THE STORY STRUCTURE WORKBOOK

HOW STORY STRUCTURE CAN BRING YOUR STORY TO LIFE

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The Story Structure Workbook

How Story Structure Can Bring Your Novel to Life

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I've seen it time and time again...

Despite the plethora of stories that use structure in exciting ways, there’s still a harmful belief in the writing community that story structure will stifle our creativity and create cookie-cutter storytelling. I bought into this belief for a long time, holding firm that if I wrote my stories without concern for these “restrictive” ideas, I would produce great works of fiction.

Unfortunately, what I ended up doing was getting lost—a lot.

My stories would never find a solid conclusion and never give my readers—or myself—any payoff. Most discouraging of all was that I didn't understand what I was doing wrong. Months would pass with no progress, and after spinning my wheels for weeks I would destroy any motivation I had.

Finally, I gave up on my stubbornness. I had believed story structure would hurt my writing, but once I stepped back and looked at the bigger picture, I realized it was what I needed the most. Not only that, but I had been subconsciously using pieces of this structure all along, even though I didn’t recognize them at the time—and you probably are too!

There’s a reason The Three Act Structure is nearly universal in Western storytelling, and that’s because it’s proven to work. When used correctly, The Three Act Structure is there to inform your writing, to guide you when you’re lost, and to keep you focused on the goal ahead, preventing the kind of frustration I used to suffer from.

By learning the rules of structure, you equip yourself with the knowledge to break them in fascinating ways—but without this foundation, it’s easy to fall into common traps, writing stories that go nowhere and that lack any real payoff.

Fortunately, with a solid understanding of the Three Act Structure and lots of practice, you can master not only your story’s plot, but your character arcs, theme, and pacing as well!

In this ebook, you’ll learn:

- The basics of the Three Act Structure and they apply to your story.
- How to use each element of The Three Act Structure.
- How to blend your characters and plot to create a more memorable novel.
- How to fix the problems in an existing draft through story structure.

If all goes well, by the end of this workbook you’ll be just as passionate and excited about story structure as I am! However, before you get started, I want to let you know that I’m always available if you need help.

If anything you learn here sparks new questions, feel free to send them my way:

https://thenovelsmithy.com/contact-me/

Now, enough with the introduction—let’s get started!
An Introduction to The Three Act Structure

The Three Act Structure is one of the most common story forms in Western media. From books to movies, TV shows, plays, and even news articles, the Three Act Structure guides and informs how almost all of us think about storytelling.

With that being the case, you can see why it’s so important to understand what the Three Act Structure is as a writer. Not only will learning the basics inform your own creative writing adventures, but it’ll reveal a whole new layer to the stories you already enjoy!

In its simplest form, the Three Act Structure is a storytelling form comprised of a setup, a confrontation, and a resolution. The more commonly known terms are Act 1, 2, and 3, hence the Three “Act” Structure. This reference to “acts” comes from the Three Act Structure’s origins in playwriting, where it was first identified by Aristotle in *Poetics*. He observed how Greek plays all used similar story beats to engage their audiences, while simultaneously passing on unique lessons in the process.

Each act has an important role to play in setting up what follows, eventually coming together in a Climax that feels resonant, impactful, and cathartic—a term we’ll revisit later. Let’s cover the basics first.

**Act 1: The Setup (1-25%)**

Act 1 comprises roughly the first quarter of your novel and fulfills the important function of setting up your story’s world and characters. It’s built on four key elements, with time to develop your setting and conflict occurring in between. When combined, these catch your reader’s interest and give them the tools to understand the foundation of your story.

- Where is this all taking place?
- Who is the protagonist, and why should we care about them?
- Why does the conflict matter?
- Why does it matter to the protagonist personally?
Most importantly, Act 1 should introduce the basis of your story’s conflict. Will the guy get the girl? Will the dragon eat Bilbo? Will peace return to the galaxy? Whatever it is, it needs to be woven into the Hook, the Inciting Event, the Key Event, and the First Plot Point.

1. **Hook:** This is how you get your reader’s attention when they first open your novel. Introduce them to what makes your world unique and encourage them to ask a question about your story.

2. **Inciting Event:** The Inciting Event is there to set your plot in motion, preparing for when your protagonist will get involved.

3. **Key Event:** Here is where your protagonist will become firmly involved in the conflict, but don’t worry. There is still plenty of time for them to prepare for their quest, mentally and physically. They may still need convincing to start their journey at all!

4. **First Plot Point:** This is where your story truly begins. Your protagonist has prepared for their journey and now makes the final decision to engage with the plot. There is no turning back.

**Act 2: The Confrontation (25-75%)**

Once the journey ahead has been set up by Act 1, you can enter the meat of your story—Act 2.

This will form the bulk of your story—around half—and will consist of a series of tests and trials that push your protagonist to grow and change, preparing them for the finale and fleshing out the stakes of your story’s conflict. Here you can explore character arcs, subplots, secrets, and foreshadowing that will make your story more exciting and compelling!

Of course, it’s easy to become overwhelmed by the lumbering bulk that is Act 2, but there’s an easy trick to avoid this—think of it in two parts, separated by the middle of your story.

The first half of Act 2 sees your character reacting to the events of the plot and being driven forward by their new situation. On the other hand, the second half sees them driving the plot. They’ve hopefully gained new skills and goals that let them dictate how your story progresses as they march forward towards the finale. Of course, not all will be rosy, as Act 2 closes with the Third Plot Point, your character’s darkest moment in your whole novel.

Here are the main events of Act 2:

1. **1st Pinch Point:** If you haven’t already introduced your antagonist, now is the time to do so. If you have, remind the readers why they should take them seriously. Reinforce the stakes of the journey you established in Act 1 and why the story matters to your cast.
2. **Midpoint:** This marks a turning point for your protagonist. Whereas before they were reacting to forces beyond their control, now they’re driving the plot. They’re ready to take on the conflict ahead. Of course, they’ll be reminded why that isn’t so easy, but never the less, the Midpoint acts as a catalyst for the protagonist.

3. **2nd Pinch Point:** A follow-up from the 1st Pinch Point. In the afterglow of the Midpoint, remind your protagonist and your reader why they need to fear the antagonist. They haven’t overcome the conflict yet.

