

HARRY's tips for writing a good story



A guide for parents and their children

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Writing a good story

There are key features of successful writing which you can talk about with your child. Briefly, a 'good' story contains an effective opening, setting and character descriptions, a series of events, a problem or complication, a resolution and a satisfactory ending. The writing should show evidence of adventurous and sophisticated vocabulary, a variety of sentence constructions and accurate punctuation.

Structure and techniques

Story openings should be designed to grab the reader's immediate attention. There are three distinct opening styles: action, description and dialogue.

Evocative atmospheres or settings will be created by writing long descriptive sentences which include literary devices such as similes and alliteration.

Effective characterisation results from revealing character's feelings and inner thoughts in addition to providing descriptive details of the character's physical appearance, and through demonstrating how the character's actions determine the outcome of the story. Recording dialogue can contribute to the process of indicating a character's personality.

A strong exciting plot centres on an unexpected event, a crisis, a problem, or a complicating action, which needs to be resolved before the end of a story. Stories can contain more than one complication.

Suspense or mystery will be created by building up to events slowly. Pacing can be achieved through a succession of short, simple and minor sentences.

Story endings, after explaining the result of the events, usually bring the story round 'full circle'. The final sentence is as important as the opening sentence. It is often a succinct statement, perhaps an aside to the reader, which sums up the story's theme or message.

Grammar and Style

Words

Children's language awareness of the variety and adaptability of words will come from experience of experimenting with different words that convey shades of meaning. Adjectives and adverbs can describe details. Up to three adjectives can be used in conjunction with a noun (e.g. the dark, dank, dreary forest). Descriptions can also be enhanced by poetic effects such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, similes and metaphors.

Sentence constructions

Variety in writing is achieved by:

- Using different kinds of sentences (statements, exclamations, questions and directives)
- By varying sentence length
- By varying the way sentences are started
- Using different types of sentence construction (simple, compound, complex)

Punctuation

The key features are:

- full stops (including question and exclamation marks)
- commas demarcating lists and clauses
- speech marks

Many children experience problems with identifying where to position full stops and commas to demarcate clauses. Children often find it helpful to read their stories aloud, or hear someone else read their story to them, so they can hear where to put full stops or commas.

Story openings

Always try to make the opening of a story interesting or exciting for the reader. (Don't start with *One day* - that's boring!)

There are three different ways to start a story:

Dialogue: "Sharks!" shouted the ship's look out, "hundreds of them!"
"They seem to be heading our way," cried the Bo'sun.

Action: An ear splitting whistle made all the pirates leap to attention. At once they ran in different directions, bumping into one another, scrambling over untidy piles of ropes and tarpaulin, sliding down rickety ladders, all trying to be the first in the queue for lunch.

Description: The sea glistened like a sparkling, silver mirror. Waves lapped gently at the sides of the Saucy Sue as she sailed silently along in the cool, refreshing breeze, her Jolly Roger flag fluttering limply. Seagulls circled overhead, calling to each other. No-one would guess what terrible adventure lay ahead for Captain Peg-Leg and his crew of daring pirates.

Take a look at the openings of some of your favourite stories to see how the authors started their stories.

Try different ways of starting a story, then use the one you like the best.

Characters

Two or three characters are usually enough for a short story.

How to make the characters sound real.

- Give them suitable names.

For example:

Pirates: Captain Peg-Leg, Scar-faced Bill, Sly Sam, One-eyed Pete

Astronauts: Commander Ben Lewis, Assistant Commander Buzz Owens, Captain Tilly Jones

Don't just use your friend's names in a story!

- Describe what they look like and how they move.

For example:

- A wizened old man shuffling about the house in slippers.

- A giant, hairy, orange caterpillar creeping slowly along.

- A ten year old girl, rather small for her age, skipped merrily along the street, her long fair hair flying in the wind.

