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# A STORY'S BUILDING BLOCKS

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An introduction by John Leggett

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*Of all the writing forms, I've always been partial to the short story. It suits my temperament. It makes a modest appeal for attention, allowing me to slip up alongside the reader on her/his blind side and grab'm.*

—Toni Cade Bambara

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**W**hy do we read stories? Some people say there are two reasons: One is to enjoy ourselves, and the other is to learn something. Whatever your reason for reading, you will find that a well-made short story contains several important elements. Knowing something about these elements of storytelling will help you understand why a story interests you, makes you laugh, or makes you sad.

## Characters and Plot

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A story has at least one **character**, who may be a person, an animal, or even a machine. A story also has a plot, which tells us "what happens" to that character or characters. An interesting character helps draw us into a story and *feel* the effects of the plot.

The plot is the story's skeleton. **Plot** is a series of related episodes, one growing out of another. The episodes in a plot often create **suspense**, or anxious curiosity. Suspense is what keeps us reading: It keeps us glued to the story because we are curious to find out "What happens next?" In fact, the real power of a story lies in its ability to create suspense. A good storyteller makes us worry about the campers cooking their trout over the campfire by showing us the bear watching from the trees.

What is a plot made up of? A plot consists of four parts, or building blocks:

1. The first part of a plot is the introduction. This is like an entryway to the story. It tells us the **basic situation**: who the characters are and what they want. Usually this is where we find out about the conflict in the story. **Conflict** is a struggle. It gives the story its principal energy. An **external conflict** involves a character's struggle with another person, or with a force of nature (a tornado, a bear, an icy mountain path). An **internal conflict** takes place in a character's mind. Here is the introduction to a fairy tale you know well. The conflict is provided by a hungry wolf.

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"Hi there, Red," said a wolf to a little girl in a red velvet hood. "How'd ya like a ride on my motorcycle?"

"Thank you kindly, sir," replied Little Red Riding Hood. "I know I would enjoy a ride on your beautiful motorcycle, but as you see I'm carrying this basket of ginger cookies to my grandmother and I mustn't be late."

"Tell you what we'll do, Red. You just hop on the back saddle here and I'll whip you to your grandmother's place in five seconds flat."

"I'd certainly like that, sir," she said, resuming her way, "but it's impossible."

"Impossible?" said the wolf. "What's impossible about it?"

"My grandmother lives way out at the end of Lonely Road. It's miles and miles."

"This here motorcycle eats miles. She is a mile hog. We'll be there before you can say ginger cookies."

"I'm sure it's true about your motorcycle, but the reason my grandmother moved so far in the country is because of the motorcycles. She can't stand the noise."

"Noise?" the wolf said, racing his engine so that two shingles fell off a nearby roof and all the birds flew away. "But this is music once you get used to it. I'll explain all that to your grandmother."

"No, thank you," said Little Red Riding Hood. "I've made up my mind." She began to walk faster.

2. In the second part of a plot, one or more of the characters acts to resolve the conflict. We start to see **complications** develop, leading to the story's climax. Now serious complications develop in Red's conflict with the wolf:

"O.K." said the wolf, who had conceived a wicked plan. He would go alone to the end of Lonely Road, eat Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, and then, when the delicious little girl turned up with her delicious ginger cookies, he would eat them too.

So, arriving at the last house on Lonely Road, the wolf raced his engine, scaring Grandma Riding Hood out of her back door and under the woodshed. The wolf was puzzled to find the house empty, but he put on the nightcap and night-shirt which were hanging on the closet door and climbed into the four-poster bed to await Red and her cookies.

3. The **climax** is the story's most emotional or suspenseful moment. This is when the situation is altered and the conflict is decided one way or another.

It was nearly dark when Red arrived, but in approaching her grandmother's bed she had a sense that something was wrong. Under the bonnet grandma's skin looked unusually hairy and her eyes a very peculiar red.

"Are you all right, Granny?" Red asked. "I mean your eyes look kind of bloodshot."

