

What to Do with a Plot Idea Too Large for a Short Story: Looking at a Couple Student Drafts

For further help plotting a short story, see **CHARTING PLOT: Traditional Rising Action Plots and “Cathedral”** in Bb/Fiction Unit/Readings.

This written lecture includes an assignment for a journal entry.

1.

Below is the very rough beginning of a story your classmate Sophie is thinking through and kind of clearing her throat to tell. It’s a good first draft for us to talk about here because it can help us understand the scope and reach of what we normally think of as the “short story” genre, and how you can best get started on one.

Read it through carefully:

Sophie K

Sydney.... real or misunderstood

Once upon a time in a brisk, microscopic town lived a small girl named Sydney. She wasn’t however like other children, she was extraordinary. No matter how hard others around her tried to understand her, they simply couldn’t. Sydney’s hair was as bright as a red fire truck, she wore the same outfit every day. This included one of her fathers, floral Hawaiian shirts and a skirt, much too small for her. Sydney was misunderstood her entire life by her family, friends, teachers, and therapists. When she was little, she had three imaginary friends that “understood” her. James was a young boy who wore footy pajamas and glasses so big that any god would be able to see through them. Betsy was a teenage girl who acted as an older sister to Sydney. She wore a torn droopy shirt and dusty jeans with combat boot, holes in the bottom of both. Now both of these imaginary friends grew old and passed when Sydney began to sprout. Rachel, her third imaginary friend and although mentioned last one of the most influential to Sydney. Rachel wasn’t a regular imaginary friend that went away after Sydney grew up. She stayed by her side, she was the angel and devil on Sydney’s shoulders.

Just a few comments to begin:

Sydney.... real or misunderstood

Once upon a time in a brisk, microscopic town lived a small girl named Sydney. She wasn't however like other children, she was extraordinary town. **WOW What cool adjectives! I've never thought of a town as "brisk," and it's wonderful. And "microscopic" is funny because it kind of has an attitude (it seems like a snide way of referring to a town the speaker thinks is just too damned small haha.)** No matter how hard others around her tried to understand her, they simply couldn't. Sydney's hair was as bright as a red fire truck, she wore the same outfit every day. This included one of her fathers, floral Hawaiian shirts and a skirt, much too small for her. **LOVE these details; they make her feel distinct, an actual human being.** Sydney was misunderstood her entire life by her family, friends, teachers, and therapists. When she was little, she had three imaginary friends that "understood" her. James was a young boy who wore footy pajamas and glasses so big that any god would be able to see through them. **Nice; I've never seen glasses described this way. This is actually awesome. The whole tone of this piece is really engaging, kind of odd, kind of badass.** Betsy was a teenage girl who acted as an older sister to Sydney. She wore a torn droopy shirt and dusty jeans with combat boot, holes in the bottom of both. Now both of these imaginary friends grew old and passed when Sydney began to sprout. Rachel, her third imaginary friend and although mentioned last one of the most influential to Sydney. Rachel wasn't a regular imaginary friend that went away after Sydney grew up. She stayed by her side, she was the angel and devil on Sydney's shoulders. **Cool—makes me want to read more. Also, the idea of invisible friends is SO interesting and sets the story up for all kinds of interesting psychology in the main character. Are invisible friends our doubles? Our opposites? Our bad or good angels? A version of ourselves which we COULD be or SHOULD have been? Are they fill-ins for absent mothers or farhers?**

Ok, so, what is "the story" here?

Right now what we have is a character sketch and a very general situation, an opening that suggests any number of possible situations and *lots* of content to follow. It's basically the start of a novel—something quite substantial in length. This is common for beginning writers who have been assigned to write a story: we often get an intro to a long piece or kind of a sketch of a something long and complex, but not really what is called a “short story.” Based on this beginning, the story about Sydney could wind up being about most of her life!

The problem is, the “short story” as a genre usually can't hold much plot. Remember “Cathedral” and “How to Tell a True War Story”: we only get a handful of developed scenes in “Cathedral,” and quite a few super-short scenes in the war story. “Cathedral” includes a long section of backstory, but that is not part of the forward-going base plot, which turns out to fairly brief: just a few hours.

For a regular-length short story, what Sophie probably needs to focus on is just one to maybe eight scenes, maybe with Sydney and Rachael, **a specific situation** which will magnify, aggravate, challenge the main character.

For a short story, focus on just one up to maybe eight scenes.

