

## Short Story Writing – Brainstorm



### 1. Name a Problem

It can be [any problem](#), from crazy to mundane. If you're having an unimaginative day, just choose a real problem in your life. The only caveat is that if you choose something trivial, you'll work harder to make it meaningful, and if you choose something daunting, you could struggle to find a solution. Look for a significant problem that can be solved by one person, in one scene. But you can make anything work.



#### Example

1. The purple nail polish is missing.
2. Aliens are tapping on the windows.
3. The garden isn't pollinated.

### 2. Create the Character Who Has This Problem



Keep it simple. This is a short story; there won't be time to describe their middle name or hairdo anyway – unless those things are relevant to the problem you created. Just give yourself [a few basics](#) to get into the mindset. The rest can develop as you go.

#### Example

1. A young man
  2. A grandmother
- A gender-ambiguous child

### 3. Describe Why the Problem Matters to the Character

The more [important the problem is to the character](#), the more important it becomes to the reader. Come up with a solid reason why this character cares; this goes double if your problem is trivial. [Raise the stakes until it has emotional impact](#).

#### Example

1. The man's girlfriend bought him the nail polish a year ago, but he never wore it. Now their relationship is in jeopardy, and to keep her he has to demonstrate how he cares.
2. Long ago, the grandmother's young brother disappeared after similar aliens tapped on the windows one night. Tonight, her young grandchildren are visiting.
3. The child has a garden that supplies a rare medicine. Unless the plants are pollinated soon, half a dozen people – and close personal friends to the child – will die.

When you're done, look over your descriptions to decide if your problem is still the same. In my trivial nail polish example, the added meaning has revealed the actual problem of the story: he's about to lose his girlfriend. I'll need to describe why keeping the relationship matters to him. The other problems could also be redefined at this stage.

### 4. Illustrate an Obstacle That Holds Them Back



Think ahead to how your character could [solve the problem](#). Then decide what is preventing them from getting there. What will they struggle against during the story? If you want a character-focused story, this is where you introduce [your character arc](#); just make their obstacle [a personality flaw](#).

#### Example

1. The young man is focused on the nail polish because he's a perfectionist. He's too distracted about getting every detail right to see the big picture. This often makes him late and causes his girlfriend to think he doesn't care.
2. The aliens are immune to normal weapons, and the grandmother can't call for help because the tapping on the windows creates an interference pattern, disabling electronic devices.\*

Every pollinator brought in is immediately eaten by bats. The child hates bats, but no one has succeeded at capturing or killing them.

## 5. Narrate One to Three Attempts to Solve the Problem

I say "attempts" because your [character must fail](#) and then face consequences for that failure. This should [ramp up the tension](#) and suspense. Perhaps the hero runs down the clock on fruitless measures or causes more damage. After every attempt, they should be worse off than when they started.

### Example

1. To give himself time to find the nail polish, the young man tells his girlfriend he'll be late. She gets upset, telling him that if he cared, he'd come on time. He finds it and rushes out to meet to her, but then realizes he doesn't have any flowers. While he's buying some, she calls him to ask him where he is, saying it's embarrassing to sit at a table alone for a half hour. He hurries to the restaurant, but only in time to see her leave. He runs after her. His girlfriend tells him all she wanted was to go out to dinner with him.
2. The grandmother tries to board up the windows to keep the aliens from coming in, but their bodies flow through the cracks and enter the house. Then she grabs a kitchen knife and tries to stab them, but they just vaporize and coalesce again, moving into the bedroom where the kids are sleeping.

The child only has four days to pollinate the plants; otherwise the growing season could be too short to save lives. On the first night they bring in some butterflies, but the bats eat them. On the second night they try bees, but the bats eat those too. On the third night they bring in hummingbirds, and they *still* get eaten. Each time the child curses the bats, and their mother reassures them that bats have a purpose, too.

But there's hope! Give each failed attempt a [small step toward the solution](#). It might be clue, a tool, or a piece of advice that will help your character. That doesn't mean they'll recognize it right away. In fact, it's better if they don't.

## 6. Create a Critical Turning Point

Now the helpful hints finally click together for the hero. They have a stunning realization, a clever idea, or finally understand a piece of wisdom. This gives them their first opportunity to solve the problem.



### Example

1. He realizes that all his attempts to make his girlfriend happy actually made her unhappy, and he apologizes.
  2. She realizes that weapons designed for solid matter don't work on the aliens, so if she wants to beat them, she'll need weapons designed for things that aren't solid.
- Even though the child hates bats, they grudgingly decide to study them more closely. As

3. a result, they learn that many bats are pollinators.

If you're planning [an unhappy ending](#), the hero's realization may be false or incomplete. Perhaps the hero latches on to the wrong solution to their problem. Regardless, at this point your audience must feel that success is possible.

## 7. Show What Happens Next

You've brought your character to a critical turning point. Now [they'll make a choice that determines their success](#), and you'll narrate the results. Whatever happens, their situation must change.

### Example

1. Since all the nice restaurants are now booked for the evening, he asks if they can go out the next night instead, insisting their date is too special for fast food. She sighs and tells him it's over. Then she leaves, ignoring his apologies.
2. Just as the aliens reach her grandchildren, the grandmother grabs the vacuum cleaner, turns it on, and jabs them. In response to the jabbing they vaporize and are sucked into the vacuum.

The child devises a way to attract pollinating bats to their garden. On the fourth night these bats come, and they are not eaten!

Go far enough with your narration that your audience knows what's coming next. The young man will grieve over his lost relationship. The grandmother will dispose of the alien-filled vacuum cleaner. The child will tend to the plants and make the medicine. The details might be different, but [the direction is clear](#).