

The First Two Pages: “Green and California Bound” by Curtis Ippolito
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An Essay by Curtis Ippolito

“Green and California Bound” was my first legitimate attempt at incorporating a semi-strict structure when writing a short story.

When I finished the first draft of my debut novel, [*Burying The Newspaper Man*](#), I jumped back into writing short stories again in January 2020, after an eight-year break. In the months that passed, I had more than a dozen stories published. While I was delighted my short stories were being accepted by solid zines and print publications, a placement with a major short story market had yet eluded me—a “win” I deeply craved. All of 2021 went by with me swinging and missing with pro-paying publishers, so I determined to dig deep to write something good enough to change that outcome.

Then I stumbled across a thread on Twitter detailing Alice Adams’ ABDCE method of writing short stories: **Action** (draw the reader in), **Background** (see and get to know the characters), **Development** (show why the readers should care), **Climax**, and **Ending** (show how the characters have changed).

Seemed simple enough. Using this structured format, I loosely outlined a story idea that materialized after I read a piece in *The San Diego Union-Tribune* about the shortage of truckers in the U.S. and how the pandemic and subsequent

supply chain issues had exasperated this trend. My idea focused on a down-and-out couple who buy a rickety U-Haul to take up trucking as a means to make some quick money to climb out of the hole they've dug for themselves.

I jotted down one line for each of the self-explanatory prompts and the story's plot immediately fell into place, a rare occurrence for me. I then took off writing.

Which brings us to the story's first line.

They were both drowsy, and their state only worsened mile after mile with nothing in sight but well-worn blacktop and moonlit mountains.

I tinkered with this line right up to when I submitted the piece. I wanted to let the reader know the main characters are in peril from the jump. "Well-worn blacktop" and "moonlit mountains" were the ways to show they're out in the middle of nowhere, and the nature of these references, I believe, helps set a mysterious and dark tone. Moving along, we find out why they're so exhausted and strung out.

Couldn't blame them.

Their adrenaline had been pumping hard twenty miles back while they navigated the winding mountain pass. Randall gripping the wheel ten and two, trying his damndest to keep the rickety box truck from overturning under severe gusts of wind; while Sheila squeezed Randall's arm every time he drifted into the neighboring lane of the two-lane divided highway, and shouted when their tires rumbled over the strip signaling a non-existent shoulder and a desert of boulders waiting just beyond to obliterate them.

From the beginning of writing the piece I had the end of this last line, but I tightened up the visuals when I realized after finishing the first draft that I had foreshadowed the story's ending. *Spoiler alert* *Non-existent shoulder. Desert of boulders. Waiting just beyond to obliterate them.* This graph was also about injecting action, that first structural point.

The next few lines reveal that Randall and Sheila are searching for a truck stop in this vast emptiness. I avoided info-dumping *why* they are in this rickety box truck, risking their safety on a dark, desolate highway, but I hint at it to let the reader know why they should care about these characters.

Her thoughts turned to the dilemma she'd put them in, and she hoped their calculated gamble would pay off.

So now the reader knows they're in a jam, and Sheila placed them there, or so she believes. Did she? And how? I believe these questions will keep the reader reading, and it's in the Background where they'll find the answers.

In the next few lines, Randall fights to stay awake using tried-and-true methods, including slapping himself and singing.

The end of the first scene closes out that first prompt: *Action*. Here, the couple spots a well-lit casino and travel center with overnight trucker parking.

They're saved. For now.

The next scene is where I delve into the characters' Background and of this couple's dilemma. The end of this scene (mostly) finishes up the first two pages.

From there, the story progresses along the rest of the ABDCE tracks.

Development: Introducing the characters and laying out the plot. Climax: It's a wild ride! And the Ending: Echoes themes at the story's beginning.

I don't necessarily believe you need to outline a short story in order to write a great one. And if you outline and that works for you, great! For me, I now believe following a loose structure such as the ABDCE method sets me on the right path from the beginning and gives me a much better shot at my short stories being accepted at top markets like *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. As I type this, I have a story I've been trying to place that I believe is one of my best but that has been garnering rejections. So trust me: I don't have any of this figured out.

