



**Writer's Strategic  
Guide**



# **Story Premise Workbook**



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# **The Trellis Method's**

## **Story Premise Workbook**

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# PREMISE:

## A Writer's Strategic Guide

### *A Book Idea Differs from a Story Premise*

The advice on how to write a story premise varies, but the consensus emphasizes that it's a crucial step toward turning your idea into a novel. A book idea and a story premise are not synonymous. Before getting into the details, let's define the terms.

- **Book Idea (aka Concept):** A book idea or concept refers to the basis for a novel. Writers often phrase the concept as a what-if question (e.g., What if an innocent man died in a prison riot and the arresting officer died of grief because he couldn't overturn the conviction?).
- **Story Premise:** The premise gives a story's big picture and a writer's development strategy. It's stated in one sentence, combining character, plot, theme, symbol, event (i.e., the Story Problem), and a sense of the lead character and story outcome (i.e., the character's change and story resolution).

In John Truby's *Anatomy of Story*, he shared this premise from *A Streetcar Named Desire*: "An aging beauty tries to get a man to marry her while under constant attack from her sister's brutish husband."

## *Why Start with a Premise?*

I understand the itch to write. I've got a closet shelf littered with half-written manuscripts because my initial idea proved insufficient to support a full-length novel. In James Scott Bell's book *Plot & Structure*, the author offered this sobering question followed by sage advice:

"Why spend six months, a year—*ten years!*—hammering out something that editors and agents, not to mention readers, will not care about? You need to come up with hundreds of ideas, toss out the ones that don't grab you, and then nurture and develop what's left."

To sum up, a story premise nurtures and develops an idea that grabs you, giving strategic inspiration and guidelines to keep you on a strategic course to complete your novel.

## *Genre and Audience Expectations*

For writers, understanding your chosen genre helps you develop a story premise worthy of a full-length novel. For example, do you have genres or subgenres in mind? Are you aware of your chosen genre's conventions and key scenes? Genres and audience expectations influence your story's premise and are essential to the strategic direction of your novel.

## *Potential Book-Idea Sources*

The initial idea for your book can come from many sources. Take comfort in knowing that for centuries, storytellers have freshened up basic ideas to *entertain*, *inform*, and *inspire*. To prime your research pump, here are ways to find book ideas.

- **Let your favorite genre be your muse.** For instance, I love mysteries and thrillers, so my story ideas often launch from the crime genre. If you take the genre approach, it offers the bonus of identifying your audience's expectations, including key scenes, conventions, tropes, and archetypal characters.
- **Get ideas from books, news, and articles.** You can't copyright ideas, so capture potential concepts from an engaging novel, an intriguing headline, or a sensational article. If a book or article lacks depth but has a great premise, use that as a jumping-off point to turn a lackluster story into an exceptional novel. Then, make the idea yours by giving the story a unique twist or a fresh perspective.
- **Start with an intriguing character.** A flawed character with a checkered past offers your audience tantalizing glimpses into life. A character's backstory offers many tangents, each with the potential for a unique plot trajectory. If you plan on

writing a series, one of the supporting cast members in your current draft could become the star of your next novel.

- **Consider potential conflicts.** Story plots are a series of events that complicate characters' lives, giving them ample reasons to act and react. Sift through potential power struggles, failures, mistakes, relationships (e.g., family, friends, co-workers), responsibilities, dilemmas, and sins. Come up with fresh approaches to these conflicts, ideas that could show the full range of the characters' emotions.
- **Borrow from life experiences.** Look within and around to find book ideas. Your life experiences and the people you know offer opportunities to mine for characters and events that can be the foundation of a page-turner.
- **Turn frustrations into engaging stories.** We all have things that nudge us into action, and that means some of those frustrations are universal. Imagine a character who can turn that frustration into action, giving readers the satisfaction of overcoming the challenge.
- **Search for underdog stories.** We love *come-from-behind stories*, but in the news feeds, only the latest catastrophes get top billing. So dig deep for the story of an underdog who faced overwhelming odds but came out on top.



