

Story Building: What's the Problem?

Most stories center on one main character who has a problem to solve. In writer speak, we call that a conflict. The character—be they human, alien, animal, plant, imaginary creature, or talking toaster—has a challenge to figure out or overcome.

- It might be a problem with another character: A friend lied about them and got them in trouble at school.
- It might be a problem inside themselves: They are invited to a swim party with a new group of friends—but they're afraid of the water.
- It might be a problem in the world around them: A furious storm has hit, knocking out power and washing out roads, and their pup is missing.

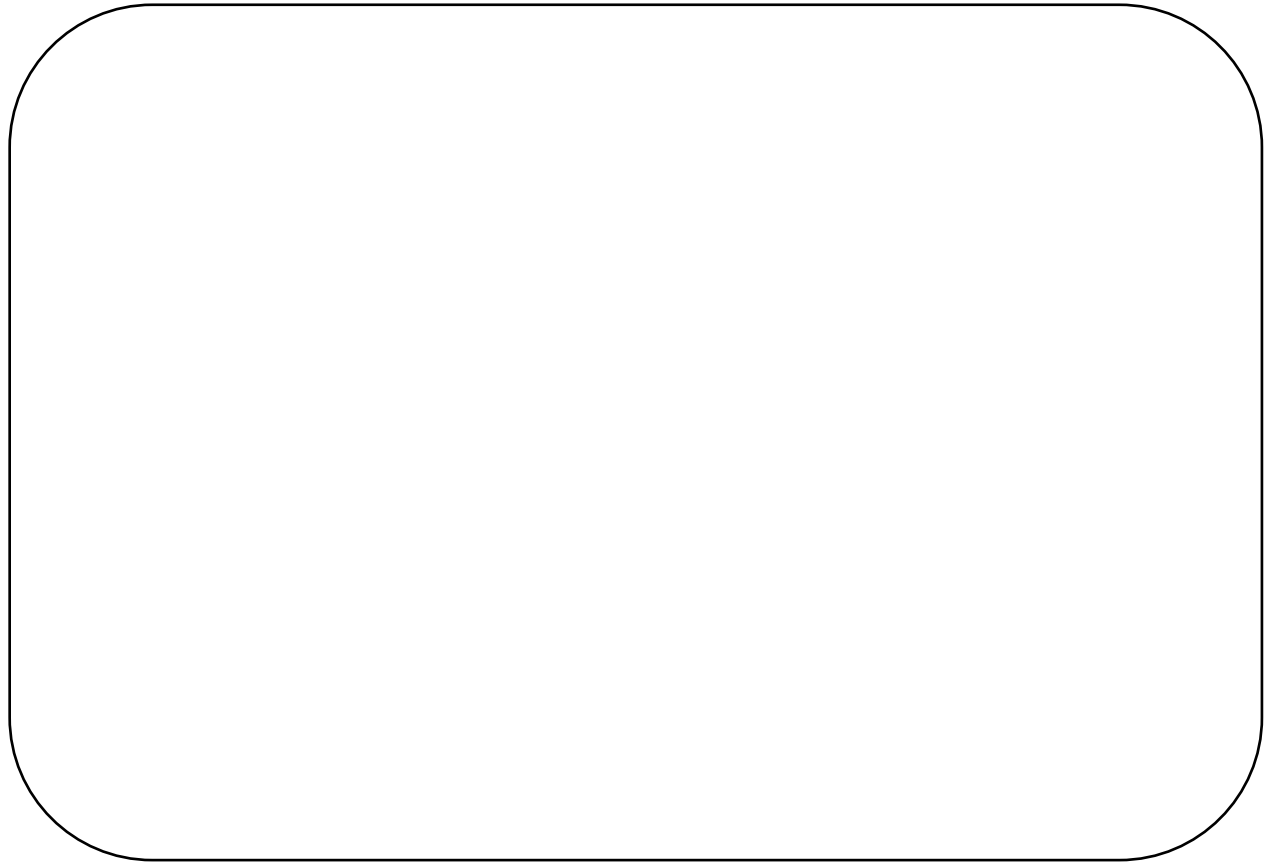
The story develops as the character tries to solve that problem. Along the way, they interact with other characters. They encounter more problems. They hit setbacks. They keep trying. As the story develops, the stakes escalate. Things get tougher. Emotions get stronger. The character changes in some way as they struggle to figure things out.

