

# FIVE EASY STEPS TO CREATING A GREAT STORY



From award-winning author  
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So many people tell me that they can never come up with a decent story idea or really good characters. The truth is that it's easier than you think to do both. I've developed a technique anyone can use. An easy-to-follow method. Five steps. I can't promise that you'll write the best-selling novel since *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* if you follow them, but I will promise you that whatever kind of stories you like to write they will be deeper and more powerful. I know that's a bold claim to make. I do so because I've used the technique successfully countless times across many schools and different age-groups, so I know it works. And it does so because it focuses on what matters most in stories - characters, and what makes readers care about them. Are you ready? Here we go ...

## CLIFFMCNISH STEP 1 - START WITH A SINGLE CHARACTER AND GIVE THEM A HUGE PROBLEM

Most people wait for an idea to occur to them and just start writing, hoping the story will get interesting as it goes along. Don't do that. Start with one thing. Come up with a single character - boy, girl, man, woman, animal - that has a problem. That's all. But it has to be a huge problem. In *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White the novel begins with Fern's father about to kill Wilbur the pig because he's weak, the runt of the litter. That's a pretty big problem to have when you have just been born!

Draw a square in the middle of a sheet of A4 paper. In that square put your character with a seriously big problem. Then think carefully about *all the many ways* that problem affects your character's life. Can he/she live normally? Is it painful? Does it spoil their friendships? Make family life harder?

## CM STEP 2 - ADD MORE CHARACTERS TO YOUR STORY MIX

Now, as fast as possible (give yourself no more than 10 minutes) come up with as many other characters as you can who just might be in your story. A brother? Sister? Mother? Father? Friend? Enemy? The only rule is that they have to be linked to the main character in some way. The closer the link, the better. Put the new characters in boxes of their own. Link them to your starting character with simple lines (as in Example 1.). Don't spend time worrying about character names for now. Just quickly decide who they are and move onto the next character. Ready? Aim for at least 10 new characters. Go.

Finished? OK. Now look at those new characters and make sure each one has at least one big problem. If you can't find one, either cut them from your story or *find* a big problem for them. Plus, at this stage, if you find that you are more interested in one of your **new** characters than the one you started with, fine. That new character can become your main one.

## CM STEP 3 - ADD DESIRE LINES!

OK. You've given all your characters big problems. But for deep character it's not enough for them just to have problems. That will make us sympathise with them, but for a reader to really care about a character - to love or hate them - the character has to **WANT SOMETHING DESPERATELY**. I think we'd agree that Harry Potter's big problem is that Voldermort is trying to kill him. But what he *wants* more than anything is to know more about his parents. Ron Weasley desperately wants to prove himself. Hermione Granger desperately wants to be seen as the most talented student in the school. Villains also have to want things desperately. Voldemort desperately wants to kill Harry Potter. He'll do anything to achieve that, and we hate him for it.

What does *your* main character desperately want? It can be something for themselves. But the characters we cherish most of all not only have something they want personally, but a noble desire as well. That is, they put themselves in danger to protect others. In *Twilight*, Edward desperately wants to taste Bella's blood. But he chooses instead to deny himself and save her life instead. We love characters who do this - who give up their personal desire for the greater good or who help someone else despite their problems.

So - do step 3 now. Decide what your main character desperately wants. Write it down as a single sentence. Make the desire clear and strong and powerful. And once you've done that, do the same for your other characters. This step is vital. It is what will lift your characters from ordinary ones into strong ones readers will identify with. People are always writing to me to say that their characters are boring and wooden. Believe me, once you give them something they desperately want readers will become desperate for them to either achieve it, or, if they are evil characters, to be stopped.

## CM STEP 4 - WORST & BEST

Now that you know what your main character's problems are and what they desperately want - and not before that - you can decide the worst and best things that could possibly happen to them in the story.

