



Those Who Forget History
Using Backstory to Enhance Your Novel
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Lesson Three – The Five W’s of Backstory
Who, What, When, Where and Why—and How

The Five W’s of backstory are the same Five W’s of journalism: Who, What, When, Where and Why, and sometimes How. In this lesson, we’ll learn to use these burning questions to understand a fictional’s backstory.

The Five Burning Questions

Who are the people closest to your fictional, the people who had the greatest influence on him? These could be family, friends, teachers, co-workers, etc.

Why are they important to your fictional? If it’s a close friend, did they fight battles together, on the playground or the actual battlefield? Are they twins who share the unique bond of having been in the womb together? Is it a mentor relationship? A parent? A child or a cousin? No matter who the person is, there must be enough of a bond between them and your fictional to affect his backstory.

What happened between them that formed this bond? Did they experience some trauma together? Did they play in the same band? Were they rivals? Were they forced together by circumstance?

When did they influence your fictional? Did the impact begin right away, or was it a gradual process? Was it sudden, as in a death or love-at-first-sight?

Where did it happen? At school? At home? At the office?

How did they influence your fictional? Was the influence good or bad? Did they betray your fictional, help them get their life in order, break their heart?

Examining the Influences

Now let’s look at how these people changed your fictional.

Meet Lucas. He’s a quiet, unassuming young man, studious and serious. He knows where he’s going in life, and he knows how to get there. But his eyes are wary. As a boy, he and his mother

endured terrible physical and verbal abuse at the hands of his father. The abuse only stopped after his father killed his mother and Lucas ran away from home.

Now let's examine the person who influenced Lucas most: his father. We might expect him to fear his father, to feel great anger toward him, but what about shame and/or guilt? He may believe the abuse was his fault, and that he should have protected his mother. He may avoid having children because he fears he will be like his father, or he may long to raise a family in safety and security.

Now meet Evelyn. She's a model, spokeswoman for an internationally famous perfume. Her huge blue eyes are her best feature, and go well with her golden hair. She's considered one of the most beautiful women in the world. All her life, people have told her how pretty she was. She was "the pretty one" among her siblings, and she began modelling when she was five. In high school, the boys competed to date her, but after a single date, when she refused to let them push her too far, they left her. In college, she studied business and marketing. Her dream is to start her own line of cosmetics.

Who do you think was the greatest influence on Evelyn? Her mother, who put her into modelling at such a young age? Her siblings, who might have resented her beauty and felt she was the favored child? The boys and men who wanted to date her for her appearance and never took her seriously? Perhaps it was a teacher who saw beneath her beauty to the intelligent woman she was and encouraged her to follow her dreams of having her own business.

When you're writing backstory, it's important to remember that it's the people and circumstances in your fictionals' lives who make them what they are.

Assignment: Write a passage explaining the 5 W's of your fictional's backstory.