

Fix Your Story in 5 steps

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<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-fix-your-story-5-steps/>

This entry is part 9 of 9 in the series [Narrative](#)

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This is about how to fix your story in 5 steps and ultimately, how to learn from your writing mistakes. I know, not so easy to do. But as a writer, it's important to be as critical of your work as possible. If you cannot be critical, you'll never improve your storytelling skills.

You sense the story isn't working. It must be fixed. But *how*? Here are the 5 essential steps.

Knowing your story isn't ready for an audience isn't the same as knowing what needs to be done to get it ready. But there are 5 steps you can take - so that you'll be able to figure out what needs to change.

We all experience it sometimes:

1. getting a grand idea for a story,
2. plotting it out,
3. writing the first draft and then SPLAT – we realize it's just no good.

There has never once been a writer who *only* spins gold. So what do you do about this? How do you fix a broken story - and is it even possible for a writer to recognize what needs a rewrite?

Yes, it really is possible for a writer to recognize and fix their own flaws. The trick is being completely honest with yourself.

1. First realize you need to fix your story.

You already know this, but it's nevertheless the step we resist most. You loved the words as you wrote them down. It's hard to acknowledge when the finished draft isn't so great. The key here is in acknowledging when the words need to change.

If you have difficulty being critical of your own writing, then you need someone to help you with that. You need a critical reader. ([Go here for details on how to Give and Get Helpful Critiques.](#))

There are five basic reasons for story problems, and you may well already know where you have a harder time.

The 5 Big Reasons for Weak Writing

1. If the reason is a [structural weakness in plot](#), you need to fill that up with purposeful action.
2. If it's **weak character** that no one cares about, *you need to take these 3 steps*:
 - define the [character archetype](#)
 - create an [in-depth character profile](#)
 - be sure to [get all that great detail into your story](#), but without it becoming a fancy list.
3. Sometimes the problem is with something more specific, like weak [dialogue](#), or
4. [boring details](#). But your story cannot shine without details, even in an [illustrated storybook](#) (where the [word count](#) is quite thin).
5. If your story is weakened because of **basic grammar and spelling issues**, you need special tools to help you through that ([go here for some helpful links](#)), and *you must read more*. If you don't read, you will never be a great writer. I promise, if you read what you wish to write, it will expand your writing abilities in ways you couldn't otherwise imagine.

One of the most alarming complaints I hear from [editors](#) is that *they feel as though most writers don't actually read*. That just should not be.

You've got to [support the industry you wish to join](#).

2. Assess what works & what doesn't.

It's really important to distinguish what works within the story and what doesn't. Make two separate lists:

- What Works
- What Doesn't Work (a.k.a. what needs a fix)

As you list these items, you'll start to see certain patterns emerge, certain connections that you wouldn't otherwise notice. Trust me: if you go through and trickle down your story to tiny bits and then decide, one-

by-one, what really hits the mark - you'll start to see what has to go into the *other list*.

Writing is really about an imaginative person's ability to make a ton of decisions and then keep those decisions organized. Making these lists will help make *more concrete* what it is you planned to do, and then reveal what you actually did (so far) with your story.

For the next draft, you'll then be able to pick-out certain specific moments and know whether you need to detail them or trim them.

How many drafts does a story require?

Short answer: it doesn't matter. Longer answer: it takes however many it takes. I think the greatest number of drafts I ever wrote was around 40+, but I did stop counting after a while. There is absolutely no shame in knowing that you need to learn more.

There is no shame in knowing your story concept needs more TLC to really come alive. Making a story seem so solid that it feels like it always existed is hard work, but also the most gratifying.

3. Determine WHY.

Look at your list of what does not work and ask yourself, "Why?" There are two basic reasons why something doesn't work, and it's typically one or the other.

Reasons Why a Story-Moment Fails

1. The great details in your mind and maybe in your story file just didn't make it onto the page.
2. The details overwhelm the story so much that the point gets lost completely.

The Why something doesn't work will inform the How you fix it.

If the details just didn't make it to the page, then you've got to work on your characterization. [Go HERE for more detail on that.](#)

If you've written just a lot of words and many details and the story sort of meanders but nothing really happens, then you've really gotten lost in the love of words. It means you need to focus more on the story. To do that, look at one page of your story at a time.

Ask yourself this question: "Is this detail necessary in telling the story I want to tell?" If it isn't, try taking it out of the story. **DO NOT DELETE IT!**

Just remove it and put it aside (some glimmer of what you've written there might work really well in another story OR in another section of the story you're currently editing). So try a draft without that section and see what happens.

If the story feels like it lost 5 pounds and now fits much better into a favorite pair of jeans, then you've

made a good edit. You'll know.

[If you're really not sure whether or not a detail is needed, read more about that HERE.](#)

4. Look at What's Working.

After you've batted yourself over the head figuring out why things aren't working, you need to check-out what is working. Then you need to determine why.

A story moment *works* when it does 2 or more of these things:

1. Strengthens our understanding of the protagonist.
2. Reveals a subtle aspect of context.
3. Brings a heightened sense of suspense.
4. Gets us asking a question we want answered.
5. Pushes the action forward.
6. Makes us feel something.

If a moment of your story does *only one* of these things, then try to find a way to bulk that up. Choose your words with more care and give more detail-punch.

NOTE: If your story is an illustrated storybook, you might use the illustrations to bulk-up your context and add another layer of interest.

5. Sleep on it. Really.

Don't make a rash decision. You really do need to let it rest. Just set it away from yourself and think about other things.

If the storm catches you, just go with it. But if you feel frustrated or stuck, this is a good time to step back a bit and let the reasons why sink in.

You have time to make your story a great one instead of an OK one. So do that. If you need a longer break from one project, use the writing momentum to work on a different project. Then return to the first project with fresh eyes.

Don't sleep too long.

Don't let the question of what to do about the story rest for too long. It becomes harder to get back into it if you spend that time not writing anything at all. Remember, there are only two options: rewrite or recycle.

If you let it sit too long, this can start to [look a lot like procrastinating](#).

That said, there's absolutely nothing wrong with switching focus to a completely different story for a

while. It might be just what your brain needs, in fact. It's a good creative distraction so that when the *new* story is drafted, you can *go back to the fixer-upper*.

Don't just trash it. Fix your story.

This is for some people the most difficult thing to do, to actually keep the material you've written even when it isn't great. There's always something you can learn.

Learn from your writing mistakes and keep what's working. If there's nothing to be done about the story, at least reuse what *is* working.

What are you editing right now? If you need a [critical reader](#), just write below and let me know - or, as ever, send me an email. I'll do my best to hook you up if I'm not a good fit for your project.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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