4. **Third Plot Point:** Your protagonist’s darkest moment. As far as they can see, the antagonist has won. This sets up the Climax, where they must prove their ability to overcome the odds. The pace of your story speeds up from here on out, leading to a tense Climactic Moment.

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**Act 3: The Resolution (75-100%)**

Act 3 begins immediately after your Third Plot Point and is a dark and tense phase for your character.

This is where you’ll find the final confrontation between your protagonist and antagonist, but it’s also where the loose threads of your story must come together. Any foreshadowing or subplots you set up in Act 1 and 2 need to be tied up here.

Most importantly, Act 3 is the culmination of your protagonist’s arc—and any other major character arcs in your story as well. The skills and knowledge they’ve gained throughout Act 2 will be tested here, and without proving they’ve learned from their journey they won’t succeed in the Climactic Moment.

Fortunately, Act 3 isn’t all doom and gloom, as it closes with the Resolution. This lets Act 3 pull double duty—it has the highest point of tension and the quickest pacing balanced by the greatest moment of release, also called catharsis.

Catharsis is a Greek term for inner purification, also coming to modern storytelling thanks to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Your goal as a writer is to provide your reader with this moment of catharsis at the Resolution of your story. This is their moment of peace and reflection where they see the effects of the conflict on the world and characters they’ve grown to love. This may be bittersweet or it may be joyous, but it should always produce the same effect of emotional release that deeply impacts your reader.
1. **Climax:** Time to ramp up the tension! The protagonist and antagonist are on a crash course and the reader is racing towards the conflict alongside them. Begin setting up the Climactic Moment, which comes soon.

2. **Climactic Moment:** This is the decisive moment within the broader Climax. Will the protagonist succeed or succumb to the antagonist? Here you must answer the question you presented in Act 1. Will he get the girl? Will she get the job? Will Unicorns return to Earth? Whatever it may be, answer it here.

3. **Resolution:** Time to breathe a sigh of relief—the conflict has been resolved. Now your cast must face the task of figuring out how their lives will continue from here. Will they begin to recover from their journey? They may return home, but their world will never be the same. There may even be hints of a sequel.

In almost every Western story you read, you’ll be able to find the backbone of The Three Act Structure. Beloved films like *Star Wars* and *The Lion King* lean heavily on this structure, following each beat down to a T. On the other hand, some stories only flirt with The Three Act Structure, deviating and circling back in their own unique ways.

Both of these methods have their benefits and drawbacks, and are largely up to the writer’s personal preference.

However, no matter how experimental a story may be, you can almost always see the imprint of The Three Act Structure holding up the foundation of the story. In fact, this structure is so omnipresent in Western culture that we can learn it through osmosis. Even subconsciously, we often follow the setup, confrontation, and resolution pattern found in the Three Act Structure.

Of course, if you want to apply this structure to your own storytelling, you need a more thorough understanding of each Act and the story beats that create it.
All of us know how important foundations are—they’re the support system for everything above them. Without a good one, the rest of your system falls apart. So let me ask you:

How do you build the foundation of your story?

This may seem trivial at first glance. If you understand the basics, why worry about the fine details, right? And you have a point. A rough familiarity with the Three Act Structure will get you through the early stages of writing. However, if you’re looking to write a novel that’s cohesive, engaging, and memorable to the end, you’ll need a good foundation. Act 1 is where that foundation begins.

Act 1 makes up the first quarter of your story, or the Setup. This is the beginning of The Three Act Structure and it serves to introduce your story world to your reader. It’s also your opportunity to get your readers excited to learn more!

This act is built on four plot points:

- The Hook
- The Inciting Event
- The Key Event
- The First Plot Point

Each of these points has a clear purpose within the setup of your story. By establishing these key elements early on, Act 1 gives them the necessary time to breathe and grow throughout Act 2, so they have the proper weight and meaning when they pay off in Act 3. If that sounds familiar, then you’re probably aware of the principle of Chekov’s Gun.

"Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it’s not going to be fired, it shouldn’t be hanging there." — Anton Chekov
A simplified version of this principle is: “Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep.”

That is the goal of Act 1, and this is why it’s so important that you clearly establish your novel’s conflict early on. For example, the conflict of *The Hobbit* is: “Will Bilbo and the dwarves reclaim the Lonely Mountain?” This seems simple on the surface, but when your reader becomes invested in seeing this question answered it becomes a powerful tool for creating suspense.

Bilbo’s journey won’t be as easy as marching up the mountain and claiming it as his own. He’ll be stopped along the way by trolls, goblins, dark caves and forests, and a host of other obstacles that disrupt the reader’s desire to see him succeed. Thus, they keep reading in the hope he’ll overcome these challenges, and the adventures of one little hobbit suddenly stick in countless hearts for years to come.

This is why establishing your conflict is at the core of Act 1. It’s there to set up your reader’s expectations and get them invested in your story’s world.
Now that you’re familiar with Act 1 in the broad sense, let’s dive deeper into its individual elements, starting with the Hook.

For the most part, the Hook’s name speaks for itself—it’s there to grab your reader’s attention, “hooking” them by teasing an interesting story tidbit for them to follow deeper into your story. This “worm” is a unique aspect of your story world that you frame as a question and answer later in Act 1. However, it’s not your story’s core conflict. Instead, it’s an introductory question that’ll guide your reader to the core conflict when it comes up naturally later on.

But where in Act 1 should the Hook be?

There are many schools of thought on this, with some saying the Hook should be as early as your opening sentence—personally, I’m not quite that strict. Instead, your Hook should fit into your narrative organically, so give yourself room to be flexible. Anywhere in your first scene works well, though the earlier you can include it the better!

Let’s pick on our earlier example again. We can write The Hobbit’s Hook as:

“What is a hobbit, and how did he find adventure?”

This occurs in the very first paragraph, while the next paragraph goes on to explain what hobbits are—which is a great bit of worldbuilding. A few scenes later the reader is introduced to the dwarves, essentially answering how Bilbo found adventure. This means the question is answered fairly quickly, so you may wonder why a reader would continue with the story after that. This is where the Hook becomes an art form.

