

Let Me Help You

Sell Your Homework

12-Week Course of Study:

*24 Ways to Write
Stories for Kids*

Lesson 7

**FRAME AND FLASHBACK
PROBLEM AND SOLUTION**

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Let's Tell a

Frame-and-Flashback Story

Leave the monster wave poised but not yet cresting as you go back and tell how you ever got into this

FIX!

The secret of writing successful frame-and-flashback stories lies in starting the beginning as close to the ending as you can.

Actually, the frame-and-flash-back stories form two stories in one, only one is inside the other. The frame holds the story to a chronological narrative sequence. The flashback provides needed background material to make the conflict meaningful.

Naturally, your story's climax will come at the end. Therefore, your opening must come as close to that climax as you can get it—without giving away your solution.

You open at a high point of excitement. Something significant has happened. Something significant is about to happen. Hook the reader here. Lock him in.

You open with a wall of water moving slowly, relentlessly toward your island in the Pacific. Transfixed only momentarily by it, you scramble for safety, moaning about whatever it was that got you into this fix.

Right there we start our flashback, leaving the monster wave poised but not quite cresting, waiting for you to get through the telling of how you got into “this fix.”

You will tell your flashback in chronological order because that way you can trace the series of events from the beginning. But keep that flashback moving. You can't ever dawdle. Dawdle and you die.

Keep the pace, baby, and get back into the main story as quickly as you can. But don't rush so quickly that you do not give a satisfactory motive for your character to have acted as he did. After all, the editors and readers want a good story to be well told.

Some writing teachers and books discourage writers from using this method because they face a trap many don't escape from. They forget to come back to the original story. That's because things are going so well in the flashback.

You can stagnate in a long flashback as you explain and explain how you

got into “this fix.” As you do, your readers suffocate. Avoid getting into what looks like a case history explanation.

Another secret of vigorous writing is to people your sentences with verbs and participles. These are the action words of sentences. Participles are the parts of the verb that end in “ing” (like running, singing) or “en” (like broken, taken) or “ed” (like hooked, cooked, looked).

You want lots of verbs, yes, but not all verbs—not verbs in the BE family.

Try to avoid these. They are the linking verbs—be, is, am, are, was, were, being, been. They link the noun in the predicate to the noun subject. They tell what IS and not what someone is DOING.

Your pace dies and the tone of your writing becomes dull when you use these words. Your doughnut sinks to the bottom of the cup. Your prose just plods. You want it to skip.

The secret is to look through your work and delete as many BE family verbs as possible. In their place put action verbs.

Look at paragraphs 3, 4, 5 on the column before—the ones beginning with “You open with a wall of water” and the next two, ending with “Dawdle and you die.” Those three paragraphs contain exactly 100 words. Of them, 25 are verbs and verbals: open, moving, Transfixed, scramble, moaning, was, got, start, leaving, poised, cresting, waiting, get, telling, got, will tell, can

trace, keep, moving, can dawdle, dawdle, die.

My ratio is one verb in every four words or 1:4. Among them all is one BE word—was. That’s good.

But 1:3 verb ratio would be even better. Good verbs make stories sing. The good verbs are active not passive verbs. Verbs become passive when they have a member of the BE family in front of them.

The old diatribe, “Women is poison,” pales before “BE verbs is poison.” But, let me say, there is nothing weak with an occasional be verb.

One more warning—keep down the number of words involved in prepositional phrases. Phrases rarely contain Doing words. They tell WHERE and WHEN, WHICH and WHAT KIND OF things we’re talking about. Each phrase begins with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun.

Better put, the sentence in paragraph four on the last page should have read, “You open as a wall of water moves slowly, relentlessly toward your Pacific island.” You gain a sense of the immediate and more threat by changing “moving” to “moves” and by shrinking the number of prepositional phrases.

But don’t get hung up on writing phraseless sentences. Simply be aware that you can heighten the vigor of your style by ridding your prose of unneeded phrase words.

And also, more important than

phrase count is euphony (sound). If phrases stilt your style, take them out. If phrases color your style and they lend it melody and lilt, leave them in.

Much bad writing is awkward sounding—like a square-wheeled cattle train. Good writing sings. Good writing reads so well that the reader will forget he's reading.

When writing for children, use contractions. They are much less formal and they help language flow.

Regarding story line, remember to make your problems and conflicts significant. They should have universal interest. What does it matter that Aunt Tillie has warts on her elbow. Her nose, yes. Her elbow, no. But whether Aunt Tillie can ever get to church on time could be quite dramatic. You want the girl on the Pacific atoll to be as concerned as the girl in the Bronx that she does.

Your characters should be appealing, their problems reasonable. And you need to write with enthusiasm. Your editors and your readers will catch your torch if you throw it. Hide it, sit on it, down-grade it with an "oh-so" style and you won't sell.

One last word, selling isn't everything. Fame fades. The money isn't much. You can earn more washing floors.

Ministry is what is important. Can you minister the things of Christ appealingly to kids?

Can you do it with enthusiasm and love?

Can you take significant problems and conflicts and create a Christian answer for troubled readers?

Money, I spend.

A letter from a reader telling me that a story I wrote changed a life—I'll treasure that forever.

May the Lord grant that our words will be like the gold, silver and precious stones that go through to eternity, not like the wood, hay and stubble that vanish under fire.

We serve the Lord Christ.

The following story shows what frame and flashback can do. I'll make notes as we go along. Interestingly, this chronological frame and flashback is also sunk and saved as well as plant and pick up.

This story emerged from the first sentence. I needed a strong hook example for a writing class. And it came!

Red Dog Said "March"

By Dick Bohrer

(Frame built on immediate threat and resistance)

"Okay, Red Dog, just because we're kids doesn't mean you can make us walk the plank," I said. "We're just not gonna do it."

I sat down right where I was standing and motioned Billy and the twins to do the same. I had to motion with my mouth and chin because my hands were tied to my side by loop after loop of tough rope.

(Threat #2)

“March!” Red Dog said, shouting.

(Resistance #2)

“April! May! June! July!” I said, shouting back. I had to outfox him somehow. He was trying to kill us.

He pointed with his sword at the diving board he called a gang plank. He was expecting us to go up the little steps and prance out to the end of the board and go splash. No way! Not this chick. That water was cold.

(Threat #3)

“I said, ‘March!’” he shouted again.

(Resistance #3)

“March winds, April showers, all bring May flowers,” I answered. Billy didn’t know whether to giggle or cry. He was afraid and so were the twins.

(Threat #4)

“If you don’t start marching, I will run you through with my sword!” Red Dog was getting red.

(Resistance #4)

“Marching along together,” I sang. From somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered this old song. I sort of had to go “dum-da-dum-da-dee-dee-dee” for the rest of the first line. And Red Dog didn’t like that any more than he’d liked my other answers to his ridiculous order. March, my foot!

(Threat #5)

He came over toward us, his sword point dancing around the area of our legs and sit-downs. The look in his eye was mean.

“I told you to march and you’re going to march!”

(Resistance #5)

I got to my feet and motioned Billy and the twins to follow me. Then, singing the wedding march, we walked in a line down one side of the deck, across the back, and forward again on the other side. We all sang together, “Here comes the bride, big, fat, and wide.”

We had to hold him off and give our dads time to find us. Fishermen come in from their runs late afternoons like this.

(Threat #6)

Red Dog was furious. The bristles on his mustache were standing straight out.

“I said to march. MARCH!”

(Resistance #6)

“We are marching,” I said. “See how she wobbles from sideways to side-tuh-duh-da-da. Here comes—”

He didn’t let me finish.

(Threat #7)

“All right, if you’re not going to walk that plank, it’s right down into the black hole for you.”