- Try to show their personalities in the things they do

For example:

Careless - always breaking or losing things

Lazy - never wants to do anything, finds quicker ways of doing things

Coward - nervous, hides behind the others, stammers and stutters

Competitive - tries to do things better and faster, wants to win

Posh - Talks very properly, snooty, thinks better than everyone else

- Try to show how they feel using adjectives and adverbs

For example:

tired, excitedly, grateful, angrily, happy, sadly, curious, worriedly, relieved, nervously.

- Write what they say and what they think.

For example:

"I'm sure I'll be able to fix the spacecraft." At that moment she believed herself.

Improving setting descriptions

Imagine you are taking a video of everything that can be seen happening.

Write detailed descriptive sentences

Expand sentences to explain **who**, **what**, **how**, **where**, **when**, and **why** something happened.

The tiny bird **hopped quickly** across the garden, picked up the bread, and **immediately flew off to a safe place to eat it**.

Write colourful sentences by grouping adjectives together to create:

Alliteration (words starting with the same letter) - e.g. dark, dank, dreary forest; crowded, cobbled streets

Rhyme - e.g. hustle and bustle; a rumbling and a tumbling

Patterning - e.g. in the highest branches of the furthest tree; travelling faster and faster

Onomatopoeia (words that sound like the thing they describe)- e.g. jingling, jangling, tinkling coins; banging and crashing waves

Use similes and metaphors for richer descriptions

Similes compare one thing to another and are introduced by the words 'like' or 'as', e.g. **The wet mud was sticky like fudge cake.**

Metaphors compare one thing with another, but are not introduced by 'like' or 'as', e.g. **The wet mud was sticky fudge cake.**

Similes for the following topics could be:

- The moon hung in the sky like it was on an invisible thread.
- The storm was as violent as a ranting bull.
- The leaves fell gracefully like twirling ballerinas.
- The wind was like a roaring lion shaking its mane.

To change the similes to **metaphors**, take out the words as and like:

- The moon hung in the sky on an invisible thread.
- The storm was a ranting bull.
- The leaves were twirling ballerinas, gracefully twirling.
- The wind was a roaring lion shaking its mane.

What could you compare the following to?
The goblin's green eyes shone as brightly as
The dragon's scales gleamed like
Stars flashed like
She ran as fast as
The sea was the colour of

Events

An interesting story will contain several events.

A strong exciting plot centres on an unexpected event, a crisis, or a problem, which needs to be sorted out by the end of a story. Stories can contain more than one problem.

Plans could go wrong.

There could be an accident.

Someone or something could get lost.

A machine could break down.

Something important could get stolen.

Suspense or mystery is created by:
building up to events slowly:

The monster attacked can be written in a more interesting way:

A very hairy monster slid amongst the trees, hid behind a bush and watched hungrily. The monster growled.

"What was that?" asked Christopher in a very scared voice.

"Probably just the wind," replied Luke.

"No, it sounded like a lion's roar," said Christopher anxiously. "Listen and see if you can hear it". The monster growled again and this time Luke heard it.

"That noise?" he asked.

"Yes!" replied Christopher. Next moment the monster leaped from behind a bush and started to attack.

And by writing sentences of different lengths:

The wolves chased them can be written in a more interesting way:

The wolves seemed to appear from thin air, from behind every tree, their eyes glinting with fire. There was a rush of wind and the glinting vanished. They opened their mouths and howled, filling the forest with the echo. They pounced! Then gave chase but...

Story endings

Explain the result of the events or show how the problem was solved. (But don't end with **everyone going home for tea** or **someone waking up to find it was all a dream** - that's boring!)

Endings usually bring the story round 'full circle'.

Start: Three scruffy pirates sat gloomily around a table in the Lord Nelson pub, staring down in to their empty beer glasses. One by one they emptied out their pockets. It seemed they had all run out of money.

Ending: The pirate gang made their way down the quay to their favourite pub to celebrate their success. They had earned enough money now to buy a year's worth of beer - and have change.

The final sentence is as important as the opening sentence. It usually sums up the story's theme or message.

- It had been the best day of my life.
- I'll never forget him.
- If only he hadn't been so selfish.
- She realised taking part is much more important than winning.
- It just goes to show, crime really doesn't pay.
- They were richer than they could ever have dreamed.
- I still laugh when I think about it.

