

Writing Craft & Creativity Mini Guides

STRUCTURE

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Work smart, not hard

There are two kinds of authors: those who strategically design their stories, and those who like to plunge in and begin, while the enthusiasm is fresh upon them, with only a sketched-out idea of where their tale is going to take them.

The latter group tends to take twice as long over a project, sweating blood and fretting. Those who plan their work instead tend to make progress confidently and sure-footedly, revelling in the freedom to pour their energy into line-by-line creativity. Their stories are page-turning and satisfying by design, because their drafts aren't written until every scene and sequence is optimized for reading-value. Authors who approach projects in this way tend to progress within the industry.

By contrast, the 'plunge in and get rolling' brigade tend to be frustrated, because their stories aren't optimized to deliver narrative payload and reading-value. 'On a roll' authors exhaust their draft-writing energy, dealing with the dozens of issues that every twist and turn in a story generates. The spark with which they began their project ends up buried in muddy compromise.

Three-Act Structure

Planning a story means building a dramatic structure to deliver it. Most fiction is structured with three dramatic acts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Put another way: trigger, complication, resolution. A three act-structure gives a reader a sense of a journey begun, sustained, and concluded resonantly.

This three-part dramatic structure is a storytelling standard from fairytales to literary fiction, and from romcoms to thrillers. Almost all novels – and most fictional writing from movies to TV sitcoms to theatrical extravaganzas – utilize this three-act dramatic structure.

Its trajectory is simple to apprehend: an incident upsets the balance of forces in a protagonist's life, and s/he must restore this balance, or find a new one. Conflict with opposing forces – 'antagonism', whether the novel be a thriller about hitmen, a slushy romance, or a meditation in old age – creates six sequences of escalation, culminating in three mid-act climaxes and three act-climaxes.

These climaxes whiplash into each other to power a narrative forward. An accessible illustration of this structure can be gleaned from TV shows like *Breaking Bad* or *Prime Suspect*: the ad breaks in hour-long dramas follow the first and second act-climaxes. This three-act structure is plainly apparent in sitcoms like *Catastrophe* or *Atlanta* too, and in cartoons like *The Simpsons* or *South Park* – the dramatic structure deployed in each is the same as that of novels like *Pride and Prejudice* or *1984*.

Progressions and Climaxes: A Case Study

When planning a full-length creative narrative project, the first job is to design a three-act structure's six climaxes. These create a narrative framework, built with bare-bones narrative logic, to guide the creation and development of every other element in the story.

These six mid-act and act climaxes need to be both resonant and surprising, shifting our engagement radically as the reader's sense of what's

at stake in the story is powerfully deepened. These six narrative peaks form a clear sequence of escalation – from romances to memoirs to literary novels to thrillers – with each new climax escalating what’s at stake, and forcing the characters into stronger responses to compensate.

Let’s look at how this works in practice. When sketching out a three-act structure, sometimes it’s helpful to boil down these six progressions to climax into potential interactions between the protagonist and the forces of antagonism. Let’s look at an example of a first act, in a hypothetical romance novel:

Inciting Incident

Jessica is a footloose and fancy-free lifestyle journalist, enjoying life in Dallas. On assignment in Alaska, she gets dug out of a snowbound cabin by a hard-boiled backwoodsman, who criticizes her unpreparedness harshly.

Sequence to Mid-Act Climax

Jessica sends the backwoodsman packing, with a robust retort which reveals his own wrong assumptions. She tries to join in with local life after the thaw, and to seek out the backwoodsman to make amends, but is repulsed anew when she sees him shooting deer whilst hiking. However, after a fresh snowfall, he digs her out again and leaves deer meat, with instructions how to cook it. Jessica enjoys an exquisite meal alone, and invites him over to help eat the rest.

Mid-Act Climax

He doesn’t show up and she pours the pot of stew into a refuse bag and tosses it out. A grizzly bear appears, terrifying her, yet separating her from her phone. The backwoodsman emerges from the forest, having tracked the bear after seeing fresh spoor by the road. Once the bear is driven off he offers to catch dinner instead, and they enjoy a romantic meal by the riverside, where his hard crust softens and his attractive qualities begin to shine through. When they return to her place the bear is there again, with a massive full-grown male and two cubs. He shoots them all – the cubs in cold blood – and she locks herself in her cabin, horrified at his brutality.

Sequence to Act Climax

Jessica learns how lucky her escape was: the grizzlies were notorious locally for their aggression, and their cubs would have starved. She tries to cure the bearskins as a mark of respect for the wilderness, but makes a reeking mess of them. She visits the backwoodsman to ask for his help in becoming less of a fish out of water, but disturbs him as he is painstakingly scenting his traps and he yells at her for tainting the process. When she visits next, she finds the cabin shuttered-up, the backwoodsman out in the wilderness working his trapline for the next couple of months. Jessica accepts a new long-term assignment and settles in to frontier life, attending indigenous dance classes, being invited to social events, organizing a book club, etc. The backwoodsman returns from his trapline, and Jessica surprises him by bidding knowledgeably on one of his furs at auction. A new friend makes the fur into mukluks for her, which he notices: they rekindle their spark and have a night together. Meanwhile, Jessica's new editor – enthused by her work – dispatches another reporter to cover life in the hardscrabble tundra villages.