He opened a door and pushed us down amidships where it was cold and dark.

(Temporary relief brought by compliance)

We screamed like we hated being punished that way so he'd think he was getting even with us. We hoped he'd leave us alone. We had to keep making him think we were more afraid of the dark down here than of walking the plank.

The four of us lay down to talk. Every sentence or so, one of us would give a loud groan. That way old Red Dog would think we were suffering.

"Think it'll work?" Billy asked me.

"Sure it will. He's so dumb, anything would work."

"Not for long. He's gonna wise up."

"Nah! Not Red Dog," I said. "I'm smart enough to recognize a jelly fish when I see one."

(Transition into the flashback)

"If you were so smart, why'd you get us into this in the first place?"

"Me!" I said, surprised.

"Yeah, you! You put us up to it. It was all your fault." Billy was mad.

(Flashback begins here in chronological order. The first major verb is in the past perfect tense: had started.)

And come to think of it, I guess it was my fault. I had started out making it my fault from the moment I opened my eyes this morning.

(#1)

First off, I didn't say my morning prayer before I got out of bed.

(#2)

And then I got up on the wall side instead of the outside of my bed. I'd always heard people talk about getting up on the wrong side of bed, so I thought I'd try it—and that's how the whole day went.

(#3)

I put on unmatched socks.

(#4)

I put my sweater on backwards.

(#5)

I tripped on my laces.

(#6)

I made my mom mad because I let the dog out of the house and he ran away. It took me an hour to find him—an hour I should have been spending on my chores.

(#7)

I dropped the eggs when Mom sent me to the market.

(#8)

I tracked mud in all over her floor.

(#9)

My elbow hit a vase of flowers and broke it.

(#10)

I backed up against a picture and knocked it off the wall. The frame

broke.

(#11)

I tripped over the bucket of water she got to clean up the mud.

(#12, 13)

I slipped in the water and knocked over a table and broke the lamp that was on it.

She was so mad, she was crying.

(Misunderstood threat)

“You get out of here and don’t you come back” she said.

My own mother! She turned me out for just breaking a few of her old things. She told me never to come back. Never!

(Retaliation)

Well, I’d show her! I went and found Billy and the twins—the twins are his two beagle pups. They go with us everywhere we go. Billy calls them Buck and Looney.

Well, we decided to take my pop’s row boat and go out in the bay near our houses. We go out a lot in the dinghy. We fish for fish and we fish for crabs and we jump over the side and swim around a lot. That’s the place we go when we want to drown our sorrows and get even with our moms.

(Unexpected threat)

And so, what happened today? We got out there and the tide carried us out to sea. We were the only boat in

sight. Our dads were out with the fishing fleet so there was no one to rescue us.

And who did we find anchored out of sight but old Red Dog, waiting for nightfall so he could come in and capture our town.

The tide took us right to him.

(Unexpected result)

He’d seen us and trained his guns on us and ordered us to come on board his ship. We had to do it or be shot out of the water.

But when we got on board, there was something strange we couldn’t figure out. Something was wrong.

Red Dog grabbed us as we both climbed over the side. We each had a twin dangling from a leash slipped around our right wrist. He threw those ropes around us and pinned our arms to our sides.

(Back to the frame)

And then he told us to march.

(Attempts to reason out the mystery)

“Why do you think he doesn’t pick us up and just throw us overboard?” I asked Billy, trying to change the subject and cheer him up.

“I dunno,” he said.

“Seems he’s afraid of us or he wouldn’t let me talk to him like I do,” I said.

“But why would he be afraid of us?” Billy said. “We’re just kids.”

Then it was my turn to say, “I dunno.”

“I know what’s funny about this ship,” Billy said.

“What?”

“There aren’t any sailors.”

He was right. There wasn’t anybody on board except old Red Dog.

“I bet they couldn’t stand his breath,” I said. “They must have abandoned ship. He smells like an old garlic eater.”

“Or maybe they saw a mouse and ran,” Billy said. We laughed.

But then we figured we’d better pray. We didn’t know how to get back home safely at all. Our dads might never notice this ship.

(Prays for help)

We asked the Lord to help us because, really, we were His kids.

We lay there a while after we finished, waiting for the prayer to get to heaven and for the answer to have time to get back to us.

“What do you think the Lord’ll want us to do?” Billy asked me.

“He’ll let us know,” I said. “He always has before.”

We waited, and then I guess we fell asleep.

(Problem renewed)

The next thing we heard were the grunts of someone trying to lift something heavy and the sounds of a chain being dragged over wood. Then the grunts would come again, followed by an angry groan.

Then we’d hear a splash and the sound of chains rattling fast. Every

time we heard that happen, we heard Red Dog cursing.

(Problem intensifies)

It was darker than dark now, and Billy and I couldn’t see each other. The dogs set up a howl at the noise. They couldn’t understand what was going on either.

Pretty soon, we heard the lock on our door being rattled. Then the door creaked open, and Red Dog called us outside. It was good to get a breath of fresh air.

“What’s up, Hot Dog?” I said.

“March!” he said, pointing us up to the deck.

“Here we go again,” Billy said.

We dragged the dogs up the ladder to the deck and stood there looking at a full moon shining through the ropes and the furled sails high above us. It was beautiful.

“Over here!” Red Dog pointed us to a big spool with arms pointing out flat from the top that you turn when you want to lift the anchor. Sailors march the spool round and round in order to wrap the anchor chain as it comes out of the water.

(Threat #8)

“Push!” Red Dog said, shoving us into position in front of two of the bars.

(Resistance #8)

“We can’t push, Hound Dog,” I said. “Our hands are tied.”

(Deliberation and explanation of a new problem)

He stood there a moment, munching on his mustache, trying to decide what to do. If he untied us, we might try to escape, boy howdy. If he left us tied, we wouldn't be much help.

He must have been trying to lift the anchor by himself. That was what the grunting was about. And then, when the anchor broke water and was heavier, he must have had to let go.

That caused the angry groan, the splash of the anchor and the rattling of chains going over the side.

(Threat #9)

“All right, I will untie you and you will lift the anchor. Then we will sail into your bay and blow up your town and kill all the people.”

(Resistance #9)

“Are you kidding?” I said. “We're not gonna help you do that. You can raise your old anchor by yourself.”

(Threat #10)

“Raise the anchor or I will throw you overboard. Take your choice.” He was mad.

“What'll we do, Billy?” I said. “I don't want to get wet.”

“If we raise his old anchor,” Billy said, “we'll have time to think of some other way out of this pickle.”

(Compliance with hidden motive)

But suddenly I got another idea. I

turned to the pirate.

“Okay, Red Dog, we'll raise your anchor. But you'll have to hold the leashes so the twins don't get in the way.”

He untied us and we gave him the leashes. He showed us which way to push and then he said, “March!”

He stood there, saying, “March! March!” while we went around in our big circle.

(Leading to solution desired)

“Call the dogs,” I shouted to Billy as we started to run the bars around the spool.

“Here, Buck! Here, Looney!” we called.

(Solution brought realistically out of the problem)

The dogs started yapping and running after us. They ran this way and that, all around old Red Dog; and, before he knew what was happening, he was flat on his back on the deck. The dogs had circled his legs with the leashes and knocked him down trying to get to us.

We forgot all about that anchor and ran for our ropes. I don't know how we did it—the Lord must have helped us—we fought off his arms and got our ropes around him.

The dogs helped confuse him by trying to lick his face. I guess they liked the taste of garlic. I don't know.

Anyhow, we tied that pirate up in knots and then we waited for our dads to find us.

(Saved)

We didn't have long to wait. The fishing fleet on its way back in had seen the boat against the sunset.

Our dads and their friends raised the anchor and sailed the boat right into our bay and home.

