

Tricks to Make Your Fiction Irresistible

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Shareable Encouragement

Write His Answer

Live Online Christian Writers Conference

July 30 - August 2, 2025

God gave you a voice.
Use it for His glory.

If you've ever doubted your calling to write,
let this be your reminder:
God doesn't make mistakes.

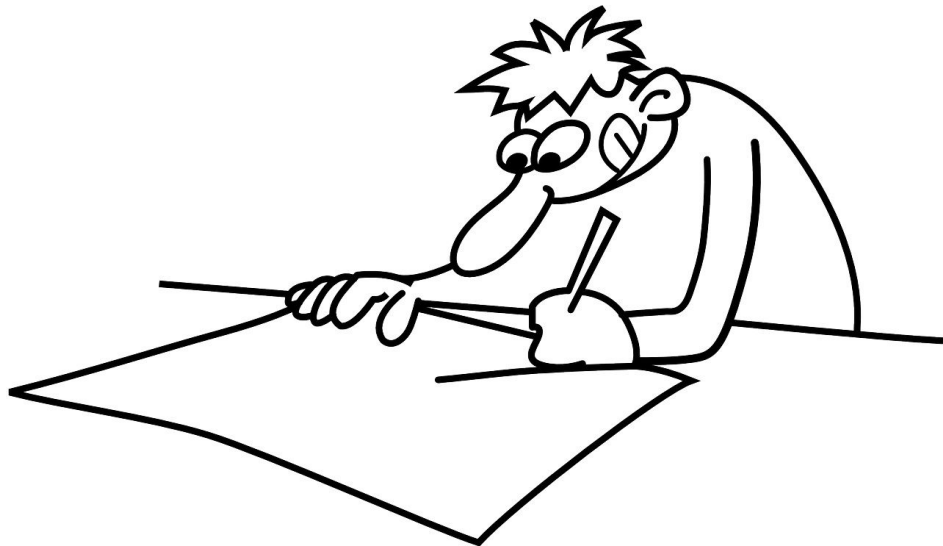
*"Now it is required that those who have been given a trust
must prove faithful." 1 Corinthians 4:2 (NIV)*

Conference.WriteHisAnswer.com

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Note: This lecture will go really fast! Don't worry about writing down everything. You can get a copy of these slides by emailing me at amydeardon@gmail.com.



Also don't forget to download the handout on the WHAC site or at www.amydeardon.blog/free-downloads



Before we get started...

If you would like to, please introduce yourself!

What do you write? Where are you from?

What is your email address?



If you have a question during the talk, don't raise your hand on the chat because I won't see it and I don't have a monitor.

Instead, please just shout out your question.

That being said, please don't do this unless it's really important since it may be disruptive to others and we have a lot of material to cover. I'm going to leave time at the end for questions.



Congratulations Writer! You are changing
the world one word at a time.



Who are you? I'm assuming for today's talk that:

- You are working hard to write your story or stories.
- Your friends and critique group love your words.
- You are hopeful to see your name on a book cover soon.
- You may even have published or self-published something.



At this conference you're hoping to learn things that will move you further on your publishing journey.



Fiction has many moving parts that can seem overwhelming.



This lecture covers a few critical elements you'll need to master in order to become published.



Ready? Let's Go!

Outline

High-Concept Premise

Plot

Reverse Outline

Pacing

Each Scene is a Story

Character Arc

Great Beginnings

Outline

High-Concept Premise

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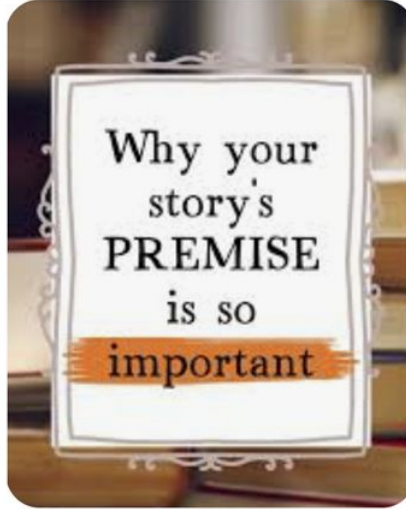
Each Scene is a Story

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Your High-Concept Premise makes your story stand out to agents, editors, and readers.



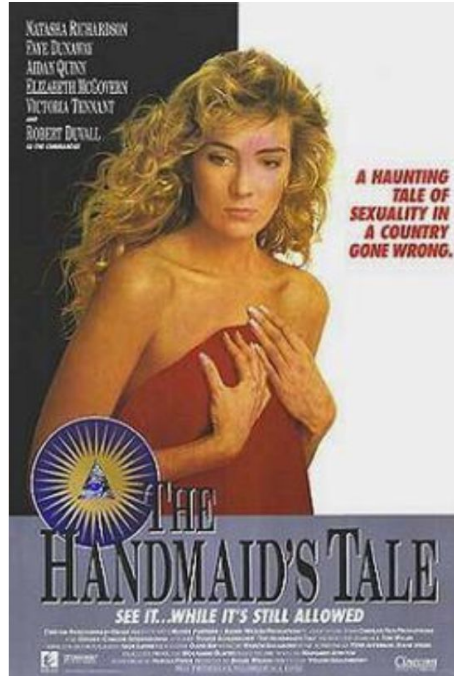
A High Concept Premise:

- Has a surprising hook.
- Can be summed up in one sentence.
- Easy to visualize the whole story.



