

# John Brown – the author’s official site » Blog Archive » The Key Conditions for Reader Suspense Part 4: Structure

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People go to movies, watch TV, and read novels because they enjoy having a certain type of experience. They enjoy it so much that they are willing to pay for it, again and again and again.

Our job as writers is to create a narrative that evokes this desired experience in the reader. Yes, we have to be passionate about our story. Yes, it’s an art. Yes, it’s complex and sometimes feels a bit mystical. But we can’t let that make us forget the fact that the ultimate purpose of the story is to guide the reader through an experience.

Now maybe that approach is too businesslike for you. Maybe it removes the artist too much from the production. If you feel that way, then think of it as the writer finding and inventing crazy things that he or she just can’t help but want to share. In this view, the author goes out into the world and brings back delights and wonders for others to enjoy.

There are many different delights to share. So some people love humor. Others delight in being spooked. Others want to relive the feeling of falling in love. Still others want to feel adventure and thrills. Or they enjoy the feeling of insight, wonder, curiosity, and wish-fulfillment. Others want a mix.

One of the core elements in a majority of the experiences readers love is being in suspense about the outcome of a character’s fate. Readers love to HOPE and FEAR for a character for 90% of the story. They love their worry and/or curiosity to build. And they love a good release.

Presenting an interesting and sympathetic character with a significant happiness problem initiates the reader’s hope and fear and curiosity (btw, presenting a mystery initiates the reader curiosity). But we can’t stop there.

Remember: readers want their worry to build to a sharp point. Then they want a good release. We do that by having the character solve his problem in a certain way. Solving those problems is what plot is all about. In the last part of the series, I talked about the details of the plot. (And if you haven’t read the first post in this series on problem and the third one on plot, I suggest you go read both right now so the rest of what I’m going to talk about will make sense.) In this part of the series, I’m going to talk about the big picture of plot, about the structure of the story as a whole, and what key elements that structure needs in order to help readers feel a building of tension and a release.

## Think about problem solving, not voodoo

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In order to do this, we first need to demystify what’s going on and get to the heart of plot. Story and plot are NOT about a character going on a mythic Jungian heroic journey. Nor are they about characters following a rigid Hollywood structure grimoire. Nor is there one secret plot pattern that all awesome stories use.

In the types of stories we’re talking about, the plot is about a character solving a problem. That’s it. That’s the grand whoop-tee-doo mystery. Not very exciting, but that’s what the writer needs to keep in mind. Well, and the fact that the manner in which the problem is resolved has to build reader tension—form follows function.

I know some people will argue that many successful artists swear by things like Joseph Campbell’s heroic journey. But if you read Campbell’s book, you’ll find something interesting. What Campbell did was survey traditional tales from many cultures across the globe. He listed common features of those tales and found that certain types of things kept popping up in the stories. He concluded these were signs of unconscious Jungian archetypes. There was no purpose to the form except to express the archetype. And so he listed the common elements, gave them

mystical names, and explained their source in pseudo-psychological terms.

Do you see where he went wrong?

Let me do a Campbell with eating utensils. Let's imagine I go around to all the various cultures of the world and look at what utensils they use to eat. Gadzooks, but I'd find a startling number of similarities. Who would have thought? For example, the super rich living in their million-dollar New York high rises drink from crystal glasses while the mud-poor hut folk in some Bangladeshi backwater use gourds or cup the water with their bare hands, but it's all the same basic form—The Hollow.

Instead of seeing that a hollow form is a great way to hold liquids and solids, I would conclude it must be a sign of some deep-seated subconscious archetype. That's why we have cups and spoons. Therefore, because The Hollow resonates with our human unconscious, maybe from our time hanging out in the womb, a powerful dinner will include The Hollow in some form precisely because it interacts with the archetype, putting us back into the womb, to the time we were being fed directly by our mothers and felt inexplicably comforted and satisfied.

Dang. That's good. Somebody out to get me one of them PhD's. I can see it now: The Mythic Meal . . .

Too bad it's a bunch of hooley.

Campbell's documenting all those traditional tales was a great thing. Identifying the similarities was cool. But instead of looking for the simple function the form was created to fill, Campbell ignored the function and turned the form into a magical totem.

People who study modern-day stories sometimes do the same thing. Except instead of using labels like "Threshold Guardian," "Shape Shifter," and "Ordeal," they use terms like "Act," "Plot Point," and "Confrontation."

