Turning An Idea Into An Adventure:

A Story Development Tool By Gabrielle Prendergast

What is a story?

Sometimes, like Athena, a story idea jumps full grown and in a complete suit of armour from your forehead. Sounds painful, and often it is. More commonly, a story starts as an "idea" as in "I have a great idea for a story/film/novel/video-game". When you have one of these "ideas" and someone says "OK, let's hear it" it often turns out to be disappointingly unformed and distinctly un-armoured. What you thought was a great idea turns out to be just a setting, like a crippled space ship, or a character, like a card-playing daycare worker, or a conflict, like a murder trial you heard of. What's missing from each of these three ideas is the other two. That is: A story needs at least one of each - a character, a setting and a conflict.

Once you have all these, you have more than a great idea for a story. You have the corner stones of your novel/film/video-game etc. But you are far from finished. In fact you probably don't even feel ready to start writing the first page.

Word made flesh(y)

There are a lot of ways of fleshing out your story idea to get it to the point that you have a lot to write about. What follows is one way, devised by me, to help beginner writers to find the adventures in their ideas.

OK, you have your setting, let's say (with respect to George Lucas) "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…". And let's say this galaxy is technologically very advanced and under the control of a corrupt and ruthless Empire. *Detail,* by the way, is the key to development of setting, character and conflict.

So we have a pretty detailed setting, now let's think of a character. "Only one?" you say – for now, yes, let's concentrate on one, sometimes called the "protagonist" but we'll call him "Our Hero". Let's say our hero is a young, idealistic dreamer, a farm boy who wants to be a pilot and who has a, to say the least, "dubious" background. We'll call him "Luke Skywalker".

Now we start to see how this technique works because once we have our setting and our character, the conflict is pretty obvious. The idealistic dreamer *hates* the Empire, but he doesn't think he can do anything about it, until…

Stories are like pastry treats

Now we get to the real jelly filling in the doughnut.

Every story has a beginning and middle and an end. This has to do with both the fact that humans perceive time in a linear fashion and that we have a story-telling tradition literally tens of thousands of years old that is based on this perception of time. Now, you're thinking "What about *Pulp Fiction*, or that episode of *Seinfeld* or *Paradise*, by Toni Morrison where the beginning is the end or the middle is the

beginning blah, blah, blah". My answer is this; unless you read backwards, or re-wind your video and watch it backwards, the beginning of all those pieces was the first thing you saw and the end was the last. That's how it works.

So, now you decide what happens in the beginning of your story. Well let's say Luke somehow comes into contact with some people who are fighting the Empire and decides to join them. And what happens in the middle? Hmmm, let's say he meets up with a few other people, rescues someone, blows up a couple of tie-fighters (detail – remember?) and delivers some very important weapon plans. So what happens at the end? Well, this ain't *Titanic*, that's for sure; Luke defeats the Empire, the good guys win and everyone lives happily ever after.

Ok? Ready to write? Not quite. Because the story above, although complete, is a bit flat. And this is where it gets interesting.

Good Stories Are Like Black Forest Cake

In my experience most stories have at least one of the following elements in them: Good vs Evil, Unrequited Love and The Quest. BUT, most *good* stories have a bit of all three.

So, for our friend Luke, the obvious element is Good vs Evil: his fight against the empire. So let's just experiment and give the story some of the other elements. Some *layers,* so to speak.

Well for unrequited love we can introduce a romantic interest, but let's be more creative, let's make her not so much loved as admired and respected. Luke almost idolises this woman for her beauty, her courage and her "spirit". In fact, let's make her a princess, Princess Leia, and let's make Luke *earn* her respect by saving her and the galaxy.

And the quest, well, wasn't Luke a dreamer, a farm-boy who wants to be pilot? He gets that in spades and more!

All right! Now we have a great idea for a story! But we can go further. Each time we add a character, we can explore the above elements for them. For example, Luke's new friend Han, will good triumph over greed in his internal universe? Will he get the love and respect of the princess? Will he find the wealth and success he seeks? Stay tuned…there's plenty of room for a sequel!

Wow! What started out as a desire to make a movie set in another galaxy has turned into one of the most loved and enduring film trilogies of our generation! Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that George Lucas used my technique when he conceived *Star Wars* (for starters, I was eight and I hadn't developed it yet). I don't know how he did it, but the end is more important than the means.

So…how do *you* do it? Turn the page, fill out your table and soon you'll be on the way to writing a rich, detailed, compelling story.

Your Story Chart

Title[1]	Character	Setting	Conflict	Beginning	Middle	End	Good vs Evil	Unrequited Love	The Quest	Comment [LL1]:
										Comment [LL2]:

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[1] Definitions to help you are on the next page.

Definitions

Title

This can be your title or a working title, but *you shouldn't leave it blank*. Soon you'll have so many good story ideas you'll need some way of referring to them

Character

Enumerate all your main characters, both the good guys (including the protagonist) and the bad guys (antagonists). Each of them can have a story if necessary. Include as much detail as you know, names, age, profession etc.

Setting

Include as much setting about the time, place and environment as you know. A setting is not just a physical place, like a spaceship. Sometimes it is an event, like a wedding, or a cultural milieu like organised crime. You are only limited by your imagination and what fits in with the other aspects of your story.

Conflict

What is the struggle in the story? Sometimes you will know a lot of detail, sometimes not. Sometimes it can be fairly arbitrary: if you have a character or setting that interests you, invent a conflict that seems to fit. For example our card-playing daycare worker may find her job in jeopardy due to her gambling problems or maybe her loan shark threatens the kids.

The Beginning

What happens first or what does the viewer/reader see first? Not the first page but the first change, the first step in the conflict. Note this for each of your characters.

The Middle

What sorts of things do your characters do in the middle and more importantly what challenges them to change (if at all). Enumerate for each character.

The End

How does it turn out? What happens to each character? Do they change? Do they find the love they've been missing, or the object of their quest? Do they defeat evil?

Good vs Evil

Probably the oldest of stories it can be man vs the elements or nature, as in tribal hunting tales or the individual vs the evil within as in *Wall Street*, and *Leaving Las Vegas.* It can be the little guy fighting the big guy as in David & Goliath or *Norma Rae.* It can be one person fighting another as in the aptly titled *Kramer vs Kramer.* It's important to remember that "evil" in this context is not always absolute evil, it is only what is harmful or antagonistic to the character in question. Such that one of the evils your gangster character might be fighting is the forces of law and order.

Unrequited Love

Unrequited love is any love impeded by some kind of obstacle. The ultimate is forbidden romantic love like *Romeo & Juliet* but there is also unreciprocated romantic love like in *Sense & Sensibility.* There are other obstacles to romantic love, but unrequited love is not always romantic, very often in stories it is parental love: everything from *Oedipus* to *Hamlet* to *Secrets & Lies.* In the latter both the parent and child are seeking the love they miss from the other. Sometimes, in fact frequently, it is the love of self which is missing as in *It's a Wonderful Life* and *City of Joy*.

The Quest

The quest is often intrinsically linked with the other elements. In *Rocky*, for example, our hero must "go twelve rounds" (the quest) with the champ to prove to himself that he's worthy of self love (unrequited love) and to those who didn't believe in him that he's not a loser (good vs evil). Sometimes quests are more overt like the quest for the Holy Grail or *The Quest for Fire.*