- **Identify your life's heroes.** Most of us can identify a parent, teacher, friend, boss, or co-worker who gave a boost at just the right time, influencing the trajectory of our lives. Use how a person changed your life as the basis of a story.
- **Use a specific setting as the seed for a story idea.** Think of pivotal locations in books and films (e.g., Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, James A. Michener's *Hawaii*). Settings can emulate character traits, and audiences want to learn more. Either from your travels or through research, find or create locations that can serve as the central point of your story.
- **Hunt for unsolved mysteries.** Readers love puzzles, and unsolved mysteries offer book ideas where you create a fictionalized resolution of whatever had frustrated investigators. Also, look for the little-known moments in history that have the potential to intrigue your readers.
- **Brainstorm changing a person or an event.** Stay curious. Look for how you can change a lukewarm notion into an exemplary idea. A few quick twists of a current or historical event, or the tweaking of an individual's behavioral traits, can generate endless book ideas.

## *Validate Your Best Book Ideas*

Test your book ideas before writing:

1. **Keyword Searches:** See how many readers search for books like the one you plan to write.
2. **Competitive Opportunity:** Determine if there's enough room in the market for your book to compete.
3. **Commercial Viability:** Check out how many people actually buy books based on similar premises.
4. **Your Passion:** Make sure the idea excites you and avoid merely writing to satisfy market expectations.

If any of these four points don't pass the test, keep searching!

Here's why:

Book ideas are a dime-a-dozen, but when you find one that's desired by readers, discoverable on Amazon, and regarded as profitable—now, that's priceless! Above all, *passion fuels the writer's creative engine.*

## *My Journey to Turn an Idea into a Premise*

To give you an example of the journey to turn an idea into a premise, I'll share my experience. Your adventures and efforts may differ, but I think you'll find many similarities in our journeys.

## *Initial Idea*

I had an idea to write a thriller set in a small town. I wanted to raise the hairs on the back of the necks of my undefined audience with action, excitement, tension, and suspense. In my writer's journal, packed with ideas, one got me excited. I wrote an elaborate opening scene, plus the murderer's backstory. It began with a murder, followed by the hunt for a serial killer. But when I evaluated whether this premise could change the lives of readers and me, I ran into several snags:

- I had not turned the idea into a premise.
- Despite several tries, I could not describe any life-changing possibilities for my undefined audience or me.
- On reflection, my idea struck me as more of a shadow of stories I had read or watched rather than a fresh concept.

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## *Start with a Killer Concept*

Several half-written stories taught me to replace a lackluster idea with a killer concept. I found that many of my initial concepts did not translate into a well-crafted story premise. At first, I tried to force the process, spending time to make my initial ideas work. I learned to abandon poor ideas and search for concepts with more appeal.

Like wheat, sift through your ideas to separate the kernel of a killer concept from the husks of poor ideas.

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## *List Your Passions*

Have you ever started something new and realized it was only a passing interest? I've still got my tiny stained-glass project, but don't expect me to make windows for cathedrals. Been there, done that (on a small scale), and I've moved on. Some ideas are like that stained-glass project—*fun and interesting, but not worthy of investing more time and energy*. I've learned to use my passions to sharpen the focus on story ideas. I hunt for one that grabs me. Then I develop and nurture the best of the best into a working premise. I love mystery books and films, and I used my passion to sharpen the focus and clarify preferences. For example:

- **Likes:** I prefer novels and movies that create puzzles to solve while delivering fast-paced scenes. The mystery and thriller genres overlap, but I enjoy puzzles the most.
- **Dislikes:** I don't like “on the nose” scenes, especially the ones that state rather than show emotions. Also, whenever a story delves into crude dialogue, I sense a lazy writer, and my mind exits the scene.

## *Identify Your Favorite Books and Films*

After compiling what I liked and disliked, I listed my favorite books and films. My list of novels and movies emphasized that writers could deliver intriguing adult subjects without resorting to crude dialogue and gruesome descriptions, so I listed more book criteria aligned with my preferences:

- **Interesting Characters:** Protagonists with strong morals, yet flawed like the rest of us. Antagonists, ordinary people until they step over the line and become criminals.
- **Tangled Plot Twists:** Events that forced characters into untenable situations and moral dilemmas, bubbling to the surface their error-prone thoughts, speech, choices, and actions.
- **Creative Lines and Descriptions:** Clever dialogue, inner revelations, and dynamic visions.
- **Universal Themes:** In the crime, mystery, and thriller genres, justice versus injustice tops the list, with heavy influences of good versus evil, courage versus fear, and selflessness versus selfishness.
- **Popular Genres:** I'm inspired by excellent mysteries, an edgy subgenre between mystery noir and cozy mystery.