So, who, in Sophie's story, *is* the character and what would “aggravate” or challenge her? We definitely get some clues about her in this opening. What do you think? What is she all about, and **what *focused* setting and plot could we set her down into, something that would be rich with possibilities, based on who she is?**

Let's help Sophie imagine possibilities. BTW, this journal entry is also for those of you who likewise have overly general beginnings. It will give you practice putting characters into specific situations tied to who they are.

IN YOUR JOURNAL, describe a situation, one to three scenes, that could be Sophie's story. (It's her story of course, and she will do with it as she likes. This is just to help us all think about short stories and how they get written.) What happens in the situation you've cooked up, and how is Sydney tested or challenged in that situation?

Aim in your response for one to two well-developed paragraphs. (Sophie: I'd like you to do this too!)

Provide a header for this journal entry: “Experimenting with a Story Draft” or “Practice Creating Character-Centered Story Situations” or maybe “Practice Focusing Short Stories.” Include a date, aprx. Nov. 1st.

My Take on Sophie's Story Sketch—for Giggles

Sophie's sketch is interesting to me in that her character's invisible “friends” are so vivid and changing. I tend to think of childhood invisible buddies as singular. Her character Sydney is also interesting in that she

feels misunderstood, seems to feel it compulsively, maybe delusionally. Really, the story sketch raises interesting questions about what it even means to “understand” another person, and what is really happening if someone “feels misunderstood.” (I mean, what does that actually mean? That others don’t get your sense of humor? That they keep expecting things from you that you don’t want to give? That they blame you for things you never intended to happen and/or actually had no part in? Maybe my story could raise these questions.)

I’m also curious about any connection such a character might have to mental illness, how mental illness is understood in children, whether “invisible friends” is considered natural or a form of neurosis, and how mental illness apparently sets in quite often during a victim’s teens. I’d probably go do some research.

I might even re-watch [Chocolat](#), a great movie from some years ago. One of the characters is a little girl whose invisible friend is a kangaroo.

In any case, my version of Sydney’s story would be set on her 11th birthday, sort of the cusp between childhood and the teen years. She invites a really weird group of half-friends from her middle school, and Rachael of course is there. Sydney sort of knows half-consciously by now that Rachael isn’t real, but she hasn’t yet completely accepted that, and so Rachael is still hanging around, if sometimes dimly. She kind of stands around on the sidelines, commenting on whatever’s happening.

I’ll say Sydney is a strange child who has a history of biting other kids at school—the ones that she really wants to be friends with. She’s mad all the time, and likes to shock her parents by telling them that she wants to be all kinds of awful or least odd things when she grows up—someone who hacks the computer systems of hospital ICUs, the worst President the country has ever had, a mortician, a Sherpa who retrieves the frozen bodies of dead climbers on Everest. Her first birthday guest, a vocal prodigy at age 10 named Stephanie McProdigy has just arrived at her door singing “Happy Birthday” very loudly and exactly like Adele.

Or maybe my story would be made up of 5 scenes. The first would be set on her 5th birthday, the second on her 8th, the third set on her 12th. In each scene, she would experience some form of being misunderstood, with Rachael there participating in some way—making things worse, helping her cope, acting as just someone commenting snidely on the side...I don’t know. Maybe Rachael is growing with her. Because these scenes occur so far apart in time, I’d separate them with an extra space, asterisk, or number.

2.

Now read this additional story:

Anderson H.

Community Justice

September 27, 1955

It was a cold fall day in Fargo North Dakota. The sky was grey, and the wind was cold, and the first flacks of snow were bound to fall at any moment. Still, unrelenting wind could not compare to the cold sweat and chilly nerves that Deputy Marshal Shafer felt in the pit of his stomach. In a cramped meeting room in the U.S. Marshal office he sat nervously tapping his foot on the ground.

Inspector Schafer was still relatively new to the U.S. Marshal service. He had graduated from the academy only 9 months prior, but Schafer felt as if he had already been through an entire career's worth of hardships. He had just finished a personally challenging assignment earlier that week. After taking a personal day he expected to return to work and immediately begin work on another assignment. Instead he barely made it past the front door before his boss told to go sit in the conference room. Now he felt as if he was waiting in the principal's office, but unlike high school, he had no idea what he had done wrong. He got up from his seat in the middle of the table and began pacing from one end of the room to the other. He stopped by one of windows and watched the cars drive down the street. He gazed up at the sky, but it did nothing to improve his mood. The gloomy sky barely produced enough light to illuminate the small room; combine with the dull white colored walls the dim light gave the whole room an eerie and ominous feeling.

