



# Structure of Story

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## *Module 0: Course Overview*

### **THE STRUCTURE OF STORY IS A STORY WORKS FICTION NUTS & BOLTS COURSE.**

I am Alida Winternheimer, your instructor. I'm a writer, teacher, and editor. Among my published works are the *Story Works Guide to Writing Character* and the *Story Works Guide to Writing Point of View*.

In this course, we will examine the universal elements of story you need to understand no matter your story's length, genre, or audience.

I'm going to assume you're writing a novel, the largest story structure model. But don't worry. If you're writing a novella or short story, you still need to understand these elements of story craft.

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- Plot arc
- 3-Act structure
- Endings
- Scenes
- Chapters
- Climaxes
- 4 Types of movement
- Critical story elements
- Writing Strong

## **YOU WILL LEARN:**

- The basic structure of any story
- The function of the arc
- How to use stakes and tension
- Intrigue, hooks, and reveals
- Optimize the 3-act structure
- How to end your story,
- How to build with scenes
- How to shape your chapters
- How to write a satisfying climax
- How to work with the 4 kinds of movement
- The most important question we writers can ask ourselves

## **HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS COURSE:**

- Work at your own pace
- Keep your journal and pen handy
- Jot down ideas as they come up
- Do the writing exercises as they come up in the lessons.
- Watch the videos (you can adjust the playback speed).
- Download the audio and listen to it when you're on the go.
- Print out the lectures and use them as notes.
- Use the comments feature under each lecture to ask questions.
- Join the Story Works Writers Facebook Group.

The spiral learning model means that you'll encounter concepts more than once as you work through the lessons. Each time you encounter a concept, you'll add layers of depth and comprehension to each concept, so that you can grasp the concept and turn it into a tool you have at your disposal every time you sit down to write.



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## *Module 1: Building Your Arc*

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- Plot arc
- Story time
- Stakes & tension
- Climax
- Resolution

### **WHAT IS AN ARC?**

There are two types of arcs: character and plot.

Character arcs deal with the progression of thematic subplots and the evolution of the protagonist.

Plot arcs deal with a progression of events and actions.

We're going to focus on the plot arc here, because this course is about the structure of story, not character development.

We tend to think of the arc as the overarching line we can draw above our novel, tracing the shape of the whole. But what does that arcing line represent?

It is quite simply: the shape of what keeps us turning pages.

It is the need to know, the tension created when a question is posed and not immediately answered.

*At its most basic, that question is “What will happen next?”*

A plot arc is the forward progression of dramatic or comedic tension that compels a reader to keep turning pages.

Think of your novel as a set of nesting dolls. The largest outside doll is the series arc, if you’re writing a series with an arc—and you may not be, even if you’re writing a series. The next doll is the book arc—if you are not writing a series or if your series does not need to be read sequentially, this is the outermost doll. The middle doll is the act arc. The small doll is the chapter arc. The tiny doll at the center is the scene arc. You can think of every level of your story as having an arc.

## **GRAPHING THE ARC**

A basic representation of the book arc looks like a triangle, or a ramp, with a long bottom. This is commonly referred to as Freytag’s pyramid.

On the bottom of the triangle, we have story time, which is the way the reader experiences the story from front cover to back cover. The numbers there represent each chapter. You might jump around in chronological time within your story. Story time is not the realistic chronology of events, but the reader’s experience of the story’s progression.

Along the vertical axis of our triangle, we have stakes and tension with a scale of 1 - 10, indicating rising stakes and tension as the dramatic or comedic action increases. The closer we get to the back cover, deeper into story time, the more stakes and tension rise.

The peak of stakes and tension is the climax. Stakes and tension quickly fall off during the resolution, the portion of the book that follows the climax.

## **STORY TIME**

The horizontal line on the graph of our book’s arc, or triangle, is the story time. It is time within the story as the reader experiences it and the progression of events, whether chronological or not, from front cover to back cover.

You can play with chronological time within your story, but story time is concerned with the logical progression of your plot as experienced by your reader.

## **STAKES AND TENSION**

The vertical line on the graph measures stakes and tension.

Stakes and tension are related but are not the same thing. They are best friends, holding hands all the way through the story. If one goes up, the other should, too.

Stakes are what the character stands to gain or lose at any given moment in the plot.

Tension is what the reader feels in relation to the stakes.

If you've got your protagonist facing imminent death, the stakes are very high. If your story is succeeding, the reader's tension will be very high as well. If, however, your reader is feeling unconcerned for the character, the tension is very low despite the high stakes, creating a mismatch between the stakes and tension.

## **CLIMAX**

The climax is the high point on your plot arc, the moment the stakes and tension are at their absolute highest. It is the culmination of every plot point that came before it.

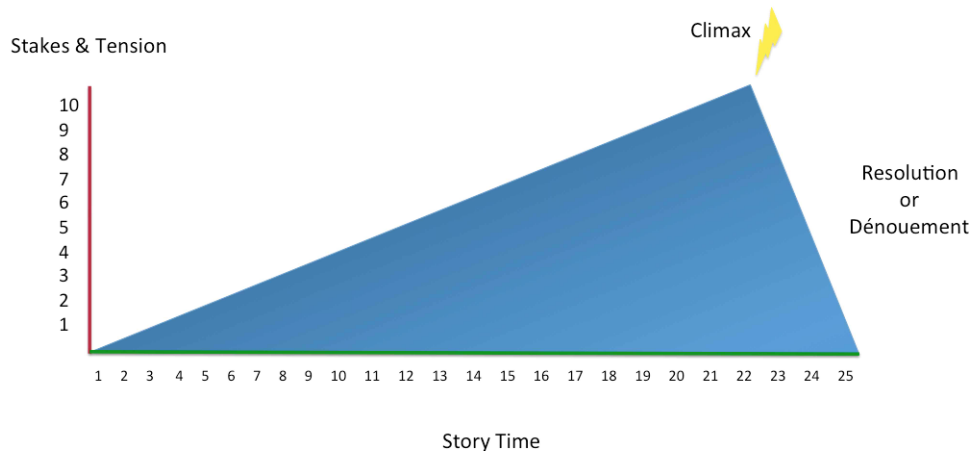
We'll discuss the climax in full in Module 3.

## **RESOLUTION**

The resolution is everything that happens after the climax. It is also called the dénouement. In the resolution, you will answer any questions that have not been answered yet, tying up loose ends in the plot or character arcs satisfy readers, and set hooks for the next book in the series, if appropriate.

It is best to close the main plot in any book, satisfying readers, and use subplots to create hooks for the next book. If you leave the main plot line open ended, you create a cliffhanger. We'll discuss the various types of endings in Module 2.2

# THE BOOK ARC



## EXERCISE #1 BUILDING YOUR ARC

For this exercise, as well as exercise #2, you'll want to have your current work-in-progress handy. You can work from an outline, storyboard, or draft of your work. You'll need to have a grasp on the major plot points and climactic moments for each chapter. If you don't have that because you're between projects, you can use the last book you wrote or take the time to storyboard at least 10 chapters in a new work.