(Restoration)

We got a hero's welcome, and even my mom said she was glad to have me back. She said she hadn't meant that I should NEVER come back.

We never could figure out why Red Dog didn't have any sailors on board his ship. Maybe it had been the garlic!

(Giving ultimate credit)

I thanked the Lord for what He'd done when I said my night-time prayers. He'd helped us make a Corn Dog out of old Red Dog and save our town.

"Thank You, Lord Jesus. Amen," I said.

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As I mentioned earlier, the story emerged out of the first sentence. Many writers do this. One Hollywood feature writer told a seminar I attended that after she interviewed, she would compose the first sentence as she drove back to her office. That done, she unraveled the whole story almost effortlessly.

Other writers write the first sentence last. For some it's easy; for others, it's hard. But work hard on the hook.

Many readers read no farther.

But I must say again, from my research for this book I have been astounded at how many story books for children begin with lame first sentences. Look back through these chapters and note that that is true.

The journalist in me—oh, how I've stressed the writing of good leads in my teaching—says that the first sentence **MUST** hook the reader's interest.

Why the reverse in children's literature?

I've noticed that it's the last sentence, the end of the story that seems to snag the editor's attention. Stories that end with whimsy or a twist or a mood or nostalgia or an unusual application will make it into print.

Good structure helps, too. Knowing structure helps you know what to do next.

Frame and flashback lets you get the story started before having to give the details. We had the viewpoint boy and Billy and the twins well through their first confrontation before we needed to go back and tell the reader how they got there in the first place.

Did you notice how the transition into the flashback grew out of the situation?

Also the motive for going out in the rowboat had to be intensified by the thirteen things our boy did wrong. I don't believe in luck, and I did not conspire to have unlucky thirteen before I started. That was coincidence in this story.

And did you notice the “tone” of the story? This is the manner—almost the tone of voice—with which the story is told. Editors are unusually aware of tone.

The boy hero is sassy, totally flip. That tone sets the pace and the story comes off as sprightly even though it ostensibly is telling a life-and-death conflict. The tone is modified by the prayer in the early middle and at the end, but the contrast doesn't hurt. In fact, it gives a deeper dimension to what could be a shallow character.

Damon Knight in **CREATING SHORT FICTION** (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writers Digest Books, 1981) says that mood—in contrast to tone—“has to do with the emotions the author makes the reader feel in less direct ways—by the sounds of the words she uses, the length and rhythm of sentences, the choice of images and their associations.”

He says tone and mood are most effective when the tone and mood are mismatched—when, for instance, the tone is solemn and the mood hilarious or when the tone is matter-of-fact and the mood is one of horror.”

He uses Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe as examples.

Did you think the insertion of the boys' reliance on the Lord artificial? I wanted it to come naturally, as part of the fabric of the boys. I felt having them wait for the answer to get up and back would be the way boys that age think.

I wanted them to be typically boy, but thinking boy and perceptive boy. It would have flawed the story to make them good theological boys.

One other thing frame-and-flashback does for a writer (I've mentioned this elsewhere) is to give him something to do in the middle of the story. He's gotten it going with a unique, hopefully compelling, hook. Now, what does he do?

The flashback takes care of that. It allows the writer to give the reader the background that led up to the complication.

But did you notice that the first verb of the flashback was in the past perfect tense? This is important.

In the transition to the flashback, we wrote: “And come to think of it, I guess it was my fault.”

Then comes the first sentence of the flashback: “I had started out making it my fault from the moment I opened my eyes this morning.”

There it is: “I had started.” This is the rule of the flashback. The first verb must be in past perfect tense. That's the tense that uses “had” as a helping verb with the past participle.

Remember your grammar? Start/started/started. Today I start, yesterday I started, I have or had started. Break, broke, broken. See, saw, seen.

The past perfect tense is used to tell time earlier than past tense. Since our stories usually are written in past tense, a flashback telling what happened before then would use past perfect.

But one danger is that you don't want to overuse it. Often, if the first verb is in past perfect tense, you can get by on that hinge alone. Put the rest in past tense.

Our hero did this when he said as the flashback began,, "And come to think of it, I guess it was my fault. I had started out making it my fault from the moment I **opened** my eyes this morning. First off, I **didn't say** my morning prayer before I **got** out of bed. And then I **got** up on the wall side . . . I **put** on unmatched socks. I **put** my sweater on backwards. I **tripped** on my laces." All those verbs are past tense.

The middle ends when the hero is forced to make a decision that points toward the climax. When our boy decided to stop resisting Red Dog and to help him raise the anchor, we were finished with the middle and heading toward the end.

The end in turn must be satisfactory.

Would you have thought of using the dogs (and now you can see why we had two dogs) to bring about a satisfactory conclusion? We had them with us as part of the story from the very beginning. We planted them in the third sentence and then picked them up to help bring us victory over evil.

The reader doesn't feel we've relied on an outside source to gain deliverance. We've simply used a resource that has been with us the whole time. The boys use the resource themselves. It comes out of our hero's cleverness

and ingenuity which he has displayed from the first. And that's where it should come from.

Also, it's reasonable that the fishing fleet would be returning at just that time and that they would see the ship in the moonlight.

In our lives, coincidences like that probably don't happen. *We'd* be out in that boat for days before anybody noticed *us*.

But in a story, we can put two and two together whenever we want and get five, and the reader will come right along with us. It's called the "suspension of disbelief." The reader chooses not to doubt us and not to say, "Oh, come now."

And that's something we must always remember to handle with care. Readers are not totally gullible. There is a point at which they will resist.

So here is frame and flashback where the frame is the essential story that surrounds the flashback.

Here are a couple of examples from other books. Your librarian can help you find more.

LI'L SIS AND WILLIE by Gwen Everett (New York: Rizzoli, International Publications, Inc. 1991)

Library of Congress summary: Surveys the life of African-American artist William H. Johnson as his young niece might have told it. The artist's paintings provide the illustrations.

First sentence: I remember the day Uncle Willie came home.

Li'l Sis, almost six, is entranced when

her uncle, a painter of pictures, came home for a visit. He told her stories of New York and Paris and gave her “dreams as bright as the pictures he painted.”

When she wants to follow Uncle Willie to Paris, her aunt tells her what life in the city is really like.

As time passed, Uncle Willie’s wife died and he, in shock, went to a hospital for the rest of his life.

“Today,” the author remembers her uncle and his pictures and the summer he came for a visit. The frame around this story is thin—one sentence in front and one in back.

YOUR TURN: Write a story about someone who has impressed you and/or told you tales of places far away. Members of Jewish families in the Old Testament did this all the time to keep family history fresh in young minds. What about your own ancestral history? Could you find a story there?

SONG AND DANCE MAN by Karen Ackerman and illustrated by Stephen Gammell. (New York: Dragonfly Books, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.)
CALDECOTT AWARD.

No summary.

First sentence: Grandpa was a song and dance man who once danced on a vaudeville stage.

The story starts when grandkids come to visit. He digs out his dancing shoes, baton and top hat from a trunk in the attic and tells them the story of how he earned his living in his earlier life. Then he goes through his routine as he did it then, much to their delight.

YOUR TURN: You could do this with any character in the Bible who lived a long life or at least lived long after the significant contribution he or she made to Jewish history. Each one of David’s mighty men has a story.

THE CLAY LADIES by Michael Bedard, illustrated by Les Tait. (Toronto: Tundra Books, 1999.)

A boy, now “nearly big,” gets to stay weekends at Grandmother’s house where figurines of clay sit everywhere on shelves. Explaining who two busts of ladies represent, Grandmother tells a story of her childhood when she brought a fledgling bird to the home of two sculptresses.

