Book Proposal

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TITLE: THE STORY TEMPLATE: CONQUER WRITER'S BLOCK USING THE UNIVERSAL STRUCTURE OF STORY

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PREMISE: Writing a novel or screenplay sounds like a fabulous idea. But where does the would-be writer start, and how does he continue? THE STORY TEMPLATE articulates the universal structure and proportions of story as a pattern, ***not a formula***, then uses a flexible process for the would-be novelist or screenwriter to organize his ideas, construct an intuitively satisfying story, and submit the work for publication.

UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION: This book is a practical guide for the hopeful storywriter (novel or screenplay) to construct a compelling, complete scene-by-scene story outline, review writing techniques, and prepare for publication.

Writers buying and following THE STORY TEMPLATE will be able to:

- Understand the four story pillars, and use the "secret weapon" of the story template (no matter the genre), to structure their stories.
- Build character depth with believable change through implementing the six stages of the character arc.
- Create subplots to raise tension while deepening and contrasting story themes.
- Use story boarding and other techniques to build a scene-by-scene outline.
- Review writing techniques to shape ideas into a compelling manuscript.
- Decide whether to pursue traditional or self-publishing, and learn steps to follow for each.

Because the book will:

- Break down multiple elements of the story to explain how they work individually, and how they integrate and reinforce each other, with examples.

- Use more than 100 sequential exercises with concrete and manageable tasks to progressively build a story.
- Discuss (with examples) techniques such as constructing scenes/sequels, developing penetrating POV, writing sparkling dialogue, employing MRUs, incorporating back story, creating tension, and crafting beginnings.
- Review presentation techniques such as creating loglines, using the 10% rule for editing (at least 10% can be cut), synopsis writing, and query letter writing, along with clear examples and exercises, to help the writer make sure he's ready to go ahead to the next step of publishing.
- Compare traditional publishing with self-publishing, and discuss steps to take for pursuing each.

BOOK OVERVIEW: THE STORY TEMPLATE is written in a "programmed learner" type format, in which the reader understands a small piece of information and then immediately is asked to demonstrate it through one or a few short exercises. Numerous examples make concepts clear and provide models for the writer to work from when completing exercises. The exercises build upon each other, facilitating painless learning while developing what the writer wants to work on—his story. The book is divided into an introduction and 7 levels:

- Introduction: Organizing a novel is hard work, no matter how many people say otherwise. This section describes story as a set of proportions, like the proportions in drawing a face, which must be present in order for the story to "work." It also reviews writing strategies for productive work habits, and encourages the writer that he can do this.

- Level One: Beginning Thoughts. (One chapter). Story has four pillars: plot, character, moral, and story world. This section describes how a story premise is based on only one of these pillars, but to build a resonant story all four of these pillars need to be created and integrated. This section also reviews writing a logline (including a helpful formula) to give a preliminary view of what the writer wants to create.

- Level Two: Building a Foundation. (Three chapters). This section expands upon the preliminary articulation of story pillars in the previous section. Each of the pillars is deconstructed, and then the components integrated to work together.

- Level Three: Structure. (Three chapters). This section details the story template and the character template. The story template is a deep structure existing in all stories. The story can be divided into four

more-or-less equal sections (act one, act two/1, act two/ 2, and act 3), each with its own themes. It is marked by story posts: events that turn the story in specific directions, and are remarkably consistent in location across genres. The character template describes the six stages of a character arc, and placement of each of these stages within the story template.

- Level Four: Adding Complexity. (Two chapters). This section develops how to generate subplots. Plot or subplots fall into one of five general categories called story strands. Each story strand except the main story strand can hold a maximum of two or three stories, although overloading is not recommended. A novel-length story should minimally contain at least one story for each of the five story strands. This level also incorporates all points discussed so far into a comprehensive section-by-section summary that the writer can use as an overall review of the story structure for future reference

- Level Five: Integration. (3 chapters). This section moves the writer from his general story structure into forming a scene-by-scene outline. It reviews synopsis writing (the logline, the pitch, and a longer synopsis), then reviews how to create an event-to-event outline by learning how to story board and use other techniques. This section stresses flexibility: it's helpful to create something, even if you need to later change it.

- Level Six: Genesis. (3 chapters). This section describes specialized writing techniques that the writer needs to master beyond simple structure. THE STORY TEMPLATE gives an overview of some factors. Openings are critical, and should immediately intrigue the reader and soon start building a relationship with the main characters. The scene-sequel dyad is the basic unit of the story, and a little thought outlining each dyad before writing will knock out writer's block. Finally the writer needs to recognize and practice specialized techniques such as point of view, tension, dialogue, etc.

- Level Seven: Refining. (2 chapters). This section discusses the importance of finding other writers, receiving feedback, and editing one's work. It continues through explaining types of publishing (subsidy, self, and traditional). It guides the writer to develop a sparkling query letter and submission package, and finding to whom to send it.

THE STORY TEMPLATE also includes a glossary and five appendices:

- List of How-To Writing Books and Other Resources.
- Sample Synopses of DRACULA and THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO.
- Novel Opening Lines as selected by editors of AMERICAN BOOK REVIEW.
- Sample Edit of a passage from A LEVER LONG ENOUGH (14% reduction).
- Self-Publishing Resources.

STATUS OF MANUSCRIPT: Completed. Current form: 18 chapters; 110 exercises; index; glossary; 5 appendices. Approximately 50,000 words. Author is delighted to modify, add to, or subtract from manuscript as needed.

AUDIENCE: Hopeful novelists or screenwriters who wish to put together a story.

Novelists or screenplay writers, whether published or unpublished, who wish to better understand and incorporate the deep elements of structure into their work(s).

Fiction editors who may use this template to better pinpoint problems in otherwise promising manuscripts.

