

What Is a Story Plot?

The plot is what happens in a story. However, a plot is not a simple sequence of events.

- A strong plot is centered on one moment—an interruption of a pattern, a turning point, or an action—that raises a dramatic question, which must be answered throughout the course of the story. This is also known as plot A.
- Every element of the plot—each scene, each line—exists in service of answering that question. There are myriad plot devices that can bolster the main story; these are considered subplots.

7 Types of Plots

The nature of the dramatic question informs the plot and what kind of story it will be. Are the characters threatened by something external or internal? What genre will the story be?

1. **Tragedy.** In a tragedy, your main character should undergo a major change of fortune — almost always from good to bad, happy to sad. Tragic characters have to suffer.
2. **Comedy.** In comedy, even though your characters have defects, their defects should never wind up being painful or destructive. Comic characters make it through unscathed.
3. **Hero's Journey.** In a "hero's journey," the hero of a story must undergo two things: recognition and reversal of a situation. Something has to happen from the outside that inspires the hero in a way that he/she didn't realize before. Then he has to undertake a quest to solve the situation.
4. **Rags to Riches.** Remember Cinderella? The classic fairy tale follows a simple rags-to-riches plot: the protagonist is downtrodden, impoverished, or otherwise struggling, and through a series of events— either magical, like in the case of *Harry Potter*, or more realistic, like in *Great Expectations* — achieves success. This type of plot often features a happy ending.
5. **Rebirth.** The rebirth style of plot follows a character's transformation from bad to good. The character will frequently have a tragic past that informs their current negative view of life, however, a series of events (usually set in motion by the protagonist or a narrator) will help them see the light. See: Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, or the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*.
6. **Overcoming the Monster.** Otherwise known as the good versus evil plot, this type of story features a protagonist (good) fighting an antagonist (evil). The protagonist can be a singular character or a group united in their mission. The antagonist is generally a big, bad evil (like Darth Vader in *Star Wars*) who continuously throws obstacles in the protagonist's way—until the final battle.
7. **Voyage and Return.** This plot is a simple point A to point B and back to point A plot. The protagonist sets off on a journey, only to return to his or her starting point having gained

wisdom and experience (and sometimes treasure too). Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is a beloved contemporary illustration of this plot.

How to Outline a Story Plot: Three-Act Structure

At its core, plot structure has three parts: a beginning, middle, and end. Each part has its own purpose and challenge. Aristotle was the first to formulate this now well-worn formula in *Poetics*. He put it this way: "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end."

In other words, your audience should be able to watch your story without being distracted with wondering what happened before the story started, what more happened after it ended, or how the characters got from the beginning to the end. Acclaimed dramatists [Aaron Sorkin](#) and [David Mamet](#) both consider Aristotle's *Poetics* to be the primary guide to writing good storylines.

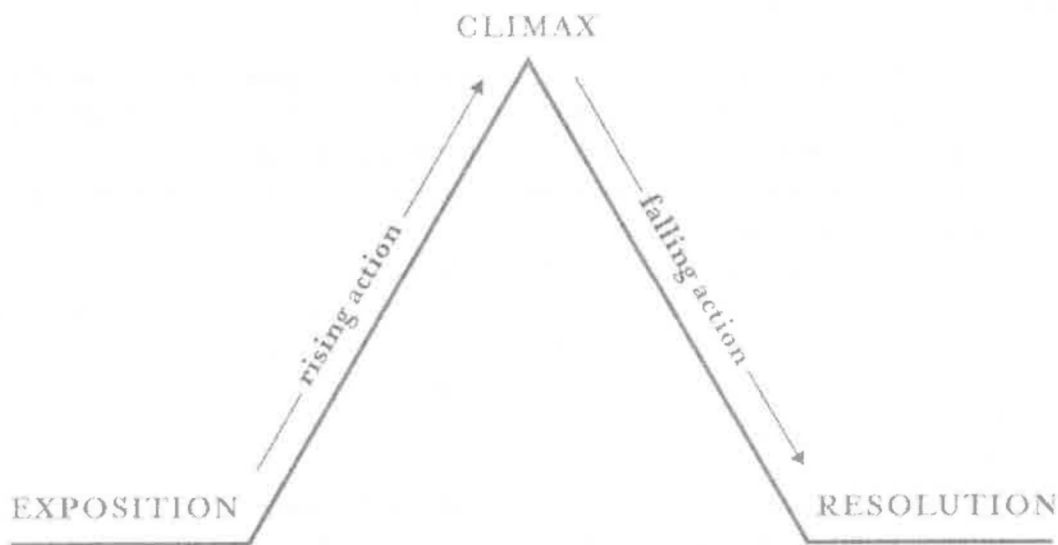
1. **Beginning.** The beginning of your novel has to accomplish a lot. It must introduce the hero, the villain, and the world of the story, as well as the story's dramatic question, and it must do this with enough energy to grab your reader's interest right away. A prologue can be useful for seizing the reader's attention.
2. **Middle.** Your job during the middle of the story is to make the hero's quest as difficult as possible so that at every moment it seems less likely that the hero will triumph. You must raise the stakes along the way and create obstacles of ever-increasing intensity while keeping your eye firmly fixed on your conclusion. The different [plot points](#) can include the basic plot, plus various subplots. The main plot of a story always has to build up to the resolution.
3. **End.** The end of your story answers the dramatic question, which already has your ending hidden within it. For example, if your question is: Will Ahab catch the whale? Then your story's finale will be the moment when he does. Often, tension evaporates in the middle of a novel, so it's a good idea to write your ending first. It may not be perfect, and you can always change it later, but it's useful to know the climax to which your characters are headed. Having that destination will help you stay focused during the "middle middle."

What Is Freytag's Pyramid?

German novelist Gustav Freytag expanded on Aristotle's concept of plot by adding two additional components to the beginning, middle, and end: rising action and falling action. Freytag's dramatic arc, also known as Freytag's Pyramid, includes the following:

1. **Exposition.** This is the beginning of the story.
2. **Rising action.** Once the story has begun, it is important to create tension by raising the stakes. You must raise the stakes along the way and create obstacles of ever-increasing intensity while keeping your eye firmly fixed on your conclusion.
3. **Climax (middle).** The pinnacle of your plot.

4. **Falling action.** The falling action occurs after the climax but before the end. Falling action frequently depicts the protagonist dealing with the consequences or fallout of the climax. The falling action is when the protagonist ties up loose ends and heads toward the conclusion. It is also referred to as the denouement.
5. **Resolution.** This is the end of the story.



9 Ways to Raise the Stakes in Your Plot

Whatever situation your hero is facing at the start of the middle section should become worse. If the story itself falters, remember that the stakes have to grow increasingly higher for your protagonist. Throw obstacles into their path, even if you don't know how they'll surmount them. Sometimes, forcing your characters into a corner can stimulate your problem-solving skills.

1. Create physical danger.
2. Create secondary characters who bring new tensions to the story.
3. Introduce new problems.
4. Give a character a complicated history or situation.
5. Create obstacles for your hero.
6. Complicate things.

7. Remind the reader of the stakes.
8. Find ways to keep your protagonist moving from one location to another.
9. Add time pressure, like a ticking bomb.

Margaret Atwood's Plot Generator

The Handmaid's Tale author Margaret Atwood provides an example of a plot, along with the various ways the story can change depending on which type of plot lines the writer chooses to follow.

The pattern of the story is this: John and Mary are living happily in their split-level bungalow. Based on this pattern, there are four different plots you could try:

1. John and Mary are living happily in their split-level bungalow. And then one day, a strange green light is seen in the sky. And a canister descends to Earth right behind their house, and out of it comes a tentacled monster. What will they do?
2. John and Mary are living happily in their split-level bungalow but then Mary begins to suspect: Is John cheating on her?
3. John and Mary are living happily in their split-level bungalow. Then John discovers that Mary is mysteriously absent during parts of the night and has developed an alarming tendency to sleep in the bathtub with all the curtains drawn. What has happened? What are those strange white fangs that have appeared? Could it be that Mary is a vampire? What is John going to do? And what about the children? Have they inherited this tendency or not?
4. John and Mary are living happily in their split-level bungalow, but they're running out of money. What are they going to do? "I know," says John. "Let's rob a bank."

