

Universal Grammar *of Story*™



THE WORKBOOK

Hazel Denhart, Ed.D.

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Universal Grammar of Story™
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Universal Grammar of Story™: The Workbook

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Annotation: *Universal Grammar of Story™: The Workbook* is the companion study guide for the main text: *The Universal Grammar of Story™: An Author's Guide to Writing for the Soul of the World*. This workbook provides practical support for story writing with worksheets, templates, study questions, individual exercises, advanced exercises, and direction for conducting literary salons. Suitable for textbook adoption.

Keywords: creative writing workbook; literary nonfiction guide; writing technique workbook; study guide; writing salon; storytelling workbook; stories; mythopoetic instruction; call to write; writing worksheets, playwriting workbook; screenwriting workbook; mythology workbook; story structure workbook.

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DEDICATION

For You, the Writer.
Yes, you really are a writer.

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	x
Prerequisite Exercises.....	xii
Chapter One: The Personal Call.....	1
Individual Exercises.....	2
Literary Salon.....	6
Chapter Two: The Social Call.....	9
Individual Exercises.....	10
Literary Salon.....	12
Chapter Three: The Mythological Call.....	15
Individual Exercises.....	16
Literary Salon.....	16
Chapter Four: Thinking in Balance.....	19
Individual Exercises.....	20
Literary Salon.....	24
Chapter Five: Awakening to Language.....	27
Individual Exercises.....	28
Advanced Work.....	29
Literary Salon.....	30
Chapter Six: Delilah’s Scissors.....	33
Individual Exercises.....	34
Advanced work.....	35
Literary Salon.....	36
Chapter Seven: The Plot Situation.....	39
Individual Exercises.....	39
Advanced Work.....	42
Literary Salon.....	44
Chapter Eight: Opposition and Conflict.....	47
Individual Exercises.....	47
Advanced Work.....	49
Literary Salon.....	51
Chapter Nine: Story Chemistry.....	53
Individual Exercises.....	53
Advanced Work.....	58
Literary Salon.....	59
Chapter Ten: The Structure of Timing.....	61

Individual Exercises.....	61
Literary Salon.....	66
Chapter Eleven: Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey.....	69
Individual Exercises.....	69
Advanced Work.....	72
Literary Salon.....	73
Chapter Twelve: A Moment in Heaven with Aldous Huxley	75
Individual Exercises.....	75
Literary Salon.....	77
EXAMPLE ANSWERS	79
Prerequisites Exercises	81
Chapter Two	101
Chapter Four.....	103
Chapter Eight.....	104
Chapter Nine	108
Chapter Ten	110
Chapter Eleven.....	112
REFERENCES.....	114
ART SERIES ABSTRACTIONS	115

WORKSHEETS

Worksheet 1: Character Relationships	5
Worksheet 2: Generational Primal Archetypes for the Study Story.....	10
Worksheet 3: Generational Primal Archetypes for Developing Story.....	11
Worksheet 4: Syllogistic Reasoning.....	21
Worksheet 5: Outer Body Experiences	21
Worksheet 6: Inner Body Experiences	22
Worksheet 7: Face Facts.....	22
Worksheet 8: Core Reactions.....	23
Worksheet 9: Emotional Reactions.....	23
Worksheet 10: The 36 Dramatic Situations for Study Story and Others	39
Worksheet 11: The 36 Dramatic Situations for Emerging Story	41
Worksheet 12: The 36 Dramatic Situations for Subplots and Minor Characters	43
Worksheet 13: Hero-Villain Polarity.....	48
Worksheet 14: Incremental Polar Movement.....	49
Worksheet 15: Events Triggering Polar Movement	50
Worksheet 16: Collective Forces Triggering Hero's Transformation	50
Worksheet 17: The Five Elements for Study Story	53
Worksheet 18: Five Elements of the Hero's Proposition for Your Story	55
Worksheet 19: State of Affairs for Study Story.....	56
Worksheet 20: State of Affairs for Developing Story.....	56
Worksheet 21: Full Proposition with prompts for Study Story	57
Worksheet 22: State of Affairs for Developing Story.....	57
Worksheet 23: State of Affairs for the Antihero of Developing Story.....	58
Worksheet 24: Timing Milestones for Study Story.....	61
Worksheet 25: Concept of Emerging Story Timing.....	63
Worksheet 26: Hero's Journey for Study Story.....	71
Worksheet 27: Hero's Journey for Emerging Story.....	72