In introducing the dwarves, the story also introduced its core conflict: “Will Bilbo and the dwarves reach the Lonely Mountain?” In one fell swoop, you’ve both answered the question presented by the Hook and established the story’s plot, seamlessly pulling the reader into the rest of the story—all three hundred pages of it!

This is your Hook’s goal. Intrigue your reader with an opening question, and by the time they’ve found their answer you’ve introduced your conflict and gotten them invested for the long haul.
However, a word of warning—don’t make the answer to your Hook a “psych” moment.

Imagine *The Hobbit* opening with the same question I outlined above, but the answer wasn’t: “Hobbits are small people in a magical fantasy world, and Bilbo’s adventure comes when he fights alongside a band of rough and tumble dwarves.”

Instead, what if later paragraphs revealed that: “This was just a storybook being read by the protagonist’s mother and it will never come up again, so you can basically forget about it.”

Wow... what a bummer.

What was built up as a unique and interesting Hook was torn out from under you a chapter or two into the book. Now, if you stick with the book at all, it’ll probably be tainted. You’ll never enjoy the fantastic aspects of it because of that one early misstep weighing on your experience.

This “psych” moment can be created in a variety of ways, but it boils down to a play on words or some other storytelling trick that disguises the true nature of your story, trying to deceive the reader into believing something that doesn’t truly exist.

So, please take this to heart and make your Hook genuine. By basing your Hook on a real and interesting aspect of your story, you’re not only setting yourself up for success, but for happy readers as well.
The Inciting and Key Events

The Three Act Structure can be nebulous at times, especially as your story gets started.

There are so many moving parts, introductions to make, settings to describe, and red herrings to place. It’s a lot to keep track of, and because of this, two plot points get forgotten more than any others—the Inciting Event and its sibling, the Key Event. So, let me set the record straight.

The Inciting Event and Key Event are the beginnings of your story’s plot.

They start your conflict, yet they remain an often overlooked part of story structure, sometimes being conflated as one event, sometimes being forgotten all together. A lot of this is because of how these two events overlap and how widely their placement can vary, but I promise they aren’t too confusing once you get a good grasp on them.

By understanding these plot points you can greatly increase the impact of your story, so let’s sort out their differences and how best to use them.

The Inciting Event

The Inciting Event begins the plot of your story. The spark that lights the match, it begins the irreversible movement of your story’s conflict. However, it’s important to remember that the Inciting Event is only plot focused—it’s not concerned with your main character’s involvement in said plot. That comes with the Key Event, which we’ll look at next.

So where exactly does the Inciting event fall within your plot?

This is one of the major points of confusion with the Inciting Event, because it can occur as early as the Hook or as late as the First Plot Point. Unlike other well-known plot points, there is no specific time in Act 1 where the Inciting Event must happen.

A good rule of thumb is that the Inciting Event should occur early in Act 1, because it begins the plot and therefore the bulk of your story. If your novel opens too far in advance of the Inciting
Event—and therefore your story’s conflict—your reader may wonder what the point of these introductions are at all.

With that said, sometimes the Inciting Event occurs outside the scope of your story, sparking your conflict long before the events of the plot. The start of a major war or a historical discovery could fill this role and could happen decades before the events of the story. However, for a beginning writer I would advise against this.

Try to make your Inciting Event directly relevant within your story, even if it’s closely related to a decades-old conflict. By having your Inciting Event occur within the scope of your story, you create a clear focal point and a more pressing, timely conflict—versus one bogged down by backstory.

For example, say a great war began hundreds of years ago, but the Inciting Event occurs thanks to a breakthrough for the rebel forces seeking to gain the upper hand. Without this breakthrough the war would have continued as normal, creating little plot development despite the lingering conflict. This new development helps the conflict feel immediate and dynamic, because the war itself is the status quo.

If that sounds familiar, you’re right! Speaking of Star Wars:

The Inciting event of *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* occurs when Princess Leia sends R2-D2 and C3-PO to escape the clutches of the Empire, carrying stolen plans for the Death Star and a cry for help. These plans are the secret the rebels need to destroy the Empire’s super weapon, shifting the tide of a decades-long war.

This event is purely focused on the plot, and Luke won’t become involved in the story until a few scenes later.

### The Key Event

While the Inciting Event is plot focused, the Key Event is character focused. It’s the other side of the Inciting Event, and it’s where your plot and main character finally meet. In short, the Key Event is the point at which your character becomes involved in your plot.

Just like the Inciting Event, the Key Event can occur in a variety of places in your story. However, it will always be after the Inciting Event, since it relies on the plot having been set in motion by that
plot point. Other than that though, it can happen anywhere from multiple scenes after the Inciting Event to practically concurrent with it. This will depend on the needs of your story and how late in Act 1 your Inciting event occurs.

A good starting place is to have your Key Event occur midway through Act 1, maybe a little after, to give your main character time to prepare both mentally and physically for their journey. This leaves room for reflection, further character development, and even resistance from your protagonist, and gives a beginning writer plenty of time to fulfill the needs of Act 1 without rushing their story.

The Key Event of *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* occurs when Luke and his uncle purchase R2-D2 and C3-PO from Jawa traders on Tatooine. Unknown to him, he's just become involved in a rebel fight he's not prepared for. By purchasing the droids, Luke and his family enter the line of fire and set up his involvement for the rest of the series.

By now you should be able to see how the Inciting Event and Key Event are distinct. While the Inciting Event is concerned with the catalyst of your story’s plot, the Key Event focuses on how your protagonist becomes involved in that plot.

I strongly encourage you to look at stories you’re familiar with and identify these two events, just like how we did with *A New Hope*. This will help you understand their differences and see the wide variety of places they can occur.

Of course, if the most natural place for these events to fall within your story is closer to the end of Act 1, that's just fine! Just be sure to include both the Inciting Event and Key Event in some way before the end of Act 1.
The First Plot Point

So far we’ve been focused on your story’s setup, but the First Plot Point is where everything finally jumps into action, marking an important shift that begins your protagonist’s adventure. In fact, the First Plot Point pulls double duty, acting as both the end of Act 1 and the doorway into Act 2. If you’ve ever heard the storytelling term “Crossing the Threshold,” it was referencing the First Plot Point.

