5 Essential Writing Elements plus 3 levers

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http://greatstorybook.com/5-essential-writing-elements/

This entry is part 6 of 6 in the series How to Start

How to Start

A writer recently asked me to explain the difference between a short story and an illustrated storybook. I'm not sure how many days I've spent mulling this over, the problem of how to best explain this fine difference, but here we go. To do this properly, I need to first explain how they are the same.

There are certain Writing Elements that a short story must have, that a novel must have, and that a screenplay must have.

As it happens, those must-have elements are all the same.

In fact, there are just 5 Writing Elements that apply to any and all writing.

The 5 elements of writing are essential tools every writer of any type must have.

What You'll Get Here:

- The 5 Elements of Writing
- How elements determine story type.
- Why we argue about theme at all.
- The 3 elemental levers to adjust for readership.

The 5 Elements of Writing

Every story of every single type (fiction, non-fiction, journalism, short story, novel, screenplay, etc.) MUST answer the 6 basic questions: who, what, when, where, why and how. As creative writers, we traditionally organize these questions into 5 elements of writing.

Character = About WHO is involved.

Setting = About WHERE and WHEN this stuff is happening.

Conflict = About WHAT is happening.

Plot = About HOW this <u>conflict</u> will either be resolved or not.

Theme = About WHY we should care about the <u>character</u> who is in a <u>conflict</u> that has launched a <u>plot</u> in a certain <u>setting</u>.

How elements determine story type

Character = About WHO is involved.

- It isn't possible to have a story without at least one character.
- It's a more engaging story with at least two characters.
- It's more complicated with five characters.
- It's epic with over ten important characters.

If you want your story to be more complex, fleshed-out side characters will become more important to your story. There is a vast difference between an [Agatha Christie](#) story and a [Cornelia Funke](#) story. The difference isn't that the authors utilize different writing elements. They're all there.

The difference is in quantity of characters, sure – but also the ways those characters are expressed. Funke characters don't speak or stand or make decisions like the characters in a Christie novel. Trying to do so wouldn't even be appropriate, because of the target age group.

Most children's stories have less than 5 important characters, though there are exceptions. Those exceptions happen when there is a protagonist who *acts as a leader* for a group of supporting characters.

[For details on how to build a character profile, go HERE.](#)

Setting = About WHERE and WHEN this stuff is happening.

Setting is one of those elements that writers tend to either write too much, or not nearly enough. The choice of how you balance this element also defines your target readership.

A book for babies will very often convey very little about where – except in mommy's arms, or in the sandbox, etc. *When* will be shown in the illustrations as daytime or bedtime. There's rarely anything in between. There is no mention of dusk in a baby book, and most baby books do not specify the name of

the baby's town.

(When the town or state name is mentioned, it's usually a gift book for kids in that location. Think about the types of kids books you find at the airport.)

The more richly defined your setting is, the more mature the intended readership. Specification becomes more important to readers who are increasingly able to take in and retain that detailed information.

Conflict = About WHAT is happening.

- If the conflict is about having to give up a pacifier, then the story's conflict is fairly simple.
- If the conflict is about liking a boy and you don't know what he thinks and maybe he glows in the dark or something like that – then the readership is Middle Grade or YA.
- If zombies are at your door, that's a YA problem, unless the zombies only eat plants or cookies or something like that. Then it's for 7-year olds.

It's all about the depth and complexity – and age appropriateness of the type of conflict you choose to throw at your protagonist.

NOTE: You really must put your protagonist through something they do not like and do not want. This is the necessary, unwanted adventure (a.k.a. protagonist's lesson). So the protagonist must resist, at least initially.

For details on creating conflict in your story, go HERE.

Plot = About HOW this <u>conflict</u> will either be resolved or not.

You cannot have a strong plot without conflict and you cannot address a meaty conflict without plot. Many do claim that these writing elements are one and the same, but the reason these are most often listed separately is because the ways we establish these two elements are different.

It is possible to write a plot without conflict, and it is possible to write a conflict without plot.

Plot is the progression of action that gets readers from Once upon a time to The End. It's the way a certain lesson is learned.