Returning daily to visit, she discovers her own gift of working in clay and the gift of “looking, looking at everything.”

The book ends as the boy and his grandmother walk slowly to her sculpturing shed, stopping to see, feel and listen to nature’s singing.

This book pays lyric attention to detail and it has absorbing illustrations.

YOUR TURN: Grandmother uses items in her house to open a story of past days. Use this as Jewish children visit Grandmother and ask her how she got that ruby ring or dish of gold or quaint earthen pot. Maybe your Grandmother had something she treasured.

SUNFLOWER ISLAND by Carol Greene with pictures by Leonard Jenkins. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999.)

Library of Congress summary: A young girl sees a sidewheeler (steamboat) run aground and over many years describes how the river makes the remains of the wreck into an island and then washes it away again.

First sentence: Once there was a river, a broad, blue river, that ran swift and strong to the sea.

This narrative is based on the story

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of the Juno, a sidewheeler on the Wash River that sank in 1865.

The river carries dirt and seeds and turns the ship into an island. Then, years later, it sweeps it out to sea.

Polly sees it all and tells her children and grandchildren and great grandchildren the story again and again.

YOUR TURN; Pretend you are a Grandma or a Grampa and tell your grandchildren a story about a house you have lived in or about an old tree or house that finally fell down in the town where you live. Or tell a story about an incident that happened to someone in your family that you'll tell over and over to your grandchildren.

LAURA CHARLOTTE by Kathryn O. Galbraith and illustrated by Floyd Cooper. (New York: Philomel Books, 1990.)

This story within a story has Laura Charlotte, a sleepless child, asking for a story when Mama was a little girl.

Mama tells that she received a stuffed elephant she called Charlotte from her Grandma on her fifth birthday.

A cousin left it outside one dark night. When it was found, it had lost an ear.

Charlotte was kept through the years and was given to Laura who was named "Laura" for her grandmother and "Charlotte" because it is "the prettiest name in the whole world."

YOUR TURN: Tell about a gift received years ago and the significance it brought to the one who received it. This book was built when Laura Charlotte asked Mama for a story when she was a little girl. That still happens these days. Surely each of us has stories to tell – a story of a time now that will be fascinating to children fifty years from now when you are an old grandma or grandpa—if the Lord waits that long to come to take us to be with Himself.

Let's Write the Single-Problem Story and Solve It

We can't just write
about any ordinary problem.
The problem we write about must be
SIGNIFICANT!

Problem and solution stories come in at least half a dozen styles.

They begin with stories having a hero in conflict with God or man or nature. He tries to solve his dilemma and finds he cannot.

No act of God can save him. No decision or move by someone else can deliver him.

He **MUST** metamorphose out of his problem by either his own action or his own realization why he cannot help himself. This latter is called the "Aha!" solution. It is the "Oh, now I realize what's been wrong all the time" solution.

Your hero's insight into himself or into his problem will now help him reach the right conclusion.

Remember, the problem must be significant. The more there is at stake if the hero fails, the more interesting the story will be. You may need to

heighten or intensify the problem to make it the more compelling.

The Type A recipe sets up the structure of the Problem and Solution story in the following manner:

1. Describe the problem
2. Identify what's at stake
3. Force an immediate decision
4. Let the hero back off—a weakling, a failure
5. Move toward a confrontation
6. Have the confrontation
7. Success

In Type A, the hero (or heroine) faces failure once before he tastes success. Other types to come will allow him to face it three times and come out of the last failure with success.

I'm not suggesting that all our heroes must succeed. You as the author can allow him to suffer final defeat in the end. This is life! Many princes never find their Sleeping Beauties or Cinderellas.

As you start your story writing, use a plot plan. Determine how close to the ending you will start. This immediately reveals to you the span of time you will be covering.

Identify the problem and what's at stake. The hero will lose something—perhaps his life—if a solution doesn't come in time. Your heroine may lose her chance to shine in a competition if Daddy doesn't get home on time to drive her there. The children will die in the attic if help doesn't come to rescue them from the rising flood.

Decide what the immediate choice is from which the hero will back off. She could walk to her meet except she'd have to pass through a threatening part of town—alone. The children could try to swim, but the current is running fast.

Plan whom or what your character confronts and where and when that confrontation will take place. Then select that certain success you want him to have.

Pay attention to your first paragraph. You'll want to hook your reader's interest right away. You won't start with "Once upon a time when knighthood was in flower" or "It was a dark and stormy night" of course, but I've been surprised at how many lead-footed first sentences appear even in very recent books.

Look through the several chapters of this book and see that what I'm saying is true. The unusual book will have a provocative first sentence. Make yours unusual.

How did "Okay, Red Dog, just because we're kids doesn't mean you can make us walk that plank!" go over with you? The goal is to make the reader—and especially the editor who churns through thousands of manuscripts a month—want to read on.

Pick up the rhythm in "I won't let you go out in the dory in weather like this, Tommy," she moaned. "Wreck or no wreck, you'll drown."

Sometimes it will take several sentences to get to the end of the hook:

"Where are you going?"

"Out of your life! Get out of my way!" I pushed her aside and reached for the knob. So what if she was my mother. The guys were waiting. We had things to do. (Lesson 5)

In each of these we have a confrontation—boy against pirate, boy against storm, boy against mother. Something important is at stake. Someone will have to move toward a decision.

Your opening will set the scene. You will name all your principal characters, even if they don't appear until later in the story. You will establish your viewpoint so we know whose story it is. Remember, it's usually the first one mentioned—but not always, as in the second and third illustration given above where the mothers are the first to speak.

Editors like twists and the unexpected. That's probably why **Q IS FOR DUCK** got published in the ABC category. It was fresh and different.

Your viewpoint may be omniscient

where the hidden narrator knows all and tells all in he/she/it third person.

Or you could limit what is told to the knowledge of one character (first person), whether a dominant character or one who is subordinate.

The cook in the story of Adoni-Bezek was not a prime mover in settling the fate of the 70 kings, but we learned all we needed to know from him.

Yeah But was dominant.

Then hint at the solution you desire for the hero.

In the hooks above, we wanted the boys to escape from the pirate's clutches. We wanted the boy Tommy to reach the wreck and come back safely with survivors. We want Bill to change his mind and not go into crime with his gang.

These things are not stated; they're hinted at by "underwriting." They are implied but not hammered home. The reader picks up the vibrations quickly. The writer doesn't have to harp on his theme or his problem to make the reader get the point.

In the body of the story, bring the hero to a point of desperation where he doesn't know to whom to turn or how to extricate himself from his problem.

This is not like "Sunk and Saved" where the hero sinks to a low point and makes a decision that will bring him back alive.

In "Problem and Solution" have the hero fail to be strong with the first decision he makes. Let things look bleak.

Show how weak he is, how indecisive, how full of self-doubt.

Fry him. Scald him so that even the reader despairs of his ever winning through. That will build sympathy for him as it shows he is inept when it comes to solving his problem. Inept, that is, the first time he tries to solve it.

At a point of desperation, have him make a decision in his confrontation with the problem that will bring him through it and into his success.

Keep it plausible. Follow your plan. Keep things real. Unless you are writing fantasy where a purple super-dragon can leap through fire and suck your hero back to dry ground, you've got to find a reasonable way he can solve his problem.

Your story will have a falling action, a time after the climax when you let your characters lower the curtain and take their exit. This is an essential part of the story. It assures the reader that everything did finally turn out all right and that the ending will be a happy one—sort of like "And so they lived happily ever after."

We'll discuss my sample story once you've read it.

Letter from Lower Mars

By Dick Bohrer

(Present complication immediately)

The words came easy. I knew what I had to do, so I sat right down at my dad's computer and did it.

“Dear Sir,” I wrote. I wanted it to sound formal.

