



Changing life stories

# Refugee Week 2023

## How to *try to* write a story about refugees

### Introduction

It is not easy to write a story about a refugee. However hard you try – unless you have been a refugee and can speak from first-hand experience – you will never be able to get it absolutely right.

But it is worth trying to do it for two reasons.

One, so that you can do some research and create a story that might help others understand the plight of people who are fleeing danger and in need of somewhere safe to go.

Two, so that you can understand a refugee's experience. If you can understand such tough experiences even a little better, then when you are given the opportunity to help a refugee or refugee charity or to take part in action to support refugees, you will be informed.

That is why the title of these writing challenges is called 'How to **try to** write a story about refugees'.

Below, you will find five worksheets helping you to write about and understand a refugee's experience and journey. They will be based on character, setting, story, plot and motivation.

Tom Palmer has made a short video to model what he means for each worksheet, and you can refer back to the *Boat People* stories as and when it is useful.

As well as an introduction video, Tom has made an extra video at the end to demonstrate how he would try to turn five worksheets like yours into a story.

Your first task is to choose a refugee to base your story on.

It could be someone you know or have met, it could be someone featured in the news recently or from a refugee support website (with it being Refugee Week this week), or it could be a famous refugee who has gone on, like many do, to achieve great things, like Alphonso Davies, Rita Ora or Anne Frank.

**It is now time to choose a refugee whose life you would like to understand better and who you would like to tell other people about through your story. Good luck, and thank you for being interested in thinking about refugees this Refugee Week.**

Tom Palmer

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# #1 Your character

## Who is your story about?

When Tom Palmer writes a story about a refugee, he bases the story on a real person's experience. And he always begins with that real person, the character who the story is about.

In his book – *After the War*, the story of 300 Jewish child refugees who come to live in the UK in 1945 – he based his characters very closely on real Holocaust survivors.

He did that because he feels that if you tell a real person's story you will be closer to the truth of what refugees have to go through than if you just make something up.

To help Tom get close to the truth, he uses testimony.

'Testimony' is the word for what a person has said about their experience.

Testimony is also referred to as a primary source. That means it is a first-hand telling of a story told by those who were directly involved. A secondary source is a story retold by those not involved.

Tom chose Henny Sinding Sundo in his first *Boat People* story – *Denmark to Sweden 1943* – because, although she was young, Henny was willing to risk her own life to help people who were being hunted to reach safety.

Who have you chosen as your character? What do you know about them?

To help you gather some facts, fill in the character form below. Write down some basic details like their name, age and country of origin. Then find out something about their family, and what they are doing now, or did after they became a refugee. You can also add any other fact that particularly interests you.

If you can't find a photograph, draw a picture of them, just to help you when you are describing them, or even just thinking about them.

Watch Tom model his example video here: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/refugee-week>.

## YOUR CHARACTER

Name:

Age:

County of origin:

Other fact:

Photo or picture

Family

What do they do now?

Other fact

# #2 Your setting

## Where and when is your story set?

Once you have a character – your **who** – you need to put them in their setting. This is the **where** and the **when**. It can be tricky to describe a place, even if you know it well.

In the *Boat People* story *Belgium to England 1914*, Tom Palmer used a painting to help him. In the other stories, he uses photographs. Having an image helps Tom to make sure he describes a place accurately. But it also gives him ideas about how to take the story forward.

Look at the picture he based the story around. Can you see some of the details that inspired the story? Now watch the short film where Tom shows how he used this picture to find ideas for his story, *Belgium to England 1914*: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/refugee-week>.

