

Novel Structure

What is plot? What is structure?

- *Plot* is a series of interconnected events in which every occurrence has a specific purpose. A plot is all about establishing connections, suggesting causes, and and how they relate to each other.
- *Structure* (also known as narrative structure), is the overall design or layout of your story.

Narrative Structure is about both these things:

Story

- The content of a story
- Raw materials of dramatic action as they might be described in chronological order
- About trying to determine the key conflicts, main characters, setting and events
- "Who," "what," and "where"

Plot

- The form used to tell the story
- How the story is told and in what order
- About how, and at what stages, the key conflicts are set up and resolved
- "How" and "when"

Story Answers These Questions

1. Where is the story set?
2. What event starts the story?
3. Who are the main characters?
4. What conflict(s) do they face? What is at stake?
5. What happens to the characters as they face this conflict?
6. What is the outcome of this conflict?
7. What is the ultimate impact on the characters?

Plot Answers These Questions

8. How and when is the major conflict in the story set up?
9. How and when are the main characters introduced?
10. How is the story moved along so that the characters must face the central conflict?
11. How and when is the major conflict set up to propel them to its conclusion?
12. How and when does the story resolve most of the major conflicts set up at the outset?

Basic Linear Story:
Beginning, Middle & End

Ancient (335 B.C.)Greek philosopher and scientist, Aristotle said that every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In ancient Greek, the protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe

Beginning **Middle** **End**

Exercise

- Write down your plot beginning, middle, and end points (either of a story you'd like to write, are writing, or have written)

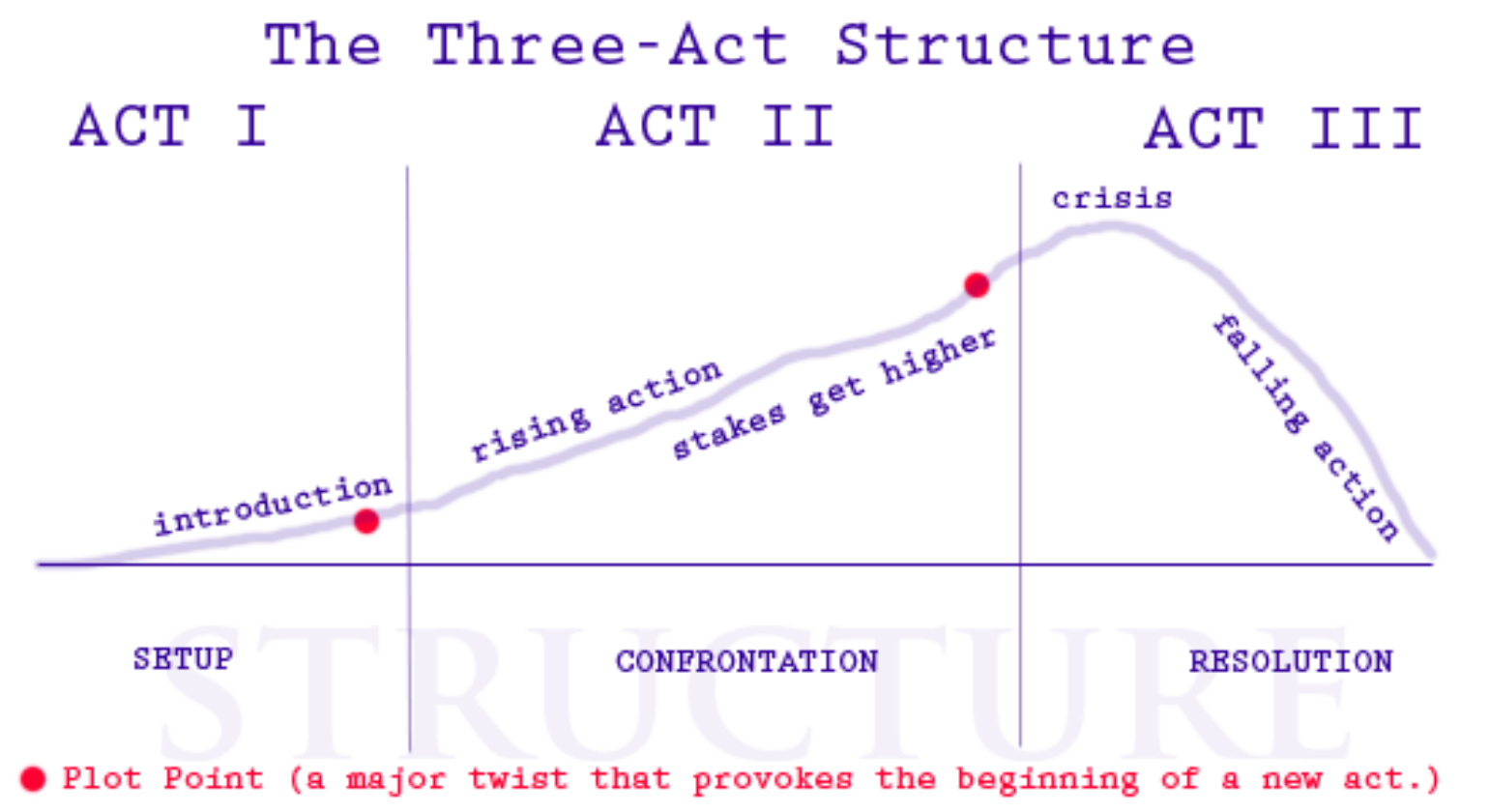


Also Known as the Three-Acts Story Arc

Act One Beginning/Exposition (Set-up)	Act Two Middle (Confrontation/Rising Action)	Act Three End (Resolution/Denouement)

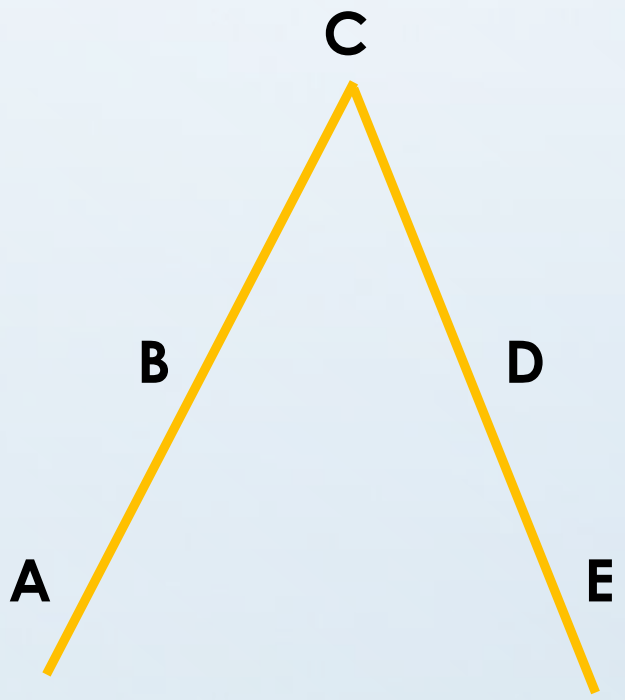
- The beginning (exposition) sets the tone and theme of the story.
- The middle is the rising action, which leads to the story's climax.
- The end contains the falling action, followed by the resolution (denouement).

Basic Narrative Arc is Often Depicted Like This



There is Also the Five Act Structure

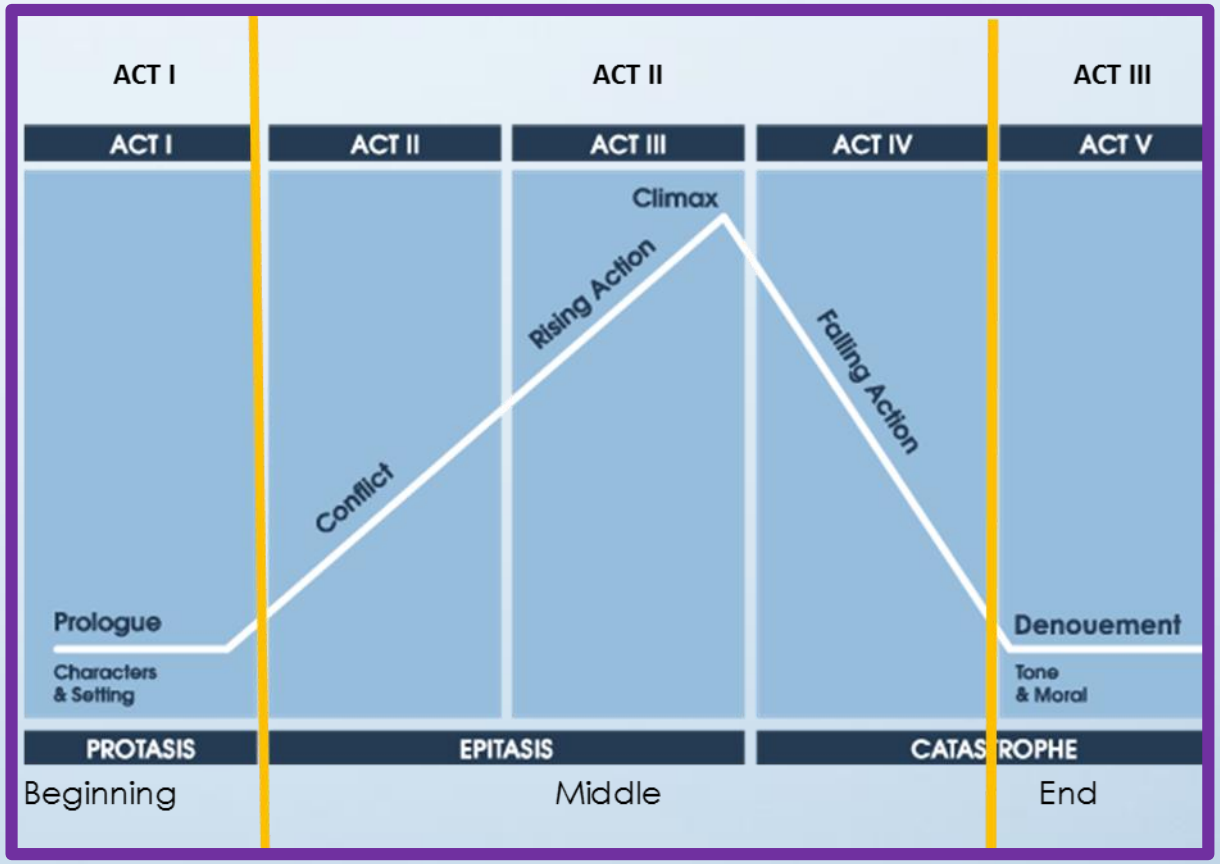
Roman poet, Horace advocated for five acts, and centuries later, a German playwright, Gustav Freytag, developed the five-act structure. (Shakespeare's Plays)