Eventually, the story resolves when the character solves the problem—or doesn't. Sometimes, they solve the problem in a satisfactory, or happy, way. Sometimes, they solve it in an unsatisfactory, or sad, way. Sometimes, they find out that the problem they were trying to solve wasn't the real problem.

So, how do you write all that? It helps to brainstorm first. Think of your basic story elements: main character, other characters, setting (time and place), and problem (conflict). Think of them as ingredients in a recipe. You need them all to cook up your story!

Story Building: Main Character

Who is your story about? Brainstorm, or jot down, possible characters that you might write about. They can be real or imaginary. They can be human, animal, plant, or thing. Think of a name you like: What does the character who goes with that name look like? Write as many ideas as you can in the space below. Record details that pop in your head, too.

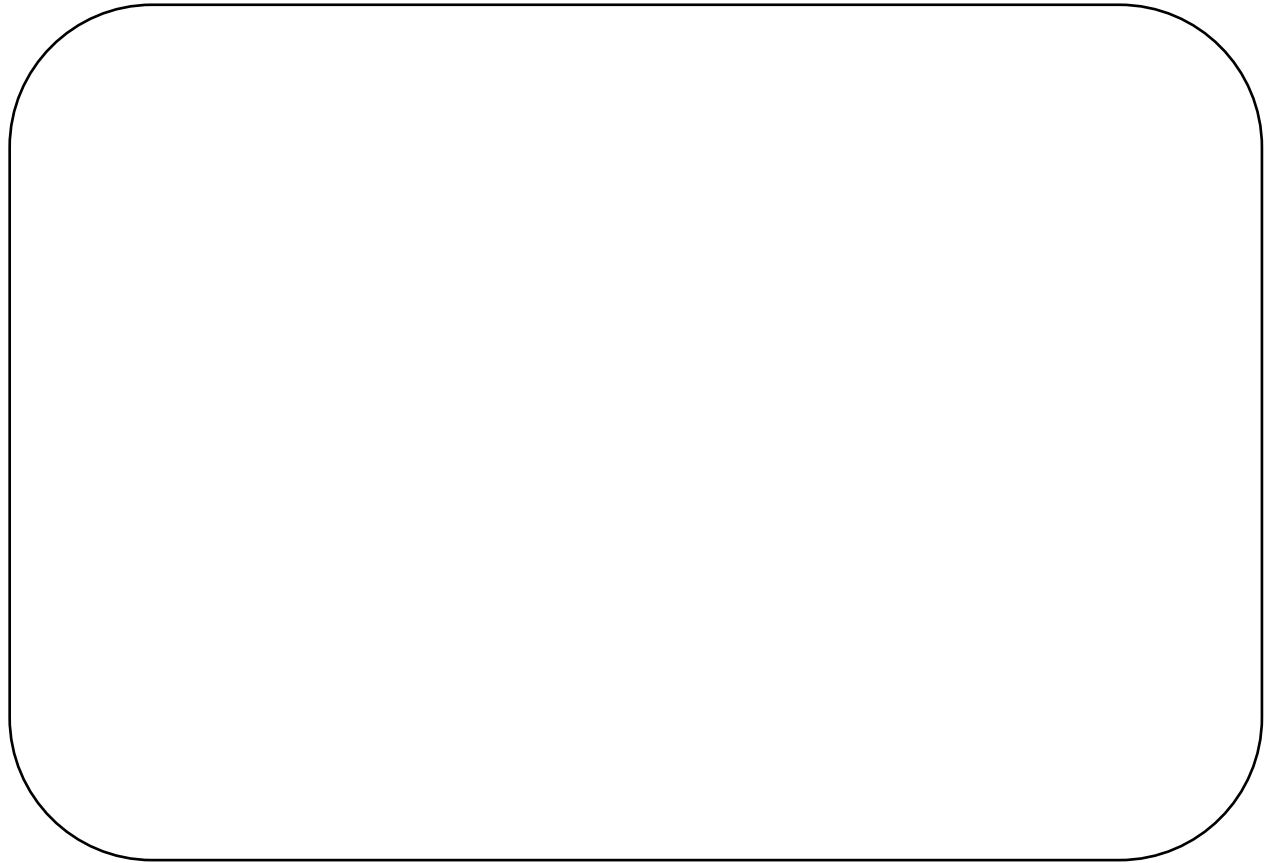


Great! Now, look back over your ideas. Circle the one that stands out to you the most. Close your eyes and picture that character. Imagine what they look like, how old they are, what they like and don't like, how they act. Jot down those details below.

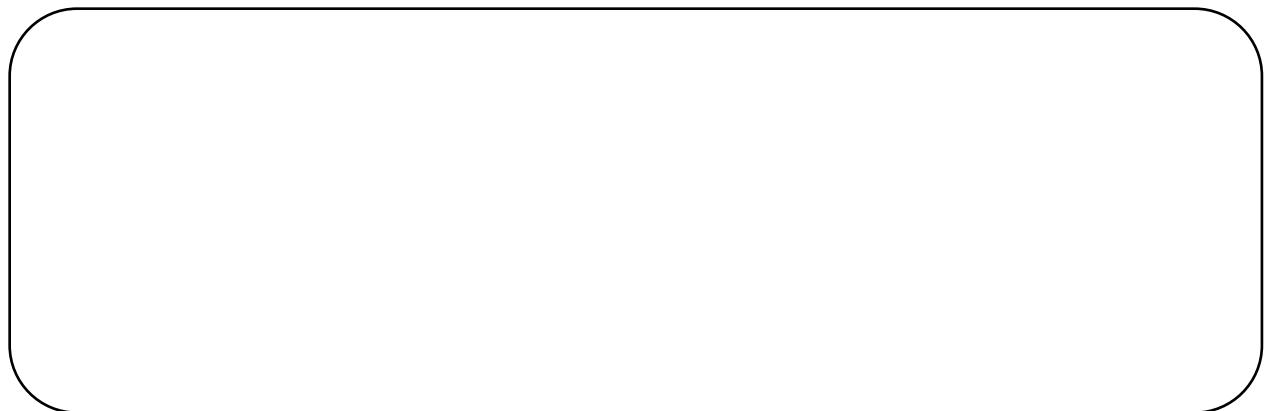


Story Building: Other Characters

Who else is in your story? Brainstorm, or jot down, other characters that you might include. You might even pull some ideas from your main character brainstorming. Think about who your main character lives, goes to school or works with. Who do they get along with? Who do they have trouble with? Who is old and new in their life?