3 Writing Exercises to Create a Good Plot for Your Story

Now that you have the elements of plot down, try your hand at writing your own story with the following exercise. In a notebook, write down:

1. Ten events that might spark a story. They don't have to be big: these could be things that happened to you or someone you know, or items you read about in the news.
2. Ten characters. These might be characters you've already worked with, people you've seen but never spoken to, or perhaps historical figures that fascinate you.
3. Ten classic stories: folktales, fairy tales, myths, or maybe family stories that were passed down to you. No need to detail them; just list a few words that sum up the story.

Now take one item from each list—one event, one character, and one existing story shell—and begin a new short story. What happens when you drop a character of your own invention into a very old folktale? How does your personal event permit you to play with the foundational folktale?

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Joseph Campbell, an American mythological researcher, wrote a famous book entitled *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In his lifelong research Campbell discovered many common patterns running through hero myths and stories from around the world. Years of research lead Campbell to discover several basic stages that almost every hero-quest goes through (no matter what culture the myth is a part of). He calls this common structure "the monomyth."

George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, claims that Campbell's monomyth was the inspiration for his groundbreaking films. Lucas also believes that *Star Wars* is such a popular saga because it taps into a timeless story-structure which has existed for thousands of years.

Many followers of Campbell have defined the stages of his monomyth in various ways, sometimes supplying different names for certain stages. For this reason there are many different versions of the Hero's Journey that retain the same basic elements.

THE ORDINARY WORLD

Heroes exist in a world is considered ordinary or uneventful by those who live there. Often the heroes are considered odd by those in the ordinary world and possess some ability or characteristic that makes them feel out-of-place.

- *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*: Dorothy in Kansas
- *The Hobbit*: Bilbo Baggins in Hobbiton
- *Star Wars*: Luke Skywalker on Tatooine
- *The Lion King*: Simba at Pride Rock

THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

For heroes to begin their journeys, they must be called away from the ordinary world. Fantastic quests don't happen in everyday life. Heroes must be removed from their typical environment. Most heroes show a reluctance to leave their home, their friends, and their life to journey on a quest. But in the end they accept their destiny.

Usually there is a discovery, some event, or some danger that starts them on the heroic path. Heroes find a mystic object or discover their world is in danger. In some cases, heroes happen upon their quest by accident. Campbell puts it like this, "A blunder—the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world."

The new world the hero is forced into is much different than the old one. Campbell describes this new world as a "fateful region of both treasure and danger...a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state...a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight". This description may seem pretty vague, but think of all the various fantasy realms characters have entered throughout the years: Middle-Earth, Oz, Narnia, Wonderland. It could even be outer space, a

haunted house, or the Matrix. Regardless of the details, the new world is sure to be filled with adventure.

- *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*: The tornado
- *The Hobbit*: Gandalf the wizard arrives
- *Star Wars*: R2D2's cryptic message

REFUSAL OF THE QUEST

During the *Call to Adventure* heroes are given a task or quest which only they can complete. They are faced with a choice: accept the quest or deny it. Their choice might seem like a no-brainer. If they don't accept the quest, there won't be much of a story—or will there? Actually there are stories where heroes *don't* accept their destinies. When this happens, the stage is set for disaster. There's a reason why the powers-that-be have chosen a particular hero. A refusal of the quest only brings trouble.

King Minos, the monarch of Crete who antagonizes the Greek hero Theseus, does not do what the gods ask of him. Poseidon, Lord of the Seas, sends him a beautiful white bull. The god's only order is that Minos must sacrifice the creature back to him. After seeing the magnificent beast, Minos decides he just can't bring himself to do what the god asks and keeps the bull as a personal trophy.

Enraged, Poseidon vows revenge and causes Minos' wife to burn with lust for her husband's prized beast. The rest of this story is strictly NC-17. It results in the birth of the Minotaur, a creature half-bull, half-human, a curse to his father King Minos.

Campbell notes that heroes who refuse their quest often become characters in need of rescuing or in Minos' case, the villain of another hero's journey.

- *Star Wars*: Luke refuses the quest until he learns his aunt and uncle are dead
- *The Lion King*: Simba refuses to return to Pride Rock and accept his destiny
- *Groundhog Day*: Example of the negative cycle caused by refusing the call

ACCEPTING THE CALL: Once the adventure is accepted, the heroes advance into the next stage of their journey.

ENTERING THE UNKNOWN

As they embark on their journey, the heroes enter a world they have never experienced before. Very often it is filled with supernatural creatures, breathtaking sights, and the constant threat of death. Unlike the heroes' home, this outside world has its own rules, and they quickly learn to respect these rules as their endurance, strength, and mettle are tested time and time again. After all, it is not the end of the journey which teaches, but the journey itself.

- *The Wizard of Oz*: Dorothy must learn the rules of Oz
- *The Matrix*: Neo must come to grips with the realities and unrealities of the Matrix

SUPERNATURAL AID

Supernatural doesn't have to mean *magical*. There are plenty of hero stories that don't have wizards or witches per say. *Supernatural* simply means "above the laws of nature." Heroes are almost always started on their journey by a character who has mastered the laws of the outside world and come back to bestow this wisdom upon them. This supernatural character often gives them the means to complete the quest. Some of the time the gift is simply wisdom. Other times it is an object with magical powers. In every instance it is something the hero needs to succeed. As Campbell says, "One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear." The job of the supernatural assistor is to give the heroes what they need to finish the quest—not finish it for them.

- *The Hobbit*: Gandalf
- *Star Wars*: Obi-Wan Kenobi
- *Cinderella*: Fairy Godmother

TALISMAN: A Special (and often magical) items that assist the heroes on their quest.

- *The Wizard of Oz*: Ruby Slippers
- *The Hobbit*: The Ring
- *Star Wars*: Lightsaber

ALLIES/HELPERS

Every hero needs a helper, much like every superhero needs a sidekick. Without the assistance of their companions and helpers along the way, most heroes would fail miserably. For example, in the Greek hero story of Theseus, Minos' daughter Ariadne, after falling hopelessly in love, helps Theseus navigate the Labyrinth. She does this by holding one end of a golden thread while Theseus works his way inward to slay the Minotaur. Without her help, Theseus would never have fulfilled his quest or found his way out of the maze once he did so.

- *Lord of the Rings*: Samwise Gamgee
- *The Wizard of Oz*: The Tin Woodsman, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion

TESTS & THE SUPREME ORDEAL

The heroes progress through a series of tests, a set of obstacles that make them stronger, preparing them for their final showdown. At long last they reach the Supreme Ordeal, the obstacle they have journeyed so far to overcome.

All the heroes' training and toil comes into play now. The journey has hardened them, and it's time for them to show their prowess. Once this obstacle is overcome, the tension will be relieved. The worst is passed, and the quest, while not officially over, has succeeded.

- *Star Wars*: Blowing up the Death Star
- *Lord of the Rings*: Mount Doom
- *The Wizard of Oz*: Defeating the Wicked Witch

REWARD AND THE JOURNEY HOME

Typically, there is a reward given to heroes for passing the Supreme Ordeal. It could be a kingdom. It could be the hand of a beautiful princess. It could be the Holy Grail. Whatever it is, it is a reward for the heroes' endurance and strength.

After the heroes complete the Supreme Ordeal and have the reward firmly in hand, all that is left is for them to return home. Just because the majority of the adventure has passed doesn't mean that the return journey will be smooth sailing. There are still lesser homebound obstacles to overcome.

- *The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies*
- *The Lord of the Rings: Return to Hobbiton*

MASTER OF TWO WORLDS/ RESTORING THE WORLD

Success on the heroes' quest is life-changing, for them and often for many others. By achieving victory, they have changed or preserved their original world. Often they return with "the exilir," an object or personal ability that allows them to save their world.