Freytag called these:

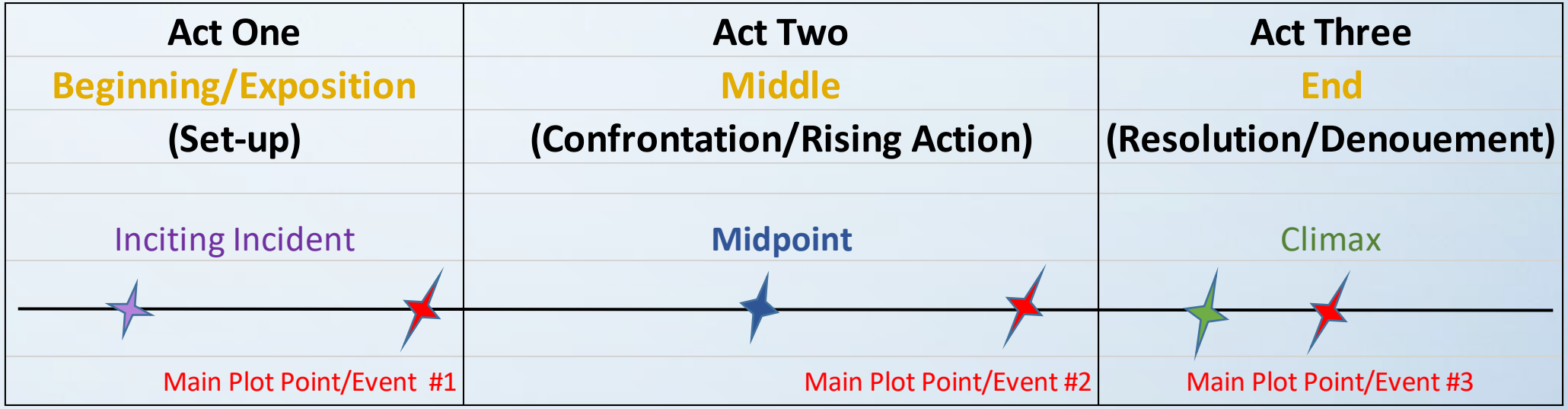
A) Introduction
B) Rising Action
C) Climax
D) Return or Falling Action
E) Catastrophe

Compared All Together – For Fun



But we'll stick with the three acts for today…

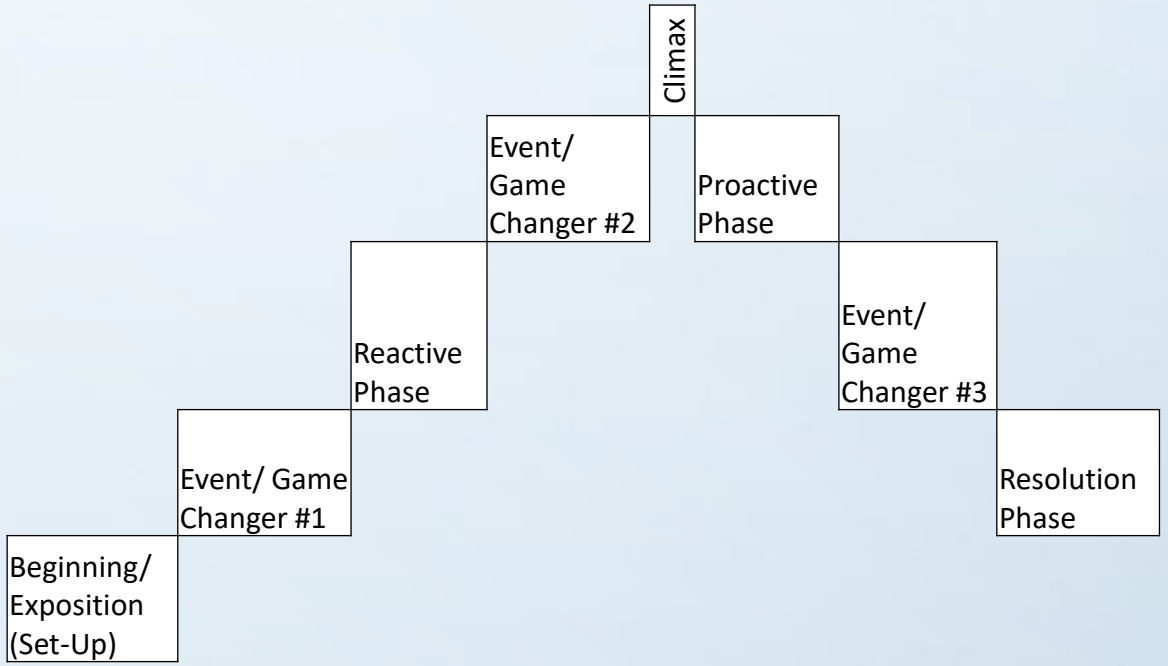
Then Plot Points Are Added

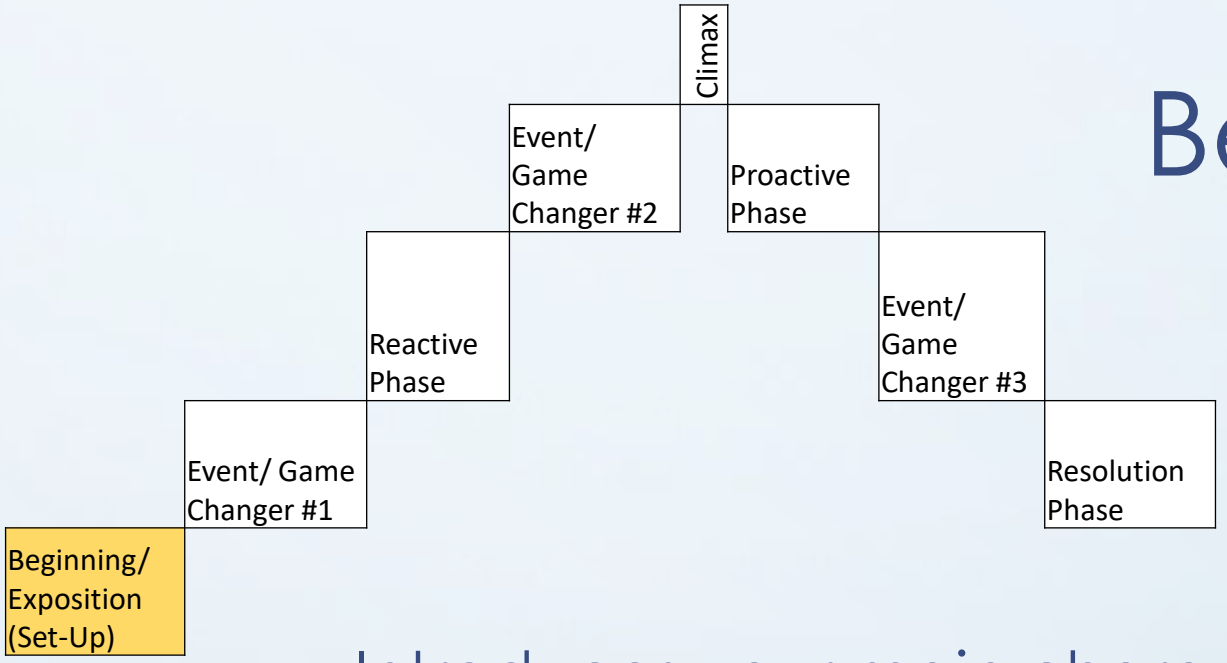


Basic Linear Narrative Arc Explained

1. **Beginning (Exposition/Set-Up)** — The opening of the story, including a reader's introduction to characters and settings.
2. **Rising Action** — A series of events that complicates matters for your characters, and results in increased drama or suspense.
3. **Climax** — The big showdown where your characters encounter their opposition, and either win or lose.
4. **Falling Action** — A series of events that unfold after the climax and lead to the end of the story.
5. **Resolution (Denouement)** — The ending of the story, in which the problems are resolved, or not resolved, depending on the story.