The First Two Pages of "Green and California Bound"

They were both drowsy, and it only worsened mile after mile with nothing in sight but well-worn blacktop and moonlit mountains to keep them company.

Couldn't blame them. Their adrenaline had been pumping hard twenty miles back while they navigated the winding mountain pass. Randall gripping the wheel ten and two, trying his damndest to keep the rickety box truck from overturning under severe gusts of wind, while Sheila squeezed his arm every time he drifted into the neighboring lane of the two-lane divided highway and shouted when their tires rumbled over the strip signaling a nonexistent shoulder and a desert of boulders waiting just beyond to obliterate them. Their nerves were fried. Exhaustion had settled in.

"There has to be another truck stop coming up soon." Randall slapped his leg. "Finding anything?"

“Keep your eyes on the road, I’m searching,” said Sheila. The cab glowed from her phone. She barely had a signal, and the map app kept spinning without loading. Defeated, she locked the phone and dropped it in her lap with a huff.

“Shitty signal.” She rolled down her window a few inches and the night’s cool air flowed into the cab, accompanied by a blustering roar that muffled the truck’s creaks and moans. Her thoughts turned to the dilemma they were in thanks to her, and she hoped their calculated gamble would pay off.

After a few minutes, Sheila scootched over on the bench seat. She started massaging Randall’s shoulders, hoping to bring relief to his tired joints, but stopped when his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Wake up!” She smacked his arm.

“I’m awake. I’m awake.”

Randall glanced down at the black hole where a radio should’ve been. Started singing “Ring of Fire” at the top of his lungs. He couldn’t remember the second verse, so he repeated the chorus for a third time in a row. This amused Sheila.

Randall shouted suddenly, pointed left. “Look. Lights!”

“Oh, thank God. Take the next exit.”

As they closed the distance, the lights grew brighter and Sheila’s stomach unclenched. Randall rolled through a stop sign and proceeded on the overpass over the highway. Straight ahead, salvation.

The Golden Acorn Casino and Travel Center.

Randall brought the truck to a stop when they reached the gas pumps and craned his neck to see the awning. The travel center’s full name was spelled out in white lettering against a dark background, with a warm white string of lights lining the top of the structure. The Golden Acorn Casino sparkled and flashed back to their left a short distance away.

“Got a signal,” Sheila said.

“How far away are we?”

“Says another hour and twenty minutes.”

Randall eased the gas pedal, guided the truck through the stalls and out the other side. “Close enough we can wait to fill up this thing, but far enough away we should crash here for the night.”

“There was never any doubt about the last thing. Unless you want me to be a raging bitch tomorrow.”

“No, no,” Randall chuckled. His eyes were heavy. “Wouldn’t want that. Here, let’s park with the big boys.”

He pulled into a large asphalt parking lot. Around the perimeter, wind turbines rotated slowly. Thirty-foot LED lampposts anchored the interior of the area, but all of the dozen semis in the lot were positioned away from the stark white pools of light. Sheila pointed for Randall to head to the back of the lot. He did, giving an all-black rig to their right about fifty yards of distance.

“Look there.” Randall leaned over Sheila. “What a beauty. Bet she has a nice sleeper too.” Even this late at night, the truck gleamed. Sheila heard the low grumble of its engine and gazed over at the orange lights outlining the cab and running down the trailer.

“Yeah.” She rolled up her window. Felt around at her feet for her water canister and jammed her thumb against the metal container. “Ow!”

“You okay?”

“Uh-huh. Startled myself more than anything.”

“Ha. You’re tired as shit. You need sleep.”

“No duh. But I have to pee worse.”

“Amen, babe.”

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Curtis Ippolito lives in San Diego, California, and is the author of *Burying The Newspaper Man*, his debut crime novel. He is an Anthony Award Finalist (2023) and Derringer Award Finalist (2023). His short stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, *Vautrin Magazine*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Bristol Noir*, *Mystery Tribune*, and several other notable publications, and have been included in multiple anthologies including the Anthony Award-nominated *Trouble No More*. He also has a novella that just came out, [Stealing Paradise](#), which is the penultimate episode in the Grifter’s Song saga. Curtis is currently querying agents with his second novel, a crime thriller. Connect with him on Twitter @curtis9980 or visit his website: curtisippolito.com.