1. Grab a big sheet of paper and your current work-in-progress.
2. Draw a straight line across the bottom and another up the left side.
3. Label the horizontal line "Story Time" and the vertical line "Stakes & Tension."
4. Put a number for each chapter in your manuscript under the horizontal line, evenly spaced.
5. Put the numbers 1 - 10 along the vertical line, evenly spaced, with 1 at the bottom and 10 at the top.
6. Examine each chapter in your manuscript. Look at the action, the consequences the protagonist faces, the kinds of choices he's confronted with, whether the chapter is concerned with the main plot or the subplot, etc.

7. Mark the stakes and tension above each chapter along the vertical axis, creating a graph of your book's rising stakes and tension as you do.

Now that you've graphed your story's arc, set this paper aside. We're going to go deeper into the arc of your story in the next module. You'll use this again and examine what you've got.

Don't worry if your graph doesn't have a neat sloping line running left to right along the triangle. A jagged line with ups and downs is appropriate at this point and we'll discuss the shape of the arc further to really explore what it means to have rising stakes and tension in your story.

### **WANT MORE?**

#### *Word Essential Writing Tips*

- [Going Up? Stakes & Tension](http://wordessential.com/blog/stakes-tension/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/stakes-tension/>
- [Crescendo!](http://wordessential.com/blog/crescendo/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/crescendo/>

#### *Story Works Round Table:*

- [019 Trouble](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-019-trouble/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-019-trouble/>
- [032 Stakes & Tension](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-32-stakes-tension/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-32-stakes-tension/>



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## *Module 2.1: The 3-Act Structure*

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- 3-Act Structure
- Critical Components of Act I
- Critical Components of Act II
- Critical Components of Act III

### **WHY 3 ACTS?**

The three act structure is fundamental, because it contains all the essential components of any story, especially a beginning, a middle, and an end. Of course, you might have two acts or four acts if that is what makes sense for your story's structure.

Use the 3-act structure. Learn as much as you can from writing three act stories, and then experiment with other structures. Use the one that best suits the story you're writing now and your creative process.

After all, this is an art, not a science.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE 3 ACTS**

Act I is the beginning in which introductions are made, the scene is set, and a problem is introduced. Act I is roughly 25% of the whole story. It ends with the point of no return 1.



Act II is the middle, in which the protagonist makes her way through one compelling situation after another, each time increasing the stakes and tension. Act II is roughly 50% of the whole story. It ends with the point of no return 2.

Act III is the end, in which the action culminates in the climax, followed by the resolution. Act III is roughly 25% of the whole story.

## **CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF ACT I**

**Opening Hook:** Every story needs to entice a potential reader to become a buying reader by opening with a compelling hook. This might be an intriguing premise, a fascinating character, dramatic action, or a funny scenario. This will definitely be a well-written opening that assures any would-be reader that he is on the receiving end of a truly enjoyable story.

**Introductions and Set Up:** The bulk of Act I is spent meeting the main character and learning about the scenario we find her in, as well as getting comfortable in the world we are about to enter, be that a coastal fishing village or a space station in the Tryzorg Galaxy.

**Inciting Incident:** Whatever scenario our hero is in when we meet her, we can be assured it is about to change. Act I ends with action that promises to forever change our protagonist's life.

**Point of No Return 1:** This moment closes Act I and launches the main plotline. This is the protagonist's response to the inciting incident. It is critical that the protagonist makes a conscious choice to pursue a certain course of action over any other action she could take.

Once the protagonist makes this choice and takes this action, the hero's journey is launched and there is no going back to her old life.

### **Example of Inciting Incident and Point of No Return 1:**

What is the inciting incident at the end of Act I in Star Wars Episode IV?

Luke Skywalker finds his family dead and the farm burned.

This brings us to the point of no return 1 and Luke's choice.

He could rebuild the farm, go to his friend's house and find a new "normal" life, join the army, go to the big city looking for adventure, or go back to Obi wan Kenobi's house and see what this Jedi business is all about.

Once he chooses to visit Obi wan Kenobi, he has passed the point of no return #1, guaranteeing his life will never be the same again and, more importantly for storytellers, launching the hero's journey that will comprise Act II and culminate in Act III.

*The point of no return, which I often refer to as PNR1 or PNR2, is the moment closing Act I and Act II, respectively, in which the protagonist makes a conscious choice to pursue a course of action that launches the main story or the climax, respectively.*

**Rising Stakes and Tension:** Act II is the body of your story. This is where the protagonist faces one conflict after another with increasing difficulty and repercussions. Each step of the way, the hero has more to gain or lose from the outcome of each conflict (stakes). And each step of the way the reader is increasingly concerned for the fate of the protagonist (tension).

If you zoom out on your story graph, it will look like the blue triangle in the slides, with a nice straight line. If you zoom in, it won't be so uniform. Stakes and tension need to rise overall, but a chapter might drop the tension if it follows a high stakes, big action chapter or if it is dealing with a subplot, instead of the main plot. So if you zoom in on your graph, the line will not be uniform, but will look jagged with an overall rising trend.

When you do not have consistently rising stakes and tension, you have a problem commonly referred to as the soggy middle. This looks like a plateau in the middle of Act II. You never want to see that.

**Success and Failure:** The journey of Act II is not simply a series of increasingly big failures until suddenly, in the climax, without any reason based on the history of failure, the protagonist succeeds in vanquishing her foe.

The hero's journey is a process of discovery. The protagonist must win some as she develops skills and confidence. She must also lose some as she discovers her weaknesses and when it is best to retreat.

Along the way, your character must develop into the hero who is capable of triumphing during the climax.

In other words, the hero has some success and some failures. He grows as a person while learning new skills or putting established skills to new uses while getting ever closer to the big shootout, the climax.

**The Midpoint or Not:** Much ado is made over the midpoint and having an emotional turning point, some sort of realization that changes the game for the

protagonist. As though at the 50% mark, he's going to get a shot of Vitamin D and suddenly have the faith and courage to enter the battle. I have heard that this turning point is when the protagonist realizes he's staying in the fight no matter what.

If this tool works for you, use it. I find it formulaic and think it's unrealistic to most stories and unfair to most readers to have a protagonist who's not even sure he's going all the way to the climax for the first half of the book. In an unwilling hero story, that may be ideal. In other stories, however, use the idea of the midpoint with caution.

Instead of marking the midpoint of my story, I look at the act overall.

- Is the action rising steadily toward the climax?
- Are the stakes escalating with each new conflict?
- Are the subplots complicating the protagonist's involvement in the main plot?
- Is my protagonist continually motivated to stay in the conflict, despite rising stakes and moments of doubt?

If I can answer those questions yes, then the story is on track, the stakes and tension are rising inevitably toward the climax, and the protagonist is believably engaged in the main plot. As such, all of my protagonist's necessary moments of reflection and realization, her growth and her reasons to see it through, are built into the story every step of my character's way. The midpoint is just a moment in a story full of moments that keep the action, stakes, and tension rising.

When the hero wants to walk away, what is keeping him in the game? This is not a question for the midpoint specifically, but something to ask yourself throughout Act II.

**Point of No Return 2:** Throughout Act II, there are moments when the hero can walk away from the conflict. Due to that increasingly strong motivation compelling him to stay in the fight, he doesn't.

The point of no return 2 is a significant moment of dramatic action in which the hero is again presented with a choice: to enter the climax or walk away. It is the final chance to walk away.

The hero's journey is launched when he passes the Point of No Return 1. The climax is launched once the hero chooses to pass Point of No Return 2. Now there truly is no turning back.