For more ideas, look at some of your favourite stories and check out the very last sentence in each.

Writing sentences

Do's

- Do write sentences of different lengths.

Some long, like this: *Wearily, they wandered along the narrow stony path, through the dark, dreary wood, past the tall leafless trees until they reached a gate.*

Some short, like this: *They were lost!*

- Do write some dialogue in between describing what's happening.
They didn't know which way to go next. "This looks like the best path," said Tim. Everyone turned to look.

- Do write a question or several questions in a row.

"What shall we do now?" Asked Amy. "Shall we explore over there?" Replied John.

- Do start sentences in different ways.

Starting with a verb in its 'ing' form, like this: *Looking up, she noticed*

Starting with an adverb, like this: *Unfortunately, they reached the platform too late.*

Starting with a connective, like this: *Whilst on his way to school he noticed ...*

Don't's

- Don't use the words and, then or but to link your ideas too often.

I went to the park and I went on the swings and the slide but it was crowded so then I fed the ducks but then it started to rain.

It's boring! Use different link words like: *as, next, later, when, whilst,* or use commas and full stops instead, like this:

When I went to the park, I went on the swings and the slide. As it was crowded, I fed the ducks. Just at that moment, it started to rain.

- Don't keep starting your sentences with the same word.

The rocket whooshed into space. The rocket landed on the moon. The astronauts got out.

It's boring! Find different ways to start your sentences, like this:

The rocket whooshed into space. After the rocket had landed on the moon, the astronauts got out.

Words

Using the same old words is boring! Don't repeat yourself!

Find different and interesting words to use, like this:

said	shouted	big	enormous
interrupted	asked	huge	massive
replied	whispered	large	vast
went	ambled	got	bought
marched	plodded	fetches	arrived
skipped	clambered	reached	retrieved

What words could you use instead of these?

good, nice, walked, ran, saw, going, small, happy, sad, bad,

Use adjectives and adverbs to describe things well

<p style="text-align: center;">The sun</p> <p>blazing red</p> <p>a gleaming yellow ball</p> <p>wintry white</p> <p>shining brightly</p> <p>pale watery disc</p> <p>a golden ball</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The sea</p> <p>mighty waves</p> <p>prancing, pounding, whipping up spray</p> <p>crashing, splashing, dashing waves</p> <p>gentle, rippling waves</p> <p>crystal clear water</p> <p>a shiny, glistening, glinting mirror</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">A wood</p> <p>Dense, bright, green trees</p> <p>rustling, whispering, fluttering leaves</p> <p>dark, dank, damp and dreary wood</p> <p>gnarled old oak tree</p> <p>a carpet of wet, slippery, slimy leaves</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Outer space</p> <p>Twinkling, silver stars</p> <p>dazzling, flashing lights</p> <p>distant, silent, orbiting spacecraft</p> <p>charcoal black expanse</p> <p>mysterious darkness</p>

What adjectives and adverbs could you use to describe:

a monster, the wind, a wizard, a cave, a pirate ship, a witch, a bear, a mountain path

Punctuation

Fullstops

- You need a capital letter to start each sentence and a full stop to end it.
- A question must end with a question mark instead of a full stop.
- Sometimes exclamation marks are better than full stops.

Example

- For an order - "*Go away!*"
- For someone shouting - "*Stop it!*"
- For something funny - *The pig balanced a cup on it's head!*
- For really short sentences - *Bang! The firework exploded!*

Commas

- Use commas between items in a list.

Example

We had pizza, salad, chips and ice-cream for tea.

- Use commas to break up long sentences, to make them easier to understand.

Example

Where more than one thing happens: (*I answered the door, but there was no-one there*).

Where extra information is given: (*The dodgem cars, with their big rubber bumpers, crashed together*).

Apostrophes

- Use apostrophes to show something belongs to a person and when making two words into one.

Example

*Tom's bike **doesn't** have stabilisers on it.*

Speech marks

- Use speech marks to show where someone is speaking. A new speaker needs a new line.