TABLES

Table 1: Structure of the Logical Syllogism.....	20
Table 2: Example of Unsound Major Premise.....	20
Table 3: Example of Minor Premise not Following the Major....	20
Table 4: Universal Grammar of Story™ Interpretation of Huxley	75
Table 5: Huxley’s Original Themes.....	76
Table 6: The Seven Deadly Sins.....	77
Table 7: Genres and Meanings	81
Table 8: Character Types.....	83
Table 9: Archetypal Family Roles	86
Table 10: Social Functions for Characters.....	87
Table 11: Professions for Characters.....	89
Table 12: Character Dispositions.....	93
Table 13: Example of Generational Primal Archetypes for <i>The Miracle Worker</i>	101
Table 14: Example of Bad Logical Reasoning	103
Table 15: Example of Corrected Logical Reasoning	103
Table 16: Examples of Unity of Opposite Pairs.....	104
Table 17: Hero Villain Polarity Example.....	106
Table 18: Example of Incremental Polar Movement.....	107
Table 19: Example of The Five Elements of the Hero’s Proposition for <i>The Miracle Worker</i>	108
Table 20: State of Affairs for <i>The Miracle Worker</i>	109
Table 21: Timing Milestones for <i>The Miracle Worker</i>	110
Table 22: Hero’s Journey for Helen in <i>The Miracle Worker</i>	112

FIGURES

Figure 1: Universal Grammar of Story™ Chart of Theories	78
Figure 2: Mind Map for <i>The Miracle Worker</i>	97
Figure 3: Mind Map for <i>Bite Your Tongue</i>	98
Figure 4: Positive/Negative Character Relationships for <i>Bite Your Tongue</i>	99

PREFACE

The Universal Grammar of Story™ is a rich intellectual inheritance coming to you from your literary ancestors of long ago. Your role is to grasp their teachings, put them to use in the service of humanity, and pass the wisdom along to the coming generations through stories.

“The Grammar” is a vibrant, dense, and multifaceted body of knowledge meant to arrive slowly and unfold in accordance with its own destiny. This graceful body of work might take decades to find its way into the wider writing community. That you have the workbook in your hands now is a subtle sign that you were intended to be one of the early recipients.

INTRODUCTION

This workbook is a companion study guide for the main text of *The Universal Grammar of Story™: An Author's Guide to Writing for the Soul of the World*. The workbook provides practical tools for navigating deeper into the multiple levels of the original text, making it easier to learn and apply the theories of The Grammar to any story. The exercises range in complexity from easy to quite challenging.

It's best to approach them intuitively, working with those that feel just difficult enough and waiting on the more advanced challenges for the future. But don't let yourself off too easily. Remember from the main text that struggle is important for advancing your development.

This workbook is intended as a practical guide to apply to stories. It can be used anytime in the writing: before, during, or even after a story is written. You can use it:

- ❖ Before a single word hits the page;
- ❖ After some writing has been done but the story seems to stop;
- ❖ After hundreds of pages are written but the story just seems to go in circles;
- ❖ Returning to a story you gave up on years ago, but which will not give up on you;
- ❖ To bust out of any form of writer's block;
- ❖ To analyze what makes a well-loved story particularly strong;
- ❖ To find out why a box office flop flopped; or
- ❖ To help your friends figure out why their stories are stuck in writer's block.

The chapters of the workbook follow the same order as those of the main text of *The Universal Grammar of Story™: An Author's Guide to Writing for the Soul of the World*. However, a “prerequisites” chapter has been added for writers who have only a vague idea for a story and need to develop a more concrete grasp of it before putting it through the paces of the chapters to come.

Many aspects of The Universal Grammar of Story™ can be easily grasped and immediately put to use. But there are other deeper

dimensions that develop slowly with dedicated practice.