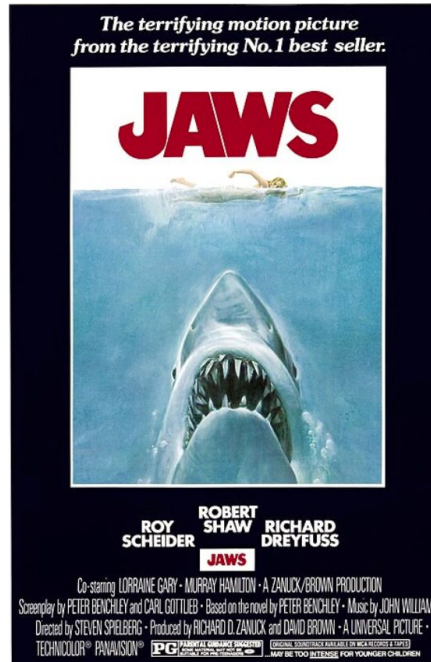
The Martian

A stranded astronaut must use his ingenuity and skills to survive on Mars while awaiting rescue.



The Handmaid's Tale

When the United States becomes a totalitarian government amidst a fertility crisis, the women are forced into sexual servitude.



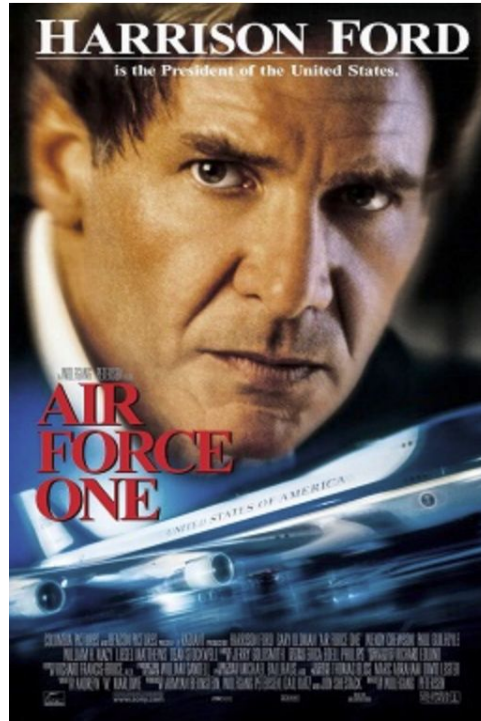
Jaws

A shark terrorizes a beach town during tourist season.



Groundhog Day

A man relives the same day over and over again.



Air Force One

The airplane carrying the president of the United States is hijacked.



Harry Potter

A teenager discovers he's a wizard and is invited to a secret magic school.



How do you create a High Concept Premise?
Some ideas...



Ask "What if..." and twist it.
What if you could clone dinosaurs?



Pair two unrelated ideas.
Kindergarten + Die Hard.



Do the unexpected.
What if the monster was the hero?



Exaggerate something normal.
What if your health app could predict exactly when you die?

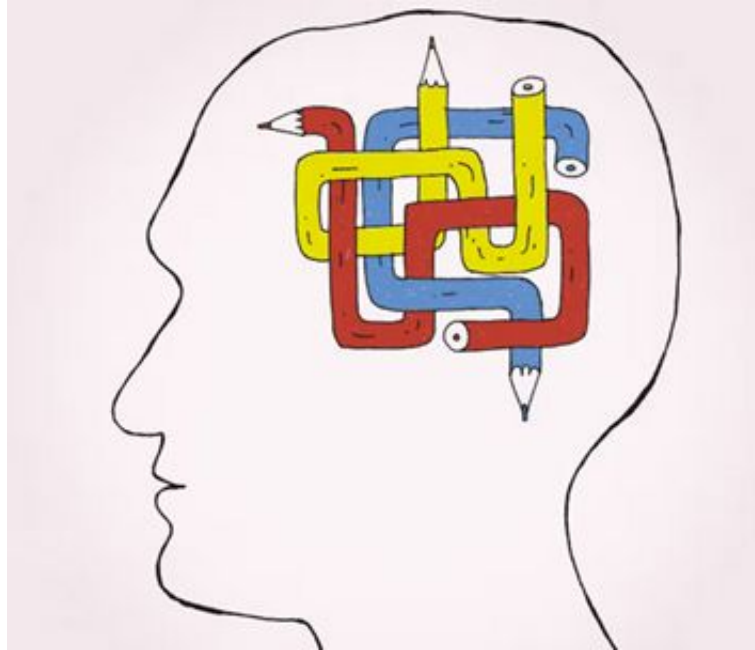
Exercise: Take Out Your Notebook!



High Concept Premise

WHAT IF...?

What's the “what if” question behind your story?



Does it have an inherent conflict or twist?
Does it feel fresh or unexpected?



Can your idea be explained in one sentence?

What's the "what if" question behind your story?

Does it have an inherent conflict or twist?

Does it feel fresh or unexpected?

Can your idea be explained in one sentence?



Time's Up!

If you would like, put your High Concept Premise
in the chat for group discussion!

Rubric for High Concept Premise

1. Can someone quickly understand your premise in one sentence?
2. Does your premise have a fresh twist or bold idea at its core?
3. Does your premise suggest strong conflict or high stakes with built-in tension, drama, and urgency?
4. Does your premise appeal to a wide audience?
5. Does your premise spark immediate curiosity or emotion?