I'm not arguing against labels or patterns. What I'm arguing against is divorcing form and function. It's true that people can sometimes use Campbell's list of common elements to build a story that works to build reader tension. But when we talk about form outside of the context of its function in the reader's experience, we prevent ourselves from seeing how things work. The form becomes a mystical black box. And because we don't know the whys behind the form we can't see when the form should and should not be used. We sometimes find ourselves falling into the trap of prescribing Procrustean plot beds that are exactly wrong for our purposes or into rebelling against form altogether.

So let's not do that.

There is no voodoo here. There is only a character trying to solve a problem.

People solve problems every day. It's not very mystical. But because it's the core of story, thinking about how your character will try to solve her problem is one of the most powerful ways to help you figure out your plot structure and detail. And that's what we're going to do in the rest of this post.

## **Key suspense structure elements**

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So how do people solve problems? What's the process?

Well, wait a minute. We have to add a little to that. We're not just having characters solve problems. We're showing characters struggle with problems in ways that engender and build suspense in a reader. Then we're showing them resolve the problem in ways that provide the reader a wash of cathartic relief. So maybe the better question is: what elements are necessary for readers to feel tension about a characters struggle to solve a problem?

Here's what I've been able to identify. I believe all the elements below are critical for a reader to see or understand. By that I meant that if you take any one of these away, it will prevent the reader from feeling tension, feeling it build, or feeling it release.

**1. PRESENT the problem.** *In this phase, a reader must:*

1. Understand what the problem is
2. See a sympathetic and interesting character
3. Understand and buy into why the character can't or won't walk away from the problem
4. Be surprised by some of the particularities of the character and problem

**2. Main character STRUGGLES to solve the problem.** *In this phase, a reader must:*

1. Understand the actions the character is going to take and why the character is taking them
2. See actions unexpectedly thwarted and troubles increase
3. See some actions succeed
4. See the character locked into an attempt to solve the problem that will be final
5. Be surprised by some of the particularities of the motives, decisions, actions, and results

**3. Main character RESOLVES the problem.** *In this phase, a reader must:*

1. See whether the character succeeds or fails. For suspense the character usually snatches victory from the jaws of defeat.
2. Understand what the success or failure means for the character's life going forward
3. Be surprised by some of the particularities of the resolution

We present the problem and why the character must face it. This raises possibilities in the reader's mind, good and bad, for the character. Because the reader finds the character sympathetic and interesting, the reader will automatically root for the character to win.

We share with the reader how the character plans to solve the issue. Then we show how those plans keep getting thwarted. This raises reader fears. We show other actions succeed. This raises reader hopes that the character still might win. At some point the character gets locked into a final attempt.

As the main character struggles this last time, it looks like she is going to lose. Then we show her snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. This produces a wonderful wash of relief in the reader.

Along every step of the way, readers need to be surprised, not about everything, but about enough of the particularities of the problem, character, actions, reactions, and resolution that it prevents the reader from knowing what WILL happen. Instead, these unexpected things allow the reader to know what MIGHT happen and worry about the possibilities.

## Not the three-act structure

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I know some of you are thinking—hey, that's the three act structure. It's true some people describe the three acts in a similar way. But I have tried very hard to avoid the word "act."

First, an act is simply a major division of a story. A part. And it's somewhat arbitrary how those divisions are made. Because of this, the structure above might describe stories with one, three, five, seven, or more acts.

Second, "act" doesn't tell you what you as the writer are trying to accomplish. It's a form term that carries little useful information, and in fact, sometimes obfuscates what you're actually trying to do.

Third, “three-act structure” is too often used in rigid forms, a lot of them originating in Hollywood, that prescribe certain proportions, obstacle types, and event sequences. It’s all focused on form outside of the context of any function, and that’s precisely what I’m trying to avoid.

So I prefer not to talk about acts, but phases of problem solving. This helps me keep clear what my goals are and reminds me of my many options.

Of course, the three phases constitute a very broad structure. They still need a bit more detail in order to be translated into the events and scenes of a specific story. But before we move into that topic, I want to take a moment to talk about what I think is the exact wrong approach to our topic.

## **Think about patterns & options, not rigid formulas**

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The three phases of problem solving form the basic structure of a story that builds suspense in readers. A number of events will occur in each phase. But there are simply too many variables for there to be one best sequence of events for giving the reader the type of experience we hope to deliver.

Think about this mathematically. If we have three phases to solving a problem, and there are three sequence options for the events in each phase, then we have 27 different possible combinations. 27 different possible event sequences or plot patterns!