This body of wisdom is one we never outgrow. It evolves with us becoming ever more multifaceted as our focus shifts with maturity and life experience. Younger writers tend to be more interested in the nuts and bolts structure of writing found in the chapters on the core theories. Older writers, even those just taking up their first story, tend to be more interested in the fundamental philosophies of the Call to Write and the mystical ones weaving together the chapters on mythology. Regardless of where you might fall on the career path, there is a seat of wisdom waiting for you in the one-room schoolhouse that serves as this book. For aspiring writers (including those who have yet to set a word to paper) it introduces the fundamentals of why we write and for whom, as well as how to get those words to stick to the paper and behave themselves. For the advanced career writer, it reveals why those unwelcomed moments arrive when the story stubbornly goes on strike for no apparent reason. Understanding *The Grammar* makes such moments more predictable but they will never be preventable. Like the tide rising and falling, the ebb and flow of writing is a vital and inevitable part of the rhythm of life.

OK, here we go...

The Blessings of Trouble

Sometimes writer's block comes after months of feverish work and sometimes it happens before a single word finds its way onto the first blank page. Regardless of the timing, sooner or later most every writer experiences the distress of enthusiasm fading as a streak of creativity runs its natural course and the story grinds to a customary, inevitable, and agonizing stop. It's a lot like parenting. The newborn comes with a bounty of excitement, aspirations, and hope; but eventually the child turns into an adolescent and nothing seems to go according to plan. You find yourself at wits end and exhausted in the face of unrequited love for a being who is the center of your universe.

Not to worry. When the creative flow slows it will be time for this workbook. Until then its best to let your creativity run amuck with unfettered intuition in a mind where things are still spontaneous, giddy, and not yet over-thought.

You will need to bring two stories to this workbook. The first

will be the one you are writing that's playing hard to get. It doesn't matter whether it still only exists in your thoughts as a vague idea or if you have already written 500 pages. You will also need a second, "study story." This needs to be a well-known favorite that you are not likely to tire of. Beloved stories act like favorite hymns, recitations, or chants—so comforting they never grow stale.

Writing salons using this workbook for group study will also need to choose one study story for the entire group that is different from those of the individual members.

Films are ideal for working through the lessons providing you have the technology to pause, fast-forward, and rewind segments in order to pinpoint moments that align to a given point. Film and play scripts also work well; however, any form of story is suitable (novel, epic poem, short story, etc.) provided it is well-known and loved.

For the writer whose emerging story is still a vague idea that cannot quite be grasped, the exercises and worksheets below will help you develop it enough to carry on through the coming chapters.

Prerequisite Exercises

Try not to overthink your answers. It is best to let your intuitive mind work free and unrestrained which happens by choosing what grabs you first. There are no right or wrong answers. This is a simple play of serendipity. You will find charts and sample answers to guide you in the Prerequisites' Example Answers at the end of the book.

1. Identify the type of work (novel, film, etc.) and give a working title for your story.
2. Is the story a comedy or tragedy? If it is a mix of both make a binary decision as to whether it tends to be more serious or funny.
3. Choose your genre and explain your choice. See the Example Answers on page 81 for a chart of genres and their meanings. Some stories might be a blend of more than one, but one will take the dominate role. For example, *Hamlet* is both a tragedy and a family drama, but it is classified as a tragedy.
4. Generate a list of character types describing your protagonist. Is this person a commander? A wise elder? An evil lord? A

gentle giant? An eccentric pixie girl? Or a blend of more than one? See the Example Answers on page 83 for a chart of character types.

5. What *symbolic* extended family/tribal role does the main character fill? Think of your characters as if they were in an ancient tribal world. In purely symbolic terms, cast your protagonist into an energy type that we understand on a familial level. Does the protagonist project the energy of a father, stepmother, daughter, cousin, aunt or half-brother, etc.? A character need not appear as an actual step-uncle in the story to project that kind of energy. See the Example Answers Table 9, page 86 for a chart of symbolic family roles.
6. What is the protagonist's name and meaning? Names are powerful things and must reflect the personality of the named. Turn to a book of baby names or baby name website to search for names based on character type, or to learn the meaning of a name you have already chosen. Obituaries also provide a good source of names.
7. What is the protagonist's social function within the community/tribe? Communities naturally bring together diverse individuals whose given functions provide benefits or detriments to the group. Even a seemingly homogenous group will still yield a: peacemaker, complainer, gatekeeper, monopolizer, etc. A single character might well take on more than one function. See the Example Answers on Table 10, page 87 for a chart of social functions.
8. Choose a profession for your main character and imagine how the character came into this career. See the Example Answers on Table 11, page 89 for a table of nearly 300 professions.
9. What is your protagonist's disposition? Is your character generous? Stingy? Kind? Cruel? Several types may apply to the same character. See the Example Answers on Table 12, page 93 for an example of potential dispositions.
10. Sparking the beginning of a natural conflict is straightforward once you identify the protagonist's character type and disposition. All you need do is:
 - A. Choose the antonym of the character type you chose (#4 above).

