



STORY  WORKS

Structure of Story

Module 3.2: Chapters

WE WILL COVER:

- Chapters
- Function
- Length
- Pacing
- End hook
- Climactic moment

In theory, chapters are simplicity itself, but in practice, writers often struggle with how long to make their chapters, when to insert a break, and how to pace their action.

WHAT IS A CHAPTER?

A chapter is a unit within a book. Think of it as a box that can hold a certain amount of story. To contain an entire novel, you'll need twenty to thirty of those boxes. (Of course, you might need less or more.)

HOW DO CHAPTERS FUNCTION IN A STORY?

Each chapter in a story delivers a portion of the whole story in such a way that readers desire to keep reading, even when they reach a chapter's end.

Just like the story as a whole, each chapter has a beginning, middle, and end with an arc.

The arc illustrates rising stakes and tension over the course of the chapter to a peak or climactic moment.

HOW LONG SHOULD A CHAPTER BE?

This will vary depending on the story you're telling. Find a good average page count for each chapter, one that allows you to fulfill the chapter's arc without skimping or bloating your scenes. If 10 pages is your average, you can expect some chapters to run 7, some 12 or 13 pages.

An exceptional variation is fine if it is intentional. It can be exciting if you are aiming for the effect created by breaking the pattern. For example, a well-executed single page chapter can intensify the effect of the plot point because of its unusual format.

The goal is to create a rhythm and pace that works for your story and, once established, feels natural to the reader, breaking it only when doing so heightens a desired effect.

HOW SHOULD YOU HANDLE PACING?

Pacing is not about how short you can make your chapters. Just because a reader finishes a chapter in record time does not mean the book is fast paced. And just because chapters run 15 or 20 pages does not mean the book is slow paced.

Pacing is about creating tension that compels the reader to keep turning pages. Pacing is about that "unputdownable" quality of a great book. It is not about how much white space surrounds text, how short the sentences are, or the ratio of narrative to dialogue.

Pacing is about being such a well-crafted work of prose with such a tightly constructed plot and engaging characters that readers cannot stop reading it.

A book with a lot of white space and more dialogue than narrative will probably be a quick read, but if it is poorly written, it won't be fast paced. It will be a slog, like any other poorly written story.

Fast-paced stories are typically plot driven, lack introspection, and the protagonist quickly moves through one dangerous scenario after another.

Slow-paced stories are typically character driven, involve introspection, and the protagonist moves through scenarios that are more focused on emotional resonance than on thrilling action.

There is nothing wrong with any speed of pacing. Fast is not better than leisurely. Problems arise when a story is poorly written.

As when a writer, attempting to write a page-turner, skimps on the narrative and world building, likely leaving the reader confused.

Or when a writer, attempting to build a rich, 3-D world, bogs down the pace of the story with descriptions irrelevant to the protagonist and the action in that moment, likely boring the reader.

WHEN SHOULD YOU END A CHAPTER?

Typically, chapters end at the climactic moment, before the resolution. This is because the climactic moment serves as a hook to entice the reader to keep going into the next chapter.

Occasionally the climactic moment must be resolved within the chapter, such as when there is a large jump in time or location over the chapter break that would make it impractical to save the resolution for the next chapter.

Remember, hooks ask questions; resolutions answer them. When the question is answered, the reader is satisfied and can close the book.

ENDING WITH A HOOK

End each chapter with a hook, a question that the reader needs to have answered.

The question should be implicit in the scenario, not stated.

If the final scene has the hero tied to a chair, the reader will wonder how will he get out of this?

If the final scene has the hero watching her lover board a train to go off to war, the reader will wonder will she ever see him again?

If the final scene has the hero trying to talk a jumper off a ledge, the reader will wonder will he save the jumper's life?

THE CLIMACTIC MOMENT

No matter how many or how few scenes it has, every chapter needs the 3-act structure of a beginning, middle, and end. And each chapter should include a climactic moment.

These climactic moments may be subtle or grand. They can be emotional or action-based. The kind of climactic moment you create for each chapter will depend on your genre, whether the chapter is focused on the main plot or a subplot, and whether the moment is grounded in action or emotion.

Following the 3-act structure of a beginning, middle, and end, a chapter will:

1. Introduce new action *or* resolve the previous chapter's climactic moment.
2. Create forward movement in the story *or* introduce new action and create forward movement in the story.
3. Bring the movement to a climactic moment and resolve the action *or* bring the movement to a climactic moment.

Even a single-scene chapter will contain 3 movements within it, following this structure.

No matter how many scenes you have in your chapter, you will need to introduce action, create rising action, and climax that action. The resolution of that climax will either follow it immediately or come at the beginning of the next chapter.

Chapters typically end at the climactic moment to create the hook that compels the reader to turn the page (and not go to bed).