Structure As Building Blocks: A More In-depth Look

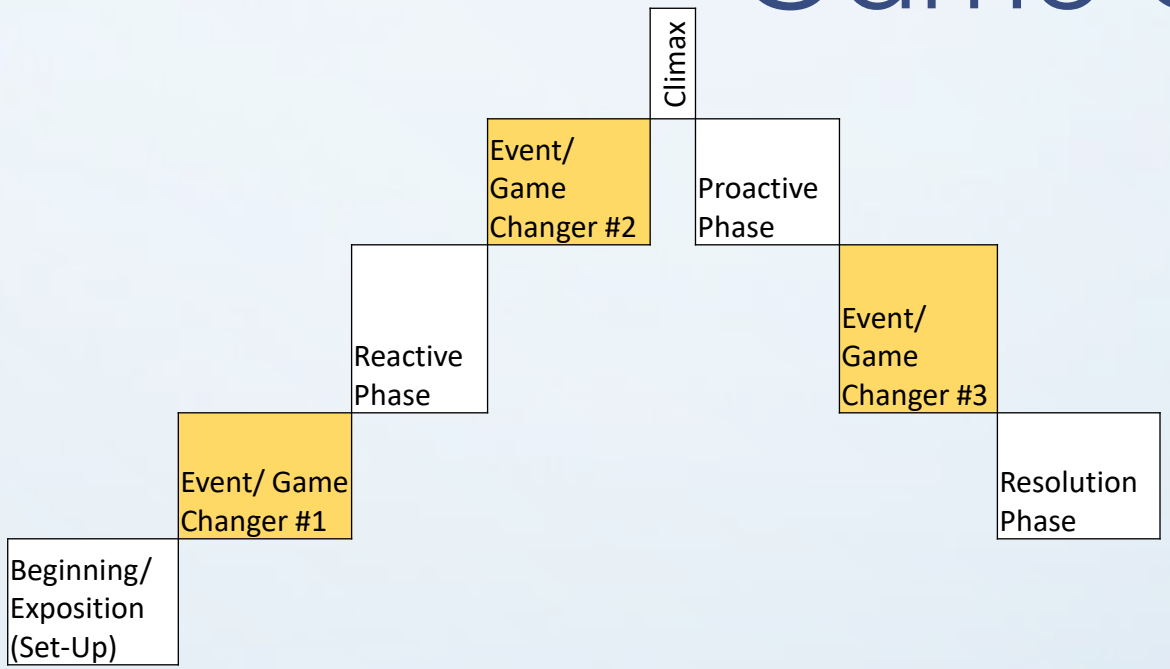




Beginning/Set-Up

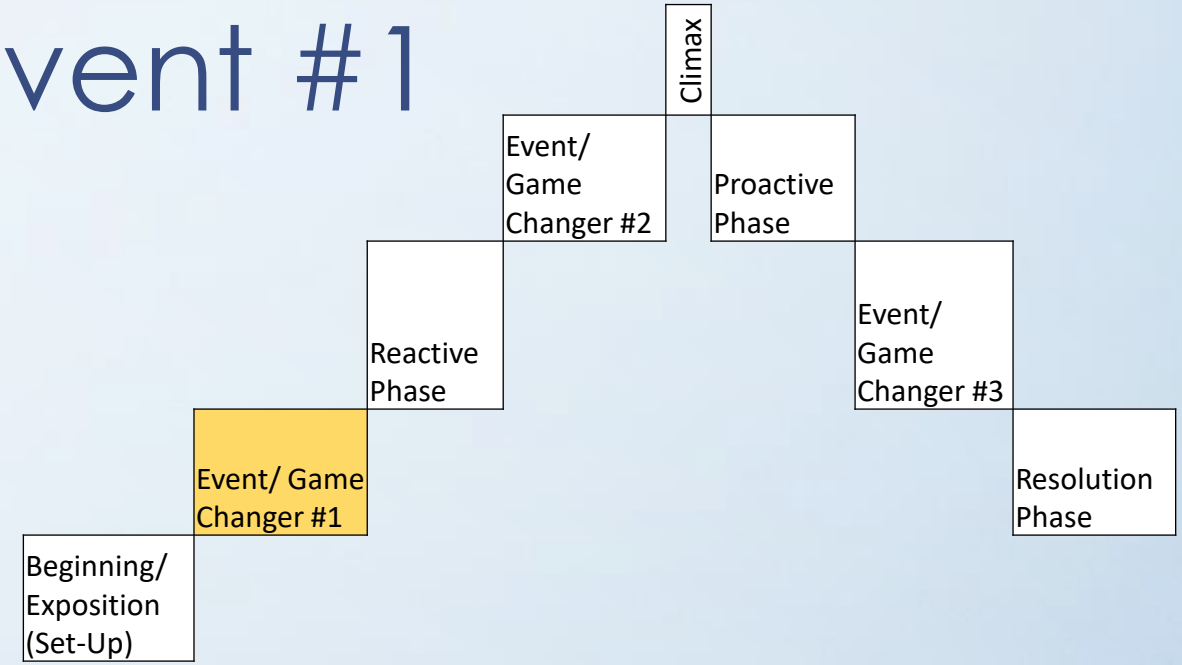
- Introduces your main characters and sets up your story
- Takes up about ¼ of your book
- Goal is to set the story question and create empathy for your main characters
- Ends with a game changing moment

Game Changers/Events



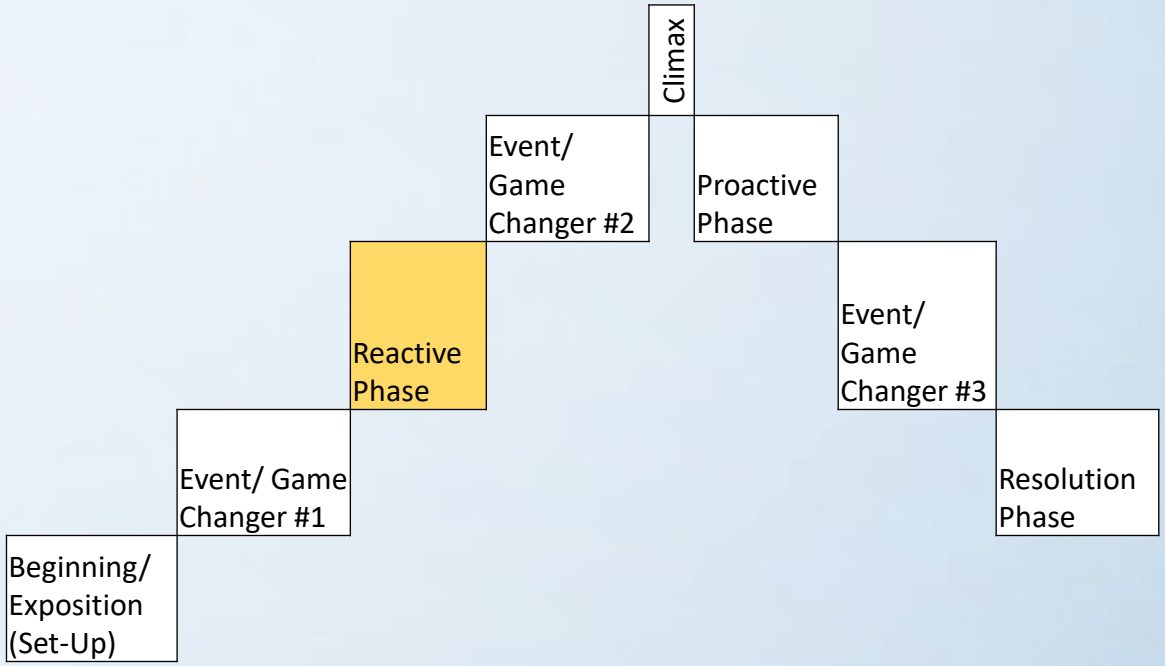
- Points in the story that completely change things for your protagonist
- Points at which there can be no turning back from
- Can be more than three

Game Changer/Event #1



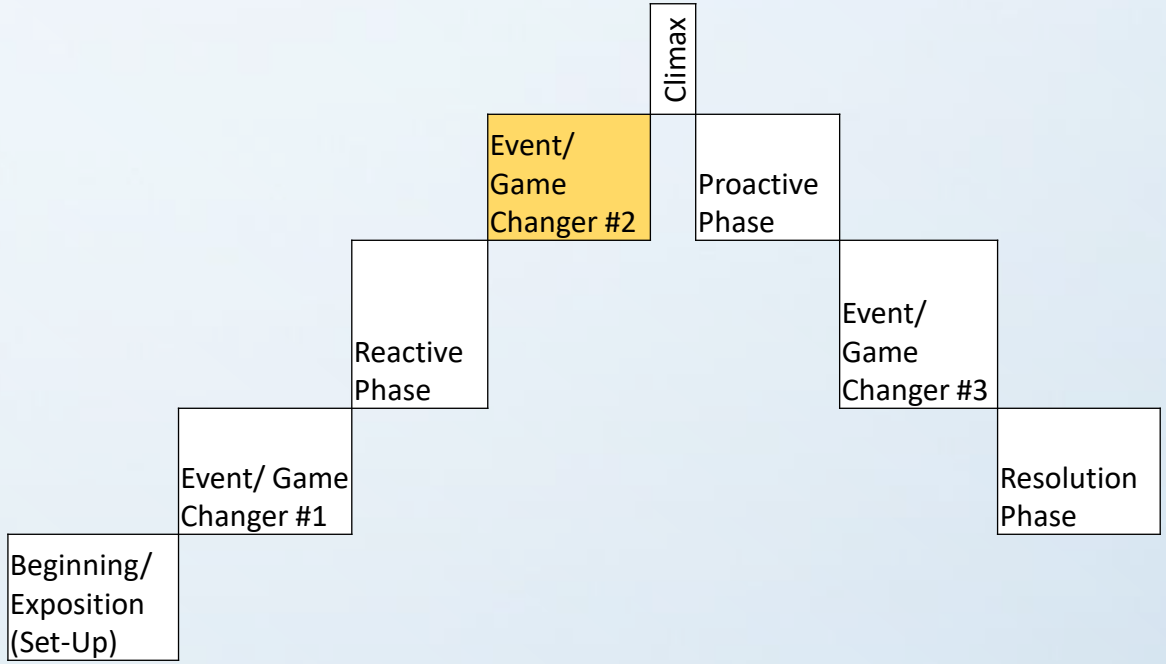
- Propels the main character full force into the story
- Forces them to make a decision that will change everything and make the rest of the story possible

Reactive Phase



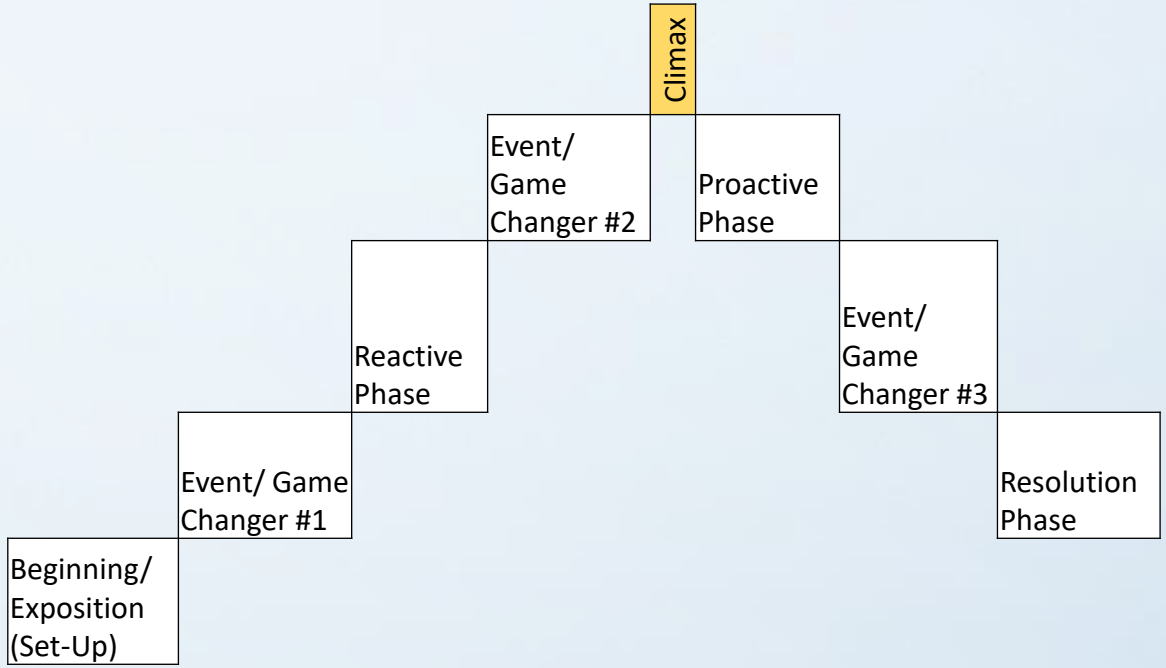
- Your protagonist reacts to the antagonistic forces of the story, trying and failing to beat those forces
- Ends with a game changing moment