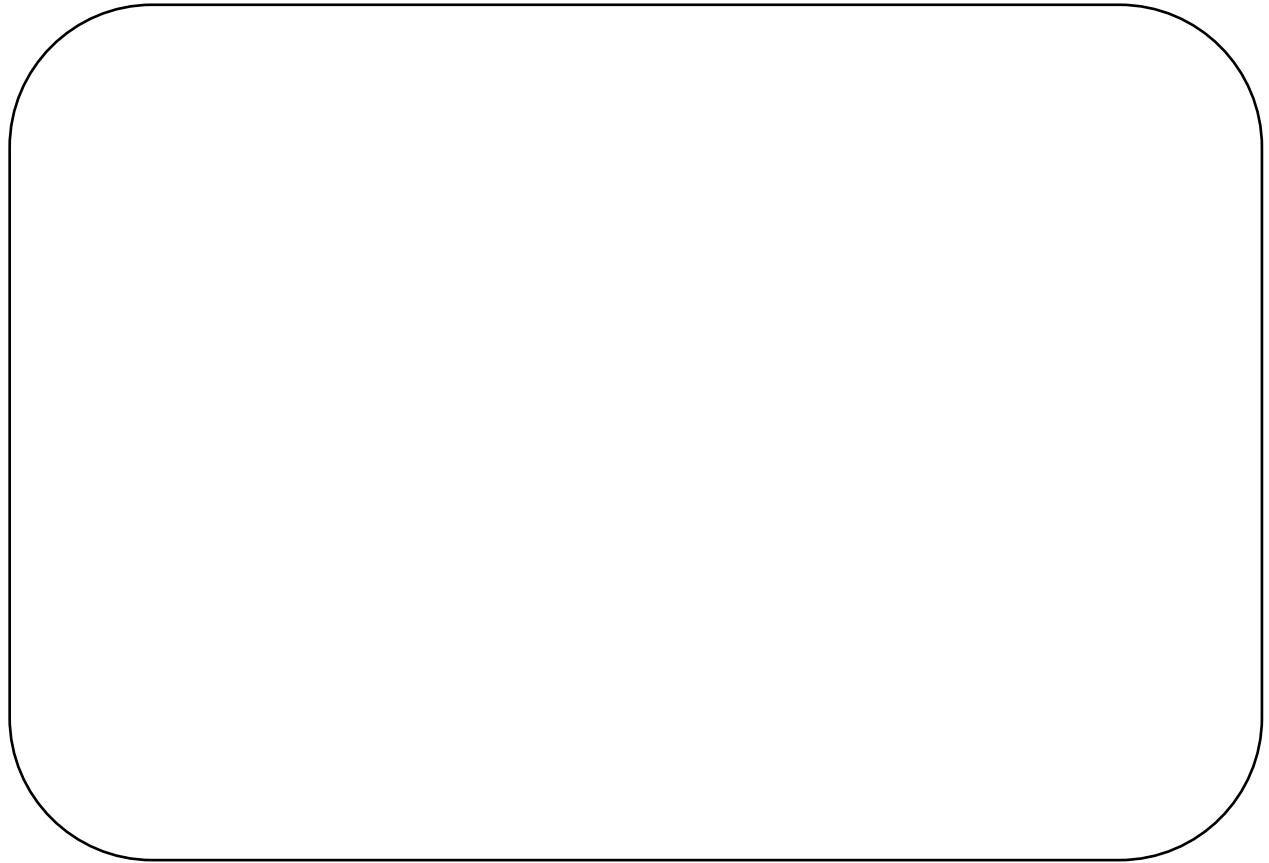


Awesome! Now, look over your ideas again. Circle one to three of them. Picture what that character looks like, how old they are, what they like and don't like, how they act. How do they know or relate to your main character? Jot down those details below.



Story Building: Setting

All stories take place somewhere, sometime. Where does your story happen? When does it happen? Your story may happen in one place or many places. Those places may be real or imaginary. It may take place in the past, present, or future. Brainstorm some places and times you might want to write about.