**WORST.** Always start with the WORST outcome. Why? Because if you begin with the best outcome - the nice ending you think most readers want - then you don't stretch the story enough. You have to think of the worst things that could happen, and not just to the main character but *all the people they care about in the story as well*. Do they fall ill? Do they die? Do they let other people down who depend on them? Will their enemies triumph? Do this right now. **Decide the worst possible outcome for all the characters you like.**

**BEST.** And once you've done that you do the opposite. Decide the best possible outcome for your main character and the other people they care about in the story. Do they get what they want? Do their enemies fail? How happy can you make it?

Finished? OK, you now have a decision to make. Do you want a happy ending where your main character gets what they desperately want? Or an ending where things turn out for the worst? Or something in between? The point is this: if you want a happy ending, you build suspense by making your reader believe they are heading for the worst ending. That's what J.K. Rowling does in Harry Potter. She always makes you think that Voldemort is going to kill Harry Potter, take over the school and enslave the world in dark magic. Then, at the last minute, she gives you the happy outcome most people want. But of course she was only able to do that *because she took the time to consider all the worst possible outcomes first*. It is the reader's fear of the worst that keeps them reading! On the other hand if you chose to give your story the WORST possible outcome (brave you!), then of course you do the opposite - lead the reader to believe that they will get the happy ending and then shock them by jumping to the dark side. The choice is yours.

## CM STEP 5 - ENDING & PLANNING YOUR STORY STEPS

Once you have decided whether you want the best possible outcome or the worst for your main character, miraculously you have your ending! For those of you who rarely finish your stories, I guarantee that if you complete step 4 you will do so. But you have one final task before you actually start writing your story. You need to decide the four or five main things that have to happen in your story to get from the beginning to your worst or best ending. These will be your key story scenes. In all of them you show your main character dealing with their problems and trying to get what they desperately want. Think about this right now. And in all scenes try to make the next problem your main character faces **BIGGER** than the last. Keep the pressure up as much as possible. As world-famous novelist Stephen King says, **'Somewhere in your story there is a character you love. Think of all the horrible things you can do to him or her. Be bold. Be cruel. And have fun.'**

### Example 1 - The Hunger Games

#### Primrose Everdeen

(Katniss's Little Sister)

**Problem:** She's been picked for the Games

**Desperately Needs:** To be saved

#### Haymitch Abernathy

(winner of 50<sup>th</sup> Games)

**Problem:** Alcoholic, can't bear helping people about to die

**Desperately wants:** to help Katniss & Peeta survive

#### Coriolanus Snow

(president of Panem)

**Problem:** Katniss jeopardising the Games by changing the rules & how people feel.

**Wants:** The corrupt Games to succeed according to his sadistic rules

#### Peeta Mellark (16)

**Problem:** To survive the Games.

**Desperately wants:** To safeguard his secret love Katniss, even if he has to sacrifice himself to do so.

#### Katniss Everdeen (16)

**Problem:** Forced to take part in battle to the death

**Desperately Wants:** To make sure her mother & sister are safe and cared for, even if she dies

#### All the Problems this gives her:

- She has only a tiny chance of survival
- Her family will not be able to live without her
- She has to brutally kill other people to have any chance of surviving
- She has to pretend to be a different personality to improve her TV ratings
- She has to pick up survival skills while trying to stay alive

#### Worst Outcome (Possible Ending 1)

- Katniss dies horribly
- She also fails to save Peeta, who loves her
- One of the callous, brutal 'Career' killers triumphs
- Her mother & sister fall into abject poverty & die
- Haymitch Abernathy remains an alcoholic and fails to save himself or anyone else
- Instead of dealing a blow to the Hunger Games, Katniss only succeeds in increasing the TV ratings & making sadistic President Snow even more secure & popular

#### Best Outcome (Possible Ending 2)

- Katniss defies the odds and wins
- The rules of the Games are changed so that Peeta survives too!
- Katniss hardly needs to kill anyone
- Rue dies, but her death is at least a noble one, which was what she wanted
- Katniss gets what she desperately wanted - safety and security for her family
- Coriolanus Snow and the Game are dealt a severe blow - 'A great success for Democracy!'

To find out more about Cliff McNish's own award winning novels for children and young adults go to [www.cliffmcnish.com](http://www.cliffmcnish.com)