In the small window Schafer could see his own faint reflection in the glass. He wondered if he was paler than usual or if anyone could tell that he hadn't been sleeping well the past three days. Inspector Schafer was a young law enforcement officer in his early twenties, but everyone always told him he looked much older than he really was. He had short hair that was a tad shorter than the common style of men his age. He preferred it this way though since it required little to no maintenance in the morning. He wore a light blue suit similar in style to ones he wears every day for work. His shiny black shoes along with the revolver hiding inconspicuously under his coat all combined to produce the model image of a Federal Law Enforcement Agent. A model agent who always upheld to law and always did everything right and by the book. At least until now its seems.

Schafer was suddenly startled ~~when the eerie silence was suddenly broken~~ by the sound of the old door swinging open. Schafer quickly turned to see two men enter the room. Both men were wearing dark suites and carrying briefcases. The first one was an older gentle with greying hair and large glasses. The second was a slightly younger man, who appeared to be in his late thirties with a square jaw and a receding hair line. The first man quickly moved to the head of the table and sat down. He opened his briefcase and pulled out a pile of papers and laid them out in front of him. He organized the small stacks into smaller stacks for several seconds before looking up at Schafer. He made a slight motion to the chair to his right and calmly said "inspector Schafer, please take a seat."

Schafer hesitantly moved to the chair and slowly sat down. "Can I ask who you guys are?"

Good use of dialogue conventions. When another person begins speaking you always drop down and indent for the next line of dialogue. Anderson is also doing well here in that he doesn't overuse dialogue tags such as, "he replied," "she muttered," "he interjected," etc.

Be sure to capitalize the first letter of the first work in a line of dialogue, though. Note where Anderson's lines sometimes begin with a lower-case letter.

The old man answered first in a rather distracted tone "we're your legal counsel. "

"legal counsel." Schafer was now completely Perplexed. "why do I need a lawyer?"

the older man looked up from his papers with a slightly annoyed look on his face "don't worry you're not in trouble, yet. We're simply here to review the events that occurred on May 1st, 1955 at 11:30 pm to May 2nd 1955 3:30 am."

"I submitted a report."

"I know, I have read it multiple time."

"we both have." The younger man quickly interjected

"then what is this about?" asked Schafer suddenly very annoyed.

The older man sat back in his chair "we're here to get a more thorough report and an idea of your mental state at the time to ensure that all the proper procedure was followed under the circumstances as you saw them." Schafer was puzzle and alarmed by this as he thought to himself "I did my damn job. Why would they think any differently?"

The younger man leaned forward in his chair and folded his hands as he rested them on the table. He took a breath then calmly asked "how long have you been in law enforcement Inspector Schafer?"

"I was in the Military Police Corps for four years, and after the war in Korea ended, I joined Marshal service."

"yes, well you see, this isn't Korea. Deadly gun fights do not just happen here on a weekly basis and they certainly don't happen in small towns like Sully's creek. Now the Governor is outraged at everything happened there earlier this week and he has order a full investigation into the incident, so we are just making sure that all the proper procedure was followed and that everything that transpired was in no way caused be the negligence of any officers."

The older man was now leaning forward in his chair with a pen in his hand ready to take notes. "Alright, we need you to tell use everything that happened that night.

"I don't even know where to begin."

"try the beginning and remember to be as detailed as you possibly can be."

"I suppose it all started last Monday. When I go my first solo assignment."

Three days ago

The sun beat down a quite dirt road baking the dirt and the rocks that had not been tampered with in hours. The old road resting on the northern half of the Great American Desert. No trees or great brush for miles. A dark brown line in the middle of golden sea of grass. The only life to be seem at this time of day being grassing cattle and little birds hopping around the dirt road looking for little stones to help chew their food. The little flock of black birds resting on one end of the road to the other feeding peaceful, having not been disturbed in some time.

Then suddenly the whole flock shot up into the air as a dark black Chevrolet roared down the quite lifeless road. The black tires barely clinging to the loose dirt throwing great clouds of dust into the air behind it. The Black car racing down the quite country road with a ferocity that made it apparent to the few who saw it that no one in that car wanted to be there.

