

Week Six: The Set Up: Beginning your story and creating your world

Reading: <http://wisdomhomeschooling.com/images/courses/creativewriting/beginnings.pdf>

The Beginning

It's simple: the beginning of a story starts when the story starts. It begins on the day that made all the difference. It begins *in media res*—in the middle of things.

The Set Up

Stories are about CHANGE, a “before” and an “after.” The set up creates the BEFORE. We need to know what a character is like when they begin their journey, so that we have an image to take with us and compare with the AFTER at the end of the story.

The set up does this by delivering information. Think of it as the first scene, or establishing shot, in a movie: *A date flashes on the screen: November 1989. We see the Berlin Wall—then the camera zooms to the Brandenburg Gate and we see a crowd of people standing around as soldiers knock down a section of the wall.* Very quickly we have been given all the information we need to orient us: Time (November 1989), Place (Brandenburg Gate), Characters (soldiers, crowd), and Situation (breaking down of the Berlin Wall).



In this same way, you need a solid base on which to build your short story. The reader should be situated in time and understand the landscape (both physical and emotional) as quickly as possible.

As writers, this can sometimes be challenging, because we know a scene so well in our heads that we forget to fill the audience in on the details. But when we don't provide a good set up for our readers, it's a bit like asking a friend who has never seen *The Lord of the Rings* to start watching the movie when Sam and Frodo make it to Mordor. This is a pretty exciting moment, but your friend would have no idea what those two characters are doing or how they are related. They would be completely confused.

There's a reason why beginnings are usually the most rewritten part of any story. A lot needs to be accomplished in a brief period of time, and often writer's don't know the set up information themselves when they start writing—they figure it out as they're creating the story. Because of this, set up is often added after a writer finishes a draft.

Keeping that in mind, here's a trick you can use to make sure the right set up information is in place.

The Coma Patient Trick

What happens when a coma patient wakes up in the hospital? They usually start asking questions. That's because they are entering a scenario with ZERO information (just like your reader).

Where am I?

This is probably the first thing a coma patient would ask after waking up. ("You're in the hospital.") Place/Setting is a great way to ground your reader. It's also an indispensable part of your story. You can use it to create action, tell backstory, or even express your character's emotions. The sooner your reader knows WHERE they are, the sooner they can start fully imagining the scene you're trying to describe. Two people talking in empty space is not nearly as interesting as two people talking at a bookstore or a run-down movie theatre.

Who is there?

("It's me, honey. It's mom.") The people closest to our coma patient would be in the hospital room, waiting for our patient to wake up. In the same way, important characters should be introduced in the set up of your story. It's a quick way to narrow the focus to the major players, and start explaining how they are connected to each other.

What time is it?

A coma patient will probably ask what day or time it is. ("How long have I been asleep?") Time is often neglected in stories, but it can be a great way to bring power and importance to a specific moment. An exact time (May 28, 2004 at 1:23am) can create narrative authority and also make your reader feel more grounded. Time can also give you boundaries for your story by setting a timeline (the action happens over one day, or one week, or 10 years). This will help you keep the pacing on track.

What happened?

A coma patient will also want to know what landed them in the hospital in the first place. ("You were in a car accident.") In the same way, you might want to include some information about your character that explains their current situation. What were they doing right before this story began?

What's the diagnosis?

Now that our coma patient knows where they are, who's in the room, and what happened, they're going to ask about their future prospects. ("Am I going to walk again?") Putting in some small hint of where the story is headed will bring authority and control to the voice. It's the kind of thing your reader probably won't notice the first time around—but their subconscious will register it. The second time they read your story they *will* see it, and be impressed.

In-class exercise:

As a class, create a 5-sentence story (either by volunteers or by going student-by-student for each sentence): balance, unbalance, quest, crisis, new balance. Then ask: **What time is it?** Add one sentence to the original first sentence that places your story in time through some detail (year/season/month/day/time of day). Then ask: **Where am I?** Add one sentence that describes the setting. Take the brief mention of the setting in your original first sentence and expand it, using a sensory detail (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) or factual information. Then ask: **Who's in the room?** Add a sentence that focuses on the characters and reveals or develops something about their relationship. Make the identities and/or emotional situations of your characters clear. This sentence could be action, memory, description, and can be put anywhere in the paragraph. Then ask: **What's the diagnosis?** Your final sentence should hint at the diagnosis for the patient (i.e. character). Where are they going to end up in the new balance? You already have the last sentence in this story, so you already know the answer. This hint should use a light touch—a

sentence your reader won't necessarily notice the first time around. But the second time they read it they'll see how you were setting up the ending right from the start. Now read all the sentences together as one coherent paragraph!

Homework

This week you will begin to write your story! Write the set up—the beginning up until the inciting incident. Include all of the important information: introduce your main characters, give a hint of where the story is going to end up, set the time and place. Spend time choosing your words: everything from the *way* you describe a room to the *way* your character speaks or acts is important—it all reveals information to your reader. And remember the golden rule: Show, Don't Tell. **This assignment should be about 2 pages. You must write within the page limit.** Anything inordinately over the page limit will not be considered as part of your assignment. This may seem strict or limiting, but in this class you are only writing a 5,000–7,500 word (10-15 page) short story.