Game Changer/Event #2



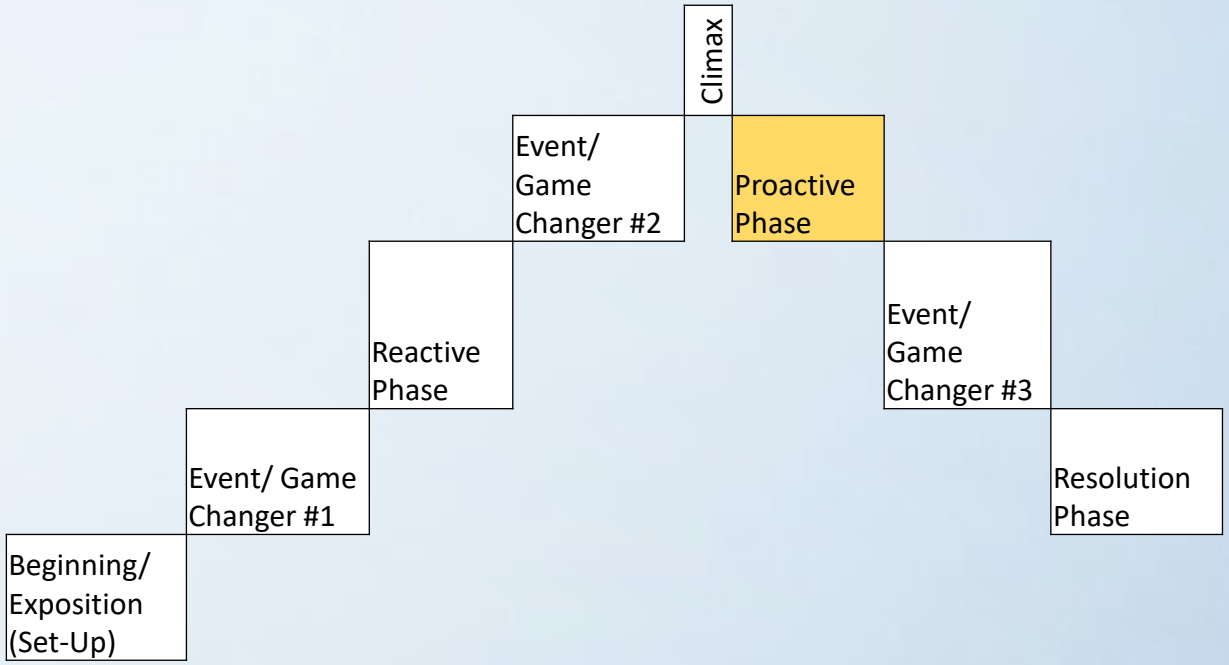
- A moment that should turn your protagonist from reactive wanderer to proactive warrior
- Shifts the story in another unexpected direction

Climax



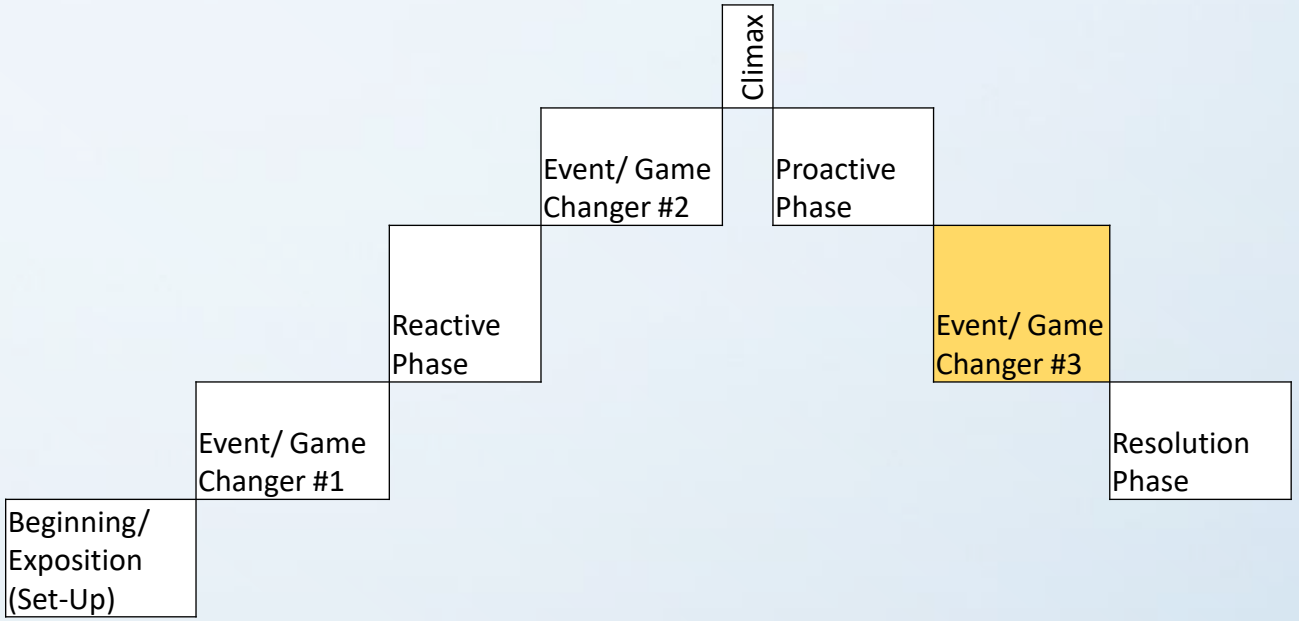
- The ultimate crisis in the protagonist's story
- The turning point of whether or not they will take action to achieve their goal

Proactive Phase

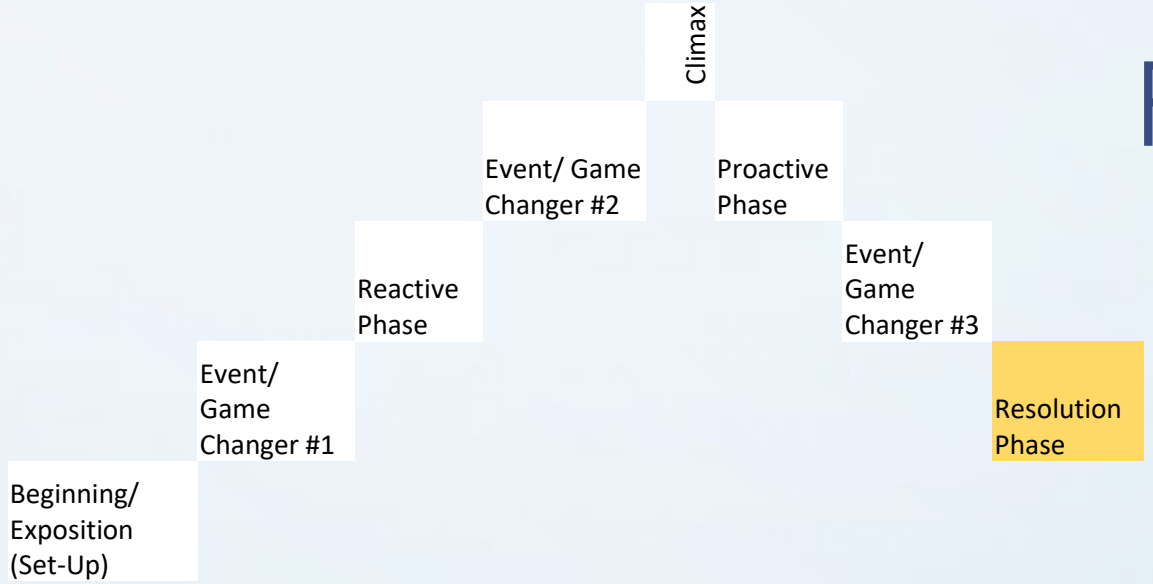


- Your protagonist takes control and goes to war against the antagonistic forces standing against her/him, whatever they may be
- Builds to the story climax
- This phase ends with game changing moment

Game Changer/Event #3



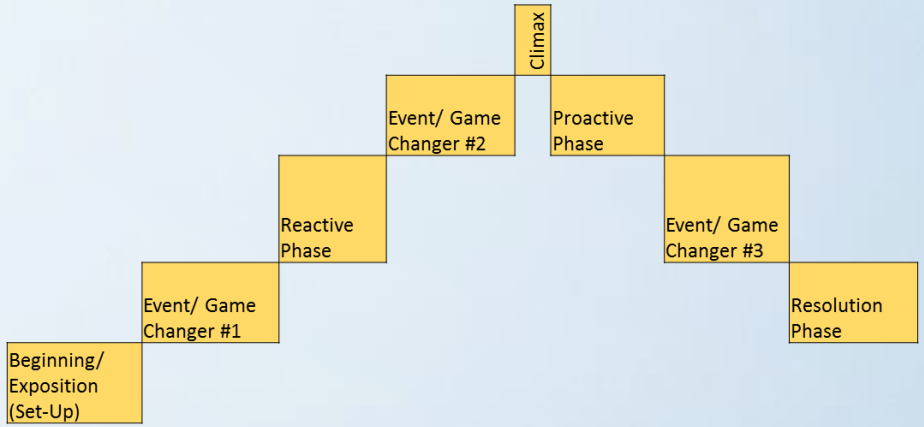
- Something that "arms" the protagonist with some sort of new information that will allow her/him to press forward for the final confrontation with the antagonistic force



Resolution Phase

- No new information can enter the story
- Nothing can miraculously come along to save the protagonist
- They must be heroic and deal with everything by themselves
- Their actions alone must bring the story to an end

Basic Plot Review



(1) **Beginning/Set-up –** *Your HOOK; establishment of characters and starting state*

(2) **Event/Game Changer #1** – *Call to action, inciting incident; primary conflict revealed*

