

# The Writing Cycle

*Shape your story.*

5 Essential Questions for  
Shaping a Story with  
**Artistry & Expertise**



[www.writingcycle.com](http://www.writingcycle.com)

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**T**HOREAU ONCE ASKED, “COULD A GREATER MIRACLE TAKE PLACE THAN FOR US TO LOOK THROUGH EACH OTHER’S EYES FOR AN INSTANT?”

Few things offer this glimpse as effectively as a good book. By immersing readers in the experiences of others, literature facilitates empathy. That’s worthy work. And The Writing Cycle is passionate about helping writers get their work publication-ready.

Whether you’re polishing a draft for submission or simply yearning to deepen the artistry and professionalism of your work, this complimentary guide will empower you to:

- Understand the secret of resonant writing.
- Increase writing speed.
- Craft masterful openings.
- Emphasize individuality to up your publishing edge.

### Materials needed:

- A printed version of this PDF and a pen.
- The first three pages of your current work-in-progress.
- Time and willingness to answer each of the questions – in writing.



## WHY QUESTIONS, NOT TIPS?

As a creative writing professor, I'll never forget the day I changed my workshop format from allowing students to offer comments on one another's manuscripts to insisting they pose only questions to the authors under discussion. This instantly elevated discourse, laser-focusing on each draft's strengths and bypassing generalities in favor of probing what each story ultimately wanted to explore.

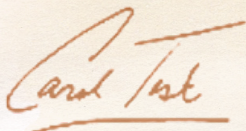
Here's what I learned: Statements can be polarizing. They prompt listeners to agree, disagree, or even disengage. Questions require introspection, a far "stickier" experience than that which arises from reading a list of tips or simply hearing someone's opinion. More importantly, questions tap into the part of the brain that facilitates creativity and innovation. Why not think about writing in a way that better reflects – and activates – the creative process?

The highest value editing professionals offer comes from knowing the *right questions* to ask authors at each stage of the writing cycle. An editor may elevate a manuscript toward publishable quality, but only its author can dream up an idea, draft a compelling story, and infuse this with his or her distinct personality. Remember, craft can be mastered, but creativity is innate. Good writing requires both.

That's where these 5 Essential Questions come in.

The questions posed in this complimentary guide have been designed to help you achieve greater clarity, resonance and distinction in your writing. I hope they connect you more intimately with your work-in-progress . . . and your process. By venturing answers in these pages, you open yourself to the wisdom you already possess along with all that awaits discovery through the act of writing itself.

It's a privilege to join you on this journey. Let's get started.



Founder, The Writing Cycle  
[www.writingcycle.com](http://www.writingcycle.com)



Carol Test helps writers achieve creative goals. She brings her signature skill set and passionate commitment to every project, elevating the smallest of details while zeroing in on what an author ultimately wants to say. Explore her custom editing, critique, and coaching services at [writingcycle.com](http://writingcycle.com).



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## 1. Does your opening hook readers with key questions?

The rise of online submissions means it's likely your manuscript will first be encountered by agents or editors in digital format. Form affects experience – people's attention spans are shorter online. In addition, agencies often lack the staff to read unsolicited submissions to completion, so it's essential you craft an opening that hooks readers on page one.

Many writers mistakenly believe this means an opening must contain some gimmick or high drama. In fact, a hook need only include a *question* that readers yearn to answer.

Read through the first three pages of your work-in-progress to see if you can clearly identify:

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"A good idea doesn't make a good book. A good writer makes a good book."

- Shannon Cain

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### 1. What's the plot question?

Every story is a mystery, no matter the genre in which you're writing. Readers read on in order to uncover answers: will the lovers stay together, will he find his father's killer, will they survive the war . . . will she ever change? It helps to frame your central conflict in terms of a question, explicit or implied, in the first three pages.

Your plot: \_\_\_\_\_

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## 2. What's the clock?

Clock refers to the duration of time it takes for the present action of a story or novel to unfold. Readers appreciate the brackets a clock provides; these tell them when a story will end or what event a novel is building toward. A clock might span the duration of a holiday weekend, a road trip, or a tour of duty. Ann Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, for example, uses the duration of an interview as clock, while the novel's backstory comprises the vampire's life. The tighter your clock, the greater the tension.

Your clock: \_\_\_\_\_  
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## 3. What occasions the story?

Antonya Nelson, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston and author of the acclaimed story collection *Funny Once*, encourages writers to think of occasion in medical terms: When you attend a 50-minute therapy session, you cannot cover the material of your entire life. Instead, you must answer the question, "What brings you in *today*?" This is the presenting condition. Underlying this may be chronic conditions that get brought to light as a result.

*Why are events unfolding now, as opposed to at any other time in the main character's life?*

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If you cannot clearly identify plot, clock, and occasion in your opening, read onward to find where each first appears. Look for ways to work these in earlier. (Very often, writers find their true opening buried somewhere on page five.)



## 2. What mystery about the human experience does your story explore?

Resonant writing involves raising questions rather than offering easy answers. An answer can be reductive, whereas a question gives readers something to consider long after they've closed a book. Consider the thematic statement: "Slavery is bad." While most readers would agree, this doesn't invite them into contemplation of all the disquieting reasons used to justify slavery throughout history. "Why do good people do bad things?" or "In what ways does a society founded on freedom justify keeping certain groups enslaved?" both open doors to deeper thinking.

