STORY DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

The DreamForge 3,000-Word Story Challenge

An Interactive Story Development Guide

Introduction

One of the toughest things in writing is developing an engaging short story at a length of 2,500 to 3,000 words. At the same time, for a well-crafted story, that word-length is among the easiest to sell to almost any venue.

Our goal here is to provide our DreamCaster supporters with a 3,000 word Story Writing Challenge that walks the writer through a 3 Phase approach to Developing, Drafting, and Revising a short story.

The challenge is open to all varieties of speculative fiction. While positive and DreamForge style stories are appreciated, write what works best for you, even horror and apocalyptic fiction if you want.

Story length: 2500 to 3200 words is acceptable for our "3,000 Word Writing Challenge."

Prizes

There are prizes. After reviewing all DreamCaster submitted stories, DreamForge Editor Scot Noel will award First, Second, and Third place prizes of $175, $100, and $50 respectively. Prizes have no strings attached, and any stories submitted to the contest can be submitted to the venue of your choice for possible publication. We want to help you write a good story— then let's see how many of these stories we can sell.

In fact, all appropriate stories will be considered for publication in DreamForge, so, whether you win a contest prize or not, your story could receive an offer for a $0.08/word contract for publication. If we see a story or stories we love, we'll make offers.

Timelines and Submission

For this Writing Challenge, the deadline for submission is June 01, 2025. Both submissions and any questions are emailed directly to Scot.Noel@DreamForgeMagazine.com.

Stories Developed by the Rules

Over the years, we've written articles on plotting structure, character development, opening lines, dialog, story beats, and more. The concepts we've covered are used in the following story writing guide.

This guide is divided into three phases:

1. **Planning:** Develop your core story elements

2. **Drafting:** Write your story section by section

3. **Revision:** Refine your work to ensure structural and thematic coherence

Each section includes explanation, examples, guiding questions, and word count targets to help you craft your narrative within the constraint of 3,000 words.

Note: This kind of story development isn't for everyone. You don't have to use it to create your Writing Challenge entry, but you should note that your story will be judged according to the criteria of the Planning document, so… At the very least, you might want to consider your story against the Checklists available under the Drafting phase.

PHASE 1: PLANNING

Before writing, let's develop the key elements of your story. For each component below, answer the questions to build your story framework.

Story Concept (Complete before proceeding)

What kind of story do you want to tell?

- Genre: Science fiction, fantasy, or another speculative subgenre?

- Tone: Serious, humorous, melancholic, hopeful?

- Theme: What idea are you exploring? (e.g., sacrifice, redemption, discovery)

Story Seed: Write 1-2 sentences describing your core story idea.

Setting (Complete before proceeding)

Where and when does your story take place?

- Physical location

- Time period/era

- Notable aspects of this world that differ from our own

Sensory Details: List 3-5 sensory details (sights, sounds, smells, etc.) that make this setting distinct.

Protagonist (Complete before proceeding)

Who is your main character?

- Name

- Age/appearance

- Occupation or role

- Key personality traits

Character Flaw: What weakness, fear, or limitation holds your character back? This should be something that will be challenged during your story.

Heart's Desire: What does your character want more than anything? What drives them?

Central Conflict (Complete before proceeding)

What problem must your protagonist solve?

- External conflict (person vs. person, nature, society, technology)

- Internal conflict (personal struggle)

Stakes: What happens if your protagonist fails? Why should the reader care?

Story Structure Outline

Fill in basic ideas for each section (you'll develop these further in Phase 2). Note, in this section, you're just jotting down some notes to keep you on track.

1. **Orientation:**

   o Opening setting and situation

2. **Character Introduction:**

   o How we meet your protagonist

   o How their flaw is revealed

3. **Threshold Event & Narrative Hook:**

   o The incident that disrupts normal life

   o How the protagonist becomes personally involved

4. **Try/Fail Cycle - Obstacle One:**

- First challenge

- Protagonist's attempt to overcome it

- Result (typically partial success or new complication)

5. **Try/Fail Cycle - Obstacle Two:**

    - Second, more difficult challenge

    - Protagonist's attempt to overcome it

    - Result (typically failure or complication)

6. **Try/Fail Cycle - Obstacle Three:**

    - Final, most difficult challenge

    - Protagonist's desperate attempt

7. **Climax:**

    - The turning point

    - Resolution of the central conflict

8. **Denouement:**

    - Aftermath and closing

    - How the protagonist has changed

PHASE 2: DRAFTING

Now that you've planned your story, it's time to write it section by section. Each section below includes guidance and a checklist to keep you on track.

