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## How to outline a story example

The story outline is a great bridge between your story idea and a polished work of fiction. When you're not sure how to start writing a story idea you might have, working on an outline will save you time and frustration, while also generating new ideas. Some writers balk at the idea of using a story outline, as they think the process constrains their creativity. If you approach story outlining properly, though, it won't limit your creativity—quite the opposite. Let's delve into how to write a story outline, and why learning to structure a short story or novel will actually unlock its creative potential. What is a Story Outline? A story outline is a way for writers to organize the events of their story before they actually write it. It's possible to do both short story writing and novel writing without a story outline, but when you're not sure where to begin or how to continue, outlining your ideas can help you put one word in front of another. The story outline is a sturdy bridge between your story idea and a polished work of fiction. Story outlining isn't something you master right away. Like fiction writing itself, writing an outline is a skill that you master over time. This article will suggest four different ways to outline your story, but these are just suggestions—the best outline will adapt to your writing style and methods, with Jack Smith April 6th, 2022 Over eight weeks, you'll develop a solid basis in the fictional elements—protagonist, setting, secondary characters, point of view, plot, and theme—while you develop the outline of your novel. You'll receive feedback at all stages from your fellow writers and your instructor. How to Write a Good Story Outline Step-by-Step The story outline process is intended to build your story from idea to finished product. This process will help you expand the components of the story into a workable piece of fiction. While these steps are only a guideline, they will almost certainly help you structure a short story or novel. 1. Start With Your Story Premise A good story outline starts with your story premise. The premise is a 1-3 sentence summary of what happens in the story. Story premises mention the protagonist, the setting, and the conflict, while also highlighting what makes the story interesting. A great story premise will introduce the central conflict with your characters, while highlighting what makes the story interesting. Let's take a story that most people are familiar with: Romeo and Juliet. A great story premise will introduce the central conflict with these characters, while a poor premise offers little in the way of structure and storyline. Here's an example of a successful premise: "Two teens, Romeo and Juliet, pursue their forbidden love with each other—to the chagrin of their rival families. When Juliet must choose between her family and her heart, both lovers must find a way to stay united, even if fate won't allow it." This story premise tells us who the characters are, what their conflict is, and that their story explores—the themes of love and fate. The makings of a legendary story are written in these two sentences, ready to take the stage! 2. Flesh Out Your Characters Once you have a story premise, start thinking about the characters in your story. What are their needs and motivations, how do they dress, what are their backstories, how will they respond to the story's central conflict? Most stories are character-driven in one way or another. Your characters advance the plot, explore the story's themes, and help you reach new conclusions about life and humanity. When you don't know what to write next in your story, thinking back to your characters' psychology can often provide the answer. Do the work of fleshing out your characters now, and your story will develop a life and pulse of its own. 3. Build Scenes Around Your Characters The world of your story should be just as alive as your characters. Whether your premise takes place on Earth or in a distant universe, your next step is to craft the world your characters live in. When developing your scenes, consider the smallest details to add layers of visual and sensory description. Tell us where the action of the story is happening, then zero in on information to ground the reader. Consider details like the temperature, the color of the sky or the walls, the time of day, etc. Include unique descriptions and objects to make the reader fully present. The world of your story should be just as alive as your characters. Most importantly, tell us how the character feels in each scene. These emotional responses help navigate the reader through the world itself, coloring the story and driving the plot forward. Scene writing helps you move towards structuring a short story or novel. You can order each scene based on your tentative idea for a plot, then start plotting the story itself! 