(3) **Reactive Phase** – *Put pressure on characters; force action*

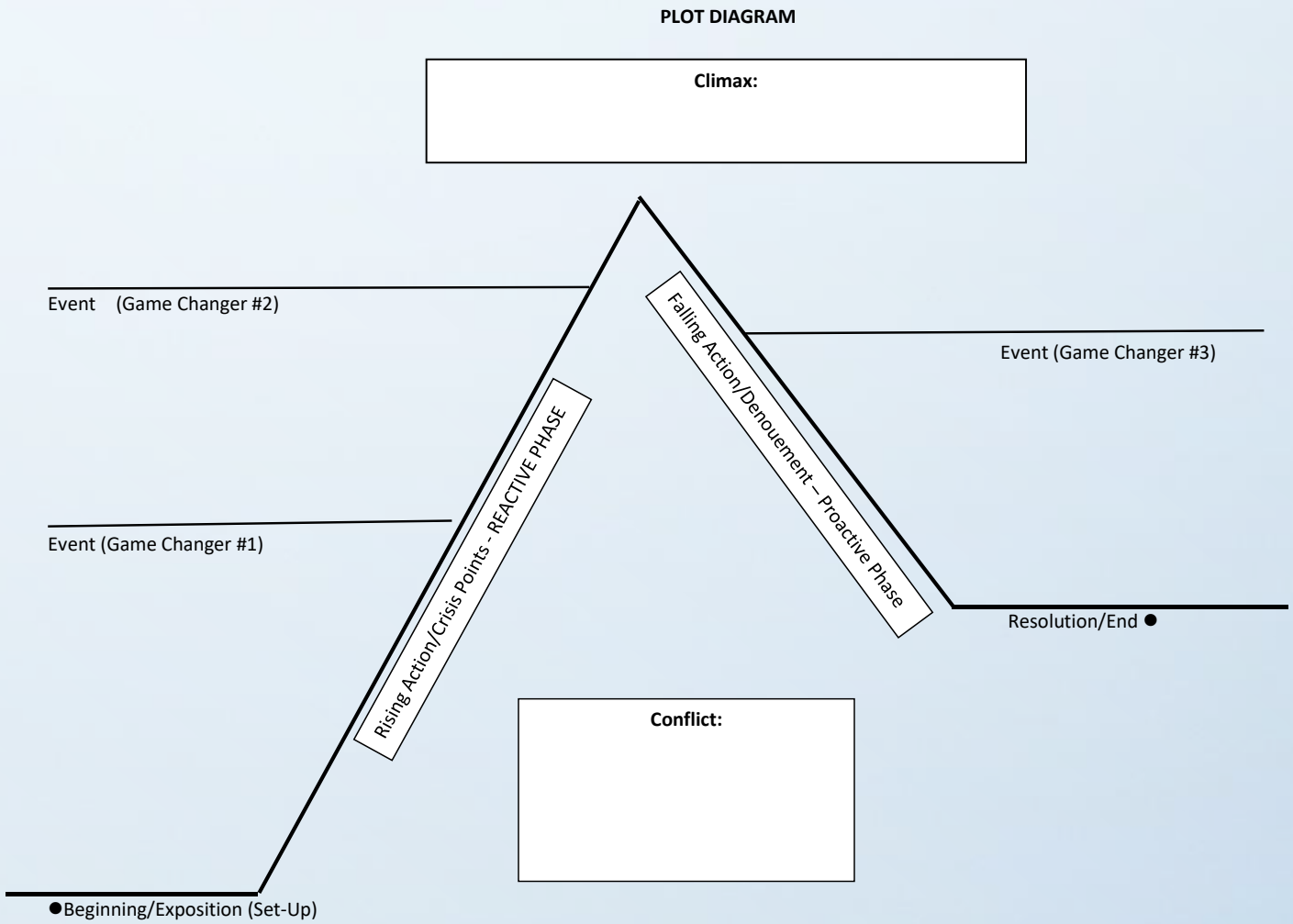
(4) **Event/Game Changer #2/Midpoint** – *Hero stops stalling and really gets busy solving the problem*

(5) **Climax** – Point of no return, the character has to push on or perish

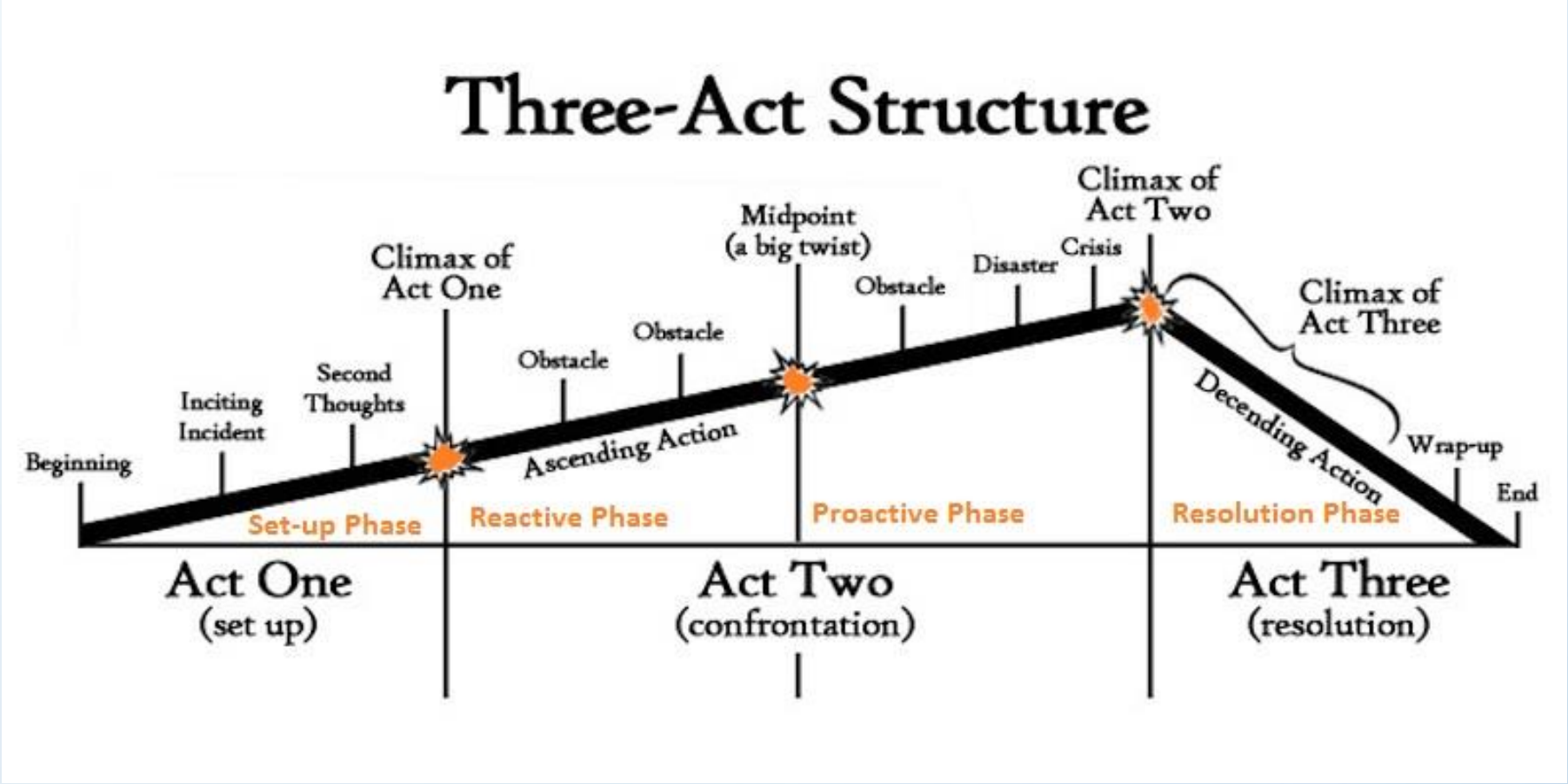
(6) **Event/Game Changer #3** – Character *gets the last piece of the puzzle; learns they have power to solve the problem*

(7) **Resolution** – *the character achieves the goal (or not); story arcs are resolved, character grows in overcoming inner obstacles*

Exercise: Add Events/Plot Points



Even More Plot Points Can Be Added



Exercise: Story Structure Quiz

1. A
2. D
3. A
4. C
5. B
6. A
7. E
8. D
9. A
10. B
11. E
12. A
13. D
14. B
15. C

Story Engineering by Larry Brooks - Handout

400							
#	PARTS & MILESTONES	DESCRIPTION	PAGE (approx.)		WORD COUNT		CHAPTER
1	**Part 1--The Setup**	Introduce protagonist, hook the reader, and setup First Plot Point (foreshadowing, establishing stakes); major goal is establishing empathy (not necessarily likability) for the protagonist.	1	100	1	27500	
1.a	Opening Scene	Opening scene or sequence of story; protagonist must be introduced within first 1-3 scenes.	1	10	1	2750	
1.b	Hook Moment	Something that creates a question the reader wants an answer to or an itch that needs to be scratched; doesn't need context with protagonist's needs or stakes.	1	20	1	5500	
1.c	Inciting Incident	*Optional* Game-changing event occurring during Part 1, often leading to a decision at the First Plot Point.	1	79	1	21725	
1.d	First Plot Point	Antagonistic forces fully comes into play, defining the goal, stakes, and obstacles for protagonist; first time the meaning and implications of antagonistic events are seen.	80	100	22000	27500	
2	**Part 2--The Response**	The protagonist's reaction to the new goal/stakes/obstacles revealed by the First Plot Point; the protagonist doesn't need to be heroic yet (retreats/regroups/doomed attempts/reminders of antagonistic forces at work).	101	200	27500	55000	
2.a	First Pinch Point	Reminder of the story's antagonistic forces, not filtered by narrative or protagonist's description, but directly visible to the reader.	150		41250		
2.b	Midpoint	New information or awareness that changes the experience or understanding of context for the protagonist and/or reader; a catalyst activating new decisions/actions.	200		55000		
3	**Part 3--The Attack**	Midpoint information/awareness causes the protagonist to change course in how to approach the obstacles; the hero is now empowered with information on how to proceed, not merely reacting anymore; protagonist also ramps up battle with inner demons.	201	300	55000	82500	
3.a	Second Pinch Point	Reminder of the story's antagonistic forces, as the antagonist ups the game against the protagonist's attacks.	250		68750		
3.b	All Is Lost Lull	*Optional* A slower paced, all-hope-is-lost lull before the Second Plot Point.	251	299	68750	82500	
3.c	Second Plot Point	The final injection of new information into the story (doesn't need to be fully understood by the protagonist yet); protagonist's quest is accelerated.	300		82500		
4	**Part 4--The Resolution**	The protagonist summons the courage and growth to come up with solution, overcome inner obstacles, and conquer the antagonistic force; all new information must have been referenced, foreshadowed, or already in play (otherwise, deus ex machina).	301	400	82500	110000	

Exercise: Character Arcs

Within your story, you will also want to have a story arc for your main character (protagonist).

