

STORY: The Key to Making Fiction Interesting

By Mike Klaassen

If written fiction is to be engaging, it must be about something interesting—a story. Like so many terms used in the craft of writing, *story* means different things to different people. I believe that any term may be better understood if it is clearly defined, and by that I mean an explanation that boils the concept down to its essence. Dictionary definitions of *story* are so generic that they provide little practical guidance. Many how-to books about writing fiction stress the importance of story, but they don't provide a useful definition. E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), defined *story* as “. . . a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence . . .”ⁱ Forster deserves credit for his pioneering attempt at clarification, but his often-quoted definition sheds little light on what the hallmarks of a story are.

Much has been learned about the craft of writing fiction since Forster's time. For example, there are five fundamental elements that comprise all fiction: character, plot, setting, theme, and style.ⁱⁱ Each has its own specific function:

1. *Plot* is *what happens*.
2. *Character* is the *who*.
3. *Setting* is the *where* and *when*.
4. *Theme* is the *why*.
5. *Style* is the *how*.ⁱⁱⁱ

If fiction consists of five fundamental elements, shouldn't the definition of a story include those elements? My definition of *story* is as follows: A work of writing that dramatizes a character's attempts to achieve a goal.

Let's dissect that definition and examine the parts. *A work of writing* clarifies what is being defined, as opposed to stage plays and screenplays and verbal storytelling.

Dramatizes addresses the style of the writing by suggesting that the intent is to create reader interest, to entertain, to generate an emotional reaction. *A character* reflects the concept that without a character, there is no story. *Attempts to achieve a goal* reflects plot, in which the character must have a goal and must make multiple attempts to achieve that goal.

This definition of *story* includes reference to style, character, and plot, but it doesn't include setting and theme. The definition could certainly be expanded to include those elements but doing so isn't necessary. A story cannot exist without a setting (a place and time), so by default it's there, with no need to include it in the definition. Likewise, the telling of a story automatically generates a theme as the character strives to attain his goal, so including theme in the definition of a story is also unnecessary. Every story, by its nature, has a built-in setting and theme.

A story is a lot like a cake. The process of baking a cake causes a chemical reaction that melds flour, eggs, sugar, etc., into something new (cake) in which the ingredients are no longer easily distinguishable or separable. Similarly, the process of developing a story creates a product in which plot, character, setting, theme, and style become difficult to distinguish and separate. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is credited with

saying “Character is plot, plot is character.”^{iv} In the same way, setting might become an integral part of plot: In some stories the setting thwarts a character’s attempts to achieve his goal, thus assuming the role of the antagonist, almost becoming an additional character. As we have already seen, theme grows naturally out of the plot, and style permeates all written fiction. In effect, plot, character, setting, theme, and style get “baked into the cake” of a story.

In addition to providing a definition of a story in *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster included an example: “The king died and then the queen died.”^v Once again, Forster deserves credit for an early attempt at a definition, but his example is of little use in understanding the concept of a story.

Using my definition of a story and the example offered by Forster as a starting point, let’s consider the following example.

In the kingdom of Greenwald, King Archibald dies of poisoning. Queen Sophia’s efforts to find her husband’s murderer are cut short when King Gustav of a neighboring kingdom invades Greenwald, captures the castle, and kidnaps Sophia. She discovers that Gustav had ordered King Archibald murdered, so Sophie kills Gustav.

This simple example is by no means fully developed, so its ingredients are still easily identifiable. The *setting* of the story is the Kingdom of Greenwald. The focal *character* is Sophia, supported by King Archibald and King Gustav. The main character has a *goal* (identify and punish Archibald's killer). Sophia makes *attempts* to achieve her goal. The *themes* of the story could include such concepts as "crime doesn't pay," "justice prevails," and "persistence leads to success." The *style* of this example could be described as straightforward.

A clear, precise definition of *story* and a simple example pave the way for greater understanding of how written fiction works.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Third-Person Possessed*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

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ⁱ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 27.

ⁱⁱ Klaassen, "The Fifth Element," Helium.com, August 23, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Klaassen, "The Fifth Element," Helium.com, August 23, 2007.

^{iv} Fitzgerald, www.quotemaster.org, May 4, 2017.

∨ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 86.