

# Stories from life

*Writing stories inspired by personal experiences*



Catherine Duffett  
2025



[info@mshauried.org](mailto:info@mshauried.org)



[www.mshauried.org](http://www.mshauried.org)

## Introduction

Creative writing is fun. Telling stories is something humans have always done. It's how we make sense of ourselves and the world around us. When we read or write, we can be carried to new places—or even brand-new worlds—that exist only in our imaginations. Stories can make us laugh, cry, feel nervous, or jump with excitement.

You've got stories inside you that are worth telling. This booklet is here to give you some handy ideas to help you shape those stories and share them with others. Hopefully, it will also spark a love of writing and reading that sticks with you for life.

Inside, you'll find tips on how to put a story together—from the beginning, to the middle, to the ending. There's also a short story, *One Impulsive Decision*, which shows off many of these techniques in action. As you go through each section, come back to that story and see how the strategies are being used.

*Writing is an extreme privilege but it's also a gift. It's a gift to yourself and it's a gift of giving a story to someone.*

— Amy Tan, best selling author

Ms Catherine

## Write often

Writing takes practice. A good way to start is by keeping a notebook to collect ideas. Try these activities to help you build a regular writing habit:

- Collect interesting words and phrases and add them to Appendix H
- Write what you observe using your senses. What can you smell, see, touch, or taste?
- Sit in a place (or imagine a setting) and describe it using your senses.
- Give your reader a tour of your home. Describe what you see in each room and add memories to bring it to life.
- Borrow words or phrases you've read or heard elsewhere to spark ideas. For example, try finishing these sentence starters with your own experiences:
- From where I stood I could see...

The silence was broken by...

- The air smelled of...
  - The ground beneath my feet felt...
  - I ran as fast as I could... knowing that...
  - Suddenly the lights went out and...
  - The secret was hidden in plain sight...
- Use a true event as inspiration, then ask *what if?* Try changing the event by adding a new character, plot twist, or theme.
  - To create memorable characters, visit a place with the goal of observing people. Watch, listen, and make notes about what you notice and imagine.
  - Start your writing with a bold claim such as *Everyone...*, *No one...*, or *Never...*



Reading books helps to improve your writing, so read as often as you can.

## Writing techniques

### Show, don't tell!

The *show, don't tell* strategy can be used throughout a story to add drama and make it more engaging. *Telling* is factual, while *showing* adds detail and helps the reader feel as if they are experiencing the story

Where in the story *Once* impulsive decision, can you find examples of the *show, don't tell* strategy?

themselves. This technique can be used to bring every aspect of a story to life including its setting, plot, and characters.



Rewrite the following sentences so they *show and don't tell*:

- She was angry.
- He was tired.
- They were excited.
- The classroom was noisy.
- It was a cold morning.

### Point of view

If you are writing about an event from your own life, then the story is written in first person (as opposed to third person). The other decision to make is the tense that you will use in crafting your story. Usually stories inspired by a personal experience are written in the past tense. However, writing in the present tense can sometimes make events more graphic.

Re-read *One impulse decision*. What do you think are the advantages of writing this story in first person as opposed to third person?



Write a paragraph about a funny event from your own life. Write it in past tense, then re-write it in present tense. What effect does changing the tense have on the story?

### The Fast Start

Your job as the writer is to make sure the story you create keeps the reader engaged and wanting to read more, so the first few sentences are vital. You want your reader to be asking questions about the story as the plot unfolds. This needs to happen from the very first sentence.

How does the story *Once impulsive decision*. Can you think of a better way to start this story?

Try starting your story with:

- a sound
- an action
- an unusual statement
- dialogue
- a thought
- a mystery



Try choosing one of these techniques and give yourself one minute to write a ‘fast start’!

## Creating characters

To help bring your characters to life, create a list of your character’s features. This is a valuable exercise. Include both physical and personality traits, as well as family and social details—such as how many brothers and sisters they have, their ethnic background, and hobbies. Appendix B provides a list of words and phrases that can help you describe your character. At times, you will want to



1. Write a list of physical and personality traits of one of your main characters.

Details regarding their family and ethnic background can also provide important information about characters.

