

HOW TO WRITE HORSE STORIES

By Jessie Haas

If you like to read horse stories, maybe you'd like to write them too. Writing is a lot like reading – and like riding. You start on a journey. Maybe you don't quite know where you're going. Certainly you don't know everything that will happen along the way. As when you climb on a horse and set out on a trail some sunny morning, you're in for an adventure.

The best horse stories have plenty of action: catching horses, training them, riding them, or winning ribbons on them. As a writer, your job is to grab the reader's attention and hold it throughout the story. The first thing you need is a strong beginning.

OFF TO A GOOD START

There are as many ways to start a story, as there are writers. One way is with a great line. Maybe you don't even know what it means at first, or what's happening in the scene.

Sid Fleishman begins *Mr. Mysterious and Company* that way: "It was a most remarkable sight. Even the hawks and buzzards sleeping in the blue Texas sky awoke in midair to glance down in wonder." When he started writing, Sid didn't have a clue what those birds were glancing at. But by asking himself questions about the characters, setting, and what could possibly happen next, he came up with a story.

This is a fun way to write. If you have an intriguing line teasing at the back of your mind, write it down. Then write the next line, and the next. Stories want to get out, and this is how they coax us to write them.

Other writers prefer knowing where they're going and what will happen before they start. They outline, plan scenes, and choose the scene that will make the best beginning.

So what makes a good beginning?

- Start the character's day in an unusual way.
- Start with the day when everything changes.
- Set something in motion. Don't stop for explanations.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY?

First of all, you should be able to state the basics simply, as in the following examples. *The Black Stallion*: Boy and wild stallion marooned on a desert island. *Chase*: Boy framed for murder flees, pursued by two men and a mysterious horse. *Afraid to Ride*: Injured girl and horse cure each other's fears.

Secondly, stories need conflict. A good story is about someone you like, in some kind of trouble. She needs something, desperately, and there are lots of obstacles in the way of her getting it.

WORRY THE READER

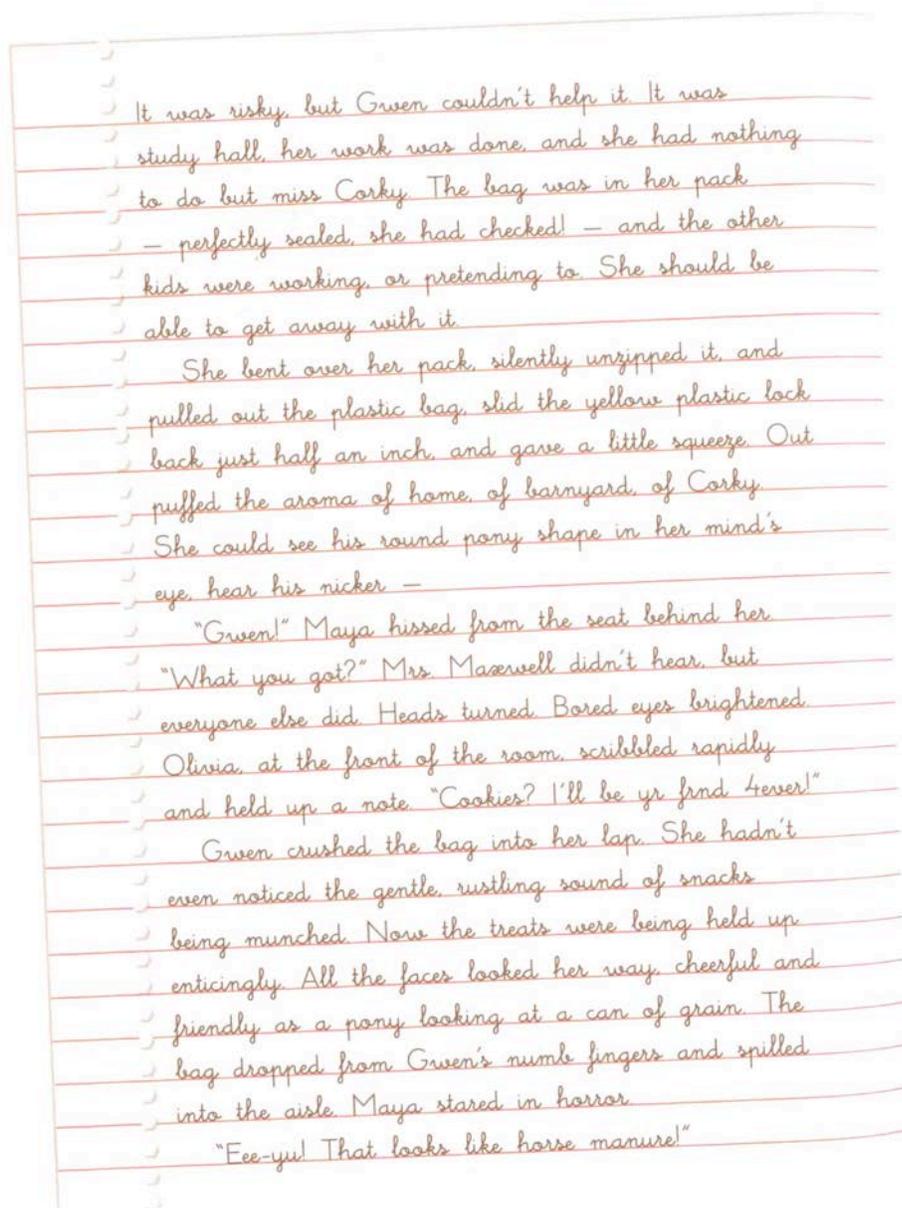
Stories are about trouble of one sort or another. Even the gentlest stories must have some tension – something the reader hopes for and fears. The reader needs some person to worry about, and some *thing* to worry about. Trust me, readers *want* to worry. They want to sit wide-eyed, glued to the page. They want to be so engrossed that if their mom says, "I think the refrigerator just exploded," they answer, "That's nice ..."