If a story has the potential to satisfy my listed criteria, I'm more likely to buy and read that novel, and that revelation encouraged me to refine my premise.

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## *List Premise Possibilities*

As I turned ideas into premises, here are my top-two drafts:

1. A Nazi officer and his family escaped Germany in 1945 with gold and art, settled in Texas, and one of the twin grandsons killed his parents to abscond with millions in pillaged WWII loot.
2. An introverted gallery owner learned to overcome fear and solve a murder.

I found this part of the process more difficult than expected. The first premise stirred excitement, and the second one included an interesting universal theme. However, both premises were drafts subject to evaluation and change. The temptation to keep refining had me changing initial story premises too many times, so I hunted for a better way.

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## *Evaluate Your Draft Premises*

Instead of adding more potential story premises, I discovered questions that helped me identify what was not working.

- **Q: Does the premise create enough possibilities for a full-length novel?**

*A: Neither story premise 1 nor 2 created enough possibilities.*

- **Q: Does the premise provide an interesting landscape for the story?**

*A: Premise 1 and 2 failed to denote an interesting landscape.*

- **Q: Does the premise make room for abundant details?**

*A: Premise 1 made room for abundant details, but not 2.*

- **Q: Will this story premise entice potential readers to buy book?**

*A: Premise 1 sounded like a retread of history-based novels, and story premise 2 seemed boring yet might attract readers who want the inspiration to overcome fear.*

- **Q: Does the story premise sound original and plausible?**

*A: I sensed combining story premises 1 and 2 could create a fresh and believable premise, so I updated the draft. For example:*

**When the murder of a client disrupts an introverted gallery owner's peaceful life in the Texas Hill Country, she uses her research skills to identify the killer and discovers the intriguing odyssey of a priceless painting looted in World War II.**

## Story Premise Challenges

By asking additional questions, I could evaluate the challenges.

- **Q: Will this premise confuse readers with the required number of interesting and relatable characters?**

*A: I envisioned a relatable amateur female sleuth who has strong investigative skills but fears losing her peaceful life, and that emotional flaw hinders her efforts to identify the killer. She's aided by her husband's technology skills and encouraged by her best friend. In contrast to the sleuth's serious efforts, the quirky community characters will lighten the narrative without confusing readers.*

- **Q: Will this premise allow building a believable and interesting world?**

*A: The small town, set in the beautiful Texas Hill Country, will engage readers of cozy mysteries. The fictional community will create abundant possibilities for a multi-book series.*

- **Q: Based on this premise, can you envision how the main character's arc will transform, and will readers find that change meaningful?**

*A: Until her client's death, the gallery owner led a sheltered life and was unaware of how fear held her back. By the story's end, she will learn to move forward despite her fear and heed the call to sleuth.*



- **Q: Can you make the theme and message come through to readers without sounding preachy?**

*A: Most readers will perceive the internal theme as universal (“you can’t let fear hold you back from what you’re called to do”). Also, they’ll find the story’s message inspirational (“by heeding the call, you can do more in life than you hoped or imagined”).*

- **Q: Does the potential premise allow you to convey essential details without the need for an upfront information dump?**

*A: Given the interactions with husband, best friend, and community characters, the sleuth can convey essential details without an up-front information dump.*

- **Q: Can you create narrative drive (i.e., what-happens-next questions that keep readers turning pages) without sounding like a cliched serial?**

*A: I envisioned scenes that would place questions in the minds of readers, each one designed to keep them turning pages.*

- **Q: Can you provide the details without overloading the audiences with too much information (i.e., will they “get it” without an explanation)?**

*A: To avoid too much backstory at the outset, an interesting prologue will bridge the historical period from 1945 to the present. An epilogue at the end will wrap up loose ends without sounding like a documentary.*

## *Choose an Overall Storytelling Approach*

To arrive at the overall storytelling approach, I determined how I would tell the story and what I would convey in the narrative. In *The Anatomy of Story*, John Truby used *The Godfather* as an example:

- **Story Premise:** The youngest son of a Mafia family takes revenge on the men who shot his father, and he becomes the new Godfather.
- **Storytelling Approach:** The premise used the format of a classic fairytale to show how the youngest of three sons became the new “king” (the what).

