



Writers to Authors

Presents

Foundation Factors

The
**4 STEP
BLUEPRINT**

for Crafting a Winning Story

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Introduction

As writers we know there are several ways to write a book. Whether you outline or write by the seat of your pants, writing a book can take many forms with no one way more correct than the other.

The only correct way is the one that leads to a finished novel.

But even with all the methods, formulas, and strategies that a writer can choose from, there are four pillars, **Foundation Factors** as I call them, which should be present and lined out at some point in your writing process.

For some, these foundation factors can be outlined and set before you begin writing. For others, these foundation factors will present themselves after the first messy draft. But either way they will be present.

I call each of these pillars “Foundation Factors” because I believe they form the foundation of any good story and without them the story, your story, won’t have anything substantial to stand on.

We hear a lot about story structure and anyone who as read my blog posts at [Writers to Authors](#) knows I am one of the biggest proponents of story structure. But how good is a structure if it doesn’t have a solid foundation?

We wouldn’t build a house if the foundation was faulty or unsettled and our stories are no different. If we want our story to engage and excite our readers then that structure needs to be placed on a firm foundation. And that is what this guide is all about.

In this guide we are going to cover in detail the four Foundation Factors of any good story. And to make them easier for you to recall you can use the word **PLOT**ⁱ to remember them.

- **P**roblem
- **L**ead Character
- **O**bjective
- **T**he Resolution

These four Foundation Factors, no matter your writing process, will be present in your story, or at least they should be. Take any of these away and your story will suffer. Each of these Foundation Factors adds an element to your story which when added together, like ingredients in a recipe, will produce something wonderful.

We will be covering each of these Foundation Factors in order and I will provide a list of twenty eight questions to prompt you to think deeper about each. By the time you answer all the questions in this guide you know some of the following about your story:

- What the main conflict in your story is
- Is the conflict big enough to write an entire story
- Who the lead character is (you will know your lead character very well)
- Who the antagonist is

- The objective of both the hero and antagonist
- Character arc
- Story arc
- Character goals (ambition vs. tangible)
- How your story will end

With this information firmly settled you should have no problem beginning to write your story right away or use it to springboard you into deeper outlining of your story.

Your choice.

The Foundation Factors are flexible and can be used over and over again to pull more information out of your story. And although you can work through this entire guide in one sitting I recommend that you take a day or two per Foundation Factor so that you are not rushing and forcing the creative process.

Foundation Factor #1 – Problem

This Foundation Factor is going to cover the main conflict in your story. This is the conflict that is so big that it forces your lead character to react, his life can't stay the same. To get the most out of these questions, take your time answering each one of them. Even if it takes you a few days to go through all seven questions for this Foundation Factor, take the time.

Usually I recommend a person take a full seven days per Foundation Factor but there are no hard and fast rules about how to do it. Do what works for you. My purpose is to be your guide and help you understand your story better than you do now.

And without further delay, let's get started.

Question 1:

What is the main conflict in your story?

Things to Consider:

This problem, or conflict, is the thing that is driving your story. It is the action, entity, or force that is pushing down on your character, forcing him to act.

Examples:

Lord of the Rings – The main conflict in this story stems from Sauron wanting his ring back and Frodo, who has the ring, trying to keep it from him. This back and forth enters them into a chase that goes all the way from the Shire to Mordor.

Also, think about how this main conflict brought so many other players into the mix. Conflict in a story, especially this one, never happens in a vacuum. It will always affect others.

Harry Potter (Book #1) – Voldemort wants to obtain the Philosopher's Stone so he can use it for its life giving properties. Harry Potter decides to stop him by finding the stone first. (Obviously more could be said about this story. This is just a snapshot to get you thinking about your story)

Jurassic Park – Dinosaurs escape their fences after the power goes out. Now the people on the island are penned against dinosaurs in a battle for survival.

As you can see from these brief examples there is a problem, a major problem, and one so big that there is no way that the lead character can ignore it. A decision must be made.

For Frodo he decides to throw the ring into Mount Doom in order to destroy it. Harry Potter decides to find the Philosopher's stone first and give it to Dumbledore before Voldemort can get it. And in Jurassic Park Dr. Grant and others decide to flee the island and escape before being eaten.

With every conflict, whether the main story conflict or smaller scene conflict, there is a response that is generated. Someone has to decide to do something.

Make your conflict big. It needs to be. It needs to be heavy enough that your lead character has no other option but to do something in response.

Conflict moves your story along.

Question 2:

How did this problem/conflict start?