But there are more than three options in each phase. Furthermore, there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of possibilities for each of the story elements listed below:

- Type of problem
- Number of sub-problems (sub-plots) included in the story
- Types of characters
- Character personalities & traits
- Numbers of characters in the story
- Places where the problem takes place
- Character motives for solving the problem or opposing its resolution
- Reasons why the character must face the problem
- Actions that may work to solve the problem
- The skills and resources the character can bring to bear on the problem
- The skills and resources the opposition can bring to bear on the problem
- Obstacles to solving the problem

Each choice for the elements above will affect the sequence of events in your story as well. There are just too many variables to say there’s one sequence of events that’s best, even though you will run across folks who propose just that.

Building stories is like building houses. Yes, you need a foundation, walls, and a roof, but holy cow, look at all the variations that are possible and successful given those basic requirements.

So instead of thinking there’s ONE ultimate magical structure, I’ve found it’s more productive to identify many event sequence patterns that work.

This is one reason why reading other stories is such a powerful way to increase your skills—you get to see so many patterns that do and don’t work. This gives you a whole catalog of options that you can use or tweak into new variations for your own stories.

For example, if you’re writing about a heist, then look at how real and fictional characters have solved that

problem. If you're writing about a chase, do the same. Stories about romance and friendship problems have certain patterns as do stories about catching spies and solving mysteries. Look at your story problem, think about how you'd solve it, then go and see how others have solved it. You can use what you find or change it to suit your purposes, always keeping in mind the type of experience you hope to deliver to the reader.

## How a plot pattern saved my writing

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This idea of plot patterns is actually one of the things that helped me learn to how to finish stories. I once reached a point where I was going to give up my dream of writing. I was in a week-long workshop and couldn't finish the story that we were supposed to write. I'd worked on it for at least fourteen hours and didn't even have the opening scene. This was five years after I had won the Writers of the Future prize. Five years in which I couldn't finish a story of any kind.

It's not that I didn't have ideas. I had bucket loads of cool problem, character, and setting. But there was something I lacked. I didn't know it at the time, but I lacked an understanding of the key fourth story element—I lacked plot. So with this particular story, I didn't know how to proceed. I didn't quite understand how characters went about solving the type of problem I wanted to write about.

But again, I didn't know that. Instead, I concluded that I just didn't have what it took. My one success had been a fluke.

So I sat in a restaurant on that Thursday night contemplating the fact that my dream was going to be put away for good, because I was determined not to waste another minute or dollar on something in which I had no chance of being successful. Luckily (or Divinely) about an hour before I gave it all up, I stumbled into thinking maybe I could try applying to my story an event sequence pattern I'd seen used elsewhere.

I applied the one little pattern I knew for that type of story problem. Suddenly, the lights went on, the music began to play, and the story came to life. The scenes rolled out in front of me. And I wrote a story that went on to sell multiple times. More importantly, I was able to continue to finish stories afterwards.

This lack of understanding about plot wasn't the only thing that was keeping me back at the time, but it was one of the main ones. Looking for patterns and variations has been useful to me ever since.

So let me recommend you think about and look—not for some formula or grand master sequence of acts, plot points, or events—but for effective event sequence patterns (plural) for the types of story problems you write about. When you do, you'll find your stories come easier.

To get you started, I'm going to describe some of the patterns and variations I've seen in each of the three story problem-solving phases. Each is a tool I think you'll want in your story workshop. None of them are the golden key to success. However, each of them is an option that can work, depending on the story and your objectives.

## 1. Patterns for Presenting the Problem

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The story begins when we present to the reader (a) the main character, (b) the problem she'll face, and (c) a good reason why the character can't or won't walk away from the problem. If the main character is sympathetic and interesting, the reader will root for her and want to see what happens. If some of the particularities of the character and problem are surprising or novel to the readers, it will generate more interest than if it's something they've seen many times before.

Here are some options to think about when you structure the event sequence of the presentation phase.

- Number of scenes to present the problem

- Straight or twist presentation
- Central problem or a subplot problem start
- The reason why the hero can't or won't walk away
- Size of the presentation phase (proportion)

We'll briefly discuss each in this section.

### **Number of scenes to present the problem**

We can present the problem in one scene or over the course of a couple of scenes.

For example, in Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games*, the problem is presented in one scene. Katniss goes to reaping day event, witnesses her little sister's name drawn, volunteers to take her place, and then sees the boy she's going to have to kill.

In Dean Koontz's *The Good Guy* the problem is presented in two scenes. In the first scene a guy shows up and mistakes our hero for a contract killer. He passes the hero an envelope with \$10,000 and a picture of the woman he wants killed with the address on the back. In the next scene, just a few minutes later, the killer shows up and mistakes our hero for the guy putting out the hit. We know very quickly what the whole story is going to be about.