The someone-to-worry-about is the main character. In a horse story there's often a pair of main characters; a horse and the young person who loves, wants, or possibly fears him.

PUT YOUR CHARACTER IN CRISIS

For readers to worry about your main character, they need to like him or her, or at least suspect that they're going to. That means the first introduction is important. Show the character doing something. (Sleeping is not doing something. Neither is waking up, unless she's waking up because the smoke alarm just went off.)

And that something should be important to the story; something that shows who she is. Let it be an action or event that'll get her in some kind of trouble – soon. Remember, stories are about trouble. The trouble should start as soon as possible. For example:



It was risky, but Gwen couldn't help it. It was study hall, her work was done, and she had nothing to do but miss Corky. The bag was in her pack – perfectly sealed, she had checked! – and the other kids were working, or pretending to. She should be able to get away with it.

She bent over her pack, silently unzipped it, and pulled out the plastic bag, slid the yellow plastic lock back just half an inch, and gave a little squeeze. Out puffed the aroma of home, of barnyard, of Corky. She could see his round pony shape in her mind's eye, hear his nicker –

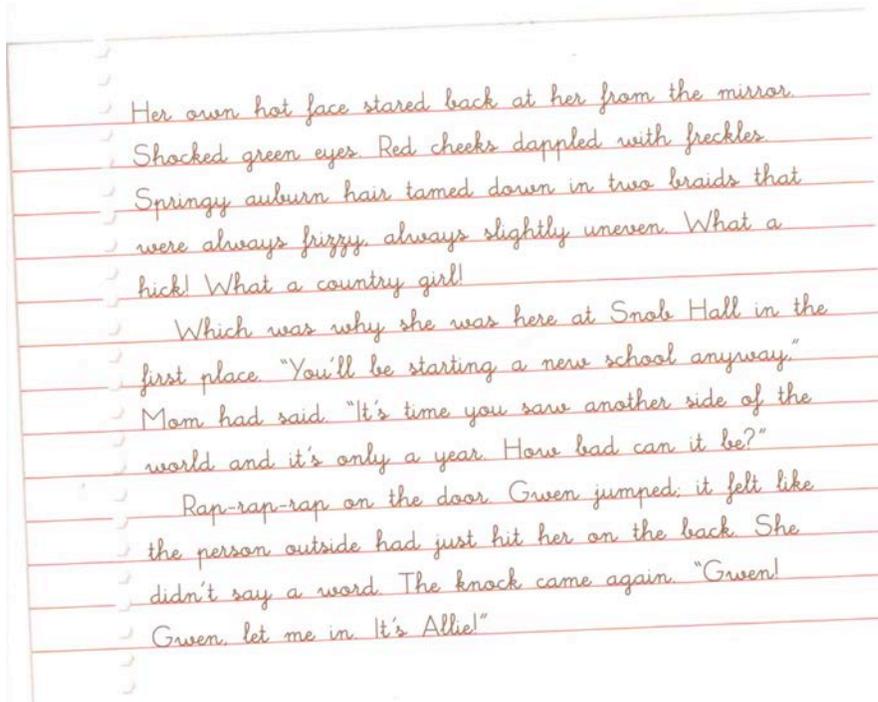
"Gwen!" Maya hissed from the seat behind her. "What you got?" Mrs. Maxwell didn't hear, but everyone else did. Heads turned. Bored eyes brightened. Olivia, at the front of the room, scribbled rapidly and held up a note. "Cookies? I'll be yr frnd 4ever!"

Gwen crushed the bag into her lap. She hadn't even noticed the gentle, rustling sound of snacks being munched. Now the treats were being held up enticingly. All the faces looked her way, cheerful and friendly as a pony looking at a can of grain. The bag dropped from Gwen's numb fingers and spilled into the aisle. Maya stared in horror.

"Eee-yu! That looks like horse manure!"

Gwen's in trouble already, at the bottom of the first page. Why is she sniffing a plastic bag of dried horse manure? It's because she's homesick, horsesick, and imprisoned at boarding school, which is just about to become much more miserable.

Do we know that yet? No. We don't even know who Gwen is, let alone Corky. That's another thing about good beginnings. They just start. The names float out there unsupported for a while. The page isn't clogged with the characters' whole biographies. Good fiction trusts itself to hook the reader. She'll be dragged deep into the story, where the background can be filled in gradually and naturally. Like this:



MAKE IT THROUGH THE MIDDLE

The middle can be the hardest part of a story. You jump in with a good line and good characters – and now what? Remember: worry your reader. Afflict your character. Things need to go from bad to worse. Your character will need to face challenges. She'll have to lose sometimes, get hurt, even fight.

She'll need something, or someone, to fight; something she needs or wants, and a major obstacle in the way of getting it. And a subplot can help. Without the complications it brings, your story might be too simple and lack energy.

Here's our story so far: Gwen, a country girl stuck at a high-class boarding school, misses her pony so much she even brings a bag of pony poop to class. When she gets caught sniffing it, everybody teases her even more than before. Okay, but now what?

There are lots of possibilities. Maybe another girl who's also being teased wants to be friends with Gwen. Gwen doesn't like her and thinks that's a bad basis for a friendship, but this girl is the daughter of the school's stable manager. If Gwen plays her cards right, maybe she can bring Corky next semester.

Or maybe that night, as Gwen cries herself to sleep, she hears a snort outside her window. (Make it a fourth-story window.) What can that be? Gwen goes to look and finds a winged pony nuzzling at the latch. Further adventures are bound to ensue in this scenario, like what will school officials think when the rain

gutter atop a four-story building is blocked by pony poop?

