

The Magical Writer

The Craft: Five-Act Structures

Breaking a story into distinct “acts” helps narrow down the work that needs to be done at a given moment, and gives us a way to situate ourselves in the overall plot.

I like working with five acts, based on Shakespeare’s plays. Screenwriters sometimes speak of a three-act structure, which is similar but less nuanced. Here is an outline of a five-act structure, and what I aim to accomplish in each act:

Act I — Introduce characters, milieu, and early plot promises and complications.

- Tip — introduce characters amid early conflict while showing the milieu — try to have every paragraph move all three aspects — character, conflict, and milieu — forward. Aim to have most characters introduced by the end of Act I or early Act II.

Act II — Interweave characters, introduce more promises and subplots — increase the complexity of the plot.

- Example — in a mystery novel, a detective has two cases — the murder of her beloved Aunt Beulah and the theft of the royal diamonds. They are separate cases and make competing demands on the protagonist’s time and attention.

Act III — Increasing complexity. At end of Act III comes the *pivot* — the moment when separate plot strands clearly and dramatically coalesce, and the protagonist gets dragged deeper into the plot (see page two for more on pivots).

- Example — the pivot is when the detective realizes that the murder of Aunt Gertrude is connected with the theft of the royal diamonds — and that Aunt Gertrude may in fact have been the mastermind. The separate plots come crashing together.

- Often, at the pivot, the detective and reader will have a theory about “whodunit” (modify this concept for other genres) — but this obvious solution will be refuted in Act IV.

Act IV — The now-unified plot, which momentarily seemed clearer, gets much muddier — at the end of Act IV, we should be at maximum confusion.

- Example — in a mystery, the detective enters Act IV with a leading suspect — but soon the suspect winds up dead, throwing the detective’s theory into confusion.

Act V — Climax and denouement — all plot strands and characters come together. A “set piece” such as a wedding (see separate handout) can bring everyone together for the grand finale. Preserve suspense to the end by keeping some plot threads and promises open. Once all significant questions are answered, the story is over.

- Example — in a mystery, even when we know “whodunit,” keep the final resolution veiled as long as possible. A classic tactic is the villain, finally unmasked, taunting the captive detective. The detective is about to be executed — but first the villain must gloatingly explicate the entire mystery, clue by clue. By maintaining suspense about how the villain finally will be thwarted, the author can wrap up other promises without losing our attention.

Exercises on page 2

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For more information, contact George, <george@directaction.org>

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe, c. 1800.

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The Craft — Structure

Elements of Plot

Once you've developed your overarching plot, you can use devices such as subplots, sub-climaxes, and a mid-story pivot to give texture to the narrative.

Subplots and sub-climaxes

Within the overarching plot, each of these acts might be broken into any number of shorter chapters — *The Da Vinci Code* uses nearly a hundred chapters (each ending with a cliff-hanger) to maintain breakneck pacing. Yet the book as a whole maps neatly as a five-act structure.

Each chapter, scene, or subsection of a book has its own plot arc. You can place sub-climaxes along the way as some of the lesser promises and mysteries are cleared up.

For example, in *Casablanca*, we have a sub-climax when Ilsa pulls a gun on Rick midway through the movie. The subplot of their old relationship comes to a climax here, and has its own denouement as they come together for a soft-focus kiss. Luckily for the movie, many promises and plot threads remain open, and instead of defusing the tension, the kiss is a pivot that drags Ilsa and Rick deeper into the plot.

These sub-climaxes give nuance and shape to the plot arc, carrying our emotions up and down like a roller coaster on the way to the ultimate payoff.

Note — Plot structures exist to help us craft our narratives, not to shackle us. Adapt these structures to suit your own needs. Use them when they support your work, and discard them if they interfere.

The Pivot

Many novels and screenplays have a mid-plot pivot — a moment when the entire plot suddenly takes a sharp and clarifying turn. Specifically:

Separate subplots come together.

In *Dirty Dancing*, the two subplots involving Penny's abortion and Baby's flirtation with Johnny crash together when Baby is forced to wake her father (a doctor) in the middle of the night. His response — humane yet patriarchal — unifies these subplots while greatly raising the stakes for the young people.

The protagonist is pulled more deeply into the story. Early in *Casablanca*, Rick is a jaded, alcoholic voyeur. But when the desperate Ilsa pulls a gun on him, followed by their first kiss in years, Rick is wrenched into the thick of the danger.

The characters' core challenges are articulated, and the conflicts are internalized. As the subplots merge, the protagonists are forced to step up not just to a difficult situation, but to their own deepest challenges. As the conflict is internalized, they are forced to "come of age," a theme of many Hollywood films. In *Casablanca*, once Rick and Ilsa kiss, he is forced to confront not just the Nazi authorities, but also his own bleakest shadows — he must make decisions he has long evaded.

Everything is on the table. All major characters should be onstage before this point, and all conflicts and subplots introduced. The pivot brings out the deep conflicts of the story and shows how the various subplots are actually all part of one overarching challenge.

Writing Exercises

Plot Mapping

Re-watch a favorite film and identify the major parts of the plot:

- When and how were key characters introduced? Were characters introduced amid conflict or as part of a milieu?
- At what point did you understand the major theme of the plot (presuming you didn't know it beforehand)?
- Can you identify a mid-story pivot, where subplots merge and protagonists are pulled more deeply into the story? Can you name one key scene where this happens?
- When is the plot's major conflict clear? Is this before or after the pivot?

Conflict Inventory

In a story you are writing, or using your autobiography, make a list of several major conflicts or challenges to cover.

What is the common thread of these conflicts and challenges? Can you identify the core conflict or challenge?

Can you open the narrative with separate conflicts and challenges that later merge toward the common thread? Can you use the subplots to maintain interest, letting the core conflict emerge slowly?

Can you envision a dramatic pivot in which the subplots will come together? What might trigger this synthesis? Is it a sudden discovery? A dying person's revelation? A seemingly minor conflict that suddenly escalates and lays bare a core tension? (Notice the cliff-hanger possibilities here.)