The heroes have also grown in spirit and strength. They have proved themselves worthy for marriage, kingship, or queenship. Their mastery of the outside world qualifies them to be giants in their own.

- *Lord of the Rings: Frodo saves the Shire*
- *The Wizard of Oz: Dorothy rids Oz of the Wicked Witch*

THE MONOMYTH: NOT JUST FOR MYTHOLOGY

While Joseph Campbell's monomyth works best with the traditional form of the quest—folk and fairy tales, myths, legends, and other fantasies—it can be applied to many different genres or types of stories. A quest does not have to include swords and monsters. It can just as easily occur in the *real world*. The monomyth, ageless and universal, exists anywhere and everywhere.

ARCHETYPES APPEARING IN THE HERO'S JOURNEY

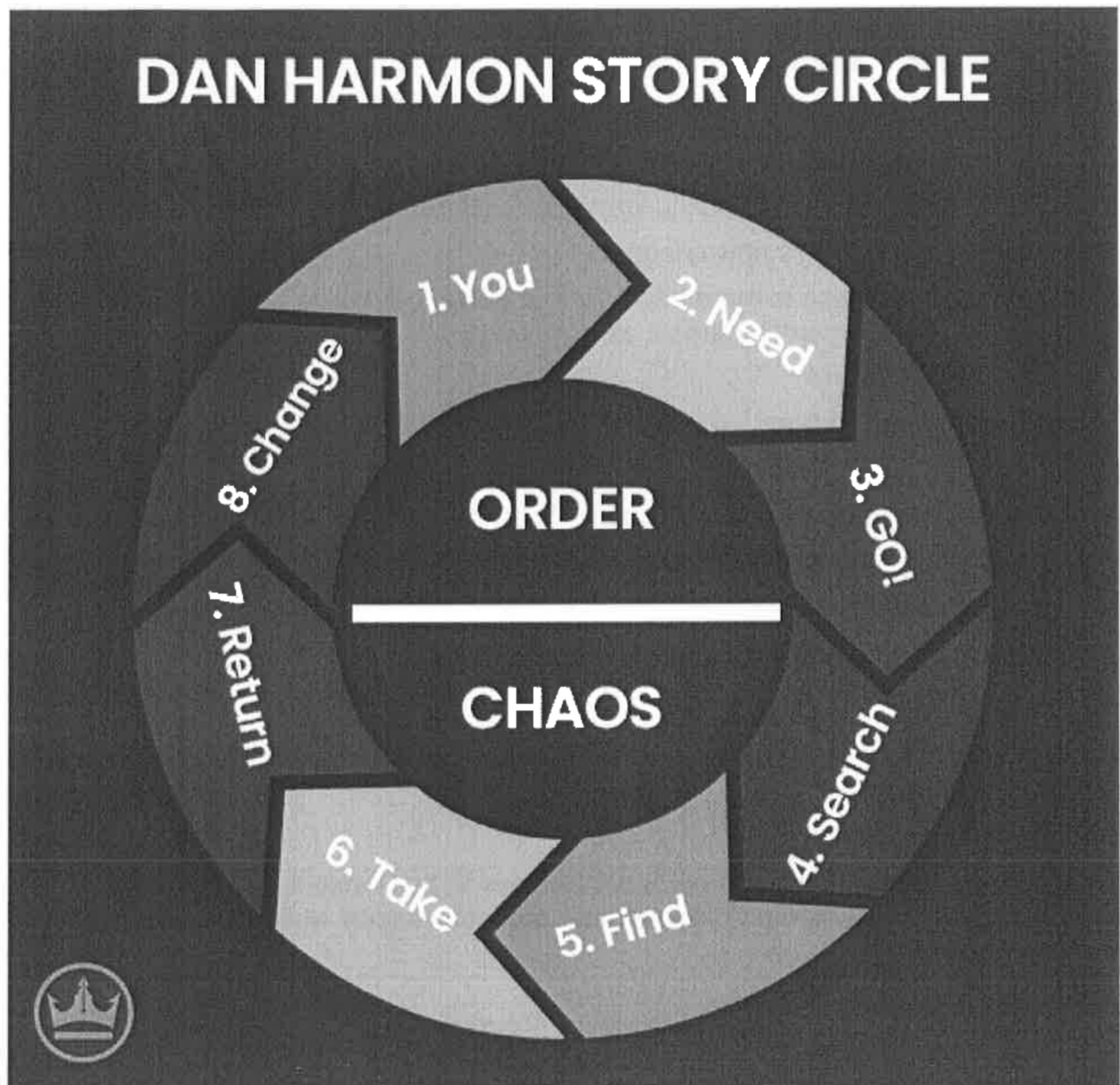
Joseph Campbell was heavily influenced by the Swiss Psychiatrist Carl Jung whose theory of the collective unconscious involved archetypes—recurring images, patterns, and ideas from dreams and myths across various cultures. Below are several archetypes often found in myths.

- **HEROES:** Central figures in stories. Everyone is the hero of his or her own myth.
- **SHADOWS:** Villains, enemies, or perhaps the enemy within. This could be the repressed possibilities of the hero, his or her potential for evil.
- **MENTORS:** The hero's guide or guiding principles.
- **HERALD:** The one who brings the Call to Adventure. This could be a person or an event.
- **THRESHOLD GUARDIANS:** The forces that stand in the way at important turning points, including jealous enemies, professional gatekeepers, or even the hero's own fears and doubts.

- **SHAPESHIFTERS:** In stories, creatures like vampires or werewolves who change shape. In life, the shapeshifter represents change.
- **TRICKSTERS:** Clowns and mischief-makers.
- **ALLIES:** Characters who help the hero throughout the quest.
- **WOMAN AS TEMPTRESS:** Sometimes a female character offers danger to the hero (a femme fatale)

The Dan Harmon Story Circle: The Ultimate Guide in 8 Steps

By Jason Hamilton



The Story Circle is a narrative structure, first coined by screenwriter and creator Dan Harmon, which is modeled off of the hero's journey, first popularized by Joseph Campbell.

Like the hero's journey, the Story Circle can be found, in one form or another, in almost every story ever told. You will find it in myths from all over the world, you will find it in modern storytelling, you may even find it when you hear your neighbor telling you what happened to them last week.

That said, it is not exactly like the hero's journey. The Story Circle has eight stages:

1. **You** – Where the character is in a zone of comfort
2. **Need** – And they want something
3. **Go** – So they enter an unfamiliar situation
4. **Search** – Adapt to it
5. **Find** – They find what they wanted
6. **Take** – Pay the price of taking it
7. **Return** – They go back to where they started
8. **Change** – And is now changed

I'll discuss each of these in more depth further down, but notice how this compares to the 12 steps of the hero's journey, as outlined by Christopher Vogler:

1. Ordinary world
2. Call to adventure
3. Refusal of the call
4. Meeting the mentor
5. Crossing the threshold
6. Tests, allies, enemies
7. Approach to the innermost cave
8. Ordeal
9. Reward
10. The road back
11. Resurrection

What Dan Harmon has done in his Story Circle is to boil these 12 steps down to eight, focusing specifically on the character arc, motivations, actions, as well as consequences.

How Does the Dan Harmon Story Circle Work?

The top part of the circle, i.e. the first three steps and the last step, represents order. During these four steps, everything is in a state of equilibrium, and all is right with the world.

The bottom half, i.e. steps four through seven, represent chaos. It is during these times that the world brings unknown temptations and trials, and our character has to deal with situations that are uncomfortable.

It is through these trials that the characters are able to gain strength, overcome weaknesses, and ultimately return to the place of order, this time a changed character.

So as the character progresses through these eight stages, they manage to go from order, to chaos, and back to order again.

The 8 Stages of Dan Harmon's Story Circle

Now it's time to dive straight into all eight stages of Dan Harmon's Story Circle. I'll give you the basic information about each, as well as breakdown approximately how this should fit your story overall.