Capital letter to
start speech

Speech marks
end speech

Laura shouted, "Race you to that tree."

Comma before
speech starts

Speech marks
open speech

Full stop at the
end of the

"Bet I win," replied Sarah.

Comma if a sentence
continues after the speech

Writing recipe

Here is Harry the Writing Wizard's recipe for writing a good story.

Ingredients:

An **opening** that makes you want to carry on reading

Characters you feel you know really well

Settings you feel you can really picture

Exciting and unexpected **events** which keep you on the edge of your seat

An **ending** which explains how everything is sorted out

Method:

Start with an entertaining **opening** (choose between action, description, dialogue). Mix **speech** with exciting **action**. Stir in **different kinds of sentences**. Use what the **characters** say to develop the plot. Sprinkle with tasty **descriptions**, peppered with **adjectives**, **adverbs**, **similes** and **metaphors** etc. Garnish with a really good **ending**. Add correct **punctuation** and spelling. **Serve or publish!**

Example Story Planning Sheet

<p>Title Mission to Planet Unknown</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Theme</p> <p>Space adventure - astronauts visit an unknown planet and discover alien creatures, who nearly prevent them from leaving their planet.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Opening</p> <p><u>Dialogue</u>: A boy talking to himself as he plays a space game on his computer.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Characters</p> <p>Astronauts - Malcolm (Commander), Lara and Simon (assistants)</p> <p>Aliens - Blurbs (blob like creatures which hover several metres off the ground)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Setting</p> <p>An unknown planet</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playing a space computer game at home • Astronauts going up in a rocket for real • Landing on the unknown planet • Encounter with Blurbs <p>Complication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blurbs try to capture astronauts by hypnotising and poisoning them 	
<p style="text-align: center;">Resolution and Ending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Astronauts discover the blurbs weakness is nail varnish and kill them • Astronauts return to Earth - heroes - appear on the T.V. news • Astronauts name the unknown planet 	

Example of how this plan could be turned into an entertaining story through the careful selection of varied sentence structures and words

"5,4,3,2,1, blast off!" The spaceship took off when it heard the ground control radio it from star command.

"Lift off in procedure!" announced John as the journey began. Going past meteors, massive boulders flew past the cockpit window. "Oh, no!" A jagged rock hit the rocket. The next thing John knew, the rocket was blowing up. The P.C. screen flickered black and red words came up on the screen, saying 'GAME OVER!'

"Oh dear, that massive rock again is it?" John's father said coming into his bedroom, "Never mind, it's time for tea now anyway, switch your computer off now will you?"

"Okay." John agreed and came down for tea.

"I expect John knows more about space than I do!" John's father commented. He was going on an expedition to an unknown planet that hadn't been visited before.

"It's exciting up there in space!" said John excitedly. "When I'm older, I'm going to be an astronaut!" His father ruffled his hair and sat down to tea. The fish and chips smelt wonderful and they tasted even better!

John couldn't believe his dad was going into space the day after tomorrow. He felt excited for him but he was also worried about him, what if a sharp jagged rock killed him up there? His baby sister Clare was only two years old. She didn't understand about solar systems and planets yet, she probably didn't know her dad would be the first person to step on the colourful, big planet; that hadn't even got a name yet!

"5,4,3,2,1, blast off!" This time, for real! John had butterflies in his stomach as his sister, mum and himself watched the spacecraft hurling itself, ever faster, into space. Malcolm held his breath as the rocket flew up and up, he could feel the change in the atmosphere and was glad of his seatbelt. He was sitting in the middle of his two other colleagues, Lara and Simon. From loud noise to dusty silence, hot climate to freezing cold.

As the rocket landed on the unknown planet, Malcolm undid his seat-belt and cautiously took off his helmet. From what the experiments showed, there was a form of air on the planet. The only danger he knew that lived on the planet was the ' blurbs ' These creatures were a danger to man-kind, although only being 30cm tall they act nicely at first, but then they poison you. Their only big weakness was nail-varnish. You may laugh, but I'm not kidding you. One whiff of that, and they die on the spot! Magic!

