

The End of Writer's Block!

Sometimes solving a problem can be as simple as changing the way you look at it.

BY MAYA KAATHRYN BOHNHOFF

My road to victory over writer's block began, innocently enough, when I heard the phrase used by a particularly melodramatic acquaintance.

"I have *writer's block*," she sighed, and struck a Scarlett O'Hara pose—wrist to brow, wilting.

I allowed myself to savor the image, envisioning her melodramatic face pressed up against a wall—brick or stone, something *gritty*—and perhaps (and here I indulged myself still further) even butting up against it repeatedly. The image was delicious enough to cause me to really *hear* the metaphoric

expression for the first time.

The phrase implies the presence of something solid. A barrier the writer must dig under, climb over or dismantle brick by brick. A daunting prospect. Yet, when actually confronted with the blank page, I'd always felt a distinct *lack* of something—specifically, *ideas*. That empty paper represented more of a gap than a block—less an obstacle to surmount than an abyss to fill with characters, dialogue, plot.

Well, there, I thought. We've been using the wrong image. It's not writer's block, it's writer's *gap*.

This exchange of metaphors accomplished more than I expected. It made the problem less daunting, and it set a more positive tone: Writing isn't demolition, it's construction. The writer builds

Figure 1

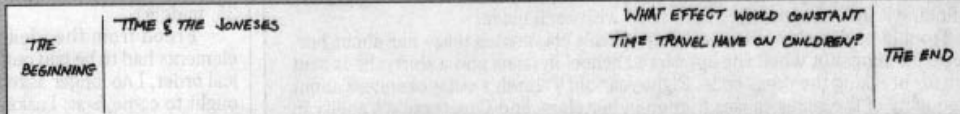


Figure 2

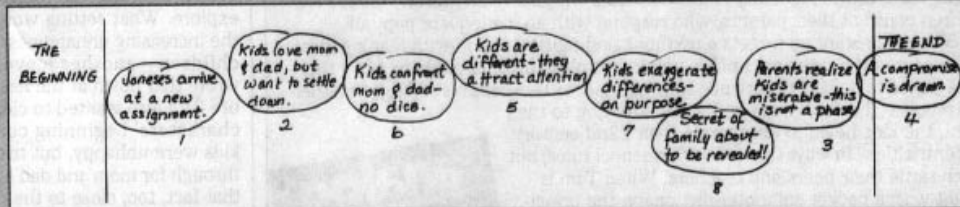
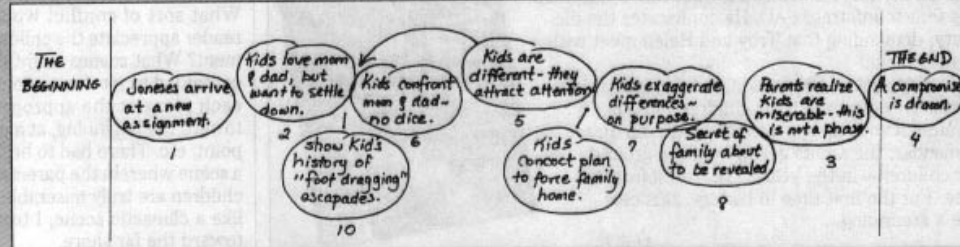


Figure 3



a bridge across the trackless waste between a story's beginning and that fair and verdant land called The End.

But how? My attempts to construct such bridges by jumping in a straight line from the near cliff toward the far edge ended with my writing plunging into Dead End canyon. Ideas are notoriously difficult to manage; where we want them to fall into a tidy line, they appear with wanton randomness, mocking our desire for order.

I began to conquer writer's gap when I realized that, though my heroines had to sink before they could swim, I didn't have to outline my ideas in that order. The most creative distance between two points is not necessarily covered in one great leap. A bridge certainly isn't built that way. The engineers first establish a series of piers on which to raise the superstructure. That's what I needed, too: piers or, more appropriately, stepping-stones. I needed a substructure of ideas on which to build the

superstructure of my story.