COMPETING BOOK TITLES: Recent competing titles:

- Blake Snyder: SAVE THE CAT! THE LAST BOOK ON SCREENWRITING YOU'LL EVER NEED. (2005).
- John Truby: THE ANATOMY OF STORY: 22 STEPS TO BECOMING A MASTER STORYTELLER. (2007).
- Randy Ingermanson and Peter Economy: WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES. (2009).
- Larry Brooks: STORY ENGINEERING. (2011).

THE STORY TEMPLATE covers similar ground to all of these excellent and worthy titles, and would be marketed to the same groups of book buyers, yet it also contains significantly different material presented in a step-by-step format. It is both more and less basic than these books, since it reviews in depth each foundational story element, then clearly demonstrates how to integrate these elements into the whole.

Snyder's and Truby's books are both for screenwriters. Snyder covers the "outer story" in a groundbreaking and entertaining style—this is the closest pass to THE STORY TEMPLATE's algorithm for outer story I have found in the literature. Truby's book develops in a magnificent fashion the

inner characterization within the context of story, and instructs how to integrate these parts. Both of these books are personal favorites and well worth studying. In contrast to them, though, THE STORY TEMPLATE includes even more detail for outer story than Snyder, and compared to Truby uses different tactics (character arc, "hidden need" and so forth) to develop and integrate character growth with story. Furthermore Template reviews additional story elements (story world, moral, subplots, writing techniques, and so forth) in an explicitly directional format.

Ingermanson's and Economy's book expands upon Ingermanson's brilliant "Snowflake," a two-page design tool with 10 steps that progressively adds more detail to the previous story work. This design tool has been quite helpful for many novelists over the past ten years, and is often discussed on the ACFW loop of which I am a member. The tool can be found at: http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/art/snowflake.php. WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES also discusses how to format, edit, and submit the work for publication. The Snowflake tool, though, while helpful, does not go into as much detail as my algorithm. For example, in plotting it simply instructs the writer to come up with "three problems and an ending." THE STORY TEMPLATE focuses on taking the writer by the hand to learn how to completely develop and then refine his story.

Brooks' book reviews in a loose manner the important foundational elements for story (his list is: concept, character, theme, structure, scene execution, writing voice). Brooks' style is casual and seems more to list important sub-elements of concepts with interesting reflections rather than to analyze how a writer might integrate them within his story. In contrast, THE STORY TEMPLATE is written in a directional, no-nonsense style that gives explicit guidance, with examples, for developing story sub-elements *and then integrating them* into a story.

GENESIS: The idea for this book grew from my own frustration in writing a novel. I looked forever for a nuts-and-bolts book that explained how to put together a story. While the literature was heavy on techniques (POV, dialogue, characterization etc.), I couldn't find something that gave clear direction for actually *writing* something from beginning to end. After finishing my novel through sheer grit, I decided to solve this problem, and dissected close to 100 well-structured modern novels and films in a variety of genres to learn how story is told. I have since used my algorithm to coach numerous students for developing and writing their own stories.

AUTHOR BIO: AMY DEARDON self-published one novel, A LEVER LONG ENOUGH, in 2009. It was endorsed by well-known CBA authors Randy Ingermanson and Wayne Batson, won two awards, and currently has 36 reviews on Amazon averaging 4.5 stars. The novel sold 500 copies with minimal publicity or marketing efforts. She is accustomed to presenting complex topics in a logical and understandable manner. Currently she coaches

students to develop their stories, and teaches e-publishing at writers' conferences.

PLATFORM: Conferences: I speak at about 2 writing conferences per year, and come in direct lengthy contact (classes or individual conferences) with 100-200 conferees annually. I am also available for ad hoc meetings at meals and in general areas. My books always sell well (20 at least).

Local Speaking Events: I speak at libraries and other venues. For example, my recent showing at a nearby Curves location sold 80 books.

Writing Group: I run a local writing group, *3rd Saturday of the Month*, with 30 participants.

Student Coaching and Critiquing: I do local coaching of writing students from the high school and other venues. I also critique entries for several contests (ACFW Genesis, Phoenix Rattler, and others) and coach over the internet.

Blogging: I have two new blogs: a general blog and a blog that focuses on writing techniques, which I started a few months ago. I post on each blog twice a week, and am currently working to increase readership. The blogs can be found from my website at www.amydeardon.com.

ABOUT THE STORY TEMPLATE: This book is currently available as a self-published book released July 2011. Although THE STORY TEMPLATE has had no marketing aside from a small blog tour (<20 blogs) in December, Template currently has 13 reviews on Amazon: all 5 stars except for one 4 star review. The reviews suggest a unique and effective approach to organizing and writing a story.

PURSUING TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING: I wish to move to a traditionally published forum since I am finding persistent difficulties in being reviewed in conventional formats, despite what I believe is a unique approach to understanding story structure and writing a story. Furthermore I am frustrated in dealing with the impenetrability of Amazon to pass on to customers the sizeable book discount I give as a publisher, which basically is killing sales.

ENDORSE-
MENTS: THE STORY TEMPLATE has received numerous endorsements both before and after self-publication. Here are a few:

From the book:
Vickie McDonough, award-winning author of 23 books and novellas:
Amy Deardon's THE STORY TEMPLATE is a writer's conference in a single book. Building brick upon brick, she teaches the writer how to create his novel, from the basics of story structure, plot, and characterization, to writing a synopsis and publishing. I wish I'd had this detailed tool when I first started writing.

Stephanie Morrill, author of THE REINVENTION OF SKYLAR HOYT series and creator of GoTeenWriters.com:
I love THE STORY TEMPLATE's clear language and story-building exercises. In my writing, I've never been successful with traditional outlines: THE STORY TEMPLATE helps nail down plot points yet doesn't suffocate the spontaneity that I love about the creative process. I work with teen writers, and this will be my go-to book for helping them construct a story.

Grace Bridges, Managing Editor, Splashdown Books:
Amy makes me want to pick up the pen and launch into a new novel because she makes it sound so easy. A practical guide for fiction writers at any level, certain to unlock creativity because it takes care of the nuts and bolts of story construction, freeing the imagination to do its thing.

8 more book endorsements.