Because of this, the opening of the next chapter often needs to resolve the climactic moment of the previous chapter.

However, if you resolve the climactic moment in the same chapter, right after it occurs, you will open the next chapter by introducing a new movement in the story.

This is sometimes necessary when the chapter break shifts us to a new point of view character or covers a large jump in space or time.

Of course, even if you resolve the climactic moment at the end of a chapter, you should still create a hook to encourage the reader to read on.

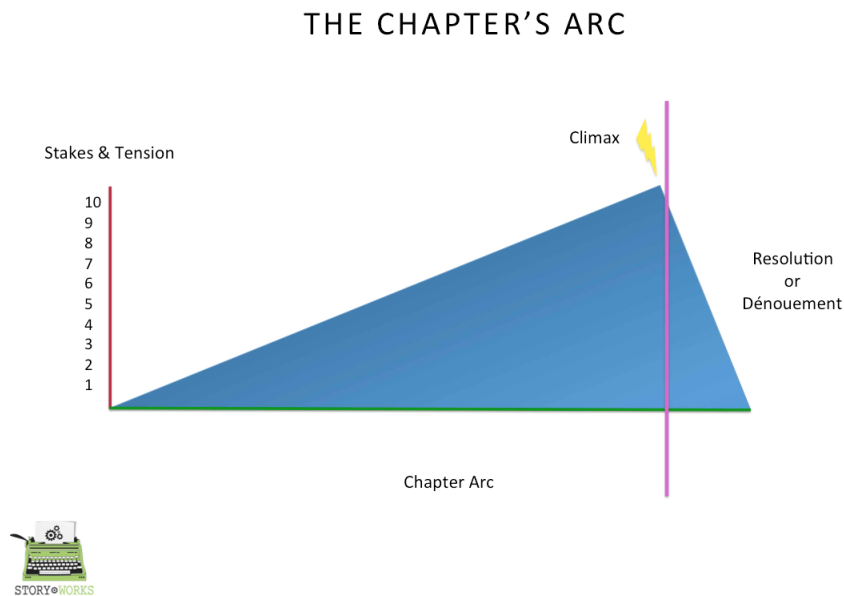
With the chapter arc, the question is where to place the chapter break. Often it goes just beyond the peak of the climax, leaving the resolution to open the next chapter.

Episodic television makes this technique very apparent. Think of the season as the book and the episode as the chapter. When you place the break at the climactic

moment, you are essentially saying “Tune in next week” or in the case of a book, turn to the next chapter to see how this turns out.

The alternative to placing the chapter break right after the climactic moment is to resolve the climactic moment in this chapter and open the next chapter by introducing new action.

In the image below, the pink line shows the chapter break placed right after the climactic moment. Thereby leaving the resolution for the opening of the next chapter.



EXERCISE #4

LEARNING THE BREAKS

You're going to write a complete movement for a story. This one happens to be action driven, because it is often easier to identify the elements of a movement in an action scene.

I kept the plot points vague to give you the most freedom possible to create your own version of this movement. Want your hero male or female? Want your building to be underground or a skyscraper? Want to add guard dogs to the scene? It's all good. Have fun.

1. Write this movement as one continuous scene. Do not write in any breaks.
 - Your hero plans to steal something.
 - Your hero sneaks into a building and steals the objective.
 - Your hero is found out.
 - Your hero gets out of the building.
 - Thugs chase your hero.
 - Your hero ends up running down an alley with a tall fence at the end.
 - The thugs rediscover your hero and come down the alley.
 - Your hero narrowly escapes, getting over the fence.
 - Your hero regroups with allies at home base.

2. Go freewrite this movement and then come back to do the assessment.
 - Examine your movement.
 - Look for natural places to insert scene breaks. Mark them.
 - Where is the climactic moment in this movement? Mark it.
 - What is the hook at the end of the chapter? Mark it.
 - What is the resolution? Mark it.
 - Where is the best place to insert chapter breaks?
 - What have you learned doing this? How can you apply it to your writing?

You can see how I would mark the breaks on the next page.

Your answers might differ from mine, but this is how I would use breaks to define this movement.

Chapter Break (opening the movement at the beginning of a chapter)

1. Introduce new action

- Your hero plans to steal something.

Scene Break (the setting changes)

2. Rising Action

- Your hero sneaks into a building and steals the objective.
- Your hero is found out.
- Your hero gets out of the building.
- Thugs chase your hero.
- Your hero ends up running down an alley with a tall fence at the end.

3. Climactic moment

- The thugs rediscover your hero and come down the alley.

Chapter Break (the break creates the hook, manipulating readers into jumping the chapter break to get the resolution of the climactic tension)

1. Resolution

- Your hero narrowly escapes, getting over the fence.

Scene Break

2. Introduces new action

- Your hero regroups with allies at home base.