

*Universal Grammar of Story™*  
**The Workbook**

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Workshop Handouts  
The Call to Write  
Willamette Writers Conference  
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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: *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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# 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.

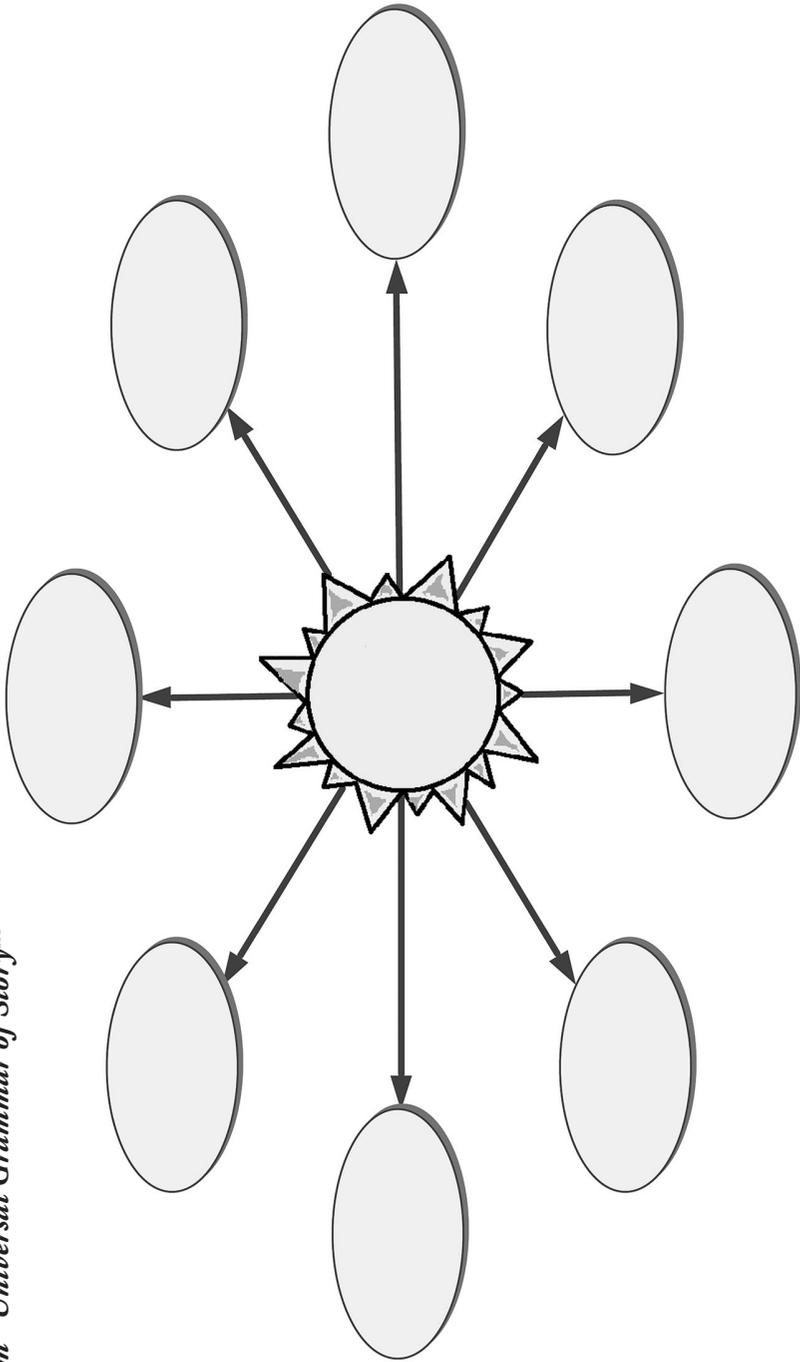
### Character Relationship Exercises

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 Two

# The Social Call

Chapter two expands our investigation of the call to write into the social sphere where writers' personal needs give way to that of the collective. Here, writers move beyond the self, in service to something greater: society's struggle against the crushing threat of atrophy brought on by the status quo. The world begs its writers to "do something!" Yet more often than not it paradoxically refuses to cooperate or even recognize the writer's vital work. Even so, in such lonely moments, writers persevere and through their characters push the wheel that keeps our social world evolving.

While the personal call changes over the course of a writer's life as problems come and go, the social call by contrast remains ever the same throughout its era. It also remains the same across all creative disciplines: Painters, poets, composers, writers, and performing artists of all walks are drawn together by the force of a single, grand collective need. In Modernity that need was to restore our humanity against the heartless brutality of the industrial world. The echo of that summons can still be heard although it is fast fading. As postmodernity takes its dominant role, we are ever more strongly called to guide society to tribal reunion in the aftermath of modernity's brutal scattering us from one another.

