

Let Me Help You

Sell Your Homework

12-Week Course of Study:

*24 Ways to Write
Stories for Kids*

Lesson 5

**CUMULATIVE
SUNK AND SAVED**

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Let's Write the

Story that Accumulates

Whether it is Christ gathering disciples beside the Sea of Galilee or Sir Edmund Hillary gathering climbers for Mt. Everest, this story can be a

CHALLENGE!

The first starts out and is soon joined by the second and then the third and then the fourth. It's like Jacob's children. Finally, there's a troupe and they move together with a purpose.

Naturally, we start with the hero and add his comrades one by one.

In the case of Little Half Chick, the story started with the drop of an acorn. Remember, it hit old H.C. on the head and she thought the sky was falling.

She ran off in all directions, telling each sympathetic listener she met the whole story all over again.

By the time we reach the climax, we have a mob scene. That's the cumulative structure at work.

The same thing happened to the Brentown musicians. The first one became discontented with his lot in

life and set off for the big city. Each animal he met shared his discontent and decided to join the troupe.

As they got to their destination, they found a house they would like to live in. They serenaded its occupants—a band of robbers, scared the dwellers out of their wits with their racket, and won possession of the house.

Cumulative means simply that we accumulate. One person or animal meets another and persuades him. The two meet a third and so on. Sometimes the contacts follow the leader and sometimes the leader touches base with a string of contacts.

It all seems so simple. Well, it is simple. We don't need momentous adventures in order to have an effective children's story. The subject may be quite ordinary, but there does have to be evidence of craft. You can't toss

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words together and have something editors will break their necks over.

And it helps if you understand children and their interests, capacities and needs—to say the least.

With the cumulative structure, you must study incentives. What gets your group to gather? As you do your contemplating and your research, make note of this.

Little Half Chick needed comfort and assurance. The Brementown musicians wanted the good life. In the example story which follows, the children collect because of the expectation of a treat.

Remember, don't let each character you add be a carbon copy of the hero. He may share the hunger or the discontent, but there should be something distinctive about him.

Another method becoming popular is to prevent your characters from getting what they're seeking. It takes real skill to pull this off and to leave your young reader with a sense of satisfaction. Make note of this in your research as well.

I've written the following story out of the viscera of my first four years, growing up in Brooklyn, NY, on 92nd street near Shore Road. My father, a doctor, died when I was four and we subsequently moved to New Jersey.

A raft of children in the Brooklyn neighborhood would wait for Uncle Eddy to come home on Friday afternoons from work out of town. Jeannie, my sister, along with

neighbors Ruthie, Billy, Doris, Louise, Louella and Dickie (me) would gang up and go meet him at the far end of the block when he got off the trolley car.

It was cumulative all the way, but we got what we were seeking.

Uncle Eddy

By Dick Bohrer

Jeannie threw her jacks and tossed her ball. She was on her sixes and she missed. She could only snatch up five before her ball fell again.

“Mother, is it time?” she called over her shoulder into the house.

“Pretty soon, now,” her mother called back.

Jeannie tried her sixes again and again. She missed every time.

“Why don't you try to practice throwing them right?” a voice said.

“Oh, Ruthie, you scared me. I didn't hear you come over.”

Jeannie had held her jacks close to her heart when Ruthie startled her. Now she threw them down in front of her again.

“Just drop them and they won't scatter so much,” Ruthie said.

Jeannie dropped her jacks, tossed the ball and scooped up six. “Hey, it works!” she said. “Let me try it again.”

She dropped the jacks and scooped them up.

“I'm sorry your father died,” Ruthie said. “Do you miss him, Jeannie?”

“Oh, yes. But Dickie misses him the most.”

“It’s time now, Jeannie,” her mother called out the kitchen door.

“Time for what?” Ruthie asked.

“Time for Uncle Eddy,” Jeannie said. “Don’t you remember, Ruthie? Today is End Friday!”

“Oh, yeah.” A bright smile shined on Ruthie’s face. “So it is. Where’s your brother?”

“He’s out back in the sand box with Billy.”

“Let’s go get them,” Ruthie said. “Uncle Eddy likes to see all the kids on End Friday.”

The two girls ran into the back yard, jumping over a strip of tulips growing beside the walk.

“Dickie! Billy! It’s time for Uncle Eddy. It’s End Friday!”

The boys ran, scampering for their tricycles.

“Is he coming right now?” Dickie called.

“Momma says it’s time.”

“Oh, boy,” Dickie said. “Uncle Eddy’s coming.”

“Where’s Doris?” Ruthie said.

“Doris. DORIS!!” Jeannie shouted as loud as she could.

A window went up in the house next door and a girl leaned out. “Waddya want?”

“It’s End Friday and Uncle Eddy’s coming.”

“I’ll be right down,” Doris called and she slammed the window and disappeared. A moment later she

came running out the front door. “Where’s Louise? Does she know it’s time?” she said.

Jeannie raised her shoulders. “I don’t know. Louise!” she called. Then all the girls called together, “LOUISE! LOUISE!”

The door opened in the house across the street.

“Yeah?” A girl stood there with her hand on the knob.

“Uncle Eddy’s coming. It’s time for Uncle Eddy!”

The kids watched Louise call back into her house to her mother that she was going to go meet Uncle Eddy, and then she came running down the front steps and out to the sidewalk. Her straight hair flew out behind her head.