Outline

~~High Concept Premise~~

Plot

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The story is a JOURNEY of some sort. A good story must have:

- Story GOAL and multiple mini-goals
- Story STAKES and multiple mini-stakes
- Story OBSTACLE (usually an antagonist) and multiple mini-obstacles



The STORY GOAL is the thing that your hero is pursuing throughout the story. It can be defined by several characteristics:

- The story goal is a real **external thing** rather than a wifty internal state of being.
- The attainment, or not, of the story goal is **very clear** by the end of the story.
- The hero actively pursues the story goal by creating a **series of mini-story goals** throughout the story.



Examples of a Story Goal:

- to win a dance contest
- to open a homeless shelter in the community
- to send a criminal to jail



The STORY STAKES are the **reason** the story goal is so important to the hero. Your hero must have very good positive and negative reasons for pursuing a story goal that will no doubt be uncomfortable and even dangerous to attain. For best results your hero should pursue the story goal for **altruistic** reasons.

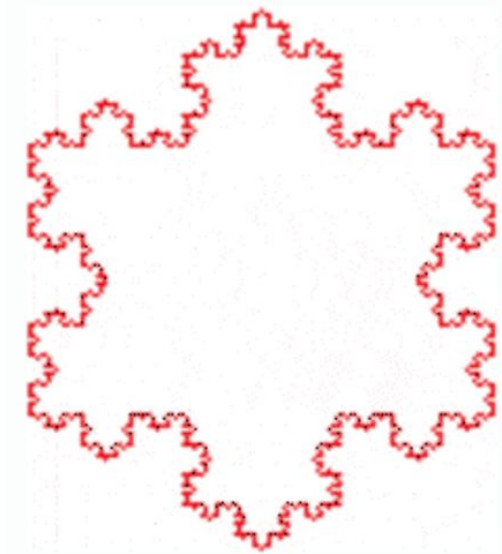


- The hero wants to win a dance contest so that he/she can use the prize money to pay for little sister's college tuition
- The hero wants to open a homeless shelter in the community so that people like the hero's uncle, a Vietnam veteran, won't die on the streets
- The hero wants to bring the criminal to justice so the criminal won't continue to hurt people like the hero's parents



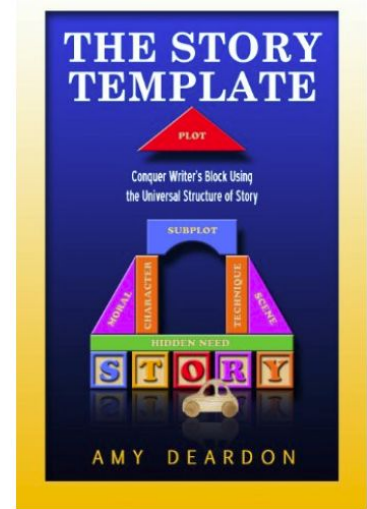
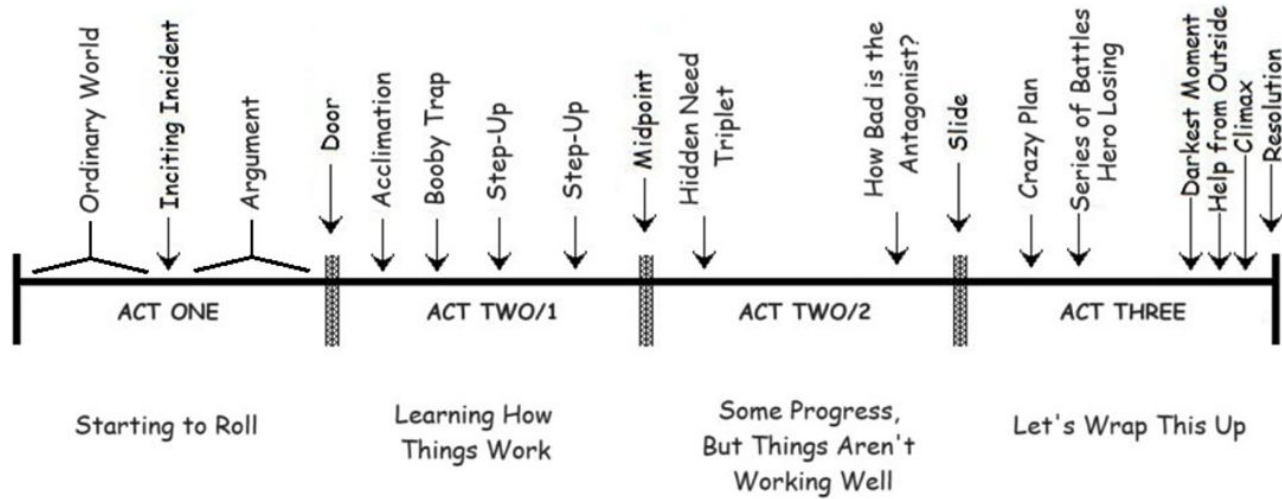
The STORY OBSTACLE works best when it is personified into an antagonist or **villain** that fights your hero tooth and nail for the story goal.

Your hero also will fight **many smaller obstacles**—internal and external—throughout your story.



According to Randy Ingermanson's *Snowflake*, your story should have "3 disasters and an ending."

This means your plot should have a major event that changes the story direction at the 25% mark, the 50% mark, and the 75% mark.



