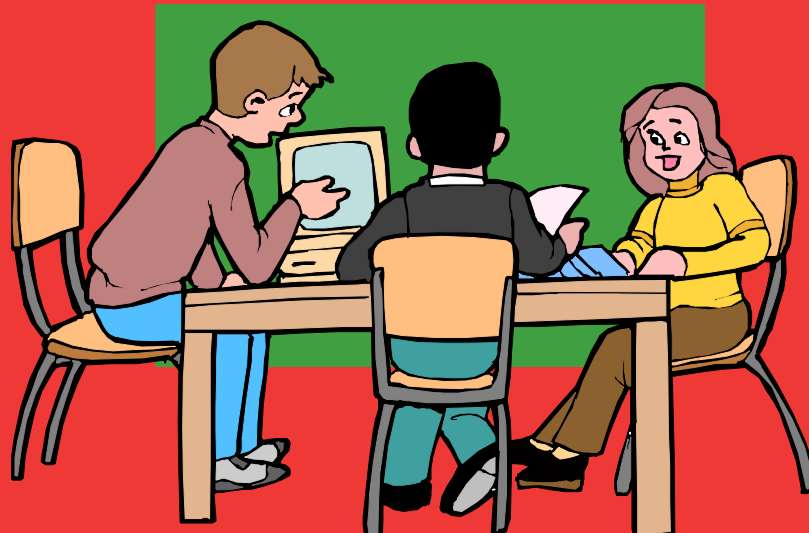




StoryMakers  
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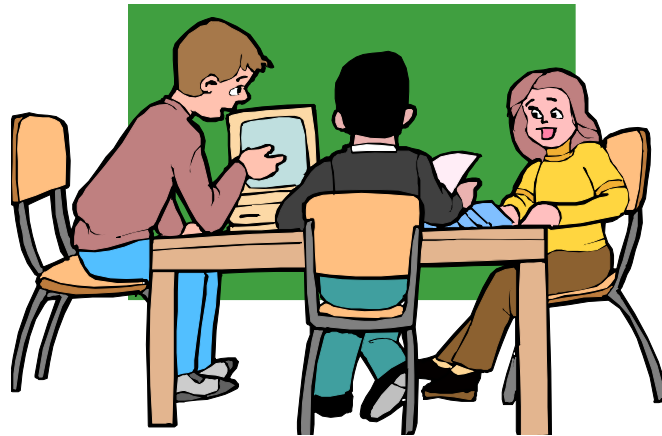
# Writing Cool Short Stories



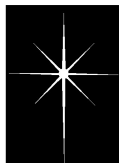
**Carol J. Amato and Maria Cisneros Toth**

# StoryMakers Funshops

## Writing Cool Short Stories



Carol J. Amato and Maria Cisneros Toth



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Corona, CA 92877-0100

*"Educate, Enlighten, Entertain"*

Dear Teachers and Parents,

Stargazer Publishing Company provides books that educate and empower, enlighten and entertain. In keeping with that mission, we are proud to present this guide for writing short stories. It is designed to accompany the teacher's guide, student workbook, and PowerPoint slides for the StoryMakers Funshops Creative Writing Course for 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> graders.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call us at (800) 606-7895 or e-mail us at [stargazer@stargazerpub.com](mailto:stargazer@stargazerpub.com).

Sincerely,

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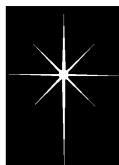
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Sample manuscript in Chapter 11 is taken from the first chapter of *The Lost Treasure of the Golden Sun*, by Carol J. Amato, published by Stargazer Publishing Company in 2005.



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## Introduction

**T**he StoryMakers FunShops textbook, *Writing Cool Short Stories*, is a guide for parents or teachers conducting the StoryMakers Funshops creative writing course, *So You Want to Write Stories*, for 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> graders. It allows you to familiarize yourself with the basics of short-story writing so that you can more easily explain the concepts to your students.

This book teaches you about the parts of a short story, the ingredients for creating cool characters, deciding on a setting, developing the plot, writing narrative, staying in viewpoint, choosing person and tense, writing believable dialogue, and using metaphors, similes, and other clever word forms to give a short story that extra punch.



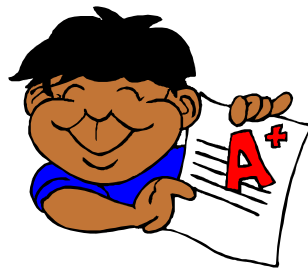
Short stories have been around since Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote his 1837 book, *Twice-told Tales*. Designed to be read in one sitting, short stories are the perfect form for young writers to exercise their creative writing skills and to have a different outlet from writing school reports. A close teacher-student bond is necessary to create the non-threatening environment required to let children express their thoughts freely—without criticism, ridicule, judgment, or censorship. Writers can be sensitive about their work.

This book assumes there is more than one student in the class; however, the material can easily be targeted to a single child. The information is presented in a user-friendly way. Some of the concepts are complex, so alternative terminology is provided for those in addition to examples in the teacher's guide and student workbook and on the PowerPoint slides.

Because short stories are no longer a commercially viable medium, there are no current universal ones to use as examples. The principles of writing short stories are identical to those of novels and movies, so book and movie examples, that both adults and children will recognize, are used.

Good writing skills are not stressed enough in schools today. Businesses are seeing the result of this in employees who cannot write reports. Ensuring that your students have good writing skills will not only help them get better grades in school but will prepare them for high school, college, and the world of work.

Writing a short story can be challenging at first, but once your students let their creativity flow, you will be surprised at the amazing stories they will produce.



# Chapter 1

## Parts of a Short Story

**S**hort stories are composed of the following parts:

- plot
- theme
- characters
- climax
- denouement (wrap-up)
- conclusion

Let's take a closer look at these concepts.

*“Plot is what happens.”*

### ***What is Plot?***

Plot is a series of cause and effect events threaded throughout the story. Plot is what happens. Plot is the beginning, middle, and end.

The plot begins with a main character. As in real life, this character has a problem or encounters a situation to be overcome or solved. Having a problem is critical to the plot's development. Without it, there is no story.

The middle is where the writers' imaginations soar. It is packed with action, tension, and heart-pounding suspense and includes a few unexpected obstacles that get in the character's way of solving the problem.

Think back to the Wizard of Oz and all the obstacles Dorothy encounters along the way before she finally reaches the Emerald City. It's enough to make anyone want to give up. But Dorothy is determined to get back home to those she loves most—her family.

By the end, the character figures out how to solve the problem. He/she has grown and learned something new from his/her experiences. Dorothy learns that there is no place like home.

The overall storyline is like a roller coaster ride with lots of twists and turns, loopity-loops, and crazy ups and downs, leaving the readers feeling satisfied at the end and wanting to ride the roller coaster again.