“I am a sophomore at my high school, and in my English class my teacher, Miss Fisher, has one copy of each of your books on writing English compositions.

“I noticed when I looked at one of the books the other day that it said that no part of the book may be reproduced in any form. Well, that is what I am writing you about.

“My teacher reproduces pages of the book and then hands us the print-outs of them. I know that you would want to know if someone was doing this to your books. I am enclosing some samples of what I mean.”

(Intensify the complication)

As I was typing, I heard my dad coming down the hall into the den. I felt him lean over behind me, and I knew he was reading what I wrote.

This was all right with me. I didn't care. He'd already told me it wasn't legal for her to copy a book that's copyrighted. That was how I got the idea to write this letter.

I kept on typing.

(Hint at the ending the hero desires)

“If I can be of any further assistance, please let me know,” I wrote.

Then I put a “Yours truly” and a place to sign. So they would spell my name correctly when this hit the newspapers, I typed it below the space I left for my signature.

(Opposition)

Then Dad spoke. “Is that the right way to go about it?”

I turned around and laughed. “Sure, why not? She deserves it.”

“Why?”

(Defense)

“Look at these crummy assignments she gives us. We're supposed to learn the lines of the hand and then describe the actions of a made-up character whose Mount of Venus is almost not there and whose Mount of Lower Mars is very prominent.”

Then I looked him right in the eye and nailed him.

“Is this Christian? Do you want me learning this occult stuff in school? Besides, you already said the handouts aren't legal.”

(Opposition)

His eyelids narrowed and he got a hard look in his eyes.

(Defense)

“And it's killing our Bible club,” I said. “I'll never get the guys in my class to come now!”

“What do you mean?”

“They say all this junk she's giving us is so much more interesting. They say it works—now. It's not pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by.

(Anticipated victory)

The old wheels inside his head were really grinding. I could almost smell the smoke. I knew he was go-

ing to pull some Bible verse on me about the end justifying the means. I could feel it coming.

He'd say, "But what do the Scriptures say about this?" And then he'd have me go to Miss Fisher first and then to her department head and then to the head custodian and then—right up the ladder to the principal and even to the Board of Education.

But I knew how to cut out all that red tape. Write the publisher!

Dad didn't speak for a minute.

(Unexpected reaction)

Then he said, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Hunh—wha—?"

"Sign it."

"Sign it?"

"What did you write it for?"

"Oh, sign it! Yeah—sure."

I signed it.

"Well, fold it up and let's go mail it."

"Mail it? Now?"

"Listen, Dan," he said, "if you're going to take matters into your own hands, you've got to act with decision. Let's go."

Guy! You live with a man for fifteen years and you know him inside out and he goes and pulls one on you. How can he expect me to understand him when he goes and acts different from the old man I know?

We got on our coats and went out the door. There's a mail box down two blocks.

"You think you're calling my bluff, don't you?"

"Your bluff?" he said. "What did you write the letter for if you didn't want to mail it?"

"I want to mail it."

"Then what are you worried about?"

"What should I worry about?" I asked him. I learned long ago to always answer a question with a question.

(Opposition—question the contemplated action)

"Have you thought of how she's going to feel when the publisher sends her a copy of your letter?"

"He wouldn't! He'd have no right!"

"How do you know?"

I didn't know. "Well, I won't look at her, and I won't talk to her."

"How about in court?"

"In court?"

(Identify what's at stake)

"Where else will this lead? They'll probably sue her for \$50,000. She's a new teacher. She probably doesn't have suit insurance. She'll be in hock for the rest of her life."

(Press for a decision)

We had reached the mail box. He held the lid down for me.

"You sure know how to make a guy feel like dirt."

"It's your decision."

"Well, it's the right decision, isn't

it? She's doing wrong. And, besides, why should I have to study palmistry?"

"Is this the only way to take care of that?"

"And what about Bible club?"

"Like I said. Is this the only way to take care of that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Why don't you give me that letter for a while until you come up with some creative options."

(Decision)

I gave him the letter.

(Question the decision)

"Why am I always such a coward?" I asked him as we walked back home.

"You're not a coward," he said. "You've just decided to let the Lord have a little time to work. You'll see. He'll take care of everything."

(Hero backs off—conscious he is a weakling)

It was nice of him to say that, but I felt like a failure just the same. Why couldn't my solutions be the right solutions for a change?

In school the next day I went up to her and said, "Uh, Miss Fisher?"

"Yes?" she said, looking right at me.

I knew I should talk to her about her handouts but—"uh, nothing."

I turned to go to my seat.

"Come on, Danny. You have some-

thing on your mind. Spill it."

I could imagine what she'd be thinking if she knew about the letter.

(Move toward a confrontation)

"Well," I cleared my throat. "Well, my dad's a teacher too, and he saw my handouts, and he said it's not legal to copy something that's copyrighted. You could get in trouble with the publishers."

"Spoken just like a Lower Mars," she said. She took my hand and turned it palm upward. "See how high your Mount of Lower Mars is?"

I could feel my face turning red in front of everybody.

"You've got active courage, Danny. Sometimes you're quarrelsome and sometimes you're quite rash. And see? Your Mount of Venus is almost non-existent. That means you're not too sympathetic."

"But I know what's right," I said, snatching my hand away.

"Oh, you do, do you?"

Her face was getting red now. She was getting mad.

"And since when do you think you have the right to tell me what I can do and cannot do?"

I knew I should keep my mouth shut and sit down. I knew I should. There's a time when ladies rant and rave that a man's got to keep his mouth closed. One innocent word—any word—snaps her trigger.

But I couldn't help it.

"But my dad said—"

(Confrontation with 3 jabs)

#1

“I don’t care one bit what your father said. Not one bit!”

Her trigger clicked and she started firing roman candles. The whole class froze. This was better than Fourth of July.

She started taking out after parents who interfere with teachers and education and who think they know all the answers.

I knew she was about to start on my parents so I had to head her off.

#2

“But the publishers said—”

And it worked. She took out after those publishers who try to keep teachers from doing a good job of teaching. You would have thought she was a politician the way she took those publishers apart.

And it made me mad. She was stealing their material and lying her way out of it.

#3

“But the Bible says—”

That one set off the rocket’s red glare. She turned scarlet.

When will I ever learn?

I knew she would make a Holy War out of this if I didn’t do something.

Anything.

We were having enough trouble getting our Bible club going without her ripping God’s Word to shreds.

What could I do?

(Desperation)

My mind was blank. All I could pray was, “Lord, help!”

(Turning point)

And then—I don’t know where the thought came from—I held up my hand to stop her.

“I didn’t know you were a Lower Mars, too.”

“I am not!” she snapped. “I don’t have any Lower Mars. I’m a Venus. See?”

She held up her palms for me to look at. She put them right under my nose, in fact.

“A Venus? You’re a Venus?” I asked her. “That means you’re sympathetic and not easily ruffled, doesn’t it? At least, that’s what you’ve been telling us in these handouts.”

“I don’t see what that’s got to do—with . . .”

The light slowly dawned, and she saw how she herself had blown her superstitions sky high. She was acting just the opposite from her Venus.

The bell rang then and the class filed out.

She let us go. She didn’t have one more thing to say.

(Success)

And, you know? That was the last day she handed us those duplicated handouts. We still had to write compositions, but she never mentioned palmistry again.

I sure thanked the Lord for showing me what to do. I'd never have thought it up by myself.

And that was just what our Bible club needed. Nearly my whole class has started coming out.

###

It's easy. You examine your life for subject matter, draw it out in a step-by-step you-are-there kind of style following a pattern and you've got a story.