“Can you see him yet?” she asked, as she came across the street.

“No, he’s not up there yet. He hasn’t gotten off the trolley. It hasn’t come,” Ruthie said.

“Then is there time to get Louella?”

“She’s on the way,” Jeannie said. “I’ll race everybody to her house.”

The girls all started to run and the two little boys pedaled as fast as they could to keep up. Everybody shouted, “Louella! LOU-ELLA!” as they got close to her house.

A voice called from an apple tree in the side yard. “I’m up here.”

“Come on down fast,” Louise called. “It’s End Friday and Uncle Eddy’s coming.”

“I see him! He’s coming,” Billy shouted, pointing up to the end of the block where a man had just gotten off a trolley.

“He’s coming!” everybody shouted. The girls ran past Billy and shouted together as they ran toward Uncle Eddy. The boys pedaled fast to catch up. “Hi, Uncle Eddy!”

“Welcome home, Uncle Eddy!”

Uncle Eddy kneeled down on one knee right there on the sidewalk. He had red hair and a bristly red mustache. Little Dickie pedaled his tricycle right up into Uncle Eddy’s lap.

“Hi, Uncle Daddy,” he said. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Oh, you children aren’t waiting for me,” he said with a teasing twinkle in his eyes. “You just like the butterscotch buttons I bring you on End Friday when the foreman brings me back to town and gives me my pay check at the end of the week.”

“We don’t want you to bring us anything,” Dickie said. “We just want you to come back.”

“You don’t want me to bring you ANYTHING?”

Dickie shook his head. “We just want you to come back.”

Uncle Eddy wiped a tear out of his eye. “I thought you just liked my butterscotch buttons.”

“We love YOU,” Jeannie said.

“Yeah,” everybody said.

“Well, it just so happens that I happen to have a little white bag of buttons in my pocket. Don’t you think you’d like to see them, too?” Uncle Eddy asked.

“YEAH!” everybody shouted.

Uncle Eddy let each one reach into the little paper bag and take out a big brown butterscotch button.

“But, Dickie, my boy,” he said, “I’ve got two for you.”

So, holding hands and laughing and talking, all the children and Uncle Eddy walked down the street and back home.

Let’s examine other cumulative stories to see how their authors ganged characters and took them on a journey. Birds, animals, kings, queens—a menagerie of characters will appear.

A GIRAFFE AND A HALF by Shel Silverstein and illustrated with line drawings by the author (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964).

The author begins with a giraffe and stretches him another half before he adds 13 plausible impossibilities with six syllables in each line so that he has a giraffe and a half with a rat in his hat. He includes a suit, a rose, a bee, some glue, a flute, a chair, a snake, a skunk, a dragon, a bike and a whale in a hole with a mole carrying each one along as baggage as he goes to the next. Then he begins divesting each of them until he ends up where he began—with just the giraffe.

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YOUR TURN: This is another bright story from the late Shel Silverstein and well worth looking for in your favorite library. A little rhyme, a little rhythm, some outlandish collections and you have a charming tale. How bring in the gospel? Tie it to the Creator and marvel at what He does.

AARDVARK'S PICNIC by Jon Atlas Higham (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986).

Searching for ants for his picnic, Aardvark leaves home and starts off for the picnic. He meets apes, a crocodile, a toad, a snake, an elephant and invites them to come along to the picnic as he meets each one. When he gets to his other aardvark friends at the picnic, he learns where his ants have gone. He had packed them in his picnic basket. Everyone eats his own favorite food, and then they all go home.

YOUR TURN: There is nothing profound here. A gathering group has a picnic and then they all go home. It's the winsomeness of the aardvark who looks for the ants that makes the book appealing. You could do it with kids in a ghetto neighborhood or on a mission field or at school or Sunday school. The key is to give the main character a servant's heart. Perhaps he's an insignificant entity, but he makes a big contribution to everyone's happiness.

BONE BUTTON BORSCHT by Aubrey Davis and illustrated by Susan Petricic (Toronto: Kids Can Press Ltd., 1995).

A beggar needing a warm place to stay promises a synagogue caretaker he will make borscht if he can find him one more button (he has five from his own coat), bowls, a ladle and a pot.

The caretaker rounds them up and the owners come with them (cumula-

tive) to see the miracle of borscht soup from buttons.

They bring garlic, vegetables and pickle brine.

Soon they have a feast and dancing to celebrate the miracle borscht. The beggar goes, leaving behind a greater miracle: The people have learned to help one another in hard times.

This could also be listed as a "concept" story in Lesson 11.

YOUR TURN: Devising a story with a seemingly unintended ending requires inspiration. Here is a Christian message of helping one another. It works among the rich and the poor, the bright and the mentally challenged. Many challenged children have big hearts.

Their need to report to the king draws the characters together in Anne Rose's **THE TALKING TURNIP** (New York: Parents Magazine Press, 1979).

Things happen when a turnip, a cat, a spoon and the floor speak to a little old woman. She runs to tell the king and meets a woodchopper who joins her when his axe speaks.

A boy joins them when his geese speak.

The king shames them and sends them home.

As they go out the door, he makes a snide remark about them—that they are foolish troublemakers.

The writer makes the king eat his own words by having his own crown say words out loud that agree with the king.