*“The theme is a central idea that is repeated throughout a story.”*

### ***What is Theme?***

The theme is a central idea that is repeated throughout a story. It tells what it is about. The theme is a statement that contains a subtle message; it's the inner meaning and can be a moral lesson, a personal belief, or an opinion.

Sixth grade/advanced writers should be able to sum up the theme in one sentence. Here is an example: “Cheating not only gets a student in trouble, it also robs him/her from learning something new and exciting.”

### **Short Story Ingredients**

- Plot
- Theme
- Characters
- Climax
- Denouement
- Conclusion

The above statement expresses the author's moral beliefs and can be subtly echoed throughout the story without being preachy.

Here's another example: “Little brothers can be a real pain, but life would be lonely and boring without them hanging around.”

One more: “Being the new kid in school can be pretty scary, but making new friends can also be lots of fun.”



“A short story should have only two main characters.”

Some writers think of the theme before they begin to write, but just as many don't worry about it because they want to get into the action. Either method works.

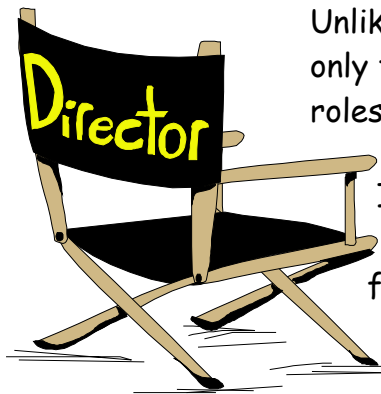
After the first draft is completed, writers can reflect back on their words and see if there are common ideas threaded throughout. If young writers still don't see a theme, it's not a problem. It's more important to encourage them to let their creativity grow wings and fly. The theme may come to mind later; but again, it may not. Sometimes, the reader will discover it.

### ***The Characters***

Creating story characters is great fun, because the writers get to sit in the director's chair and are in charge of the casting call. Characters will begin to develop in the writers' minds, which are usually firing off in a number of different creative directions. Once writers' minds are fully activated, there is no stopping them.

#### **Short Story Must-Haves**

- Protagonist
- Antagonist



Unlike novels, in a short story, there is usually room for only two well-rounded characters with significant parts. Other roles go to secondary characters.

In the writers' minds, the cast of characters nervously chews on their fingernails while the authors make the final decisions. Who will play the lead roles?

Of course, there are moans and groans from all of the hopeful characters waiting anxiously in the recesses of the writers' minds, but only a few will land the most important roles. And the lead role goes to—the *protagonist*.



The protagonist is the character who is likeable and easy to relate to. This is the “viewpoint” character—the person through whose eyes we see the story unfold. Readers are drawn to the protagonist because they can see a part of themselves in the individual. Who wouldn't want to be Harry Potter—or Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*?

Now that the lead role has been chosen, there is great anticipation among the rest of the characters to see who will land the next role—the *antagonist*.

The antagonist is the villain—the person the readers like to boo. And in the end, readers cheer when justice prevails and the bad guy gets what is deserved.

Secondary (minor) characters often have a personal connection to the protagonist. They are usually friends or maybe a pet like a beloved dog, cat, or horse. These minor characters have much smaller roles but are important to the story, too. In a short story, it's best to limit the number of minor characters to a maximum of four or five.

*“Limit the number of minor characters to just a few.”*

Next, it's off to hair, makeup, and wardrobe.

The writer chooses everything from a character's hair and eye color to personality quirks and flaws. After all, nobody is perfect no matter how smart, adorable, and funny one is. The authors also get to go shopping and pick out wardrobes and cool wheels, such as a skateboard or bike.



After the writers have chosen who will play which roles, it's on to writing the rest of the story.

Quiet on the set! Action! Roll 'em!

### ***Climax***

The climax of the story is the most exciting part. It's where everything comes to a head. The main character encounters the situation that will either allow him/her to solve the problem or fail. Most often, readers want to see the main character succeed.



### ***Denouement***

The *denouement* (pronounced day-noo-MAH) is a fancy French word for "That's a wrap."

The denouement comes right after the climax and just before the conclusion.

It's the outcome of the story's plot. It's now time to wind things down, clarify a few things, then make a quick exit.

In the movie version of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy clicks her heels three times and suddenly wakes up in her own bed at home. Surrounded by her loved ones, she briefly tells them about her adventures.

### ***Conclusion***

The conclusion is *the end* of the story.

There are a number of ways to end a short story. These are detailed in Chapter 4, *Developing a Plot*.

It's up to the writers how they want their stories to conclude. Sometimes writers become attached to their characters and have difficulty parting with them. But it's time to say goodbye.

As Shakespeare said in *Romeo and Juliet*, "Parting is such sweet sorrow!"

## Chapter 2

# All About Genres

Now that you know all about the structure of a short story, it's time to talk about *genres*—the categories of short stories your students can write. We have pared these down to the kids' favorites:

*“Genres are categories of stories”*

- mystery
- action/adventure
- science fiction
- fantasy
- horror
- historical
- multicultural
- humor

Let's talk about each one:

### ***Mystery #1***

In the first type of mystery, the main character tries to solve a crime or a puzzle. Examples are the following series:

- *The Phantom Hunters*
- *Monster Moon*
- *Nancy Drew*
- *The Hardy Boys*
- *Gilda Joyce*
- *Cam Jansen*
- *The Third-Grade Detectives*
- *Sherlock Holmes*
- *The Boxcar Children*



The solution to this type of mystery is who? why? how?

## **Mystery #2**

In this type of mystery, the main character is being chased or is trapped by a known or unknown person or group. Examples are the series listed below:

- *Alex Rider*
- *The Shadow Children*

The solution is "how can he/she get out of this?"

## **Action/Adventure**

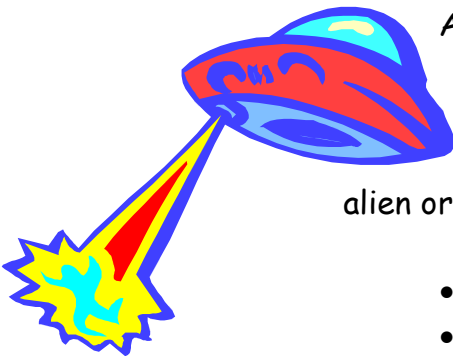
In action/adventure stories, readers follow a spy as he/she infiltrates the enemy, travel the high seas with pirates on dangerous voyages, get shipwrecked on an island with the only survivors, climb mountains that loom larger than life, and bite their fingernails as the main character defies social convention. Examples of this genre are the following series:



- *Indiana Jones*
- *On the Run*
- *Jack Sparrow*

## **Science Fiction**

A science fiction story takes place in the near future, far future or on another world. It has technology or situations that don't exist in everyday life, but the story seems real. The characters may be human or alien or both. Examples are listed below:



- *Star Trek*
- *Star Wars*
- *Charlie Bone*
- *The Gideon Trilogy*

## Fantasy

A fantasy story takes place in another world. The story is not real and might or might not seem real. It can have dragons, fairies, wizards, and other mythical beings. Fairy tales fall in this category.