Sometimes it takes quite a number of scenes to present the central problem. For example, in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* the full problem takes nine chapters to fully reveal itself. We start off immediately with three interesting women in different hardship situations. That alone builds our sympathy and invests us in them. But it's not until the end of chapter nine that we finally know the specific issue that will form the central question of the story.

Sometimes it takes so long because we're presenting a string of events that lead in a causal manner to the main problem. For example, in Larry Correia's *Monster Hunter International*, we start with a scene where a fat boss turns into a werewolf and tries to kill the main hero. This attack sends the hero to the hospital. But it also prompts the hero being offered a job to join a monster hunting organization. The offer leads to his acceptance, which leads to some training scenes, which leads, at last, to the central story problem being introduced in chapter six.

### **Straight or twist presentation**

How we reveal the nature of the problem is another option in the presentation phase. We can present the problem clearly up front. Or we can start with one understanding of the problem, then, as the character gets to work on it, we present another scene that opens our eyes to the real nature of the issue.

The problems in *Hunger Games* and *The Good Guy* are straight presentations. We start knowing exactly what's up.

On the other hand, we could start with two murders. The detective thinks it's the work of some crime organization. Then he discovers they both have a peculiar tattoo. One that was found on another dead man who was a soldier that worked on some super-secret Army biological weapon project. He comes to find out that all three men were on that project.

### **Central problem or a subplot problem start**

Another option is to lead with the central problem, or to lead with something else, maybe the introduction of a subplot or something about the character that will engender interest and sympathy.

In Lee Child's *Gone Tomorrow*, the first page starts with the presentation of the central problem of the story. The same thing happens in Brandon Sanderson's *Elantris*.

However, in *The Good Guy*, we start the book with banter back and forth between the hero and a bartender friend about the hero's lack of a love life. It's funny and interesting and actually sets up the subplot of the book, which is a love story. But it isn't the central plot issue. That comes in the next scene.

Likewise, in *Spiderman 2* we start with Peter Parker having issues trying to keep a job, do well in school, and win the love of his life. This subplot directly impacts the central story problem. But the central story problem of Doctor Octopus doesn't show up until a few scenes later.

In *Hunger Games* we open with a short introductory scene that presents the character and builds interest in her. It also introduces a love element. After that brief presentation, we move directly into the presentation of the central story problem.

### **The reason why the hero can't or won't walk away**

Of course, if our character could just walk away, then we as readers would expect them to. So there must be a good reason to face the problem. Our fourth set of options center on this.

There are usually three reasons why someone would be locked into dealing with a problem:

- Physical
- Moral and value
- Professional

Physical reasons are simply those that physically force people into facing the problem. You're stuck on a runaway train. You're not going to jump at 80 mph. You are on an airplane flight with terrorists. You are on the Titanic when it hits the iceberg. The villain wants you dead and seems to have no problem finding you. In these stories, something physical is preventing the character from avoiding the problem. It doesn't matter whether they want to solve the problem or not, they're going to have to deal with it.

On the other hand, there are situations where our characters have a choice.

The character might have strong moral reasons that compel him to face the problem. Maybe a child is in danger. In this situation, the hero does something bad by not acting. In another sense, a character might lose something of great value if he doesn't act. Maybe someone he loves will be hurt or die if he fails to deal with the issue.

A character might also have professional reasons. These characters try to solve problems because it's their job. Cops track down killers. Soldiers go into war. Bounty hunters chase folks that jump bail.

These motivations can be presented in the same scene as the problem, or they can be presented in a separate scene. For example, sometimes the hero is willing to charge forward. Sometimes the hero is unwilling and needs a shove. So in *The Good Guy* our hero takes about one paragraph to decide he's going to take the problem head on. But in another story you might have a hero who doesn't want to engage. This may require a scene or two that gives him the motivation.

### **Size of the presentation phase (proportion)**

How long should the presentation phase be?

You'll often read some story structure models that claim the story should have a 25-50-25 structure. The first part should be about 25% of the story. The resolution should be 25%. And the struggle should take roughly 50%.

The problem is that the rigid 25-50-25 proportion doesn't hold up very well when tested against actual stories. Look at the stories below:

- *Hunger Games* finishes the presentation phase 8% of the way into the novel.
- *The Good Guy* finishes the presentation phase 4% of the way in.
- TV episodes of *The Mentalist* routinely finish the presentation phase less than 2% of the way in, but in one episode they threw in an extra case and took 30% of the time.
- *The Help* finishes its 27% of the way in.
- *Monster Hunter International* finishes its presentation phase 28% of the way in.