This diagram is from my book *The Story Template: Conquer Writer's Block Using the Universal Structure of Story*. The “shape” of the story is universal. There are many iterations of demonstrating the story shape in the how-to literature eg *Save the Cat*, *Hero's Journey*, *Syd Field*, etc. etc.

Outline

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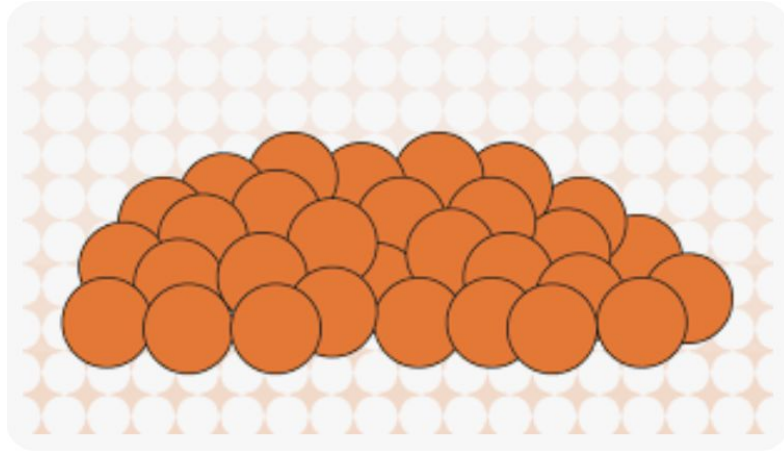
Each Scene is a Story

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A Reverse Outline is a great way to analyze your manuscript.



You can use your reverse outline for many things:

- Analyze plot and story structure.
- Balance your subplots.
- Determine character change and interactions.
- Measure the pacing.
- Find holes and extra scenes.



You can use a Word or Google doc with bullets to create your reverse outline.

Or if you want to get fancy, use Excel or Google sheets and color code your entries.

Copy: Create my own personal narrative

Name _____ Date _____ Mrs. Thompson

The Five Elements of a Story

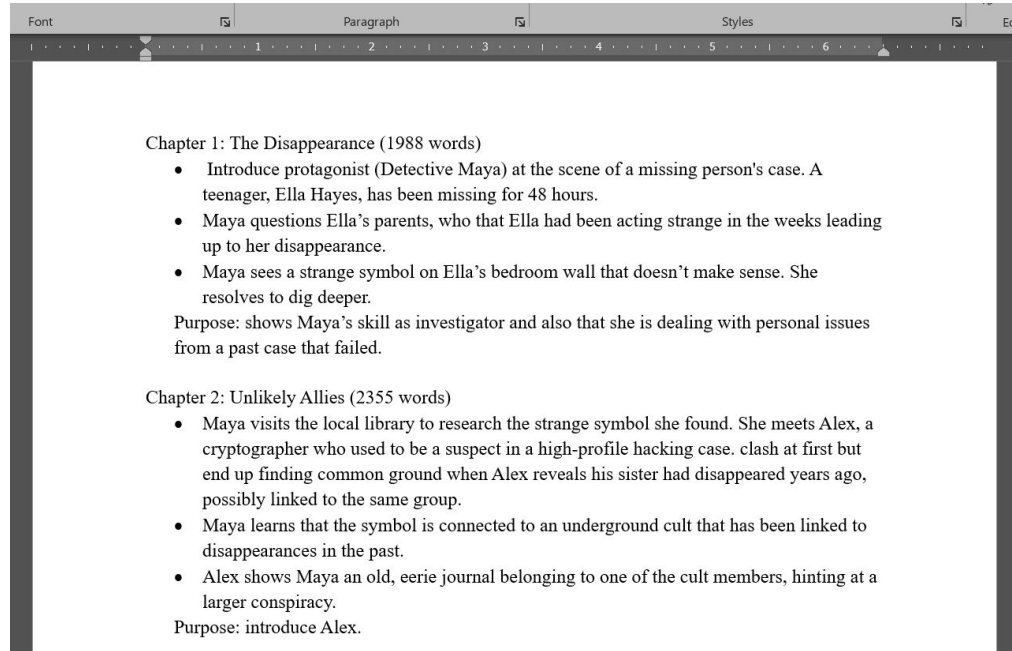
Use this sheet to record the five elements of a story. Then you can write your own story about a thing or place or person or event.

Learn From the Song, Five Things

| The Elements | Definition | Examples in the Song | Your Examples |
|--------------|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Setting | * place * time | * castle | * forest/woods |
| Plot | * sequence of events * beginning, middle, end | * 4 men at sea * first, next, last | * long boy * long man * old man |
| Characters | * People / Animals / Things that carry out action | * dog * Harry Potter | * boy * tree |
| Conflict | * Problem * INT - Internal * EXT - External | * Pudd in face | * boy unhappy |
| Purpose | * Main idea * Lesson learned | * Sacrifice * Do Your best | * Give to others |

You can even create a sheet template for each chapter with:

- Setting
- Plot
- Characters
- Conflict
- Purpose



For each scene, list the word count, the main character(s), what happens, and why you included it (what it does for your story).

