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# WRITE AWAY

*One Novelist's Approach to  
Fiction and the Writing Life*



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Perennial Currents

*An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

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## Gimme a Map, Please

*Beginning a book is terrifying. I can see why some writers go from book to book at a pace that allows them virtually no time off. I don't want to live that way, and as a result, I have to face my demon fear each time I begin a novel. But Steinbeck faced it; Marquez continues to face it. If Nobel Prize winners can admit their fears, so can I.*

*Journal of a Novel,  
June 1, 2001*

Sometimes people feel insecure without a guide. They like rules and regulations. They experience that lost-at-sea sensation unless they have some sort of template to superimpose upon their idea, molding it till it fits a predetermined form. Sometimes, though, people just like to know all their options, and the purpose of this chapter is to put you in the picture about the options you have with regard to plot.

Please keep in mind that the only rule is there is no rule, and this is especially true when it comes to formats for plots. Try plotting out *Absalom! Absalom!* if you don't believe me. My guess is that the last thing William Faulkner worried about was how he was going to plot his story.

However, there *are* certain guidelines you can follow if you need the security of a pattern. And there is nothing wrong with having a set pattern if it gives you the kind of fallback position you need to keep writing in moments of pure despair. So I'm going to go over some plot structures for you. But you have to keep in mind that novel writing does not have to be confined to any of these.

## THE SEVEN-STEP STORY LINE

This particular format breaks a novel down into seven distinguishable parts, which can be identified as the major structural components in a story.

- ① The *hook* comes first, and as its name implies, its purpose is to snag the reader's attention by making him wonder what's going to happen in the unfolding story. As I noted earlier when I was discussing narrative hooks, this section of the novel needs to expose the reader to conflict, emotion, excitement, intrigue, suspense, mystery, sheer human interest, or human drama. If it doesn't do any of that directly, then it needs to stimulate in the reader the *anticipation* of one of those elements.

As the writer constructs the first section of the novel, introducing characters, creating or relating back to a primary event that interrupts the status quo of the main characters, she begins to address the conflicts in the story as she leads up to *plot point #1*, which can generally be found about a quarter of the way through the book. At this point in the story, ongoing events change in some way: Perhaps unexpected information is received; perhaps facts previously unknown come to light; perhaps a personal discovery is made or an agreement is reached; perhaps a new character shows up. But in any case, the result of the plot point is that the story pivots, suddenly propelled forward by whatever constituted the plot point. Sometimes a change of scene is involved, but even if that is not the case, reader interest is heightened as the story moves in a new direction, burdened with additional complications.

- ② All of this—and the renewal of reader interest that it creates—leads up to the *midpoint*, which comes at the center of the story. At this spot in the novel, further information increases the intensity of the drama. Perhaps someone arrives unexpectedly; perhaps a character uncovers a threat; perhaps a death occurs; perhaps a divorce happens; perhaps a natural disaster hovers on the horizon. At any event, the reader's interest is once again heightened, and as a result, the story is propelled forward another time.

- ③ *Plot point #2* completes the complication phase of the novel. There is nothing new to be added at this point and the only possible solution

to the crises that have occurred is an ineluctable journey to the climax of the novel. Either that, or the hero just gives up the ghost, which isn't likely to occur. Tensions should be at their highest point right now, and the protagonist must make a decision about what he's going to do to deal with the situation.

This is what happens in the *narrative climax*. The protagonist decides. The wife decides that leaving her cheating husband is the only answer. The detective decides upon a way to trap the killer. The widower decides to take a risk and leave his house for the first time in six months. The wheelchair victim decides to take an action that will alter his life forever. The decision involves risk: mental, physical, emotional, or psychological. But it's the only option left.

After the protagonist makes that decision, the highest point of the drama occurs in the *dramatic climax*. In action novels, this is the chase, the fight, the assault, the battle. In courtroom dramas, this might be the verdict, but it also might be the closing arguments, the revelation of the true guilty party, or the sentencing of the convicted. But during this part of the novel, the antagonist gets his punishment, and justice is meted out: whether it be psychological, physical, emotional, or poetic. According to the Greeks, the emotional peak of the story—for that's what the climax is—is supposed to lead to catharsis, an emotional release. Satisfaction is what we're looking for here: a reason to have read the story in the first place.

Finally, the last pieces of the story click into place in the *denouement*. If there are any loose ends, they are tied up now. Explanations are given; analyses are made. The story reaches its inevitable conclusion in a way that satisfies the reader's desire for logic in an illogical world.

## THE HERO'S JOURNEY<sup>1</sup>

In his fine book *The Writer's Journey*, Chris Vogler offers Joseph Campbell's tried and true hero's journey as yet another way to consider plotting. This model divides a story into twelve parts that follow a pattern long established in Western mythology.

The story begins in the *ordinary world* of the hero. During this section of the tale, the writer establishes for the reader what the life of the protagonist is like prior to the primary event (that's my own term, not

Vogler's), which will alter his world forever and send him on the journey that is the story itself. The reader, in short, learns about the status quo of the hero.