4. Start Writing Your Outline Once you've considered your characters, scenes, and your intent for writing the story, it's time to start writing the actual outline. We haven't yet explained how to write a story outline, and that's because there are many different ways to write one! Your outline takes all of the above information about your scenes, characters, and ideas, and it organizes that information in a coherent, linear way. The intent of an outline is to generate plot points to refer to as you write your story, but it also helps ground your story idea in a meaningful way. Your outline will organize your scenes, characters, and ideas in a coherent, linear way. The following four methods of story outlining are popular ways of jumping from idea to writing, but play around with your own outlines to figure out what works best. Four Approaches to Writing a Story Outline Good story outlines come in all shapes and sizes. If you've got the ingredients above, but you're still not sure how to write a story outline that will work for you, here are four approaches you can try. Feel free to mix-and-match, and so on—these are not ironclad rules, but guidelines designed to support you. 1. The Plot-Based Approach The most common way to outline your story is to create a bulleted or numbered list of plot points. Each bullet details the events that happen in each scene. Let's use Romeo and Juliet as our example again; the following would be the first few bullet points in a plot-based outline: Members of the Montague and Capulet families are fighting in the streets. The Prince interrupts the fighting to warn that the next person who starts a fight will be executed. Later, the Capulets host a dinner to introduce their daughter, Juliet, to Paris, her arranged husband. Romeo, a Montague, sneaks into the party to see his current love Rosaline, but ends up falling in love with Juliet. Each bullet point summarizes a basic plot element that will later be filled in with details. Obviously, Shakespeare's story is filled with many more details than what the bullet provides, but this way of scaffolding a story allows you to build details around the basic plot. 2. The Scene-Based Approach The scene-based approach adapts a plot-based outline to focus specifically on the scenes and world-building of the story. This is a great way to structure a short story—or even a novel!—if world-building and setting are central elements of your fiction. This is how you might take a scene-based approach to Romeo and Juliet: We start in fair Verona, an Italian town whose peaceful nature is interrupted by the Montagues and Capulets. Verona is an independent city-state with its own Prince and monarchy. Verona emulates certain "Italian" traits like love and passion. Within Verona, the Capulets host a masquerade party to reveal their daughter, Juliet, to the handsome Paris. Romeo, a Montague, sneaks into this party and falls in love with Juliet. The Capulets are a wealthy family and represent a caring, feminine household. The Montagues are also wealthy, but much more brash and masculine. This approach uses world-building details to advance the story, letting Verona take charge of the tale. Of course, Verona is not the focus of Romeo and Juliet, so a scene-based approach probably wouldn't have helped Shakespeare as much as it might help writers in fantasy, sci-fi, and magical realism. 3. The Themes-Based Approach To write a short story or novel outline with a themes-based approach, you want to consider how the events of the story advance its ideas and themes. Here's a themes-based approach to Romeo and Juliet: The story's preface explores themes of love and fate, insinuating the story's tragedy of a romance destined to fail. The tension between the Capulets and Montagues are explored, introducing the story's masculine/feminine dichotomy. Romeo and Juliet complicate this dichotomy: Romeo is tender, delicate, and heartfelt, while Juliet is full of banter and says "un-ladylike" things. This approach is certainly more conceptual and ideas focused, focusing less on the story itself and more on what the story offers. While it might not work for every story, you a themes-based approach will certainly benefit you if you know what you want to say, but not how to say it. 4. Freytag's Pyramid A last possible approach to take is to chart the story based on Freytag's Pyramid. This approach will work best for writers who want a basic structure for their story, but don't want to feel so confined that they lose their creative edge. All you need to do is write down the basic plot elements that correspond with Freytag's pyramid, and you're welcome to use as many or as few details as you like. A writer can take the five basic elements of a story and craft a heart-wrenching tale of love and disaster. The following is a simplified pyramid that corresponds to Romeo and Juliet. Exposition: We learn about Verona and the family conflicts within the city. Inciting incident: Romeo and Juliet meet at the Capulet's dinner party. Rising Action: Romeo and Juliet pursue their forbidden romance. Romeo and Juliet meet again after Juliet learns she is to marry Paris. Romeo and Juliet marry in secret. Juliet must find a way to escape Verona with Romeo before she is betrothed to Paris. Climax: Romeo kills Paris, and then himself, when he wrongfully believes Juliet to be dead. When Juliet finds that both men have died, she also kills herself. Falling Action: The two warring families agree to settle their disputes. Resolution: A brief exploration of the value and hardship of youth, love, and the cruelty of fate. Freytag's pyramid is the most summaristic of the above outlining strategies. Romeo and Juliet bears much more complexity than what this outline offers, but a writer can certainly take these basic elements and craft a heart-wrenching tale of love and disaster. How to Write a Story Outline: Keep Experimenting! Though you can't completely write your short story or novel step by step using the frameworks above, you absolutely can set up a strong story by investing the time into creating an effective outline. Just like your writing, your story outlines will improve with practice, so play around with different formats and ideas! What's important is that you explore the elements of fiction and expand upon your ideas. Want to learn more about how to write a good story, or how to write a story outline? Take a look at our upcoming fiction courses, and let one of our award-winning instructors guide you through the novel and short story writing process. Reserve your spot in one of our courses today!

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