Outline

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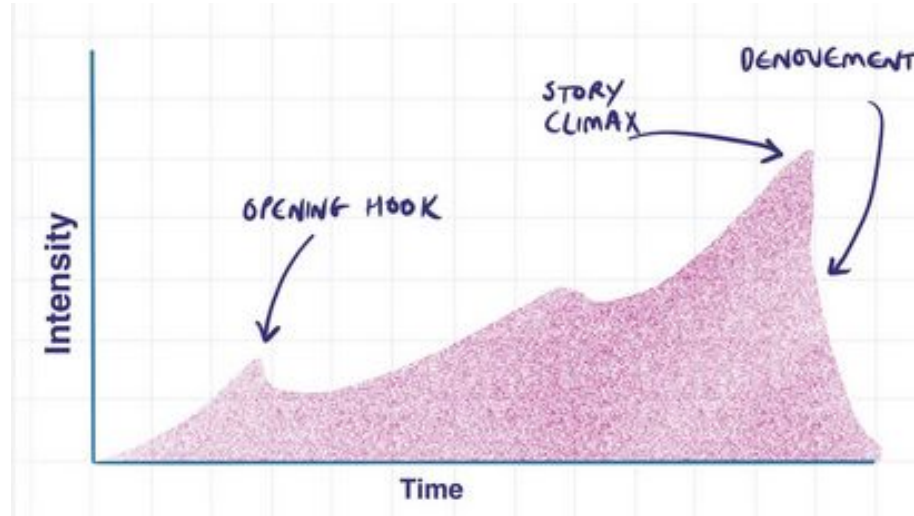


Pacing refers to how “fast” or “slow” your story seems to the reader.



For a story that seems neither too rushed nor too draggy, you need BALANCE.

- Good mix of action and reflection.
- Steadily rising tension.



Your reverse outline is an outstanding method to track pacing in your draft and fix it as needed.

STORY HOOKS



Opening Hook

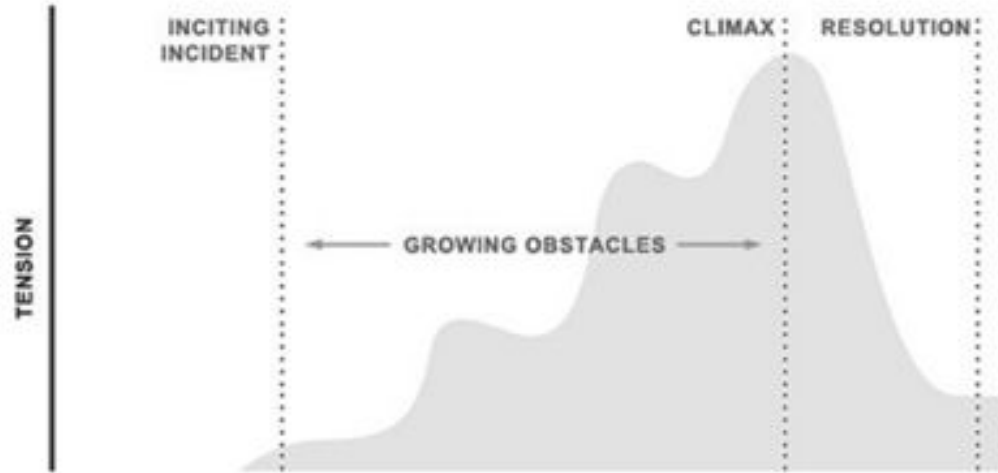
Is conflict and tension introduced in the first sentence, paragraph, and page?



Scene Variety

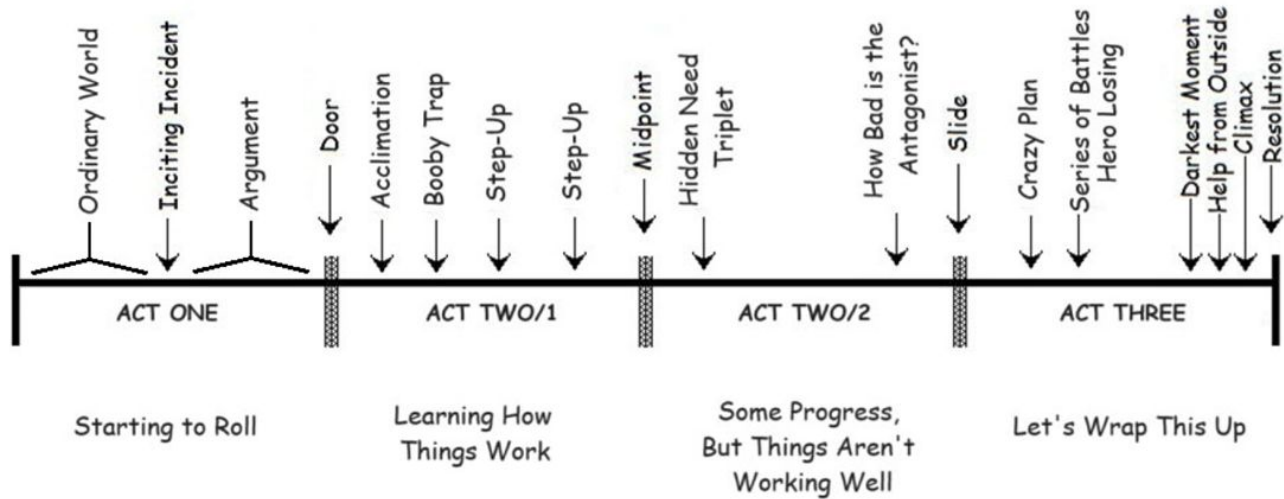
Is there a good mix of fast scenes and slower reflection that balance intensity with internal character development?

THE TRADITIONAL STORY ARC



Rising Tension

Are the story stakes continuing to multiply and get more severe?