Act Climax

The new reporter is secretive about his work, and when the FBI arrive in town one day, Jessica sees this journalistic colleague conferring covertly with the feds. A crack FBI unit descends on the district, making opiate-abuse busts far and wide, and repercussions resonate through the community. The backwoodsman disappears, and Jessica begins to suspect she is being watched. One night when she hears bears outside her cabin she goes out to see tail-lights flash among the trees as a truck pulls away. She follows the road it took, and finds it burning close to the highway: it's the backwoodsman's truck. She goes to his cabin and finds a cache of drug-money and assault weapons.

The narrative trajectory across a single dramatic act is one of **trigger, then complication, then twist** – a seismic reversal of expectation, which cracks the story open and reveals the human truth within it. The human truth here is that this guy isn't living something out of Thoreau, but dealing with everything from wolves to pipeline constructors to illegal loggers to opiate gangsters

fighting turf wars. Anna's quest to find a more authentic life immerses her in the stark realities of frontier life more than she could have guessed.

The six progressions, across three dramatic acts in a novel, play variations on patterns of small victories and big setbacks. A 'win' for the protagonist at one of these climax positions results in an escalation of what's at stake for the antagonist, and a consequent redoubling of their efforts; a consequent setback for the protagonist at the next climax might force them to double-down in turn – or to ambush the antagonist, having anticipated the strikeback.

Three-Act Structure across Genres

Thrillers turn the *will-they won't-they* of romance stories into *do or die*, burning all of the octane inherent in a three-act structure to generate intrigue, dilemma, and a powerful face-off between protagonist and antagonist. Literary fiction uses the same friction, between a protagonist and forces of antagonism, to build explorations of ideas and emotions into its dramatic progressions across three acts.

The ubiquity of the three-act structure makes a reader feel unsatisfied if an author doesn't deliver this sequence of progressions, climaxes, and consequent escalations: this is what agents, editors, and commentators mean when they talk about 'pace'. The six sequences of progressions across a story, delivering six whiplash climaxes, give the reader a sense of engagement with what's at stake, as the forces of protagonism and antagonism undergo serial complication and reversal of expectation, redoubling efforts to restore the balance upset by the story's trigger.

The critical aspect, when designing dramatic structure, is the push-pull nature of the relationship between the forces of antagonism and the protagonist. If the protagonist wins, the antagonist loses, spurring the latter to greater effort to maintain their position, and vice versa. This orchestrated interplay of opposing forces is the engine that powers story on the page: the progressive escalation of romance or action, intrigue or jeopardy, and suspense or dilemma which characterizes compelling narrative.

Scene and Sequence design

To achieve this page-turning readability, structure must be combined with the other principles of effective storytelling, like *show don't tell*. Canny storytellers design scenes that show us developments, both in the plot and in the characters' inner lives, rather than telling us about them. Sequences animate these into structured progressions, which win our engagement by involving us in an unfolding story, as what's at stake for the characters deepens. Mid-act and Act climaxes take this engagement and deepen it further with surprise and reversal of expectation.

The same principles apply to scene design. Scenes which engage us and draw us deeper into a story achieve this by showing us what we need to know, not telling us. They not only show rather than tell, but show only what we need to know. They 'get in late' to a developing situation, engaging a reader by delivering intrigue directly.

Sequence Design: A Case Study

Let's look at the opening of *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, which tells the story of some young boys marooned on an island by a plane crash.

Many writers would begin this story with the schoolboys on the airliner, and the easy sequence it suggests: harried stewardesses struggling to maintain order, paper planes whizzing about, the revelation of a smuggled pet mouse, etc. They'd proceed faithfully to narrate the engine trouble, and the freak weather that escalates it, following it with predictable sequences: the panic of passengers, building until it overwhelms the crew at a critical moment; the fateful dive, the smoking wreckage, the injured and dying, culminating in the surviving boys' almost-unthinkable realization - that they are marooned alone on a far-flung isle and must somehow survive or die.

To an author who *tells* rather than *shows*, these sequences might occupy sixty double-spaced pages, and they might be moderately entertaining, but

they wouldn't be compelling. Golding chose instead to 'cold open', with a half-dressed boy crawling over rocks under a tropical sun.

Showing us nothing more than the boy, Golding leads us rapidly through a series of powerful revelations: this is not a boy native to the tropics, but a Caucasian schoolboy; he is not playing but hunting; there are other boys similarly engaged. Crashing realisations follow hard: there are no adults here; there has been a plane crash; these boys will not be rescued any time soon. By showing us what's happened – rather than 'telling', with a blow-by-blow narration – Golding engages the reader with his story from the start, inviting them to interpret what they see, and let their minds make the leaps that infuse a reading experience with resonant story energy.

Moving Forward

The plot of a novel can be represented as a zig-zagging graph, with six climactic peaks and six troughs. These are the successive mid-act and act-climaxes, and the successive sequences which follow-through on each climax, building to the next. For authors, this zig-zag is the roadmap for story. Only once its depths and vicissitudes are plotted is the story's 'surface' explored creatively: setting and locations, characters' traits and situations, the circumstances and events of the plot. Designing an optimal structure to deliver engagement and entertainment-value means working smart, not hard – and freeing your draft-writing energy to flourish on the page.

THE AUTHOR

Matthew Branton is the author of four novels and two books on creative writing, all published internationally. After studying creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University under E.A. Markham and Lesley Glaister, and working in publishing before beginning to write, she underwent gender transition and is now Barbara Branton. As a manuscript reader she specializes in literary thrillers, action thrillers, noir thrillers, and any fiction that is plot-driven and character-led. Her favourite authors include Annie Proulx, T C Boyle, Lee Child, and Donna Tartt, and her professional interests range from money-laundering to combat trauma.