

STORY STRUCTURES

Guidance sheet

OVERVIEW

Some writers enjoy diving straight into their story and letting their ideas unfold as they go. However, most agree that having a clear structure is beneficial, even if you only create one after your first draft. A solid structure helps you to understand your story's direction and can inspire you to keep writing.

Take a look at these story structure techniques and find the one that best aligns with your subject matter and writing process.

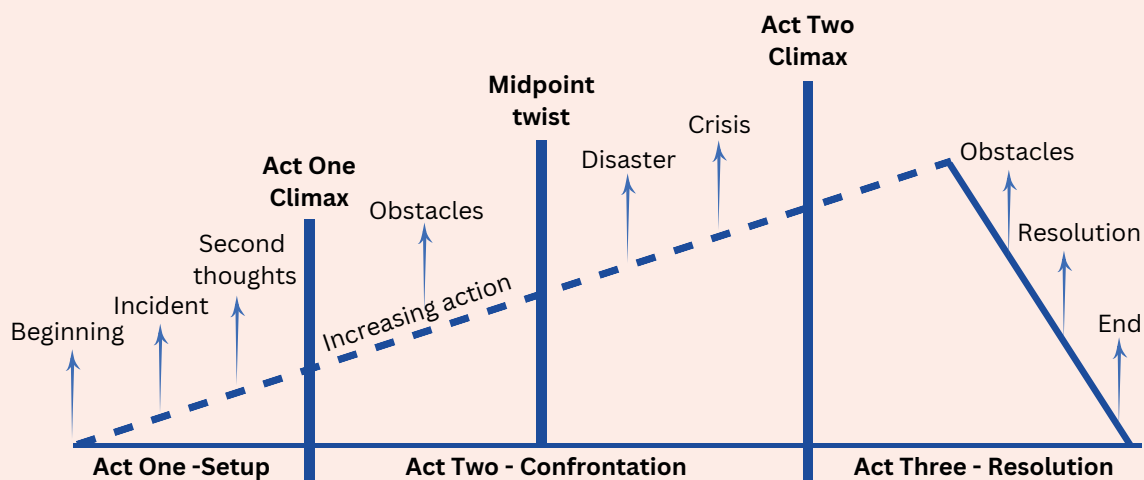
The Three-Act Structure

This classic approach to storytelling is often linked to Aristotle, who suggested that every story should have a beginning, middle and end. It's framework that is still widely used by modern writers, particularly in screenwriting.

The structure divides a narrative into three distinct parts. Act One sets the stage, providing background information and introducing a pivotal event that launches the protagonist into action. In Act Two, the protagonist often encounters challenges, and experiences a key turning point. This act builds towards a crisis, setting up the dramatic climax in Act Three, where the protagonist faces their ultimate test (such as a final showdown with the antagonist). The story concludes as loose ends are tied up, and the protagonist's journey reaches its resolution.

Act Two is usually the longest section, with the tension gradually increasing until the start of Act Three. The climax marks the peak of the story, after which the narrative winds down to its conclusion. This structure is a favourite in Hollywood and is particularly evident in Marvel superhero films and other blockbuster hits.

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The Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell popularised the idea of using archetypes and mythological patterns in storytelling, identifying a recurring structure in compelling narratives. According to Campbell, the most satisfying stories often involve a hero embarking on a quest or adventure, overcoming a major crisis to achieve victory, and eventually returning home transformed by their experiences.

Despite its title, the Hero's Journey isn't limited to epic fantasy tales. In fact, this structure underpins many modern stories across a variety of different genres.

The journey begins with the hero receiving a call to adventure. Along the way, they typically encounter a mentor or guide who provides wisdom or tools to help them face their challenges.

At their darkest moment, when failure seems inevitable, the hero experiences a revelation or breakthrough that allows them to transform. They rise from despair, complete their quest and then return to their ordinary world.

You can identify the Hero's Journey in classics like *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and within films such as *Star Wars* and *The Lion King*.

The Ivy Structure

This structure is often favoured by writers of creative non-fiction. It takes inspiration from the natural form of an ivy branch. The central stem represents the core theme or message of the piece, while the leaves symbolise individual scenes or opinions.

The leaves can be arranged one after another, or grouped together to highlight key points or create emphasis. This flexible structure allows writers to weave their narrative around a central idea, branching out in ways that support and enrich the main message.

Save the Cat Structure

Originally devised by screenwriter Blake Snyder as a guide for crafting screenplays, the Save the Cat structure can also be applied to fiction, especially if your story has a strong visual element. Borrowing elements from both the Hero's Journey and the Three-Act Structure, this framework revolves around putting your protagonist (the cat) in a precarious situation (up a tree) and then escalating their challenges.

The story begins with an opening image that establishes the protagonist's ordinary world. Before long, a catalyst disrupts their routine and forces them to take action, propelling them into Act Two and the heart of the story's challenges. In Act Two, the protagonist faces escalating obstacles, leading to a moment when all hope seems lost. However, they eventually find the resolve or inspiration needed to push forward into the climactic finale.

Key elements of this structure include cascading catastrophes, where attempts to solve problems only make things worse, and foreshadowing, such as showing an item or event early on that will play a significant role later.

This structure is a practical tool for crafting engaging, tightly paced narratives with a strong emotional payoff.