Story Shape

Do plot points fall where they should?



Resolution

Does the story wrap things up quickly, with a resolution that isn't too long? (Think Tolkien's *The Return of the King* for problems in this area).

Outline

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Each Scene is a Story

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Every scene needs to have a purpose.

1. Goals 
2. Conflicts 
3. Stakes 
4. Choices 

It's easy to keep your story from dragging if you write each scene as a mini-story with:

- Goal
- Stakes
- Obstacles



Each scene should have tension.
Tension = uncertainty about at least one thing.

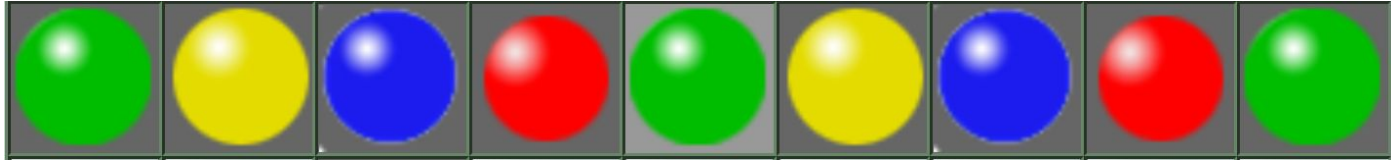


While there are many techniques to increase tension, today I'm going to give you a MAGIC TRICK that is easy and always works if you do it correctly.

You can also find an article explaining this magic trick on my website at www.amydeardon.blog/free-downloads



Here we go...



Think of your story as consisting of a string of small goals leading from start to finish on the way to reach your story goal.

As one small goal question is answered, another immediately pops up. This uncertainty generates reader curiosity and tension.

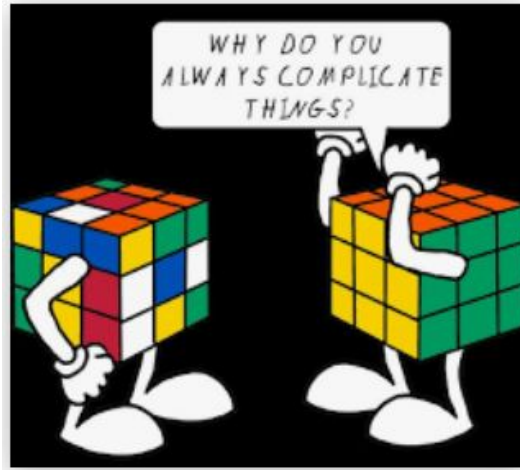


The drama that unfolds in each scene is a good place to answer one story goal question while simultaneously posing another.



To create a new small goal in a scene, ask a *specific* question that can be answered by a YES or NO.

- Will Abby be able to find the note in time?
- Will Jack be able to escape his pursuers?
- Will Shelby realize that Robert is behind the door listening to her?



At the end of each scene, answer the question in such a way that the protagonist's situation is worse (and/or the antagonist's situation is better):

- Yes, but...
- No, and furthermore...



Avoid plain “yes” or “no” answers when answering the story goal:

YES → stops the action since there’s nowhere to go.

NO → the scene is unnecessary since nothing has changed.

Yes but...

Will Abby be able to find the note in time?

Yes, Abby finds the note, but it doesn't contain the information she needs. Now she's going to have to... (new goal).

Yes but...

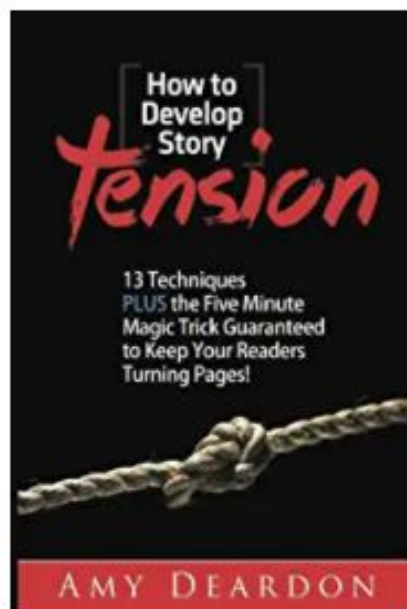
Will Jack be able to escape his pursuers?

Yes, Jack escapes, but his car touches off a fire and he's trapped. Now he's going to have to... (new goal).

No and furthermore...

Will Shelby realize that Robert is behind the door listening to her?

No, Shelby doesn't notice the cracked closet door, and furthermore is tricked to spill her secret so that Robert hears it. Now she has to... (new goal).



Check out my book for more ways to increase story tension.

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Every well-balanced story should have a hero with a hidden need. A hidden need is a lack of something that holds the hero back from emotionally functioning well.

Some examples of a hidden need are

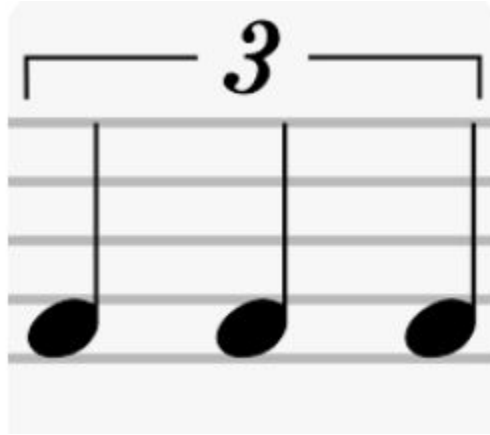
- fear to love
- fear to work with others (lone wolf)
- love of money over ethics



It's important to remember that your hero's hidden need **hurts other people**, not just the hero.

