

The Story-First Checklist for New Writers

“Stories aren’t told. They’re built—with craft, conscience, and courage.”

— Sajeed Varghese

Story Development Checklist for New Writers

● 1. Concept & Premise

- Is your concept emotionally intriguing and high-stakes?
- Does your premise create tension between what is and what could be?
- Is your story idea driven by a “what if” question with real consequences?

● 2. Theme & Message

- Can you articulate your story’s central theme in one line?
- Does every major scene reflect or challenge this theme?
- Is the message universal enough to resonate but specific enough to matter?

● 3. Characters & Arcs

- Does your protagonist want something *urgently* — and why now?
- Do they have a flaw or fear that creates internal conflict?
- Will they **transform** through the story (emotionally, morally, or spiritually)?
- Are the supporting characters mirrors or foils to the protagonist’s journey?

● 4. Structure & Stakes

- Does your story follow a clear 3-act structure (or purposeful variation)?
- Are the stakes personal, emotional, and escalating?
- Is there a midpoint twist or reveal that reorients the journey?

● 5. Scenes & Subtext

- Does every scene *advance* plot, character, or theme?
- Is conflict built into the fabric of your scenes — not just spoken?
- Are you showing subtext, not spelling it out?

● **6. Dialogue & Voice**

- Do characters have distinct voices and worldviews?
- Is the dialogue crisp, real, and layered with intention?
- Are you using silence and rhythm as much as words?

● **7. Emotional Payoff**

- Will the ending emotionally satisfy the audience *and* fulfill the story's promise?
- Are key transformations *earned*, not forced?
- Does your story *leave something behind* in the reader/viewer?