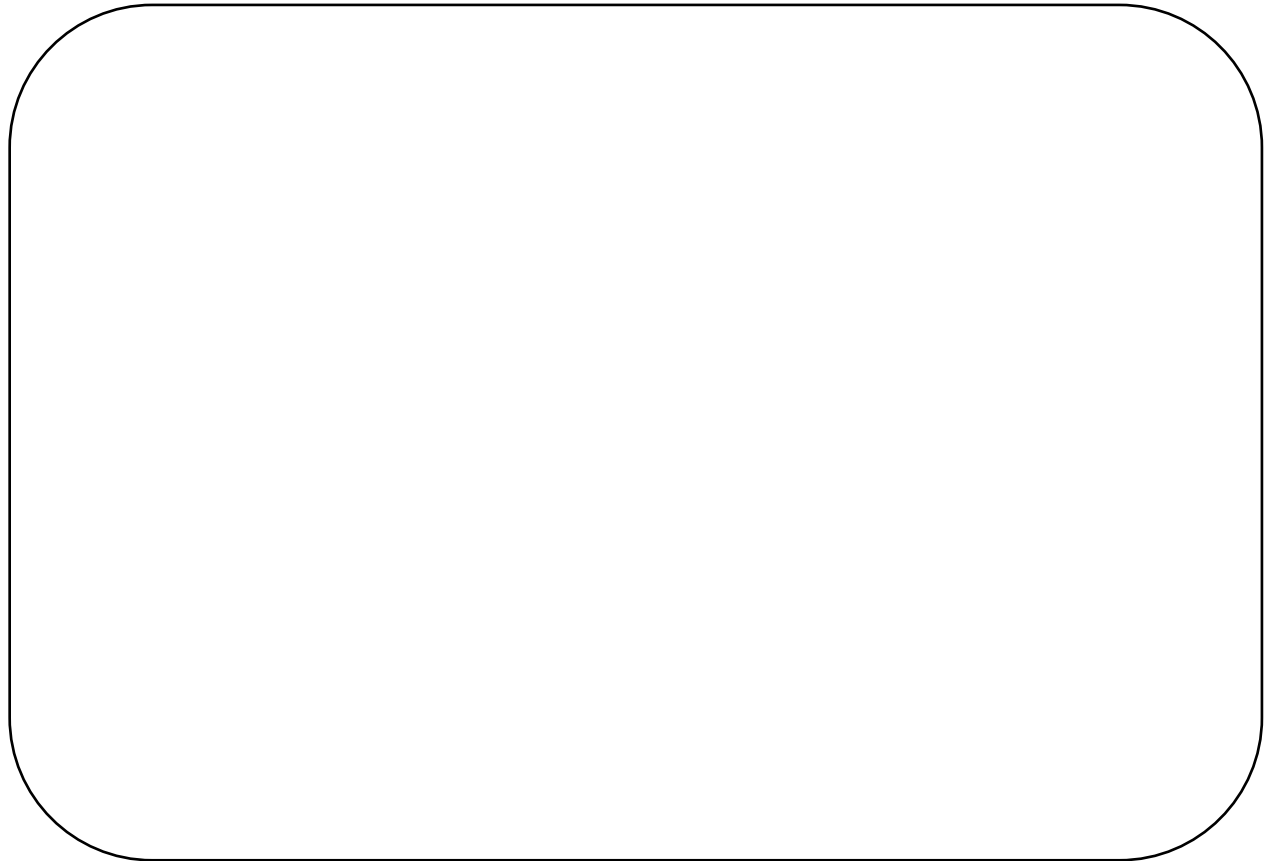


Excellent! Now, look over your ideas. Where does your main character fit? What feels right or interesting? Circle one or more places. Box or underline times. Add more detail below.



Story Building: Conflict

Now your main character needs a problem. No problem, no story. Think about your main character—their likes, their fears, their worries, their life, and the world around them. What do they need or want? Why can't they get it? Brainstorm some possible problems below. Write down at least three ideas: a problem inside themselves, a problem with other characters, and a problem in the world around them.



Super! Now, look over your ideas. Select one problem to be the heart of your story. Write some more about how that problem comes about and why it's a challenge. Tuck away the other ideas. You might be able to work them into your story, too.



Story Building: Put It Together

We don't really mix all the story ingredients in a bowl like cake batter to make a cake. That would be messy. Most stories tend to follow a more linear format. They move from a beginning to a middle to an end. The order of events makes sense.

Try answering these questions on a separate sheet of paper:

Beginning: Set up your story!

- How will you introduce your main character and their world?
- What's your main character like?
- Why do we care about your main character?
- How will you introduce the problem?
- What does your main character want, and why?

Middle: Try to solve the problem. Try more than once. Get more problems.

(Most of your story will happen here, in the middle.)

- How does the main character try to solve their problem?
- What gets in their way?
- How do the main character's emotions, or feelings, change?
- What part do other characters play?
- Why and how does your main character keep trying?
- What big decision do they make that pushes us toward an ending?

End: Wrap up your story!

- What happens after that big decision?
- What are the consequences for the main character?
- What about for other characters and their world?
- How has the main character changed during the story?

Guess what? Now, you have an outline, or plan, for your story!