Just as the point of no return 1 closes Act I, the point of no return 2 closes Act II.

### **CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF ACT III**

Act III contains two main elements.

**The climax:** The culmination of all the action of the story in a big dramatic or comedic event that fulfills the story's promise.

**The resolution:** Everything that happens after the climax in order to answer questions posed over the course of the story and satisfy the reader by resolving the story threads.



STORYWORKS

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## Module 2.2: Endings

### WE WILL COVER:

- Endings
- The end hook
- Ambiguous endings
- Cliffhangers

### OVERVIEW OF ENDINGS

Any loose ends, any questions raised over the course of the story about the fates of your characters and their worlds must be *resolved* or turned into a *hook* that ties into the next book in the series. Alternatively, you may leave a story thread unresolved without turning it into a hook. This creates the *ambiguous ending*. It is a kind of resolution in itself and is different than simply not addressing a thread. The *cliffhanger* is when the main plot is left open-ended.

### THE END HOOK

This is an open thread at the end of the story that is *not* the main plot line, but one of the subplots. The hook is a question left open with a promise that it will be answered in the next story installment, a teaser.

The reader feels satisfied, however, because the story has come to a natural conclusion and the main plot is resolved.

More on Hooks in Module 5.1.

## **THE AMBIGUOUS ENDING**

Every story thread you introduce must be resolved or turned into a hook during the resolution, if not before, unless you want to create an ambiguous ending.

Ambiguous endings are mostly found in literary fiction, especially short stories.

Whereas hooks are intended to pique the reader's curiosity so strongly that she must buy the next book, an ambiguous ending closes the story in a way that is open-ended, but satisfying to the reader.

The story has clearly been brought to its inevitable conclusion, but as to whether the couple stays together or not, the man survives the wilderness or not, the team can forgive the betrayal or not, etc., is left to the reader to determine for himself.

## **THE CLIFFHANGER**

If you are not writing an ambiguous ending and you do not neatly wrap up all of your loose ends, you are leaving something open ended to create either a hook or a cliffhanger.

In the cliffhanger, the writer leaves the main plot of the story unresolved. You might as well write "tune in next week" at the end of the book, because readers have no way of knowing how the story turned out without getting another installment.

This can work against you, frustrating readers who feel cheated by an unfinished storyline. The key word here is unfinished. There is no way to feel satisfied by reading a book with a cliffhanger, because the ending has been postponed and is therefore not in the reader's hands.

## **EXERCISE #2**

### **ASSESSING YOUR ARC**

As you do this exercise, make sure you don't simply make marks on the graph. Assess your arc, think about each of these critical components and how they are functioning in your story. Note anything that is or is not particularly strong and why. Write down ideas for revisions.

1. Grab the arc you made in Exercise #1.
2. Mark the inciting incident.
3. Mark the Point of No Return 1.
4. Mark the end of Act I.

The inciting incident is a major event and therefore the climactic moment that closes a chapter.

The Point of No Return 1 occurs right after the inciting incident. PNR 1 resolves that climactic moment, either immediately or in the next chapter.

Act I closes when the protagonist decides what to do now. Embark on a journey? Seek justice? Make amends?

5. Mark the beginning of Act II.
6. Assess the stakes and tension.
7. Mark the Point of No Return 2.
8. Mark the end of Act II.
9. Assess the stakes and tension across Act II.

Use your scale. Above each chapter number, mark the stakes and tension from the beginning to the end of the book, then perform the assessment. Obviously, you can't assign a number to the stakes and tension of each chapter without knowing what the plot points are, what the conflict is, what the protagonist is thinking and feeling during each chapter. As you mark your graph, do some journaling with any thoughts you have about your story's forward momentum and how effective your arc is at this point.

- Is the action rising steadily toward the climax?
- Are the stakes escalating with each new conflict?
- Are the subplots complicating the protagonist's involvement in the main plot?
- Is the protagonist continually motivated to stay in the conflict, despite rising stakes and moments of doubt?

The point of no return 2 occurs after a major dramatic movement. This may not be explosive action, but it will be high stakes and tension, because it's the moment the protagonist chooses to enter the climax.

10. Mark the beginning of Act III.
11. Mark the climax's peak.
12. Mark the resolution.

Your climax might span several chapters. Action accelerates from the opening of Act III to the climax's peak. It is a race to the finish as pacing and tension mount. The peak is the most intense moment of the entire book, the one everything else has built up to.

The resolution is everything that follows the climax. The more complex the story, the longer the resolution will need to be. Though it may be a few chapters, don't dally. Make your exit quickly and gracefully.

- Assess your ending.
- What kind of ending have you written? Is it the ending your story demands? Will readers be satisfied with this ending?
- Assess your arc as a whole and make notes about the story's structure. Are you satisfied with it? What have you learned? Where are your arc's strengths? Weaknesses? How will you write or revise now?

### **WANT MORE?**

#### *Word Essential Writing Tips:*

- [Hooks & Endnotes](http://wordessential.com/blog/hooks-endnotes/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/hooks-endnotes/>
- [Are Cliffhangers Evil? \(blog\)](http://wordessential.com/blog/are-cliffhangers-evil/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/are-cliffhangers-evil/>
- [Ups & Downs](http://wordessential.com/blog/flash-tip-ups-downs/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/flash-tip-ups-downs/>

#### *Story Works Round Table:*

- [7 Endings](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-7-endings/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-7-endings/>
- [005 The Soggy Middle Problem](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-005-soggy-middle-problem/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-005-soggy-middle-problem/>
- [016 Cliffhangers](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-016-cliffhangers/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-016-cliffhangers/>
- [033 How to End Your Story029 Hooks: Premise & Opening](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-29-hooks-premise-opening/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-29-hooks-premise-opening/>





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## *Module 3.1: Scenes*

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- Scenes
- Function
- Number
- Breaks

### **WHAT IS A SCENE?**

Scenes are the basic unit of a novel. If our chapters are boxes that each hold so much of the story, then scenes are the material within those boxes. They're flexible, easy to move and rearrange.

### **HOW DO SCENES FUNCTION IN A STORY?**

Every chapter, like every book, needs a beginning, middle, and end. Your scenes provide that structure.

As such, a good rule of thumb is that your chapters should contain three scenes each. As a rule of thumb, there is a lot of wiggle room, and I'll explain when you might want a single scene chapter or more than three in just a moment.

## **HOW MANY SCENES SHOULD YOU HAVE?**

Let the story you are telling find its own shape. Once you've identified that shape, you'll know the rule of thumb for that story. Let the rule guide your decisions and occasionally break the pattern for variety and effect.

## **WHEN DO YOU END A SCENE?**

End your scenes when a movement within the story has come to its conclusion and you need to shift the action and reader to a new location or timeframe. The characters involved may or may not change.

If the timeframe is continuous and the set does not change, you can have as much action occur as you like within a single scene. As many characters as you like can enter and exit the stage of the page. As such, it is possible to create a chapter with a single, long scene.

If you require four or five settings within a chapter, you'll have four or five shorter scenes or a very long chapter.

## **SCENE BREAKS**

These are necessary when the setting changes or when there is a jump in the timeframe of the story. They function like the jump cut in film, creating a visual cue to the reader that the story has just shifted in space and/or time.

If the action of the chapter is continuous in time and the setting does not change, you can have all the characters you want enter and exit the stage of the page without a scene break. Thus, you would have a single scene chapter.