In simple terms, the First Plot Point is the pivotal moment where your protagonist begins their journey thanks to an important decision. They’ve officially crossed their point of no return by deciding to engage with the story. This leads them to the tests and trials of Act 2, and ultimately their confrontation with the antagonist at the Climax.

Of course, this decision is almost always related to the Key Event, when your plot was introduced to your protagonist. The newly relevant conflict gets the wheels moving and prompts their decision, which ultimately sets your story in motion. By deciding to “cross the threshold,” even if they’re forced to, they become an active player in the conflict, letting the First Plot Point fulfill another role beyond advancing your story’s plot.

This secondary role is to act as the first step your protagonist takes in overcoming their inner struggles and completing their character arc. Without this pivotal decision, they would never face the challenges of Act 2 and never be pushed to grow past their flaws.

For this reason, the First Plot Point needs to relate directly to your protagonist’s inner struggle.

Additionally, because of how important the First Plot Point is for your plot and characters, it has a specific place it should occur in your story’s structure.

Act 1 takes up the first 20-25% of your story, and the First Plot Point occurs right at the end of this. This length is purposeful. That solid quarter of your story gives you enough time to develop a baseline for your world and characters that will make the challenges they undergo during Act 2 meaningful and distinct when compared to their previous life.
If the First Plot Point comes too late, the reader will feel like your story is stagnating. If it’s too soon, there won’t be enough time to get them invested or flesh out important aspects of your story’s world.

Without the First Plot Point, or with a weak one that doesn’t draw on your character’s inner struggle, your story will never get off the ground. This is the catalyst that sets your story in motion—and you don’t want to shuffle awkwardly into this conflict when you could enter it with a bang!

The decision made by your protagonist and the new plot development that comes with it will define the rest of your story until the Climax. In fact, the First Plot Point is probably the most important moment of your plot until the finale.
Now that you’re moving into Act 2, you’re ready to begin the body of your story. You’ve spent all of Act 1 building to this moment, meaning it’s finally time to let loose all of your crazy ideas and plot twists – right?

Well yes, and no. You’re right to some degree. Act 2 is that wonderful time where you get to dive into all the scenarios that inspired you and that you dream of getting to write. However, there are also some important roles Act 2 needs to fill, because to come out with the best possible story, even Act 2 needs a bit of structure.

Of course, by learning what Act 2 does for your story, you’ll be all the more equipped to turn these great ideas into meaningful, memorable moments for your novel—moments that’ll knock your reader’s socks off, and hopefully impress you a bit too!

And for those of you intimidated by the open, unplanned space of Act 2, don’t fear—there’s something here for you as well.

So what is Act 2?

In short, Act 2 is the bulk of your story, around 50%, consisting of a series of tests and trials meant to challenge your protagonist and further your plot.

This is a fairly straightforward Act, with a lot of time and flexibility to make it as complex or as simple as you want. In fact, one of the benefits of Act 2 is the large amount of open space you have to experiment with your story, but it does have a few plot points you should keep in mind:

- The First Pinch Point
- The Midpoint
- The Second Pinch Point
- The Third Plot Point

These four components serve to escalate your conflict, keep your plot moving, and provide moments of growth or failure for your characters. The trials you create throughout Act 2 are all
about further developing your story through your cast, themes, subplots, and world building, and can be some of the most memorable adventures in your novel.

Luke and Han exploring the Death Star as they search for Princess Leia, Bilbo Baggins sneaking through Smaug’s dark lair, Kuzco running from Yzma and Kronk as a newly transformed llama... These adventures may be frightening, silly, or serious, but no matter their tone they’ll define the journey your readers and characters are about to go on.

The Difference Between Act 2.0 and 2.5

This wide open space is encouraging to a lot of writers. So much time to play and so many fun ideas to explore, and that’s great. But for some—myself included—Act 2 is intimidating for that exact reason. Some of us just need a little more structure in our writing!

This is where Act 2.0 and 2.5 come into play. Because Act 2 is so large, it’s helpful to split it into two halves. Each half ends up around the length of Act 1, which is a much more manageable size.

It isn’t just the shorter length that makes this method helpful either. Each half serves a distinct purpose for your protagonist.

Act 2.0 focuses on a period of reaction driven by the decision your protagonist made at the First Plot Point. This first half sees your character pushed forward by the plot, trying to keep their head above water in this new world. They’re punished for their lack of skills and tripped up at every turn, but all the while they’re learning—and slowly they start to succeed thanks to these lessons.

From there, the skills and knowledge your character gained come into full force for Act 2.5, beginning a period of action. The start of this second half occurs at the Midpoint, acting as a turning point for both your plot and characters.

All the lessons learned in Act 2.0 let your protagonist drive the story in Act 2.5, actively working towards a resolution. They’re finally equipped to handle this new world and take charge of the story.

Of course, their growth isn’t over yet. I’ll talk a lot more about that when I discuss the Third Plot Point at the end of Act 2.

When looked at as a whole, these distinct halves combine to form a natural growth from reaction to action for your protagonist, while the narrative shift at the Midpoint keeps your story from sagging.
The First Pinch Point

The first plot point after Act 2 begins is one often forgotten by writers. Yet this First Pinch Point plays an important role in developing your antagonist and your conflict.

Its purpose is to either introduce or remind your audience of the antagonist and the stakes of your story. It shows why the conflict is real and threatening, why the antagonist is powerful, and often foreshadows a future attack by the antagonist.

What’s interesting about this First Pinch Point is that it doesn’t necessarily involve the protagonist themselves. It could be a wholly separate scene that the protagonist never sees or interacts with, one meant to warn the audience of what’s coming while the protagonist remains ignorant. Of course, this doesn’t mean they can’t be involved, but it’s important to remember that they’re in a period of reaction, unequipped to deal with the conflict even if they are a part of this First Pinch Point.

This plot point is important to your pacing for a variety of reasons as well.

Most obviously, the First Pinch Point is a moment for the antagonist to shine, to remind the reader of the full depth of your novel’s conflict. Beyond that, it also serves as an important reminder amidst the many adventures of your protagonist.