The exercises below direct you in recognizing the social call. They also direct you in analyzing rudimentary character archetypes based on the work of Carl Jung. A balance of archetypes is necessary for a cohesive tribe to emerge and hold together throughout the story. While hundreds of archetypal roles exist, here we just need those primal, symbolic family roles projected by characters. Such include father, mother, child, grandparents, etc. On a metaphorical level these roles are not concerned with age. For example, a child might carry out the role of a parent figure as in Ben Zeitlin's film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Here, we see the mother figure develop in a six-year old girl named Hush Puppy. Likewise, in stories about men at sea, one will take on the mother role, another the grandmother

role, etc. (although it is possible for one character to symbolize more than one role).

For the purpose of these exercises, the terms “hero” and “villain” refer to Jungian concepts of these archetypes—primal symbols of good and bad—not to be confused with the actual hero and villain/antihero of Universal Grammar of Story™ proper, taken up in the core narrative theories to come.

## Chapter Two: Individual Exercises

See Example Answers on page 101.

1. Is your chosen study-story aimed at modernity or post-modernity? Specify the elements that represent this and explain what changes would be needed for an audience of the other era.
2. How might you answer the postmodern craving for re-tribe-ing or reconnection in the story you are writing?
3. Distribute the characters of your study story among the generational primal archetypes using the worksheet below. (Remember, the generational role a character plays need not fit the actual age of the character).

### *Worksheet 2: Generational Primal Archetypes for the Study Story*

Story Title:		Author:
Archetype	Function	Character
Father	Leader, imposer of order, the status quo	
Mother	Nurturer, comforter, intercessor of the father	
Child	Innocent, vulnerable figure, victim, the needful one	
God	All powerful creator. The purely good one of whom all are in awe	
Devil	Destroyer. The wrench in the works of the purely good one. The despised one	

Wise Grandfather	Guru, intercessor of God, masterful transformer of Devil	
Wise Grandmother	Crone, nurturing, magic maker, balancing creation & destruction	
Trickster	Defies the status quo	
Hero	The everyday person at the highest level of virtue	
Villain	The everyday person at the lowest level of virtue	

4. Distribute the characters in the story you are writing among the generational primal archetypes using the worksheet below.

***Worksheet 3: Generational Primal Archetypes for Developing Story***

Story Title:		Author:
<b>Archetype</b>	<b>Metaphorical Role/ Figurative Role</b>	<b>Character</b>
Father	Leader, imposer of order, the status quo	
Mother	Nurturer, comforter, intercessor of the father	
Child	Innocent, vulnerable figure, victim, the needful one	
God	All powerful creator. The purely good one of whom all are in awe	
Devil	Destroyer. The wrench in the works of the purely good one. The one we all despise	
Wise Grandfather	Guru, intercessor of God, masterful transformer of Devil	
Wise Grandmother	Crone, nurturing magic maker, balancing creation & destruction	

Trickster	Defies the status quo	
Hero	The everyday person at the highest level of virtue	
Villain	The everyday person at the lowest level of virtue	

5. What elements of your story depict realistic discord within a family system?
6. Identify and analyze the negative and positive characters in your Generational Primal Archetype Worksheets above.
7. How do the characters in the Generational Primal Archetype Worksheets reflect a well-balanced tribe or pseudo-tribe? Do not confuse “balanced” with “harmonious.” A balanced tribe has enough representation of archetypes to be believable regardless of how dysfunctional it is. Note that a harmonious tribe of all sister archetypes will not feel nearly as believable or satisfying as a severely dysfunctional tribe balanced with the symbols of mother, father, grandfather, etc.
  - A. What other characters or elements might be conceived of to fulfill missing roles?
  - B. If one character takes on more than one role, does this add to the story’s vitality or confuse it?
8. How do the characters in the story you are writing reflect your own family, legends in your family, or fantasy of the ideal family?
9. How do your characters experience discord and come to terms with it through the interplay of archetypes?
  - A. What is the precise mechanism?
  - B. Would this be realistic in everyday life?

## Chapter Three

# The Mythological Call

The mythological call comes out of an instinctive need for us to share a moment of collective reverence with others on a deeply subconscious level. We know we are in a mystical/mythological moment when we lose ourselves in the beauty of a story, briefly lose track of time and place, and feel a sense of awe with others sharing the experience.

In such moments of collective reverence, we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves—freed from personal anguish and the stress of surviving.

The ancient Greeks thoughtfully provided for collective reverence with a sacred yearly festival of magnificent stories. While such grand pageants are important, they are not necessary for us to experience shared reverence. Even a simple story can bring it about, providing one essential element is present in the work; the hero must undergo a moment of authentic ego release through which the audience can experience a greater reality. This is often characterized as a quasi-religious experience.

From within the prison of our own egos we see only ourselves. Everything else is an interpretation of what our ego wants to see. But once the ego walls are breached and we see the reality of a greater world around us, we experience a moment of ecstasy. Unfortunately, most of us quickly fall back into the amnesia of self-centeredness thus dissolving the new vision. Then it comes again for another fleeting moment with another story granting us a peak at the ultimate reality again.