Examples are as follows:

- *Harry Potter*
- *Lemony Snicket*
- *Artemis Fowl*
- *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*
- *Fablehaven*



## Horror/Thriller

Horror stories have one aim: to scare the reader. Classic horror stories include *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Horror stories include ghosts, monsters, vampires, and anything that goes bump in the night. You'll find your nightmares here.

Edgar Allen Poe is considered the father of the horror genre. His short stories are perennially available. The popular horror writers of today include Stephen King and R. L. Stine. Contemporary horror stories for kids are listed below:



- *Twilight*
- *Goosebumps (series)*
- *Monster Moon (series)*

While horror stories for kids are scary, they can be lots of fun, too.

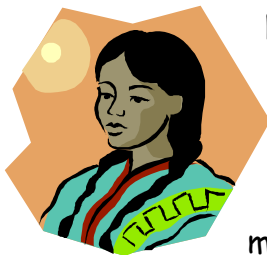
## Historical

The historical genre includes stories that take place in the past. The setting may be in World War II, the Old West, the Revolutionary War period, etc. Examples include:

- *Little House on the Prairie*
- *Out of the Dust*
- *Johnny Tremain*
- *American Girl series*
- *The Slave Dancer*

## Multicultural

Multicultural stories take place in another culture, but it could still be in the United States. For example, the story can take place on an Indian reservation, in a hispanic or African-American neighborhood, or in an Asian community. It can take place in a foreign country, too. Multicultural stories also focus on problems that occur between a culture and mainstream American society. The point of the story is to open the readers' eyes to the culture and the problems it faces.



Examples are as follows:

- *The Lost Treasure of the Golden Sun*  
(takes place on the Navajo Nation)
- *House on Mango Street*
- *Esperanza Rising*
- *Lupita Manana*

One could even argue that *Harry Potter* and *Lemony Snicket* are multicultural in that they take place in England.

## Humor

Humor stories are funny. The point is to make readers laugh. Some examples include:

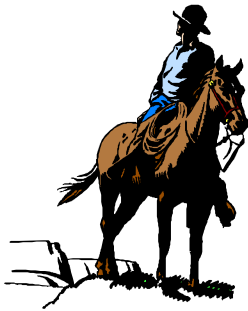
- *Captain Underpants*
- *The Beloved Dearly*
- *The Teacher's Funeral*
- *Bunnicula*
- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*



## Western

While not as popular in mainstream society as they once were, westerns are still popular in some areas of the country. Westerns generally take place in the 19th century.

Some examples are listed below:



- *Tucket's Travels*
- *True Grit*

Some stories can be more than one genre, such as an historical mystery, a science fiction mystery, a western horror story, etc.

Allow your students to pick their own genre. It will provide an opportunity for them to do a little research to come up with their story.

## Mainstream

Mainstream stories that take place in the current time period and don't fit any of the other genres. One such series that takes place against the backdrop of sports is the *Come-back Kids*, by Mike Lupeca.



## Chapter 3

# Creating Cool Characters

**N**ow that the genre is determined, it's time to create the characters. The writer has several things to consider here, such as the main character's name, his/her background, age, grade, family members, pets, hobbies, likes and dislikes, achievements, and fears.

### Naming Characters

So what's in a name? Everything.

*“So what's in a name?”*

Just as parents-to-be rustle through the family tree or hunt tirelessly through baby name books for that special name for their child, writers do the same. After all, story characters must live with their names in print—forever!

Imagine if 19<sup>th</sup> century author Louisa May Alcott had named the four sisters in her children's classic novel, *Little Women*—Gertrude, Flora Jean, Agnes, and Wilhelmina—instead of Jo, Meg, Amy, and Beth? Also, the sisters in the story affectionately call their mother, *Marmee*, instead of the traditional title of Mother or Mama.

Just as people live up to their names, so do characters. Josephine March, also nicknamed Jo in *Little Women*, lives up to the strength of her name, no matter what hardships and tragedy that come her way. While her sister, Beth, is sweet, shy, and fragile.

To help students think of unique names for their characters, have them flip through baby name books, newspapers, magazines, phonebooks, school yearbooks, and maps. Maps are a great source since most towns are named after people. Young writers can also shake the family tree and see what falls out.

A character's name should also be different from other characters, so the reader will not confuse them. If one character's name is Abby, the writer wouldn't want to name another one Gabby. These names sound too much alike. Also, Viola and Violet are too similar, but what about Abby and Viola? That combination works. Also, try to avoid names starting with the same letter such as Nick, Nancy, and Nevada, or Joe, Jen, and Jasper.

Ask your students to listen for unique names because character names are everywhere!

*“Characters must be more than names.”*

### **Fleshing Out the Characters**

Now that the main characters (protagonist and antagonist) have names, it's time to flesh them out. Characters must be more than names; otherwise, they are "flat." Good characters are three-dimensional. Readers want to know many things about them, such as their ages, hair and eye color, hometown, family background, hobbies, fears, and likes and dislikes. Most important is the goal the protagonist wants to accomplish. All these details help to create a visual picture and heighten the ability of the readers to identify with the characters.

Have your students "interview" their main characters using the profile sheet shown on page 15. A copy of this is included in the Student Workbook and in the Teacher's Guide.



## Character Profile

My character's name \_\_\_\_\_

My character's age \_\_\_\_\_

My character's grade in school \_\_\_\_\_

My character's height \_\_\_\_\_

My character's weight \_\_\_\_\_

My character's hometown \_\_\_\_\_

My character's hobbies \_\_\_\_\_

My character's family:

Parents \_\_\_\_\_

Brothers and ages \_\_\_\_\_

Sisters and ages \_\_\_\_\_

My character's favorite color \_\_\_\_\_

My character's hobbies \_\_\_\_\_

My character is afraid of \_\_\_\_\_

My character's mood: \_\_\_\_\_ happy \_\_\_\_\_ sad

My character wants \_\_\_\_\_

## Character Arc

As the story progresses and become more intense, the character grows and changes.

Maybe at the beginning of the story, the character expressed how he is scared to death of spiders, especially big hairy ones! Now, all that's standing between the character and what he wants to achieve is on the other side of a two-foot-deep line of tarantulas creeping across a mountainous trail.