The beginning of Act 2 is a long stretch full of exploration and growth for your characters, and it can be easy for both you and your audience to get distracted from the conflict. The First Pinch Point’s placement comes midway between the end of Act 1 and your Midpoint, making it the perfect time for a reminder of the stakes of the journey.

While it should come up organically in your story—much like the Hook—this is a good ballpark to shoot for. This midway placement is ideal because it keeps the tests your characters undergo relevant to the broader conflict, helping the plot progress even as you explore subplots or your wider cast.

Essentially, the First Pinch Point keeps the plot moving forward, instead of sideways, up, down, or over—as it often tries to do.
A time for reflection and growth, the Midpoint is a major step on your protagonist’s adventure. They’re a long way from home, caught up in a strange world with strange new people. Yet, for the first time on their journey, they can look back on where they’ve been and no longer feel unsure if they should’ve left home at all. Here your characters get the last boost they need to feel confident on their quest, the last piece of the puzzle to pursue the conflict full force. They’re beginning their march to the finale, but they have some things to take care of before they set out.

This plot point holds up the center of your story in terms of plot, character, and pacing. With a weak Midpoint your story will sag in the middle at best, or collapse entirely at worst. However, this only explains the Midpoint’s surface role. What it actually does requires a little more depth to explain.

Essentially, your Midpoint acts as the turning point for Act 2.

Here your protagonist moves from a period of reaction to action by overcoming a major challenge. This challenge is the logical culmination of the tests and trials of the first half of Act 2, and should force your protagonist to demonstrate their newly gained skills and knowledge.

Essentially, the Midpoint is your protagonist’s college midterm—certainly no final exam, but critical if they want to reach finals at all!

By overcoming the Midpoint they prove to themselves and others that they’ve earned their place on this journey, and they’re often gifted a major secret or skill for their success. From this point onwards, your protagonist will feel equipped to confront your core conflict and will drive your story towards its resolution. They can finally engage with the conflict instead of just reacting to it.

This shift is incredibly important for your story’s pacing and plot, as well as your protagonist’s character arc.

In terms of character arcs, the Midpoint is still a catalyst, though it works a bit differently. Within a character’s arc, the Midpoint manifests as the “solution” to their want. In overcoming the Midpoint, they seem to have found the key to achieving this want, without having to go through
the difficult process of addressing their real inner struggles. After all, it’s easier to ignore our deepest problems than meaningfully addressing them, and that’s exactly what your protagonist will do here.

However, this doesn’t mean they haven’t grown throughout Act 2. They’ve likely begun uncovering important truths about themselves and their world throughout their tests and trials. Yet, they’re resistant to addressing this truth, preferring to sidestep around this necessary change. Because of this, the solution found at the Midpoint is important and represents your character’s growth, but is still only a half-step within their arc.

Overall, the Midpoint is a catalyst with good reason.

Without this strong turning point, you often stunt both your plot’s development and your protagonist’s arc. Without undergoing this moment of growth and shift towards action, it’s easy to set yourself up for a weak Third Plot Point (a moment tied to your character’s growth at the Midpoint) or Climax (a moment tied to both the plot and character developments of the Midpoint).

At best, a weak Midpoint causes uneven pacing, where you have to cram so much necessary development into scenes late in Act 2 that it feels rushed or bloated. These developments then lack much needed time to breathe, lessening their impact at the Climax.

While many points of the Three Act Structure offer a lot of flexibility and can sometimes be left out entirely—though I obviously advise against this—the Midpoint is one that is non negotiable in a well-balanced story. It simply pulls too much weight to be ignored.
The Second Pinch Point

As you might expect, the second half of Act 2 fulfills the important role of setting the tone and pace for Act 3—but that isn’t its only function. It also serves a critical purpose within your character’s arc, and it begins the path to their final confrontation at the Climax.

That’s because we’ve come to the darkest part of your character’s journey. This is where the rising storm of your conflict will finally catch up to your characters, and it’s where your antagonist will reassert their power after the Midpoint.

Despite this, the Second Pinch Point is a fairly simple plot point, much like the First Pinch Point. At its most basic level, the Second Pinch Point is there to remind the audience of the antagonist’s power, but unlike its sibling from earlier in Act 2, your protagonist will be directly involved.

If you remember, the First Pinch Point didn’t necessarily need to involve your protagonist for it to serve its purpose. Often, not having them present was more effective because it set up a sense of tension for the reader, as they suddenly knew more about the coming danger than your own characters.

The Second Pinch Point, however, is not the time for this.

Ideally, your protagonist should be personally threatened by the power of your antagonist, as a reminder of the challenges ahead. This is important in the afterglow of the Midpoint, where it’s easy for your audience and characters to lose focus on the stakes of the journey.

Of course, you may wonder why this is necessary, and that’s understandable.

Perhaps you want to shock your readers with the true power of the antagonist later on, or show the folly of your protagonist’s false sense of security. However, these goals won’t benefit from neglecting the Second Pinch Point.

The Second Pinch Point anchors your character’s growth from earlier in Act 2 and it can be an excellent tool for foreshadowing developments later in Act 3. Above all, it keeps the conflict real and pressing, so that the downfall at the Third Plot Point feels like a logical progression of the story, versus a sudden and contrived punishment for your protagonist.
Still, despite this critical importance, the great thing about the Second Pinch Point is that it easily adapts to your story and writing style.

The Second Pinch Point’s placement in your story mirrors that of the First Pinch Point—ideally, it occurs halfway between the Midpoint and the Third Plot Point. As with its sibling though, there’s a lot of flexibility here. You want this point to occur organically in the conflict, usually after a moment of hubris on the part of your protagonist.

Though this is a plot point meant mostly as a support for “the big three,” don’t ignore your Second Pinch Point!
The Third Plot Point

The Third Plot Point is the last of the primary trio of plot points in the Three Act Structure, with the others being the First Plot Point and the Midpoint. This trio forms the plot and emotional arcs of your entire story, with the Third Plot Point representing the darkest time along this journey.

Here your character ends Act 2, enters Act 3, and faces the most difficult test of their arc.