The two occupants being as polar opposites as two men could appear to be. The driving being a man of the law, Young Inspector Schafer. The second man handcuffed in the back seat being a murderer and a criminal. A middle-aged man by the name of Douglas Carter. He had moved to a small town called Sully's Creek North Dakota two years ago where he got a job as a farm hand on a little farm about a mile out of town. He worked and live on that family farm with the farmer, his wife and their son and daughter. He worked there for almost a year until he snapped and murdered the entire family. He buried their bodies under a bridge that crossed the creek for which the town was named. He told the town that they had left in the night for some family emergency since they had on the east coast, and he said that they put him in charge of the farm until they returned. He continued to live on the families' farm after he murdered them. He fed their animals and harvested their crops, he even sat in the pew the family use to use at church on Sunday. He did this until he was so overcome with guilt that he sold all of the families belonging and then he used the money to wander the Midwest. Some kid that had been playing in the creek found the bodies of the family after he had left the farm. A warrant was put out for his arrest, but he was along way from North Dakota. He was finally arrested three months later for trying to bust a friend of his out of federal custody while he was on trial at a federal courthouse. While he was in custody the feds found the warrant for his arrest for the murders he committed. Now he was being transported back to Sully's Creek to stand trial for what he did.

The ride had been quite, both men silently disgusted by each other for their own reason, but as the car moved farther down the dusty road and they got closer and closer to their destination Douglas' nerves could not stand the silence anymore. "Why don't you just ask me?"

"Ask you What?"

"why I killed that family after they treated me like one of their own?"

"I honestly don't care. I figured you're just crazy. Either way it's not up to me to judge you. I'm just a marshal. It's up to the courts to decide that." Douglas began to laugh and Schafer paused before asking "I am curious why you would try to break your friend out of prison? You had gotten away with murder and you could have kept going south and started a new life, but you stopped and did something you had to have know would probably get you arrested. So Why?"

“I did that on principle. I don’t believe in our justice system; a bunch of people that don’t give a shit about you, coming together to give you some arbitrary punishment that will do no one any good. Instead of this heartless system we should have the one affected by the crime come together with the one who committed it so they can see the damage he has caused. Then all together they should decide how guilty can give back to the community.”

“and what if the community decides that the best way you can give back is by hanging from the end of a rope?”

“They wouldn’t do that because no one would gain anything from it. do you disagree?”

“Not about the death penalty no. I agree that it does not good and I was happy when the state banned it, but I believe in the justice system.”

“Of course, you do you’re nothing but a cop.” Douglas grunted as he leaned back in his seat. Schafer frowned. Douglas proved to be a lot smarter than Schafer had originally assumed. That didn’t change who he was or what he had done but his words caused Schafer to pause and think. His dad had been a judge and he taught him to believe true Justice can’t happen unless the judges are completely disconnected from the crime, because that is the only way they can give an objective verdict and punishment. Of course no is complete objective. Everyone has some bias for or against something. So maybe there is a hint of truth in what Douglas was saying

“I guess we’ll never know who is right, but the state won’t hang you, so you’ll have plenty of time to ponder the answer.”

The rest of the drive was silent an

Ok. Again, as with Sophie’s story, what we have in Anderew’s is a FABULOUS beginning, excellent dialogue, a plot already totally engaging, but too large for the bounds of a typical short story.

One way you can tell is that there are *several* narrative questions present. Remember that a story’s narrative question is simply a question that is explicitly or implicitly evident at the start of piece, and it’s why we keep turning pages: we want to know the answer. What’s the narrative question for *The Wizard of Oz*? Initially it’s “Will the mean lady in black on the bicycle permanently take Toto away from Dorothy? But then it becomes, “Will Dorothy make it back home?” What question focuses *The Great Gatsby*? Of course, it’s “Will Gatsby finally get Daisy back?” The novel is complex, though, and actually includes additional questions that keep us reading: “What will Nick learn from his experience of visiting with his cousin and hob-nobbing with the wealthy elite? Will Nick and Jordan get together? What will Tom do to stop Gatsby from winning Daisy back?” A novel can develop and sustain our curiosity about a number of

initial questions, but short stories generally aren't long enough to believably answer very many.

In Anderson's piece, we get at least five fairly huge questions in just a couple pages:

1st narrative question: why did Shafer kill Douglas?

2nd narrative question: why did Douglas kill the family? Also: how does his interesting philosophizing in the cop car connect with what he did?

3rd narrative question: will Shafer be convicted?

4th narrative question: will Douglas be convicted?

5th narrative question: how, if at all, will the situations of these two men be further entangled?