1. You: the character is in a comfort zone

Step 1 takes place at the very beginning of your story, when you are introduced to your main character, understand the world that your character lives in, and demonstrate that they are in a familiar situation of some kind (whether that is emotional, physical, etc.).

Quick tips to make step one shine:

- Find a way to help the reader care about your protagonist (i.e. save the cat), as readers will not care what happens to your protagonist if they don't have a reason to.
- Allow the protagonist sometime to interact with the world around them so that we understand that they are in the comfort zone, and why that comfort zone is important to them.
- Keep the exposition to a minimum. Add just enough that the reader understands the location that the protagonist is in, and anything that is immediately important to know for that character. Remember that a lot can be picked up by context alone.

Chronology note: this step takes place during Act I, and should take up approximately 12% of your story.

2. Need: The Character Must Want Something

Right from the beginning, you should make it clear that all is not right in the protagonist's world. While they are operating from a place of comfort, they have some internal or external need.

Often, it is this need, or something related to it, that creates the inciting incident of the plot. So it is important that you get this part right.

Quick tips to make step two shine:

- For plot-driven stories, use external needs, where the protagonist wants to change or achieve something. This can be anything from a physical object to the love of someone, to respect of their peers.
- For character-driven stories, go with an internal need, which can be something like humility if they are prideful characters, courage if they are a timid character, etc.
- Many stories have external and internal motivations.

- During this section, you should introduce the inciting incident, ideally related to their need.
- Ideally, this needs should be so great that it propels the character outside of their comfort zone.

Chronology note: this step should be introduced early on within Act I of the three act structure, ideally on or before the 15% mark of your book.

3. Go: The Protagonist Enters an Unfamiliar Setting

It is at this point that the characters are thrust into worlds unknown, completely outside of their comfort zone, whether that be literally or emotionally.

This section introduces the core conflict of a good story, conflict that will be with the protagonist until near the end of the story. This is where the character starts working towards their goals, but encounters resistance along the way.

Quick tips to make step three shine:

- Make the conflict of the story readily apparent, as this can increase the tension and get readers excited to read more.
- The character should have their first encounter with a real challenge at this point.
- While the character is firmly outside of their comfort zone, they should still be willing to take action to get what they need.

Chronology note: step three ventures into Act II of a three act structure, roughly around the 25% mark. At this point we have left Act I behind and should be firmly entrenched in the main narrative.

4. Search: The Character Must Adapt To the Unfamiliar World

It is at this point that the character realizes that they may have bitten off more than they can chew. Suddenly, the journey to get what they need has become much more complicated.

So in order to get what they need, they must search for solutions to their challenges, which can lead to more challenges, and more crises, all leading to the ultimate climax of the story.

Quick tips to make step four shine:

- Start adding additional conflict to make yours a better story. Show the protagonist continuing to try and overcome the conflict, only to fail and try again.
- If you have not already, introduce allies that are there to help your protagonist along the way.
- You can increase the stakes by ensuring that something or someone is lost along the way.

Chronology note: by now, we are firmly in Act II of a three act structure, and the stakes are beginning to rise. Nevertheless, don't spend too much time in this section, and let it take you to approximately the 30% mark of your story.

5. Find: The Character Finds What They Wanted

Now we come to a pivotal turning point, roughly at the midpoint of your book, where the protagonist finds what they need, and they are awarded a brief moment of victory.

What we don't know, however, is that finding the solution brings new problems with it. The character may discover that what they wanted was not what they actually needed, or looks considerably different from what they thought.

Quick tips to make step five shine:

- Start by showing a victory, a.k.a. the protagonist finds something that appears to be the correct solution.
- Take a moment to celebrate, allow the reader to think there is hope, then use this as an opportunity for a plot twist and raise the stakes once again.
- For external motivations, this can be a physical item or achievement. For internal motivations, the thing that the hero finds is often a revelatory piece of information about themselves.

Chronology note: this step takes place roughly at the middle of the story, around the 50% mark.

6. Take: The Character Must Pay the Price of What They Found

At this point in the story, the character must face a hefty price for the thing that they thought they wanted, and that they achieved in the last step.

This huge price tag should bring the character to a new low, building up to the final climax of the story. This new low will create a new need, one that is a little more fitting of the character.

It is what the character truly needed, despite the fact that it probably conflicts with what the character wanted.

Quick tips to make step six shine:

- Make it clear that the character's actions have huge consequences, sometimes catastrophic.
- Have the character face new challenges as a result of finding what they think they wanted.
- You should have the character face a significant loss, the nature of which will depend on the genre and the type of story you want to tell.

Chronology note: This takes place towards the end of Act II, right around the 65-75% mark.

7. Return: The Hero Returns to Where They Started

This is a figurative or literal return to where the hero started, complete with new knowledge, skills, items, etc. that they found along the journey. It is these things that the character finds that prepares them to confront the final conflict of the story.

While this is not the same type of return talked about in Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, as the climax has not happened yet, it is a return to more familiar grounds. You will often see stories returning to where they started, often literally, but also thematically.

Quick tips to make step seven shine:

- This is a moment to pause and show how the character is returning to their normal world.
- This is also an opportunity to show how the character has changed.
- Remember we are still in the stage of chaos. Not all is set right with the world yet, but by returning to the comfort zone armed with new power, the character is building towards that climax.

Chronology note: this is the start of Act III, roughly 75% of the way through the story.

8. Change: The Character Is Able to Shift the World around Them

At last we get the final climax of the story. This is where we see the character use all that they have gained/learned in order to achieve their goal or defeat the antagonist.

This is where the main conflict and the hero come head-to-head, and we see what the characters' discoveries are truly worth. And they change a lot.

Not only has the character changed, but they are able to change the world around them.

Quick tips to make step eight shine:

- Don't hold back. Make this the biggest showdown of your story, whether that be a physical battle, an emotional punch, a huge triumph over inner demons, etc.
- Remember this is a circle. We want to show that the protagonist is returning to their place of comfort, but this time a changed person. The more you can thematically tie the ending to your beginning, the better it will read.

Chronology note: this climax takes place roughly between the 85 to 87% mark of your story. Bear in mind that there is still room for falling action once this section is done. You will still need to tie up any loose ends.

Examples of Dan Harmon's Story Circle

Let's take a look at some better-known stories, and see how they implement Dan Harmon's Story Circle. While none of these were specifically intended to use this circle, you will start to see it pop up in almost every story you ever hear.

Harry Potter

1. **You:** Harry starts out in the familiar (albeit distressing) situation as an orphan living with his aunt and uncle who wants nothing to do with him.
2. **Need:** Harry learns that he is a wizard and that he has untold possibilities ahead in his future.
3. **Go:** Harry goes to Hogwarts, completely immersed in an unfamiliar world.
4. **Search:** Harry learns various spells, gains friends and mentors, and learns to fly.
5. **Find:** Harry finds what he thinks he wants when he learns that he has natural talent at Quidditch.
6. **Take:** slightly overconfident, Harry believes that there is a conspiracy going on involving Professor Snape. He is thrown closer to an encounter with Lord Voldemort.
7. **Return:** Harry defeats Voldemort and eventually returns to his home.
8. **Change:** he is no longer the shy boy living under the stairs. He has changed, and his aunt and uncle know it.

While You Were Sleeping

1. **You:** Lucy lives alone, working a tedious, boring job at a ticket booth.
2. **Need:** she wants to have a family, and specifically wants to marry a man that she sees every day at her job.
3. **Go:** Lucy saves the man she is infatuated with from an oncoming train.
4. **Search:** she lies to Peter's family and tells them that she is his fiancée.
5. **Find:** Lucy gains the family she always wanted, but finds that she is falling for Peter's brother Jack.
6. **Take:** it is revealed that she was not Peter's girlfriend, and it seems like her relationship with the family is over.
7. **Return:** instead, Lucy marries Jack before returning to her work at the train station.
8. **Change:** even though she is back in her familiar world, she is changed. She enjoys her life more now that she has Jack.