You could just as easily have a 2 or 4-scene chapter. If you have more than 4 scenes, I would ask if one of those scene breaks should be a chapter break.

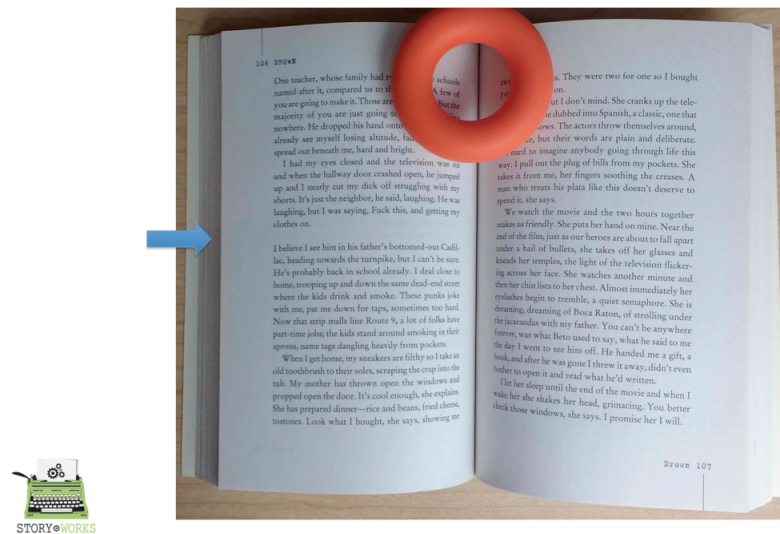
Do not insert unnecessary scene breaks into your stories.

**Signaling a break:** Simply leave a line of white space after the end of the scene and do not indent the first paragraph of the new scene.

That visual cue is important. Sometimes a scene break ends up falling on a page break. By not indenting the first paragraph, you are assured that you have provided readers with a visual cue that a scene break has occurred. Without it, you can find yourself in trouble, because the shift in time and space can confuse the reader if she's reading it as a continuous scene.

Note that not all publishers format scene breaks without the indentation, but I'd rather rest assured that I've provided a visual cue to my reader than risk creating confusion with a scene break that falls on a page break.

## Scene Break



### HOW LONG SHOULD THE SCENE BE?

Scenes, like chapters, will develop a rhythm natural to your style of writing and the particular story you are telling, so there is no hard rule. As a guideline, chapters mirror the 3-act structure of the novel, which is why the rule of thumb is 3 scenes per chapter.

The first scene, which resolves the previous climactic moment or introduces a new scenario, will be one quarter to one third the length of the chapter.

The middle scene, which introduces a new scenario, if that hasn't already been done, and builds the dramatic or comedic action, will be one third to one half the length of the chapter.

The third scene, which brings the action to its head and hooks the reader into staying up for one more chapter, will be one quarter to one third the length of the chapter.

Scenes are the foundational building block of any story. They must present it all to the reader, from the most subtle and nuanced emotional moment to the most dramatic and explosive action.

*A well-written scene will always have forward momentum, because it contains something significant enough to propel the story and the reader forward.*

When we look at scenes, we need to look at the subtle, inner workings of our story. Perhaps the forward momentum comes not from the action, but the emotional content of the moment. Perhaps there is an evocative description of the setting that creates mood.

Your scene may be as simple as a man sitting at a desk writing a letter. If we only consider the action, it seems flat. What action could possibly rise, propelling the reader forward, about a man writing a letter?

Nothing—if we only consider the action. Everything—if we look deeper than the action and discover the relevance and meaning of this moment to the larger story.

Why is he writing a letter? To whom is he writing? What does the letter mean to him and its recipient? What consequences will come from this action? How does he feel as he writes?

Whatever it is that makes this scene important to the story, it will create forward momentum, the urge to find out what happens next. And that is why even the most subtle, quiet scene has an arc, a rise in dramatic or comedic tension that advances the story.

### **EXERCISE #3**

#### **WRITING A COMPELLING SCENE**

1. Freewrite a scene in which someone is sitting at a desk, writing a letter.
  - Set a timer for 15 minutes
  - Keep your hand moving.
  - If you need more time, keep going or do another session later.
2. Having written your scene, let's assess it.
  - What about your scene is compelling? Is it the action? The emotion? The mood? The description?

- What do you like about your scene? What do you dislike? Could you work with your scene's strengths and weaknesses to improve it, without changing the content of the scene?
- What about the end of the scene makes you want to read on? What is the hook or connection that will lead the reader into the story's next movement?



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## *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.

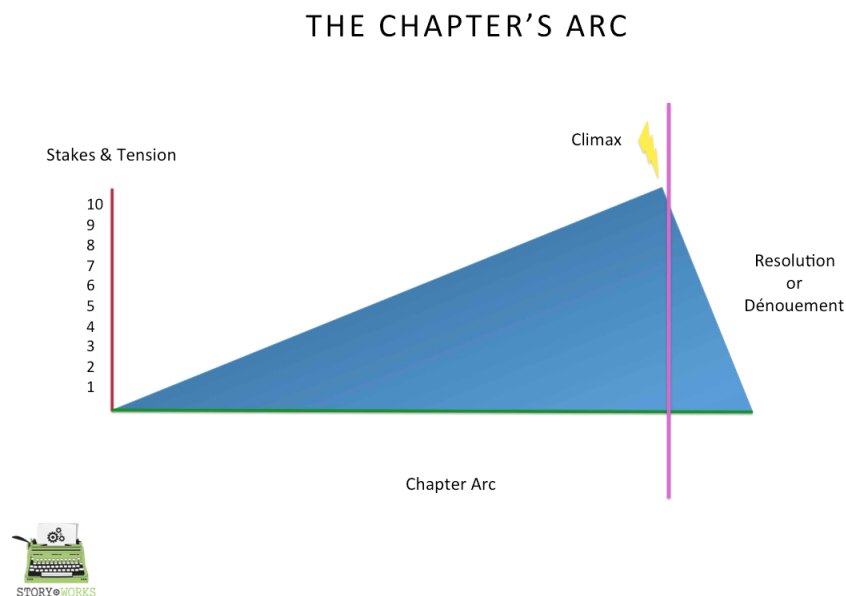
With the chapter arc, the question is where to place the chapter break. Often it goes just beyond the peak of the climax, leaving the resolution to open the next chapter.

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.



# Structure of Story

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## *Module 3.3: Climaxes*

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- Climactic moments
- Factors that shape climactic moments
- Book climax
- Example of a romantic climax

### **CLIMACTIC MOMENTS**

I call chapter climaxes “climactic moments” to avoid confusing them with the book’s climax and to avoid giving the impression they need to be great in scale or dramatic tension.

Each chapter has an arc, just like the book it is a part of. The chapter arcs are small and the kind of action and climactic moment will vary greatly depending on several factors:

**Placement in the book arc:** Close to the front of the book there will be less dramatic tension and the climactic moment will be smaller. The exception, of course, is the inciting incident that launches the protagonist’s journey.

Close to the back of the book and the climax there will be more dramatic tension and climactic moments will be larger. The stakes will also be greater for the protagonist.

**Main plot or subplots:** The hero will be most concerned with a given issue in your chapter, relating to either the main plot or a subplot.