I took the idea to heart. Armed with a vague idea that had been plaguing me for months, I sat down to turn it into a story. I succeeded—the story was eventually published in *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact* as "Home Is Where"—but when I started, all I had was a working title ("Time and the Joneses") and three elements: a question ("What if...?"), a set of characters, and a waking-up-fuzzy dream I'd had that was somehow connected to the rest.

My particular *what if* concerned time travel. If a family traveled in time constantly, what effect would that lifestyle have on its children? Raised as an Air Force brat, I know what transient lifestyles can do to children and teenagers. Being constantly uprooted, floating from one school to another (sometimes across cultures), losing friends to reassignment—all these lead to loneliness and hurt. I had jotted down some notes about how being from a different

time, as well as a different place, could aggravate those stresses, but that wasn't a plot. It was only an idea.

THROWING STONES

My main characters were a family from the future: a couple of historians who pursued their projects via time travel (the mechanism for which I'd established in an earlier story in *Analog*) and four children—a teenaged boy and girl and a set of younger twins. All talented, all bright, all very unhappy.

My fuzzy dream involved a group of children in a classroom, each holding in one hand a banana clip of the type beauticians use. They were gathered around a small boy who held in his hand a butterfly clip—a device similar in function but very different in appearance. "Well," he said, "I wanted to make a banana clip, but I couldn't remember what one looked like, so I made a butterfly clip instead." That gave me a jolt that brought my notes on families and time travel to life: These kids were different, very different. They had talents and faculties their peers didn't share.

With this foundation, I began tossing stepping-stones into the creative streambed. I drew a simple diagram that contained only a beginning and an end and wrote, at the top of the diagram, my question about the effect of time travel on children (Figure 1, page 25, top). Then I brainstormed ideas, big and small, important and incidental, and dumped them into the stream until I had a foundation for the story (Figure 2, page 25, middle).

Freed from the idea that my plot elements had to be laid out in chronological order, I no longer asked myself what ought to come first; I asked what would best illuminate the ideas I wanted to explore. What setting would best show the increasing unhappiness of the Jones children—another move, perhaps? I wrote that down at the near shore (Figure 2). I also wanted to clearly state my characters' beginning condition: The kids were unhappy, but tried to muddle through for mom and dad's sake. I noted that fact, too, close to the near shore.

Then I reached for other ideas. What sort of conflict would make the reader appreciate the children's predicament? What scenes might illustrate it? I continued to jot down thoughts, placing each stone at the appropriate place—toward the beginning, at a midway crisis point, etc. There had to be, for example, a scene wherein the parents realize their children are truly miserable. Since it felt like a climactic scene, I tossed that one toward the far shore.

By this time, ideas had begun to

A Synopsis of "Home Is Where"

The story opens in Papillion, Nebraska, a small town near Offutt Air Force Base (Strategic Air Command). The year is 1955. Into this bucolic setting arrive the Joneses, a family of six from the year 2112. Troy and Helen Jones are historians on a research project. Their four children, Anastasia, Tamujin, Constantine and Tahireh, are suffering from the loneliness brought on by their lifestyle. They're reluctant to make friends they will never see again, and are finding it increasingly difficult to fit in with each move.

Trouble begins almost immediately; Stasi's classmates tease her about her strange clothing, but when she appears at school in jeans and a shirt, she is sent home for breaking the dress code. Eight-year-old Tahireh's outspokenness about the equality of the sexes causes friction in her class, and Constantine's ability in mathematics draws immediate attention. Tam withdraws into a surly cloud. The children confront their parents, who respond with an inadequate pep talk.