*“The main character must confront his/her fears.”*

The character's heart is racing. Sweat streams from his brow and stings his eyes, turning the spiders into a fuzzy, black blur. The ground pulses to the beat of his heart. With his sleeve, the character wipes his eyes, then sucks in a huge breath and takes a brave flying leap over what he fears most—AUGHHHH! Tarantulas!

The readers, who have hung in there with the character throughout his story, hold their breaths as he makes that daring and courageous leap.

Hooray! The character makes the jump! He thuds to the ground on his hands and knees, then scrambles to his feet. He glances down and sees a tarantula clinging to his pant leg. Reaching down, he plucks it off and sets it on the ground with the others.

NOT! The character is brave, not stupid. He screams and knocks the spider from his leg, then dashes off in the direction of what he wants. After all, his prize is waiting for him only a few paragraphs away!

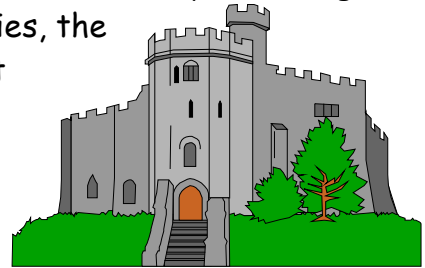
The character has grown by confronting his fear of spiders. He may not want to touch a spider, but the character has developed confidence to face other fears in his life—or perhaps another short story!

## Chapter 4

# Deciding on a Setting

**T**he setting of the story includes the locale, time of year, time of day, and the weather.

Where does the story take place? At school? At an amusement park after hours? In a haunted or abandoned house? In the desert or jungle? On an alien planet? A short story generally has a maximum of three scenes, so it needs a main locale. Where do the characters live? Think about Harry Potter again. While these are long books and movies, the majority of the scenes take place at Hogwarts Academy.



Writers must describe the setting. They should think of the locale of their stories as a movie set. What does the camera see? What do the writers see? If the story occurs at a school, readers need to visualize the white/smartboards, desks, books, and everything else associated with a classroom.



What time of year is it? This will influence the description of the outside landscape. In the spring, the trees and plants will be coming into bloom. The weather may still be rainy. In the summer, it may be hot or it may be thunderstorming. If it's fall, the readers will want to picture the red and yellow leaves as the main character crunches through them. If it's winter, is snow on the ground? Maybe the main character is stuck/trapped in the house because of it. Or perhaps the main character is visiting Florida or California for Christmas. How does it feel to be in sunshine at this time of year? There should be enough detail for the readers to picture where the character is.

What time of day is it? Morning? Afternoon? Night? When does the story take place? In medieval times? In the old West? Today? In the future?

All of these elements should be clear to the readers on the first page.

Make sure the students have their settings clearly in mind before they start writing their stories.



## Chapter 5

# Developing a Plot

**C**hapter One mentioned that the plot of the story is the beginning, middle, and end. Plot is the main story. It's what happens to the characters in the pursuit of solving the problem or reaching the goal. It's a plan of action, a pattern of events threaded throughout the story.

Figure 1 shows a diagram of the plot of a short story:

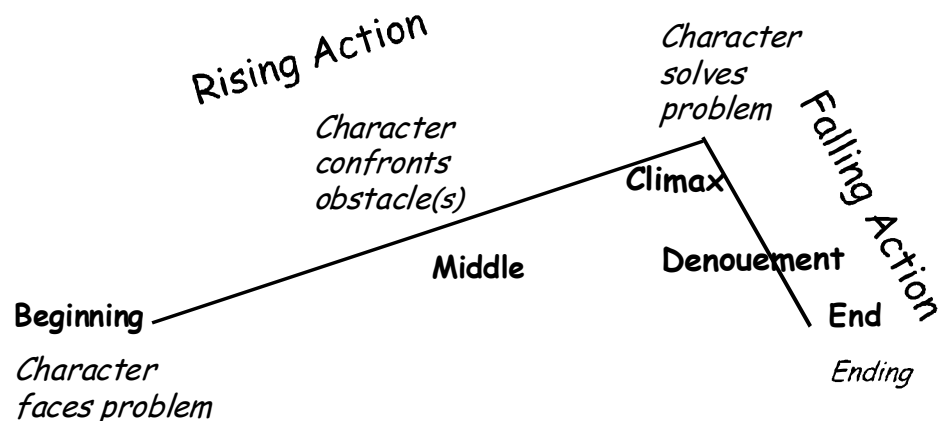


Figure 1. Diagram of a Short Story's Plot.

### Beginning

In the beginning, and it should be on the first page, something critical happens. This is called the "inciting incident." You can refer to it as the "story hook." The reader learns about the protagonist—the main character (the hero/heroine of the story) and his/her problem. The reader drops in on the action in the character's life.

What is it that the character wants to achieve or solve? The character must have a goal. This motivates the character to try different things to accomplish the goal. Without the problem, there is no motivation and, therefore, no plot.

Let's look at some story hooks:

*“The story hook is a critical event that happens at the beginning of the story to capture the reader’s interest.”*

*Oh, dragon crap!* AJ Zantony groaned. He got that awful feeling something was about to happen. For AJ, every day was like Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. If there was a pile of dog-doo, he'd end up stepping in it. If he cruised past a cute girl on his skateboard, a tree root would trip him up. And if a major homework assignment was due, it mysteriously disappeared. But today was different. The feeling was stronger.

– *Monster Moon: Curse at Zala Manor*, by BBH McChiller

Intense heat rushed over Anny Bradford as though she had opened the door to a hot oven. Flames flashed before her, and she shrank against the vinyl upholstery of the old green station wagon as it rolled up the desert highway of the Navajo Nation. *Oh, no, please!* She clutched her stomach, trying to ward off the image.

– *The Phantom Hunters: The Lost Treasure of the Golden Sun*, by Carol J. Amato

Plenty Porter was nearly thirteen when her brother smacked her face red. I am Plenty Porter and my brother is Jerry and that was yesterday.

– *Plenty Porter*, by Brandon Noonan

If you think a school for girls is simply a place to wear ribbons in your hair and expose your dimpled knees, you've never been to Our Lady of Sorrows.

– *Gilda Joyce: The Ladies of the Lake*, by Jennifer Allison

## **Middle**

The middle is rising action, where the story is full of tension and gritty suspense. The main character is challenged by an obstacle or obstacles that get in the way of solving the problem. A short story should have no more than three obstacles for the hero/heroine to overcome.



## **Denouement**

The denouement is the falling action, where the hero/heroine figures out how to solve the problem at last and where all the loose ends get tied up in a nice, neat bow.