Say our hero is an FBI agent who has to capture a serial killer (main plot) while trying to repair a failing marriage (subplot). Whether our hero is tracking the villain across state lines or spending a much needed evening with her husband will determine the kinds of stakes and tension we present to the reader in this chapter. Tracking a criminal and arguing with a spouse can both be high stakes/high tension, but the kinds of danger inherent in each is very different.

**The protagonist's goals for that chapter:** The kind of climactic moment you write will also depend on what you need your hero to accomplish with the current plot point.

Say our FBI agent has to establish a relationship with local authorities. This could be a critical chapter, but it focuses on characters, not action. The climactic moment could be fairly subtle, hinging on a relationship dynamic. For instance, the protagonist has history with the local guy and that could make it hard for them to work together.

Whatever kind of climactic moment your chapter requires, make sure you are raising the stakes and tension from one to the next, mounting as we get closer to the book's climax.

Remember, there are many kinds and degrees of dramatic tension. In a romance, the stakes may be that the lovers will be kept apart by a jealous rival. The tension increases relative to how much the reader wants to see those lovers come together.

## **THE CLIMAX**

The climax is the peak of the arc when the action comes to a head.

Each book will have a single climax that arrives after a series of climactic moments.

The kind of action that occurs during the climax depends on the story being told. Some climaxes are explosive, some are funny, some are heartwarming. Regardless of kind, the climax is the moment when the events of the main plot come to their exciting head. Stakes and tension have never been higher. The protagonist's future happiness, wellbeing, or even life depends entirely on the outcome of the climax.

Inherent in every climax is a question that must be answered to satisfy the reader.

- Will the boy get the girl?
- Will the doctor save the patient?
- Will the cop bring in the killer?
- Will the orphan find a home?
- Will the addict get clean?

- Will the judge bring justice?
- Will the sinner find redemption?

This question is posed when the inciting incident occurs, launching the main storyline. The action of the climax jeopardizes the outcome the reader is hoping to see fulfilled.

### **EXAMPLE OF A ROMANTIC CLIMAX**

Let's examine Baz Luhrmann's 1992 film, *Strictly Ballroom*.

At the inciting incident, Scott, the local favorite to win a big ballroom competition, is left without a partner. Fran, a ballroom beginner, dares to ask him to give her an audition.

Throughout the film, we watch the young couple, Fran and Scott, dance around a possible romance, hoping and waiting for them to fall in love. At the climax of the film, Fran is heartbroken, attending the big ballroom dance competition without her partner, Scott. She doesn't know that Scott swapped partners because he was told he'd disappoint his father if he danced with Fran. The way things are stacking up against the boy and girl, with the competition practically over, there is no way they will get together...or will they?

Of course, in the final moments of the climax, Scott learns the truth about his parents and runs after Fran as she's leaving the competition. Her grandmother just so happens to have brought Fran's dance costume "just in case," and now Scott and Fran are ready to make their entrance as a ballroom couple in the final dance of the competition.

It's not just a dance; it's love. And the audience is thrilled to see them finally publicly dance together.

This romantic comedy has a climax with the odds stacked against our protagonists, a ticking clock, and obstacles like miscommunication, family pressure, and crooked competition judges jeopardizing their happy ending. Does the boy get the girl? Of course. And the girl gets the boy, too!

Although the outcome is assured—the hero almost always wins—the fun comes from the tension created when we watch our heroes pursue their goals despite mounting obstacles.

And that is the whole point of the arc: mounting obstacles create a pleasant sort of low-grade tension in the reader that compels her to keep turning pages in order to reach the inevitable (though hopefully not predictable) outcome.

Even when the ultimate outcome is predictable, as in boy gets girl, the events that lead up to that outcome should be fresh and surprising.

## **EXERCISE #5**

### **CLIMAX CHECKLIST**

Use this checklist for every book you write to assess your climax after each draft until you know you've got it right for your readers!

Grab your book's climax:

- Is the climax the absolute peak of dramatic stakes and tension in the book?
- Does the climax force your protagonist to finally confront and resolve the issue established in Act I?
- Does the climax address the question the reader must have answered in order to be satisfied?
- Is the reader's desired outcome (the hero's success) sufficiently uncertain?
- Is the climax inevitable?
- Is the climax unpredictable?

## **WANT MORE?**

*Word Essential Writing Tips:*

- [Chapter Structure](http://wordessential.com/blog/chapter-structure/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/chapter-structure/>
- [Action Scenes: Clarity v Pacing](http://wordessential.com/blog/action-scenes/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/action-scenes/>
- [Pacing and Action Scenes](http://wordessential.com/blog/pacing-action-scenes/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/pacing-action-scenes/>
- [Writing Good Sex Scenes](http://wordessential.com/blog/writing-good-sex-scenes/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/writing-good-sex-scenes/>
- [Fight Scenes](http://wordessential.com/blog/fightscenes/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/fightscenes/>

*Story Works Round Table:*

- [11 Pacing](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-11-pacing/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-11-pacing/>
- [31 Action Scenes!](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-31-action-scenes/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-31-action-scenes/>





# Structure of Story

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## *Module 4.1: 4 Kinds of Movement*

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- Narrative
- The POV Stranglehold
- Action
- Hyperrealism
- Dialogue
- Thoughts

### **WHAT IS MOVEMENT?**

Movement is the ways and means we writers have of advancing a story.

There are several kinds of movement we're going to discuss here: narrative, action, dialogue, and thoughts.

When you write, think of creating forward movement with every scene, every moment.

*Ask: How is this advancing my story?*

### **WHAT IS NARRATIVE?**

Narrative is storytelling. It is everything you write that is aware of the reader and ensures a story is being told.

Narrative is not the point of view character's thoughts, dialogue, or simple stage direction type of action.

In other words, narrative is almost everything, and there is no story in the world without narrative.

If the narrator shows action on the page, that is narrative.

If the narrator describes the landscape, that is narrative.

If the narrator explains how the protagonist feels about something, that is narrative.

### **HOW DOES NARRATIVE ADVANCE YOUR STORY?**

Every story advances through narrative the way every fish swims through water. It simply can't not.

When you write narrative, it advances your story through its descriptive powers. This is not limited to describing the setting your character acts in or the actions your character takes. It does that and more. Narrative:

- establishes mood, style, and voice;
- describes characters, setting, lighting, sound effects, wardrobes, etc.;
- allows you to summarize movement that isn't important enough to write in scene; and
- gives you the power to show and not tell.

### **HOW DOES NARRATIVE ENHANCE YOUR STORY?**

The power of narrative lies in the voice or style narrative creates on the page. When we talk about the prose and whether it's good or not, we're talking about the narrative voice.

It is through this voice you create mood and atmosphere. This is the "feel" of the piece.

Think of a movie without a soundtrack. It would still have setting, character, dialogue, and action, but it would lack much of its emotive power.

Enhancing your narrative movement with evocative prose will make your story a more compelling read, much as a soundtrack makes a film a more compelling watch.

Use your narrative voice to enhance all kinds of movement.

Since you will be writing narrative, embrace your narrator. Develop your voice and make your style, descriptions, moods, and summary wonderful.

Find a narrative voice that suits the story you're telling. Gritty? Charming? Edgy? Academic? The voice should suit your writing style and the story's genre and themes.