Unsolicited reviews from Amazon:

Marlene Bagnull: *Highly recommended! THE STORY TEMPLATE is one of the most practical and helpful books I've seen for novelists, and as the director of two large Christian writers' conferences I've seen a lot of how-to books. I'm especially impressed by the 110 exercises throughout the book that make it a great tool for beginning novelists as well advanced who are "stuck." Highly recommended. - Marlene Bagnull, Litt.D., Director Colorado and Greater Philly Christian Writers Conferences*

Charlene L. Amsden "Quilly": *Informative, Instructive & Vital. THE STORY TEMPLATE trumps any and all writing books I have ever read, and that is saying A LOT! This isn't just another book on writing great prose, or creating memorable characters, or detailing place, or creating a scene. In THE STORY TEMPLATE, Amy Deardon explains what she discovered when she sat down and applied scientific research techniques to isolate the common elements that make hit stories, hits. In reading THE STORY TEMPLATE prospective writers will not only learn what elements comprise all hit stories, they will also receive practical instruction on how to*

implement those ideas. If you've got the great prose, memorable characters, vivid place down pat, but your stories still keep falling flat, then THE STORY TEMPLATE just might be the last writing book you'll ever need.

A. Chai: *Do NOT read this book... Unless, of course, you have a pen and a notebook in your lap. The author suggests reading the entire book as an overview before beginning the exercises, but you will find it impossible to resist the temptation to start doing them right away. This book is filled with "aha" moments that will move you from a shallow focus on technique and plot to a deeper revelation of the emotional/moral journey of the story arc.*

I own a number of writing books, including THE MARSHALL PLAN, PLOT AND STRUCTURE, WRITING TO CHANGE THE WORLD, ADVICE TO WRITERS and more. I also have a collection of "technique" oriented books that emphasize dialogue, creating characters, and other details. THE STORY TEMPLATE is unique for a number of reasons, but mainly because it takes a step back to show you what makes a story memorable, meaningful, and resonant.

The first unique aspect of THE STORY TEMPLATE is the fact that it is based on objective research instead of "personal experience." In the Introduction, the author describes how she did an in-depth analysis of the story structure of a number of classic books and movies. Her findings showed that each of them shared a remarkable degree of similarity in underlying aspects of the story arc. Prepare to be amazed as a number of famous stories are deconstructed and compared.

The second unique aspect of THE STORY TEMPLATE is that the writing exercises help you to plot your story with story cards in a way that maximizes the relevance of the story arc WITHOUT becoming some sort of a "write by numbers" sort of manual. (ie: this is not THE MARSHALL PLAN) It will help you see the "hidden need" of your character, and you will see how the inner story relates to the outer story. This will really make a difference as you plot your novel.

Finally, THE STORY TEMPLATE is unique because it has everything you need to get from idea to submission. It is very practical and provides lots of useful resources. It is kind of like three books in one: a plotting book, a technique book, and a submission advice book. It even talks about receiving criticism, not that I would ever need that!

The bottom line: Worth the money, worth the read. Will almost certainly give you surprising moments of insight.

Additional comments are posted on Amazon.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

THE STORY TEMPLATE

Conquer Writer's Block Using the Universal Structure of Story

Amy Deardon

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LEVEL ONE: Beginning Thoughts

CHAPTER ONE: Four Story Pillars and One Logline

Story is built on four story pillars:

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
CONCRETE	Plot	Character
ABSTRACT	Story World	Moral

The story premise (fundamental concept that drives the story) is based on just one of these pillars. For example, *Iron Man* premise is based on plot, *Rocky* premise is based on character, *Ender's Game* premise is based on moral, and *Harry Potter* premise is based on story world. However, story resonance occurs as the other pillars are developed and integrated. Finally, logline encapsulates the story essence in 15-20 words and may be written from this formula: an optional adjective subject, in this situation, acts to do this. For example, the logline for *Romeo and Juliet* is: two teenagers from warring families fall in love and must overcome family obstacles of hate to stay together.

LEVEL TWO: Building a Foundation

CHAPTER TWO: Story World Pillar and Moral Story Pillar

This chapter specifically develops the abstract story pillars: story world and moral. Story world describes the matrix within which the story unfolds: descriptions of the time period, environment, food and clothing, customs etc. If a magical world, limits to the magical properties need to be included. It's important to describe not just the world, but the characters' perceptions of the world. Moral describes the single universal theme or principle guiding the story. It can be described in one sentence. For example the moral of *Romeo and Juliet* is: great love defies death. The moral premise can be articulated through a five-step process that identifies the primary theme and primary opposing force.

CHAPTER THREE: Plot Story Pillar

Story is differentiated from premise in that it has a story goal, stakes, and obstacles. Plot has a beginning, middle, and end, and more specifically has a 7-point structure: beginning, bridging story goal, door, story goal, journey, slide, and resolution. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet* (Beginning): the Montagues and Capulets are at war, and (Bridging story goal): Romeo Montague wishes to attend a Capulet party to glance his "love" Rosaline. (Door): Romeo and Juliet meet and fall in love, although their families are mortal enemies. (Story goal): They wish to live together in love. (Journey): Romeo and Juliet meet friends and have adventures and trials traveling toward a life together. (Slide): Juliet drinks the potion that makes her appear dead. (Resolution): Romeo misses Father John's letter, thinks Juliet is dead, kills himself, and then Juliet kills herself.