YOUR TURN: This is another surprise story at the very end that succeeds in making the accumulation of unbelievables actually believ-

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able. What can you do with a houseful of mice or a neighborhood full of cats, knights in armor, junior high girls who champion a cause no one understands until the last minute.

In **ONE MONDAY MORNING** by Uri Shulevitz (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), the addition of each character lends emphasis to the importance of their visit.

A youngster narrates that he wasn't home on that certain day when the king, queen and little prince came to call.

The entourage returns on each successive day for a whole week.

Each time, one new member of the royal household—a knight, a guard, the cook, the barber, the jester and a little dog—accompanies those who have come before.

Each time the narrator is not home.

On the final Sunday he is and the little prince tells him that they just came by to tell him hello. The final picture shows that the narrator has been musing over a set of cards, a doll and a picture of a puppy on his wall.

YOUR TURN: This one shows a child imagining and bring us a surprise ending. Try it. Maybe yours is putting a jigsaw puzzle together and imagining he is one of the people in the picture.

Peaceful co-existence seems to be a unifying thought in **SIXES AND SEVENS** BY John Yeoman (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

Barnaby's mother sends him to Limber Lea on his raft with instructions to help any people in villages along the way who want him to take things for them to the city.

He picks up one kitten, two mice, three schoolmistresses, four schoolboys, five monkeys, six parrots, seven dogs, eight snakes, nine frogs, ten grasshoppers.

He delivers all safely to Limber Lea despite the fact that each one could have had some kind of relationship with the group that followed him onto the raft.

YOUR TURN: This story has that double significance where each group could have devoured or harassed the group that followed them onto the raft. Editors like this kind of double-level implication. Maybe a son of Noah could be gathering animals on a raft to bring them to the ark. In truth, God brought them without anyone's help. Maybe you could narrate how each group could have eaten the next group as they walked together to the ark.

A game of hide-and-seek gathers the children in **HOW MANY KIDS ARE HIDING ON MY BLOCK?** By Jean Merrill and Frances Gruse Scott (Chicago: Albert Whitman, 1970).

This book presents a variation of the game of sardines we used to play in the back yards of our neighborhoods. The viewpoint character counts to ten while ten children hide.

Each one found joins the one who is looking. The "It" boy calls out that though ten kids are hiding he can't see one. This alerts them to his whereabouts. He reminds them that they cannot hide inside a house or in the neighborhood store.

His short-legged sister whom he expected to find first he finds last.

YOUR TURN: We used to play "Sardines" where one person hid and each one who found him

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stayed with him until the last person found them all. You could use this game and this structure with a challenged child who finds the hiding one first—or last.

And **HENNY PENNY** (similar to dopey Little Half Chick) is the classic story of this genre. Paul Galdone (New York: Seabury Press, 1968) has written a version.

An acorn falls on Henny's head and she rushes to tell the king.

She gathers Cocky Locky, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Loosey, Turkey Lurkey and talks them one by one into following her to the king.

Foxy Loxy woos the flock into his cave.

The king never did hear the sky is falling, but Foxy and his family still remember the fine feast they had that day.

Talk about a negative ending! But children, even on the 14th reading, seem to enjoy the excitement of impending doom facing the quintet of feathered friends.

YOUR TURN: Have you noted how many of the old fairy tales have impending doom and even great violence? You can accumulate pre-flood neighbors being preached at by Noah or Israelites in Egypt being told to put blood on their doorposts and lintels and get the same effect. Knowing better, they let a Foxy Loxy talk them out of doing the right thing.

Now motivation is a significant part of stories for children. They will be quick to spot an inconsequential story if your characters have weak motives for the things they do.

It is SO important to have something at stake that is significant to the

characters. We set a prize in front of the hero and make him reach beyond his capacity to reach. This is the surge behind winning teams, the impulse that sends men on to Everest and into space.

To adults a butterscotch button, finding a short-legged sister, rushing to tell the king fall far short of being significant. But not to children

But when you have a character running to tell the king, you must supply an adequate "why" answer.

Jacob deceives Isaac into thinking he is Esau. Why? Because he wants the birthright and the blessing.

Why did the ten brothers sell Joseph? Why did Achan steal the wedge of gold, the silver and the garment? Why did David stay home from battle? These are essential questions and their answers help make the stories significant.

It's the reader's curiosity that keeps him turning the pages. The clever writer dawdles, dangles and delays. We can drive a reader to frenzy or to midnight before we reveal the plot's solution. This is fine writing.

But you'll find that many children's stories do not drive the child to that frenzy. Publishers want him able to get to sleep afterwards without seeing rats all around the room gnawing on their knuckles.

In "UNCLE EDDY," the motive for all the children but Dickie was a physical one—they wanted the butterscotch buttons Uncle brings every

time he comes home.

The words I put in Dickie's mouth were words that little Ethiopian boys spoke to me in 1950 when I was contemplating whether I would stay home in the States for more education or return for a second three-year term teaching in the provincial school in Azozo, Begemeder Province.

"What shall I bring you if I come back?" I asked several schoolboys one day, thinking they might indicate a toy or book or clothes.

"**We don't** want you to bring us anything," one said. "We just want you to come back."

I didn't go back, and those words stir my heart to this day.