### **THE POV STRANGLEHOLD**

Avoid choking off your narrator in favor of your point of view character. I call this the POV Stranglehold and I see it all the time in manuscripts.

The POV Stranglehold is when the writer is so afraid of making a POV slip that she doesn't develop her narrative voice and the prose feels strangled, missing that critical component of storytelling...the storyteller!

Let the protagonist's personality and attitude come through his dialogue and actions. In a first or close third person point of view, the narrative will be infused with his personality, but that is far different from replacing the narrator with the POV character.

### **WHAT IS ACTION?**

The action of a story consists of the characters' movements. It is something we can attribute to the actors on the stage of the page. It is what characters do.

### **HOW DOES ACTION ADVANCE YOUR STORY?**

Action advances story through plot points, the events that together comprise your story.

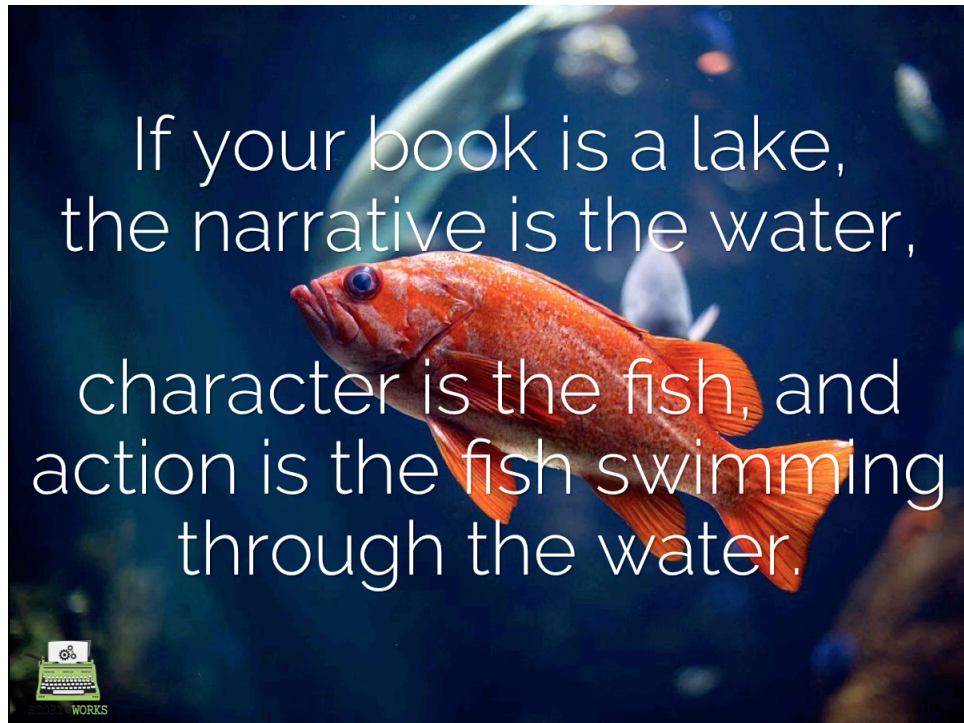
It is easy to see how action creates movement in a story, because you can simply track the protagonist as he advances through the events of the plot.

Any action you bother to include on the page needs to be significant to the story, which means it needs to be significant to the reader.

Ask: What will the reader learn or experience through this action?

The action must in some way the character, plot, or theme of the story. If it does not, it is bloat and can be cut.

When you have action that is bloating the story, but it's necessary for the reader to know that X happened or that the hero moved from A to B, use narrative summary. Summary allows you to get that information on the page and into the reader's mind without overwriting your scene.



## **HYPERREALISM**

Overwriting your action leads to something I call hyperrealism.

Hyperrealism is when the writer shows the reader everything the character does.

The protagonist has to get on a plane, so we see the taxi arrive, the hero get in with a bag, the traffic on the way to the airport, the security checkpoint, the walk to the gate, waiting next to a family with a fussy toddler...

Unless there is something significant here that creates forward movement in the story, these are details that can be summarized in a sentence or two.

They could even be left off the page entirely. Use a scene break and get the reader to the next significant moment in the story. That might be sitting on the plane, or it might be exiting the airport at the destination.

If a scene does not advance the story through forward movement, it is bloating the manuscript and creating drag in your pacing.

Summarize it or cut it.

## **WHAT IS DIALOGUE?**

Dialogue is anything spoken by a character. Dialogue goes in quotation marks, following the conventions of grammar.

## **HOW DOES DIALOGUE ADVANCE YOUR STORY?**

Dialogue advances character because it is through dialogue that our characters get to express themselves in their own words and voices.

Dialogue advances plot when our characters exchange words that increase dramatic or comedic tension, often revealing something to the reader that will escalate the action.

Dialogue advances theme when characters address subtle aspects of the story, such as relationships and emotional content.

## **GUIDELINES FOR WRITING DIALOGUE:**

- Any dialogue you write on the page should advance the character, plot, or theme of the story.
- Do not use dialogue to explain what has already been shown in exposition or action .
- Do use dialogue when the speech is revelatory, revealing something to the reader that cannot be shown in any other way.
- Characters need to only address each other, not the reader. When characters explain things they would already know, but the reader would not, their speech becomes artificial and creates drag in the pacing.
- Use contractions and other conventions of speech to make the dialogue feel natural.
- Avoid phonetically writing accents. A well-chosen word or two that represent the whole of the accent can be effective. Dialogue with unconventional spellings and contractions, however, quickly becomes tedious and has an undesired effect, pulling the reader out of the story as he tries to navigate unusual spellings. Remember, accents are heard, not read.

- Do not rely on dialogue to advance your story. If your manuscript is starting to look like a script, you're relying too heavily on dialogue to advance your story. You are therefore not showing action or giving your narrator room to breathe and actually tell your story.
- Writers often think they are showing, because they are writing a story heavy on dialogue and light on narrative, but you can easily create a story full of dialogue and telling.

## **WHAT ARE THOUGHTS?**

When a character speaks a line of dialogue internal to her head, you are writing out a thought.

Written thoughts are a quote of what the character thinks.

Alternatively, thoughts can be part of the narrative exposition, a description of what the character thinks.

## **HOW DO THOUGHTS ADVANCE YOUR STORY?**

Thoughts advance character, plot, and theme the same way dialogue does, except the words are internal, instead of external, to the character.

Thoughts advance character because it is through thoughts that our characters get to express themselves in their private words and voices.

Thoughts advance plot when our characters think something that increases dramatic or comedic tension, revealing something to the reader that will escalate the action.

Thoughts advance theme when characters privately address subtle aspects of the story, such as relationships and emotional content.

## **GUIDELINES FOR WRITING THOUGHTS:**

- As with everything else, do not overuse thoughts. It is better to convey how the character feels and what she thinks through her action, dialogue, and attitude than by spelling it out in a thought.
- As with dialogue, any thought you write on the page should advance the character, plot, or theme of the story.
- Only use thoughts when they are revelatory to the reader. That is, they must reveal something of interest that cannot be revealed in another way.

- Often writers use thoughts to explain to the reader how the character feels or what he thinks about something, but feelings and attitudes should come across in subtext, that which is not expressly stated but is apparent nonetheless.
- Do not use thoughts to explain what has already been shown in action or exposition.
- Quoted thoughts are often overused. Use a quoted thought when the character's actual words enhance the reader's experience of the story.
- It is generally better to simply describe what a character thinks as part of the narrative exposition. A quoted thought can interrupt the flow of the section it is in, because it is offset from the rest of the text.