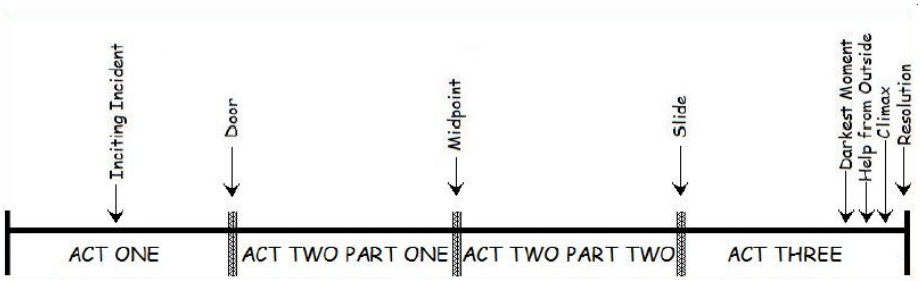
CHAPTER FOUR: Character Story Pillar

Many techniques can develop character. The main character should have a hidden need: an emotional lack growing from the story pillars, especially moral, that is solved within the course of the story. For example if the moral story pillar is *lack of leadership destroys society*, then the protagonist's hidden need might be that he must learn to lead rather than act as a "buddy." This hidden need may develop from an emotional wound, and causes the protagonist to develop a protective personality. The author's bargain offers everything the protagonist wants—but only if the protagonist can first jettison his protective personality and live life free, with his hidden need solved. Other character types, such as the confidante, the antagonist, and the romantic interest, are not required but make plotting a story easier.

LEVEL THREE: Structure

CHAPTER FIVE: Explanation of the Story Template

During my studies I was amazed at how persistent, on a deep level and across genres, was the shape of story:



The story template is a deep structure existing in all stories. The story can be divided into four more-or-less equal sections, each with its own themes. It is marked by story posts: events that turn the story in certain, specific, directions. This chapter illustrates the story template with three different stories: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Star Wars*, and *The Wizard of Oz*.

CHAPTER SIX: Writing With the Story Template

The writer needs to verify for himself that the story template works. This chapter also reviews the story posts so that the writer can begin to develop his own story.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Character Template

Although often not as explicit as the story template, the character arc also follows a "typical" pattern through the story, with six stages that fall within specified areas of the story template. The protagonist heals his hidden need and learns to live a new, usually better, type of life. It's important to remember that the emotional grip of the story bypasses logic, and therefore the writer must be responsible to formulate a true and edifying message.

LEVEL FOUR: Adding Complexity

CHAPTER EIGHT: Characters and Subplots

There should be about eight to ten recurring characters in a story—fewer make the story bare, and more make it confusing. Each character should have his own goals, and not just exist to "help the protagonist" or push the story forward. Plot or subplots fall into one of five general categories called story strands: Strand A: *Main Outer Story*; Strand B: *Hidden Need(s)* in which the protagonist works out his emotional wrinkles; Strand C: *Antagonist Story* in which events from all opposing antagonists/obstacle POVs are described; Strand D: *Gift at Climax* in which outer subplot(s) set up believable help at the end to avoid the "deus ex machine" effect; and Strand E: *Protagonist's Mirror* in which one or more additional characters face the same essential problem as the protagonist but solve it in different ways. Each story strand except the main story strand can hold a maximum of two or three narratives, although overloading is not recommended. Not all subplots require a story structure. A novel-length story should minimally contain at least one narrative for each of the five story strands.

CHAPTER NINE: Comprehensive Template "Cheat Sheet"

The story template is remarkably consistent. This chapter summarizes and consolidates for review all the previous information discussed, plus even

more detail, to serve as a summary reference tool for the writer to use when developing his own story.

LEVEL FIVE: Integration

CHAPTER TEN: Synopsis

The pitch gives a 200 word summary of the story written to intrigue. Back cover summaries of books give good examples. This chapter describes a formula to give good results. The classic synopsis, unlike the pitch, reveals the essence of the story (including the end) in about 10-15 paragraphs. Several steps organizing the story make writing the synopsis a straightforward task.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Bubbles and Reveals

The "Bubble" is the intermediate unit bridging general story and specific unfolding, and is comprised of between one and six scenes discussing a common theme and occurring in the same location. The bubble is occasionally called a "beat" in screenwriting vernacular. There are consistently seven to ten bubbles in each story quarter. Reveals further break down the action, and give a complete through line for the story events.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Story Boarding

Story boarding is a popular screenwriting technique, also applicable to novelists, that organizes a story. Using previous story work and template outline (esp. template "cheat sheet" in chapter nine) the writer formulates a preliminary list of scenes for plot and subplots. Each scene card answers: why, who, what, when, where, how.

LEVEL SIX: Genesis

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Beginnings

Opening a story is critical, and must intrigue within the first few pages. The situation should not need explanation to make it interesting. Many stories start with a disruption to the ordinary world. While opening with a bang may seem exciting, this is a difficult technique since, until the reader cares about the characters, he won't care about the disaster. Some ways to bond the reader to your characters are to have them suffering from something and/or put them in (mild) jeopardy. Characters are more easily bonded to if they are likeable and competent. Finally, craft a compelling opening line.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Writing the Individual Scene

Every scene must have a reason to be included in the story, and it's important to summarize how it advances the story. Swain and Bickham separately discuss the scene-sequel dyad. The scene describes the outer story action, and the sequel reviews the POV character's reaction to it. The scene can be outlined through GOAL/ CONFLICT/ DISASTER, and sequel through EMOTION/ THOUGHT/ DECISION/ ACTION (Bickham).

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Writing Techniques

The writer must learn techniques beyond structuring a story. This chapter reviews high points of important concepts such as penetrating POV, creating tension through consistently raising stakes and leaving questions unanswered, smooth dialogue, accurate research, and Swain's Motivation-Reaction Units (MRUs).

LEVEL SEVEN: Refining

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Editing and Criticism

Writing is a lonely profession, but it's affirming to find other writers through conferences or writing groups. If your work is critiqued, do not argue with the critiquer but study their words. If you critique someone else's work, remember there is a person behind your words, and be careful although honest. Editing one's own work is critical. My rule of thumb states that at least 10% (usually more) of a first manuscript can be cut to make it stronger. Cutting is best done in several passes, and the more passes the better. This chapter outlines at least six separate types of passes the writer can take for self-editing.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Submitting a Manuscript

The writer will naturally want to publish his work. Before starting this process, he needs to make sure his manuscript is ready to go ahead. There are several types of publishing: traditional, subsidy, self, and e-publishing. Most writers should first consider traditional publishing before moving to independent publishing. This chapter reviews finding a literary agent, what to expect if the manuscript is accepted, and developing a sparkling submission package including query, short and long synopsis, and book proposal. The chapter concludes with some marketing ideas for the writer (whether traditionally- or self-published).