Things to Consider:

This conflict didn't just start out of nowhere. Conflict of this magnitude doesn't happen in a vacuum. More than likely, there are several external or internal factors that played into this conflict starting so discover these factors and you are on your way to becoming a masterful storyteller.

Question 3:

Who does your story conflict affect? How?

Things to Consider:

The obvious answer to the first part of the question is that the conflict affects your hero in the story. But you also need to know HOW it affects him.

Also, the conflict in your story doesn't just affect your hero. There are other people involved in this story and each one can/will be affected somehow. Write out as much as you know about who is affected and how.

Question 4:

What happens if the main story conflict isn't solved or handled?

Things to Consider:

What I mean is, if the conflict goes unsolved or not handled by the hero what happens? Obviously the villain wins but what does it look like? What happens to the story world in which your character lives if the conflict is not handled or solved?

Example:

If Frodo never tossed the ring into Mount Doom and Sauron was able to obtain the ring, what would Frodo's life look like? How about a Middle Earth with Sauron in charge? What would have happened to Merry and Pippen and the other characters if Frodo didn't solve the conflict?

You need to know what happens because it adds urgency and weight to your story. It gives the reader the impression that this conflict is a big deal and HAS to be solved or handled.

The villain can't win.

Question 5:

What happens if the story conflict IS solved and handled?

Things to Consider

Understanding what is at stake and what can be gained is essential to completely wrapping your mind around writing your story. I know I probably sound like a broken record but I honestly believe there is nothing more fundamental to the foundation of a story than the conflict that drives it.

So understanding all the small details of your story conflict will only serve to help you be a better writer, not only for this book but for future books as well.

Question 6:

Why can't the hero solve the conflict right away?

Things to Consider

The goal of this question is to add some deeper levels and intricacy to your story. By answering the question above you will have to add some complexity to your story conflict that doesn't allow for the hero to solve it right away.

If the hero can solve the situation in five minutes or without much effort then the conflict isn't big enough to carry the weight of a 300 page story.

Question 7:

Why should your lead character care?

Things to Consider

It is one thing to have a great big story conflict that is multi-leveled and complex but if your lead character could care less, then what is the point.

You need to make sure this conflict and problem your story introduces is big enough but also zeroed in on making it hurt for him.

It has to be personal, it has to deliver a moment where there is no other option but to move, it should make him care about solving the conflict.

In Summary

Here are the seven questions you need to answer for this Foundation Factor.

1. What is the main conflict in your story?
2. How did this problem/conflict start?

3. Who does your story conflict affect? How?
4. What happens if the main story conflict isn't solved or handled?
5. What happens if the story conflict IS solved and handled?
6. Why can't the lead character solve the conflict right away?
7. Why should your lead character care?

Next Up

Foundation Factor #2 – Lead Character

Foundation Factor #2 – Lead Character

In this Foundation Factor we are going to be exploring your lead character. We are going to learn about who he is, what motivates him, what scares him, and all the things you need to know about your hero. The more you know about him now the more it will help you later when you are making decisions for him in your story.

Question 1:

Who is the lead character in your story?

Things to Consider

What I am looking for here is for you to start articulating who your story hero is. Write everything you know about him and who he is. The remaining questions in this section will help draw out and articulate these things you list now.

To help jumpstart your thought process, answer this additional question from the point of view of your lead character.

One thing you don't know about me is *[fill in the blank]*.

That question prompt will start you down the road of knowing the mental makeup and characteristics of your lead character. You might even be surprised in how your character responds to the question.

If you really want to go deep, conduct an interview with your lead character. Ask questions of your character and write down what their response is. Make sure not to filter the answers during this process. Just let the muse work and write down their responses to each of your questions. This is a fun exercise and is great for getting the mind working.

Question 2:

What are your lead's story goals?

Things to Consider

When answering this question you will break your answer down into two different categoriesⁱⁱ. The first category is the ambition of the lead character and the second category is the tangible story goal of the lead character.

Ambition Goal

This goal is what the character wants but is not a tangible enough to have force. Example of this could be revenge or saving the world. These are good goals but for a lead character they are not tangible or concrete enough. They need to be more specific.

In Star Wars, Luke has an ambition for revenge against those who killed his aunt and uncle.

In Lord of the Rings, Frodo wants to stop Sauron before he comes back to power and gains control of Middle Earth.

Both of these examples are ambitions of the hero but couldn't be classified as a tangible story goal. They are too broad and vague. It is a start though and is needed in order to tighten and narrow your hero's story goal.

Tangible Story Goal

Once you have your ambition goal decided, then take it and make it specific.

You want to go from vague to specific.