Write down your **beginning**, **middle**, and **end** points about your protagonist that is the major thing they need to accomplish in either a story you want to write, are writing, or have written.

E.g. Beginning: They are complacent with their emotional sense of self as xyz, or they are happy in their life being/doing xyz.

Middle: They struggle with their inner turmoil of, or against xyz of the outer world.

End: They change their outlook/grow or reached their goal of?

Character Arc & Story Structure – Act 1

(1) **Beginning/Set-up** - Main character is content, resists change (inner conflict), no reason to change

(2) **Game Changer/Event #1** – *something happens to throw everything off balance;*

- *add a surprise that shifts the story and reveals that the protagonist's life will never be the same again.*
- *put an obstacle in the way of the character that forces him or her to deal with something they would avoid under normal circumstances*

Character Arc & Story Structure – Act 2

This is about a character's emotional journey and about their conflict

(3) Reactive Phase – *give your characters several unexpected obstacles to overcome; make them struggle for their goal*

- *raise the stakes for your character*
- *challenge both their inner and outer conflicts/have the two work together*
- alternate up and down internally between hope and disappointment as external problems begin to seem solvable then become more insurmountable than ever
- surprise your reader with both the actions of the main character and the events surrounding him/her

Character Arc & Story Structure – Still Act 2…

4. Game Changer/Event #2 – appears when the character reaches a black moment

- character appears lost or beaten
- the stakes are the highest and danger is at its worst for the character
- During this moment the character draws upon the new strengths or lessons he's learned in order to take action

Act 2 Ends with the second plot point, which thrusts the story in another unexpected direction

Character Arc & Story Structure – Act 3

5. **Climax** – Point of no return, the character has to push on or perish

6. **Proactive Phase** - dramatically shows how the character is able to succeed or become a better person

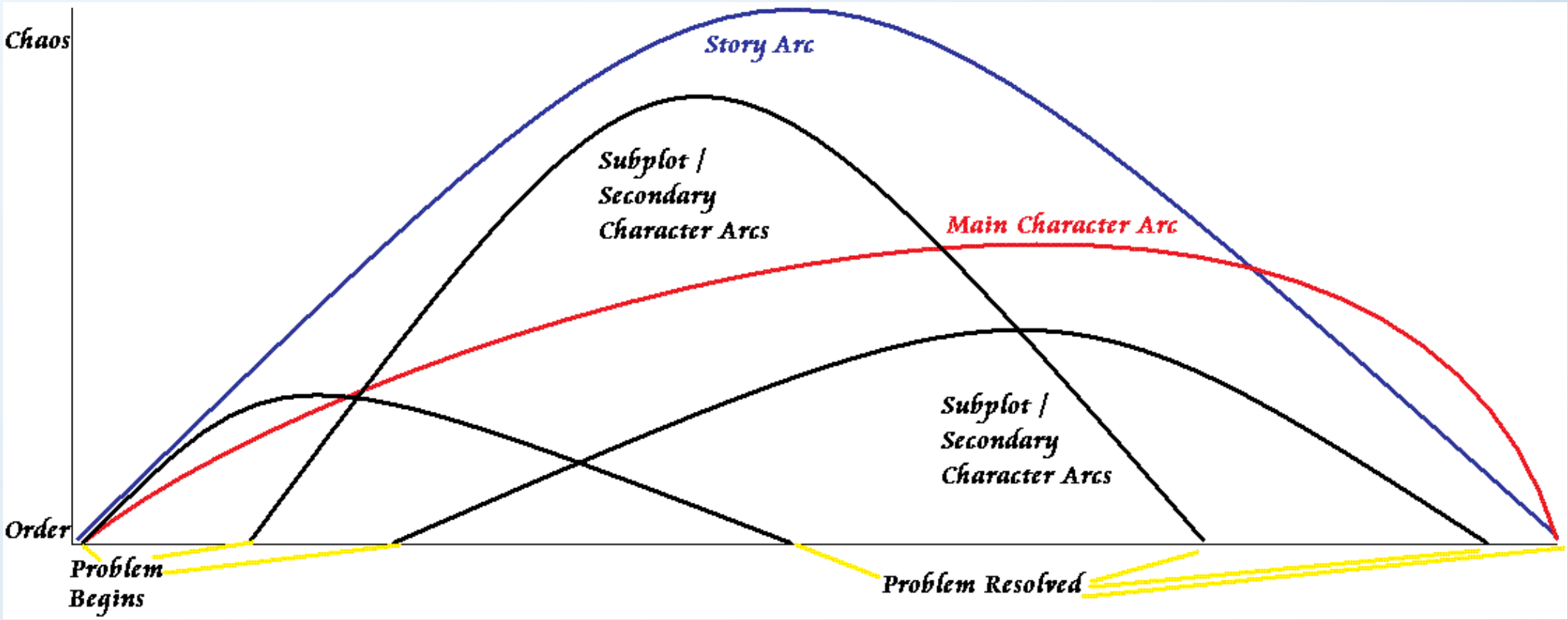
7. **Game Changer/Event #3 –** Character *gets the last piece of the puzzle; learns they have power to solve the problem*

Character Arc & Story Structure – Still Act 3…

7. **Resolution/denouement** - ties together the loose ends of the story (not necessarily all of them) and
   - allows the reader to see the outcome of the main character's decision at the climax
   - there is evidence of the change in a positive character arc

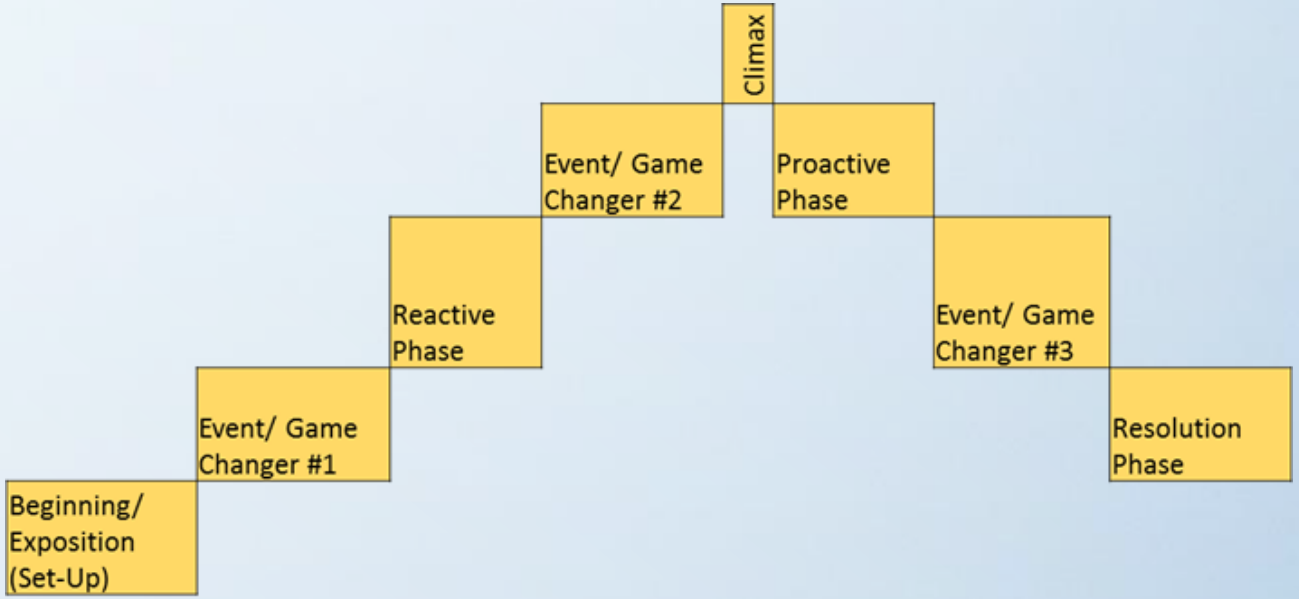


Sub-Plots, Secondary Characters, Etc.



For Each Arc, Repeat the Process





Types of Narrative Structures

- **Chronological/Linear (also called Dramatic or Progressive)**
  - predictable, archetypal structure (classic)
  - there are many forms of this:

    - **Episodic Plot -** consists of a series of loosely related incidents, usually of chapter length, tied together by a common theme and/or characters. (*Ten Stories About Coyotes I Never Told You*, by Dan Holt

    - **Parallel Plot -** The writer weaves two or more chronological dramatic plots that are usually linked by a common character and a similar theme. (*The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood) Great URL that explains six types: http://www.lindaaronson.com/six-types-of-parallel-narrative.html

- **The Circular or Epic Narrative** - tales end where they begin, with the hero or protagonist returning home after his epic journey (*The Odyssey* in poetry, *Chronicles of Narnia*)

- **Framed Narrative**
  - stories within other stories (*Wizard of Oz, Alice in Wonderland – both protagonists go into a dream state*)

- **The Fractured Narrative** - fractured or bent to alter or intensify a story/to jump back and forth in time (*Time Traveller's Wife*)

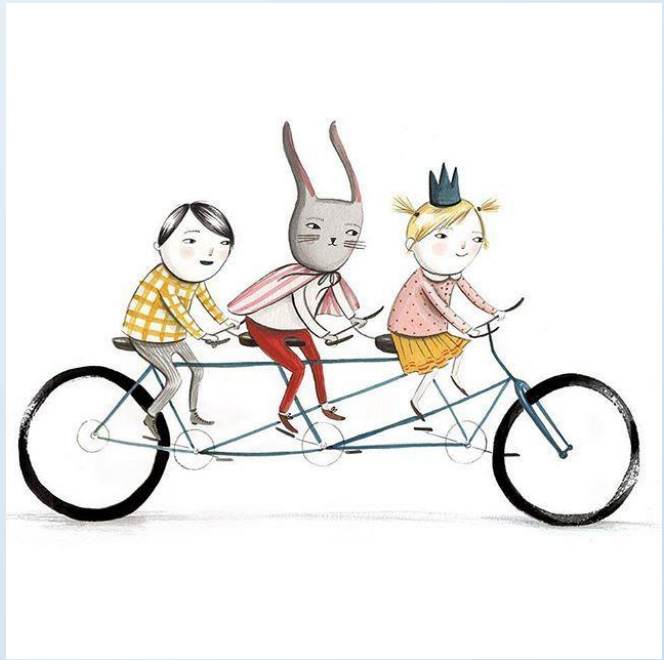
- **Flashback** - This structure conveys information regarding the character's background and give them an idea of the characters motives for doing certain things later in the story. (*Wuthering Heights, Memento -movie*)…more…

Parallel Narrative

Parallel narrative forms that use flashbacks, time jumps, non-linearity, fractured storylines.