And this is another example of how a writer can bring into his stories rich things from his background, the marvelous things people have said to him, the colorful things that have happened.

They may be used entirely out of context—as with Dickie and Uncle Eddy. It's an entirely different situation. But this story warms me when I read it because I've strengthened it with marvelous emotion from my past.

Dickie's father (my father) had recently died, never to come back. This is touched lightly at the beginning of the story, but not enough to interrupt the flow of narrative. That "Dickie misses him the most" provides the explanation of the yearning twist on Uncle Eddy's name at the end. It

gives a deeper dimension to the story and makes it more than a group of kids running to meet a friend when Dickie calls him "Uncle Daddy."

I bring my own personal sorrow into the story to make it richer. Hopefully, the reader is touched; but he may never know the writer's motive for his method.

The craft is to use this original material, motivation, emotion and curiosity to develop reality—a "now-ness" that puts the reader in the scene in such a way that he is not conscious that you the writer are there. We want him to feel your story is actually happening.

Your faithful reporting of fact in your fiction, your ability to write simply yet tellingly, your sharing what you've seen, heard, touched, smelled and tasted, and your willingness to share if ever so lightly the spiritual significances you've experienced and enjoyed will help you write a classic.

And the junior age is all ready for classics. These youngsters are full of energy. They are growing rapidly. They love doing things. They act first and think afterwards. They are noisy and boys this age either love to fight or love a fight. Screaming, they will surround the fighters and egg them on.

They love the outdoors and competition, and they are beginning to become conscious and curious about sex.

They collect. They like to talk and

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give their answers and opinions. Their reasoning power is developing, and they are quick to sense favoritism and challenge decisions that favor the opposite sex. Actually, they usually scorn the opposite sex and have close friends with their own. They can't stand public displays of affection. Count on them to be quick-tempered and self-centered.

They yearn for commendation. They admit to sin in their lives and will receive Christ as the one who saves from the penalty and power of sin.

They are perhaps the last battalion of readers we will find until they turn adult. They will read stories about

older children because they want to be—they can't wait to be—older themselves. But the fact that they read makes us want to turn inside out to give them good stories, compelling stories, sensational stories, inspiring stories.

What a time to exalt the Savior and bring these young ones to Him. A check from a publisher you will spend. A letter from a reader who received the Savior because of a story you wrote you will keep and reread forever.

May we who write consecrate ourselves to serving our Lord God to the very best of the ability He has given us!

Research Sheet

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Author: _____

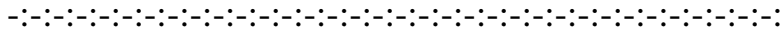
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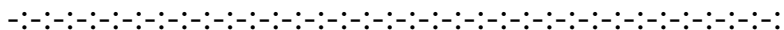
Publisher _____

Synopsis _____

First Sentence: _____

Crisis _____

Library of Congress Summary: _____



Let's Write
Stories Where We're Sunk
and . . .
we can't move.
Our foot is stuck. The water is rising.
Nobody's home.
Who's knocking?
We're here!
We're
SAVED!

Sunk and Saved stories fill TV and the movies.

They are in the comic strips and radio mystery theaters. They are daily fare for the situation comedy, the police chase, the medical team, the dramatic thriller.

Why else are we so engrossed in sports?

Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* blazed the trail for all the cowboy heroics to come. Lovely Rebecca is tied to the stake. The torch that will burn her to bacon is held aloft, ready to ignite all. Across the moors comes the thundering herd of knights to the rescue. Will they make it in time? Will the brave

Rebecca be saved? I couldn't read fast enough as a boy!

And I was the primary who stood on his seat in the Saturday afternoon movie while the sheriff walked slowly down the street toward the gallows where our hero was being strung up.

"Hurry!" I shouted. **"Hurry!!"**

My little friend sitting next to me said, "Don't worry, Dickie. He'll get there."

And ever since Sir Walter Scott, adventure stories have ended with a chase. People are running after or running away. Sometimes they make it. Sometimes they don't.

Look at "Sunk and Saved" and you find stories using this structure

fall into at least four categories - A, B, C, D. We are sunk by Actions, Beasts, Characters (animate and inanimate) and Disasters.

Our Actions are such things as falling, dropping, drowning, skidding, losing, starving, burning. In any one of these we dangle at the end of our rope, calling feebly for help, longing desperately for a strong hand to save us.

Our Beasts are often sharks or piranhas, dragons, lions, raging elephants, mad dogs, stubborn mules. There breathes not a beast from bee to behemoth who has not been for at least someone or something a serious threat.

Our Characters can be angry stepmothers, retarded brothers, stalking murderers, giants, witches, school teachers, farmers' wives, ballerinas, wicked fairies—anybody. And our inanimate characters can be failing brakes, runaway elevators, stalled cars, tractors, ropes, skates on stairs, helicopters, balloons.

Our Disasters include floods, hurricanes, storms of all sorts, fires, earthquakes, avalanches, bombings and explosions.

Virtually anything can be so filled with threat that it can be an instrument that will sink any one of us. Our dilemma is to make our threat solvable in a way that is not an act of God or an accident or a coincidence or an insult to the intelligence of our reader.

Our hero must get himself out of his

problem by himself. This is much stronger than having a handsome knight save our Rebecca's day. But if, by virtue of who she is, she deserves a rescue, let her be rescued.