- Luke wants revenge for the deaths of his aunt and uncle (ambition)
- Luke decides to become a Jedi so he can learn the force in order to defeat Darth Vader by blowing up the Death Star. (tangible story goal)

The ambition of the hero is not the same as the actual story goal. One is abstract, or vague, and the other is tangible and attainable.

Start with the ambition of the lead character then work on the actual specific story goal.

Question 3:

What are some of your lead's quirks or unique qualities?

Things to Consider

I know what you might be thinking, *why does this matter?* But honestly knowing some quirks about your character will help add depth and realism to him as you write.

What happens a lot of times is that the character is so alive to the writer but it never translates to the reader because the reader can't be inside of your head to see your hero the way you do.

Take the time and make your hero alive and real for the readers. Give them something about him that they love or at least remember.

That being said, even if only you know the quirks are there and they never make it onto paper that is alright. It just means you are beginning to know your character really well now.

Question 4:

How does the lead character get pulled into the story?

Things to Consider

In order for character arc and progression to take place in your story, your readers will need to see the life of your character before the **Problem** of the story pulled him in. The Problem of the story adds

all kinds of chaos and decisions to his life, so having a glimpse (even a brief one) of the character's life before the problem begins to help the reader buy-in and root for your character.

Knowing how the character gets pulled into the problem provides several elements to your story:

1. Readers get a glimpse of the character's life before problem (change)
2. Forces you to make decisions about the gravity of the problem and why it affects the lead character. (importance)
3. Lays a foundation of character and story arc (progression)

Question 5:

What is the bio of your lead character?

Things to Consider

I understand if this sounds like a dry exercise but the more you know about your lead character the more the real he will show up on the pages. It will flow naturally in your writing because you will know so much more about him. It will also allow people who read your story feel like they know him intimately and that is what you want.

But if you want your readers to know your lead character intimately, think Harry Potter, how are they going to know him if you don't even know him.

Take the time and answer the exercise questions below. For good measure, try to fill out a bio sheet for each of the major characters in your novel.

Here are some typical bio sheet questions to get you started:

1. Name
2. Age
3. Hair color
4. Eye color
5. Height
6. Weight
7. Siblings
8. Occupation
9. Greatest fear
10. First love
11. Religious preference
12. Physical description (e.g. lightning bolt scar above eye)
13. Friends (male and female)
14. Hobbies
15. Education
16. Parents
17. Personality
18. Athletic abilities

19. What do they consider a fun Friday night?
20. Would you want to be friends with them? Why or why not?

Use this list to get you started on crafting your lead character and all additional characters you choose to run through this exercise.

Question 6:

What is the summary of your lead character within the story?

Things to Consider

This exercise is really going to stretch your thinking about your lead character and your story. I know we haven't spent any time on the objective and resolution yet, so this is a good time to start brainstorming them.

Think about:

- The problem
- How your character is introduced to the problem, how he manages the problem, how he resolves it.
- What does he have to do to win?

Try to write a one paragraph summary of your lead character in the story. The key is to start combining all the story elements that you have written down already along with the ones in your head and start making some sense out of it.

Question 7:

How does your character change throughout the story?

Things to Consider

This question is meant to start building some character arc for your lead. He needs to change. If he is shy and timid in the beginning of the story and at the end he is still the same, then the problem of your story wasn't big enough.

The problem should be big enough to force your character to change.

In Summary

Here are the seven questions you need to answer for this Foundation Factor.

1. Who is the hero in your story?
2. What are your hero's story goals? (ambition and tangible)
3. What are some of your hero's quirks or unique qualities?
4. How does the lead character get pulled into the story?

5. What is the bio of your lead character?
6. What is the summary of your lead character within the story?
7. How does your character change throughout the story?

Next Up

Foundation Factor #3 – Objective

Foundation Factor #3 – Objective

In this Foundation Factor we are going to explore the objective of your main character along with the objective of your antagonist – yes, your antagonist has an objective just like your lead character.

Question 1:

What is the main objective of the antagonist of the story?

Things to Consider

Your lead character obviously has an objective that he is trying to complete. But it is usually in response to the objective of the antagonist's. So it is helpful to start with the antagonist's objective since it will give you some guardrails as to what would be the logical objective of your lead character.

For example:

Sauron wants the ring for himself so he can rule Middle Earth. That objective provides a natural objective for Frodo, destroy the ring.

Question 2:

What is the main objective of your lead character?

Things to Consider

Look back over your notes with regards to your antagonist's story objective and fine tune anything you need to by adding to or taking away. For this exercise remember that your lead character's objective should be a natural response to what your antagonist is doing. They can't be so disconnected that it seems like two different stories.