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Conclusion

A short chapter discusses a gentleman who was ready to throw away his 30-year dream to write a novel until he started practicing some of the template's ideas for organizing a story. This chapter encourages the writer that he can truly create his book or screenplay.

Back Matter

Glossary

APPENDIX ONE: How-To Writing Books and Other Resources: 31 resources.

APPENDIX TWO: Sample Synopses: DRACULA and THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO.

APPENDIX THREE: Examples of Opening Lines: from AMERICAN BOOK REVIEW.

APPENDIX FOUR: Sample Edit: A LEVER LONG ENOUGH: 382 to 329 words (14% cut).

APPENDIX FIVE: Self-Publishing Resources

This appendix discusses the difference between subsidy and self-publishing, and areas needed to prepare for self-publishing (ISBNs, cover, interior, etc.). E-publishing is another option that can be done for free or low cost without starting a publishing company.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS:

Introduction
(Level One: Beginning Thoughts)
Chapter One: Four Story Pillars and One Logline
(Level Two: Building a Foundation)
Chapter Two: Story World Pillar and Moral Story Pillar

THE STORY TEMPLATE
Conquer Writer's Block Using the Universal Structure of Story

Amy Deardon

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Introduction

Writing a novel or screenplay sounds like a great idea until you sit down to start. Where do you start? Many different methods exist to write the story, ranging from extensive preplanning to venturing onto the first page without an idea. This book describes an approach to developing story—laid out as a sequential series of exercises to facilitate implementation—that you can use whether you prefer a structured or loose approach to writing. You can use it at the start to develop an idea fragment, or later to rescue a partial or completed manuscript that doesn't seem to be working. The method works whether you want to write plot-driven (genre) or character-driven (literary) stories. It enables you to efficiently use your time and creativity by breaking down the process of story building into a logical plan. You will not waste time sitting at your keyboard, wondering what you should write and how you can organize your ideas into a complete manuscript.

The idea for this book originated from my own learning process in producing a novel. Having written scientific articles, newspaper columns, and other nonfiction, when

I decided to write a novel I was surprised by how difficult it was to get the words down. I tried outlining, and I tried just going ahead. I had wonderful ideas, but although the scenes I wrote were exciting the story itself often seemed somehow "wrong." I threw out more pages than I care to remember. Through sheer grit I finished the novel, but when I thought about writing another my heart sank. I decided to first solve the problem of understanding how story worked.

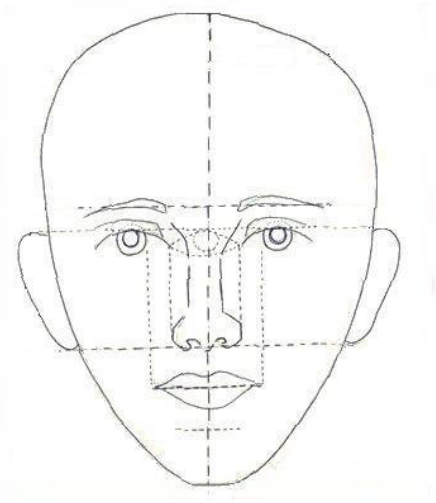
I chose twenty entertaining, modern novels in different genres, and fifteen more-or-less recent films (and I've since confirmed my preliminary observations with tens of more stories). One at a time, I took them apart: I made a list of each scene, then did a word count or timed the scene, calculated percentages and other statistics, and graphed each story onto a five page chart. I studied each story's progression, then compared the progressions of different stories to determine common pathways. I also read all that I could on constructing stories. The writing how-to literature was heavy on techniques (plotting, point of view, characterization, dialogue)—all of which are important—but there wasn't much on blending it all together. Screenwriting how-to books were stronger on structure, but still didn't give me all I needed.

I studied story after story, puzzling out how they were built. First, I identified elements called story posts, and found that these posts fell reliably within the timing of the whole. Then I found consistent trends of progression in the plot, as well as consistent trends of development and interactions in the characters. My biggest surprise, in fact, was finding just how unvarying were the underlying levels of the story. I also identified a unit of story construction I call a "bubble" that bridges the gap between the high concept ideas for the story and individual scenes.

Once I had my background knowledge, I coached students to develop their stories, and thereby constructed an algorithm for the practical application of this theory.

So, what is this "story template" that is the title of this book? Is this a formula or blueprint you can mindlessly follow, like a paint-by-numbers canvas?

In a word, no. I like to call what I found a template since it describes the shape or progression, on a deep level, of virtually all stories. Recognizing this pattern in a story is something I liken to sketching a face. An artist will tell you that a person's eyes are about halfway down the head, and are separated by another eye width. The bottom of the nose is halfway between the eyes and the chin, the mouth is proportionally between the nose and the chin and extends to imaginary vertical lines drawn below the eyes' pupils, the tips of the ears hit about eyelid level, earlobe tips at bottom-nose level, and on and on. Faces are infinitely varied, yet if the artist ignores these rough proportions, no matter how carefully sketched the face will always look "wrong." Similarly, you will use the template to ensure that your story elements are proportionally correct and all present. The template gives you a guide, but never dictates, what you can write.



Getting the story shape right is the first, and (in my opinion) the hardest step to writing a gripping novel or screenplay. Without good structure, the story tends to meander without a point: although it may have high action, it is characterized by low tension.

You may want to first read this entire book to get an overview of story before starting with the exercises. Keep in mind that shaping a story is intensive work, and it will take you weeks or even months to get your story organized. This is normal. Don't get discouraged, and don't skimp on the exercises. Take your time to thoroughly work through each step. At the end, your story will be much stronger, and the actual writing will go like a dream.