Taken

- **You:** Bryan, Liam Neeson's character, lives a comfortable life as a retired government operative.
- **Need:** Bryan wants to be a little more involved in the life of his daughter.
- **Go:** his daughter is kidnapped in Paris, and Bryan must go after her to save her.

- **Search:** Bryan searches for his daughter, using his past skill and expertise to lay waste to the opposition.
- **Find:** Bryan finds his daughter, but is not able to rescue her yet.
- **Take:** Bryan is forced to kill the head of the human-trafficking organization in order to save his daughter from them.
- **Return:** Bryan brings his daughter back from Paris, gaining more respect from her and her mother.
- **Change:** Bryan is able to go back to his familiar life, but this time with a new connection to his daughter.

How to Use the Dan Harmon Story Circle

The Story Circle is a great framework to make your story better. It is likely that you are already doing some of these things instinctively, as they have been ingrained in us through pop culture.

In fact, you will find that the Story Circle is applicable to almost anything. Even while telling a personal story to a friend, there is a good chance that you have unconsciously used this story structure.

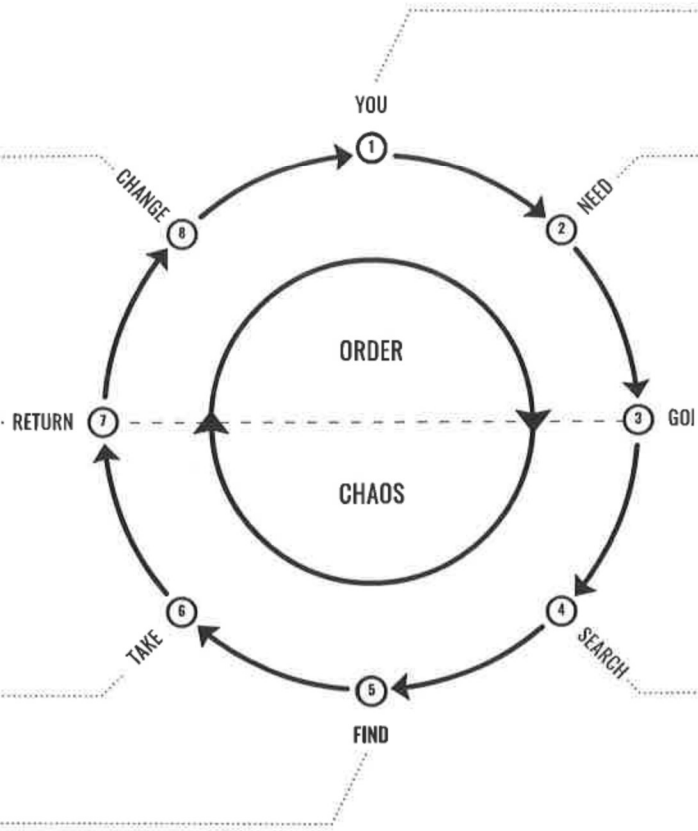
For example, imagine telling someone about that time you got food poisoning:

1. **You:** You were at home
2. **Need:** You were hungry
3. **Go:** You went out to eat
4. **Search:** Spent a while looking at the menu
5. **Find:** Ate your food
6. **Take:** Got horribly sick
7. **Return:** You went home
8. **Change:** And never went back to that restaurant again

That is, essentially, the Story Circle. It is easy to incorporate into your storytelling process as well.

PROJECT TITLE: _____

WORKSHEET
STORY CIRCLE



STORY NOTES

Blank lined area for writing story notes.



PLOT FORMULA CHEATSHEET

LESTER DENT'S MASTER PLOT FORMULA

6000-word pulp story divided into 4, 1500-word parts:

FIRST PART:

1. Begin with (as many as possible):
 - a. A different murder method for villain to use
 - b. A different thing for villain to be seeking
 - c. A different locale
 - d. A menace which is to hang like a cloud over hero
2. Introduce hero.
3. Put hero in trouble.
4. Hint at a mystery, menace or problem.
5. Hero tries cope.
6. Introduce ALL the other characters ASAP.
7. Hero in physical conflict near end.
8. Plot twist near end.

SECOND PART:

1. Hero in more trouble.
2. Hero struggles, which leads to...
3. Another physical conflict.
4. A surprising plot twist near the end.

THIRD PART:

1. Hero in more trouble.
2. Hero makes some headway.
3. Hero corners villain in...
4. Physical conflict.
5. A surprising plot twist which ends badly for the hero.

FOURTH PART:

1. Hero almost buried in trouble.
2. Hero extricates themselves using their own skill, training or brawn.
3. Remaining mysteries resolved as...
4. Hero takes control of final conflict.
5. Final big plot twist.
6. The punch line.

After each part check:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Increasing suspense?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Growing menace?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Logical progression?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Purposeful action?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Varied action?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Continuous action?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Show don't tell?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Character tags?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Convincing triumph?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Satisfying for readers?

DAN WELLS'S 7-POINT PLOT STRUCTURE

STORY ORDER:

1. Hook
 - a. Hero in opposite state to their end state.
2. Plot Turn 1
 - a. Introduce the conflict.
 - b. The hero's world changes; call to adventure.
 - c. New ideas
 - d. New people
 - e. New secrets
3. Pinch 1
 - a. Apply pressure:
 - i. Something goes wrong.
 - ii. Bad guys attack.
 - iii. Peace is destroyed.
 - b. Forces the hero into action.
 - c. Introduce villain.
4. Midpoint
 - a. Movement from one state to the other.
 - b. Shift from reaction to action
5. Pinch 2
 - a. Apply more pressure until situation seems hopeless:
 - i. A plan fails.
 - ii. A mentor dies.
 - iii. The bad guy seems to win.
 - b. The jaws of defeat.
6. Plot Turn 2
 - a. Move the story/from midpoint to end.
 - b. Hero obtains final piece to move from midpoint to resolution.
 - c. "The power is in you!"
 - d. Hero snatches victory from the jaws of defeat.
7. Resolution
 - a. Hero follows through on their decision from the midpoint.
 - b. Hero becomes the opposite of their Hook state.

PLOTTING ORDER:

1. Resolution
2. Hook
3. Midpoint
4. Plot Turn 1
5. Plot Turn 2
6. Pinch 1
7. Pinch 2

FLESH OUT THE SKELETON:

- Rounded characters
- Rich environments
- An "ice monster" prologue
- Try/fail cycles
- Subplots

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RANDY INGERMANSON'S SNOWFLAKE METHOD

1. 1-sentence summary (1 hour)
 - a. 15 words or fewer
 - b. No character names
 - c. The big picture to "personal picture" - what does the character have to lose and what do they want to win?
 - d. Read NYT bestseller blurbs for inspiration
2. Expand sentence to full paragraph summary (1 hour)
 - a. Approx. 5 sentences
 - b. Story setup
 - c. (Three) Major disasters
 - d. Ending
3. One page summary for each character (1 hour each):

Character's...

 - a. Name
 - b. 1 sentence storyline
 - c. Motivation (what do they want abstractly?)
 - d. Goal (what do they want concretely?)
 - e. Conflict (what prevents them from reaching goal?)
 - f. Epiphany (what they learn, how they change)
 - g. 1 paragraph storyline
4. Expand each sentence in summary (#2) to full paragraphs. (several hours)
 - a. All paragraphs end in disaster, except...
 - b. Final paragraph shows how the book ends.
5. 1 page description of each major character (1-2 days)
 - a. Tell story from POV of each character.
6. Expand each paragraph from #4 into full page synopses. (1 week)
 - a. High level logic & strategic decisions
7. Expand character descriptions from #3 into full character charts. (1 week)
 - a. Birthdate
 - b. Description
 - c. History
 - d. Motivation
 - e. Goal
 - f. Epiphany, etc.
8. Turn 4-page summary from #6 into a scene spreadsheet.
 - a. 1 line per scene
 - b. Columns for:
 - i. POV character
 - ii. What happens
 - iii. Page numbers
9. (optional) Expand each scene from spreadsheet into multi-paragraph description.
 - a. Add dialogue
 - b. General workings of conflict
10. Start writing first draft.