So this is already looking pretty complex: more than one main character, three extremely dramatic situations, plus introduction of some genuinely interesting philosophical themes! This would likely have to be as long as a novella, at least (a short, short novel) for all the narrative questions to be worked out. If we get the answers in just 5-10 pages, they won't seem credible and the fast pace can make the story even comic.

What can help with an overly large or grand plot idea is to *shift focus from plot to character*. Rather than focus on *what* will happen next, the writer might instead develop a full sense of *who* the main character is. Who might Anderson's story ultimately be about? Douglas? Shafer? Both? So far, who do you understand each character to be? What makes each guy distinct, round, and believable? What are the flaws, quirks, weaknesses in each man's character that make them interesting—in themselves, or as two different guys interacting?

Now what single scene (or let's say maybe up to 3 scenes here) might be a good story situation, given the character you've chosen? That is, what scene in Anderson's work above would magnify and aggravate that character's weakness in an interesting way and could in fact become a short story all by itself? You might even imagine additional scenes before or after the plot Anderson has given us.

A SCENE in a story or movie is a relatively short unit of continuous time, marked at its beginning and end by a change in place, time, and/or characters. If the characters have changed, we've possibly entered a new scene. If the place has changed, then we have a new scene. And if we move to a future time, we are in a new scene.

You might recall that the notion of scenes comes from literary drama or plays. At scene breaks in a play, the curtains close and the set is rearranged to become a new location and/or a different point in time, with possibly a different set of characters, right?

Scenes usually include just one chief action and have one main purpose within the story.

Scenes in Anderson's story (plus scenes only alluded to):

- The moment Douglas kills the family.
- Shafer with Douglas in the squad car.

- The moment Shafer kills Douglas.
- Shafer in the interrogation room.

Additional scenes I can *imagine*:

- A day in Shafer's future trial.
- The day Shafer gets out of prison

For me, the most interesting scene is the car ride. Here we have what will turn out to be two killers, and they have a tense, kind of mysterious, as well as philosophical conversation in a cop car. I would make them both primary characters, because its their interaction as such different people that interests me. One is a recognized crook, and the other is an unrecognized crook (the cop—at least at the very start). One seems seems intense, a complex thinker, with a dark attitude, and the other seems sort of “normal,” calm, maybe a tad dull. Plus we have a micro journey: the car's traveling from one place to the next. Journeys are always fascinating. I think this car ride scene could be a short story all by itself.

What would be the story's narrative question with such a scene choice? What implied or openly stated question early on would keep us reading, wanting to know the answer?

- Will one of these men change the other in some way?
- Will the criminal's ideas make the cop think about the world differently?
- What will each man learn from the other?
- Why did the arrested man commit the crime he did?

Any one of these could be the question that anchors our attention. Notice that they are all character-centered; we'd keep reading because they are interesting people, not because the action of the story is necessarily sensational.

Below is how I might *storyboard* such a piece.

A STORYBOARD is like an outline, often used in film and plays. Each square can represent a chapter, or a scene, or a moment in a scene.

Below is a storyboard of scenes I could create out of Anderson's draft. Each is a full scene:



1. The cop puts a handcuffed Douglas into the car. Some backstory on the cop—his absolute loathing of criminals. His fury at the violence of the world.	2. Silence—just images of things going by as they drive.	3. Conversation begins.	4. Conversation takes philosophical turn.	5. Conversation takes turn toward very loud argument.
6. Another spell of silence; new images going by.	7. The cop suddenly has a strong hunch or insight into why the crook killed the family.	8. The arrested man has an insight into how the cop hides his own violent tendencies behind the law.	9. Each man tells the other his hunch. Both look absolutely furious and obliterated.	10. The cop turns onto a dark, empty road and drives for several miles at an excessively high speed. The arrested man finally says, “Where in the hell are you going?!”
11. The cop pulls the car over. He shuts off the engine and the lights and the darkness is so thick you can almost drink it. The hot metal of the car ticks. The arrested man says, “Some fun!” The cop says, “It's no real pleasure in life.”	End			