With these notes in mind answer the following questions.

1. What is the objective of the lead character? (Try to be as specific as you can be)
2. Does the lead character's objective flow naturally from the antagonist's? How?
3. How do the two tie together (lead and antagonist)?
4. Would the lead character have different story objective if the antagonist didn't have his objective? What would have it been? (This shows the reader disruption in the lead character's *normal* life)

Question 3:

What happens if the objective is not met? (Antagonist)

Things to Consider

There should be something driving an objective. A person's objective to do something isn't usually done in a vacuum since there is a specific reason why they are doing what they are doing.

Detail out what happens if the antagonist doesn't meet his objective. Do worlds get destroyed, does he go to jail, lose his family, fame, or fortune?

There is a reason why he is doing what he is doing. Find out why.

Question 4:

What happens if the objective is not met? (Lead character)

Things to Consider

Same idea as the question above. Detail what happens if the lead character's objective is not met, or achieved.

Question 5:

Why can't the lead character achieve the objective right away?

Things to Consider

This is going to take some preplanning and thinking to answer this question. You will need to think of all the different reasons why the lead character can't just achieve the objective as soon as he is faced with the Problem.

Question 6:

Why can't the antagonist achieve his objective right away?

Things to Consider

Just like your lead character, your antagonist shouldn't be able to achieve his objective right away. He will face obstacles, setbacks, and failures along the way to his objective and it is for you to find out what those are.

Question 7:

Does the objective matter? Why is it important?

Things to Consider

Taking what you know about your lead's objective and the antagonist's, dig deeper to discover why this objective, for both characters, is so important.

This might seem like a rehash of what we have been doing, and in a way that's true, but now you are specifically naming why this objective matters. Is the objective important enough, big enough, to warrant an entire book?

Start to see the relationship between all the elements so far so that you begin to understand how they build upon each other.

Problem (the main conflict) → Objective (what he wants) → Resolution (what actually happens)

Your character's objective is directly proportional to the problem the story presents. Big problem requires bigger objectives. The objectives of your characters need to matter because if they don't they will feel artificial compared to the problem that produces them.

In Summary

Here are the seven questions you need to answer for this Foundation Factor.

1. What is the main objective of the antagonist of the story?
2. What is the main objective of your lead character?
3. What happens if the objective is not met? (Antagonist)
4. What happens if the objective is not met? (Lead character)
5. Why can't the lead character achieve the objective right away?
6. Why can't the antagonist achieve his objective right away?
7. Does the objective matter? Why is it important?

Next Up

Foundation Factor #4 – The Resolution

Foundation Factor #4 – The Resolution

In this Foundation Factor we are going to explore and answer questions about the ending of our story. Understanding and knowing the ending of your story helps you create two important things.

1. Story arc
2. Character arc

Story Arc

When you know how the story ends and the details that make up the ending you can begin your story with the opposite in mind. For example, if the world is desolate with an evil power taking control then you would begin your story with the world being serene and utopia like. And as your story progresses there would be change, an arc, to the end.

Character Arc

Just like story arc, the ending lets you create a believable character arc. For example, if your lead character ends the story as brave and confident then you would start him timid and shy. And as your story moves along all the obstacles in the middle would be set in place for a purpose, to move him from one set of character attributes to another.

So let's get into the questions for this final Foundation Factor.

Question 1:

How does the story end? (happy/sad)

Things to Consider

Usually a story ends one of two ways, happy or sad. In older days they would classify these two kinds of endings as Drama or Comedy. I'm sure you can guess which one is the happy one and which one the sad one.

Although we are not writing the ending of the story yet, we are determining the feeling the ending will give. Will it have a happy ending or a sad one? Once you determine that then we can begin to list out the details of the ending that further develop and add the basis of why.

Question 2:

Does the ending tie up all loose ends?

Things to Consider

If there are loose ends that the ending doesn't tie up then you will need to decide how you are going to manage them. Not all loose ends will be tied up by the end of your story since loose ends are what provide sequels and book series. But if your story is going to have loose ends you need to kind of hint that they will be tied up at some point.

I would also suggest that you do not have any major loose ends still out there from your main plot. That is not to say that everything will be tied up, but your main story problem should be completed.

If the reader gets to the end and it says, “The End” and there hasn’t been closure. Then I would suspect frustration would ensue and that would be the last book they buy of yours.

Question 3:

Does the character achieve his objective in the end? How?

Things to Consider

You will need to answer this question for both your lead character and your antagonist. Put some focus into explaining, not just if they achieved their objective, but also how they did it.

Did the lead character achieve his objective of defeating the villain? Yes? Great, but how?