BLAKE SNYDER'S BEAT SHEET

ACT ONE (THESIS)

1. **Opening Image (1)** - set tone, mood & style; give "before" snapshot of hero.
2. **Theme Stated (5)** - declaration of theme, argument or story purpose (by minor to main character).
3. **Set-up (1-10)** - introduce hero's quirks; how & why they need to change
4. **Catalyst (12)** - bad news that knocks down set-up, but ultimately leads the hero to happiness.
5. **Debate (12-25)** - hero questions their ability to proceed.

ACT TWO (ANTITHESIS)

6. **Break into Two (25)** - hero (through their own decision) moves into the antithetical world.
7. **B Story (30)** - break from main story; often a "love" story; meet new characters antithetical to earlier ones.
8. **Fun and Games (30-55)** - provides the promise of the premise; movie trailer moments; whatever's cool.
9. **Midpoint (55)** - fun and games over; hero reaches false peak or false collapse; changes dynamic; raises stakes.
10. **Bad Guys Close In (55-75)** - bad guys regroup; internal dissent in hero's team; hero isolated and headed for fail.
11. **All is Lost (75)** - false defeat (that feels real!); "whiff of death" (often of mentor); end of old way.
12. **Dark Night of the Soul (75-85)** - darkness before the dawn; hero feels they're beaten and forsaken.
13. **Break into Three (85)** - internal B story provides solution to A story.

ACT THREE (SYNTHESIS)

14. **Finale (85-110)** - triumph for hero; bad guys dispatched (in ascending order); hero changes world.
15. **Final Image (110)** - opposite of opening image; proof of real change.

THE NEW & IMPROVED

GARY PROVOST PARAGRAPH

from *How to Tell a Story* by Peter Rubie

Once upon a time, *something happened* to someone, and he decided that he would pursue *a goal*. So he devised *a plan of action*, and even though there were *forces trying to stop him*, he moved forward because there was *a lot at stake*. And just as things seemed *as bad as they could get*, he learned *an important lesson*, and when *offered the prize* he had sought so strenuously, he had to *decide whether or not to take it*, and in making that decision he *satisfied a need* that had been created by *something in his past*.

THE FOOL'S JOURNEY

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| 00. The Fool | 11. Strength |
| 01. The Magician | 12. The Hanged Man |
| 02. The High Priestess | 13. Death |
| 03. The Empress | 14. Temperance |
| 04. The Emperor | 15. The Devil |
| 05. The Hierophant | 16. The Tower |
| 06. The Lovers | 17. The Star |
| 07. The Chariot | 18. The Moon |
| 08. Justice | 19. The Sun |
| 09. The Hermit | 20. Judgement |
| 10. Wheel of Fortune | 21. The World |

> [Click here for a guide to using The Fool's Journey.](#)

EVA DEVERELL'S ONE PAGE NOVEL

BRAINSTORM:

- 3 names
- 3 wants/goals/needs
- 3 locations
- 3 objects
- 3 obstacles
- 3 things lost/sacrificed
- 3 occupations
- 3 things on your mind

PLOTTING ORDER:

1. Resolution
2. Stasis
3. Shift
4. Trigger
5. Quest
6. Power
7. Bolt
8. Defeat

STORY ORDER:

1. **Stasis:** the character isn't living to their full potential - opposite state to Resolution.
2. **Trigger:** an internal or external impulse (or both) forces the character to take the first step towards their Resolution state.
3. **Quest:** the character enters the new world of adventure, meets mentors or allies and makes a (bad) plan to solve the problem the Trigger created.
4. **Bolt:** the (bad) Quest plan inevitably goes wrong.
5. **Shift:** the character makes the paradigm shift necessary for them to inhabit their Resolution state.
6. **Defeat:** the character makes the ultimate sacrifice.
7. **Power:** the character finds a hidden power within themselves that allows them to seize the prize.
8. **Resolution:** the character is living up to their full potential in their Resolution state.

> [Click here to enroll in the online course.](#)

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CHRISTOPHER VOGLER'S WRITER'S JOURNEY

1. Ordinary World
2. Call to Adventure
3. (Acceptance or) Refusal of the Call
4. Meeting with the Mentor
5. Crossing the Threshold to the Special World
6. Tests, Allies and Enemies
7. Approach to the Inmost Cave
8. The Ordeal
9. Reward
10. The Road Back
11. The Resurrection
12. Return with the Elixir

> *The Caterie has a table comparing the Writer's Journey, One Page Novel, Hero's Journey & Fool's Journey.*

JOHN RUBY'S 22-STEP STRUCTURE

1. Self-revelation, need and desire
2. Ghost and story world
3. Weakness and need
4. Inciting event
5. Desire
6. Ally or allies
7. Opponent and/or mystery
8. Fake-ally opponent
9. First revelation and decision: changed desire and motive
10. Plan
11. Opponent's plan main counterattack
12. Drive
13. Attack by ally
14. Apparent defeat
15. Second revelation and decision: obsessive drive, changed desire and motive
16. Audience revelation
17. Third revelation and decision
18. Gate, gauntlet, visit to death
19. Battle
20. Self-revelation
21. Moral decision
22. New equilibrium

JOSEPH CAMPBELL'S MONOMYTH (THE HERO'S JOURNEY)

SEPARATION

- The Call to Adventure
- The Refusal of the Call
- Supernatural Aid
- The Crossing of the First Threshold
- Belly of the Whale

INITIATION

- The Road of Trials
- Meeting with the Goddess
- Woman as Temptress
- Atonement with the Father
- Apotheosis
- The Ultimate Boon

RETURN

- Refusal of the Return
- The Magic Flight
- Rescue From Without
- The Crossing of the Return Threshold
- Master of Two Worlds
- Freedom to Live

> *You can find a summary of each myth motif in 'Using the Hero's Journey' in The One Page Novel Bonus Lessons.*

NIGEL WATTS'S 8-STAGE PLOT STRUCTURE

1. **Stasis:** once upon a time
2. **Trigger:** something out of the ordinary happens
3. **Quest:** causing the protagonist to seek something
4. **Surprise:** but things don't go as expected
5. **Critical Choice:** forcing the protagonist to make a difficult decision
6. **Climax:** which has consequences
7. **Reversal:** the result of which is a change in status
8. **Resolution:** and they all lived happily ever after (or didn't!).

Save The Cat! Beat Sheet Cheat Sheet

Multi-Scene Beats

Single Scene Beats

ACT I

Set-Up (1-11%)

*Introduce the A Story and most of the characters.
Establish the "ordinary" or "thesis" world.
Show the flaws and what is missing.*

Stasis = Death

Debate / Come to Terms (11-23%)

*Convince the audience of the dangers.
Challenge the protagonist's beliefs and understandings.
What is at risk?
Make the audience root for the protagonist.
State the "tangible goal".*

Enter the upside-down new world.

Fun And Games (26-50%)

*"Deliver on the promise of the premise."
Positive trajectory.
Explore the upside-down world.
"Trailer moments."
Prepare for what is believed to be the final battle.*

ACT II

Bad Guys Close In (50-68%)

*Reverse the trajectory.
Downhill spiral.
Internal and external conflicts progress.
Losing hope.
Questions are raised about the goal(s).
Internalize conflict.*

Dark Night of the Soul / Dark Decision (68-77%)

*Reflect on the losses and explore the consequences.
The protagonist learns the theme that was stated.
Set the stage for the Act 3 ultimate challenge.*

Finale / Confrontation / Aftermath (77-97%)

Beats in The Five-Point Finale are flexible in length.

ACT III

Gather the Team / Make the Plan

Make a plan and gather what and who is needed.

Executing the Plan

Everything goes pretty much to plan...