This book is not sufficient for producing a finished story ready for publication or production. You will need to master further writing techniques such as characterization, description, dialogue, transitions, editing, etc. I will touch upon a few of these to give you some direction, but the only way to get really good is to practice. Fortunately, many excellent books are available for help. See Appendix One to start.

Outline of The Plan

I like to use the metaphor of constructing a house to envision building a story. To assemble a house, you move from larger to smaller elements to sequentially put something together. Only after you have worked through many tasks is it finally time to do the fine details of painting the windowsills and installing the wallpaper. Similarly, while you have ideas about character arcs and plot twists, and maybe you've even written some scenes, you will be well served to develop a direction before writing through your

manuscript. If you write your first draft as the ideas occur to you, then this will comprise your story planning. You'll find that you probably don't have enough material to form an entire novel or screenplay, and even if you do it may not hang together. Believe me, this is a laborious and frustrating way to go.

The Story Template gives a series of actions for you to do that will allow you to develop your story ideas with a minimum of angst and wasted energy. Some exercises will be quick, others will require a great deal of thought, and perhaps even a marination of thought, before finishing. Don't be in a rush—some of your best ideas will come as you play with character or event possibilities. As you continue to develop your story you will probably revisit different components of these exercises, going back and changing previous work, as you move through this programmed story outliner. That's okay. Just go with the flow, and have fun.

When you've finished with these exercises, you will be ready to start writing your manuscript, with ease and flow and speed, because you will have already done the hard organizational work. Even if you want to change the story as you're writing, you'll be able to do so with an understanding of how to balance the changes. You will have a detailed roadmap that will allow you to bring your vision—your book or screenplay—to completion.

Writing Tools

You are a writer. Before you start, you need to assemble the following items:

1. A tool with which to do your major writing, either a computer, an old-fashioned typewriter, or paper and pencil. If you do handwrite your notes, you may want

to treat yourself to a special pen that you love, and is only to be used for your magnus opus.

2. A system to organize your template exercises. I prefer hard copy: printing out computer files, or writing on loose leaf paper, then placing the sheets in a three-ringed binder. This notebook may inspire you and give you a sense of accomplishment as you look through to see how much you've done. Not as recommended is keeping files only on computer because they're harder to flip through, mark up, and juxtapose ideas; or a spiral or bound notebook because you can't replace pages or change their order. But do what works for you.

3. A small notebook to carry with you at all times. Use this to jot down any thoughts that come to you.

4. Index cards. Get two packs, and we'll go over how to use them to story board. Also get a roll of masking tape and a permanent marker (thin tip) for bold marks. Finally, you may want to purchase an index card binder to permanently keep your cards in order.

Getting the Words Down

Here are some tips to help you get the words down:

1. Decide on a daily quota of words that is manageable. A good starting goal might be 300, but remember to keep pushing this number up as you become accustomed to the writing process. Create a log to record your daily output. Post this on your refrigerator or otherwise keep it prominent in your daily life.

2. Set aside at least fifteen minutes at a time in which you can remain undisturbed. Aim for an hour or more if you can.

3. Don’t start your writing session by checking your e-mail or doing anything else except for writing.

4. Turn off anything that might distract you—music, radio, or television. Some people can write through these things, but try without for a few days to see if you do better.

5. If you’re stuck, do free-writing where you talk to yourself on paper. Something like, “I’m trying to figure out what Jason’s problems with Mike might be in this scene. I was thinking about…”

Let’s get started.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS:

Introduction
(Level One: Beginning Thoughts)
Chapter One: Four Story Pillars and One Logline
(Level Two: Building a Foundation)
Chapter Two: Story World Pillar and Moral Story Pillar

THE STORY TEMPLATE

Conquer Writer's Block Using the Universal Structure of Story

Amy Deardon

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Level One: Beginning Thoughts

You are now on the first level of story construction. On this level you're going to scout out your preliminary ideas to determine what sort of story you want to write and how you might go about doing this. If you have a stalled piece of writing, or a completed-but-not-working manuscript, make sure you still do this level's exercises: you may be surprised by the hidden connections and ideas you find.

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Chapter One: Four Story Pillars and One Logline

What are you going to write about? You may have a striking image, or a character, or a situation, for which you feel compelled to write something. You may even be fortunate enough to have already written some pages. This level will help you start to organize your ideas.

A technique called free-writing will be essential to you as you go through these exercises. Basically, you talk to yourself as you record your thoughts on the computer screen or paper as they occur. Don't self-edit or otherwise worry about what you're putting down. If you don't know what to say next, write "I don't know what to say next because…" and go from there. The thought is that if you're not worried about exactly how you write something, the ideas will come more freely. And don't worry about the chaos—no one is going to see your exercises except you.

At the end of each exercise, write a cogent summary of your answer.

Remember that, at this point, everything is fluid. Don't be afraid to make decisions because they are easy to change. Just put something down.

Ready? Let's go.

Exercise 1: Similar Stories

List some stories from childhood that you loved. Why did you love them? What sorts of stories do you now read and/or go to the theater to see? What is it that attracts you to them?

As you envision your novel or screenplay name three or so stories that might be similar. If you can, take these books or films off the shelf to quickly review them. What do you like about them: interesting characters, exciting plot, a unique vision of the world? What sorts of story questions are raised? How might your story be similar, and different, to these stories?

Exercise 2: Current Status of Your Story

Write down the current status of your novel or screenplay. Why do you want to create it? How much have you already written, if any? Did you stop, and if so, why? If you have a vivid character or situation as the seed of the idea, put that down. What will happen in your story? Quickly list possible ideas, characters, scenes, or actions you might want to include.

The Four Story Pillars

A story is usually thought of as having two arms: an outer narrative and an inner one. The outer narrative covers the external plot: what your friend will summarize when you ask him what a movie or book is about. In contrast, the inner narrative describes an emotional journey and changes within the characters. Different types or genres of stories

tend to emphasize different arms—for example, a romance or literary work focuses on inner story while a mystery or action-adventure emphasizes outer story.