Into this world comes a call to adventure in the form of something that alters the status quo. In *The Deep End of the Ocean*, for example, the protagonist's toddler son is kidnapped, altering her world forever. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy shows up at the ball and Elizabeth sets her mind and heart against him. In *Rebecca*, Maxim de Winter suddenly proposes to the narrator. What's important to remember if you wish to use this pattern that Vogler sets out is that you don't have to be writing a suspense novel or a thriller in order to follow it.

When confronted with the call to adventure, the hero's first inclination is to refuse the call. Sometimes this refusal comes in the form of simple reluctance, a marked hesitation as the protagonist weighs the pros and cons of engagement. Sometimes this period is marked by outright and reasonable fear. In either case, the hero's initial unwillingness to become involved in the unfolding situation requires the intercession of another character for the story to move forward.

This is the mentor, the older person who prepares the protagonist for his or her journey into the unknown. There are obvious mentors in literature: Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* comes to mind at once. And there are less obvious ones: John le Carré's agent runner Joseph in *The Little Drummer Girl* is a particularly interesting use of the mentor. But in any case, the mentor serves as a source of inspiration or encouragement for the protagonist.

Thus, the hero sets out on his journey, and when he enters the world of the story, he is crossing the first threshold, which is the next stage. This constitutes his agreement to engage in the activities called for in the novel, and it's the point at which the story gets rolling, sometimes in actuality and sometimes metaphorically. Action is called for, and the protagonist declares himself just the person to take such action.

This leads him to tests in the form of challenges that he encounters on the way. During this time of tests, he makes friends who'll be his allies and he begins to understand the nature and identity of his enemies. He's gone from the world he understands to the new world of his adventure, and it is during this portion of the story that he learns

about the nature of the new world. Picture a child sent to a boarding school: The Harry Potter novels come to mind, and the events that illustrate how Harry comes to understand the world of his school of wizardry.

He learns important lessons along the way, and these eventually lead him into danger, which, in the hero's myth, is represented by the approach to the inmost cave. For the hero, this is a place of fear as well as danger. In an adventure story or a myth, the fear is of something physical and very real. But fears can also be deeply psychological. They can be metaphorical as well. Don't think of the inmost cave in strictly concrete terms. As with everything else in the hero's journey, it can be interpreted symbolically.

Encountering his worst fears or his biggest enemy, the protagonist faces an ordeal. He may confront the possibility of death, having to do actual battle with an enemy. Or it may simply be his blackest moment when, for example, he doesn't know if a relationship he values is going to survive a blow that has been dealt to it. In any event, this constitutes a moment of real suspense for the reader, as he wonders if the hero is going to prevail.

But, of course, in this particular kind of story, the hero *does* prevail, and like all good heroes who slay dragons and rescue princesses, he earns his reward. This might be the love of a good woman. It might be the resolution of a personal conflict with another character. It might be the realization that that which he was seeking is inherently without value. Or it might be an actual physical reward: like the sword in the stone that young Arthur grasps.

Having been rewarded, the protagonist is set up for the road back, which marks the point in the story at which the hero decides to return to the world that he left. But things are not going to be the same in that world because the hero is not the same person who left it in the first place. So the road back has its own dangers he must confront, even if, once again, those dangers are those of the mind or soul. In *Ordinary People*, for example, the road back for father and son is a road on which the mother will no longer be traveling. There is grief in this, even as there is joy in knowing that they have, at least, found each other.

The penultimate part of the hero's journey is resurrection. This is



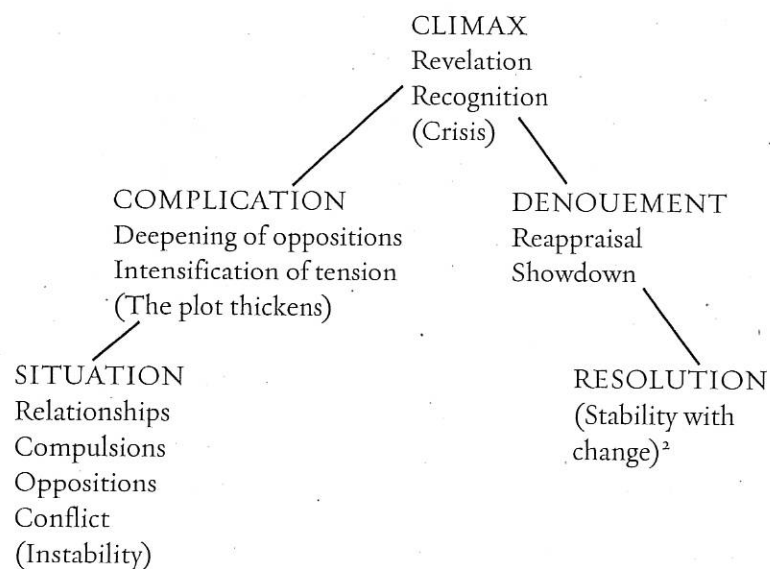
generally that one last moment in which something occurs to test the solidity of what the hero has learned on his journey. The bad guy might make one final appearance (as happens so depressingly often in films where someone presumably dead rises up to attack the good guy one last time). The hero might confront his personal demons yet again but in a different way. In any case, surviving this final ordeal leads to the transformation of the protagonist. He has, in effect, been reborn through his experiences in the story.