There are three forms, each with subcategories:

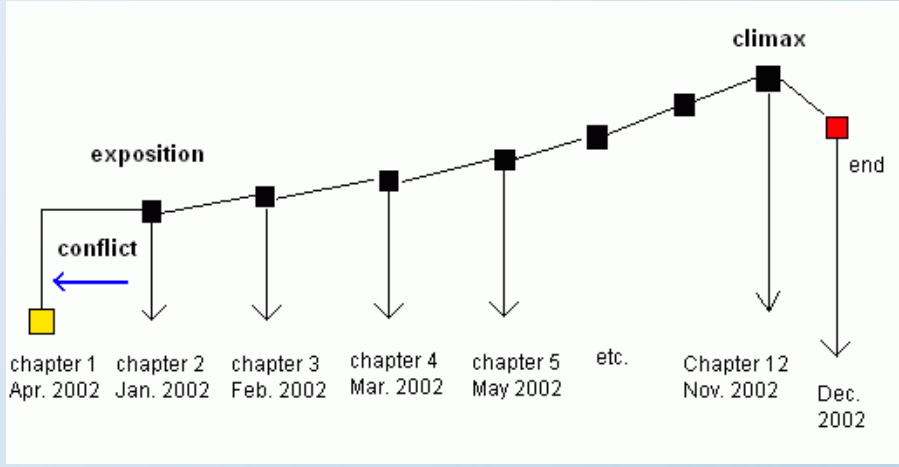
1. Flashback
2. Consecutive stories
3. Fractured tandem



Flashback

This structure conveys information regarding the character's background and give them an idea of the characters motives for doing certain things later in the story. (*Wuthering Heights, Memento -movie*)

- Flashbacks can occur more than once and in different parts of a story.
- provide stimulus for and deepens the inner conflict
- Increase tension



1. Flashback: six subcategories

1. Flashback as illustration: a simple backstory device, as when, for example, a detective asks: 'Where were you on the night of April 5?' and we flash back to what happened.
2. Regret flashback: non-chronological fragments from an unsuccessful love relationship
3. Bookend flashback: a scene or sequence in the present that appears at the start and the end of the story
4. Preview flashback: the book starts on a scene or sequence midway or two-thirds through, then flashes back to the start, running through chronologically to the end

Flashback cont'd

5. Life-changing incident flashback: one life-changing moment is revealed bit by bit in one flashback shown several times incrementally

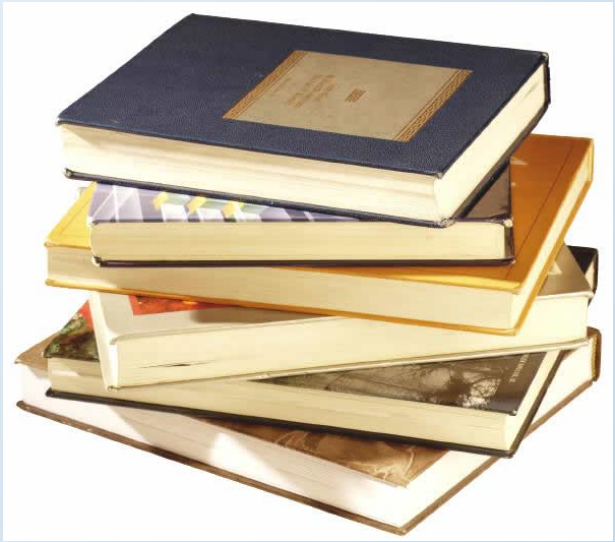
6. Double narrative flashback – has stories in past and present:
   - Type : Thwarted Dream flashback, where an enigmatic outsider pursues a thwarted dream (in films like *Remains of the Day*, and *Slumdog Millionaire*)
   - Type 2: Case History Flashback, where the enigmatic outsider is either dead, close to death, and their story is told by others (*Citizen Kane, The Usual Suspects*).



2. Consecutive Stories

- equally-weighted, self-contained stories following one after the other joined together at the end.
- split into a number of categories with different structural rules.

There are several sub-categories:



2. Consecutive Stories: Sub-Categories

- Stories walking into the picture: that is, stories simply happening one after the other, linking at the end
- Different perspectives: that is, different versions or points of view of the same events (*Groundhog Day*)
- Different consequences: that is, different outcomes from the same events
- Fractured frame: fractured versions of one of the three above, using one split-up story to act like a bookend one story split into two parts, with other complete stories inserted in between (*Pulp Fiction)*

3. Fractured Tandem

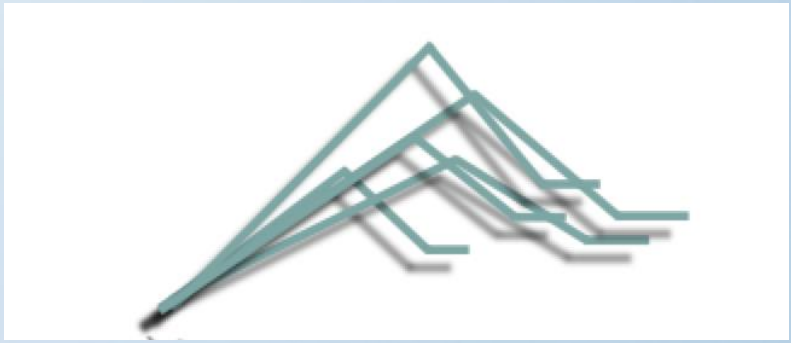
It consists of equally-weighted stories, often in different time frames, fractured and truncated and put together again in such a way as to steal jeopardy and suspense from the ending and create it at the beginning and throughout.

use its odd non-linear structure to tell or to fix up stories that need a long set up, where the normality of each of the three protagonists is vitally important to the story's poignancy, but is profoundly boring except with hindsight

- This form uses special structural means to transmit the following story content:

3. Fractured Tandem Story Content

- unexpected, often tragic, connections between apparently or initially very disparate people, triggered by an accident or random event
- several equally important stories, some or all fractured, running simultaneously sometimes in the same time frame, but often in several
- consequences, chain reactions linked to one usually horrific event (but it probably needn't be horrific)



Tips

1. Make the structure of your book suit your central idea - What are the most important topics of your story? If your novel is about a character struggling to remember (like the protagonist does in Christopher Nolan's critically acclaimed film 'Memento'), a fragmented structure in which scenes are not chronological could parallel and underscore your main character's own fragmented mental state.

2. Modify conventional forms such as the three act structure – maybe your story needs to be told in 5 or 7 acts. Make your structure useful for resolving the problem you raised in your story's opening.

3. Establish some novel structure early to simplify the drafting process – trying outlining and building your story up scene by scene using the three act structure – then see if this works.

- Consider the 'two pillar' structure, in which the start and end of your story are two pillars supporting a bridge that your reader must cross….The developments between the beginning of your novel and the end should carry the reader unfailingly to the end.

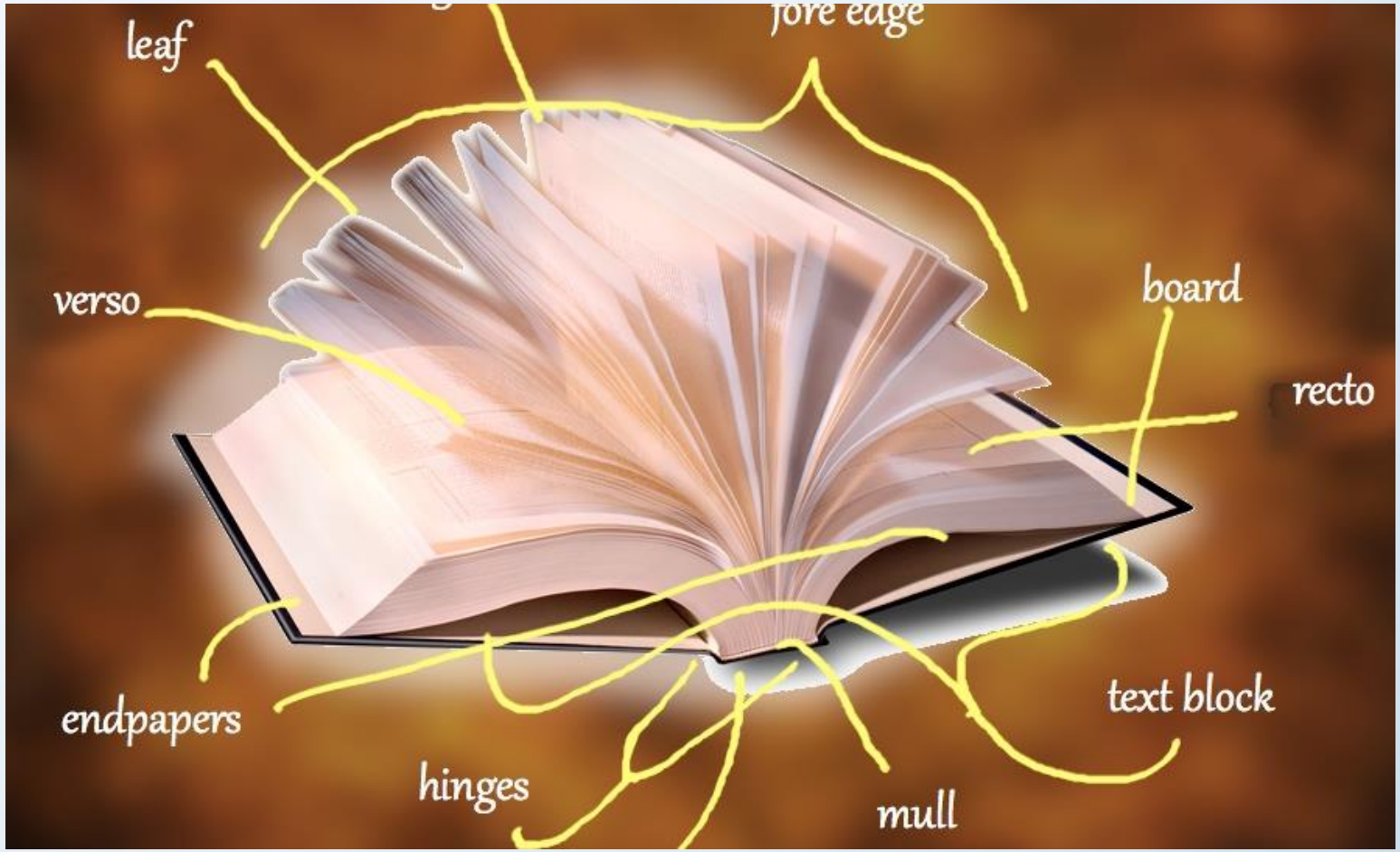
4. Make your structure support your story invisibly – the reader should simply find themselves thrust into the next stage of development with its typical rising stakes or increasing challenges or uncertainties.