Don't have a hand reach out as the hero falls past the 34th floor and snatch him in mid-air. It's more reasonable to have him fall past a window-washer's platform and catch hold of a rope. Or his fall might be broken by an awning. Above all, our solutions must be believable.

Remember to sink the hero so low that the reader cannot see salvation coming from any angle.

Then, if you can, solve the problem with a stage property—a birthday knife he just “happened” to have in his pocket—that you planted in the story or on his person earlier in a move the reader has overlooked. Then its use is reasonable and believable as he remembers what you did.

You may write chronologically and work slowly into your threatening problem or you may begin with the water rising, the electricity out and the children crying in terror.

Early on, make your reader like your hero—usually he is the first one mentioned in the story—and make us want him to be saved. Show that he's a good buddy, a nice guy, a sensitive girl, an ailing bunny.

Write reportorially. That means give us a “you are there” feeling. Include details—but don't get us off the track of the story with too many of

them. We want to see and feel and re-live the experience of the hero. We want to be there with him. Make it so real that we can't put the story down. Attention to details is a factor here.

Mention all the characters you will have in your story on your first page. Let us know what time of day it is and where the scene is set.

If your hero is not caught in the disaster yet, give a hint of what is to come and do it early. Whet our appetite and make us want to read your story.

Suspense—whether we have a mystery killer or not—is a marvelous ingredient in sunk and saved stories. Dangle, dangle, dangle us and then resolve everything at the last minute.

The concepts of “sunk and saved” are like our salvation experience more than any other structure in this book. God HAS stepped in to our lives when all else had failed to save us from our sins and from hell.

As we grow in our Christian life, we see Him repeatedly reaching in and helping us out of our tough problems. Your challenge in your writing is to let your hero trust the Lord but to make him get out of his problem by using his head and not by relying on someone else or Someone Else.

Think through it now.

Our Heavenly Father will let us go our own way, like the prodigal son who “spends his substance in riotous living.” He then brings us to our senses—often when we are miserable

in a pigpen somewhere—and He offers us a way of forgiveness and acceptance and escape.

He reminds us that “the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.” He also reminds us that “if we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

But in our stories we need to let our character suffer.

Involve him so thoroughly in his problem that neither he nor the reader can ever think of a way out. Then, out of the problem itself, bring the solution.

Meredith and Fitzgerald in their superb *The Professional Story Writer and His Art* have urged us to show that the problem **MUST** be solved. Our hero **MUST** be saved. Something important is at stake if the problem is not solved.

Make that something a critical issue. Give us a strong reason for wanting him to live through the storm, as it were.

Then they say that if no solution to the problem can be found within the problem itself, let self-discovery and change lead your character out of his problem.

Let him discover something about himself or about his problem that he didn't know before and use this to bring him out—or at least to point him toward the solution.

He would then say, “Oh, I was so blind! Why didn't I see that I was the

one who was making my stepmother so angry.”

Examine “The Decision.” I’ve sunk the ship in the first two paragraphs. Then by underwriting rather than by exaggeration, I’ve tried to bring the character to self-realization and “salvation.” (In this story, he’s a saved boy but out of fellowship.)

I’ve used this story in my *J. Edgar Beanpole and Friends: Stage Snoop* novel as the turning point in the story.

The hidden structure is alternating action and reflection. The viewpoint character, Jitter, does something and then thinks something, does something and then thinks something all the way through.

With each section, I’ve identified it in bold print; but you normally would probably not be aware of the structure at all. Using this builds interest in the suffering character. It’s a good device.

The peak of the climax is the sentence, “Fill MY every longing.” He gets up and goes home, signaling to his friends that he’ll join them later. We know he won’t. He’s a walking answered prayer.

We bring the end on quickly so we don’t belabor our point.

Try this pattern.

Let it work for you.

The Decision

By Dick Bohrer

(Begin the action)

“Where are you going?”

“Out of your life! Get out of my way!” I pushed her aside and reached for the knob. So what if she was my mother. The guys were waiting. We had things to do.

(Action: Set the scene)

A blast of hot air hit me as I opened the door. Only kooks stay in Marlowe in the summer. I walked down the street past the other fourteenth century houses everybody in our town lives in. Tourists like them. Someone might as well.

(Reflection: Name the problem)

Who did she think she was? Grilling me every time I want to go out. Why couldn’t I go where I want and do what I want? She was always so afraid I’d get into trouble.

“You’ll be dishonoring the Lord Jesus.”

I mocked the sound of her voice in my mind.

(Action)

I pulled a blade out of a clump of tall grass growing near the sidewalk and chewed the end. Two dogs were playing tag in a yard down the street. First, one would be the chaser, then the other. I watched a minute and then moved on.

(Reflection: Flashback to origins of the problem)

I’d grown up in this town. My pa had been the preacher of the white board church at Fifth and Park.

But when he died, Ma seemed to shrivel inside. She let her hair go, never went out, ignored all her friends. She wore old clothes. And all she ever talked about was Jesus.

(Action)

The dogs came running alongside me, wanting to play. I picked up a couple of rocks and rolled them down the street ahead of me. They took off after them. They both went after one at first, but the brown mutt was faster. Then they came prancing back to me, each one with a rock in his mouth.