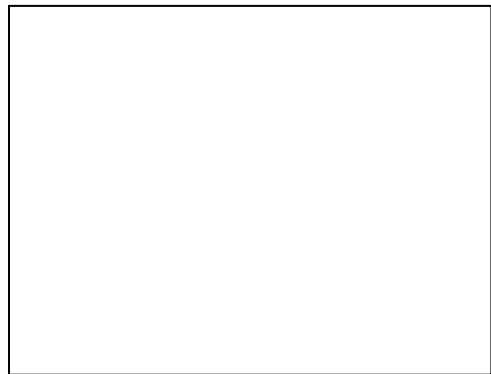
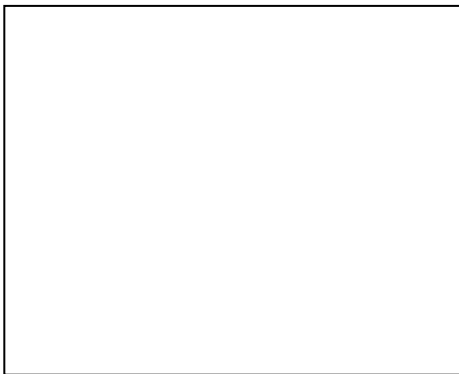
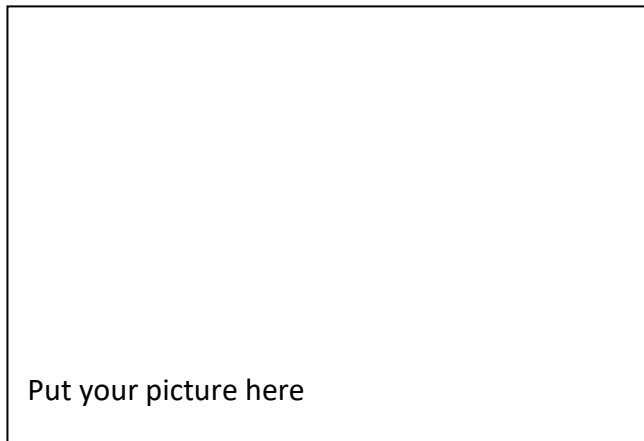
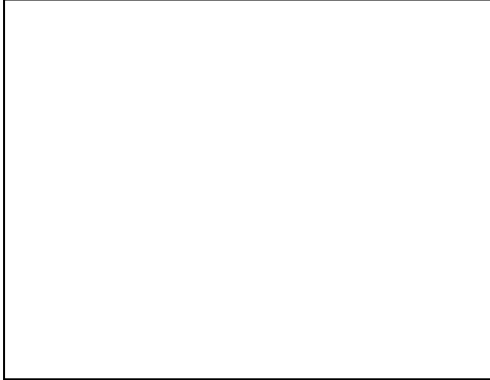


Now it's your turn! Find a picture that relates to the setting – the where and when – of your character.

Can you find four things that might help you describe the setting of your story, or that might give you ideas as to what your story might be about?

Focus on what really interests you.

## YOUR SETTING



# #3 Your story idea

## What is your story about?

You have your character (**who**), and you have your setting (**where** and **when**). Now you need to think about the story idea (your **what**).

Tom used a news report film to help him with his story *Vietnam to Malaysia 1975*.

You can see how Tom included the TV reporter, the woman the TV reporter interviewed, and the man who was pleading for help. Combining the three elements of the report meant Tom had some of what he needed to tell the story.

*Tom was also very lucky to talk to someone he knows who left Vietnam in the 1970s. Her memories helped Tom to make it clear what the Vietnamese people suffered.*

Can you find a short film about your refugee? If not, can you find an article online and some photographs? Remember to validate your sources if you can.

Use your film, or other resources, to list possible things that could happen in your story.

Watch Tom model his example in the short film, and see how he uses the sheet below to record ideas he might be able to use: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/refugee-week>.

## STORY IDEA

Jot down ideas you have from the film that could feature in your story:

# #4 Your plot

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## How is the story going to move from beginning to end?

Now you have a **who** and **where/when** and a **what**, you need a plot. Or a **how** the story moves from its beginning to its end.

This is a difficult part of writing.

You might have an idea already. A sequence of events. In his story *Afghanistan to Australia 2010*, Tom told the story of some local people on Christmas Island who witness the terrible shipwreck of a boat full of refugees.

To understand the journey these people had been through, Tom used a map to help him understand how a group of Afghans ended up on a ship in the Indian Ocean and in such peril. This helped him to tell their story, and the story of the local people on the island who saw them and tried to help.

You can watch a short film of Tom doing that here:

<https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/refugee-week>.

As well as working with the map, Tom used the short documentary and a newspaper article to help him understand their journey.

The map helped Tom to work out where the refugees had gone on their journey, and to try to understand what they might have been through.

You can see Tom's map on his film.