Once outside the rocket, the threesome hid their nail varnish so as not to frighten the creatures that lived here. Their advantage was that they could levitate. They could kill humans easily by levitating. Without the three knowing it, four blurbs hovered above their heads, seeing the nail-varnish, reporting it back to the boss.

"I could have sworn I saw a shadow just then!" Lara commented, although nobody heard her. Just then a whole fleet of blurbs stood in front of her. They surrounded her, gagged her, and took her away. When they got to the blurb's base, they put her in blurb jail.

Now, as I said earlier, blurbs are 30cm high. They are greenish/purple in colour and have long, hairy ears, a 10mm thick tail with a ball of fluff on the end, small arms as thin as a frogs and rabbits feet on which they bounce everywhere. Only one blurb in every pack can speak the languages of all the countries on earth. This one stepped forward and tried in all languages to say,

"Where's your nail varnish?"

Lara pretended she only knew how to speak in English, which by the time he tried it, the poor blurb had a sore throat.

"What is nail-varnish?" Lara said, faking she didn't know.

"You have some with you!" the blurb persisted.

Meanwhile, Malcolm and Simon were looking for Lara. They were seriously worried when out of the blue, three blurbs popped up in front of them, one was standing on his head, tongue lolling out of his mouth, wagging his feet. Even though they were worried, they just had to laugh. Little did they know, the blurbs had hypnotised them, just as they were about to do with Lara.

When the three came out of their trance, they were all in jail. They found all the nail varnish but Simon's had gone. They hadn't been able to locate his.

"Let's use yours!" Lara suggested. Simon got his out and undid the cap. Suddenly, all the blurbs that were standing for a mile around clutched at their throats. Voluminous colours filled the air. The blurbs were dead!

When the threesome arrived back home, everyone cheered, T.V reporters rushed to them, families, relatives, friends and newspaper reporters all crowded round them to hear about what they'd been up to in the planet.

"We have now given the planet a name!" announced Lara, "Blurb varnish!" and everyone laughed.

Children can try writing a story using this planning sheet to guide them

Title Beepers and Boopers	
Theme Rivalry between two kinds of space creatures - Boopers are jealous of the deckchairs made by the Beepers and steal them.	Opening <u>Action:</u> Beepers busy at the junk yard, Boopers fast asleep in their homes.
Characters <u>Beepers</u> - tall, thin, mouse like creatures, with tails and long thin snouts. Always busy, like making things. <u>Boopers</u> - short, fat, stubby creatures, without tails and stumpy snouts. Lazy, enjoy an easy life, and sleep most of the time	Setting Junk yard, planet Zoodoo Boopers' homes
Events	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beepers collect materials from junk yard left by space men. • Beepers make deckchairs. • Beepers leave the deck chairs to dry whilst they have lunch. • Boopers wake up and steal deckchairs. 	
Complication	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deckchairs collapse as soon as Boopers use them because the glue hasn't dried. 	
Resolution and Ending	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beepers return and laugh at their lazy neighbours. • Beepers decide to make beds the next day and ask the Boopers if they would like to help. • Boopers say they need to get some rest first! 	

This planning sheet is ready to be filled in!

Title	
Theme	Opening <u>Action:</u> <u>Description:</u> <u>Dialogue:</u>
Characters	Setting
Events	
Complication	
Resolution and Ending	

After your child has written a story, fill in this grammar and style checklist to help determine their strengths and weaknesses

Feature	Example(s)
Long descriptive sentences	
Short simple sentences	
Questions	
Exclamations	
Dialogue - explaining what is happening - explaining characters' personalities	
Varied sentence starters (Do any start with an adverb or a verb in its <u>ing</u> form?)	
Similes or metaphors	
Adventurous words	
Adverbs	
Adjectives	
Simple words	
Over use of any word?	

Try completing another planning sheet to see if your child has remembered to include all the key features of a successful story.

For more information about story writing go to:
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