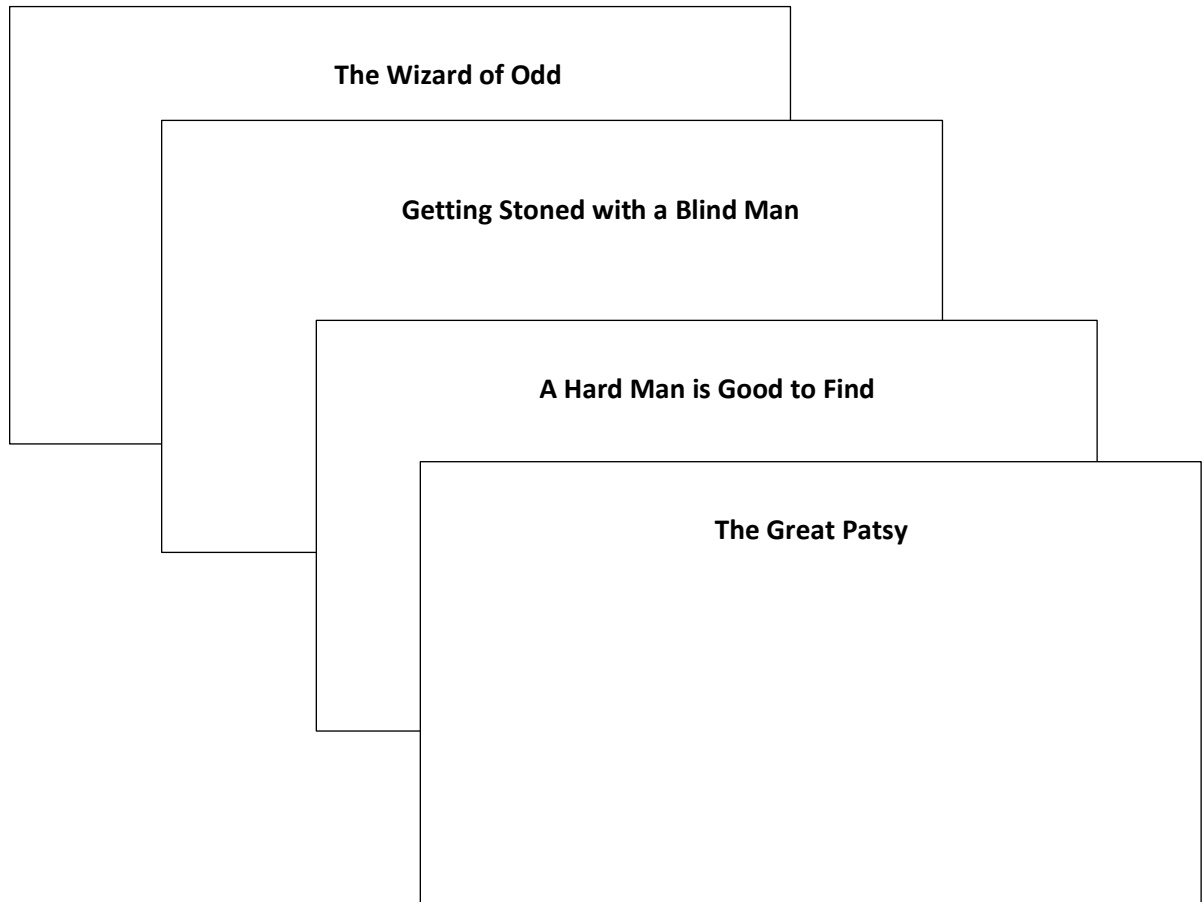
I hope you notice that I stole the last lines of dialogue from our assigned story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” LOL.

Notice as well that I gave the story an indeterminate ending. I could leave it that way, or I could hint earlier in the story at what finally happens, or I could just let the reader intuit what follows.

Note: this situation and plot idea are in NO WAY required, of course, for Anderson. This is just a possible version of his piece which illustrates the focus you need for a short story.

3.

Still another idea for when you have conceived a plot too large for a short story: turn it into a collection of flash pieces, each focused on just one scene and each with its own title!



Questions to ask yourself about your own story:

- Do you actually have a developed story—or do you have more like a *sketch* or summary of a story? Or do you even have what is really a beginning of a *novel*?
- Where do your story's scenes begin and end? Mark them on your draft in **red**. (Just write **Scene 1**, **Scene 2**, etc. above or next to where the scenes begin.)
- Do you actually have undeveloped scenes kind of mashed together? Do you need to cleanly separate them?
- Do you have overly short, undeveloped scenes?

- Do you have any scenes that don't need to be there? For instance, do you have a character driving from his home to work, with all kinds of details about the drive that don't add anything to the story? You could possibly just have him go from home straight to his workplace with an easy transition such as, "After his usual boring, one-hour commute, he found himself at work...." Or you could drop down an extra space before starting the new scene.