- B. Choose the antonym of the character disposition you chose (#9).
 - C. These words represent the opposing force the protagonist will encounter in the story. Form a sentence of these words that will develop into the heart of the conflict that the story exists to resolve. See #10C on page 96 for an example.
11. Brief summary of the story.
- A. Gather your answers from questions 1-10 in a simple list.
 - B. Use the list to write a brief summary of the story. A simple paragraph is enough but if the spirit moves you write until you feel like stopping. See #11B on page 96 for an example.

This chapter has guided you in materializing the main character of your story. Later on, as the story grows more confident in your mind, repeat these exercises for the supporting characters.



Chapter One

The Personal Call

The personal call to write urges us to tackle unresolved problems disguised as characters we project into stories. It acts a bit like the butterfly's cocoon—the place where a story sparks to life and germinates but which also must be overcome and cast away before its structure turns oppressive and kills the very thing it came to give life to.

In this chapter we explore what might be calling us to a given story. Luckily, the gift of writer's block helps us with this puzzle. When it hits for no apparent reason and the infatuation fades into hard work, it's time for this chapter. What feels like unrequited love is in fact a valuable and necessary moment that can be enormously helpful in penetrating an elusive story.

One of two things is likely to happen when a writer's block is taken down by means of the personal call: Either the story will burst forth and return to writing itself, or it will utterly collapse and appear to die. When the latter happens, we have likely mistaken the story for what was merely a momentary means of dealing with a personal issue. In this case, once you resolve the issue, the story will have served its purpose and disappear. This doesn't mean that the work is a total loss. Not at all. It means it has served its purpose for now. If so, this would be the time to respectfully set the manuscript into a pretty box in the attic. It might just need time (perhaps even twenty or thirty years) to germinate into something else. What you have written could be the premonition of a radically different story awaiting you in the future. Or, it could be that this is not a story of its own but a piece belonging to another story. So, hold onto it.

With that in mind, when you address the personal call bear in mind it:

- ❖ Should not be “work” and should never be forced.
- ❖ Sends images into our daydreams from the unconscious.
- ❖ Triggers stories to tackle personal problems from the safe distance of fiction.

- ❖ Can be identified by a metaphor appearing in a single sentence summary of the story.
- ❖ Can be identified by the relationships between other characters in the story.

A note of caution: few writers are aware of the personal call which by its very name is a private process and not something to openly share without careful forethought. Also, exercises like this can be exciting for some while unpleasant for others. Remember, it is not necessary to do these exercises to write a great story. They simply offer a tool to better understand your relationship to the symbols that characters might represent to you. The following exercises guide you in exploring your story as a metaphor for your life, or perhaps as a message from you to your own self.

Chapter One: Individual Exercises

Story Description Exercises

Answer the questions below for your study story. Then repeat them for the one you are writing. See the answer key in Example Answers beginning on page 97.

1. Make a mind map for your study story. Write the title of the story at the top of a blank sheet of paper. In the center of the page write the first word that comes to mind about it. Draw a star-shape around this word. Next, in random places on the paper, jot down about a dozen or so stream of consciousness words in rapid-fire succession. Circle each word as you write then draw a connecting line to the word in the star or another on the page. The words might all connect back to the center or not. Perform this exercise by intuition, by feel. Try not to think logically about it.
2. Compose a sentence from the words you have generated above. Add additional words as necessary. Avoid specifics; keep it general.
3. Refine the sentence into a simple description of the story. Keep it generic enough to apply to any story, anywhere, at any time in history.
4. Contemplate how the description might have attracted you to this story.