Manuscripts gain immediate dimension and sophistication when authors pose theme as a question rather than a statement. For example, "What if we lived in a world where people had no sex organs, and were therefore free of gender roles?" (Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*.) Or, "If love is transient in nature, why bother cultivating it?" (70% of all short stories ever written.)

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"Fiction is about enlarging - not resolving - mystery. Love, death, how we live in the world, these things remain mysterious, that's why we write about them."

- Robert Boswell

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**Phrase the theme of your work-in-progress as a question.**

Once you've identified your thematic question, place it in the header of your document to serve as a reminder of what your work wants to be about.

*What larger question about the human experience does this story explore?*

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### 3. What's the connection between you and your material?

Art arises from *who you are* + *what you notice*. There's always a reason a particular moment strikes you as story-worthy. Perhaps you view it differently than others do. Perhaps it raises a question that puzzles you. Perhaps it encapsulates some key challenge faced by your family, culture, or generation. Even if the answer remains unclear, it's vital to consider:

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"Many times your feeling for an idea is as important as the so-called 'quality' of the idea itself."

- Ron Carlson

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#### Why has this material captured your imagination?

This connection will sustain your interest through the drafting process and ensure your writing remains distinctive. After all, if what you write could be composed by anyone else in too similar a fashion, you aren't yet maximizing the connection between author and subject.

*Potential connections:* \_\_\_\_\_

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## 4. What 30-minute writing task can you tackle today?

Most of us prefer short-term goals with tangible results. Art time, by contrast, can feel endless. Writing a book, a task whose measures of “success” are rarely guaranteed, requires tremendous tolerance for uncertainty. Few writers are blessed with innate stores of this, which leads them to mistake difficulties inherent to the creative process for personal defects.

Stanford professor Bob Sutton notes ambitious goals that promise distant rewards almost *always* cause individuals to freeze up. Instead, small, visible accomplishments keep people motivated. If you’re eager to achieve ambitious goals, frame tasks in ways that facilitate momentum and encourage success.

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“One day’s work is all I can permit myself to contemplate.”

– John Steinbeck

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### 1. Adopt a mono-tasking mentality.

Mono-tasking activates the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing stress and stimulating parts of the brain conducive to innovation; multi-tasking releases cortisol, creating the brain wave state least conducive to creative work. Use neuroscience to your advantage by setting a single goal each time you sit down to write. When drafting, focus efforts on a single scene, or even a single description. If you plan to revise, pick one (and only one) element to fix at a time.

### 2. Type, don’t think, your way forward.

You’ll get more from a day of drafting than from a month of thinking or research. Good ideas are rarely in place at a project’s inception; instead, they get discovered through action. “Throwaway” details included merely to sketch out setting or get characters talking in the first draft of a two-page scene may later reveal themselves to be potential plot points or metaphor. Make use of whatever drafting yields. Your unconscious will offer up more than you anticipate.

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### 3. Set daily tasks, not grand goals.

Writing a book is a grand goal. Describing what your main character forgot to do last night is a doable task. Publishing the next Great American Novel triggers stress by turning your focus toward a dream *not yet achieved*. Completing a paragraph builds up your word count and self-esteem. Your confidence and momentum should grow as writing sessions progress. If they do not, consider taking your current list of writing tasks and breaking them into smaller steps.

*What specific task can you approach today? (Be realistic, not idealistic: Could you complete this task in a 30-minute session?)*

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*If not, how can you break it down into two or three smaller steps? List these here.*

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## 5. How do you emphasize your individuality as an author?

According to a *New York Times* article by Joseph Epstein, “81 percent of Americans feel that they have a book in them — and should write it.” That equals approximately 200 million people who aspire to authorship. While only a small percentage of Americans achieve this, nearly 17,000 query agents each year. So how do you set your work apart?

Acquisitions editors suggest debut authors lean into their individuality to up chances of seeing their work in print. While the world doesn’t need more stories exactly like the ones we already have, the world might need your story. Why? Because there is no one exactly like you.

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“Personality is our way of processing the world, our way of being, and it cannot be artificially removed from our activities.”

- Zadie Smith

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### Identify and embrace:

#### 1. Your passion.

Make a list of your five favorite books and five favorite films. Identify elements they have in common. (Exotic locales? Love triangles? Epic scope?) Notice if a particular theme or obsession arises again and again. What you are drawn to speaks to what you should be writing.

*Favorites:*

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## 2. Your purpose.

Tracking Wonder Founder Jeffrey Davis defines purpose as a “more-than-me yearning” and cites studies performed at Harvard Business School that rate purpose as the most important motivator for sustaining momentum over time, outranking both performance and profit. Identifying motivational forces – both ego-driven and altruistic – helps pinpoint questions about the human condition that pique your interest, as well as the subject matter through which you enjoy exploring them.

*What are you writing for?* \_\_\_\_\_  
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## 3. Your influences.

Each writer functions best at a specific intersection of time, place, and eternity, according to Flannery O'Connor. Why not put specificity to work in your favor? List some things that make you distinct. They need not be dramatic – they only need be specific. Once you have your list, draft into questions such as: *How has being a second-born impacted the way you see the world? What would have been different if you hadn't been born in Arizona?* You may find yourself a more interesting person than you realize.

*Distinctions:* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Ready to shape your story?*  
Explore our custom editing and  
one-on-one consulting services  
for authors.

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