2. What did you notice?

Write one or two sentences about your character that answer each of the following questions:

- How did they move? (fast, slow, tired, confident...)
- What did their face or body show? (happy, worried, proud...)
- What were they wearing or carrying?
- What did they say or do that showed something about them?

3. Write a paragraph about the person using some of the sentences you created about your character. Don’t say who they are — just describe what they looked like and what they did using your best “showing” strategies.

## Creating dialogue

Dialogue helps to create memorable characters, to help the story progress and to *show and not tell*. However, it is important to keep dialogue brief so it doesn't slow the pace of your story. Dialogue tags make it clear to the reader which character is speaking. For example: *"The chickens!" I screamed.*

While the word "said" is appropriate to use in many instances, there may be times when you want to convey a tone of voice, and "said" can be replaced with words such as "shouted" or "whispered." Dialogue tags can go before, during, or after the dialogue, as the following examples illustrate:

- A dialogue tag placed before the dialogue: *Mr Juma snapped, "Sit down right now!"*
- A dialogue tag placed during the dialogue: *"I just don't know," Neema said, "if I can finish this in time."*
- A dialogue tag placed after the dialogue: *"That's the best ugali I've ever had," Rehema exclaimed.*

Action beats are physical descriptions or gestures that replace or support "he said/she said." They help readers picture the scene more clearly. For example: *"Pass it here!" Jamal waved his hands wildly as he ran toward the goal.*

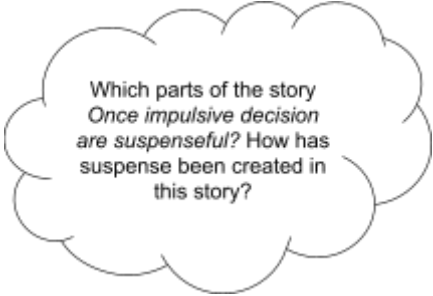


Write a short **4–6 line conversation** between two characters. Make sure at least half of the lines use **action beats** instead of "said."

## Creating Suspense

Suspense is created by setting up an expectation that something is going to happen, but then there is a delay in revealing whether it actually occurs. The following list provides some strategies for creating suspense:

- Begin the story with the character in a safe place.
- Show, don't tell. Use your senses to describe the character's environment.
- Use phrases from the Scope table (Appendix D) and Appendix F to describe the characters and their environment.
- Use empty words such as "something," "someone," "it."
- Use sound effects, e.g., "Crack!"

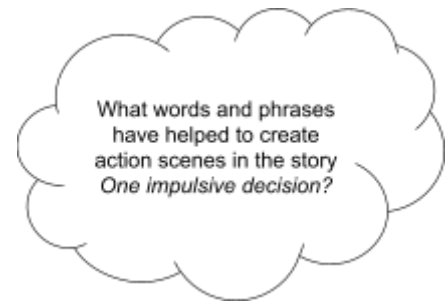


Which parts of the story  
Once impulsive decision  
are suspenseful? How has  
suspense been created in  
this story?

- Show how the main character feels—what they are thinking, how they react, what they do. Use phrases like those that describe a character’s vantage point (Appendix C).
- Use repetition for effect (Appendix F).
- End the scene with a question that shows what the character is concerned about or thinking.
- Include lots of detail so that each small action is described. Use sentences of varying length. When the scene reaches the climax, gradually shift to shorter sentence parts by using **semicolons**, then transition to short, sharp sentences and even a sentence fragment. Refer to Appendix F for examples of grammatical deviation that can be used for building suspense.

### Creating Action

The “slow motion” technique is a great strategy for building action scenes. A powerful way to level up your writing is to find the action verbs you’ve used and consider stronger alternatives.



Underline the action verbs in your writing. What message are you trying to convey to your audience? Is there another action verb that might be more precise that you could use?

### The ending

The ending needs to answer the question that was generated at the beginning of the story. It needs to leave the reader satisfied that the story is complete and that the character’s dilemmas and problems have been answered.

## Writing your story

### Sources of Inspiration

The inspiration for a personal narrative can be drawn from different experiences. Think about a moment where there was either external or internal conflict. The following suggestions might help you find an idea for a story:

- An experience that resulted in you learning a valuable lesson
- A moment when you experienced a strong emotion. For example, an event that caused you to feel betrayed, jealous or embarrassed.
- Something that is important to you. For example, an item of clothing, a particular celebration or a pet
- An important event such as an achievement, or friendship



Brainstorm some examples of these different experiences.