The potential approaches, include but are not limited to, telling the story from the viewpoints of the protagonist, antagonist, setting, present, historical, culture, and community. For my story premise, I envisioned using the classic quest to show how the sleuth’s knowledge of art enabled her to find the painting and reveal the killer (the what). From the writer’s perspective, I felt this approach would *entertain readers with a puzzle, inform with interesting historical facts, and inspire courage by showing how the protagonist overcame emotional challenges.*

## *Select the Best Lead Character*

Within the Mystery, Thriller, and Suspense category on Amazon, you'll find a subgenre of women sleuths. This niche ranged from noir to cozy mysteries, and contained books written by both famous and debut writers. After reading several of these mysteries, studying the Amazon marketplace, and scanning many reviews, I became convinced my best character would be a female amateur sleuth. Her occupation as a gallery owner offered the opportunity to share many little-known facts about art, and her Boston terrier would draw readers who love animals.

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## *Determine the Opposition*

Characters without conflict are boring! To engage readers, I had to determine who or what would oppose my lead character. In a cozy mystery, the identity of the person who opposes the sleuth remains hidden from the reader until the climax. Identifying the chief conflicts before writing would prepare me to align and prioritize the value shifts occurring at midpoint. For instance:

- Plot events force the characters to deal with emotional situations caused by internal and external conflicts, and that's important because my sleuth's values will shift at the story's midpoint:

- From resisting to embracing her “call” to investigate
- From fearing to welcoming her “role” as a sleuth.
- For example, I envisioned:
  - The main character at first resists the call to sleuth because she fears the loss of her idyllic life (internal conflict).
  - Her best friend’s troubled past feeds the sleuth’s fears (external and internal conflicts).
  - The local police chief first encourages, then hinders the sleuth (external and internal conflicts).
  - The setting changes from idyllic to deadly (external and internal conflicts).
  - The sleuthing tasks include interviewing five suspects, and because of that, she will receive death threats (external and internal conflicts).

These conflicts promised to surface the emotions readers crave.

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### *Identifying the Moral Choice*

As I thought through how the story’s premise would play out near the end of the narrative, I envisioned the sleuth facing a moral choice that could turn deadly. Her decision would ultimately replace what she thought was an idyllic life with an exciting adventure as an amateur sleuth, setting up the

opportunity for a series. I decided the moral dilemma faced by the lead character would pit selflessness (e.g., doing the right thing for others and the community) against selfishness (e.g., maintaining her idyllic life). For instance:

- If she does the right thing, her husband will suffer.
- If she maintains her ideal life, she'll suffer from guilt.

This dilemma would increase tension until her breakthrough decision in the climax, engaging readers until the story's end.

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### *Validate the Premise's Appeal*

This crucial step determines if the fleshed-out premise is likely to please the writer, target readers, and a wider audience. Here are the validation questions and my responses:

- **Q: Are you passionate about writing a full-length novel centered on this premise?**

*A: I'm passionate about writing this book because it embodies my values and mixes elements of thriller and mystery.*

- **Q: Will readers care enough about this premise to buy your novel?**

*A: I believe the answer is yes, but this will be a delicate balance because I must position the book as a cozy mystery with an edge.*

- **Q: Do you see people buying such stories?**

*A: Yes, and I found many examples on Amazon.*

## *A Well-written Premise Is Worth the Effort*

After researching the marketplace and reading many books, I could see people buying a book based on my story's premise. Even though the process requires effort to draft a story premise, I'd repeat the process in a heartbeat because of the benefits. A story's premise helps you to:

- Discover the core reasons you want to write a book.
- Develop a vision of how the story could work.
- Become more confident about the potential for your book to compete successfully in the marketplace.
- Avoid wasting time writing a story that goes nowhere.

Complete the *Story Premise Worksheet* to turn book ideas into a story premise that will guide your writing strategically.