The High Tower Surprise

A twist that challenges the protagonist directly. The original plan will no longer work. The "almost" defeated.

Dig Deep Down

Protagonist faces a test of faith. Find the strength to overcome the challenge.

Execution of the New Plan

Resolve action and complete the character arc. Victory or "purposeful failure".

Opening Image

First impression of the protagonist.

Theme Stated (5%)

Something is said, probably not by the protagonist, that hints at what the protagonist will learn before the end of the story.

Catalyst / Inciting Incident (11%)

*Something happens that disrupts the "ordinary world".
The call to adventure.
Something happens TO the protagonist.*

Break Into Act II (23%)

The protagonist takes action that is in response to the Catalyst.

B Story (27-99%)

*The protagonist's "internal" or "spiritual" story.
Possibly introduce a character who helps transform the protagonist. This character might be an anti-thesis to Act 1 characters.
Love interest, buddy plot, family dynamics, personal growth, fish out of water, professional revelries, reconciliation, etc.
The B Story can be the place to have characters discuss the theme.*

Midpoint (50%)

The stakes are raised. Something big.

- A kiss or major romantic development
- Add a ticking clock
- The threat becomes personal
- The threat is revealed to be bigger

The story pivots. Change trajectory from positive to negative or negative to positive.

The B-Story can negatively interact with the A-Story

All Is Lost (68%)

*The protagonist's lowest point.
A literal or metaphorical death of someone/something.
"The whiff of death."*

Break Into Act III (77%)

Protagonist learns/realizes something new, likely from the B Story, that changes everything or makes a bold decision.

Final Image (99%)

A reflection of the Opening Image. Show what has changed.

SAVE THE CAT BEATS

Opening Image

Theme Stated

Setup

Catalyst

Debate

Break Into Act 2

B Story

Fun & Games

Midpoint

Bad Guys Close In

All is Lost

Dark Night of the Soul

Break Into Act 3

Finale

1. Gathering the team
2. Executing the Plan
3. High Tower Surprise
4. Dig Deep Down
5. Execute New Plan

Final Image

The Snowflake Method For Designing A Novel

Writing a novel is easy. Writing a good novel is hard. That's just life. If it were easy, we'd all be writing best-selling, prize-winning fiction.

Frankly, there are a thousand different people out there who can tell you how to write a novel. There are a thousand different methods. The best one for you is the one that works for you.

In this article, I'd like to share with you what works for me. I've published six novels and won about a dozen awards for my writing. I teach the craft of writing fiction at writing conferences all the time. One of my most popular lectures is this one: How to write a novel using what I call the "Snowflake Method."

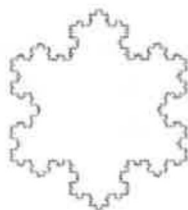
This page is the most popular one on my web site, and gets over a thousand page views per day. Over the years, this page has been viewed more than six million times. So you can guess that a lot of people find it useful. But you may not, and that's fine by me. Look it over, decide what might work for you, and ignore the rest! If it makes you dizzy, I won't be insulted. Different writers are different. If my methods get you rolling, I'll be happy. I'll make the best case I can for my way of organizing things, but you are the final judge of what works best for you. Have fun and . . . write your novel!

The Importance of Design

Good fiction doesn't just happen, it is designed. You can do the design work before or after you write your novel. I've done it both ways and I strongly believe that doing it first is quicker and leads to a better result. Design is hard work, so it's important to find a guiding principle early on. This article will give you a powerful metaphor to guide your design.

Our fundamental question is this: How do you design a novel?

For a number of years, I was a software architect designing large software projects. I write novels the same way I write software, using the "snowflake metaphor". OK, what's the snowflake

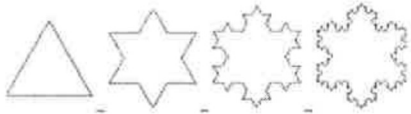


metaphor?

This is a snowflake fractal. Don't tell anyone, but this is an important mathematical object that's been widely studied. For our purposes, it's just a cool sketch of a

snowflake. The way this image is created is a series of steps. It doesn't look much like a snowflake at first, but after a few steps, it starts looking more and more like one, until it's done.

The first few steps look like this:



I claim that that's how you design a novel — you start small, then build stuff up until it looks like a story. Part of this is creative work, and I can't teach you how to do that. Not here, anyway. But part of the work is just managing your creativity — getting it organized into a well-structured novel. That's what I'd like to teach you here.

If you're like most people, you spend a long time thinking about your novel before you ever start writing. You may do some research. You daydream about how the story's going to work. You brainstorm. You start hearing the voices of different characters. You think about what the book's about — the Deep Theme. This is an essential part of every book which I call "composting". It's an informal process and every writer does it differently. I'm going to assume that you know how to compost your story ideas and that you have already got a novel well-composted in your mind and that you're ready to sit down and start writing that novel.

The Ten Steps of Design

But before you start writing, you need to get organized. You need to put all those wonderful ideas down on paper in a form you can use. Why? Because your memory is fallible, and your creativity has probably left a lot of holes in your story — holes you need to fill in before you start writing your novel. You need a design document. And you need to produce it using a process that doesn't kill your desire to actually write the story. Here is my ten-step process for writing a design document. I use this process for writing my novels, and I hope it will help you.

Step 1) Take an hour and write a one-sentence summary of your novel. Something like this: "A rogue physicist travels back in time to kill the apostle Paul." (This is the summary for my first novel, *Transgression*.) The sentence will serve you forever as a ten-second selling tool. This is the big picture, the analog of that big starting triangle in the snowflake picture.

When you later write your book proposal, this sentence should appear very early in the proposal. It's the hook that will sell your book to your editor, to your committee, to the sales force, to bookstore owners, and ultimately to readers. So make the best one you can!

Some hints on what makes a good sentence:

- Shorter is better. Try for fewer than 15 words.

- No character names, please! Better to say “a handicapped trapeze artist” than “Jane Doe”.
- Tie together the big picture and the personal picture. Which character has the most to lose in this story? Now tell me what he or she wants to win.
- Read the one-line blurbs on the New York Times Bestseller list to learn how to do this. Writing a one-sentence description is an art form.

Step 2) Take another hour and expand that sentence to a full paragraph describing the story setup, major disasters, and ending of the novel. This is the analog of the second stage of the snowflake. I like to structure a story as “three disasters plus an ending”. Each of the disasters takes a quarter of the book to develop and the ending takes the final quarter. I don’t know if this is the ideal structure, it’s just my personal taste.

If you believe in the Three-Act structure, then the first disaster corresponds to the end of Act 1. The second disaster is the mid-point of Act 2. The third disaster is the end of Act 2, and forces Act 3 which wraps things up. It is OK to have the first disaster be caused by external circumstances, but I think that the second and third disasters should be caused by the protagonist’s attempts to “fix things”. Things just get worse and worse.

You can also use this paragraph in your proposal. Ideally, your paragraph will have about five sentences. One sentence to give me the backdrop and story setup. Then one sentence each for your three disasters. Then one more sentence to tell the ending. Don’t confuse this paragraph with the back-cover copy for your book. This paragraph summarizes the whole story. Your back-cover copy should summarize only about the first quarter of the story.

Step 3) The above gives you a high-level view of your novel. Now you need something similar for the storylines of each of your characters. Characters are the most important part of any novel, and the time you invest in designing them up front will pay off ten-fold when you start writing. For each of your major characters, take an hour and write a one-page summary sheet that tells:

- The character’s name
- A one-sentence summary of the character’s storyline
- The character’s motivation (what does he/she want abstractly?)
- The character’s goal (what does he/she want concretely?)
- The character’s conflict (what prevents him/her from reaching this goal?)
- The character’s epiphany (what will he/she learn, how will he/she change?)
- A one-paragraph summary of the character’s storyline

An important point: You may find that you need to go back and revise your one-sentence summary and/or your one-paragraph summary. Go ahead! This is good—it means your characters are teaching you things about your story. It’s always okay at any stage of the design process to go back and revise earlier stages. In fact, it’s not just okay—it’s inevitable. And it’s good. Any revisions you make now are revisions you won’t need to make later on to a clunky 400 page manuscript.