## Plot outline template

Use a table like the one below to create a basic outline of your plot.

| Question        | Answer |
|-----------------|--------|
| When            |        |
| Where           |        |
| Who             |        |
| What            |        |
| Why             |        |
| How did it end? |        |
| Result          |        |



Using the plot outline, tell the story to someone else and encourage them to ask questions about the story. This will help you recognise any additional information that needs to be included in your first draft.

## The first draft

Write your first draft. This is about getting your ideas on paper. It doesn't have to be perfect!

- Use a double page spread in your notebook. Write on the left hand side, leaving the right side for rewriting your story.
- write on every second line to leave enough room to edit your work.
- Leave a wide margin to make notes about editing.

## Revising your work

Now that you understand how to craft all the elements of a personal story - the setting, characters, and the plot, rewrite your story. Remember that your reader wasn't present when the actual events occurred, so you need to include enough detail so that your reader can understand the story.

Consider these questions when revising your work:

- Have you used the same word repeatedly throughout your story? If so, are there synonyms that you can use instead?
- Are there any sections of your story that would benefit from incorporating some sentence signposts (Appendix A) to make it easier for your reader to understand what is happening?
- Where in your story can you eliminate words? Highlight all the adjectives and adverbs. Can any of these be removed by making a noun more precise? What adverbs can you remove to make the associated verbs more precise?

For example:

*The old man slowly and carefully walked across the dusty, broken, uneven, old street with his small, scruffy, brown, little dog trotting quickly beside him*  
can be rewritten as: *The frail old man shuffled across the cracked street, his scruffy dog trotting at his heels.*

## Editing your story

Once you have completed your second draft, try reading it aloud to someone so help you discover sections where you might need to include more detail. If you have set up your notebook as described previously, then you can make editing notes in the left hand column as you read your story aloud. The acronym COPS is helpful to remember when editing your work. This stands for:

C - capitals

O - organisation - are your sentences grammatically correct? Are your paragraphs in the correct order?

P - punctuation

S - spelling

## Continuing your writing

Reading stories is fun. Who will you share your stories with? It takes time to develop good writing skills. Can you seek feedback from others on how you can improve your stories? This booklet has given you the skills to write from personal experience, but can you use these strategies to create a story set in an imaginative world? Could you create a story that involves a mystery to be solved?

Above all, I hope you continue on your writing journey.

Catherine

## Appendix A - Sentence signposts

| <b>Time/Sequence Signposts</b><br><br><i>These show the order in which things happen</i>                                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Location/Setting Signposts</b><br><br><i>These help show where the events are taking place</i>                                                                                                                     | <b>Emotional/Reflective Signposts</b><br><br><i>These help show the narrator's thoughts or feelings</i>                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Action/Turning Point Signposts</b><br><br><i>These show when something important or dramatic happens:</i>                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>It all started when...</i><br><i>At first...</i><br><i>A few days earlier...</i><br><i>Suddenly...</i><br><i>Just then...</i><br><i>Later that day...</i><br><i>The next thing I knew...</i><br><i>Moments later...</i><br><i>Eventually...</i><br><i>By the end of the day...</i> | <i>We were standing at the edge of...</i><br><i>Right in the middle of...</i><br><i>Across the street from...</i><br><i>Back at home...</i><br><i>Somewhere I'd never been before...</i><br><i>In the distance...</i> | <i>I couldn't believe what I was seeing.</i><br><i>My heart was pounding.</i><br><i>I didn't know what to do next.</i><br><i>Looking back, I realise...</i><br><i>At the time, I didn't understand why...</i><br><i>It was a moment I'll never forget.</i> | <i>That's when everything changed.</i><br><i>Out of nowhere...</i><br><i>Without warning...</i><br><i>All of a sudden...</i><br><i>Before I knew it...</i><br><i>Then came the moment I'd been dreading...</i> |

