

Let's say you have an idea for a story involving a meteor streaking toward earth, a conflicted scientist, his crumbling marriage, and a coworker who makes his life miserable. How do you decide what to do with it?

There are hundreds of variations on the same premise. You develop the idea by choosing a story skeleton and dressing it up to suit your taste.

Let's start with choosing a story skeleton based on the central question.

Every plot hinges on a central question. Posing the question at the beginning of the tale and answering it at the end is sound story architecture.

♥ **The Romance** skeleton poses the central question: Will they or won't they end up together?

The answer had better be "yes" or a satisfying equivalent. The girl can find out guy A isn't what she wanted after all because she found guy B, but this is not the genre for an "I'm okay on my own" ending. That story uses the Literary or Women's Fiction skeleton. Romance readers want passion and fulfillment and are very disappointed if they don't get it.

🕵️ **The Mystery** skeleton poses the central question: Who did it and will they catch him?

The answer is "yes." The criminal may escape at the last moment to torment the detective another day, but the case that is the focus of the story is considered solved. Twists where someone other than the detective solves the crime or there wasn't a crime after all should be rerouted to the Thriller section.

🕒 **The Thriller** skeleton poses the central question: How will they, and by proxy we, survive the threat to an individual or society?

For an "up" ending, the hero succeeds. If you want a "down" ending, the hero can fail and learn an ugly truth. Twists often provide an unexpected answer in this genre.

🏠 **The Con, Heist & Prison Break** skeleton poses the central question: What is really going on and will the plan succeed?

The plan may be straightforward and the goal obvious or there can be lots of twists and turns. The protagonist can succeed or fail. The reader can be hoping for the protagonist to succeed or fail. There is often a team. Some of them are sacrificed along the way.

👤 **The Gothic** skeleton poses the central question: when will she realize the danger and how will she escape?

This is typically a well-intentioned protagonist who stumbles upon a festering secret. Her arrival acts as a catalyst that brings it to the surface. The reader is anxious for her to realize her mistake and flee, or expunge the necrosis and live happily ever after in the newer, healthier world. A new

status quo is preferred, but she can escape the scene when she realizes the world she has stumbled upon is too diseased to be cured.



**The Horror** skeleton poses the central question: What brought the danger near and how will they escape it?

The answer can go either way as long as you reveal the reason why. Some horror stories ignore the first half of the question, but fans consider that a weak story. Fans usually want the main character to live to be frightened another day, even if every other character is knocked off by the tale's end.



**The Science Fiction** skeleton poses the central question: Will the hero find, change, or stop something in time?

Most fans prefer an "up" ending. They want to believe that we can overcome the challenges to our existence, especially if you plan a sequel.



**The Fantasy** skeleton poses the central question: Will the hero obtain or learn to use the power to defeat the evil that has disrupted his world in time?

The force is usually with the hero. The wicked witch gets her just due. Lord Voldemort is defeated. If you plan a sequel, the villain can live to fight the hero another day, but the story must show a resolution to a skirmish in the battle.



**The Western** skeleton poses the central question: How will they overcome the difficulty and will they stay or leave?

Leaving, staying, or accepting a new status quo are all acceptable answers. The protagonist's quest can drastically change him or he can remain steadfast. The ending can be up or down or up-down. The protagonist generally lives, but often makes sacrifices along the way.



**The Historical** skeleton poses the central question: What happened and how did it change things?

The overall story problem focuses on the historical situation with emphasis on a point in history. It can shed new light, debunk old theories, or twist history in an unusual way. The protagonist can succeed or fail, live or die.



**The Team Victory** skeleton poses the central question: Will they win?

They should. If they don't, they have to still feel really good about it: almost was good enough. There can be series of successes and failures along the way.



**The Road Trip** skeleton poses the central question: How did this journey change him?

In the road trip scenario, it is rarely the destination that is important. He can succeed or fail in reaching it. The reader cares about the protagonist's journey and the lessons he learns along the way.



**The Comedy** skeleton poses the central question: What do I think and how has this changed it?

A good comedy exposes human foibles, prejudices, and practices. It can utilize exaggeration or subtlety to achieve its stealth purpose ... as long as it leaves them laughing.



**The Literary** skeleton poses the central question: What are they feeling and how will it change?

The conflict in a literary story typically revolves around a wrenching personal crisis or decision. It can be slow-moving and highly thought-provoking. It can be emotionally fraught or as subtle as a spring breeze. The ending can be uplifting, upsetting, or left unresolved.

Which category do you want to explore with your premise? You may not be certain yet. There are subcategories to consider.

For more in-depth information on the story skeletons and the subcategories you can use to dress them up, pick up a copy of *Story Building Blocks: The Four Layers of Conflict*.

Once you've chosen a skeleton, the challenge is providing riveting obstacles between question and answer to keep the reader glued to the page. The reader knows from the outset that the hero will most likely survive. Your mission is to make them question the outcome anyway. You do that by exploring believable obstacles.