# INFOGRAPHIC: Story Premise Process

**The premise is what your story is about.** Like a movie poster, the premise shows the essence of what the audience can expect. Readers prefer a *high concept*—a *catchy one-line book description they immediately understand and want to read*. **Writers use the premise to guide the story's development, and in one sentence, gain a strategic sense of the character, plot, theme, and outcome.**

## Example

*Star Wars*: When a princess falls into mortal danger, a young man uses his skills as a fighter to save her and defeat the evil forces of a galactic empire.

—John Truby

Start Here

**1. Understand the difference between an idea and a premise.** An **idea** or concept refers to the basis for a novel. The **premise** gives a story's big picture and writer's development strategy.

**2. Start with a killer concept.** List hundreds of concepts, filter the ideas based on your favorite TV shows, films, and books, but only nurture and develop the ones that match your your passions.

**3. Write several versions.** Include the **character**, **action**, **effect**, and **outcome**. Examples:

-> *The Godfather*: The youngest son of a Mafia family takes revenge on the men who shot his father and becomes the new Godfather.

-> *Casablanca*: A tough American expatriate rediscovers an old flame only to give her up so that he can fight the Nazis.

**4. Evaluate your draft premise.** Is the premise suitable for a novel? Does it offer an interesting landscape and room for details? Will it entice readers to buy, sounding original and plausible?

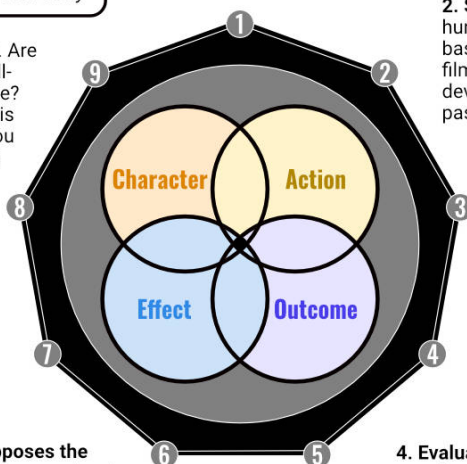
**5. Choose a storytelling strategy.** How will you tell the story (e.g., point of view, setting, timeframe, culture, opposition, genre conventions)? What will the story convey to readers? Which *masterworks* serve as your novel's model?

**6. Select the best lead character.** Which character do you relate to? In book reviews, which characters resonate with readers? Do your passions guide the character selection?

**7. Determine who or what opposes the lead character.** Who will oppose your lead character? Will the conflict engage readers? What else will cause conflicts, adding interest to the story?

**8. Specify the lead character's moral choices.** What inner conflicts will the lead character experience? How will the character's choices cause moral dilemmas? What will readers learn and will those lessons resonate with the audience?

**9. Validate your premise's appeal.** Are you passionate about writing a full-length novel based on this premise? Will readers care enough about this premise to buy your novel? Can you find where people actually buy such stories? Will the competition allow your book to compete?

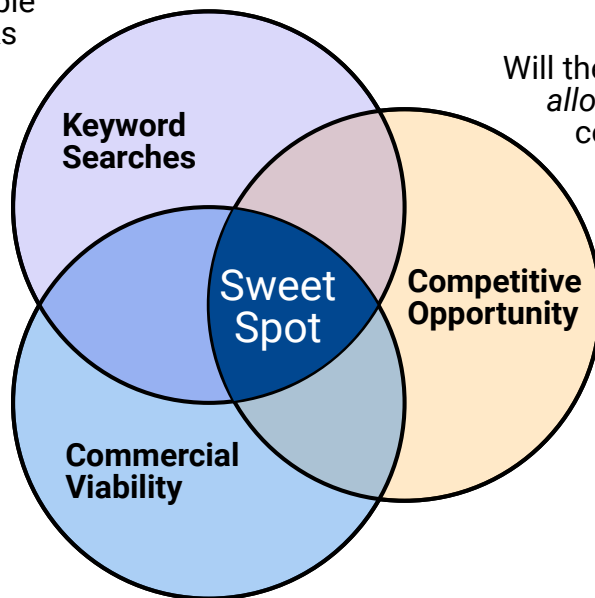




# Story Premise Validation

Research to validate your book's premise before spending time working on your first draft.

How many people  
*search* for books  
like yours?



Will the market  
*allow* you to  
compete?

How many  
persons actually buy  
books like your premise?