For a story to be worthy of the mythological call, writers must present the hero's momentary transcendence in a way that the audience vicariously experiences it. Stories that fail in this regard leave us disappointed and feeling exploited of time and money.

The details of character transcendence are taken up in Chapter Eight. For now, we are just touching on the general concept of it at work in the mythological call.

This ethereal idea resists easy analysis but there are a few tests we can conduct to identify where and when a story has adequately responded to the mythological call. It comes at that moment when we can no longer hold back the tear breaking away from the corner of our eyes. We feel goosebumps, lose track of time and forget we are watching a movie or reading a story. It's that point where our focus changes from wondering what happens next in the sequence of events, to wondering how the hero is going to react to these events.

The mythological call lets us re-conceptualize our real-life struggles and find new solutions via a new perspective.

### **Chapter Three: Individual Exercises**

1. Name a few stories that have deeply touched you and identify the moments that gave you chills or brought you to tears.
2. In your study story, do you experience a moment when you turn to the person next to you to see how they are reacting?
3. Identify places in your study story where you forget you are watching/listening/reading a story and become “one” with it—where you forget yourself and your stresses?
4. How do you see the story you are writing serve the audience rather than exploit it?
5. In the story you are writing, what elements might bring about a profound emotional change in the audience's feelings about the hero?

From Chapter Four

*Exercises in Emotion*

The first step in developing emotional skill comes with identifying and mapping how you physically react to emotional situations. For example, what happens to you physically when you stand up in front of a crowd to give a speech? Even the most logically written speech can quickly become a sheer emotional experience in such a situation.

1. The outer body experiences. Rate how the surface/skin of your body reacts to an emotional situation.

*Worksheet 1: Outer Body Experiences*

	Low	High
Perspiration	1-----	10
Twitching	1-----	10
Flushing	1-----	10
Blotching	1-----	10
Describe reactions with your skin:		

2. The inner body experiences. Rate how your inner body reacts to the emotional situations.

*Worksheet 2: Inner Body Experiences*

	Low	High
Trembling hands/arms	1-----	10
Trembling knees/legs	1-----	10
Trembling jaw	1-----	10
Trembling shoulders	1-----	10
Nausea	1-----	10
Chest breathing	1-----	10

(Instead of diaphragmatic breathing)

Describe your inner body reaction:

3. Face facts. How does your face, tongue, and throat react?

Worksheet 3: Face Facts

	Low	High
Voice raises	1-----	10
Speaking too fast	1-----	10
Breathy voice	1-----	10
Tongue clumsy/heavy	1-----	10
Teeth clench/jaw tight	1-----	10
Describe the changes in your throat/jaw/and face (these affect your voice and sound production):		

4. Core Reactions. How does your central nervous system and cognitive processing react?

Worksheet 4: Core Reactions

	Low	High
Heart rate increases	1-----	10
Memory blanks out	1-----	10
Feeling dissociative	1-----	10
Color and sound changes	1-----	10
Difficulty keeping focused	1-----	10

Heightened sense of awareness	1-----10
Feeling “jumpy”	1-----10
Describe some feelings associated with your central nervous system and cognitive processing functions.	

5. Emotional Reactions. How do your emotions affect how you feel about yourself?

*Worksheet 5: Emotional Reactions*

	Low	High
Feeling inadequate	1-----10	
Fear of being boring	1-----10	
Fear of looking dumb	1-----10	
Fear of showing fear	1-----10	
Depressed at self	1-----10	
Angry at self	1-----10	
Happy at self	1-----10	
Describe your emotional reactions:		

*Exercises in Intuition*

These final exercises address intuition or what we call “sudden insight.” This is the mode of thinking that brings solutions to complex problems all at once. It functions infinitely faster than understanding through our senses or use of language. While we cannot “will” this type of thought into being, we can still create favorable situations for it to arise.

Rollo May suggests that intuitive thinking comes at an “in between point” between work and rest. It’s that moment when we are getting on the bus that we suddenly know how to write the term paper. Or we might be just stepping out on the jogging trail when a breakthrough comes. For many, it often comes first thing in the morning, in the transition between sleeping and waking.

6. Keep a journal of your experience of sudden insight guided by the following questions:
  - A. Where were you when it happened?
  - B. What time of day was it?
  - C. What were you doing just before the idea came?
  - D. How long did it take for the idea to completely unfold in your mind?
  - E. Write out the complete idea.
  - F. Compare how long it took to grasp the idea in your mind as it arrived, to how long it took to translate it in the logical realm of language.
7. Become more aware of your periods of transition between work and rest or play. Do you notice ideas coming more easily in such transitions? If so, contemplate the way you think in these transitions compared to the way you think in just work or just rest.