5. Take existing forms and scenarios that might be familiar and gives them their own unique element:

- Mislead and surprise readers – where they might expect a major climax, intentionally create an anti-climax

- Play with structural expectations for your genre e.g. if readers might expect a journey to a strange place, a conflict that occurs there and a return home, add another revelation after the final conflict (*Lord of the Rings*)

- Change the narrative sequence – e.g. instead of ending with the discovery of the sunken treasure, start with the moment of discovery and tell the buildup t this moment afterwards



ANATOMY OF A SCENE

Chapters are not related to story structure.

- the fundamental unit of fiction is NOT the chapter, **it's the scene**.
- A chapter typically contains one or more scenes.
- Each scene needs to be its own story. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- **A scene has two levels** of structure, and only two. They are:
- The **large-scale structure** of the scene
- The **small-scale structure** of the scene

Large-Scale Structure of a Scene

The large scale structure of a scene is extremely simple. There are two choices:

1. A **Scene** has the following three-part pattern:
   - Goal
   - Conflict
   - Disaster
2. A **Sequel** has the following three-part pattern:
   - Reaction
   - Dilemma
   - Decision

Scene Defined

- **Goal:** A Goal is what your POV character wants at the beginning of the Scene. The Goal must be specific and it must be clearly definable. The reason your POV character must have a Goal is that it makes your character proactive.
- **Conflict:** Conflict is the series of obstacles your POV character faces on the way to reaching his Goal. You must have Conflict in your **Scene**!
- **Disaster:** A Disaster is a failure to let your POV character reach his Goal. Don't give him the Goal! Make something awful happen. Hang your POV character off a cliff and your reader will turn the page to see what happens next.

Sequel Defined

- **Reaction:** A Reaction is the emotional follow-through to a Disaster. Show your POV character reacting viscerally to his Disaster. Show him hurting. Give your reader a chance to hurt with your characters.
- **Dilemma:** A Dilemma is a situation with no good options. If your Disaster was a real Disaster, there aren't any good choices. Your POV character must have a real dilemma. This gives your reader a chance to worry, and wonder what will happen next.
- **Decision:** A Decision is the act of making a choice among several options. This is important, because it lets your POV character become proactive again. Make your character decide, and make it a good decision. Make it one your reader can respect.

Small-Scale Structure of a Scene

- Use Motivation-Reaction Units (MRU).
- Write your MRUs by alternating between what your POV character sees (the Motivation) and what he does (the Reaction).
- The Motivation is external and objective.
- The Reaction is internal and subjective.

Motivation

- The **Motivation** is something that your character can see (or hear or smell or taste or feel). You will write this in such a way that your reader also sees it (or hears it or smells it or tastes it or feels it).
- No longer than a paragraph and can be less. E.g. *The tiger dropped out of the tree and sprang toward Jack.*

Reaction

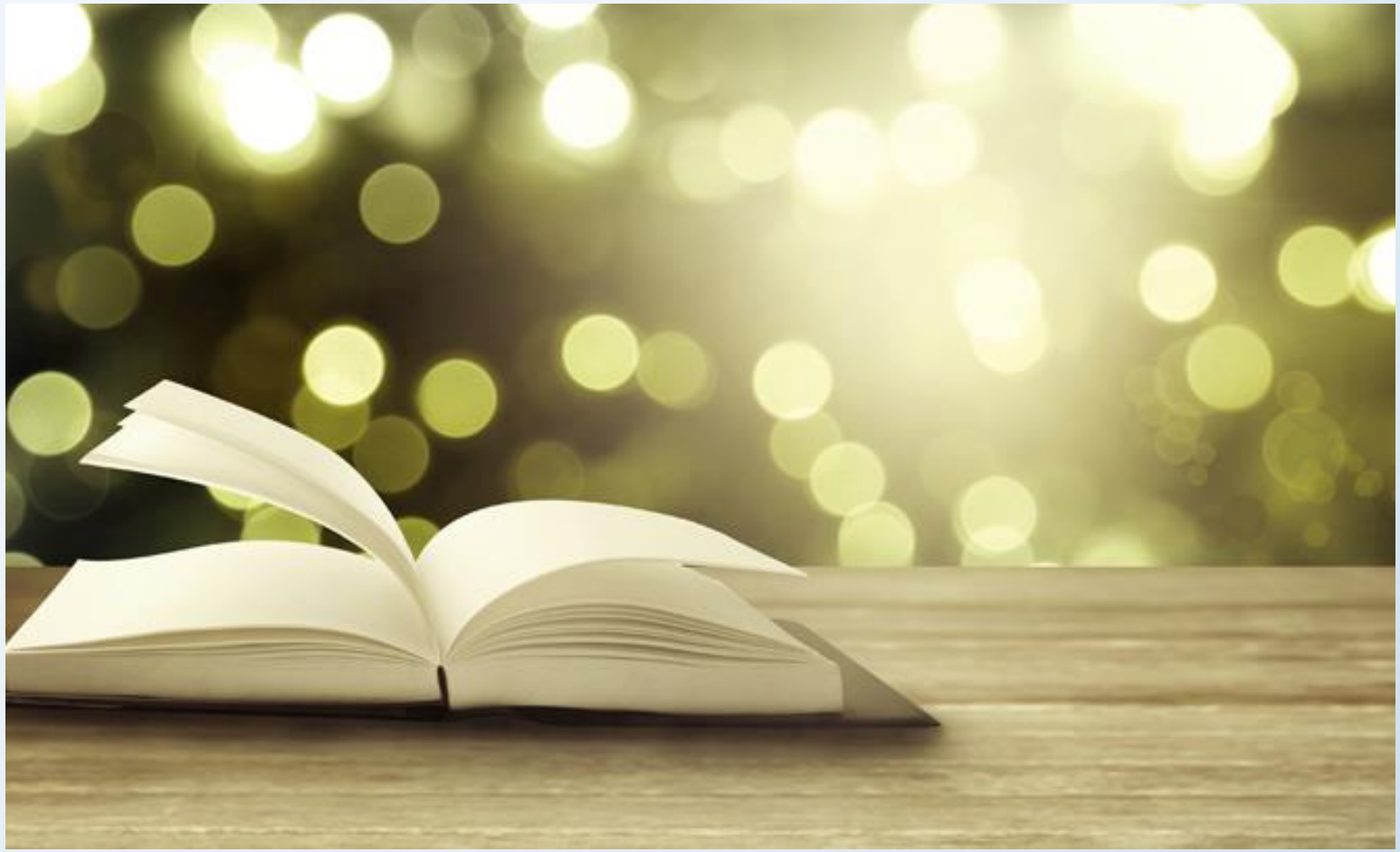
- one or more things your POV character does in Reaction to the Motivation.
- done in one or more paragraphs
- present it exactly as your POV character would experience it — from the inside.
- present the full complex of your character's reactions in order, from fastest time-scale to slowest. First reaction (is fear), instinct kicks in, then first reflexive reaction - time to react rationally, to act, to think, to speak

(E.g. *A bolt of raw adrenaline shot through Jack's veins. He jerked his rifle to his shoulder, sighted on the tiger's heart, and squeezed the trigger. "Die, you bastard!"*

And after the Reaction comes . . . another Motivation

- This is the key. You've got to write another and another and another.
- The Reaction you just wrote will lead to some new Motivation that is again external and objective and which you will write in its own paragraph.

E.g. *The bullet grazed the tiger's left shoulder. Blood squirted out of the jagged wound. The tiger roared and staggered, then leaped in the air straight at Jack's throat.*



ANATOMY OF A NOVEL

Physical Structure of a Novel

- **How Many Chapters Should a Novel Contain?**
  - As many as you like. Can be one to 50. The average is a dozen to fifteen.
- **How many pages in a Chapter?**
  - A couple of pages to fifty pages. The average is 12- 20 pages.
- **When Should One Chapter End and Another Begin?**
  - insert a chapter break when a scene ends and an interlude begins (when the "action" phase of a mini-plot ends and the "reaction" phase begins).
  - After an interlude.
  - when the action is about to shift to another time and another place, or on a cliff-hanger.
  - between a compelling question being raised and the answer being provided.

- **What about mini breaks within chapters?**
  - Mini breaks are the ones denoted by a line of white space or asterisks
  - Not necessary but may help the reader distinguish a switch in action, POV, or a shift in time and place
- **What is the purpose of splitting a novel into parts?**
  - Parts are only there to warn the reader that a major shift (one they have not experienced before) is about to take place.
  - Use for major differences in
    - time (1924 to 1978)
    - place (Part One is set in Europe, Part Two is set in Canada)
    - Narrators (POV of two lovers, or a mother, daughter, granddaughter in a saga)

- **Should You Use Prologues and Epilogues?**
  - Only add a prologue if they add to the story in a significant way (e.g. if they add crucial backstory for a character – someone who has a major injury or incident that happened years earlier that continues to plague them).
  - Keep them brief.
  - Epilogues are extremely rare in contemporary literature, and shouldn't be anticlimactic.

Use your instincts!

Last Words About Story Structure

Story structure ensures that our characters suffer enough to discover the truth about themselves.

That truth may lie at the heart of why readers read. And why writers write!

A story seeks structure in order to arrive at the truth.

That's the art of fiction.

From *How to Create a story Structure to Die For* by PJ Reece, http://writetodone.com/how-to-create-story-structure-to-die-for/

Novel Structure

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