

A Guide

The manuscript is not the story. Whether you're the sort of writer who "discovers" the story while typing its pages, or the sort who knows most of the story's details before sitting down at the keyboard, remember that nothing on the paper is sacred. The manuscript is only a vehicle for making a purposeful series of events appear in the reader's mind. The latter is your objective. Everything on the hard copy should contribute toward it, nothing in the hard copy should be superfluous, nothing should confuse it. Work on the manuscript until it cleanly conveys your story, and then stop.

Writing is not the reverse of reading. Most of the rich detail, judgmental commentary and interesting digression you enjoy in the process of reading is supplied by your own mind, drawing on its experience of life. Show the reader what is necessary for a grasp of the events, let the reader overhear only what must be said between characters, and trust the reader to supply the rest, just as you do when you read.

Tell only your story. Edit away all the first draft hesitations and coyness that were your means of getting up to speed on the manuscript. Remove every word that would allow the reader to mistakenly construct some other story. You can do whatever you like to get through the first draft; just be sure all of your story is in there somewhere. Then cut away as if you had to pay the publisher by the word.

Every story is either a short story or a structure of interlocking short stories. Every principal character has a story of his own, intersecting the stories of the other characters. Not all of every story needs to be shown in full, nor does it need to be elaborate, but it must be there in your mind, so that all the characters are consistently motivated and their contentions with each other are coherent and significant to the reader. Therefore, a grasp of what a short story is, is fundamental to writing skilled fiction.

There Are Seven Parts to a Perfect Short Story:

- (1) A principal character; the person the story begins with. This person should have traits, that is, visible habits that reflect various important strengths and weaknesses.
- (2) A context; the time of day and the physical setting, but also whatever else the reader needs in order to be sure of this person's name and place in the world. As you write this in, the reader also should begin to be able to see some traits the character doesn't realize are important.
- (3) The most important problem this particular person could have. At this stage, it is stated only generally and he may not realize the degree of all-out commitment to which it will lead him: He must slay the dragon, or he must not lose his job, or he must save the day.

As the story proceeds, details will emerge. In many stories, there is an “antagonist” who resists or attacks the first character, who is called the “protagonist.” The antagonist isn’t the problem; the antagonist acts in such a way as to bring the problem to the protagonist’s attention. The antagonist is equally motivated; he wants to win what the protagonist must win. They actually share the problem, from opposite sides. Their contending actions will be associated with greater revelations about the problem, and about their resourcefulness and dedication.

When you have first shown the above three things to the reader, the “beginning” of the story has been completed. You cannot, in the course of any other part of the story, violate the “rules” you have just created. If you do, you “invalidate” the story. Note: The beginning of the manuscript may or may not be the same as the beginning of the story. More experienced writers learn how to tell a story wrong end to, or to mix the elements in other ways, in order to produce the most dramatic effect. It may very well be, and sometimes is, that the reader does not see the true beginning of the story until the end of the manuscript (or printed version). It may be that you can so craftily construct your manuscript that some of the story never appears literally on the page, but causes the reader to supply the “missing” parts out of his or her own experience of life as seen in the light of the words you do write down.

Nevertheless, by whatever art, all seven elements must be made to appear in the reader’s mind before the story will be satisfactory. And you can certainly do perfectly well by simply arranging your manuscript events in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 order, with no “gaps” or transpositions. Even the most sophisticated writers usually do it that way, and many readers much prefer it.

Remember, however, that what you show your reader during the beginning, wherever it occurs, establishes the rules, that is, the universe in which the story occurs. For instance, if in that universe the characters are not said in the beginning to have prehensile tails, they cannot suddenly sprout them later when they need to whip a gun out of the antagonist’s hand. That invalidates the story.

(4) The start of the middle. Here the protagonist makes an intelligent, believable attempt to solve the problem, based on what the protagonist thinks he knows about the situation and his own resources.

(5) The protagonist’s first attempted solution fails. The problem reveals greater complications which are logical in hindsight. But the protagonist is motivated to persist and draw further on his resources. He tries and fails again and again, and each time the problem unfolds its details in such a way as to engage his resources more and more deeply and more and more quickly. Now the character cannot help but stake everything on the solution, for to fail is to be obliterated, either literally or spiritually. The character and the problem are both growing, though the character may not realize that.

(6) When the problem is about to become a total disaster, one last gasp achieves either victory or death. In order to win, the character must turn away from some old traits, no matter how precious, and emphasize new ones, no matter how undesirable they would have seemed in the beginning. Some last straw happens; something breaks, or something precipitates. In an action story, the villain kicks a dog the protagonist suddenly realizes is the most precious thing in the world; in a more “literary” story, the “kick” can be just exactly the right word or glance at the right instant. Suddenly, the character’s own idea of the character is shattered; the traits fall into a new pattern. Simultaneously with the climactic physical action, the character displays a new view of the world, grown out of the old one.

(7) **The end.** Here this view must be validated. If it is a true winning view—if the physical action is the equivalent of finally shooting down the Death Star, or winning the garden club award—someone or something must do the equivalent of pinning a hero’s medal on the character. If, instead, the character has collapsed, someone or something must show the reader that the antagonist was the hero, like it or not. In either case, this “someone” must be a trustworthy figure, because the reader must be convinced that the preceding series of trials and errors really has come to a meaningful end.

Validation in fact proceeds throughout the story. Every incident must ring true according to the established rules, every asserted event must be supported either by never allowing it to have an ambiguous interpretation or by having some authoritative figure act or speak with an air of absolute conviction of its reality. Formal detective fiction is particularly good at apparent validation and apparent invalidation. In fact, that is essentially what manor house murder stories are. Their study will repay you with an expert grasp of how validation works. It can be used craftily. But it must be used in some sufficient way, or the reader fails to believe your fiction.

If you intend to go on with fiction writing, I hope you will save these suggestions and refer back to them from time to time as you develop your skills through practice. Good luck to you.

– Algis Budrys

Algis Budrys was born in Königsberg, East Prussia, on January 9, 1931. He became interested in science fiction at the age of six, shortly after coming to America when a landlady slipped him a copy of the *New York Journal-American* Sunday funnies.

Algis began selling steadily to the top magazine markets at the age of twenty-one, while living in Great Neck, Long Island. He sold his first novel in 1953 and produced eight more novels including *Who?*, *Rogue Moon*, *Michaelmas* and *Hard Landing* and three short story collections. In addition to writing, he was very accomplished as an editor, having been the editor in chief of Regency Books, Playboy Press and all the titles at Woodall’s Trailer Travel publications.

In 1983, Algis was asked by L. Ron Hubbard to help with a new writing contest for aspiring writers. This was a request he took to heart. Not only did Algis assist with the contest judging, he used his well-known skills as editor for the *Writers of the Future* anthology.