## Appendix B - Words and phrases to describe a character

| Physical appearance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Personality Traits                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Emotional states or changes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Social Habits / Relationships                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Habits, quirks and motivations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| short and stocky<br>tall and lanky<br>wiry build<br>soft features<br>weathered face<br>unruly hair<br>deep-set eyes<br>hunched posture<br>walks with a limp<br>always fiddling with something<br>voice rough like gravel<br>eyes that don't miss a thing | quick to laugh<br>cautious and thoughtful<br>stubborn to the core<br>kind but guarded<br>always trying to prove herself<br>driven by curiosity<br>doesn't trust easily<br>quietly confident<br>wears his heart on his sleeve<br>impatient with small talk<br>naturally takes charge<br>prefers to stay in the background | easily frustrated when plans fall apart<br>hides hurt behind a smile<br>can't stand being wrong<br>lives in constant worry<br>often overwhelmed but hides it well<br>lets anger simmer silently<br>beams when praised<br>crumbles under pressure<br>thrives when challenged<br>struggles to express emotions | - fiercely loyal to close friends<br>- avoids confrontation at all costs<br>- jealous of her younger sister<br>- always trying to fit in<br>treats strangers like old friends<br>- distrustful of authority<br>- desperate to impress<br>- protective of those - weaker than him<br>- lonely even in a crowd<br>- always the peacemaker in the group | - bites nails when nervous<br>- double-checks everything<br>- carries a notebook everywhere<br>- can't resist a challenge<br>- always late but never flustered<br>- obsessed with fairness<br>- avoids mirrors<br>- lives by routine<br>- never forgets a face<br>- stays up late thinking |

## Appendix C - Vantage Point

This helps readers empathise with your character. Place yourself in a particular scene and describe what you see using words related to your body.

| <b>Body based verbs</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <b>Adverbs</b><br><i>how you do something</i>                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Prepositions of Position / Movement</b><br><i>places the reader "there"</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Feeling Words</b><br><i>Connects with emotions</i>                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| clutched my chest<br>wiped my sweaty hands<br>shuffled my feet<br>hung my head<br>squeezed my eyes shut<br>curled my toes<br>stiffened my shoulders<br>hunched over<br>turned away<br>blinked back tears<br>rubbed my arms<br>bit my lip<br>crossed my arms tightly<br>leaned in close<br>stepped back<br>reached out | nervously<br>quietly<br>shyly<br>slowly<br>quickly<br>carefully<br>hesitantly<br>anxiously<br>proudly<br>silently<br>softly<br>suddenly<br>awkwardly<br>gently<br>tearfully<br>boldly<br>angrily | behind the door<br>under the table<br>beside my friend<br>in the back corner<br>near the window<br>across the room<br>on the edge of my seat<br>at the front of the line<br>behind my hands<br>inside my head<br>beneath the blanket<br>between them<br>next to the noise<br>around the corner | my heart pounded<br>my stomach turned<br>a lump formed in my throat<br>my face burned<br>my chest felt heavy<br>my voice trembled<br>my hands tingled<br>a tear slid down my cheek<br>my jaw clenched<br>my eyes darted |

## Appendix D - Scope

This helps create suspense. Imagine you can't see the whole object or body. Imagine zooming in on a specific part. Make that part do the action.

| Object Parts (as subject nouns)   | Example sentences                                         |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| The frayed edge of the backpack   | A single bead of sweat slid down his temple.              |
| A loose shoelace                  | The doorknob twisted slowly.                              |
| The cracked corner of the phone   | Her fingers hovered just above the envelope.              |
| A torn sleeve                     | The corner of his mouth twitched.                         |
| The bent rim of the glasses       | A shoelace trailed behind him, dragging through the dirt. |
| A flickering screen               | The curtain shifted—just a little.                        |
| The muddy sole of a boot          | A flickering light blinked in the hallway.                |
| A shaking pencil                  | One foot crept forward, toes curled.                      |
| The swinging zipper of her jacket |                                                           |
| The handle of the door            |                                                           |
| A dripping tap                    |                                                           |
| The creaking hinge                |                                                           |

## Appendix E - Describing motion

This helps to create motion and helps the reader track a character as it moves across a scene. Describe what they move through, by, under, or over, like seeing each one through a window.