Regardless of the age group, plot must have a certain arch. Without that progression, we do not recognize it as a real story. It might be a scene, or an interesting moment dramatically portrayed - but not a story. All stories have a beginning, middle and end. For details on each of these story stages, click on one of the following links.

- **The Beginning: How to begin a story to hook readers, editors and agents.**
- **The Middle: How to write rising action in Act II.**
- **The End: How to write a great ending.**

Theme = About WHY we should care about the <u>character</u> who is in a <u>conflict</u> that has launched a <u>plot</u> in a certain <u>setting</u>.

The theme ties everything together and answers the question of *why* we should care about any of it. Though some writers feel quite strongly that theme is irrelevant and should be dropped from the list of 5 Elements, I feel strongly (along with most in the publishing industry) that it is actually the most important decision a writer must make.

Why do we argue about theme at all?

My suspicion here is that most people confuse theme as a writing element with other uses for the word. Theme as a writing element isn't like choosing pirates or fairies – which are birthday party themes. Theme also isn't about a moral lesson.

Stories with moral lessons must have a theme, but these terms are not synonymous. You absolutely can write a story with theme that absolutely lacks any specific moral lesson.

Theme is something that should fundamentally define your protagonist. If your protagonist doesn't seem to have a soul, doesn't **feel real**, it's probably because it lacks themes. (**IMPORTANT NOTE: theme should be a <u>character</u> focus, NOT a <u>plot</u> focus.**)

Themes can be Family, Honor, Loyalty, Magic, Knowledge, Freedom, Nature, etc. – whatever single word you might use to simply identify two things that are most important to your protagonist. You need to do this so that as you structure the plot, you'll know exactly what a given character would be compelled to do in any given situation.

A deeper instructional on how to pick themes to develop character is included HERE: Why start with the character.

Detail *isn't* Word Count Specific

To be clear, detail does not directly translate to word count. **While word count does influence the general type of story <u>form</u>,** *it doesn't dictate the target readership*. Flash fiction can sometimes have fewer words than an illustrated storybook. But most flash fiction is for adults only.

For details on expected word count for various writing forms, go HERE.

So if word count doesn't inform my target readership, what does, exactly? That's what I call the **3 elemental levers**.

3 Elemental Levers

There are 3 basic levers that if you push forward or pull back in your writing, it will directly affect who should be reading your story, and possibly even why.

Word Choice

Think level of complexity. The type of words an adult uses with a doctor is typically different from the words they might use with a 6-year old. Exceptions would be - perhaps - if the adult is using a foreign language, in which case they would use the same basic vocabulary no matter who is listening.

Word choice is contextual, even when we talk about color. We can say *pale green* or we can say *chartreuse*. The meaning is the same, but the word choice suggests a lot to us about who would use those words and when. Whether it's appropriate to use one or the other will weigh heavily on the intended readership.

General use of language

Think about the narrator's depth of detail. The narrative voice of a book for young children is quite different from a YA novel.

For details on how to create a strong and intentional narrative voice, go HERE.

It isn't a matter of style, it's a matter of depth and complexity that a certain age will be able to perceive - or not.

Example: I remember as a kid watching The Muppet Show television series with my parents. I always thought it kind of strange that my mom and dad would laugh in those moments when I thought it a smidge dull. Even stranger, whenever I laughed, they would just smile. When many years later I saw a couple of episodes again, I understood the show in a whole new way. It was sexual, political, and silly in an adult way that my younger self just did not perceive.

Dialogue

Think appropriateness. A toddler and a teenager do not have the same speech patterns. Even if the dialogue is idealistic (rather than realistic), there's still an expectation there of what is feasible speech - writing style aside. Here are three drastically different aspects of writing solid dialogue:

- **Writing awesome dialogue: 10 reasons writing dialogue isn't like talking**
- **How to write dialogue as *action*.**
- **Dialogue and other words: *pacing* in an illustrated storybook.**

What do you think?

What are your thoughts on the 5 elements - or on the 3 elemental levers? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send me an email. I'd love to hear from you.

Keep creating, no matter what.

This entry is part of the series
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