During the story your hero solves this hidden need.

This solution is the story quality that resonates with your readers.



How is the Hidden Need solved? I'm glad you asked.

I discovered during my story analyses that the hidden need generally is solved in the third quarter of the story (act 2 part 2).

This solution occurs in a specific sequence called a **Hidden Need Triplet** that often takes place as a separated mini-story right after the midpoint.



The stages of the Hidden Need Triplet:

- The weakness is shown
- The weakness is solved
- The weakness is shown to be solved



Two Examples...



U571 is an exciting movie that is flawlessly structured and well worth watching. It came out in 2000 and stars Matthew McConaughey, Bill Paxton, and Jon Bon Jovi. The story is about an American submarine crew that stealthily attempts to capture a German submarine to obtain the Nazi Enigma encoding machine.

HERO SET-UP

The hero, Tyler, is second-in-command of an American submarine who, while he is a good “big brother” to his crew, does not decisively command. At the midpoint Tyler is thrust into the leadership role when he and his crew are stranded on a crippled Nazi U-Boat with limited options to safely reach shore.

HIDDEN NEED DEMONSTRATED

The crew asks Tyler what they will do. Tyler tells them he doesn’t know.

HIDDEN NEED SOLVED

The chief petty officer takes Tyler aside and tells him he must never say he doesn’t know—the captain must always have the answer. The confidence of his men and their ability to perform depends on this.

HIDDEN NEED SHOWN TO BE SOLVED

Directly afterwards, as Tyler’s crew surveys the area from the deck, a small Nazi airplane approaches the crew. Since they are on a Nazi U-Boat Tyler instructs his men to wave as if they are Germans. However one of Tyler’s enlisted men orders another man to fire the deck gun. Tyler shouts “NO!” The sailor does not fire the gun. The plane passes over.

Tyler punches out the crew member and growls, “This is not a democracy!”



This was the first Star Wars that came out in 1977. The story goes that George Lucas wrote this script with a copy of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* on his knee. I don't know if that's true, but this story certainly has the mythic elements that are so popular with some storytellers. BTW if you're interested in using myth structures and archetypes I recommend Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* and James Frey's *How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth*.

HERO SET-UP

Luke is a kid who has not yet learned to act as an adult. Once Han Solo's Millennium Falcon is pulled into the Death Star (the midpoint), Han and Luke decide to rescue Princess Leia who is locked in a prison cell on the Death Star. They grab two uniforms to impersonate Stormtroopers then find the prison block.

HIDDEN NEED DEMONSTRATED

Luke and Han release Leia from her jail cell, but once they have her Luke doesn't have a clue for how they'll escape. Leia blasts a hole into the wall and they slide down a garbage chute.

HIDDEN NEED SOLVED

In the garbage collection area, Luke is pulled underwater and almost drowns, then resurfaces. (Note: this is also a mythic death-and-rebirth beat).

HIDDEN NEED SHOWN TO BE SOLVED

Right after they escape from the trash compactor, the group is chased by Stormtroopers. Luke and Leia are separated and trapped at the edge of a canyon. Luke swings Leia across the chasm.

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The first one to ten pages are make-or-break to determine if your reader is going to stay with your story.



Give Context and Emotional Connection

A compelling opening is something the reader can immediately understand and be moved by. Don't start by just describing something — explain why it matters to a character as well, or else the reader won't care.

Weak Opening:

The bomb went off at precisely 6:03 am, ripping through the quiet street and sending a fireball into the sky. Sarah jolted awake in her bed three blocks away, heart pounding. She stumbled to the window, the sky already glowing orange. Somewhere, sirens began to wail.

Strong Opening:

At 6:03 am, the letter slid under Sarah's door. No signature, no return address -- just five words in stark black ink: I know what you did. Sarah read it five times, her heart lodged in her throat as dark spots crowded her vision. Downstairs, a door thudded shut. The messenger had vanished without a trace, but someone knew. And they wanted Sarah to KNOW they knew.

Don't Open in a Void

Imagine you are blindfolded and dropped into a place that could be literally anywhere. This is your reader. He needs to understand what he's looking at and what's going on to start understanding your story.

While you don't want to overload description up front (or anywhere else, for that matter), you do need to fill in a few details so the reader isn't disoriented.



Weak Opening:

She thought about running. About the way the air felt when she moved fast, like freedom wrapped in wind. The world was heavy, pressing in from all sides, and she couldn't breathe. Everything was too loud. Or maybe too quiet. She didn't know anymore.

Strong Opening:

The bitter smell of smoke lingered in the air as Charles stepped under the yellow tape. Police lights pulsed against the brick walls, turning the alley into a stuttering wash of red and blue. He kept his hands in his coat pockets, eyes on the scorched doorway. It didn't look like an accident. And if he was right, then someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make it LOOK like an accident.



Anchor Your Dialogue

While dialogue is punchy and immediate, if it's confusing the reader isn't going to be intrigued — he's going to be frustrated and close your book. Just like setting, give a few clues in your dialogue so the reader can figure out what's going on.

Weak Opening:

"You're really going to do it?"

"I don't have a choice."

"You always have a choice."

"Not this time."

"What if they find out?"

"They won't."