| Verb phrases of movement                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Revealing Parts in Sequence</b><br>peeked through a crack in the fence<br><br>glanced at each shadowed window<br><br>followed the light as it moved across the floor<br><br>watched dust float in a single shaft of sun<br><br>noticed one footstep at a time in the sand<br><br><br><b>Zooming in on One Area Then Panning</b><br>eyes fixed on the torn backpack<br><br>paused at the scuffed doorknob<br><br>lingered on the stain near the sink<br><br>tracked the flicker of movement in the grass<br><br>focused on the shimmer of heat over the road | <b>Motion Across a Scene</b><br>darted between the trees<br><br>slipped past the open gate<br><br>weaved through the market stalls<br><br>tiptoed across the dusty floor<br><br>hurried along the narrow path<br><br><br><b>Passing Landmarks or Features</b><br>raced by the sleeping dog<br><br>crept under the low-hanging branches<br><br>ran past the row of wooden crates<br><br>crawled beneath the wire fence<br><br>leapt over the broken wall |

## Appendix F - Focusing attention on a person, action or particular details

The following table provides some suggested phrases and sentences that help to focus attention on a particular person, action or details that are important within a scene.

| Postpositive adjectives    | Syntactic repetition                                     | Grammatical Deviation                         |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| A time unknown.            | He ran past the gate, past the tree, past the open road. | And then—nothing.                             |
| A door ajar.               | She waited and waited and waited.                        | A crack. Then two. Then silence.              |
| The river wild.            | It was dark. It was cold. It was silent.                 | Gone. Just—gone.                              |
| The stars visible.         | Over the rock, over the ridge, over the edge.            | The door, it opened. Slow.                    |
| The answer unspoken.       | First the sound, then the shadow, then the scream.       | Not the wind. Not the leaves. Something else. |
| A path narrow and winding. | She saw it in the dust, in the glass, in the water.      | She, of all people, knew.                     |
| A silence absolute.        | Not yet. Not now. Not here.                              | Running. Breathing. Stopping. Listening.      |
| A beauty rare.             | He kept walking—kept walking even when it hurt.          | No sound. No light. No rules.                 |
| Something strange stirred. |                                                          | What she saw? Not possible.                   |
| A fire eternal burned.     |                                                          | It moved. Slowly. Carefully. Wrongly.         |

## Appendix G - Energy

To create a sense of energy in your scene, show how energy passes from the subject to object using active verbs where sentences have the following structure: Subject, active verb, direct active object.

eg : *The boy (subject) hurled the ball (object), which bounced off the wall and hit the bucket (effect).*

| Physical Energy Transfer                                 | Emotional or Interpersonal Energy                         | Environmental Energy Chains                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| She kicked the door, sending it crashing into the wall.  | She glared at him, freezing him mid-step.                 | Lightning split the sky, sending shadows skittering across the ground. |
| He threw the stone; it shattered the window.             | He whispered the truth, igniting panic in her chest.      | Rain pounded the roof, drumming into the floor below.                  |
| The child tugged the string, and the kite soared upward. | They laughed loudly, shaking the quiet room.              | The river surged forward, toppling branches and flooding paths.        |
| They slammed the shutters, rattling the hinges.          | She hugged him tight, pressing the breath from his lungs. | Waves crashed onto the rocks, spraying foam across the sand.           |
| She flicked the switch, and the room burst into light.   | He pointed the finger, and the crowd turned with him.     | The fire crackled, spitting sparks into the air.                       |
| He stomped the ground, shaking the loose tiles.          | She snapped the words, cutting through his thoughts.      | The wind howled, slamming shutters and tugging at clothes.             |
| The wind bent the branches, which knocked over the vase. |                                                           |                                                                        |

## **Appendix H - Useful vocabulary**

*Record any vocabulary here that you might want to incorporate into a story.*

## References:

Hamand, M. (2023). *Creative Writing For Dummies*. John Wiley & Sons.

Healey, B. (2025). 'Let me see it through your eyes': Teaching grammar-for-writing as imaginative embodiment. *Literacy*, 59(2), pp.242–254. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12387>.

Jericho Writers. (2025). *Jericho Writers: With You From First Word to Final Publication*. [online] Available at: <https://jerichowriters.com/>.

Miller, P. (2024). *Writing true stories : the complete guide to writing autobiography, memoir, personal essay, biography, travel and creative nonfiction*. Second Edition ed. London: Routledge.

Serravallo, J. (2017). *The writing strategies book : your everything guide to developing skilled writers with 300 strategies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Wilcox, A. (2021). *Descriptosaurus Personal Writing*. Routledge.