What I mean by this is that the Third Plot Point will mark a major struggle for your protagonist. Their skills and the growth they’ve experienced will prove insufficient. To them—and likely to your readers—it’ll seem as though they’ve failed.

Fortunately, as far as your plot is concerned, this failure is only temporary.

The Third Plot Point opens the door to your Climax and the Resolution of your story. Instead of ending your story, it provides an opportunity for the antagonist to reassert their dominance and demand that the protagonist up their game. This is essentially a twist within your plot, at least from your main cast’s perspective.

What they believed to be true about the conflict is more complex, and they now need to adjust their plans to cope with this new reality. Your audience, on the other hand, may have known about this for some time, adding a sense of irony when your characters finally catch up. This shift in your conflict is also important because it reinforces your antagonist’s power, creating a more tense and meaningful Climax when your protagonist finally succeeds against all odds.

However, I would argue that the Third Plot Point’s most critical role lies within its effect on your protagonist’s arc.

Throughout your protagonist’s journey, they’ve been facing an inner struggle, one fed by the conflict between their want and their need. After the Midpoint, it seemed that your character had found a path to achieving their want, but as I mentioned previously, that success was superficial. Your character cannot complete their arc without addressing their inner struggle head on.

This is where the Third Plot Point really shines.
It’s the turning point that forces your protagonist to address their struggles during Act 3, and is therefore directly responsible for the culmination of their arc.

However, to achieve this final burst of growth for your character, the Third Plot Point needs to target two specific elements of their arc—their want and their inner struggle. The first is fairly straightforward. The Third Plot Point will snatch their want from their grasp, forcing them to work even harder to achieve it.

It’s through their inner struggle that the Third Plot Point has its deepest effect. An ideal Third Plot Point directly agitates your protagonist’s inner wounds, playing on their deepest flaws and insecurities to make them feel truly defeated. This presents them with the opportunity for growth by demanding that they confront their problems.

They’ll never progress a step further on their journey without taking time to address the truth they’ve discovered on their quest, taking it to heart and overcoming their struggles in the process. It’s through this reflection and rededication to their quest that they achieve the largest amount of growth in their character arc, the growth that sets them up to succeed at the Climax.

Note that this isn’t always true. Negative arcs see your character failing, and flat arcs require a different outlook on this inner struggle entirely. I encourage you to check out these articles on positive, negative, and flat arcs for a more in-depth explanation. For this ebook, the big picture will have to suffice.

Just like the rest of the trio, the Third Plot Point has a more rigid placement in your story, coming in at the 75% mark.

This is less negotiable than some other plot points because you want to transition into Act 3 smoothly, leaving plenty of room for your conflict to reach its natural conclusion at the Climax.

This three quarters placement discourages you from rushing either Act 2 or 3, or from adding padding where it isn’t necessary. Remember, at this point in the story, the pace of your conflict should be ramping up. By keeping the plot moving steadily forward you help pull your reader along with you, maintaining their investment in your story.
Act 3: The Resolution

Act 3 marks the end of your story, and is the last act of The Three Act Structure!

This is where your story’s many threads come together. Here your characters will face their final confrontation with your antagonist and hopefully overcome the conflict of your story.

However, Act 3 does a bit more than just end your novel, and that’s where it becomes more complicated—and all the more important to understand. It’s responsible not only for bringing your story to its conclusion, but also for completing your protagonist’s arc, tying up your story’s theme, setting the tone for the end of your novel, and leaving your readers feeling satisfied.

So, with so much involved in the final 25% of your story, it might be good to know exactly how Act 3 works.

In simple terms, Act 3 ends your tale. It takes all the pieces you’ve been moving into place for the last few hundred pages and puts them on a crash course towards one another. This culminates in the final confrontation between your protagonist and antagonist. However, there’s a lot more to the last quarter of your story than a final battle.

Act 3 also fulfills a lot of critical functions within the broader Three Act Structure, providing your characters and readers with an important sense of closure.

For starters, Act 3 is the final test of the skills your characters have gained throughout their story. All of their past tests and achievements should become relevant here, at least if you’ve done your setup right in previous Acts.

Of course, before any final confrontations can begin, your protagonist needs to rise back up from the blow that was the Third Plot Point and rededicate themselves to their quest. The opening of Act 3 provides them with time to reflect on their inner struggle and undergo a last moment of growth. Only once this reflection is over and they reengage with the conflict can you get into the plot points of Act 3:

- The Climax
- The Climactic Moment
The Resolution

Your Climax begins increasing the tension of your story as your protagonist approaches the Climactic Moment, their final showdown with your antagonist. Once this battle is won or lost, the Resolution provides a time for rest, camaraderie, and life after the conflict.

When put together, these plot points tie your cast, themes, plot, symbolism, and tone into one cohesive package, leaving your reader feeling satisfied that your story is complete!

When looking specifically at your plot, Act 3 contains two extremes: the Climactic Moment and the Resolution.

In the Climactic Moment, all relevant developments from your story come together in a dramatic and intense scene that pushes your story to its logical conclusion. On the other hand, the Resolution takes the time to show the aftermath of that conflict, to imply a living, breathing world that will continue long after your reader turns the last page.

Likewise, your characters go through a similar process of extreme tension followed by release. Act 3 functions as the end of their character arc, where they finally recognize their truth, overcome their central problem, and fulfill their need—negative arcs are a special case, of course.

This jump from high to low intensity lets your reader experience catharsis, a term we've covered before and will look at again in depth at the very end of this ebook. However, we aren’t quite there yet, as we've only just begun Act 3. There are still a few challenges ahead in your story.

We’ll take care of creating catharsis when we finally come to the Resolution!
If storytelling is a game of chess, the Climax is checkmate.

Or more specifically, the Climactic Moment is. Here, both sides of your story’s conflict confront each other one final time. This is the last hurrah of your story—though not quite it’s ending. Through this plot point, you’ll need to fulfill the promises you made to your readers, giving them an intense and dramatic conclusion to the journey you’ve just taken them on.

Of course, as I just alluded to, the Climax is more complicated than many of us realize at first glance. Not only does it conclude the various threads of your story, but it also contains an entirely distinct plot point within it, one you don’t want to ignore: the Climactic Moment.