STORYWORKS

# Structure of Story

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## *Module 4.2: Moving Your Story*

### **EXERCISE #6**

#### **MOVING YOUR STORY**

This is a 5-part exercise in which you're going to work with one kind of movement at a time, layering each new movement on top of the previous one. Limit yourself to the kind of movement we're focusing on so you really develop and refine your skills with that kind of movement. Set a timer and do the freewriting after each part.

#### **NARRATIVE**

1. Freewrite a scene in which you use your narrative voice to create a feeling.
  - A couple is having an argument.
  - They are in their kitchen.
  - By the end of the scene, they are no longer angry at each other, but have found a way to reconnect.
  - No words are spoken in this scene.

Use your narrative to describe the couple and the setting. Focus on the mood of the piece. What does this argument feel like? Be evocative.

#### **ACTION**

2. Freewrite a scene in which you only use narrative to describe the couple's actions.
  - A couple is having an argument.
  - They are in their kitchen.



- By the end of the scene, they are no longer angry at each other, but have found a way to reconnect.
- No words are spoken in this scene.

Use your narrative to describe their actions and interactions. Show us how they feel through their expressions, movements, and body language.

Use action to build upon and enhance the narrative scene you wrote before.

## **DIALOGUE**

3. Freewrite a scene in which you use dialogue to advance the story.
  - A couple is having an argument.
  - They are in their kitchen.
  - By the end of the scene, they are no longer angry at each other, but have found a way to reconnect.

Use your characters' words to move from anger to peace. Remember that much is left implied and unspoken between people who know each other well. Use the space between their words effectively.

Use dialogue to build upon and enhance the action scene you wrote before.

## **THOUGHTS**

4. Freewrite a scene in which you use thoughts to advance the story.
  - A couple is having an argument.
  - They are in their kitchen.
  - By the end of the scene, they are no longer angry at each other, but have found a way to reconnect.

Use your characters' thoughts to move from anger to peace. Only use thoughts when they will be revelatory to the reader.

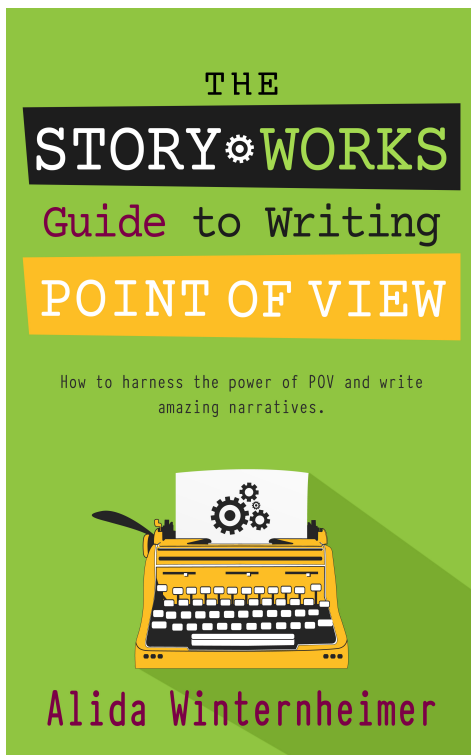
Use thoughts to build upon and enhance the dialogue scene you wrote before.

## **ASSESSMENT**

5. Make notes in your journal to assess what you wrote.
  - Did each layer enhance what came before it?
  - Did you see the power of narrative by writing a scene that is only narrative?

- Of action by writing a scene without dialogue?
- Of dialogue by writing it only after the narrative and action were on the page?
- Of thoughts by using them judiciously, only after the scene was complete without them?

## WANT MORE?



### *Word Essential Writing Tips:*

- [Heart Your Narrator -](http://wordessential.com/blog/heart-your-narrator/)  
<http://wordessential.com/blog/heart-your-narrator/>
- [POV Stranglehold -](http://wordessential.com/blog/povstranglehold/)  
<http://wordessential.com/blog/povstranglehold/>
- [Avoid Hyperrealism \(blog\) -](http://wordessential.com/blog/avoid-hyper-realism/)  
<http://wordessential.com/blog/avoid-hyper-realism/>

### *Story Works Round Table:*

- [001 Dialogue -](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-001-dialogue/)  
<http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-001-dialogue/>

[Amazon](http://amzn.to/2HCJfpD) - <http://amzn.to/2HCJfpD>



STORY•WORKS

# Structure of Story

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## *Module 5: Intrigue, Hooks, Reveals*

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- Intrigue
- Hooks
- Opening hook
- Chapter hooks
- Ending hook
- Emotional hooks
- Examples
- Reveals

We've already touched on these aspects of story in one way or another. But these elements are significant enough to deserve special attention.

### **INTRIGUE**

Intrigue is a question implied in the text of a story that the author can reasonably assume the reader wants to have answered.

*The most basic form of intrigue is "What will happen next?"*

Of course, that is just an umbrella question. For each chapter you write, you should be able to frame the intrigue as a question that specifically addresses that movement in your story.

In every chapter, things need to happen that pique a reader's curiosity and keep her turning pages to see how the implied question will be answered.

When writers don't pay attention to intrigue, they can create a story without the necessary pull to keep a reader engaged. Things are too easily known, too quickly resolved. Key to effectively working intrigue into a story is posing the question, then allowing the action to play out for a while before introducing the reveal.

The less significant the intrigue, the less time is required to effectively play it out over the course of the story.

## **HOOKS**

A hook is a form of intrigue that raises questions that must be answered to advance the plot. They are placed at the opening of a story, the end of chapters, and the close of the story when there is a sequel.

### **THE OPENING HOOK**

It raises the question that launches the entire story. It is designed to entice the reader to read (i.e. buy) the book.

Opening hooks tend to be dramatically exciting, posing a question that is not fully resolved until deep into the plot or even the book's climax.

### **THE CHAPTER HOOK**

It is a question raised in the chapter during the climactic moment. Chapter hooks are designed to get the reader over the chapter break by creating that "I just gotta know" feeling. Chapter hooks are quickly resolved at the opening of the next chapter.

Chapter hooks create an enticing spike in reader emotions. This can be excitement, as when the character is in danger, or it can be sympathy, as when the character is emotionally wounded, or it can be elation, as when the scene just read is so funny the reader is eager for more of the same.

Avoid ending a chapter in a moment of emotional stillness. This is why chapter breaks often occur at the peak the chapter, and not after the climactic moment has been resolved.

It is important to note the great variety possible in any story. Chapter hooks are simply questions that beg to be answered that are relevant and appropriate to the movement just read that are placed at the end of the chapter.

Some hooks are action driven. A car has crashed. We need to read on to see if the people inside survived. Some hooks, however, are character driven. The character's emotional state following a turn in the plot engages the reader's sympathy and entices her to turn the page.

### **THE ENDING HOOK**

This is a hook placed at the end of a book to entice the reader to get the next book in a series. It is not a cliffhanger. The main plot has been satisfactorily resolved, but some minor question is raised at the end of the book to hint at what's to come in the next installment of the story. This may involve a subplot or create a sense of trouble brewing. Either way, this book is complete.