Another important point: It doesn't have to be perfect. The purpose of each step in the design process is to advance you to the next step. Keep your forward momentum! You can always come back later and fix it when you understand the story better. You will do this too, unless you're a lot smarter than I am.

Step 4) By this stage, you should have a good idea of the large-scale structure of your novel, and you have only spent a day or two. Well, truthfully, you may have spent as much as a week, but it doesn't matter. If the story is broken, you know it now, rather than after investing 500 hours in a rambling first draft. So now just keep growing the story. Take several hours and expand each sentence of your summary paragraph into a full paragraph. All but the last paragraph should end in a disaster. The final paragraph should tell how the book ends.

This is a lot of fun, and at the end of the exercise, you have a pretty decent one-page skeleton of your novel. It's okay if you can't get it all onto one single-spaced page. What matters is that you are growing the ideas that will go into your story. You are expanding the conflict. You should now have a synopsis suitable for a proposal, although there is a better alternative for proposals . . .

Step 5) Take a day or two and write up a one-page description of each major character and a half-page description of the other important characters. These "character synopses" should tell the story from the point of view of each character. As always, feel free to cycle back to the earlier steps and make revisions as you learn cool stuff about your characters. I usually enjoy this step the most and lately, I have been putting the resulting "character synopses" into my proposals instead of a plot-based synopsis. Editors love character synopses, because editors love character-based fiction.

Step 6) By now, you have a solid story and several story-threads, one for each character. Now take a week and expand the one-page plot synopsis of the novel to a four-page synopsis. Basically, you will again be expanding each paragraph from step (4) into a full page. This is a lot of fun, because you are figuring out the high-level logic of the story and making strategic decisions. Here, you will definitely want to cycle back and fix things in the earlier steps as you gain insight into the story and new ideas whack you in the face.

Step 7) Take another week and expand your character descriptions into full-fledged character charts detailing everything there is to know about each character. The standard stuff such as birthdate, description, history, motivation, goal, etc. Most importantly, how will this character change by the end of the novel? This is an expansion of your work in step (3), and it will teach you a lot about your characters. You will probably go back and revise steps (1-6) as your characters become "real" to you and begin making petulant demands on the story. This is good — great fiction is character-driven. Take as much time as you need to do this, because you're just saving time downstream. When you have finished this process, (and it may take a full month of solid effort to get here), you have most of what you need to write a proposal. If you are a published novelist, then you can write a proposal now and sell your novel before you write it. If you're not yet published, then you'll need to write your entire novel first before you can sell it. No, that's not fair, but life isn't fair and the world of fiction writing is especially unfair.

Step 8) You may or may not take a hiatus here, waiting for the book to sell. At some point, you've got to actually write the novel. Before you do that, there are a couple of things you can do to make that traumatic first draft easier. The first thing to do is to take that four-page synopsis and make a list of all the scenes that you'll need to turn the story into a novel. And the easiest way to make that list is . . . with a spreadsheet.

For some reason, this is scary to a lot of writers. Oh the horror. Deal with it. You learned to use a word-processor. Spreadsheets are easier. You need to make a list of scenes, and spreadsheets were invented for making lists. If you need some tutoring, buy a book. There are a thousand out there, and one of them will work for you. It should take you less than a day to learn the itty bit you need. It'll be the most valuable day you ever spent. Do it.

Make a spreadsheet detailing the scenes that emerge from your four-page plot outline. Make just one line for each scene. In one column, list the POV character. In another (wide) column, tell what happens. If you want to get fancy, add more columns that tell you how many pages you expect to write for the scene. A spreadsheet is ideal, because you can see the whole storyline at a glance, and it's easy to move scenes around to reorder things.

My spreadsheets usually wind up being over 100 lines long, one line for each scene of the novel. As I develop the story, I make new versions of my story spreadsheet. This is incredibly valuable for analyzing a story. It can take a week to make a good spreadsheet. When you are done, you can add a new column for chapter numbers and assign a chapter to each scene.

Step 9) (Optional. I don't do this step anymore.) Switch back to your word processor and begin writing a narrative description of the story. Take each line of the spreadsheet and expand it to a multi-paragraph description of the scene. Put in any cool lines of dialogue you think of, and sketch out the essential conflict of that scene. If there's no conflict, you'll know it here and you should either add conflict or scrub the scene.

I used to write either one or two pages per chapter, and I started each chapter on a new page. Then I just printed it all out and put it in a loose-leaf notebook, so I could easily swap chapters around later or revise chapters without messing up the others. This process usually took me a week and the end result was a massive 50-page printed document that I would revise in red ink as I wrote the first draft. All my good ideas when I woke up in the morning got hand-written in the margins of this document. This, by the way, is a rather painless way of writing that dreaded detailed synopsis that all writers seem to hate. But it's actually fun to develop, if you have done steps (1) through (8) first. When I did this step, I never showed this synopsis to anyone, least of all to an editor — it was for me alone. I liked to think of it as the prototype first draft. Imagine writing a first draft in a week! Yes, you can do it and it's well worth the time. But I'll be honest, I don't feel like I need this step anymore, so I don't do it now.

Step 10) At this point, just sit down and start pounding out the real first draft of the novel. You will be astounded at how fast the story flies out of your fingers at this stage. I have seen writers triple their fiction writing speed overnight, while producing better quality first drafts than they usually produce on a third draft.

You might think that all the creativity is chewed out of the story by this time. Well, no, not unless you overdid your analysis when you wrote your Snowflake. This is supposed to be the fun part, because there are many small-scale logic problems to work out here. How does Hero get out of that tree surrounded by alligators and rescue Heroine who's in the burning rowboat? This is the time to figure it out! But it's fun because you already know that the large-scale structure of the novel works. So you only have to solve a limited set of problems, and so you can write relatively fast.

This stage is incredibly fun and exciting. I have heard many fiction writers complain about how hard the first draft is. Invariably, that's because they have no clue what's coming next. Good grief! Life is too short to write like that! There is no reason to spend 500 hours writing a wandering first draft of your novel when you can write a solid one in 150. Counting the 100 hours it takes to do the design documents, you come out way ahead in time.

About midway through a first draft, I usually take a breather and fix all the broken parts of my design documents. Yes, the design documents are not perfect. That's okay. The design documents are not fixed in concrete, they are a living set of documents that grows as you develop your novel. If you are doing your job right, at the end of the first draft you will laugh at what an amateurish piece of junk your original design documents were. And you'll be thrilled at how deep your story has become.

Ways To Use The Snowflake

Are you struggling right now with a horrible first draft of your novel that just seems hopeless? Take an hour and summarize your story in one sentence. Does that clarify things? You've just completed step (1) of the Snowflake, and it only took an hour. Why not try the next few steps of the Snowflake and see if your story doesn't suddenly start coming to life? What have you got to lose, except a horrible first draft that you already hate?

Are you a seat-of-the-pants writer who finally finished your novel, but now you're staring at an enormous pile of manuscript that desperately needs rewriting? Take heart! Your novel's done, isn't it? You've done something many writers only dream about. Now imagine a big-shot editor bumps into you in the elevator and asks what your novel's about. In fifteen words or less, what would you say? Take your time! This is a thought game. What would you say? If you can come up with an answer in the next hour . . . you've just completed Step 1 of the Snowflake! Do you think some of the other steps might help you put some order into that manuscript? Give it a shot. What have you got to lose?

Have you just got a nightmarishly long letter from your editor detailing all the things that are wrong with your novel? Are you wondering how you can possibly make all the changes before your impossible deadline? It's never too late to do the Snowflake. How about if you take a week and drill through all the steps right now? It'll clarify things wonderfully, and then you'll have a plan for executing all those revisions. I bet you'll get it done in record time. And I bet the book will come out better than you imagined.