5. Repeat 1-4 for the story you are writing.

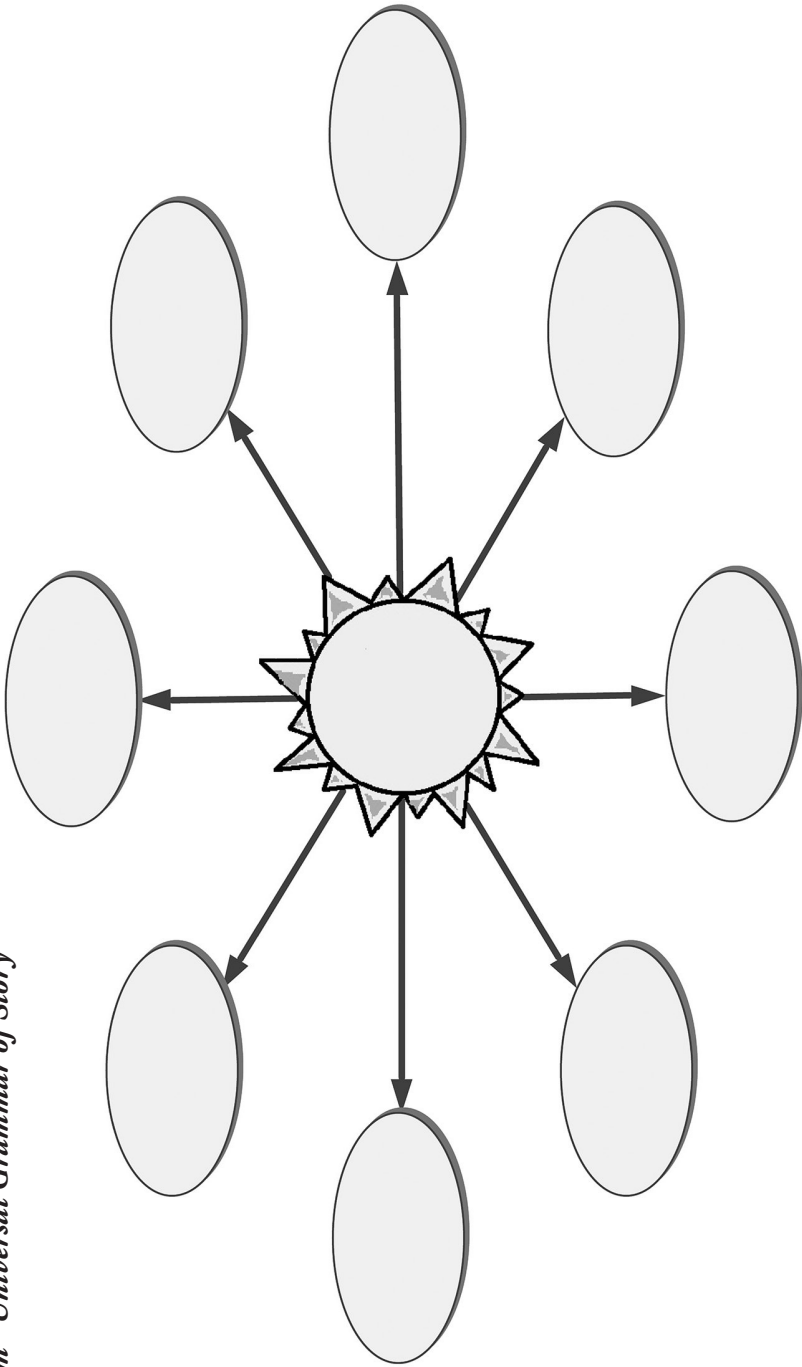
Character Relationship Exercises

The following exercises are intended for the story you are writing, but they can also be applied to the study story to expand your understanding of character dynamics. They explore the connection between characters, as well as between the writer and characters. In the center of a blank piece of paper, draw a sun symbol large enough to write a character's name in its center. See worksheet 1, page 5.