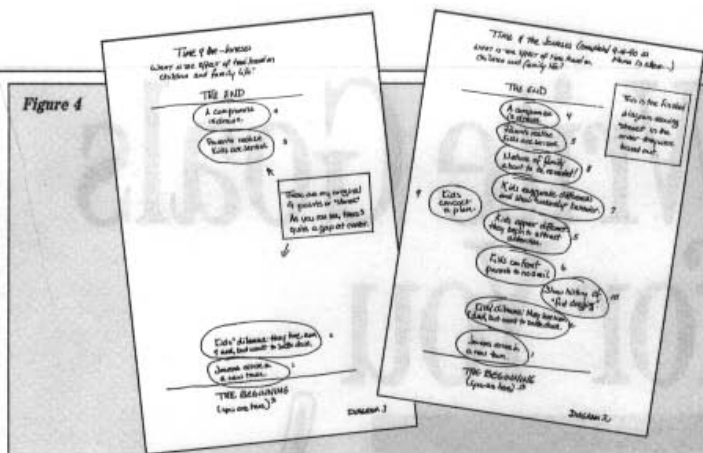
When Constantine forgets a textbook and fabricates one with blank pages, he ends up in the principal's office, where his older brother explains away the blank-paged text. This experience spawns an idea; Tam calls his siblings together to strategize. To draw mom and dad's attention to their plight, the kids begin to exaggerate their 22nd century "eccentricities" in ways that are within school rules, but which rattle their peers and teachers. When Tam is caught with a pocket computer-dictionary, the principal of the school is convinced the Joneses are Russian spies sent to infiltrate SAC. He confiscates the dictionary, demanding that Troy and Helen meet with him to explain.

During that confrontation, the Joneses at last realize how desperate their children must be. Threatened with an appearance by the Air Base commander, the adults gallop home to ground their children—in the year 2112—until further notice. For the first time in history, kids celebrate a grounding.

—M.K.B.



Figure 4



spawn other ideas. These kids were different from the other children around them—because they were from the future, difference was inevitable. That difference would create stress and provoke a confrontation with their parents. The adults would fail to recognize the seriousness of the situation, of course, and that suggested a major plot element: The Jones children would begin to exaggerate their differences, hoping to force mom and dad to pack it in before their cover was blown. To make that point, I needed to show the impact of this odd family on its neighbors, so I added the threat that the Jones family secret was about to be discovered. I put it near the far shore because it seemed to represent a crescendo in tension.

I did this work with a pen and paper as shown in Figures 1-3, but 3×5 cards could work as well. With cards it might be easier to shuffle ideas. But the diagram allows you to get an overall view of the story without needing a basketball court to spread it out on.

Before long, I had a solid line of piers—the substructure for my story. The idea-collection phase of the process was complete. Now I needed to collate the ideas, cull them and order them. I could move the stones around, try different patterns to see if they suggested new plot twists or changed the dynamics of the story. I could also toss out any ideas that didn't seem to fit and bring in new ones that did.

In the case of "Home Is Where," I made no major changes, but I did shuffle the order of the stones in order to build conflict while leading up to the kids' confrontation with their parents. I also added some incidental scenes to the substructure—scenes I could use to set up the major and minor conflicts I'd already conceived.

Figure 3 (page 25, bottom) shows the final arrangement of the story's piers. Once they were arranged to my

satisfaction, I felt I could begin to write with reasonable assurance that I would not plunge, head first, into the abyss.

BUILDING BRIDGES

"Home Is Where" is a novelette of about 13,000 words. I wrote it directly from the diagram, without going through the intermediate phase I use with longer fiction—that of synthesizing the story to see if the ideas I've assembled work in the order in which I've assembled them.

Synopsis or no, once the piers are in place, design choices need to be made. Will this story be first person, single narrator? Parallel structure (two narrators alternating viewpoints)? Multiple, woven viewpoints? Will the story be linear, or will it jump about in time and space? Usually something about the story itself will suggest a viewpoint and/or design, and once I've determined that, I begin to write.

While writing, in order to give the story direction and momentum, I use a method I call the *rolling outline*. I've never liked static outlines; I've never been good at creating them or using them. But the alternative can be chaos. The rolling outline gives me the flexibility I want, and the security I need.

When I've completed a chapter or segment of a story in longhand, I immediately write down the plot elements or scenes I want to include in the next segment. A few words are usually adequate to capture the feeling of a scene, as well as its purpose. These notes become my outline for the next section.

