

A Simple Four-Stage Story Building Process

1. PREMISE — What is my story?

Character → Goal → Obstacle → Deadline → Stakes → Action → Complication

2. EXPANSION — Bring those Premise elements to life

A few questions about each element.

3. STORY LOOPS — What happens next?

Problem → Decision → Action → Consequence → New Problem

↓

Problem → Decision → Action → Consequence → New Problem

↓

Problem → Decision → Action → Consequence → New Problem

4. DIRECTION — Where might this be heading?

Big decision → Climax → Ending

Stage 1 creates the story. Stage 2 gives it substance. Stage 3 makes it move. Stage 4 brings it home.

Stage 1: The Story Premise

Start with the template:

[CHARACTER] wants [GOAL], but [OBSTACLE]. They must succeed before [DEADLINE], or [STAKES]. So they [ACTION], which causes [COMPLICATION].

Don't overthink it. Fill in the blanks. This is the foundation of a story.

Stage 2: Bring Your Story to Life

Give yourself about 10 minutes. Short answers or bullet points are fine, or a sentence or even a few words.

CHARACTER — Who is this story about?

Name:

Who are they? Age, occupation, where they live, etc.

What are 2–3 important traits?

The point isn't to create an exhaustive character biography. It's simply to turn "a retired teacher" or "a maintenance worker" into someone you can imagine writing about.

GOAL — What do they want?

What specifically do they want?

Why does it matter to them?

That second question gives you motivation.

OBSTACLE — What's in the way?

What is preventing them from getting what they want?

Why isn't the problem easy to solve?

DEADLINE — Why must they act now?

When must they succeed?

What makes that deadline unavoidable?

STAKES — Why does it matter?

What happens if they fail?

Why does that consequence matter personally to the character?

ACTION — What do they do about it?

What does the character decide to do?

What do they *expect* will happen?

COMPLICATION — What goes wrong?

What *actually* happens because of their action?

How does that create a new problem?

And stop there.

You now have something substantially richer than the original premise, without trying to outline the entire story.

Stage 3: Build the Story

Introducing the Obstacle Loop.

Starting from the original premise (and with more insight into your character and the overall story), let's build the story even more...

Beginning at the end of your story premise, we tack on another set of blanks...

My character faces [PROBLEM], so they decide to [DECISION]. They [ACTION], but this causes [CONSEQUENCE], creating another [NEW PROBLEM].

Then:

LOOP 1

My character faces _____,
so they decide to _____.
They _____,
but this causes _____,
creating a new problem: _____.

Now take that new problem and put it at the beginning of the next loop.

LOOP 2

My character now faces _____,
so they decide to _____.
They _____,
but this causes _____,
creating a new problem: _____.

And perhaps once more:

LOOP 3

My character now faces _____,
so they decide to _____.
They _____,
but this causes _____,
creating a new problem: _____.

For a short story, two or three loops could very well be enough before you're approaching the climax.

As an aside, for a novel, the principle doesn't change. There are simply more loops, larger problems, additional characters, subplots and complications.

Stage 4: Where Is This Going?

After you've filled in the loops, complete just three more blanks:

Eventually, my character will have to _____. (turning point \ final decision)

The story will probably reach its climax when _____. (point of highest tension / conflict)

By the end, _____. (resolution)

You don't have to know your ending. Just put a stake in the ground and say, *"At the moment, I think I'm heading roughly over there."*

We only need to figure out enough of the story so we can begin writing with direction. We will trust the creative process and the act of writing to discover the rest.