At the end, the character learns something about him/herself. As in real life, people grow from their experiences; so should the main character.

*“A writer can use one of four kinds of endings.”*

## **End**

So, how to end a story?

The writer can use one of the following:

- twist ending
- full-circle ending
- sad ending
- happy ending

## ***Twist Endings***

Twist endings are sneaky and catch readers off guard with something they didn't expect or see coming. In one of the *Star Wars* movies, Luke Skywalker, who has dreamed of finding his father all his life, finally does, only to discover he is Darth Vader, the villain.

Twist endings are fun and challenging to write and are as equally satisfying to the readers as they are to the writers if they are well-executed.

In M. Night Shamalyan's movie, *The Sixth Sense*, the main character, a boy about 10, sees dead people. A psychologist helps him come to terms with his ability. The twist ending is that the psychologist finds out at the end that he's one of the dead people., too. This twist ending took audiences by surprise. It was not in the least bit predictable.

Another example that is not as well-executed is Shamalyan's *The Village*. The people in the story are 19th century pioneers, live in an isolated area in the middle of a vast forest. They can't leave their village because of a monster in the woods. When one person is forced to seek medicine, the audience discovers that the villagers are living in the middle of Central Park in New York City and that the village elders are really yuppies who got tired of city life.

*“Twist endings must be well-executed.”*

### ***Full-Circle Endings***

In full-circle endings, the character's problem is resolved and the story comes winding back where the person started from before his/her life took a turn for the worse. Dorothy is such an example; she realized she was happy to be back at the farm, where she had been so bored at the beginning of the story.

### ***Sad Endings***

Sad endings are just that... sad. The main character resolves the problem but usually at the cost of something very dear. In the previously mentioned *Star Wars* movie, Luke Skywalker not only learns his father is Darth Vader, but he also loses him as soon as he has found him. Just as in real life, a character's fictional life isn't always fair.

### ***Happy Endings***

In a happy ending, the main character gets what is desired or wanted. The villain gets what is deserved. Fairy tales have happy endings: Everyone lives happily ever after and the readers cheer.



Don't try to steer your students to one type of ending or another. They know where they want their stories to go.

## Chapter 6

# Choosing Person and Tense

Most short stories are written in either first or third person. Since some writers feel more comfortable with one or the other, let's take a look at both.

### Choosing First or Third Person

#### *Using First Person*

In first person, the writer uses the pronoun, "I" as the storyteller's voice. Here's a first person example from a middle-grade novel, *Butterfly Hollow*:

I cleared my throat, then boomed, "The scariest day of my life was the day I came face-to-face with the gator-man. I was down at Crawdad Creek hunting for arrowheads when a strange noise came from the woods."



Notice how the writer, Maria Toth, uses the pronoun "I" in place of the character's name. In real life, a person would not refer to him/herself by his/her own name. A supporting character can call the protagonist by name, such as in the following sample from the same story.

"Charlene," Momma called. "You best get to bed. We've got church in the morning. Did you memorize your Bible verses?"

If Charlene were telling her own story as though she were talking directly to the reader or speaking to a good friend, it might go something like this:

My name is Charlene, but Momma and Daddy call me Baby Girl even though I'm almost twelve.

One warning with first person and young writers: Some children may end up with the "I" character being themselves as the author and not the main character in the story. Make sure they understand that if they use first person, the main character must be the one who is "I."

### ***Using Third Person***

In third person, the story is still told from the main character's viewpoint. The reader knows exactly what the character is thinking and feeling, but instead of using the "I" pronoun, the writer uses "he" or "she." Look at the paragraph below from *Monster Moon: Curse at Zala Manor*.

AJ dug in his backpack and grabbed his math book. "I hate math." He pitched himself backwards onto the bed, crossed his arms and stared at the water stains on the ceiling. They looked like ghosts circling a pirate ship.

With both first and third persons, readers pop into the main character's head and experience everything he/she does. From the very start, readers make a connection and feel for the protagonist, which makes the character likeable. Readers quickly become involved in his/her life and care about what happens. They laugh with the character, they hurt when feelings are crushed, and they cheer as the tension rises leading up to the climax of the story. They want the character to succeed and get what is so badly wanted or needed.



“Writers must choose between present and past tense.”

### Choosing a Tense

Once students have determined who will tell their story and in which person it will be told, it's time to choose the tense. Choosing a tense is actually a breeze, because there are only two tenses to choose from: present tense and past tense. In present tense, the events of the story are taking place in the moment. The writer uses present tense verbs such as *am*, *is*, *are*, *do*, and *does*. Here's an example:

“Omigosh, look!” Ashley *shouts* as her bike *skids* to a stop in front of the theater.

Yards ahead of her, Trinity *stops* her bike and *wheels* around.

Ashley *stares* at the poster announcing auditions. “It’s a musical!” she *says*. “I’m going to try out!”

In past tense, the events of the story have already taken place, perhaps days before or even longer. Nevertheless, the character is still telling the story. The writer uses past tense verbs such as *was*, *were*, and *did*; however, when the story is told in past tense, the character still speaks in the present tense in the dialogue. Dialogue tags—the “he said, she said”—and narrative sentences are written in the past tense. Here’s another example:

“Omigosh, look!” Ashley *shouted* as her bike *skidded* to a stop in front of the theater.

Yards ahead of her, Trinity *stopped* her bike and *wheeled* around.

Ashley *stared* at the poster announcing auditions. “It’s a musical!” she *said*. “I’m going to try out!”

Once writers choose which tense to use to tell their stories, they should be consistent throughout the story. No matter which tense writers use, they should always remember to use present tense in the dialogue, just the way people converse in real life.

Once writers choose which tense to tell their stories, they should try to be consistent and use the tense to the very end of the story. And no matter which tense writers use, they should always remember to use present tense in the dialogue, just the way people converse in real life.



## Chapter 7

# Writing Narrative and Exposition

Narrative is to tell or recount a story as it happened or is happening. It's a sequence of events with all of the juicy details. It's the chunks of text woven between the speaking parts—the dialogue. Narrative is the blocks of paragraphs where the character can unload all of his/her thoughts, emotions, or reactions to a situation. Here's one example:

Why do I have to apologize? Jack's the one who threw that paper airplane at the author. Everybody laughed. It's not fair. I get blamed for everything. It's not my fault that I was born with that same guilty look that Dad had as a kid.

Here's another sample of narrative:

The substitute teacher was a clown. She taught us how to play the kazoo. Then at recess the wind ripped her rainbow-color wig off her head. Some of us kids chased after it. The wig rolled across the playground, then got stuck against the baseball backstop. Everyone roared laughing when Mrs. Ruffles pulled on her clown wig. Her head looked like a tumble weed!