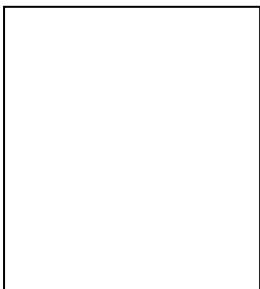
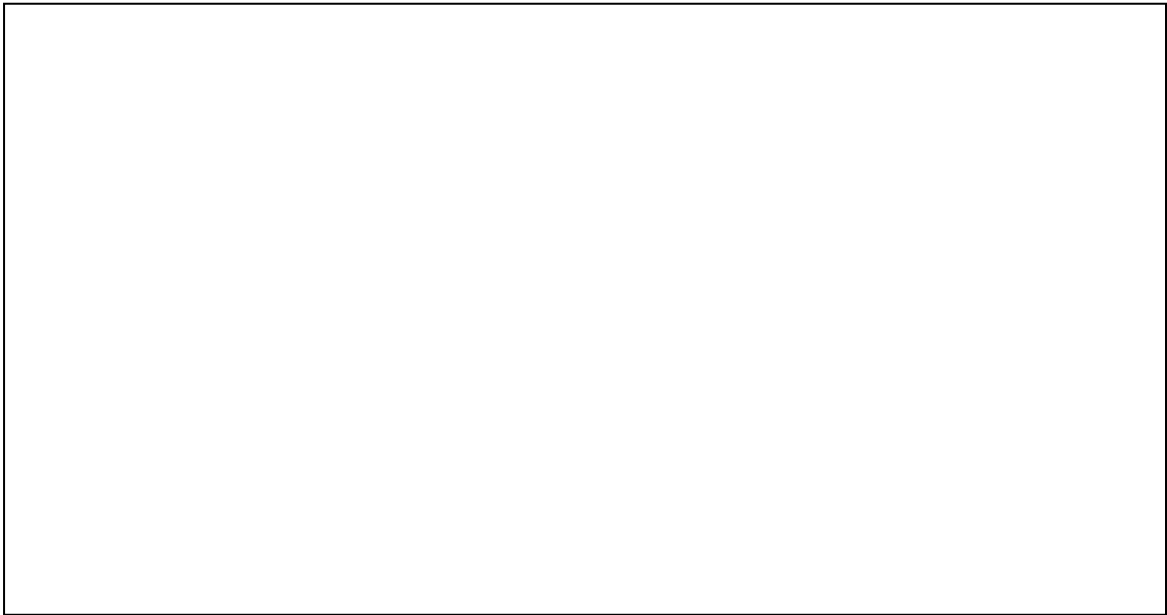
Now you have a go at making a map with your refugee story.



## PLOTTING YOUR STORY

Try to use a map to describe the chain of events on your refugee's journey.

Stick or draw a map here. Then make notes about where they were and what they might have had to do at each stage.



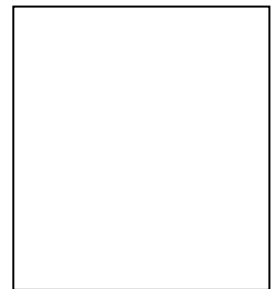
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# #5 Motivating your character

## Why do they do what they do?

Having decided your **who**, **where/when**, **what** and **how**, the final element you need to make your story work is the **why**.

Having researched your refugee character's experience and history, it really helps to understand why they have done what they have done.

Why did they leave their country of origin?

Why have they chosen to come to the country they want to feel safe in?

Stories only work if you understand the why.

For instance, why does Alex Rider put his life on the line against countless adult villains? Or why does Elsa in Frozen not want to see the sister she clearly loves throughout their childhood?

Those reasons run deep, and they make your reader believe in a story, as well as helping them to care about what happens to your character.

Try to answer the two questions below, then add any other detail you think is important.

Watch Tom's short video modelling that process here:

<https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/refugee-week>.

## MOTIVATING YOUR CHARACTER

Why did your character flee their country of origin?

Why did your character want to go to the new country?

Add and other thoughts here:

### Using your research to make a story

You can use the five sheets you have filled in to make a story. The sheets can act as building blocks to help you to decide how your story will work.

You can do that in any way that works for you.

If you are struggling to know how to take this forward, Tom has a way that really works for him that he has demonstrated in this video: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/refugee-week>.

His idea is to take all his planning sheets and cut them up, then to rearrange the pieces on the floor. At random first of all. But then trying to put things in an order that might work as a story.

This way of doing things doesn't always work for Tom, although it usually does. And it might not work for some other people. But – if it appeals – give it a go.

**Thank you for giving this way of working a go. We hope it worked for you. And – if it didn't – that it has helped you work out how you like to plan and work out a story.**