Finally, he *returns with the elixir*. This is the lesson he learned from his adventure. Or it's the actual treasure he was seeking. Most often it's an abstract elixir: knowledge, compassion, love, or wisdom.

Both the seven-step story outline and the hero's journey are ways of looking at the plot through a succession of events. There are, additionally, diagrammatic ways of examining plot, and for the visual learner, these work well.

### GUSTAV FREITAG'S PYRAMID

Oakley Hall describes this diagram in *The Art and Craft of Novel Writing*. Its appearance is an imperfect triangle that looks like this:



Looking at the diagram, you can see that in the initial stages of the novel, the writer's concern is with the art of establishing: She's setting up the relationships between the characters, as well as illustrating what they want in the novel (their compulsions, i.e., what is going to compel them to act). Conflicts come to light, placing the characters in opposition to one another. As a result, we have a situation of instability.

During the complication phase, the action rises. So do the tensions and the conflict among the characters as their wants, needs, and intentions begin to meet resistance from each other and from outside forces.

Things heat up for all of them, propelling them toward the climax. At this point, they're on overdrive and overload, and a crisis arises. A high point of the action ensues, and tensions are released.

This leads the novel into its denouement, the point at which a reappraisal is made of "life as we know it." Ultimately, all the changes undergone by the characters lead to resolution. But the situation is different for the characters now, because of the things that have happened to them all in the course of the novel.

### THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

Both the seven-step story line and the hero's journey can be fit into the three-act structure of a novel. And all motion pictures are written following this format as well.

In act one, the status quo is established. As this is being done, the writer introduces her characters and begins to make clear their individual throughlines. The primary event occurs to disrupt the status quo; the conflict becomes clear, and the stakes are set. Act one concludes with the plot point that either charges up the action or reverses it in some way.

In act two, the action rises. Conflicts intensify and tension increases. Confrontations occur; crises happen. It is during act two that the climax of the novel develops and explodes into action.

The resolution takes place in act three. The act one status quo of the characters will never be quite what it was. Perhaps new alliances have been forged, new relationships committed to, new knowledge attained. But change is the order of the day.<sup>3</sup>

## VARIATIONS

It's crucial to remember that there are no hard and fast rules. For example, you probably are seeking answers to unanswerable questions about length: How many pages do I have till I get to act two? How many pages till plot point #2? You're probably wanting the truth about structure: Can I have more than one climax? Can I create a completely false climax? (Well, it sure worked for Thomas Harris in *Red Dragon*.)

But if I could leave you with one truth to remember and to fall back on in moments of doubt, it would be this: There are no rules; there are only informed choices. But you can't *make* an informed choice if you remain uninformed.

Thus, it's wise to know that there are other plotting maps you can use in creating a novel.

The *double plot* uses an upstairs-downstairs approach.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, you have the main plot, with characters who are the object of our main attention and sympathy. They are caught in a situation that is, somewhat similar in circumstance or theme to characters who are in the subplot. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a good example of a double plot. On the one hand, we read about the love triangle of Charles Smithson, his fiancée Ernestina Freeman, and the enigmatic and eponymous Sarah Woodruff, who walks the Cobb and gazes out to sea, mourning—so the local legend goes—the French lieutenant who betrayed her. On the other hand, we have the love story of the servants Sam Farrow and his Mary. As we progress through the story, we see these two plots in contrast to each other, and we're treated to John Fowles's observations on everything from their lives to the prospect of their loves. We're always aware, however, that the major plot is that of Charles, Ernestina, and Sarah. But this would not have been the case had the author chosen a different construction.

The *hourglass plot* follows two sets of characters whose importance bears equal weight in the novel.<sup>5</sup> But unlike the double plot in which the two stories intermingle, in this particular structure the two plot-lines run separately like two parallel lines for a portion of the novel. Then they converge at one point, after which they separate again. Each plot can stand alone. Each is important. Our curiosity is piqued, and we wonder how and when we'll see the relationship between the two

plots. All the time we have the sense that we are heading inexorably toward a moment in time when clarity is achieved through convergence.

Finally, the *picaresque plot* shows a series of episodes in the lives of the main characters, and these episodes are not related to each other causally. They may be related thematically and they may be related by the identity of their actors. The essential ingredient, however, is adventure.<sup>6</sup> Even with an end in sight—such as the discovery of the Holy Grail—it's the journey that is the author's emphasis, not the ultimate destination.