I threw them again and again, until I was almost downtown. Just before I had to turn a corner, I threw the rocks back the way I'd come so the dogs would go back home. I had to think, and I wanted to do it in peace.

(Reflection: Chronology of the problem)

I guess things really started going bad when my sister ran off with a nightclub singer and had his kid. Dad quit the church and seemed to just melt away after that.

Mom hadn't been so bad at first. I sympathized with her because she really loved Dad and they'd enjoyed having the church.

They'd seen a lot of people come to—come to the Lord.

But when Dad died, she started withdrawing and praying all the time. I'd burst in after school and

she'd be on her knees at the couch. What for—I don't know. It got so I couldn't bring anyone home but she'd be flopping at the couch, in the kitchen, in her bedroom.

(Reflection: Develop the reason for the intended action)

I was supposed to meet the guys at the bus stop at Park and Fifth. We were going to make a hit tonight after it got dark. An all-night gas station in the next town had been having a lot of business lately. We were just gonna help them take a little money to the bank. Nothing much. Just a little hit to tie us over till something big came along.

(Action)

I slouched down on the bench and waited. I knew I'd been early. I hadn't counted on Ma getting me mad.

"Where are you going? What are you doing?"

It was always like that.

I was still mad.

I sat, looking across the corners to the church Dad had pastored.

(Reflection)

I'd slid down that banister every Sunday for a hundred years. I knew every pew and pillar in that whole church. I knew every hiding place there was. We kids used to play hide-and-seek during the after-service when our folks would stand around for an hour and just talk.

(Introspection and meditation on the problem and the solution wanted)

I could remember the time I'd hidden in the pulpit and Dad had come down to the front to talk to a man about accepting Christ. I was cornered and had to stay crammed in there the whole time. I could never figure out why that man had started crying.

And then Dad had brought him and his wife home to dinner, and you'd never seen two happier folks in your whole life. She said she'd been praying every day for years to get him saved, the wife, that is. They were the happiest people I'd ever seen.

(Sunk)

A lot happier than I'd ever be.

(Action)

It was getting late. The sun had finally set and it was cooler. The traffic seemed to pick up a little when it got cooler. People came out of their holes in the evening and went about more when it wasn't so hot. A car full of tourists pulled up at the stop light across from me. The people inside were singing. They were singing a hymn.

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
Sweetest Name I know,
Fills my every longing,
Keeps me singing as I go.”

The car started up slowly, when the light turned green, and moved

through the intersection and on out Fifth to the highway. The sound seemed to linger there, somewhere between me and the white clapboard church at Fifth and Park.

(Resistance begins to crumble)

I could still hear their words.

“Fills my every longing . . .”

The guys would be along soon.

“Fills my every longing?”

(Reflection: Reminiscence)

That must have been why that guy was crying and why he and his wife got so happy afterwards. God had filled his every longing.

(More crumbling)

I wondered what that was like.

Every longing?

How could God do that?

Could He do that for—guys?

Suddenly, I didn't feel mad any more. I couldn't explain it. Why would a song some gypsies were singing through town suddenly seem to make a difference to me? I didn't know. I'd heard that song before—a million times.

(Confession)

But . . .

Could—He—really—fill long-ings?

Nah. What did He care about me?

I loved violence. I loved all the excitement—the hide-and-go-seek games with the cops—the good

times I was having with my buddies.

From my heart I—loved—what sinners love.

(Come-to-realize)

But . . .

There was that white board church and the memories of my pa.

It was like those two dogs. First, one side of me chased the other and then the other side chased back.

I wanted to do right, but then I loved doing wrong. With all my heart, I loved doing wrong.

I sat there a long while.

A long while . . .

All I had ever known—the verses, the songs, the hymns, the prayers—seemed to come flooding back into my mind. I don't know where they came from. I hadn't invited them.

But I felt the finger of God pointing right down at my heart.

Right at me.

Right at—me.

Finally, I put my head on the back of the bench and looked up. I looked up higher than the sky. I felt all broken up inside.

(Solution)

Lord?

I couldn't say another word.

I just sat there.

And then I started to shake.

Lord?

Can I really start over? Is that really true?

Can You really fill—every—longing?

Do you really care?

Do you REALLY care—

About me?

(Action)

I heard a whistle. It was the guys calling me to come. I stood up and made a couple of signs that told them I'd be along—but not just yet.

Slowly I walked back home and went in.

(Restitution and assurance of lasting change)

Ma had heard me coming up the porch steps. She was off her knees and walking toward me.

“You're home,” she said, smiling.

“I'm home,” I said. “But you're smiling. I haven't seen you smile since . . .”

“I haven't had anything to smile about—till now.”

“You look tired,” I said.

“I've had a long wait. A long, long wait.”

“But how did you know?”

“I guess the Spirit bears witness,” she said. “When I heard your foot on the step, I knew.”

“Well, why don't you take a good rest now. I'll rustle us something up for supper.”

(Saved)

And I—smiled.

###

I don't know if you, as you were reading it, picked up on the reasons the mother was constantly praying or the significance of her first two words on his return—"You're home."

But if you can insert undercurrents and significances like that, your writing takes on an added dimension and ministry as the reader thinks back and gets the point. If he doesn't get the point, it's his loss. If he does, it's your gain because it's wonderful when someone finally understands what you've been trying to do.