Section 1: Opening and Orientation (250-300 words)

Goal: Set the scene and draw the reader into your world.

Guidance:

- Craft a compelling first line that sets tone and creates interest

- Establish the Who, What, When, and Where of your story

- Keep exposition minimal—only what's needed to orient the reader

- End this section with a hint of what's to come

Checklist:

- ☐ My opening line is engaging and sets the right tone

- ☐ I've established a clear setting (time and place)

- ☐ I've introduced at least one character

- ☐ I've provided enough context for readers to understand what's happening

- ☐ I've used sensory details to bring the scene to life

- ☐ I've stayed within 250-300 words

Section 2: Character Introduction (200-250 words)

Goal: Make the reader connect with your protagonist.

Guidance:

- Show your protagonist in their element

- Demonstrate their personality through actions and choices

- Introduce their character flaw—the weakness or limitation that will be tested

- Hint at their desires or motivations

Checklist:

- ☐ I've made my protagonist's personality clear through their actions

- ☐ I've shown (not told) their character flaw

- ☐ I've given the reader a reason to care about this character

- ☐ I've hinted at what drives my protagonist

- ☐ I've stayed within 200-250 words

Section 3: Threshold Event & Narrative Hook (300-350 words)

Goal: Disrupt the status quo and draw your protagonist into the story.

Guidance:

- Introduce an event that changes everything

- Make it clear why the protagonist cannot ignore this event

- Raise questions that make the reader want to continue

- End with a clear direction for the story

Checklist:

- ☐ I've created a clear inciting incident that disrupts normal life

- ☐ I've made this event personally significant to my protagonist

- ☐ I've explained why my protagonist must respond (or shown their reluctance)

- ☐ I've raised stakes or questions that propel the story forward

- ☐ I've stayed within 300-350 words

Section 4: Try/Fail Cycle - Obstacle One (400-450 words)

Goal: Present your protagonist with their first real challenge.

Guidance:

- Make the obstacle meaningful but not impossible

- Show your protagonist taking action (avoid passive characters)

- Connect the obstacle to the character's flaw when possible

- End with a partial success, failure, or new complication

Checklist:

- ☐ My protagonist faces a clear obstacle related to the main conflict

- ☐ My protagonist takes specific actions to overcome this obstacle

- ☐ The obstacle challenges or highlights the character's flaw

- ☐ The resolution of this obstacle leads naturally to the next challenge

- ☐ I've stayed within 400-450 words

Section 5: Try/Fail Cycle - Obstacle Two (450-500 words)

Goal: Escalate the challenges and deepen character development.

Guidance:

- Make this obstacle more difficult than the first

- Show how the first attempt affects this situation

- Continue to test the protagonist's flaw

- Raise the stakes further

Checklist:

- ☐ This obstacle is clearly more difficult than Obstacle One

- ☐ The obstacle flows naturally from earlier story events

- ☐ My protagonist is actively trying to solve the problem

- ☐ I've shown how the character's flaw affects their approach

- ☐ The situation is now more urgent or complicated than before

- ☐ I've stayed within 450-500 words

Section 6: Try/Fail Cycle - Obstacle Three (500-550 words)

Goal: Bring your protagonist to their lowest point before the climax.

Guidance:

- Create a seemingly insurmountable challenge

- Push your protagonist to their limits

- Force them to confront their flaw directly

- Set up the final turning point

Checklist:

- ☐ This is the most difficult obstacle yet

- ☐ My protagonist is pushed to their breaking point

- ☐ The character flaw is now clearly an impediment to success

- ☐ The stakes are at their highest

- ☐ The section ends with the protagonist ready to make a crucial decision or change

- ☐ I've stayed within 500-550 words

Section 7: Climax (500-550 words)

Goal: Resolve the central conflict in a satisfying way.