It’s important to understand the difference between these two interconnected plot points.

In simple terms, the Climax is the start of your protagonist’s final confrontation with your antagonist. They’ve overcome their low point after the Third Plot Point and reentered the conflict, prepared to fight to the end. Your reader is tense and primed to see this story to its conclusion—meaning it’s time to deliver on your promises!

Based on this description, it’s easy to see that the Climax fulfills a lot of roles within your broader story and The Three Act Structure, so let’s cover them each one at a time.

To start, the Climax is a point of no return for your protagonist. Much like the First Plot Point was a point of no return for beginning their journey, the Climax is a point of no return for ending it. Once your characters enter the Climax, the conflict will reach a conclusion, whether or not it’s in their favor. You’ve backed them into a corner and are now forcing them to fight back.

Ideally, their decision to reengage with the conflict after the Third Plot Point will be what locks them into the fight ahead. This is the case for a few reasons.

First, it makes their ultimate confrontation with the antagonist their choice, a result of their own conscious, morality, or decisions. It gives the Climax a greater meaning on a level that goes beyond simple coincidence or bad luck.
For example, a meaningful Climax needs more storytelling impact than your character bumping into an old friend at the grocery store. Instead, they call that friend of their own accord and apologize for years of misunderstanding and conflict. The first situation happens by no fault of their own—they didn’t earn it. The second is meaningful because they actively sought it out.

Similarly, tying the Climax to an active choice by your protagonist helps it fulfill its secondary role as the culmination of their arc. Within character arcs, the Climax is the final stage of your character’s growth. Here, your protagonist confronts their truth and addresses their inner struggle. This is in large part because of how the Third Plot Point and the Climax trap them—they have no choice but to confront these difficult issues.

Essentially, the Climax’s job is to force your protagonist to act on their truth, building up until they overcome their internal struggles at the Climactic Moment, which we’ll look at in a few seconds.

The last major role of the Climax is to end your story. However, note that its placement isn’t exactly “the end.” Instead, the story ends with the Resolution, which directly follows the Climactic Moment.

So where exactly does the Climax fit in?

Well, this depends on what final story threads and subplots need tidying up after your Third Plot Point. It’s important to remember that the Resolution is only a short scene or two, meant to clean up any last story bits and leave your readers satisfied.

If the Resolution drags on through multiple scenes and subplots, it can suck the energy out of the ending of your novel. This means that, as much as possible, you need to get these subplots and minor issues resolved or near resolved before the Climax, so you can just touch upon them in the Resolution—instead of eating up the time needed for your protagonist’s final moments.

With that in mind, for the majority of stories, the Climax should take up most of Act 3.

As the pace picks up after the Third Plot Point, the major players within your story are on a collision course—once your protagonist has had time to reflect and rededicate themselves to overcoming the conflict, there isn’t much reason to linger.

Get your players into place for the final confrontation, and let the battle begin!
Now that your story has begun its final confrontation, we can get into the Climactic Moment.

The Climactic Moment is an interesting plot point because, instead of being standalone, it’s nested inside the more traditional Climax. It’s the decisive moment that resolves the conflict between your protagonist and antagonist, the moment the Climax is responsible for setting up.

Essentially, it’s the moment you resolve the conflict you set up all the way back in Act 1.

Will they get the girl? Will they defeat the dark side or prove that dragons can live alongside humans or return unicorns to earth? Will they succeed, or will they fail?

Say your Climax was the typical final battle of a fantasy epic. The two opposing armies go crashing into one another to decide the fate of the world. Yet, this isn’t the Climactic Moment. That wouldn’t come until late-battle, when all seems lost before your protagonist hunts down the antagonist on the field, facing off against them one on one to decide their fates.

Do you see the difference?

The Climactic Moment is the deciding event of your core conflict, while the Climax only sets the stage. Here your protagonist’s growth determines their outcome in a true final test. It begins the transition from conflict to resolution, ends your character’s arc, and concludes their journey.

As a result, this is the time to wow your readers, to drive your story to its logical conclusion and show just how far your characters have come! No need to be melodramatic, but don’t be afraid to push the envelope, so long as it resonates with your broader story and plays on the themes and symbols you’ve previously introduced.

In the same vein, the Climactic Moment is also the logical conclusion of your protagonist’s arc.

In this moment, the decision they make—either to put their truth into action or abandon it—will determine if they succeed or fail, both in the plot and in their arc. This final moment of growth can manifest in a variety of ways. It may be a dramatic speech, a quiet and meaningful internal realization, or a spur-of-the-moment choice they never could’ve made before. Whatever it is, they
must prove they’ve embraced their truth and overcome their inner struggles through the actions they take in the Climactic Moment.

So, why is it wise to separate the Climax and the Climactic Moment in your mind? Does it really matter all that much?

At the end of the day that’s for you to decide. But here’s my case...

The Climax is the setup for the Climactic Moment. It gives other characters time to play their parts and complete their own arcs, while setting the stage for the protagonist’s moment of truth. By separating the two plot points in your mind, you give yourself a goalpost to write towards during the Climax.

It’s easy to end up having so much fun with a scene, especially one as dramatic and eventful as the Climax, that you lose focus on where your story needs to end up. By thinking of the Climactic Moment as a separate entity, you ensure that you end your story with a bang, giving your readers the full impact you promised them.

Instead of staying in “setup” mode forever, you’ll actually reach the finale!

That’s what the Climactic Moment is. It’s the end of your conflict and therefore occurs in the very last moments of your Climax. Once that’s done it’s time to shift into your Resolution, as your characters figure out what this new reality will mean for their lives.
And so they lived happily ever after—the end.

These famous words are, in essence, a simple form of the Resolution—a highly abbreviated one, but one nonetheless.

The Resolution of your novel won’t be much different. It’s a moment for your readers to say goodbye, to have one final moment with your now beloved cast, and to cement your story in their hearts forever. It’s often bittersweet, but also oh so important.

Within The Three Act Structure, the Resolution acts as a period of rest and rejuvenation for your characters and your story’s world. It’s the “Return with the Elixir” of the Hero’s Journey, if you’re familiar with Joseph Campbell’s writing.