My chapter-head notes contain four to eight ideas arranged as I think they should appear (Figure 4, above). (It's okay to write down more ideas than will actually fit into a chapter; the important thing is to keep rolling.) After I've written the first scene, I go back to the beginning of the chapter and check the initial list. Did something I've written change the order in which these scenes should

occur? Have I learned that I don't need some of the scenes at all? I answer these questions and, if necessary, rewrite the list at the top of my next segment-to-be. I do this for each chapter.

This process works even when writing directly on the computer, since most word processors allow the insertion of comment lines. (These are lines of text that appear on the screen, but don't print unless you want them to.)

The rolling outline is an inherently flexible tool with only one requirement: You must never end a segment without writing down where you are headed next—even in the abstract. It works, too; since I've disciplined myself to use this technique, I've avoided writer's block (oops, I mean gap) altogether.

SURVEYING THE RESULTS

There is one last phase of this process that I heartily recommend for anyone working on a long project such as a novella or novel. At key points during a story's creation (and at its conclusion), I go over what I've written and synthesize, noting what happened in each chapter or segment, what discoveries were made, what conflicts arose. This allows me to maintain an overall view of the story, which can be helpful when writing a 100,000-word novel. Synthesizing forces me to view my work as a whole, and to ask, again and again, important questions about pacing, flow and scene order. Does my story make sense? Does it flow smoothly, or are there dead spots? Is there both suspense and release of suspense? Did I get key points across?

If any of the answers are unhappy ones, I can turn to my diagrams and rolling outline notations to discover where the story went awry.

The chief advantage to building a story in this way is that the process is flexible. Whether you're prone to traveling using minimal landmarks, or need a detailed road map to complete your journey, a bridge diagram and rolling outline can help you find your way from one side of the story to the other. ■

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Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff has sold nine stories to *Analog* and one book, *The Meri*, to Baen Books. The sequel, *Taminy*, will be published this summer.

TIME of the Joneses
WHAT IS THE EFFECT of time travel on
children and family life?

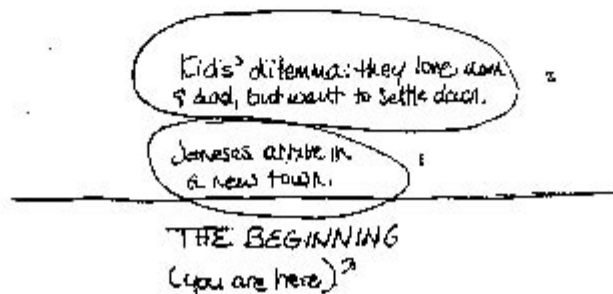
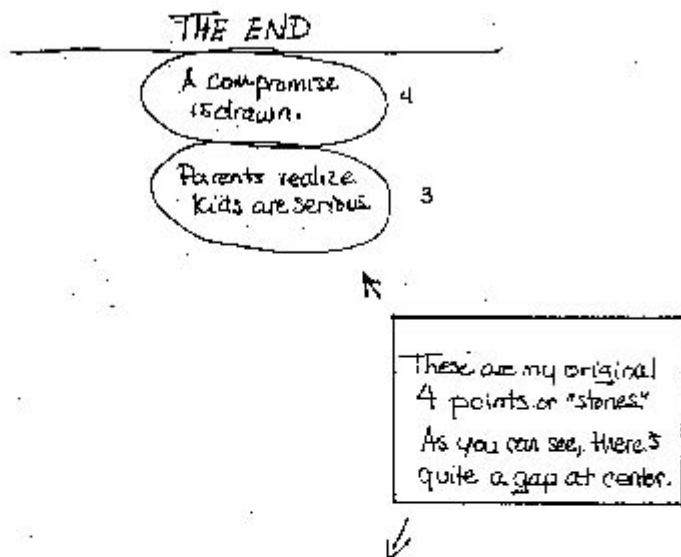


DIAGRAM 1

TIME & the JONESSES (completed 9-15-90 as
 WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF TIME TRAVEL ON Home Is Where...)
 children and family life?