I did that in this case, finding my own son sitting at my typewriter writing a letter very much like this. He had the same intent—avoiding writing compositions about palmistry. I don't know that we handled it the way Dan's father did in real life, but the idea originated in my own home. This was the same son who perpetrated the Yeah But revolt.

But you noticed how the moment of truth, when Dannie had to make his decision as to whether he would mail the letter, revealed his essential weakness. He wanted to mail it, but he didn't have the strength of his convictions. It was easy to talk him out of it, realizing the strength in the father's argument about beginning teachers.

But Dannie realized no hand would come out of the ceiling to snatch the egg before it goes splat on the plaster (remembering Shel Silverstein's ABZ book in the ABC chapter). We attribute the brilliance of the resolution to an answer from God, and it rose out of the situation itself.

Crafty writers always pull tricks.

One of the interesting things to do with the single problem and solution structure is to reverse it here and there.

Yes, you begin by describing the problem. But in so doing, suspend one law of nature or assume one illogical premise. Then proceed to the conclusion. En route, you do identify what is at stake, you force an immediate decision and the hero comes off smelling like a rose instead of a failure. Move toward a confrontation and have him emerge at the end a total failure but a little winsome.

The story must read like fact, like reality. It must not reach a solution that is anything but the natural solution of the problem. Remember, "Momma don't 'low no coincidences 'roun' hyar."

Take the story of **FERDINAND THE BULL** by Monroe Leaf (New York: Viking Press). We find him in the fields smelling flowers as the story opens. He is supposed to be in training for the bull ring.

We expect him to be ferocious, pawing the ground, yearning for the hide of a timid bullfighter. Instead, that quality is suspended and he is a fragrance-loving bovine, content to sit and smell flowers.

The ring master comes to decide whether Ferdinand is ready for the arena. He must make a decision.

At this point, Ferdinand sits on a bee.

It is completely plausible that he will snort and rage and prance and ferosh. It hurts!

But the ring master doesn't know. He chooses this dragon for the main event and hauls him away.

Come the moment of confrontation with the toreadors and matadors and Ferdinand becomes himself. The fragrance of the ladies' flowers overwhelms him. He's a glutton for a sweet smell.

We follow him through to his final failure, and we love him.

We suspend his bullish temper at the outset. We let the fantasy develop naturally, and we have a memorable story.

Try one of these. But remember, it hinges on suspending a law of nature or assuming an illogical premise. Rolling stones do gather moss for you. A stitch in time doesn't save nine. A bird in the hand is not worth two in the bush.

Or what goes up must come down, as was used in the story of the valiant little tailor who in competition with the giant threw not what everyone thought was a rock but a bird into the air. It didn't come down and he won the day.

Problem and solution stories don't have to have seven points. They can simply have a problem that gets solved. Many writers do it that way.

Mirra Ginsburg in **MUSH-ROOM IN THE RAIN** (New York: Macmillan, 1974) has an ant, a butterfly, a mouse, a sparrow, and a rabbit seek shelter under a mushroom.

Fitting each one under is a chore, but all somehow fit. When the rain stops, they ponder how they all could fit. A

green frog tells them what a mushroom does when it rains. "IT GROWS!"

YOUR TURN: What other thing grows when it gets wet and assumes a wider use? Umbrellas. Wonderful things can happen under a shared umbrella. People have received the Savior under a shared umbrella.

In **SOMETHING QUEER IS GOING ON** by Elizabeth Levy (New York: Delacorte, 1973) Fletcher disappears. Jill and her friend Gwen search the neighborhood for the fat beagle.

They become suspicious when a neighbor contradicts himself when denying he has seen the dog. The two girls and Jill's mother follow him next morning and discover he has indeed stolen Fletcher to star in a TV commercial he is filming.

The neighborhood enjoys a big party from Fletcher's earnings.

YOUR TURN: A disappearance and a search are always good grist for problem and solution stories. Newspaper stories of folk lost in the mountains or down rushing streams occur almost daily. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son prove the great usefulness this kind of story has for the Christian writer.

In **MOUSE TROUBLE** by John Yeoman (New York: Macmillan, 1972) a miller is plagued by mice and buys a large tabby cat that proves worse than useless.

The mice even feel sorry for the cat—so sorry that when the miller bags the cat in order to drown him, the mice perform a rescue. This is a story where the problem—the mice—get the better of the solution—the cat.

YOUR TURN: You could use this in school where the principal is about to fire a likable substitute teacher because he/she is inept. The students put on a performance during the evaluation to show the teacher should be kept.

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: THE SINGLE-PROBLEM STORY

MATTHEW’S DREAM by Leo Leonni (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

First sentence: A couple of mice live in a dusty attic with their only child.

Problem: Mouse Matthew doesn’t know how to answer questions—“What will you be when you grow up?”

Solution: When he goes to an art museum with his class, he discovers the worlds of wonder he could create if he were an artist. He dreams about it and his dream comes true.

YOUR TURN: This is a “wishing will make it so” story. Many children pray for the salvation of a loved one and often it comes about. Prayer does often change things—if it is the Father’s will. Lessons are learned when it is and when it isn’t. Worlds of wonder exist everywhere for kids.

BOOTSIE BARKER BITES by Barbara Bottner and illustrated by Peggy Rathmann (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1992).

Library of Congress summary: Bootsie Barker only wants to play games in which she bites, until one day her friend comes up with a better plan.

First sentence: My mother and Bootsie Barker’s mother are best friends.

Problem: Bootsie the Horrible, claiming to be a dinosaur, terrorizes the child-narrator by threatening to eat her. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat and cowboy boots, Bootsie endears herself to the adults.

Not until she dreams up a counter-threat that works (she’ll play paleontologist and hunt for dinosaur bones) does the “I” figure overcome. Bootsie flees in terror.

YOUR TURN: This is David and Goliath again. See how many variations you can get out of this theme story? Don’t forget David’s victory was the Lord’s doing. It’s interesting to see writers like Barbara Bottner bring this theme into a family story. One character threatens. The other thinks and trusts and finds a solution.

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEA by Hans Christian Andersen and illustrated by Dorothee Duntze (New York: North-South Books, 1984)

First sentence: There was once a prince who wished to marry a princess, but she had to be a real princess.

The prince travels far and wide but can’t find a princess he feels is a real one until a girl claiming to be a princess arrives at the castle.

Problem: How will the family know she is a real princess.

Story: The queen tests her by putting a pea under 20 mattresses and 20 quilts.

Solution: The next morning the princess complains that something hard in her bed had made her black and blue all over and had kept her awake. This convinces everyone she is a real princess and the wedding takes place.

YOUR TURN: Although this is a retelling of the old story, it clearly illustrates the problem and solution structure. This is the “putting out a fleece” angle that can be used in school, sports, family, church and retold Bible stories. How do we know the new boy can kick field goals under pressure or that the new girl can spike a volleyball in competition. We think up tests to see if what they say is true.

CHRISTINA KATERINA AND THE TIME SHE QUIT THE FAMILY by Patricia Lee Gauch and illustrated by Elise Primavera (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1987).

First sentence (and problem): It was a quarter past nine and a perfectly good Saturday when Christina Katerina quit

the family.

Story: Angered by her brother and his noisy disrespectful friends and especially by her mother who blames her, not the boys, for the mess in her room, CK quits the family: “Call me Agnes.”

Solution: Her mother goes along with it, saying, “Call me Mildred.”

They divide the house and “Agnes” eats and does what she wants and goes where she wants —until it gets cold the end of the week.

She changes her name: “Call me Christina” and gets “Call me Mother” in return.

YOUR TURN: She makes a threat and Momma takes her at her word. This good idea shows children that words have meaning and can get them in trouble. Use this in sports stories and school and family stories.