Students can also punch up their narrative by using the five senses. The five senses include: sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste—though it's not necessary to use all of them at once. Take a look at the following sentence:

Rain slid off John's jacket as he crunched through the damp red and yellow leaves littering the sidewalk. He kicked at a pile, dreading what his teacher would say when he got to school without his homework.

This sentence uses sight (the rain, red and yellow leaves littering the sidewalk), sound (crunched), and touch (damp). The idea is not to say merely, "It was raining. Leaves were all over the ground. John went to school without his homework." The idea is

to incorporate the sensory details into the plotline and characterization.

While the character narrates the story, it's the student, the author, who is the story-master, behind all of the action!

### **Exposition**

Exposition is background story. It gives readers a glimpse into the character's past/history. The writer briefly explains what has happened to the character that led to the point where he or she is at the beginning of the story. After all, the character had a life before the current story and will continue to live long after the story ends.

In exposition, the writer briefly introduces the plot, setting, theme (if the writer knows what his/her theme is), and character problem, then moves on with the telling of the story. Students should not spend too much time writing the character's background information. It will slow the story down before it begins.

Here's an example of exposition:

In the novel, *Harry Potter*, the reader learns at the start of the plot, how Harry's parents were murdered by an evil wizard. That's how he came to live with his aunt and uncle and pesky, spoiled-rotten cousin. The author also informs the reader about the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. The exposition in the first *Harry Potter* book is rather long, but it could be because *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was the first book in the *Harry Potter* series.

Remember to keep exposition (background information) as short as possible, then move on with the plot—the action that takes place in the story!



## The All-Important First Page

Five critical elements must appear on the first page of a short story. Called the "5 Ws and the H," these are who, what, where, when, why, and how. That means the following questions must be answered:

- Who is the main character?
- What is the problem to be solved?
- Where is the story taking place?
- When is the story taking place?
- Why has the situation occurred?
- How did this situation arise?

Here is an example of a story opening that covers all the bases:

Jason Carpenter had wanted to be an astronaut since he was four years old. When he had heard NASA needed a teenager to send to space to test the effects of weightlessness on young bones, he had applied. He had never thought in a million years that he would win. Now here he was—in an airplane on his way to the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, for astronaut training as a guinea pig. "I'm either the luckiest or the craziest 14-year-old in the universe!" he mumbled to himself, as a knot formed in his stomach.

Let's consider our list again.

Who is the main character? Jason Carpenter

What is the problem to be solved? To test the effects of weightlessness on young bones.

Where is the story taking place? At the Johnson Space Center in Houston.

When is the story taking place? Current day.

Why has the situation occurred? NASA asked for applicants for their testing program.

How did this situation arise? Jason applied to be the guinea pig.

The 5 Ws and the H do not need to be in the first paragraph, but they do need to be on the first page. The problem that befalls many new writers is "factstuffing." They cram everything into a few sentences in a way that makes it obvious the author is intruding. Here's an example:

Twelve-year-old Amber raced home. "Mom, I'm back at our huge house, which is only five blocks from my school."

In this passage, Amber knows she's twelve. This is also author intrusion. Age should be presented in a more natural way, such as that shown in the previous example on page 28. Both Mom and Amber know her house is large and only five blocks from the school, so Amber wouldn't say this when she arrives home. This information, too, can be presented in a different way.

### First Page Must-Haves

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Why
- How

Let's look at how this paragraph could be rewritten:

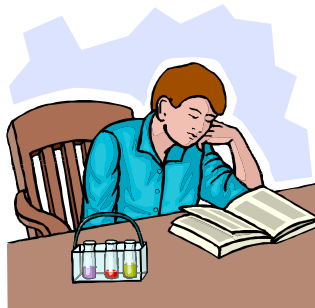
Amber raced home from school. She couldn't wait to tell Mom she'd won the 6th grade spelling bee. Running across the lawn and onto the wide porch, she threw open the door and rushed down the long hall. "Mom! I'm home!"

In this version, the information is part of the narrative. From the fact that the porch is wide and the hall is long, we get the impression of a large house. The reader can wait to learn that she lives only five blocks away. It's not important right now.

Some things to avoid in the opening are the following:

1. Openings that begin with dialogue.
2. Long descriptions.
3. Any scene that doesn't have to do with the story.
4. Any character who doesn't have a central role in the story.

One thing to keep in mind is that the opening of the story is not the same as the beginning. The story may start in the middle of some action, and the reader will learn what led up to that situation as the story unfolds.



## Chapter 8

# Maintaining Viewpoint

Now that person and tense have been established, through whose eyes will the reader experience the story?

With short stories, the character through whose eyes the reader sees the story unfold is usually the protagonist. The writer should stay in the protagonist's viewpoint all through the story.

Let's take a look at some examples of the correct and incorrect way to handle viewpoint.

### **CORRECT**

Dylan brushed past Justin and grabbed his bat from the metal rack. As he headed out of the dugout, he took a deep breath. There were two outs. If he didn't get at least a base hit, the game would be over and the Titans would lose.

Justin rolled his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Dylan asked.

"Nothing...." Justin replied.

"There must be something wrong," Dylan said. "You rolled your eyes."

"It's--it's just that I wish I'd get a chance to bat one of these days," Justin said.

Justin sounds bummed out, Dylan thought. "Don't worry. You'll get a chance to play."



In this passage, the readers are in Dylan's head. They know what he is thinking, but like Dylan, they don't know what's going on in Justin's head, only what he says. From his body language and spoken words, readers know Justin is bummed out.

Let's take a look at this same paragraph with the writer jumping out of viewpoint.

## INCORRECT

Dylan pushed past Justin and grabbed his bat from the metal rack and headed out of the dugout. He took a deep breath. There were two outs. If he didn't get at least a base hit, the game would be over and the Titans would lose.

Justin rolled his eyes. Why can't I ever bat? he wondered. His mood darkened. The coach never lets me play, he thought.

"What's wrong?" Dylan asked.

"Nothing...." Justin replied. Couldn't Dylan figure out how much he wanted to play? He tried to hide how bummed out he was.

In this passage, we start out in Dylan's head, and the second paragraph suddenly switches to Justin's point of view. If Dylan is the main character, he won't know what is going on in Justin's head. The writer has jumped out of point of view. This confuses the readers. Who is the main character? Dylan or Justin?



Here's another example:

## INCORRECT

Ashton tiptoed into the room, not realizing that Mackenzie was hiding behind the door.

If Ashton doesn't know Mackenzie was behind the door, he can't realize he doesn't know. This is an example of *author intrusion*, a writing no-no. The author is telling the reader what Ashton doesn't know so that the reader will be aware. If Ashton is the main character, the reader can see only what Ashton sees and knows.

