![STORYADAY logo]

Un-Stick Your Story

I'm sitting here at my desk: with time to write, a story to work on, all my tools on my desk.

And I'm stuck.

(Actually I'm not stuck anymore, and that's why I'm writing this: so that when you find yourself in this situation, you might remember what I'm about to tell you and get yourself unstuck too.)

CONTENTS

Unstick Your Story

Writer's Block - real or not, it stinks!

Sometimes blocks are about our fears ("I'm not good enough") or our frustrations ("I'll never get published, so what's the point?") – but of which are lies, by the way.

But sometimes it really is about the story not working.

The first thing to know about this is that EVERYONE experiences this. Novices, experienced writers, and award-winning writers. Every writer starts stories that get away from them a bit.

The first trick is to know what to try when it happens.

The second trick is to keep going, when it's hard.

Today I'm going to try to help a bit with the first trick, by walking you through what's going on with my story.

The Idea

I had this idea for an Advance Party of colonists to land on a planet they're planning to settle, only to crash on the way down.

Of course, they discover that the planet isn't everything they thought it was, and they start to experience some strange side effects of being there.

The Plot

In my search for 'what happens next', I decided their quest would be to travel for three days across different hostile environments, to reach the rescue ship's extraction point.

The Problem

As I wrote the set up to the story, I had a character wake from a medically-induced coma to discover that her crewmates were on the planet and already experiencing the weird side-effects of being there.

Then I was going to force them to trek across the planet for three days.

To make it interesting/realistic, I had an advance party of five people. Even though one of them doesn't do much (for story reasons), that's a lot of people to manage.

I had barely introduced them all and I was pushing the 1000 word limit.

For a story that I was planning to bring in around 4000 words, that's a lot of set up.

The Resistance

Stephen Pressfield famously says that Resistance in writers is/feels like an external force, pushing on us and trying to prevent us from doing our creative work.

So when I stalled at the point where I had to make my characters get up and begin their trek, I considered that: was I having internal resistance?

Nope.

I was just doing it wrong.

I was stalled because I was overwhelmed by the prospect of coming up with several different environments on the planet that would cause obstacles to them getting to the rendezvous point, guiding five distinct personalities through it with enough peril and banter to keep readers interested, and get them to the final climax and resolution...all in the number of words a short story affords.

The Answer

I realized I was brainstorming a plan for a novella at the very least, not a short story,

(Throw in a subplot about the geopolitical reasons they were there, or the secret sabotage efforts of one of the crew, and I was working towards a novel!)

(Note: I wasn't outlining as such, but, having reached a sticking point, I was brainstorming what needed to come next.)

Short stories are short.

Which means the central idea they address has to stay smaller in scale than our imaginations are capable of making it.

I had to rein myself in.

If I wanted to keep the five characters – and I did – and if I wanted this to be a short story not a novella, I probably needed to shrink the scale of the problem.

The New Idea

At this point, a new idea began to form: what if the story is not about their trek across the planet, encountering obstacles? What if I bring the obstacles to them, and all they have to do is survive?

That way, I avoid having to come up with new settings, as well as coming up with ways to address the passage of time, and several different types of peril.

Show The Most Interesting Parts

This led me to another 'aha':

I had already come up with an intriguing idea: that the planet was affecting them all differently.

I had not, however, shown the reader any of that.

In other words, I had put all the most interesting parts in backstory and conversations:

"Oh, yeah, by the way, while you were asleep, all these weird things happened. Look, let me show you the aftermath."

Yawn!

That was me - the writer - telling myself the story.

What if I showed the reader that weird and wonderful stuff as it was happening?

Now I was starting to get excited about the story again.

I was thinking on a scale that would work in short fiction.

I didn't have to come up with a whole bunch of new ideas

I immediately started thinking of fun ways to show what I had already described in my opening 1000 words,

Starting Again Without Starting Again

When a story stalls, it is oh, so tempting to throw it out and go with the shiny new idea that presents itself.

But by digging into what I know a short story is and should be, I found my way back to the thing that excited me about this story in the first place.

So sure, I had a lot of ideas about this story that I'm discarding.

Sure, I have to go back to the beginning and write it completely differently.

But now I get to play around with the ideas I already came up with instead of overwhelming myself—and potential readers—with too many new ideas.

And I have a story idea (the trek across the planet) that I can use at another time.

STORYADAY

WORKSHEETS

Unstick Your Story

Worksheet Questions

With Notes

How many characters are in the story?

(This includes anyone who has a name or a function. Anyone you have to spend words explaining, even if they don't appear in the action. E.g. "Alice gripped the steering wheel as she negotiated the turn into the nursing home drive. Her mother had been here for four months now, ever since her dementia had reached a point where Alice could no longer look after her" There are two characters in this passage even though the mother doesn't appear, she is a character the reader has to pay attention to.)

Can a reader easily identify your main character?

Name them.

What does your main character want? Are there obstacles to that?

The most interesting stories often have internal and external obstacles to the main character's desires. What are yours?

Internal

External

How many locations are in the story?

Do you need them all? Could you shrink the physical scale of the story?

What incidents happened to your characters just before the story starts? Should they be shown to the reader instead of referred to in passing?

(e.g. Do you tell us that your characters are standing around planning a bank robbery? Could you instead start your story as they make their first demand of the cashier? Or, could you show us the pre-planning conversation, instead of telling us about it, using dialogue to teach us about the characters?)

What are your characters doing when they are most active, in what you have written?

Should your story start here? If it did, what information would be essential to feed to the readers, later? (Note: this may contradict your answer to the previous question. Now you have options to play with and decisions to make.)

Does your story hinge on a single moment or decision or action taken by your character?

Describe it.

Does everything lead to (or away from) that moment/decision/action?

If not, what could you cut?

What one thing do you want the reader to be thinking about as they walk away from your story?

(This is a question for after you have started writing. Ask it too early and you may stall yourself or end up writing a cliched morality play....)

Worksheet Questions

Fill In The Blanks

How many characters are in the story?

Can a reader easily identify your main character? Who is it?

What does your main character want?

Internal

External

Are there obstacles to that?

Internal

External

How many locations are in the story?

What incidents happened to your characters just before the story starts?

Should they be shown to the reader instead of referred to in passing?

What are your characters doing when they are most active, in what you have written?

Does your story hinge on a single moment or decision or action taken by your character?

Does everything lead to (or away from) that moment/decision/action?

What one thing do you want the reader to be thinking about as they walk away from your story?

ADDITIONAL NOTES