WANDA’S ROSES by Pat Brisson and illustrated by Maryann Cocca-Leffler (Honesdale, Pa.: Caroline House of Boyds Mills Press, Inc., 1994) 32 pp.

LofC Summary: Wanda mistakes a thorn bush for a rosebush in the empty lot. She clears away the trash around it and cares for it every day, even though no roses bloom.

First sentence: One morning in May on the way to school, Wanda noticed a bush growing in the empty corner lot at Fillmore and Hudson streets.

Story: Wanda cleans out the trash around her rosebush so it will get more sun and bloom. When it doesn’t bloom, she gets water from a nearby store. She tells all the neighbors it will bloom. They know it won’t. The bush is not a rose.

Problem: How to convince them.

Solution: Wanda makes paper roses and ties them on the bush in time for a tea party she has arranged. Neighbors come carrying rose bushes which they plant in the vacant lot. That summer the lot was filled with beautiful roses “just as Wanda had always said it would be.”

YOUR TURN: Wanda didn’t just sit around and wish. She started to solve her problem herself. Neighbors honored her effort by bringing actual roses to plant. Heroes who struggle to overcome adversities often find friends to help them. Write how this has proved true in your life or the life of a friend.

THE ROBBERY AT THE DIAMOND DOG DINER by Eileen Christelow (New York: Clarion Books, Ticknor & Fields: A Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 32 pp.

LofC Summary: Lola Dog doesn’t wear her usual diamonds at the Diamond Dog Diner after she hears there are jewel thieves in town, but she doesn’t take into account Glenda Feathers’ loud talk about where Lola has hidden her jewels.

First sentence (and problem): There were diamond robbers in town!

Story: Hen Glenda gossips with thieves present that even if someone looked in the refrigerator he would never find Lola’s diamonds. The two thieves get the eggs and take Glenda.

Solution: Glenda tricks the thieves into thinking that the hen who lays the eggs with diamonds in them will be at the Diner next morning. The police nab the pair when they appear at dawn.

YOUR TURN: We wouldn’t agree that the end justifies the means. Glenda tells a lie to trick the thieves. We can fight this kind of wrong thinking in our children’s books by letting the wrong idea tempt her but by her finding an honest way to catch her thieves.

DON'T TELL THE WHOLE WORLD by Joanna Cole and illustrated by Kate Duke (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1990).

LofC Summary: Knowing that his talkative wife will reveal to the world that he has found a fortune buried on their farm, John arranges an elaborate scheme to ensure that she will not be believed.

First sentence (and problem): Once there was a woman who could not keep a secret.

Story: Farmer John, despairing that he has no money to pay the rent, is elated when he finds a treasure in the field he is plowing.

Problem: How to keep the landlord from finding out.

Knowing the landlord will confiscate it when his wife tells him about it, John plants a smoked fish in a tree, cider in some weeds and hard molasses candies (he'll call stones) in the grass.

Solution: He calls his wife to a picnic and shows her the three items he "found." He also shows her the treasure. When she tells everyone, the landlord appears.

When she tells him about the fish, cider and sweet stones, he disappears muttering about her dream. John and Emma will keep the money and never worry about the rent again.

YOUR TURN: For Christian kids, this story should have the owner finding out and consenting to share the treasure with its finder—the honest thing to do. Create stories where the honesty of your boy or girl is tested. Or the purity. Or the honor. Or the obedience. Or the love of God.

HENRY, THE SAILOR CAT by Mary Calhoun and illustrated by Erick Ingraham (New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1994).

LofC Summary: A stowaway cat proves his worth as a sailor during a sudden storm.

Problem: Man overboard!

First sentence: Henry watched them put everything on the boat but him.

Story: Miffed that his family won't let him on board their large sailboat about to leave for an outing, Henry jumps on when no one is looking.

Exhilarated, he climbs the mast for good views. He watches as The Man tells The Kid how to pull a slip knot to stop the boat.

Problem: When The Man accidentally falls overboard while The Kid is down below, Henry (solution) stops the boat by pulling the slip knot.

The Kid reappears and rescues his father. Everyone praises Henry, the "sailing Siamese."

YOUR TURN: While remote that a cat would reason out what to do when it's "Man Overboard," perhaps it could happen. It makes a good story. It offers writers an alternative to having The Man rescue himself. Think of other stories where animals have rescued people in times of danger.

COME! SIT! SPEAK! By Charnan Simon and illustrated by Bari Weissman. New York: Children's Press, 1997.

LofC summary: Ariel Kazunas wants a puppy but gets a baby sister instead.

Problem: No dog.

In 101 words and 12 sentences, young Ariel, instead of moping about

her problem, goes to work. She teaches her baby sister the things she would have taught a puppy—Come! Sit! Stay!

Solution: She teaches her sister to say, “I want a puppy” and gets to have one.

YOUR TURN: This child is enterprising. One could train a parrot, as well, to say important things. Watch for ways where children get their wishes met. You could even make much out of whiners.

MIRETTE ON THE HIGH WIRE
by Emily Arnold McCully. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1992.
CALDECOTT AWARD.

LofC summary: Mirette learns tight-rope walking from Monsieur Bellini, a guest in her mother’s boardinghouse.

At first, she does not know, as she sees him practicing, that he is a celebrated tight rope performer who has withdrawn from performing because of fear.

Problem: His fear.

First sentence: The Widow Gateau’s boardinghouse was the rooming house where all the traveling players one hundred years ago wanted to stay when they got to Paris. Theatres and music halls drew performers from everywhere.

When Mirette discovers a guest walking a wire behind the boardinghouse, her feet tingle. But the artist refuses to teach her. She teaches herself.

Eventually, he teaches her to run, lie down and somersault. But he says he will never return to the high wire. He is afraid.

He arranges an event to try once

more, but hesitates.

Solution: Mirette steps out on the other end of the wire and walks to him and he to her.

World tour!

YOUR TURN: See how inspirational “problem and solution” stories can be? Fears of all sorts can be resolved. Insertion of “the Lord can help you, man. Trust Him” can lift the outcome while not eroding the hero’s own will to succeed. Write of other Christian children who inspire hope and trust in others.

MOUSE PRACTICE, story and pictures by Emily Arnold McCully. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 1999.

No LofC summary.

First sentence: Every afternoon, the big kids had a baseball game in the park. Poor Monk, a mouse, can’t play. He’s too little.

Problem: He is a failure.

He practices and practices and practices until he is expert and the big kids find he is GOOD.

YOUR TURN: Here’s “rags to riches” again. The good lesson is that the youngster has the will to practice until he masters the skill. We preach sin and the need for salvation. Young Christians can feel inadequate, but they need the encouragement that we have a new life with new power supplied by the Holy Spirit. We want our young fish to swim upstream and not flow with the current.

PARIS CAT by Leslie Baker. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000.

LofC summary: On their first day in Paris, Annie’s cat goes off to chase a mouse and wanders around the whole city before finding her way back to where she belongs.

The first sentence tells that Alice the cat discovers and chases a mouse in Great Auntie Isabella’s garden on the

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: THE SINGLE-PROBLEM STORY

first day of her trip to Paris.

Problem: The cat chases the mouse through the streets of Paris and gets lost.

Solution: She evades dogs and guards and gardeners until her mistress finds her asleep in a flower bed.

YOUR TURN: This is simply "lost and found." Part of coming out of being lost can be the prayer, "Lord, please help me find my way home." This is not asking for a finger to drop out of the sky and point the way. It simply acknowledges that His kids need to depend on Him for help and guidance. All sorts of children and animals can be lost.

TILLIE AND THE WALL by Leo Lionni. New York: Dragonfly books (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

No summary.

First sentence: There has always been a wall there. Ever since the mice could remember.