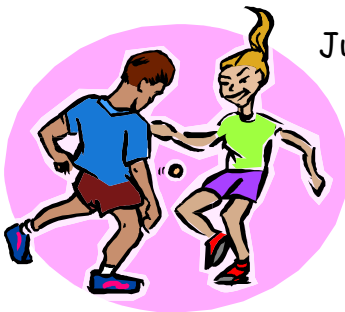
### Using Omniscient Viewpoint

Another point of view is called Omniscient. The story unfolds as told by an unseen narrator, and this unseen narrator sees everything that is going on. The reader is never in the head of any one character, only in the head of the narrator. Omniscient point of view is mostly used in stories written for young adult and adult readers, so elementary-age students should not attempt to use this viewpoint, as it is not commonly used today and is difficult for any writers but the most experienced to do well.

### Using Multiple Viewpoints

Usually reserved for novels, this style involves having some chapters in one character's viewpoint and other chapters in another character's viewpoint. This sophisticated form of writing that is beyond the ability of young writers to do well, and it is not suitable for short stories.

Sometimes young writers will slip back and forth in character's viewpoints, as shown in the first example on page 29. If this occurs during the writing of the first draft, don't worry about it. At this point, the important thing is for the students to continue writing their stories and allowing their creativity to flow. They can fix these problems during the revision process.



Just like learning to play any sport or musical instrument, the art of writing takes practice. It's a process, an exciting journey, and sometimes it can take awhile for all of the writing rules to sink in and make sense.

## Chapter 9

# Writing Dialogue

Narrative can slow the pacing of a story. To help nudge the story along, a writer needs to add snappy conversation—dialogue. Dialogue splits up chunks of narrative and revs up the action.

To write believable dialogue, a writer eavesdrops on conversations. Students learn how to write realistic dialogue by listening to everyday conversations—at school, at the mall, the movie theater, and at home.

Writers pay attention to the way people of all ages talk. Before students realize it, eavesdropping becomes a habit. A necessary and fun habit for a writer! Listening to people's conversations also helps hone a writer's listening skills to help create cool characters anyone would want to hang out with!

### Dialogue Tags

When dialogue appears in the story, readers need to know which character is speaking. To identify the character, add a few tags—"he said," "she said"—at the end of speaking parts—the dialogue.

The word "said" is one of those little words that become invisible to the reader. It doesn't literally become invisible—unless the writer uses disappearing ink! The reader automatically skims over the word.

Here's an example from a children's story:

"Wait! I might not be a real princess," **Hammertilda said.**

To create a variety to dialogue tags, writers can add a piece of action after "said" like in the following example:



"Wait! I might not be a real princess," **said Hammertilda, twirling on her big toe.**

Or the writer may choose to eliminate the word, "said," and replace it with only action instead:

"Wait! I might not be real princess!" **Hammertilda twirled on her big toe like a ballerina.**

Next, see how the action of the story is interspersed between the dialogue.

**Hammertilda's chin quivered.** "Now, I'll never get to break that piñata." **She moped back to the pond and sulked. She swished her toe in the water.** "I wish Prince Gorf was a prince again."

Ask students to notice how an author uses dialogue tags in the next story he/she reads. Any which way students decide to use them, dialogue tags breathe life into a story!

### **Adding Emotion**

If writers can make a reader laugh or cry, then they can win the Tear-Jerker award or Fall-on-the-Floor-Laughing trophy for best emotion in a short story!

How do storytellers add emotion to their stories?

To make readers laugh, writers can stand on their heads and tell jokes while juggling oranges with their feet. And to turn on the waterworks, writers can chop onions and sprinkle the pieces between the pages of the story.



And if that doesn't evoke some emotion, writers can add a dog to the story, build up the relationship between the character and his canine pal, and then have something happen to the dog.

*Gasp! Not the dog! You can't kill off the dog!*

Actually, writers can choose to do whatever they want. Remember that they are the directors. But Bear doesn't have to die. The situation can be just a close call. Keep the readers wiping their drippy noses by adding emotion through dialogue. Imagine the dialogue going something like this:

“Don't die, Bear.” Aidan buried his face deep into the dog's neck and choked back sobs. “You're...you're the best friend I've ever had. I don't know what I'd do without you. Please don't die. Please...”

Hopefully, the readers have a lump in their throats and tears streaming down their reddened cheeks.

How about something to lighten the mood of the story?

“Bear!” Aidan flew after his dog. Bear stole Old Lady Johnson's false teeth from the table where she had put them next to her porch rocker. “Get back here, you crazy, teeth-stealing dog!”

Readers might not be rolling on the floor laughing, but they might have cracked a little smile, happy to see Bear strong and healthy and up to his regular crazy antics. Especially after his close call with death!

### **Using Internal Dialogue**

Another method to add emotion is through internal dialogue. Characters, just like real people, sometimes talk to themselves.

Internal dialogue is the thoughts that race through a character's mind. The thoughts are usually charged with emotion. Sometimes a character will have an ongoing debate inside his/her head.

Should I or shouldn't I? I should. No, I shouldn't. Maybe. Maybe not. Yes. No. Oh, I can't make up my mind. I'm so confused.

Writers use internal dialogue to express thoughts the character might not want to state aloud for everyone to hear. These are his/her own private/censored thoughts and the reader is the only one who is privileged to read them.

If the story is written in third person, internal thoughts are always written in the moment, in present tense even if the story is being told in the past tense. The self-talk, is easily recognizable because it's written in *italics*. For instance:

*What's Kelly's problem? Just because I won't loan her the money for that new CD she ignores me like I'm a nobody? Whatever! That money took me weeks to earn. She promised to pay me back, but she's such a liar. She never pays me back!*

What if after the character has this emotional outburst inside her mind, Kelly walks up and apologizes for ignoring her friend. The girls make up and are best friends forever again. Would the character want Kelly to know what she was really thinking about her? Thanks goodness, she kept her thoughts to herself!

"I wonder what's in this letter?"



# Chapter 10

## Using Cool Words and Phrases

More advanced students can make their stories glow by using comparisons, exaggeration, and creative, colorful speech.

### **Making Comparisons**

The character can compare him/herself to something. In other words, the writer replaces "normal" words with colorful comparisons to help others understand or enjoy the writing more. This can be done in three ways:

#### **1. Simile**

A *simile* (sim-i-lee) uses the words "like," "as," or "as if."

Danielle acted like she had won the lottery.  
The night was as black as pitch.  
The look in Amy's eyes was as cold as ice.

#### **2. Metaphor**

The second way to have your character compare him/herself to something is by writing the sentence without using the words "like," "as," or "as if." This is called a *metaphor* (met-a-for).