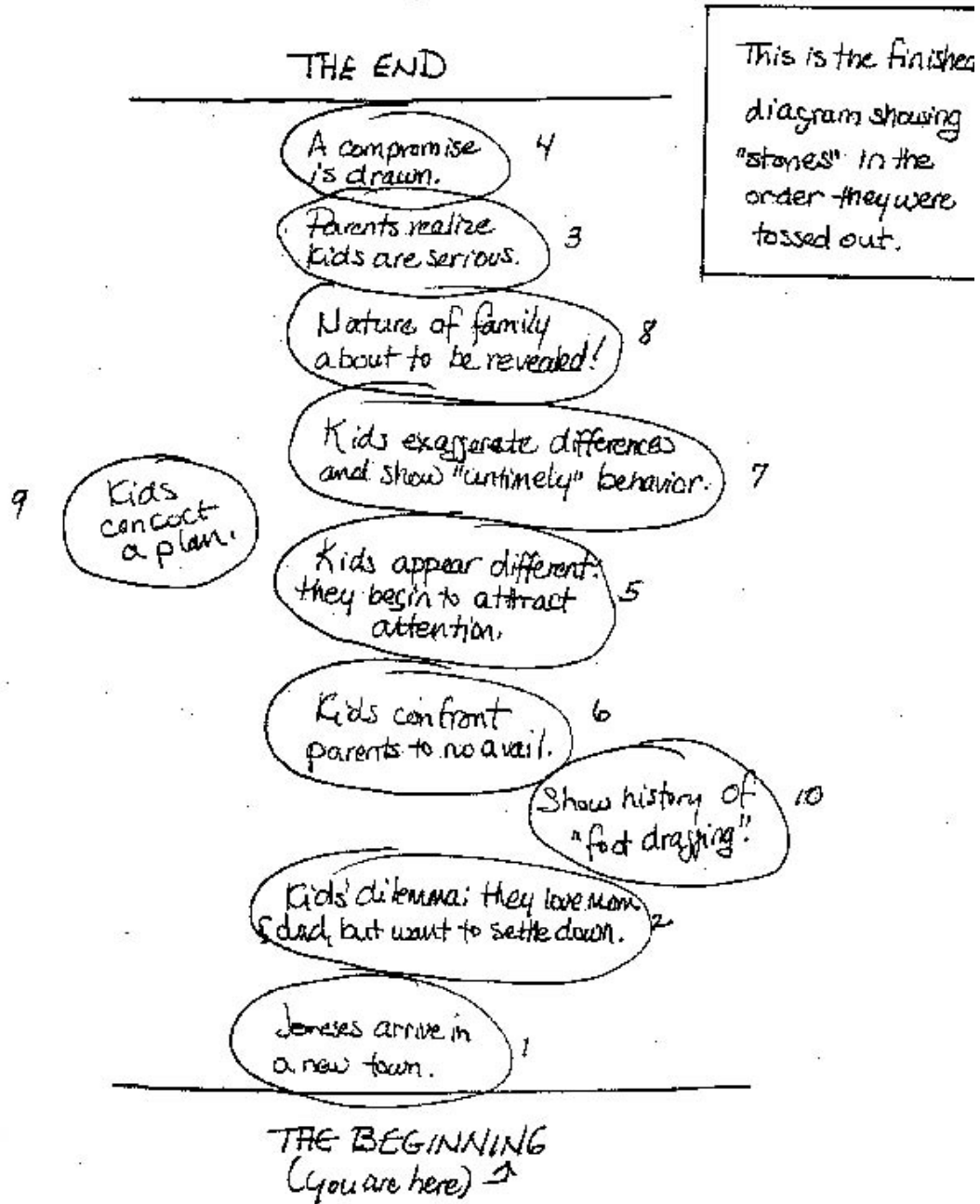


DIAGRAM 2