Problem: None of the mice but Tillie, the youngest, had any curiosity about what was on the other side of the wall.

Solution: She tried climbing it, ramming it. Not until she burrowed under it did she succeed. She found other mice who welcomed her and made a hero of her.

YOUR TURN: It's "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again." It's "just because no one else has done anything about it doesn't mean you can't." This is a virtue we want to encourage in our young. In Old Testament terms, it is time to "press the battle to the gates." Fight, team! Fight! You see a problem, work to find a solution.

It's at this point that we turn to Christian magazines and Sunday School take-home papers for not only examples of the problem and solution story but for markets. The appetite of this genre is enormous.

But it's almost impossible to get a story into the primary take-home papers. The editors know their market grows up and never looks back. First graders read up not back. Once they can read, they abandon the one-syllable stories that used to hold them spellbound.

The editors simply fill a four-year cycle and start all over again at the beginning. They have a cushy job—until you come along with something scintillating and new.

On the research sheet, I've added the name and date of the periodical in which you find the story. Make note of it and write down the address and the name of the editor responsible. If no name is given in the masthead for the fiction editor, assume it is an "assistant editor" and mail your material to his/her attention. Always make triple sure you have spelled the name correctly.

I include a self-addressed post card instead of a self-addressed envelope. Ask the editor to discard the manuscript if he is not in the market for it. It costs you less to have him do that than to return it. You can re-produce it for pennies on your computer and you get a fresh, unwrinkled copy. It beats having it mailed.

BEAR by John Schoenherr. (New York: Philomel Books, 1991.)

A bear cub awakens one morning and finds he has a big problem. His mother has deserted him.

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He searches, hungry, but he cannot find her.

His attempts to find food fail until he learns to catch fish.

He grows and scares off the bear who had threatened him earlier. At book's end he is big and fat and ready for winter—"and anything else," the author adds.

YOUR TURN: Write about a small animal that feels it is abandoned by its mother. Tell how it adjusts. Give it a God consciousness so it can pray with its inner voice for His help. This becomes more believable when the abandoned one is a ghetto child or a prisoner or a first-day-at-school child.

BE PATIENT, ABDUL, written and illustrated in acrylic paint by Delores Sandoval. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1996.)

LofC summary: With the help of his younger sister, seven-year-old Abdul raises money to go to school by selling oranges in the marketplace in Sierra Leone (Africa).

First sentence: Abdul is a little boy who lives in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone.

The boy needs to sell oranges to raise money to pay school costs, but nobody wants to buy any.

His grandmother encourages him to be patient.

After his father says his prayers to Allah, he tells his children he will take them to watch their Independence Day parade.

The children sell lots of oranges. With that money and money from Father's taxi business that day, Abdul has

enough money for school.

That night, Abdul thanked Allah.

YOUR TURN: How quickly editors buy articles about false gods and turn down stories about those who love the one true God. This is an easy story to write. We have a boy with a need who attempts to meet that need but fails. Given another opportunity, he succeeds. His need is met. That night, he thanks God. You can do it!

THE BEAR'S TOOTHACHE by David McPhail. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972.)

First sentence: One night, I heard something outside my window.

A child is kept awake one night when a bear with a toothache howls outside his window.

He takes it to the kitchen, hoping a chewy steak will work it out.

That failing, he hits it with a pillow.

That failing, he ties a rope to it and the bear jumps out the window.

That works.

The bear gives him the tooth to put under his pillow.

YOUR TURN: It is time for the practical solution. All other attempts fail. The problem is solved in a unique but obvious way. A little girl can never wake up in time to get to Sunday School. Her anxious friend searches for a solution. A brother can't get a splinter out. A sister has something in her eye. Grandma has a bad sore on her leg. These problems will have solutions.

OLD BEAR by Jane Hissey. (New York: Philomel Books, 1986.)

The stuffed toys miss Old Bear who long ago was taken into the attic through a trap door in the ceiling.

How to get Old Bear back?

They build a tower of blocks that topples.

They make a tower of themselves and tumble.

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They bounce on the bed but not high enough.

They climb a large plant in the corner, but the top leaf breaks.

Then they use an airplane toy to fly up.

Old Bear and Little Bear parachute down and land on a blanket for a big reunion.

YOUR TURN: The solution seems outlandish, but you can have that kind of solution in books for kids. Here you catalog attempts to find a solution and all attempts fail. The final, gasping, groping, clawing attempt wins the day. "Thank You, Lord Jesus," he said.

SECRET SIGNS (along the underground railroad) by Anita Riggio. (Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mill Press. Highlights, 1997.)

LofC summary: A deaf child helps pass information along the underground railroad using his paint brush and a panoramic egg.

First sentence: Luke put down his brush.

A young artist paints pictures his mother puts in sugar eggs. They use this method to pass the message that Price's farm is now the safe haven for runaway slaves since slave catchers set the Richard's barn on fire.

The problem is how to pass the message on under the nose of a catcher.

Luke paints a picture of the new safe haven and puts it in a sugar egg he gives to a contact girl in an indigo shawl.

Safe houses had a row of white bricks around their chimney.

YOUR TURN: An enterprising boy comes up with a solution to a serious, life-and-death problem that works. This is the boy with his finger in the dike. Youngsters

love stories where kids have to think to solve the mystery and win the day. I've built my "J. Edgar Beanpole and Friends" mysteries on this theme.

CORDUROY by Don Freeman. (New York: Puffin Books, 1968.)

Problem: People don't buy this teddy.

Dejected because his coveralls are missing a button, Corduroy (solution that fails) leaves the toy department and searches the store. He finds a button on a mattress but knocks over a lamp when the button pops loose. A night watchman takes him back to the toy shelf.

Solution: A girl who saw him returns to buy him. She takes him home, sews on a button and loves him.

YOUR TURN: Our hero has a defect that is not his fault. He searches for a solution but cannot find one. Someone he impressed senses his need and provides it. The sweet twist at the end is that she "loves him." This is the Gospel story again. See how many variations can come out of it!

TOM'S FISH by Nancy Coffelt. (San Diego: Gulliver books of Harcourt, Brace and company, 1994.) 32 pp.

LofC summary: Tom tries to stop his goldfish from swimming upside down, until he finds a way to appreciate his pet's individuality.

First sentence: On his birthday, Tom got some great presents.

The one flaw in the gift he likes best is that his new goldfish swims upside down. Tom tries nine solutions including getting another goldfish, Flo, who swims normally.

His ninth solution is standing on his head.

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: THE SINGLE-PROBLEM STORY

It works.

Except now Flo is upside down. 😊

YOUR TURN: That's one way to solve a problem! And it shows you that any outlandish solution will make the grade with editors. Sometimes, the crazier the better. So take heart. The solution you just deleted might be a real winner. Actually, this author was very clever to think of that solution. What would you have done?

Our next lesson will bring you stories that involve three attempts to solve the problem. This method is commonly used in longer stories, plays, television

dramas, cowboy films, even comedies.

Beyond that, there are other problem and solution story structures found in tales familiar to us all.

Again, I am trusting you to work on your stories—not only work writing them but work sending them out to suitable publishers.

Professor Dick

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: THE SINGLE-PROBLEM STORY

Research Sheet

Title: _____

Author: _____

Periodical _____ Date _____

Problem: _____

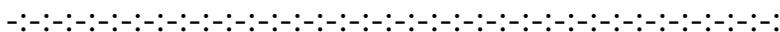
What's at Stake? _____

The Immediate Decision: _____

How Hero Backs Off: _____

Confrontation: _____

Solution: _____



Title: _____

Author: _____

Periodical _____ Date _____

Problem: _____

What's at Stake? _____

The Immediate Decision: _____

How Hero Backs Off: _____

Confrontation: _____

Solution: _____