Also, list any details of what happened if they failed in their objective.

Question 4:

How does the end of your story look compared to the beginning?

Things to Consider

Just like we looked at the characteristics of the lead character at the end of our story (brave) and then started the beginning with the opposite (timid), we are doing the same with the story.

How different was Middle Earth in the end compared to how it was presented to us in the beginning?

What about the world of Harry Potter?

Hogwarts looks and feels different in the end that it does when Harry first arrives.

Why is that?

This difference provides a story arc. It gives progression as the story moves along. If the story starts as a utopian paradise and in the end it is still the same, then the problem and antagonist wasn’t very effective.

There needs to be change in the story just like there is change for the character.

One of the best ways to build this arc is to picture and develop the environment, setting, and feeling of the end. That way when your story opens you begin with the opposite in mind and then you know what end you are writing to.

This opposite in the beginning provides you a roadmap to the end.

Question 5:

What is the ending from the perspective of your lead character?

Things to Consider

Get inside your lead's mind and write a summary of the ending from his point of view. What does he feel? What kind of emotions, setbacks, and challenges does he experience? Be specific and detailed.

You want to write this from a first person narrative even if you are going to be writing your story in third person. Writing the ending in a first person narrative from the viewpoint of your lead character will force you to get inside his head and make decisions. You might even be surprised by the things that turn up as you write.

Also, this summary only needs to be a few paragraphs in length. You don't have to write the whole ending just yet.

Question 6:

What is the ending from the perspective of your antagonist?

Things to Consider

Again the perspective changes depending on the character. Your antagonist probably views himself as the good guy or maybe justified in what he is doing because it is for a greater good. So when you write your summary, don't write as if he knows himself to be bad with all the normal cartoonish clichés that go along with being the villain.

Make sure you are creative.

Question 7:

What makes you excited about the ending of your story?

Things to Consider

We all hate an ending that doesn't live up to our expectations, so take some time and brainstorm why this ending is so exciting.

- Does it live up to the hype and tension you have been building throughout the story?
- Do you need to go bigger?
- Need to go smaller?
- Is it a logical conclusion to what has been happening?
- Is there a twist nobody's coming?

You need to think about what it is about your ending that will make people say "wow" that was a great story!

In Summary

Here are the seven questions you need to answer for this Foundation Factor.

1. How does the story end? (happy/sad)
2. Does the ending tie up all loose ends?
3. Does the character achieve his objective in the end? How?
4. How does the end of your story look compared to the beginning?
5. What is the ending from the perspective of your lead character?
6. What is the ending from the perspective of your antagonist?
7. Are you ready to start writing your book?

Next Up

What's next – Where do you go from here?

What's Next?

If you have made it to this point, *congratulations*, you are farther along than most beginner writers and have a solid understanding of your story and the foundational elements that make it up.

But what do you do now?

Good question.

I would suggest you go back over your notes and refine anything that needs further detailing and describing. And when you feel comfortable I would then take your notes and begin to apply some story structure to them. We laid the foundation in this guide but now it is time to build the structure on top.

If you are unsure of how to do that, I have written several blog posts on how to structure a story in seven points and it works in relation with these four **Foundation Factors**. The last Foundation Factor, The Resolution, provides the basis of the first story structure point, The Hook.

You can find a listing of all these Story Structure posts [here](#).

These are by far my most popular posts on WriterstoAuthors.com as they are viewed thousands of times every month by beginner writers just like you. I am sure they will be of great help to you.

However, whether you view these posts or not, the most important thing you can do is not give up or stop writing. Don't let all this hard work you did go to waste. Continue to work on this craft and the best way to do that is by writing.

As the saying goes, *Writers write*.

Thank You

Additionally to saying *congratulations*, I would also like to say *thank you*. This little eBook was created with you in mind in the hopes of helping you overcome some of the anxieties and fogginess of crafting a great story.

I would also like to thank you for signing up for my newsletter and making our community of beginner writers stronger and better than it was before. If for some reason this guide was given to you by a friend and you didn't get a chance to sign up for my blog, you can find the subscription page [here](#).

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References

ⁱ The acronym PLOT was inspired by James Scott Bell's LOCK system that he developed and teaches. If you would like to learn more about James Scott Bell's LOCK system I highly encourage you to read his book titled *Plot & Structure*. You should never begin writing a novel without a copy of this book on your desk. You can also find more about him at <http://jamesscottbell.com>.

ⁱⁱ Randy Ingermanson does a great job of explaining these two different story goals in his Snowflake Method. You can find out more about it on his website advancedfictionwriting.com.