The Resolution works to bring your story full circle, to provide a satisfying conclusion that shows the lasting effects of your protagonist’s success or failure. This reinforces the importance of their victory, making their journey feel worthwhile and, most importantly, cathartic.

We talked about catharsis previously, namely in the introduction to The Three Act Structure. Catharsis is a term for “inner purification” from ancient Greek storytelling, and it’s the primary goal of your Resolution. In essence, it’s the deep emotional satisfaction you get at the end of a good story, much like the release of tension after telling your troubles to an understanding friend. In a novel, it leaves your readers with the final emotional and thematic impact of your story. But how does the Resolution create catharsis?

Well, as always, it comes down to plot and character.

Within the realm of plot, the Resolution’s goal is to tie off the final loose ends of your story. Your job here is to show what effects their adventures will have on the world they live in, and to imply a life beyond the confines of your story. Through these final scenes you give their adventure lasting consequences for your story.

While doing this, you may also introduce new questions about your characters and world, and that’s totally fine. Just remember, the Resolution is about answering more than questioning—don’t
introduce new questions about the story you’ve just completed, only ones about your characters’ lives ahead.

Your protagonist may return home a changed person or ride off into the sunset for adventures unknown. You may even take a moment to explore the ultimate fate of your antagonist, if they survived the Climactic Moment. This is also the place to finish your story for any side characters and their related subplots. However, just as I mentioned when discussing the Climax and Climactic Moment, you don’t want your Resolution to drag on.

Ideally, the Resolution is only a handful of scenes, meant to quickly wrap up your story and deliver a final parting message. If you get caught up in extraneous details, you’ll end up taking the impact out of your novel’s ending. After all, your story’s conflict and Climactic Moment should still be fresh and raw in the minds of your readers when they turn that last page and read, “the end.”

The Resolution serves a similar but distinct role for your characters.

Your goal here is to show how much your characters have grown in a concrete and tangible way. This ties directly into their arc and usually into the themes and symbols of your story as well, making these final “foil” scenes very impactful for your reader.

The term “foil” is usually used to describe characters that act as mirrors for your protagonist, either through their behaviors, flaws, or personality, and a foil scene works in much the same way.

Think of a scene from earlier in your story—perhaps even as far back as your protagonist’s introduction—where they were unequipped to handle a specific challenge or confrontation. Mirror that scene in your Resolution, but this time, the journey your protagonist has just completed makes this challenge easy to overcome. This gives your audience a way to visualize your protagonist’s growth from beginning to end.

Of course, foil scenes don’t need to be on the nose.

Han Solo from *A New Hope* provides a great example of a subtle foil scene in his Resolution. Han begins the movie isolated in a dark corner of the Cantina. On the other hand, he ends it on a brightly lit stage, being celebrated as a hero. It’s not the same scene by a long stretch, but it takes key elements of Han’s introduction and flips them on their head, showing us how far he’s come. It also directly calls on his arc, in which he goes from selfish and alone to selfless and surrounded by community.
This is the key to writing a strong Resolution, especially for your protagonist. Pay special attention to how their final scenes show the effects of their arc, both to drive home their truth and give your audience a nice emotional payoff.

Of course, this isn’t true of negative arc characters. Negative arc protagonists like Anakin Skywalker or Jay Gatsby get very little Resolution, and what they do get focuses on the damaging effects of their arc more than anything else.

Lastly, we come to sequels.

Now that you’ve finished your first book, you’re bound to write a sequel, right? But what if you have no plans for a sequel, or what if you’re unsure?

Well the good news is that, no matter what plans you may or may not have, the Resolution should still imply a life after your story ends. This makes your story world feel like a real, living place, one that was truly impacted by the events of your character’s journey.

As a bonus, this also makes it easy to set up for a sequel, even if you don’t come back to write it for a decade or more.

Think about what your characters’ lives might look like after your particular story ends and then use those to set things up should a sequel ever arise. If you’re already halfway through planning your sequel, then you can weave these later developments organically into the Resolution too—whatever makes sense for your particular story.
What The Three Act Structure Means for You

As we reach the end of this ebook, I hope you see that—by using story structure—you don’t confine yourself to a formulaic story.

Instead, you provide your readers with cohesion, with emotional payoff and tight pacing that keeps them engaged for the entire ride. Because structure manifests in so many aspects of the writing process, it really is a fantastic tool for ensuring your story is compelling and memorable.

Still, many people worry that using structure will hamper their creativity, and I understand that fear. The way writing is taught often makes it seem like The Three Act Structure is an uncompromising dogma that forces you to follow its whims exactly—but this is far from the truth!

At the end of the day, the key is in how you use it.

If your story lacks a Second Pinch Point, but your beta readers don’t feel the story suffers, great! Don’t feel pressured to force your story into a structure if it’s working as is. On the other hand, if your story is sagging in the middle and you can’t figure out why, then The Three Act Structure is there to provide the answers.

Basically, the more you understand story structure you more you have a road map for your story, preventing you from falling into the aimless wanderings I suffered from when I began writing. Still, your path is ultimately up to you. With wise use of The Three Act Structure you’ll hopefully be a much more productive and effective writer, whether you follow this structure or not!

In the end I hope that, through a better understanding of story structure, you feel that much more equipped to tackle your own novel in the near future, or revive one you had previously given up on. Discovering story structure has been one of the greatest things I’ve ever done for my writing, and I hope the same will be true for you.😊
If you’ve found this ebook helpful, I have a lot more to share with you!

Not only can you check out the links spread throughout this ebook, but you can also download the many other resources available for free in The Novel Smithy Resource Library. Whether you’re interested in building better writing habits or creating an amazing cast of characters, I’ve got something there that can help.

Alongside these free resources, I’ve also published a variety of books designed to guide you through your writing journey.

Specifically, my *Ten Day Novelist* series will walk you through the biggest challenges of the writing process, from outlining your story to writing your first draft and editing a final manuscript. If you’re itching to make some serious progress on your novel, I hope you’ll check them out!

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Finally, you’re always welcome to reach out to me personally with any questions you might have—or even just to tell me about your new cast of awesome characters.

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Happy Writing!