these themes?
- Jot down the first and last line of every chapter. (This really works!!!)
- Use the scene cards! Jot down what you wrote. (Be truthful.) And then write down what you WISH you'd written! (This works for storyboarding, too.)

## RESOURCES



## Chapter by chapter or Scene by scene

Hook in	"What are you doing here?"
Hook out	Joe runs
What happens	Abby confronts Joe. He breaks the <u>pocketwatch</u> .
Surprises/Change/Twist	Joe has the watch
Questions asked	--
Questions answered	Who has the pocket watch?
Questions pending	Who killed <u>Dr. Blaisdale</u> ? Where will Joe live? What happened to the <u>Schmidts</u> ?
Notes/other	Third time Abby has been to town

(courtesy of Chris Tebbetts)

# THE PLOT PLANNER

“Structure is freedom.” -Norma Fox Mazer

The credit for this planner goes to David Gill. He gave me permission to play with it and share it. I invite you to play with it, too. It is a flexible document. It has helped me at different stages of the writing process.

Obviously, this is very general and may seem too simplistic. It helps me when I can pick out the landmarks, so I can better see where these landmarks fall and where I need to add in more scenes, or take some away.

If I can pinpoint some or all of the landmarks, I can figure out:

- If I know my characters.
- If I don't.
- If my plot is imbalanced—too much in one act over another
- If my secondary characters are missing the best scenes
- If a secondary character could offer more subplot to support the plot.

I have put the most important items in red and blue.

Here is the **MY MOST IMPORTANT RULE**: Your job is to move the character LOGICALLY through the story with a goal that ends with CHANGE. The more consistent the goal, the better. This will also help you think about CAUSALITY. Actions lead to reactions lead to actions that create tension and conflict. A person can have a million problems, but your job is to find a strong, common, consistent through-line. Think about INNER LIFE goals, the emotional ones, the kinds of goals that people are willing to do anything to achieve. Obviously, there are lots of other elements to a book, but these are main plot points that make your life easier.

## ACT ONE

· Opening (How do you hook the reader? How do you make them have to turn the page? How is YOUR voice unique?)

· **PREMISE (status quo) What is your book about? Who is the main character? What is going on at the beginning of your story that sets up a vector to the very end?**

· What's your main character's MAIN problem? What are the consequences? (Think about BACK STORY. Did these problems have consequences that have changed the way the MC looks at things?)

- · Character goal: WHAT DOES HE WANT??? WHY?????

- • Stakes: It has to matter. What is his wound? His controlling belief?? (They are related to the backstory.) What makes this goal SO important?

• Note: Set up the motivation and the world as it is. This is usually easiest when things happen, when there is action!!!

• **CHALLENGE ACCEPTED!!!!!! This is the end of the first act.**

## **ACT TWO(A)**

- • The journey begins
- • Achievements moving toward goal. Romance maybe. Or friendship.
- • Relationships: The antagonist must show his face. Remember: antagonists are not always villains.
- Endeavoring

• **FALSE SUCCESS: The main character appears to have succeeded. Remember: there is nothing more devastating than thinking you have something when you don't.**

**THEN THE TURN!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Now everything is different!!! This is the midpoint. The book becomes something else. The turn is something that happens that changes the world and the relationships in the book.**

## **ACT TWO (B): the antithesis of Act 2B**

- • Hero falters; the journey stalls. There is heartbreak and loss.
- • The world is unmade—the villain/antagonist takes over. Remember: ALL CHARACTERS must have a good reason for what they do. (NOTE: Act One sets up Act 2B).

• **HERO IS DEFEATED....FOR NOW**

## **ACT THREE**

- • **DARKEST MOMENT: But she has not lost her goals!!!!!!**
- • Hero regroups and regains what she has lost.
- • Hero drives the action again
- • **THE TERRIBLE CHOICE: To me, this is where the main secondary character's arc raps up. Hero must choose between old and new goal.**
- Climax
- Resolution

## STORYBOARDING BASICS

Storyboarding is a flexible and visual tool for understanding your story from beginning to end.

For each scene/chapter, draw a square.

Above the square, jot down the main action of the scene.

Below the square, jot down the main emotion of the viewpoint character.

In the square, draw a picture! Don't think too much! No talent necessary!

In the margins, jot down notes about time and setting and reader anticipation.

## Writing Quotes that Inspire

“You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children.”

— Madeleine L'Engle

All creative acts are a form of play. Without play, learning and evolution are impossible. Technique springs from play, because we only acquire technique through the practice of practice. -Stephen Nachmanovich

“Creativity is sacred, and it is not sacred. What we make matters enormously, and it doesn't matter at all. We toil alone, and we are accompanied by spirits. We are terrified, and we are brave. Art is a crushing chore and a wonderful privilege. Only when we are at our most playful can divinity finally get serious with us. Make space for all these paradoxes to be equally true inside your soul, and I promise—you can make anything. So please calm down now and get back to work, okay? The treasures that are hidden inside you are hoping you will say yes.” - Elizabeth Gilbert

John Hendrix, the creator of Drawing Magic, commented about the inability of adults to play: “a weird thing happens when artists grow older: “We stop having fun. As a kid you draw without any thought to enjoying it. Enjoying it is assumed! Then we get to art school and learn there is a right way and wrong way to make images. We must all learn how to craft light, space, composition, form, line and shape. But, then after that, we have to be trained to learn to play again.” For Hendrix, finding enjoyment is an essential first step to finding good ideas.

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others, then dramatic tension will be produced.” This dramatic tension is what makes the character less predictable and causes the reader to want to keep reading. It can also cause readers to sympathize and root for a bully. -Janet Burroway

‘It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.’ –Wendell Berry

“One of the things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.” -Annie Dillard

*Dear Writers,*

*Christopher Reeve said: “So many of our dreams at first seem impossible, then they seem improbable, and then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable.”*

*Embrace your dream. Embrace the process. Take small steps forward every day. Curiosity is your super power. So get busy! Readers are waiting for your story.*

*If you want to discuss these ideas further, you can find me on socials or [www.saraharonson.com](http://www.saraharonson.com). Or subscribe to my newsletter. I offer a writing prompt every Monday!*