"But if they do--"

"They just won't, OK? Trust me."

Strong Opening:

"You're bleeding," Marilyn said, reaching for his arm.

Joe pulled away, wiping his hand on his jacket. "It's not mine."

They stood in the stairwell, one flight above the chaos -- sirens blaring outside, footsteps thundering below. Smoke curled under the exit door.

Marilyn stared at him. "What did you do?"

He didn't answer.



Don't Withhold Too Much Information

Some writers want to intrigue their reader by being mysterious. Without context, however, the reader is not going to be intrigued but confused, and he will close your book.

Weak Opening:

They said the stars would whisper when it was time.

Tonight they screamed.

She moved through the shadows, bare feet silent against the stone. The blade was where she left it -- ice cold and waiting for her.

Everything was ending. Or maybe beginning.

It didn't matter anymore.

She was ready.

Strong Opening:

Lila pressed her hand to the temple door, praying it would open before the moon slipped behind the clouds. If it closed, she'd be locked out for another cycle -- and the blade would be gone by morning. The Emperor's guards were already on the ridge. She could see the torchlight flickering through the mist.

One minute. Maybe less.

She glanced over her shoulder, heart hammering. If they caught her trespassing -- after her brother's arrest -- they wouldn't exile her. They'd execute her.



Limit Backstory and World-Building

Until your reader cares about your characters and story, he isn't going to be even a little interested in background stuff.

Weak Opening:

In the time before the Sundering, when the twin moons still rose as one, the kingdoms of Alenvar and Drosai had not yet fractured beneath the weight of the Great Accord. The Magelords of the Eastern Reach still held dominion over the skyways, and the elemental rites had not been outlawed by the Ninth Emperor's decree. But when the Godveil cracked -- splitting the Realmroot into seven planes -- chaos swept through the Veiled Lands and cast the Chosen into exile. Only then did the Star Savors rise.

Strong Opening:

The guards at the border checkpoint didn't bother to look up as Ro slipped her forged travel slip onto the table. Good. That meant the charm was still working. She kept her head low, hood drawn, the scent of burnt copper clinging to her robes from the forge she'd passed on her way through the Alchemy District.

Just five more steps and she'd be across the threshold into Imperial territory -- where magic was banned, and where the name *Ro Takara* was still splashed across wanted posters.



Don't Try to Sound Literary

Again, don't put irrelevant stuff in your story, especially at the front. The reader doesn't care if you're smart — he wants a good story.

Weak Opening:

The sun spilled its molten gold across the emerald hills, each blade of grass trembling with dew-laced reverence beneath the kiss of dawn. A gossamer breeze meandered through the heather, rustling secrets older than time itself. The sky blushed a pale coral, as if the heavens themselves were shy of waking. In the distance, the river sang its eternal lullaby to the slumbering earth.

Strong Opening:

I was twenty-nine minutes late to my ex-boyfriend's wedding, which, in hindsight, was the most punctual I'd been to any of his events. I sat in the back pew, clutching a gift bag with a bottle of mid-shelf champagne and a card that said, Congrats on your next bad decision.

Technically, I wasn't bitter.

I just hadn't planned on showing up without a date.

Exercise: Take Out Your Notebook!



Story Opening

Why does your opening matter to your character?

Is your opening located somewhere physical?

Does your dialogue have a context?

Are you disclosing enough information that the reader isn't lost?

Have you avoided backstory and world-building except through your character's eyes?

Are you avoiding writing descriptions in an omniscient tone?



Time's Up!

If you would like, put up to 100 words of your opening in the chat for group discussion!!

Rubric for Story Opening

1. Does the opening immediately capture the reader's attention? Is it intriguing, provocative, or emotionally compelling?
2. Does the opening establish a strong sense of time, place, and mood? Is the setting immersive or intriguing?
3. Are the characters introduced in a way that is intriguing, relatable, or memorable? Do we get a sense of their personality or goals?
4. Is the author's voice distinctive and does it make the reader want to keep reading?
5. Is there an indication of conflict or a problem to be solved, whether internal or external? Do the stakes feel relevant or interesting?
6. Is the reader immediately engaged without feeling lost or overwhelmed by too much information?



In Conclusion...



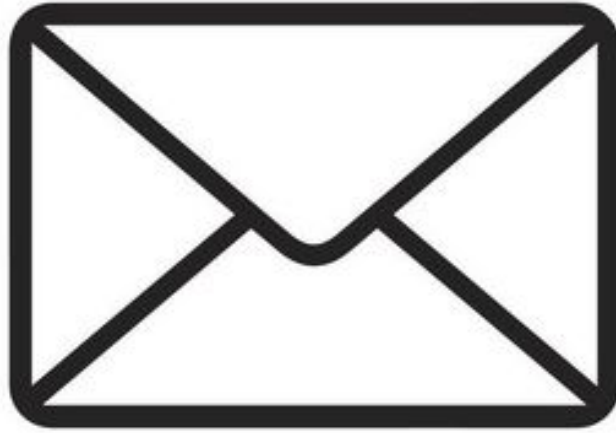
This was a firehose of information.



Make sure you get the handout and slides and take the time to study this stuff — IT IS IMPORTANT!

Handout: WHAC site or
www.amydeardon.blog/free-downloads

Slides: send me an email at amydeardon@gmail.com



I'd love to hear how you're doing!

Send me an email if you like at
amydeardon@gmail.com



Happy conference!



That's all, folks!