6. With a clock face in mind, quickly write the names of all your characters on the periphery where the hours would be. If you haven't settled on names yet, then jot down the roles characters might play. This should be done in brainstorming fashion without analysis or thoughtful recall. The idea is to get outside of your logical mind.
 - A. Circle the names and draw a straight line back to the sun center. If you have only a few characters, the image will resemble a pie with large pieces. If you have several, it will look like a clock or even a bicycle wheel with spokes leading to the hub.
 - B. Make as many copies of this image as you have characters, plus one additional.
 - C. On the first copy, write the protagonist's name in the sun center. Then indicate that character's feeling toward the others by marking the connecting line with a negative (-) or positive (+) symbol. The line connecting the same character at the center and periphery indicates that character's sense of self.
 - D. Repeat the above with the additional sheets so that each character has a sheet of their own. In this way, the feelings of all the characters toward one another is better understood.
 - E. On the remaining sheet, write your name in the sun center and indicate your relationship to the characters.
7. On a blank sheet of paper, write the word "To" at the center top. On the left side below, list all the characters followed by the word "Represents" after each one. Make as many copies of the page as you have characters plus one additional.

- A. On the first sheet, write the protagonist's name at the top and indicate below what each character represents to this person.
- B. Repeat with the other sheets for each of the other characters. On the line where a character's name appears on both the top and below, indicate the sense of self. Note that the relationship will not necessarily be the same both ways. What Hamlet means to King Claudius is very different from what Claudius means to Hamlet.
- C. On the remaining sheet, write "Me" at the top center and list what each character represents to you.
- D. When you are finished, pencil in who you think each character could represent from your past or present life, real or imagined. A character might also represent a future version of yourself that you envision, or someone else you hope will come in the future.
- E. Contemplate the underlying metaphor or reason these characters have appeared to you in the daydream of your story. What message might you be sending to yourself? In other words, if your story were a dream, how might it be interpreted? What is the over-arching metaphor?

*Worksheet 1: Character Relationships
From "Universal Grammar of Story™"*



Chapter One: Literary Salon

Forming the Salon

1. Begin forming a salon by bringing together a group of no less than three but no more than ten people. Six is ideal. If eleven show up, form separate groups which still come together as a whole for staged readings and other social activities.
2. Consider including other narrative artists such as musicians, photographers, and painters, etc.
3. Be mindful of group chemistry by seeking a diversity of members while avoiding close friends and relatives. Members need fresh insight from those who are less likely to prejudge their ideas based on history with each other.
4. Find a meeting place with a literary or creative intellectual feel such as a bookstore or literary café, public library, college campus or school, or community center, etc. Try to avoid online meetings if possible because digitally mediated conversation does not hold the same synergy as good old-fashioned vis-à-vis encounter.
5. Create an inviting atmosphere with some gentle classical music played low, a plant, center piece, and/or warm lighting.
6. Think of the salon as a think tank where your mind and action need to be at their best (like the 9 a.m. meeting in Geneva to save the world—even though you are meeting in the evening). Keep the meeting time to about two hours with a frequency of no more than twice a month. Once a month is a good rule at first.
7. If the group is comfortable with it, you might consider having a staged reading, publishing a zine, or exhibiting members' work once a year.

Agenda for the First Meeting

1. Keep the atmosphere playful by coming together for a meal if possible. The purpose of this first meeting is to establish the group, get to know one another, agree on a permanent space and share summaries of members' work in progress.

2. Choose a core study story to analyze together over the next several months. Consider beginning with a film that salon members can easily watch together.
3. Each salon member still needs to choose a separate story for personal study.

Agenda for Following Meeting:

1. Discuss Chapter One of the main text *The Universal Grammar of Story™: An Author's Guide to Writing for the Soul of the World*. How relevant is this chapter to the experience of the salon members?
2. Watch the first 25 minutes of the group study film together. You should feel a natural break in the story about that time.
3. What metaphors do group members see in the core study-story? Is there unanimous agreement on the metaphors? If not, do some members see a different tale than others?
4. What life story can the salon members extrapolate for the writer of the study-story? In other words, in viewing the story as a dream of the writer, what do you imagine the life of that writer to be like?
5. What life events or themes in the writer's personal life might have triggered a conscious or unconscious need to generate this tale?

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