A story can also be thought of as having two tiers of construction: concrete and abstract. The concrete tier describes the actual events and characters in the story, whereas the abstract tier comments on the broader applications of your story: why it may reflect society, relationships, or life.

I like to think of the story, then, as having four story pillars:

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
CONCRETE	Plot	Character
ABSTRACT	Story World	Moral

The fundamental concept that drives the story, or the story premise, comes from just one of these four areas. For example:

Plot – *Iron Man*, *Jaws*

Character – *Forrest Gump*, *Rocky*

Moral – *Facing the Giants*, *Ender's Game*

Story World – *Fellowship of the Ring*, *Harry Potter*

Plot is the most commonly used story pillar for the story premise.

It's possible to tell a story based mainly on the external pillars of plot and story world. For example, some hard-core adventure stories and Agatha Christie mysteries are plot-based and fun to experience—but the story evaporates as soon as it's finished.

A story becomes resonant as the internal pillars of character and moral are developed. In addition to an exciting journey, your reader or viewer is looking for an emotional experience and the ability to conclude something about life in general. If you wish your story to be something that people will want to experience over and over, you'll need to strengthen and coordinate each of these four pillars.

This level begins to explore these areas. In Level Two you'll develop each of these story pillars in detail.

Exercise 3: Premise Preference

Based on your answers to Exercises 1 and 2, write down this sentence:

For the story I'm writing, my premise will be THIS (Plot, Character, Moral, Story World). If you're not sure, just go with one. This decision is not irrevocable.

Now, rank your second, third, and fourth preferred areas.

Exercise 4: Plot

Often at this stage you'll have in mind only a plot twist or other brief flash. Not to worry: write down as much as you have. Then brainstorm a little: what might be the ultimate outcome of this situation? What could launch a character to get into this situation in the first place? What might be the ultimate goal being pursued? What might be the main problem(s) to achieving this goal?

Exercise 5: Character

Who are some of the people you'd like to tell your story? Do you have one quirky or troubled personality, or maybe two or more characters who have strained relationships? Are your characters male or female, old or young? Do they have interesting jobs or backgrounds? What makes them unique? Also, plot often suggests certain types of characters. For example, a story about a new invention might need an inventor and/or a thief. A romance requires a man, a woman, and probably a rival. Write down a few ideas for characters.

Exercise 6: Moral

What is the main message you want your reader or viewer to learn from your story? It can be something like "Beware evil masquerading as good," or even "Bad guys get their comeuppance." Write down some ideas for your moral.

Exercise 7: Story World

Describe the primary environment(s) in which your story will take place. Put in anything that occurs to you—time and date, social customs, buildings, transportation, food, clothing, technology, etc. Does this world remind you of anything?

Exercise 8: Interlinking Areas

Look at your thoughts for the four story pillars in Exercises 4 through 7. Is there anything you can do to reinforce ideas between them? For example, how might constant rain in the story world reflect a theme of sorrow? How might a plot of a disappearing

treasure be contrasted by a stand-out character? Go through your exercises and think about any parallels or contrasts you might be able to draw, then write them down.

Exercise 9: Preliminary Shape

Your ideas right now may be breathtaking, but in order for anyone else to understand you must be able to clearly communicate them. Now that you've thought a little about the components that might be in your story, take time to consolidate them.

For this exercise, talk to yourself on paper (or computer screen) about exactly who and what your story is about. Is it primarily a romance or an adventure flick? Are there any important lessons learned? Does it end happily? Your writing may be fragmented and take three or more pages, but don't worry about putting down a lot of mush. You're clarifying your thoughts.

At the end, summarize your story in a few coherent sentences.

Logline

A logline is one sentence of about fifteen to twenty words that describes your story. There are many ways to write this logline. This formula produces good results if you're having trouble framing your sentence:

An (optional adjective) subject, in this situation, acts to do this.

Some examples:

The Wizard of Oz: A farm girl is transported to a magical land and must find her way home. (Fifteen words)

The Fellowship of the Ring: A hobbit must destroy a magical ring of power before it destroys his world. (Fourteen words)

Romeo and Juliet: Two teenagers from warring families fall in love and must overcome family obstacles of hate to stay together. (Eighteen words)

The Count of Monte Cristo: A wrongfully imprisoned young man gains freedom and a fortune that he uses to wreak an elaborate revenge. (Eighteen words)

The logline strips your story to its bare minimum. You'll notice that character names aren't used, yet the premise is specifically described. The logline doesn't have to follow this formula, but should contain irony if possible, and cause the listener to become intrigued. This is a deceptively challenging assignment: don't be satisfied with your first attempt. You'll return to writing the logline as you go further through the template, but start work on it now.

Exercise 10: One Sentence Story Description or Logline

Write your preliminary logline.

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Level Two: Building a Foundation

You are now on the second level of story construction. On this level you're going to establish a strong foundation for your story by constructing and integrating the four story pillars. When you've finished this level you'll have established the boundaries of your story so that you can imagine the rough outlines of what it will look like from beginning to end.

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Chapter Two: Story World Pillar and Moral Story Pillar

The story pillars—plot, character, moral, and story world—form the foundation of your story. The best way to develop these is to start in, then keep circling through them a few times until they're deeply interconnected. This chapter will review the abstract pillars (story world and moral), and the next two chapters the concrete pillars (character and plot). You may wish to go over this chapter and the next two a few times until your pillars seamlessly interlink.

Story World Pillar

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
CONCRETE	Plot	Character
ABSTRACT	**STORY WORLD**	Moral

The story world is usually the easiest pillar with which to start. Remember that your story does not take place in a vacuum. Some stories, especially in genres like science fiction, fantasy, and adventure, emphasize technology and special environments, but all stories must take place somewhere even if it's just around the corner.

Your story world should give just that sense: a world that is going on around your particular narrative. The reader or viewer wants to feel that there are many stories that could be told here, and they happen to be reading this one. Your world should seem large, and real, and immediate. You do this by using specific details to describe a specific place and environment.

