

The Journey: Plotting and Writing *Your* Short Story



Here is a structured approach to rapidly writing a short story based on the classic story line of a character who is trying to get home. Each of the steps may be handled in one, two, or three paragraphs, but no more. Keep this story rolling ahead! *Tip:* Easiest for students if spread across several short writing sessions.

- 1. Decide** if you want to embrace the **fantastic**—magic, sci fi or the like—**or** base your story in (some) **gritty reality**.
- 2. Pick your protagonist.** You'll write about them in the third person. They will be determined to get home from a shipwreck that left them on an unfamiliar shore (for example). They will be brave but imperfect, strong but vulnerable, worried but determined. Their persona should make them human and sympathetic as they struggle toward home (or whatever destination you choose).

Examples: In *The Old Man and the Sea*, a fisherman finally catches the huge fish he's been seeking all his life, and must somehow bring it in to port. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the Greek king Odysseus and his crew sail for home after the end of the Trojan war, but run into a lot of problems along the way. In Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, a scientific expedition is actually trying to find their way home, just like your character.
- 3. Start writing. Have them explore their environment.** Do they find something to use (compass? weapon? camping supplies? boat?) or find a path or road to take? Make it clear they are eager to escape and start their journey home (or wherever you're sending them.)
- 4. Get them started on their journey.** Make the beginning of their journey remarkable for its (choose one) hopefulness, awkwardness, sense of foreboding.
- 5. Have the first thing go wrong.** Put them in danger. Create some trouble they have to respond to at once.
- 6. They escape the first problem,** even though it may have seemed insurmountable. Send them on their journey again.

7. **Introduce another problem.** Some new obstacle, danger, or diversion. If you want, they can pick up a helper or shipmate of some sort (human or otherwise) as they escape (or who helps them escape) this danger. Or do it on their own.
8. **Move them along, with changes?** Make it clear how their journey has changed or is changing them. Or not? Maybe they so far aren't adapting or developing in such a way as to be likely to make it to the end—which can set up an exciting confrontation in the next misadventure, not only with some new challenge, but also with themselves.
9. **And now for the third, most daunting problem!** (Or perhaps they just keep hitting the *same* challenge because they haven't grown enough as a character yet?) I.e. their fear and unwillingness to trust their little sailboat keeps them from getting past the surf on the reef that circles the island, so they keep getting washed back up on the same shore... Ow. Or your some other equivalent of a Sisyphean experience! Anyway, now there is finally a *breakthrough*, literal or metaphysical. They get over this third and largest hump, and are *finally* headed home!
10. **home at last!** You may end it here, as they approach home—with a sighting on the horizon, the smell of something familiar, a land bird venturing out off the coast. Or have them step over their own threshold and *hurray!* they are back. But consider this...
11. **What if, instead of a happy climax, there is an anticlimax?**
Home isn't what they thought it would be. Has home changed? Have *they* changed? (If they picked up a traveling companion, how did that change them?) Now what? End here, wondering, or...
12. **An option** for your ending is that they decide they have to leave home. The journey has defined them. They need to undertake another journey... So, paradoxically, **the story ends with their heading out once more...**
- Or what if they come home and no one recognizes them? Lots of twists to imagine... :-)

Congratulations,
your story draft in complete.
Good work!

