

Story Structure

By Terry Wright – TWB Press

I am a stickler for story structure, be it a novel or a short story, these elements must be evident within the pages of your manuscript. Scene starts, character arcs, and story elements, when utilized properly, create a better and more memorable reading experience for your readers.

The 3 Ps of Scene Starts:

Within the first paragraph or two of every chapter or scene break, I want to know where I am, whose head I'm in, and what problem is at issue.

Place: Set the scene. Ground the reader in a place.

Person: Establish the POV (point of view) character for the scene. Through whose eyes will I be seeing the action? Whose emotions and fears will I be experiencing throughout the scene.

Problem: What is the point of the scene? What problem needs solving? What is so pressing that I should read any further? Also known as the "hook."

Example: From Kevin J Anderson's Hidden Empire – The Saga of Seven Suns – Book 1
The first paragraph reads:

Safe in orbit high above the gas giant, Margaret looked through the observation port at continent-sized hurricanes and clouds far below. She wondered how long it would take for the entire planet to catch fire, once the experiment began.

Place. We are safe in orbit above a planet like Jupiter, in a spaceship of some kind with viewports. **Person:** We're seeing the planet through Margaret's eyes and we're hearing her thoughts as she wonders about: **Problem:** Someone is going to do an experiment that involves igniting the entire gas planet.

I'm grounded in a scene. I know who is on stage and I'm in her POV, and I'm interested in the experiment. Now I'm ready to read further.

The five Ws of character:

Characters have motivations and goals, which should cause them to make decisions that drive the plot forward. Their arcs must be complete, especially for the protagonist, but if the antagonist is another person, his/her arc is just as important.

What does s/he want?

Why does s/he want it?

Why can't s/he have it?

What must s/he do to get it?

What's at stake if s/he fails?

Example: Star Wars:

Protagonist: Luke Skywalker wants to be a Jedi knight like his father once was, but he can't because he's stuck on his uncle's farm and hasn't had the proper training. After the inciting incident when storm troopers kill his aunt and uncle, he must join a band of rebels to learn the ways of the force, defeat Darth Vader and destroy the Death Star before freedom in the galaxy is crushed forever.

Antagonist: Darth Vader, having turned to the dark side, wants to destroy the rebel alliance for the Emperor, but the force is strong among the rebels, so he must destroy Obi-Wan Kenobi, his teacher, and the newest Jedi student, Luke Skywalker in order to take over the galaxy or face the Emperor's wrath.

Supporting character: Princess Leia wants to defeat the Empire so her people on Alderaan can live in peace. When the Death Star destroys her planet, she must get the Death Star's blueprints to the rebel leader in hopes of finding a weakness so they can destroy it before it destroys the rebel base.

If characters just move about on the page and lots of neat stuff happens to them, the story is not going to be fulfilling for the reader. Story is about characters in conflict. Characters who strive for goals and suffer high stakes if they fail make for more interesting reading.

The Elements of Story:

These are the pieces-parts of the story, that when utilized properly, make for a better reading experience.

ACT I

Normal World: Characters are introduced in their normal world.

The inciting incident: The event that changes or threatens to change that normal world.

Call to Action: Characters must do something to return that world to normal. Usually the character turns down the call, at first, but something personal is thrown in the mix, usually with high stakes, and the character then takes up the call to action. Goals are set, plans are made, and the journey begins.

ACT II

Rising Action: Plans are put in motion toward achieving character goals, but obstacles get in the way of those goals, problems mount, drama escalates.

Rising Stakes: Complications lead to higher stakes for your characters.

Turning Point: Characters are forced to make decisions that send them in different directions to achieve their goals, or possibly even change their goals.

Black moment: This is the point when all is lost. There seems to be no way the character(s) can reach their goals. This usually ends with another Turning Point.

ACT III

Climax: Conflict between characters comes to a head, a final battle where lessons learned along the way come into play and give the protagonist the edge to win in the end.

Resolution: The conflict is resolved. Characters have changed, for better or worse, having reached or failed to reach their original goals, and usually, the world returns to normal, or a better normal than in the beginning.

Tension, Conflict, Drama, and Suspense = Emotional Impact:

Nobody wants to read about the happy family. Story comes from conflict between characters, which creates tension for the reader, which leads to drama (hopefully exciting drama) and this drama is propelled forward with suspense, the thing that makes readers have to turn the page. Every chapter/scene needs to end with a cliffhanger. This entire bundle of 'tools' we writers use to engage our readers must pay off in emotional impact. This is the golden nugget that makes a story memorable. Good stories evoke emotion from the reader. Readers remember how a good story made them FEEL. So after every word you write, every sentence, every paragraph, every scene, every chapter, ask yourself this question: "How is my reader going to FEEL about this?" Write for the sake of the reader, not for the sake of the story.

So now you know what I look for in a story. Granted, every story is not written this way, but every great story has many of these elements firmly in place (if not all). So before you submit your short story, novella, or novel, see how close you've come to this formula, or better still, fill in the blanks before you start:

What does my character want? GOAL _____

Why does my character want it? MOTIVATION _____

Why can't my character have it? OBSTACLE _____

What must my character do to get it? PLOT _____

What's at stake if my character fails? HIGH STAKES _____

What is my character's normal world? _____

What is the inciting incident? _____

What is my character's call to action? _____

What does my character do? _____

What are the complications along the way? _____

What happens to the stakes for my characters? _____

What is the main turning point? _____

What does my character do? _____

What happens in the black moment? _____

What happens in the climactic battle? _____

What has changed in the end? _____