Joe's gaze shot daggers at Jeff.  
Sue's feet were rooted to the floor.  
A blanket of snow covered the ground.

#### **3. Hyperbole**

A *hyperbole* (hi-PER-bo-lee) is an exaggerated comparison. Don't confuse it with a simile or a metaphor.

John felt as if he'd been hit with a ton of bricks.  
The bear was as big as a bus.  
I nearly died laughing.  
I tried a thousand times to get the answer.



These comparisons are not literally true, but people make them to sound impressive or to emphasize something, such as a feeling, effort, or reaction.

Writers think about what they want to write about, then consider what it/he/she reminds them of. For example, if the character is big and solid, they might compare it/him/her to a tree, which is also big and solid with or without the words "like," "as," or "as if." The following paragraph shows how a character can be compared to a tree.

Mr. Clemens stood as if he were rooted to the floor, his arms outstretched like massive limbs. His knobby fingers looked like they had walnuts growing out of each knuckle. His hair hung like weeping willow branches, and his clothes were as old as bark. He was the biggest tree of a man I had ever seen!

## Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia refers to words that sound like their meaning.

"Woof!" barked the dog.  
The bat cracked out a home run.  
Beep! Beep!  
The lion roared.

These words add the sense of sound to a story, which makes the story pop with reality for the reader.



## Chapter 11

# Using Proper Manuscript Format

One of the first things that marks a professional writer from an amateur writer is using manuscript format. Your students will feel like real writers when they see how their manuscripts look formatted properly. Require students to submit their work as shown below:

- Clean, 8.5" x 11" white paper
- Double-spaced
- Paragraphs indented to .5"
- Ragged right margin
- 12-point Courier, Arial, or Times Roman

While manuscripts are not paper-clipped or stapled when they are sent in to editors, you may want your students to do so to prevent any separation or loss. Any "clean" manuscript has been proofread for grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Figures 2 and 3 show an example of a first page and a second page of a manuscript formatted to publishing requirements.

Normally, the author's name and address would appear in the upper left-hand corner. For students, however, this is not practical. Instead, have them list their name, their grade, and their teacher's name.

Samantha Jones  
5th Grade  
Ms. Green

1

### The Lost Treasure of the Golden Sun

Intense heat rushed over Anny Bradford as if she had opened the door to a hot oven. Flames flashed before her, and she shrank against the vinyl upholstery of the old green station wagon as it rolled up the desert highway of the Navajo Nation. *Oh, no! Please! Not now!* She clutched her stomach, trying to ward off the image.

Flames crackled viciously, though she knew no one else in the car could see or hear them. Above the blaze floated a turquoise stone rimmed in silver on a beaded leather band. Smoke seared her lungs, sucking the air right out of them. She coughed violently, gasping for breath.

Beside her on the back seat, Scout nudged her and whispered, “You’re not having another vision, are you?”

Anny ignored her twin. The flames began to lick at her. She raised her arms to protect herself against the blast as smoke stung her eyes.

*Figure 2. First page of a manuscript in proper manuscript format.*

Jones/Lost Treasure

2

“Don’t let Jim see you,” Scout continued, her tone more than a little irritated. “He’ll send us home!”

Anny tried to control herself. Their parents and Eric Larson’s grandma had let them fly alone to Arizona yesterday from their homes in California. Not many twelve-year-olds got to do that. She didn’t want to be responsible for ruining their first parent-free vacation.

Eric reached across Scout’s lap to touch Anny’s arm. He rapidly formed words with his hands, his way of talking because he was deaf. “*What are you seeing?*”

Anny wanted to sign back but couldn’t. Sweat beaded on her forehead despite the chill that ran up her spine. The leather band and flames weren’t really there, she knew, yet she reached out to grasp the stone. As her fingers closed around it, the silver at its edges burned her skin. She pulled her arm back quickly, the stone still in her closed fist. She rolled down the window, desperately hoping that fresh air would save her. Thrusting her burning hand outside, she hurled the stone and band to the ground, gasping again as clean air replaced the smoke in her lungs. She prayed the experience would end.

*Figure 3. First page of a manuscript in proper manuscript format.*

## About the Authors

**C**arol J. Amato knew she wanted to be a writer when she was in the 4th grade. To date, she has written 20 books, almost 175 articles, and two short stories. Her memorable books for young people include the acclaimed series *Breakthroughs in Science (The Earth, Astronomy, The Human Body, and Inventions)*, *50 Nifty Science Fair Projects*, *Super Science Fair Projects*, and *50 More Nifty Science Fair Projects*.

Her latest endeavor is her award-winning new mystery series for kids ages 8-12, *The Phantom Hunters*. Firmly believing that kids' fiction can be educational as well as entertaining, Ms. Amato has applied her M.A. in Anthropology to creating this series. Each mystery takes readers to a different culture. The first title in this series is *The Lost Treasure of the Golden Sun*, takes place on the Navajo Nation. She has finished Book #2, *The Secret of Blackhurst Manor*, set in Lincolnshire, England, due out in 2010. The third book in the series, *The Ghosts of San Juan Capistrano*, is currently underway.

She has taught at the intermediate and high-school levels, both in the United States and England, and currently teaches writing part-time at the college level. She has served as a judge for the Orange County and California State Science Fairs.

Ms. Amato is a member of the Writers' Club of Whittier, Inc., a professional writers' critique group, and three other critique groups, including Books are Born Here, The Poison Pen, and the Corona Writers. She is also a member of the California Writers' Club, the Independent Writers of Southern California, and the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). She is listed in *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who of American Women*, *Who's Who in the West*, *Who's Who in Orange County*, and the *World Who's Who of Women*.



## About the Authors

**M**aria Toth is a children's writer. She has written many articles for newspapers and magazines and has had several poems published in the *Pacific Review* at California State University, San Bernardino. Her children's serial stories have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times' Kids' Reading Room*, and she was the editor of the children's pages, *KidStuff* and *Youth Scene*, at the *San Bernardino County Sun*, where she also wrote a weekly column, *Family Outing*.

Her winning ghost story, *Southland Stranger*, was performed at the Riverside Ballet Theater's Halloween Ghost Walk. With two local authors, she recently co-wrote *Monster Moon: Curse at Zala Manor*, the first book in a mystery series published by Stargazer Publishing Company.

She enjoys sharing her love of books with students through the Reading Buddy program at area schools. She has also taught poetry workshops for CAPS, an after-school program, and a creative writing program for GATE students. Maria has participated in school events promoting literacy. She has appeared twice on a local children's television show *Storytime*. Many students have come to know her as Maria Tortilla.

Ms. Toth is also an active member of two writing critique groups, *Books Are Born Here* and *The Poison Pen*.

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