If you are inventing a magical world, remember to put limits on any special abilities, talents, or phenomena so the reader or viewer perceives them as real rather than magically made-up. Think Superman with the kryptonite.

The story world can be developed to impinge upon the plot, to become almost another character, and/or to be a metaphor for the story moral. It serves as a reflection of ideas and themes, comparisons or contrasts, within your story.

The story world becomes compelling when you describe not just the environment, but your characters' reactions to it.

A word of caution: similar to character, some writers become obsessive about building their story world. By all means take time to understand the background, but remember that this *is* background. When it's time to write your story, you will need to include much less than you might think—just enough to give a tang.

Exercise 11: Story World

Describe the environment(s) in which your story will take place. Some ways to describe your story world include the time and date, social customs, languages, technology, buildings and structures, transportation, food and clothing, weather, and anything else you might think of. What do your characters think and feel about, and how do they respond to, this story world? When you're finished free-writing, write a succinct paragraph or two describing your story world.

Moral Story Pillar

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
CONCRETE	Plot	Character
ABSTRACT	Story World	**MORAL**

To write an emotional story you need to articulate one, and only one, universal principle or theme. This is the element that causes the reader or viewer to return again and again; it's the element that resonates deep within him. Yes, you can write a story without a moral, but if you do this the story will disappear as soon as the reader puts it down. A clever adventure or mystery is fun to experience, but without a moral it doesn't resonate.

The moral is the backbone of your story. You can bend or adjust the other story elements to fit the moral more easily than you can adjust or add a moral once you've planned the other parts.

I want to add a cautionary word here: stories resonate within us because they touch the emotions, and thereby open the mind to accept an illustrated concept. You need to be responsible when writing since the emotional draw of your story can lead someone to accept a bad premise. Your moral should be something true, and something edifying.

You should be able to express your story's moral in a single sentence. Here are some examples:

Romeo and Juliet: Great Love Defies Death.

Forrest Gump: Unconditional Love Redeems the Rebel.

Fellowship of the Ring: Willingness to Relinquish Absolute Power Leads to Preservation.

The Godfather: Family Ties Overcome Individual Virtue.

Rocky: Courage and Persistence Lead to Significance.

The Incredibles: Working Together Allows Each Individual to Shine.

How do you write your moral? One way is to use this process:

1. Identify the primary emotion or principle driving the story.

2. Refine this emotion so it's specific.

3. Determine what that emotion's opposite might be.

4. Imagine what the outcome will be when these two forces go head to head.

5. Write out the heart of your story in a single sentence.

Let's go through these.

1: Identify the Primary Emotion

You need to determine the overall theme or emotion you want to explore in your story. Some examples might be love, hate, forgiveness, anger, generosity, greed, humility, arrogance, friendship, enmity, courage, fear, truth, doubt, etc.

The Wizard of Oz: Longing.

The Fellowship of the Ring: Power.

Romeo and Juliet: Love.

The Count of Monte Cristo: Revenge.

Exercise 12: Moral Primary Emotion

What is the primary emotion you might wish to use to drive your story? Write down several alternatives, then choose one to go with.

2: Refine the Emotion

Can you further refine this emotion and make it specific? For example, if your primary emotion is love, then it could be the love of a parent for a child (or vice versa), love for animals, or love that fails.

The Wizard of Oz: Longing for something outside of self.

The Fellowship of the Ring: Absolute power.

Romeo and Juliet: Great love between lovers.

The Count of Monte Cristo: Righteous revenge against a great wrong.

Exercise 13: Moral Refining the Primary Emotion

Think about the primary emotion driving your story. How can you focus it? Take some time to ponder, then write down your driving emotion in a succinct phrase.

3: Determine the Emotion's Opposite

What is the opposite of the driving story emotion about which you will be writing? This opposite, or a powerful oppositional force, allows you to showcase the emotion.

The Wizard of Oz: Longing for something outside of the self is opposed by something within the self.

The Fellowship of the Ring: Absolute power is opposed by willingness to relinquish absolute power.

Romeo and Juliet: Great love between lovers is opposed by death.

The Count of Monte Cristo: Righteous revenge against a great wrong is opposed by failure of ability to carry out suitable punishment.

Exercise 14: Moral Opposite of Primary Emotion

Take some time to determine how your primary emotion will be opposed. This should be a strong oppositional force that will demonstrate just how powerful is your primary emotion.

4: Outcome when these Two Forces Go Head to Head

What happens when these two forces go head to head? Keep in mind that for most stories the positive will win over the negative.

The Wizard of Oz: Longing for something outside of the self leads to the realization that the answer has been within the self all along.

The Fellowship of the Ring: Willingness to relinquish absolute power leads to preservation.

NOTE: This is the protagonist Frodo's description of moral, since his is the main story. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy also contains a subplot with Aragorn, the rightful king of Gondor, who is afraid to rule because he doesn't trust himself with power. Aragorn is an example of a technique called "protagonist's mirror" that I will discuss shortly. A description of Aragorn's moral might be: Courage to rightfully rule leads to healing. This subplot moral is a variant theme on the primary story emotion of power,

and contrasts with the main story message. Using a contrasting subplot is a powerful method to deepen and discuss a story moral.

Romeo and Juliet: Great love defies death.

The Count of Monte Cristo: Righteous revenge against a great wrong drives carrying out suitable punishment.

NOTE: The end of this story demonstrates the importance of mercy and forgiveness, so a later description of the moral might be: Forgiveness mixed with righteous revenge leads to peace with oneself. This change in moral occurs when the author demonstrates the negative as well as positive results of the moral, then concludes with a different, related, moral. This technique deepens the author's discussion of ideas within the context of the story. Another example of a story using this technique is Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Gam*e.

Exercise 15: Final Moral of the Story

Free-write to determine the moral of your story. Can you think of ways to deepen your moral, either through different characters taking different parts of an argument, or one or more characters realizing that the end result of the original moral is futile or at least partially negative? Take some time to free-write your ideas. At the end, write your story moral and contrasting morals if present in a single phrase each.