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Red Riding Hood's granny.



A knight slays a dragon, while the threatened damsel looks on.

"All the better to see you with," replied the wolf.

"And your lips. Are they supposed to be purple like that?"

"All the better to eat you," the wolf said, but stopped at the sound of his motorcycle engine which had begun to thunder in the front yard. "Wait right there, Red," said the wolf, bounding from the bed. "I'll be back in a second."

Emerging from the front door, the wolf was startled to find Grandma Riding Hood astride the motorcycle, frantically pushing this control and that.

"Hey!" the wolf shouted, "stop fooling with my motorcycle." As he lunged toward her, Grandma Riding Hood found the gear shift and the motorcycle leaped forward, gathering up the wolf on its handlebars and planting him firmly in the arms of the giant prickly-thorn bush—which is where the police found him when they arrived.

4. The fourth and last part of a story is its **resolution**. This is when the loose ends of the story are tied up. The story is closed.

And Little Red and her grandma let the police officer make a cap of the wolf's fur. Ever after, they all lived very happily.

## Point of View: The Voice Telling the Story

When a good reader starts a story, he or she will automatically ask, "Who is telling this story?" When you do this, you are asking about point of view. **Point of view** is the vantage point from which a story is told. In some stories, the narrator—or storyteller—is **omniscient** ("all knowing"). This narrator is "above the action," looking down on it like a god. This narrator can tell you everything about all the characters, even their most private thoughts.

Ted courageously strutted down the mountain, ready to slay the vicious dragon and save his lady, the fair Rosalie. The dragon watched the boy, licking his lips in anticipation of dinner. Rosalie watched too, wondering how this boy planned to rescue her—he was so skinny.

A story can also be told by one of the characters. In this viewpoint, the character speaks as "I." We call this **first-person point of view**. ("I" is the first-person pronoun.) In this point of view, we know only what this one character can tell us. Sometimes that isn't very reliable.

As I walked toward the dragon's cave, I was feeling quite brave. I was thinking of Rosalie with her long black hair and sweet voice. I was sure I could lick the dragon because of the huge muscles on my arms and legs.

Often, a story is seen through the eyes of one character, but the character is not telling the story. This is called the **limited third-person point of view**. In this point of view, a narrator zooms in on one character and tells the story from his or her vantage point. Our knowledge is limited to what the character sees, thinks, and feels.

Ted neared the dragon's cave, beginning to wonder whether Rosalie was really worth the risk. He noticed the beast's red rolling eyes and scaly skin, and heard Rosalie's screams. The truth is that he was beginning to wish he'd stayed at home.

## **Theme: The Story's Main Idea**

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A good story also has a **theme**. This is the main idea the story expresses about life and people. Theme is what the writer intends to say to us by writing the story. It is the message that we take away from the story. The discovery of theme gives it lasting meaning for us.

How do you find the story's theme? If you finish a story and aren't sure what its point is, you should go back over the story. Sometimes the theme is stated directly in a key sentence or paragraph. ("Real friends respect each other's feelings.") Mostly, however, you'll have to think about the story to figure out its theme. Here are some steps to take in discovering a theme:

1. Identify some important passages or individual sentences in the story and think about what they add up to.
2. Think about how the main character has changed in the story, and what the character has learned. Sometimes what the character learned can be stated as the theme. ("If you are self-centered, you can hurt yourself as well as others.")
3. Think about the title of the story and what it means.
4. Test your statement of theme against the story. Does anything in the story contradict it? If so, you'll have to change your statement of theme somewhat.

## **Sharing Feelings**

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There is no better mark of a well-told story than that sense of secret understanding between the teller and the reader. Many people might read a story about a teen-age romance, or about revenge among criminals, or about a dog who acts like a person. Each of these readers will respond to the story in a somewhat different way. As human beings, we bring our own individuality to our reading experience. We can hardly wait to talk about our feelings with someone else. That secret sharing between writer and reader is the story's joy.

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