### **THE EMOTIONAL HOOK**

Not all chapters are high stakes and high drama. They, therefore, won't have big dramatic climactic moments or life changing hooks. But the stakes and hooks must be significant to the protagonist and therefore the reader.

The emotional hook is a hook that is not action driven. Because these are more subtle and character-focused they are often overlooked in discussions of storycraft and may seem harder to define, but they are no less effective when well done.

Let's look at an example of an emotion-driven chapter hook. Then we'll look at a classic example of an opening and closing hook.

### **EXAMPLE OF THE EMOTIONAL HOOK**

In L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, orphan Anne Shirley is brought home to meet Marilla Cuthbert. Marilla declares Anne will have to go back to the orphanage, because they requested a boy. Chapter 3 ends with Anne crying herself to sleep, heartbroken that she is unwanted and will be returned.

The hook inherent in this chapter's end follows a specific plot point—Marilla plans to return Anne. Note that point is the subject of the entire chapter and not a specific, single, climactic event.

The chapter's hook relies on emotion—a girl's dream came true for a brief day and then was destroyed, because she is not a boy. The chapter ends with the image of Anne crying herself to sleep.

This movement does not need to be resolved in the next chapter; the girl went to bed. So why doesn't the reader? Because she cares about Anne Shirley. The reader sympathizes with Anne's plight, and she wants to know: Will Marilla's heart soften? Will Anne be able to stay with the Cuthberts? What new reversal of fortune will allow Anne to finally have a home?

The next chapter begins a new day and new movement in the story, one that addresses the questions that hook the reader into continuing the story.

*What do you do when your climactic moment, the point of highest dramatic tension in your chapter, is resolved before the chapter break?*

*End with a question.*

Here's another example: in one of my Skoghall ghost story/mysteries, Jess has to ask her editor for an extension. She's eating some humble pie, but pulls it off. The extension—and Jess's second chance—is granted. The chapter's drama is resolved.

Then what? Right before the chapter ends, Jess's friend asks her if she's got any new ghost trouble that could prevent her from writing. She says no...and then she sees something peculiar.

The reader will understand this peculiar sight means ghost trouble that Jess won't be able to avoid, despite her new, pressing deadline. The question is implied in the hook: What does the vision mean? How much trouble will it cause? Will Jess finish her book in time?

This is a pretty quiet hook early in the book. As the action ramps up, the reader will have all those questions answered.

## **EXAMPLE OF OPENING AND ENDING HOOKS**

*The opening and ending hooks need to wow your readers.*

In the original Star Wars, now Episode IV, the opening hook is the first scene and prologue in which Darth Vader boards Princess Leia's ship and kidnaps her. Besides quickly establishing the forces of good and evil, this scene raises several intriguing questions: Will Leia's message reach Obi-Wan Kenobi? Will Leia be saved from Darth Vader? Will the forces of good defeat the forces of evil?

If you know the story, then you know when each of those questions is answered within the plot arc. And you know that in the climax of the story, the forces of good win a significant battle, but not the war, because there is a sequel. Darth Vader's escape from the Death Star at the end of that episode is the end hook that entices us to come back for the next in the series.

## **REVEALS**

Intrigue, whether large or small, is always paired with a reveal. That is, every question is paired with an answer.

A reveal is the moment intrigue, that question a reader needs to have answered, is answered through a revelatory moment in the story. The significance and scope of the intrigue will determine the significance and scope of the reveal.

Suppose we've got a scene with two characters, Mary and Joe. Joe is Mary's boss.

Suppose Mary's boss has it in for her. We write a scene in which he comes down hard on her for resting on the job when they have a tight deadline. She's not the only one resting and he doesn't say anything to the other employees.

That scene sets up intrigue by raising the question: Why does the boss have it in for Mary?

The reveal would come later, when we learn that Mary is dating her boss despite company policy against it. He's so concerned about someone finding out that he overcompensates by being hard on her at work.

This would be a small reveal, placed fairly early in the story. It would definitely advance character, showing us that Mary is willing to take chances in the pursuit of what (and whom) she wants. It must advance plot, because any relationship, good or bad, will complicate our protagonist's involvement in the main plot, whether that relationship is central or peripheral to the main plot. It would also advance theme, if the theme is going against authority or playing by one's own rules.

Intrigue and reveals are specific to each story and the writer must craft them, carefully structuring scenes to raise intrigue, to expand the intrigue as the situation plays out, bringing tension to a head, then dispelling that tension by revealing the

answer to the question posed. How long it takes to reach the reveal and dispel the tension depends on the significance of the intrigue to the plot.

### **WANT MORE?**

*Word Essential Writing Tips:*

- [Hooks & Endnotes](http://wordessential.com/blog/hooks-endnotes/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/hooks-endnotes/>

*Story Works Round Table:*

- [6 Openings](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-6-openings/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-6-openings/>
- [29 Hooks: Premise & Opening](http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-29-hooks-premise-opening/) - <http://wordessential.com/blog/swrt-29-hooks-premise-opening/>





# Structure of Story

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## *Module 6: Writing Strong*

### **WE WILL COVER:**

- Writing strong
- The one question
- Final words

### **WRITING STRONG**

The best thing you can do for your story and your readers is write with purpose.

*Your goal is to advance more than one story element  
with each movement on the page.*

This is not difficult to do, because character, plot, and theme are intricately woven together. For example:

If your characters are a couple and they say good night and kiss each other before going to sleep, you have used action and dialogue to advance character, establishing something about their relationship.

If, as she lies down, the woman, whose point of view we're in, feels guilty for lying to her husband, you have used her emotions and/or thoughts to create dramatic tension that will further advance the **character** by revealing something new about the woman.

It will also advance the **plot**. The reader has to adjust his opinion of the characters from a loving couple to a couple in which one partner is hiding something from the other.

You have also created intrigue, because now the reader wants to know what the woman is lying about.

This movement would also advance the **theme** of the story, if a theme is deception, love and forgiveness, or how deception affects relationships.

## THE ONE QUESTION

### *What is the reader's take away?*

Constantly ask yourself: What is the reader's take away from this scene? This chapter? This movement in the story? If you can't describe its purpose in the narrative and what the reader will gain by reading it, reconsider it. You can always revise it or cut it.

Figure out what the reader is getting out of the scene based on what is on the page, not what is in your head. If that take away, the one supported by the words on the page, is not what you intend it to be, revise or cut the scene.

## FINAL WORDS

Now that you have completed the course, you have a solid understanding of the structure of story and key elements in any novel. You can apply your new expertise in building arcs, the 3-act structure, hooks, intrigue, and more to every novel you write, adapting the fundamentals of story craft if and when the story you're writing demands it. That is when craft becomes play.

I hope you've enjoyed the Structure of Story. I certainly enjoyed making it for you!

If you enjoyed this course, there are plenty more to choose from. Or there will be soon, because I am working hard to grow the Story Works Fiction online school, bringing you the best opportunities to learn story craft in a straightforward, fun way without needing a single student loan!

### WANT MORE?

- ✓ It's not too late to book a manuscript review or one-on-one coaching.
- ✓ Sign up for another course.
- ✓ Join me online:
  - [Story Works Writers Facebook Group](#),
  - [Story Works Round Table Podcast](#),
  - [Word Essential Writing Tips](#).



Happy Writing! Alida

### WANT TO CONTACT ME?

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