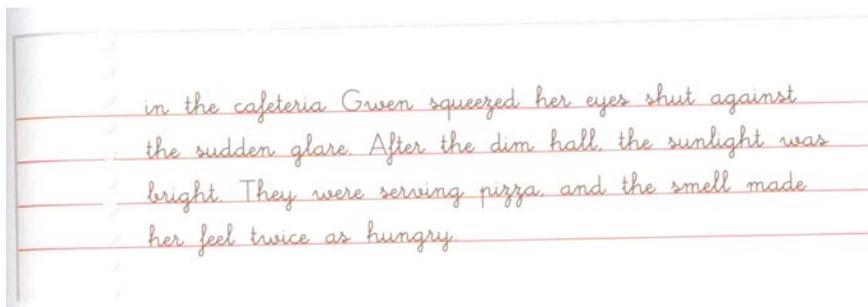
ENGAGE YOUR READER

Writing is a collaboration. You put some words down on a page. The reader looks at those little black marks and out of the clues you've given, she creates a movie in her head. If your clues are good enough, you create a virtual reality for your reader.

Stories take place in the world. How do we know where we are? We can see. Not only see, we hear, smell, touch, even taste the places around us. Good stories appeal to all our senses – not all five in every scene, but enough to keep the reader interested.

To create a full experience you must give sensory clues. What can the character see, hear, smell? The character is the reader's virtual-reality glove. If the character doesn't experience something or the writer doesn't describe it, then the reader can't experience it.

Here's an example:



This line uses the reader's own experience. We all know what pizza smells like – no need to describe it. We've all been hungry – no need to go into detail about that, either. Now if this was Mongolia and it was a lovely pot of kumiss Gwen was smelling, the reader would only have half a clue. This is one of the things that make historical fiction hard to do well.

MAKE YOUR CHARACTERS REAL

One easy way to make your narrator real is to make him or her struggle in a way that the reader will identify with. But you have to remember what you've created. If Gwen sprains her ankle on page three of this story, she's not going to be running on page eight. Hobbling, maybe, but not without saying "Ow!" with every step. (If the narrator is a horse, this rule applies to him or her, too.)

Another important element is to write realistic dialogue. This can be quite challenging. Try to write as though you are talking to your friends – your characters will sound more natural that way. But don't write exactly the way you talk. Those "ums" and "ya knows" that work fine when you talk don't work on a page.

Describing characters is where many authors walk a fine line. It's a classic cliché, but it works, to have the character look at herself in the mirror and bemoan her mousy hair or small eyes or whatever. But sometimes the main character is barely described at all. That character usually feels like a mask or identity that the reader puts on for the length of the story. You don't need a description of her, because she's you.

To make horses in stories seem real, think about what real horses are like. They do things you don't want them to do, like take fright at the sight of a blowing newspaper just when you're concentrating on a hard

jump or a cute boy. They pass gas as you walk behind them. They step on you.

They also catch you unexpectedly with their beauty, just doing simple things like walking beside you, like drinking from a trough. Watch how a horse drinks; lips smiling on the surface of the water, the way you can see the lump of water course down the long throat, the way the ears twitch with every swallow. Don't forget how it sounds; *gnk, gnk, gnk*. Don't forget how they raise their heads, and the drips fall back into the water and make rings. Write it all down exactly. Don't leave out any details. Observation is what good writing is all about.

WINDING EVERYTHING UP

The story arc comes to completion – or you can see how it might end. A satisfying story arouses anxiety in the reader, and then reassures her convincingly. The reader needs to believe that the story would end just that way; that in fact, it's the only ending possible. Here's our story's end:

Gwen and Allie, the stable manager's daughter, struggle to keep the winged pony a secret but he's too much fun – and there's only one of him. Trying to share one flying pony and survive boarding school at the same time means that one day they make a big mistake.

It turns out carrots don't agree with flying ponies; they're a root crop, after all, and they weigh that pony down. He gets stuck in a dangerous place, and without the help of the girl who's teased them most, Gwen and Allie will be unable to save him.

At story's end, the pony is safely down from the tree. He may never fly again, but he's a wonderful earthbound pony, and he and Allie have fallen in love. Meanwhile, Allie's mother and Gwen's have agreed: next week Corky's coming to school and everything's gong to be a lot better.

Then, a big storm comes up; water begins pouring through the upper-floor ceilings. The rain gutter is apparently blocked, but by what? Gwen isn't admitting anything. Pony poop's gotten her in enough trouble already!