

STORY STRUCTURE CHEAT SHEET

A Simple Guide to Building a Story That Works

Boshers Publishing Author Resource

Why Story Structure Matters

Story structure is not a cage.

It's a roadmap.

A good structure helps readers stay engaged because events happen in a satisfying order. Without structure, stories often feel slow, confusing, or directionless.

Think of structure as the skeleton that supports everything else:

- Characters
- Plot
- Worldbuilding
- Theme
- Conflict

When the skeleton is strong, the story stands.

THE 3-ACT STORY STRUCTURE

Most successful novels, films, and television shows follow some variation of a three-act structure.

ACT 1: Setup (25%)

Introduce:

- Main character
- World
- Goal
- Conflict

- Stakes

Question:

What problem is about to change this character's life?

ACT 2: Confrontation (50%)

The character pursues their goal.

Complications arise.

The conflict grows.

Everything becomes harder.

Question:

Can the character overcome increasingly difficult obstacles?

ACT 3: Resolution (25%)

The final confrontation occurs.

The character changes.

Loose ends are resolved.

Question:

Will the character succeed or fail?

THE STORY BEAT SHEET

1. Opening Image

Show readers the character's normal life.

This creates a before picture.

Example

Harry Potter lives under the stairs.

Katniss hunts to feed her family.

Jamie Garrison hides from his family's legacy.

Your Story

What does life look like before everything changes?

2. Inciting Incident

The event that changes everything.

The story truly begins here.

Examples

- A murder occurs.
- A dragon attacks.
- A letter arrives.
- A spouse disappears.
- A secret is revealed.

Ask Yourself

What event forces my character to act?

3. First Plot Point (25%)

The character crosses a point of no return.

The old life is gone.

The real story begins.

Examples

- Frodo leaves the Shire.
- Katniss volunteers.
- A detective takes the case.
- A woman discovers her husband is poisoning her.

Ask Yourself

What commitment changes everything?

ACT 2A

4. Reaction Phase

The character reacts to the new situation.

They're learning.

Making mistakes.

Trying to understand the problem.

Common Problems Here

✗ Too much wandering

✗ Too much explanation

✗ No clear goal

Fix

Keep introducing complications.

5. First Pinch Point

Remind readers of the antagonist or threat.

Examples

- Villain strikes again
- Evidence disappears
- Monster attacks
- Relationship worsens

Ask Yourself

How can I remind readers what is at stake?

6. Midpoint (50%)

The biggest turning point in the middle.

Something major changes.

The story shifts direction.

Examples

- Secret identity revealed
- Romance blossoms
- Betrayal uncovered
- Character learns shocking truth

Midpoint Formula

Information + Consequences = Momentum

Ask Yourself

What changes everything halfway through?

ACT 2B

7. Escalation

Now the character becomes proactive.

They stop reacting.

They start fighting back.

Examples

- Gathering allies
- Making plans
- Launching investigations
- Taking risks

Everything should become harder.

8. Second Pinch Point

The antagonist gains power.

Hope begins slipping away.

Examples

- Evidence destroyed
- Trusted ally dies
- Villain strikes successfully
- Character loses something valuable

Ask Yourself

How can things get worse?

9. Dark Night of the Soul

The lowest emotional point.

The character feels defeated.

Examples

- Frodo nearly gives up.
- Rocky loses confidence.
- Hero believes they've failed.

Ask Yourself

What makes my character want to quit?

ACT 3

10. Final Plot Point

The final clue, revelation, or decision.

The character understands what must be done.

Examples

- Discovering the villain's weakness
- Learning the truth
- Choosing courage over fear

Ask Yourself

What final realization prepares them for the climax?

11. Climax

The biggest confrontation in the story.

Everything has been building toward this moment.

Good Climaxes

- Force difficult choices
- Test character growth
- Resolve the central conflict

Ask Yourself

How will my character prove they've changed?

12. Resolution

Show the new normal.

The after picture.

Examples

- Peace restored
- Family reunited
- New relationship begins
- Hero starts a new chapter

Ask Yourself

How is life different now?

QUICK STRUCTURE FORMULA

Act 1

Normal Life

↓

Problem Appears



Point of No Return

Act 2

Problems Get Worse



Midpoint Revelation



More Problems



Lowest Point

Act 3

Final Revelation



Climax



Resolution

CHARACTER ARC CHEAT SHEET

A great plot changes events.

A great character arc changes people.

Beginning

Who are they?

Lie They Believe

What false belief holds them back?

Truth They Must Learn

What truth sets them free?

Ending

Who do they become?

COMMON STORY STRUCTURE MISTAKES

Starting Too Early

Skip unnecessary setup.

Weak Stakes

Readers need consequences.

Passive Characters

Characters should make decisions.

Sagging Middles

Introduce complications.

Raise stakes.

Reveal secrets.

Rushed Endings

Give major moments room to breathe.

STORY STRUCTURE WORKSHEET

Hero

Goal

Antagonist

Stakes

Inciting Incident

First Plot Point

Midpoint

Dark Night

Climax

Resolution

THE ONE QUESTION EVERY SCENE SHOULD ANSWER

What changes because this scene happened?

If the answer is:

"Nothing."

The scene probably needs revision.

Every scene should:

✓ Reveal something

✓ Change something

✓ Complicate something

✓ Move something forward

FINAL THOUGHT

Readers don't keep turning pages because stories are perfect.

They keep turning pages because they care what happens next.

Strong structure creates momentum.

Momentum creates engagement.

Engagement creates unforgettable stories.

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