Now, "The Decision" was a story for teens and perhaps should not have been in this book at all. But that story can be brought down to any level. **It's the story of the Prodigal Son all over—just in a modern setting.**

I remember dragging my way home when I'd deliberately disobeyed my mother. I knew I would get a whipping, and I didn't want to go into the house. I dawdled and waited. And it got later and later.

I was sunk and I knew it. I deserved the whipping and, when I finally went inside, I got it. It was the means—not a song sung by tourists—of getting me to change my ways.

The pattern for that story can be used for much younger children. The alternating of action with reflection is the key.

Have the hero do something and then think about his essential problem. He continues the action and the thinking—and perhaps the plotting—

some more. By the time we come to the climax, he has the answer.

Work toward the sinking and then work for the saving.

Remember, the hero can be saved from his sunken condition by all sorts of means.

Notice in these stories that follow that usually the hero is saved by his own efforts. Occasionally, he is saved by someone else.

SARAH'S BEAR by Marta Kovi. (Salzburg, Austria: Neugebauer Press, 1987.) 24 pp.

A wave sweeps Bear off a ship's rail and into a storm.

A short flashback tells us he had belonged to a little boy who had never been nice to him. Flung into the sea, he is LOST.

Eventually, he washes up on a beach where a little girl Sarah finds him and takes him home to join the other creatures she's found and taken in—a cat, dog, crow, goose-and-her-goslings and pig.

Having started with a storm, the story ends with the moon smiling through a window on the sleeping "family."

YOUR TURN: This story begins with a crisis, has a flashback and then a happy conclusion. At the height of the crisis, all hope is lost. The bear is overboard with no hope of survival. The resolution comes through someone else in this case.

In the series, **AMELIA BEDELIA** by Peggy Parish (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Amelia, the maid, is the total dimwit. (Kids love these books.)

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: SUNK AND SAVED

Her sweet girlish innocence borders on abject stupidity. She takes everything literally—to the extreme.

In **PLAY BALL, AMELIA BEDELIA**, she actually steals the bases, tags a runner, puts a boy out, and runs home.

Frequently sunk in trouble caused by her own misunderstanding of obvious things, she always triumphs. Her good-heartedness brings her out on top.

YOUR TURN: Keep a file of cliches we use that do not mean what they say. Create a character and let her loose. Perhaps you will find someone in your church like this.

Iglook's seal is saved through pity. In the story, **IGLOOK'S SEAL**, by Bernard Wiseman (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1977), the seal is not popular at home. Iglook's mother is sorry she'd let her boy keep it as he is so busy catching fish to feed it he doesn't have time to play or learn to hunt.

She puts it out of the igloo and the dogs attack it.

At this point it is SUNK.

But she repents and rescues it. When the village folk see how great a fisherman the seal becomes, they all go out to find seals of their own.

YOUR TURN: Here, again, someone else saved the one who was sunk. We began with a problem and a solution that proved to be wrong. Repenting, the mother rescues the seal, and it becomes such a success that others have to have one like it. It's the Gospel story. The One rejected is the One who is praised. What animal or what third grader can you "put out" and then rescue?

Some heroes are saved by their own

wits. In **TWICE UPON A TIME** by Irwin Shapiro (Middle-town, CT: Xerox Family Education Services, 1973) a teller of poems and stories is imprisoned in a town devoted to having everything twice as big, twice as high, twice as deep as any other because the king wants his kingdom to be twice as good as any other.

He imprisons the minstrel for beginning his stories, "Once upon a time."

Unable to think of a story beginning "Twice Upon a Time," the minstrel faces life in prison.

At this point, he is SUNK.

Then he thinks of a way out and asks why there aren't two kings in this kingdom. He tells the king it is more important to have a happy people than to have a twice-as-high kingdom. The king rewards him for his great wisdom, and he goes his way.

YOUR TURN: In this problem, the one who is sunk figures out the solution. The hero may ask for God's help in solving the problem, but the solution will come out of his own ingenuity. Think of a commonly used phrase and cause it to be the downfall of your character. Have him think of a solution. Maybe you'll use a phrase from a familiar song or poem or hymn.

We have Bible characters who have sunk-and-saved experiences in Daniel with his lions' den, the four boys in the furnace, and Joseph in prison. And, of course, each one of us has experienced this in Christ.

When we're dealing with sunk-and-saved structures, we're dealing with must-solve complications. The hero is suffering from a threat from another

character (man), from an obstacle (things) or from nature (perhaps, ultimately, God).

Occasionally that threat is from himself—although this is probably rare in children’s literature. But the complication must never be trivial. If it is, you don’t have a story.

To make a complication intense, you often have to exaggerate real life. The storm that is coming may prevent our hero from searching for the kitten that’s lost. His mother won’t let him go outside. If anything happens to this kitten, he’ll never get another one because his father is holding him responsible.

We exaggerate the intensity of the significance of the storm or whatever force is fighting our hero.

Let me repeat. Never use a complication that is easily solved. Never let someone other than the hero solve the problem—well, hardly ever. And never let an outside act of God, a coincidence, an accident or chance solve the problem.

The solution of the problem must come from within the problem itself.

Pinkie solved her problem after she had given up trying to get at *Zzzzzzzzzz*. Her “So there!” and her “I’ll stick out my tongue at you!” picked off the troublesome fly. The solution came from within the problem.

