



# *Ten Steps To A Killer Story*

Elizabeth Guy



### Step One – The Idea

All stories begin with an idea, and there's an endless amount in this vast world. But let's save the Biblical saga for another time. In this exercise, choose an idea that can occur within a mile from where you now sit. Yep, you're aiming for a neighbor.

Now ask yourself: What is this neighbor going to do? Or what is going to happen to this neighbor? What if...? What if...?

When you have a clear idea in mind, put it on paper. Define it in two sentences. Print it out and post it in a prominent place. This is the foundation on which you'll build your story.

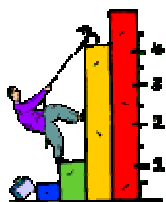


### Step Two – The Characters

Time to meet the stars of the show. In this exercise, you can have no more than three people: one main character, two minor characters. Who are they? Name them. Describe their physical appearance and their basic personality. Add depth by giving them a hobby.

Even if you don't incorporate the hobby into the story, it will remain in your mind as you write. After all, which is more interesting: a grumpy old man who yells at the neighborhood kids or a grumpy old man who

yells at the neighborhood kids and builds dollhouses in his basement? Knowing this one little tidbit about him forces you to see, and therefore write, beneath the surface.



### Step Three – The Goal

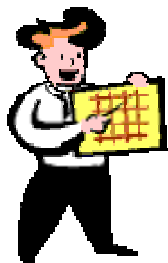
An idea becomes a story only when the character decides to DO something about his situation. So take the idea you've created and insert a goal. What does the main character want?



### Step Four – The Conflict

All great stories contain Conflict—anything (animal, mineral or vegetable) that works against the main character. So after you've defined your character's goal, make it almost impossible to attain. How? By throwing in obstacles, left and right.

What if...? What if...? What if...?



### Step Five – The Outline

Now that you have the basic story in mind, plot it. What happens, scene by scene? Bear in mind you are taking your readers on a journey. An outline serves as your map. It needn't be a formal paper with bullets and

brackets and headings. It needn't be more than a single paragraph describing the action and the point of each scene. Of course some things may change when you start writing, but a well-constructed map will keep you from getting lost along the way.



### Step Six – The Point of View

For this exercise, there's no such thing as the omniscient (godlike) point of view. You can hop into one head only. Usually the storytelling POV goes to the main character, but you might prefer to let one of the minor characters tell the tale. The goal is to remain consistent throughout. At all times, you must be aware that your POV character can neither be everywhere nor know everything. If he can't see, hear, smell, feel or touch it, neither can the readers.



### Step Seven – The Voice

Visualize your favorite person in the whole wide world. This person is far, far away from you right now, but you must tell her this story. For some reason, you can't use the phone. So pretend you're sending an email. Begin with the line: You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you...

At this point, don't worry about the writing mechanics that have been hammered into your brain. No one other than your friend will see this. Just relax, sip your favorite beverage and write the story in your own

words. This approach guarantees a warm natural tone instead of a tense unnatural “scholarly” voice.



### Step Eight - The Structure

Every story needs a beginning. But that doesn't necessarily mean you start at the beginning of the story.

To grab readers' attention from the very first paragraph, open with a bang! Introduce the main character with ACTION, not description, and set up the Conflict that's going to occur. A crime is committed, a lie is told, a heated attraction is ignited, etc. Instill a sense of urgency in the readers. Make them turn the page.

Every story needs a middle. These are the scenes/chapters that reveal what the character DOES about the situation, and how he handles the obstacles he encounters. Sometimes he takes two steps forward, sometimes two steps back. But always he's moving, doing something that make readers root for him. Will he or won't he ever achieve his goal?

Every story needs a climax. This is the scene for which the entire story has been building. It is the resolution to the problem that was introduced in the beginning. The murderer is caught, the secret is revealed, the man professes his love, etc. This moment finally answers the above question. Yes, he did achieve his goal. No, he did not achieve his goal. The suspense is alleviated.

And the satisfying end is not far behind.



### Step Nine - The Analysis

Put the story away. Don't go near it for at least seven days.

On the eighth day, print the manuscript, go somewhere quiet and calm and read the creation. How does it feel? Does the story make sense? Have you tied up all the loose ends? Did you stay focused? Did you show, not tell? If you're unsure, ask others to read it. No matter how clearly you see the story in your mind, others will see it differently and may provide crucial elements you simply overlooked.



### Step Ten – The Final Draft

Once you're confident the story is solid and complete, apply those writing mechanics to the final draft.

Have you written clear complete sentences? Have you chosen an active voice rather than a passive one? Have you double-checked your spelling and punctuation? Have you followed the guidelines for proper manuscript submissions?

If it all fits, it's time to submit!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Guy is founder of ReadingWriters, editor of The VERB Writing Ezine, instructor in the Story Room, author of Making a Scene with Mush Pump and Ice Noodle and Script Analyst for Above the Line Agency in Hollywood.



For eight years, she has provided critiques and editing tips to hundreds of manuscripts. Her articles, poems and short stories have been published all over the place, and her first screenplay reached the Quarterfinal Round of the 2008 Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting. When she isn't reading/editing manuscripts or websites, judging contests, helping students or overseeing an issue of The VERB, she's writing another thriller. Or baking pies.

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