Guidance:

- Show your protagonist's final effort

- Include a turning point or realization

- Demonstrate character growth or change

- Resolve the main conflict (even if not happily)

Checklist:

- ☐ My protagonist takes decisive action

- ☐ There's a clear turning point where something changes

- ☐ The protagonist overcomes, addresses, or acknowledges their flaw

- ☐ The main conflict reaches a clear resolution

- ☐ The resolution feels earned, not random or convenient

- ☐ I've stayed within 500-550 words

Section 8: Denouement (200-250 words)

Goal: Show the aftermath and provide closure.

Guidance:

- Show the immediate consequences of the climax

- Demonstrate how the protagonist has changed

- Tie up necessary loose ends (but not every thread needs resolution)

- Consider echoing your opening in some way for symmetry

Checklist:

- ☐ I've shown how the protagonist has changed

- ☐ I've addressed the most important loose ends

- ☐ The ending feels satisfying even if not everything is resolved

- ☐ The final line leaves a lasting impression

- ☐ I've stayed within 200-250 words

PHASE 3: REVISION

Now that you have a first draft, work through this checklist to strengthen your story's structure, character development, and overall impact.

Structure and Pacing

- ☐ Does each section serve its purpose in the story?

- ☐ Are there any sections that feel rushed or too slow?

- ☐ Does the story flow logically from one event to the next?

- ☐ Are there any unnecessary scenes or details I can cut?

- ☐ Does the story stay within the 3,000-word limit?

Character Development

- ☐ Is my protagonist's character flaw clearly established?

- ☐ Does my protagonist actively drive the plot forward?

- ☐ Can I trace my protagonist's emotional/psychological journey throughout the story?

- ☐ Does the character's growth feel earned rather than sudden?

- ☐ Are my character's motivations consistent and clear?

Conflict and Stakes

- ☐ Is the central conflict clear?

- ☐ Do the obstacles escalate in difficulty and emotional impact?

- ☐ Are the stakes high enough to create tension?

- ☐ Does each obstacle challenge the protagonist in a different way?

- ☐ Does the resolution of the conflict feel satisfying?

Setting and Worldbuilding

- ☐ Have I established a clear sense of place?

- ☐ Are there enough sensory details to make the world feel real?

- ☐ Have I avoided information dumps or excessive exposition?

- ☐ Does the worldbuilding serve the story rather than overshadow it?

- ☐ Are any speculative elements (magic, technology, etc.) consistent?

Opening and Ending

- ☐ Does my opening line grab attention?

- ☐ Does the ending provide appropriate closure?

- ☐ Is there a meaningful connection between how the story begins and ends?

- ☐ Does the final line leave a lasting impression?

Language and Style

- ☐ Have I used strong, specific verbs?

- ☐ Have I eliminated unnecessary adverbs and adjectives?

- ☐ Is my dialogue natural and purposeful?

- ☐ Have I shown rather than told when possible?

- ☐ Have I varied sentence structure and paragraph length?

Special Considerations for Speculative Fiction

- ☐ Have I introduced genre elements early enough?

- ☐ Are any invented terms or concepts clear from context?

- ☐ Have I balanced the familiar and the strange?

- ☐ Does my worldbuilding feel consistent and plausible within its own rules?

- ☐ Does the speculative element enhance the emotional impact of the story?

Peer Review Questions

Share your story with fellow DreamCasters and ask them to answer these questions:

1. Where in the story were you most engaged? Where did your interest wane?

2. Did the protagonist's journey feel complete and satisfying?

3. Were the story's speculative elements (magic, technology, etc.) clearly explained and consistent?

4. Did the obstacles feel connected and increasingly challenging?

5. Was the ending satisfying? Why or why not?

6. What was the strongest aspect of the story? What needs the most improvement?

Final Word Count Check

Target: 2,500 to 3,200 words

- Opening/Orientation: _____ words

- Character Introduction: _____ words

- Threshold Event/Narrative Hook: _____ words

- Obstacle One: _____ words

- Obstacle Two: _____ words

- Obstacle Three: _____ words

- Climax: _____ words

- Denouement: _____ words

TOTAL: _____ words

Congratulations on completing the DreamForge 3,000-Word Story Challenge!

Whether you are happy with your first draft or you make several revisions, do take the step of submitting your story to appropriate magazines and anthologies. Let's see how many DreamCaster challenge stories are eventually published!

Share your story with the DreamCaster community for feedback and support, and keep honing your craft.