Let’s say your age is 10, 11, 12.

Sunk-and-saved appeals to kids

your age. It’s as full of action as you are. A lot of kids act first and think later. You’re strong and healthy, full of noise and competition.

You love the out-of-doors. You love a challenge you have some hope of meeting and winning. You like the here and now. You collect. You read. You remember. You’re marvelous for finding lost articles about the house.

You have a strong sense of justice and will be loudly vocal over injustices you sense or imagine.

“You favor the girls,” one boy yelled at me when I was refereeing a girls-against-boys volleyball game the year I taught sixth grade.

Your gang instinct is strong. You’re devoted to Little League. You don’t like girls all that much if you’re a boy. Your best friends are your own kind—boy or girl.

You and your friends are our hero worshipers. You are impressionable. That means you believe what people say. You’re often untidy. You don’t like to see people kiss in public. You don’t have many fears, but you do have many problems.

Often you’re quick tempered and self-centered. You have a good sense of humor, love jokes, love to giggle. And you recognize sin as sin.

You’re a natural for sunk-and-saved.

You can recognize God as King, as Lawgiver and Authority, as Judge of sin, the One with a plan and purpose for your life. You can acknowledge

the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord and can confess Him publicly. I remember a call to missionary service at the end of a great conference. The only people who went forward in answer to the call were third and fourth graders.

You trust His Word and use it in your devotions. You recognize church as a place of worship and enjoy having friends there.

You like separate classes for girls and boys. And you want to know how Christianity works.

You love games, hikes, camping, and can be readily reached for God.

We need tons of fine Christian stories for kids your age with believable heroes in believable complications who solve their problems believably.

Now what if your pen is dry, your computer won't boot up, in other words you can't think of a thing to write about that you think would interest an editor.

Again, read your newspaper if you have no ideas of your own. Put yourself in the shoes of a victim. Write him, call him up if need be; but don't write his story. Let him.

You write yours.

Now some more examples follow. In each, the hero is sunk in his crisis. In each, he is saved. You will find some heroes saving themselves and others being saved by someone else. Note which makes a stronger story. And make a habit of using the stories others have written and published to give you ideas that you could develop.

But remember! No copying.

THE SIGN IN MENDEL'S WINDOW by Mildred Phillips and illustrated by Margot Zemach (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 32 pp.

When Mendel, a butcher, rents one half of his store to a tinker, he is astonished when the tinker accuses him of stealing his money. The tinker tells the police how much money Mendel stole. (He knows because he heard Mendel counting his week's receipts in a loud voice.) Mendel is sunk.

The police are convinced and are about to take Mendel to jail when a neighbor takes one policeman into the neighborhood. He learns from the neighbors everyone knows how much money was in the box. His wife shows that the coins stolen, when boiled, had been handled by a butcher when fat residue rises to the top. Mendel is saved. The police take the tinker off in chains.

YOUR TURN: The wife comes up with the solution to this more involved story. Remember, a prayer for help and the testimony that God hears and answers is an effective way to write for Christian kids.

ONE FINE DAY by Nonny Hogrogian. (New York: The Macmillan Publishing Company, 1971.)
CALDECOTT AWARD.

A distraught fox, his tail cut off by an angry woman because he drank the milk in her pail, must find replacement milk, her price to sew his tail back on so his friends won't laugh at him.

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: SUNK AND SAVED

He appeals to a cow, the field, the stream, a maiden, a peddler, a hen who all demand a price. He is sunk in frustration. Finally, a kind miller gives what he asks and he is able to give each the price he/she wanted and he gets his tail sewed back on (saved).

YOUR TURN: Here again someone else reverses the downward turn. The kind miller provides the key to the solution after the fox has gone through the neighborhood looking for help. Sometimes a kind person, a grocer, a Sunday School teacher, a neighbor, a homeless person will have mercy and will provide a key to the escape, but not the escape itself.

BASHTI, ELEPHANT BABY by Theresa Radcliffe and illustrated by John Butler. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997). No summary.

First sentence speaks of the sun rising slowly over the African plains, “a glowing ball of fire” shining over the “shimmering” ground.”

When Bashti, the baby elephant falls into the mud at a watering hole and can’t move (sunk), three lions close in. The adult elephants charge

and frighten the cats away. The more Bashti fights to get out, the deeper he sinks. His mother gets her foot under him and gets him free (saved).

His first day of life ends as he sleeps in long grass beside his mother.

YOUR TURN: His mother gets him free. It is Hagar again with Ishmael dying in the desert. The mother comes to the rescue and prays to God. He shows her the spring of water. David’s prayer was unsuccessful. His child died. The widow of Nain’s son was raised. Mother-love, father-love, both are powerful forces to be cherished and used frequently by writers.

In our next lesson, we’ll discuss how to use Bible stories when writing classics for children. We’ll also examine “Plant and Pick-Up,” a unifying tool that holds the ending close to the beginning and satisfies the reader that the whole story has been told.

Your testimonials on the value of these lessons is always welcome at dick@professordick.com.

Professor Dick

Research Sheet

Title: _____

Author: _____

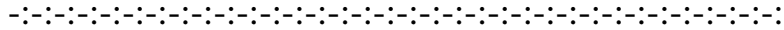
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