Quite a range. And there are a lot of stories finishing the presentation phase at all points in between.

What this says to me is that the 25-50-25 rule is something that someone cooked up without checking reality. Or, at least, the reality of today's fiction market.

It might be that a presentation phase of 35% to 50% of the whole might make it difficult to guide the reader into the pitch of emotion that's necessary for a climax. Maybe not. I haven't analyzed any stories that have such big presentation phases yet.

What I can conclude is that some stories get right into the central problem while others present subplots or multiple scenes that build to the central problem first. Until I find stories with different proportions that work for me, I'm going to try to keep my presentation phases under 30%. And if I'm not doing anything complex, I'm going to try to keep them below 10%.

### **No one right option**

As you can see, there are a lot of variations to the presentation phase. The key thing to remember is that any of these variations can work. None is intrinsically better than another. So don't fall into any rigid plot formula trap.

Instead, keep in mind what you're trying to accomplish in the present phase. Then choose the options that work best for this phase for your story and make it as interesting as possible.

## **2. Patterns for the Struggle**

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In the presentation phase, readers are introduced to the problem. But they want more than a moment of sympathy or worry. They want their tension (their hopes and fears) to build to a pitch.

How do we do that?

We don't let the characters solve the problem. Not yet, at least. Instead, we do just the reverse—we make the problem bigger and harder to solve than it was before. We make the hero struggle. We make the situation more intense. We raise the stakes. All this increases the reader's tension.

So the character forms a goal—solve the problem—identifies the first step to do just that, and takes action. Of course, she won't solve it with that one action. We talked about that in the last part of the series. If she solves it right out of the gate, the story is over. We want reader tension to build, not dissipate. And so she's going to go around the story cycle a few times trying to solve the problem.

How many times?

There's NO set number. There are many variations that work. However, I will say that with the central problem you probably need at least three revolutions (some subplots might only require one revolution). First, you need that many to create a story long enough to make it a novel. In fact, you'll probably need many more. Second, there's something about three that makes it feel significant, that the character has achieved something. Finally, three seems to be the number that sets a pattern. If someone fails the first two times, we're likely to think they'll fail the third. I believe this helps build tension surrounding that third attempt.



So while our hero makes some headway, she also runs into troubles that seem to threaten complete failure. The reader feels the hero has a chance of winning, but the troubles and failures make the odds of her losing seem to grow. Furthermore, the hero begins to run out of time, the stakes (what might be lost) are raised, vague threats become very specific. These are all the problem intensifiers we talked about in the first post in the series, and all of them make the reader's worry grow.

So what does this phase look like? Do you have to follow a strict pattern of "pinch points" and "mid act reversals"?

No.

Again, there are just too many options and variables for there to be one best sequence of events.

What you need to do is keep throwing troubles, conflicts, surprises, and obstacles at the reader. You also need to let the hero have some successes. This allows the reader to have cause to fear and hope and not know for sure how it's all going to turn out.

At some point the hero finds himself with one last chance to resolve the problem. When the hero heads, by decision or by force, into that final showdown, that last possible attempt to solve the problem, the struggle phase ends.

Here are some of the options to consider when you sequence the events of this phase:

- The type of problem your character is solving
- Trouble progression
- Actions the villain takes to oppose the hero
- Number of stories and plot turns
- What leads the hero into the final showdown
- Proportion

I'll briefly discuss each.

### **The type of problem your character is solving**

Each type of problem requires different actions to solve it. If gang-bangers are threatening your son, you will take one set of actions to solve that problem. If you've just met the love of your life, you will take a different set of actions. If you're caught at sea in a massive hurricane, you'll take a third set of actions.

If you're working with a murder mystery, a critical first step is identifying any clues that might lead to information about who did it and why. So your character will examine the crime scene. Next, he'll go talk to people associated with the victim. Next, he'll run down leads he finds from those initial investigations. He'll find more clues and more leads. He'll form a hypothesis, test it, and find it's wrong. So he'll track down more clues. Finally, he'll figure it out. Now, he has to figure out how to capture the perpetrator.

However, if you're working with a problem where a team of soldiers needs to go behind enemy lines to sabotage a military installation, you might start with the selection of the soldiers, then their training, then their deployment to the theater of action, then them going behind the lines, then their arrival at the target, then their escape.

If you're working with a love story, the characters need to meet. The reader needs to see romantic possibilities, but something must prevent them from getting together. This obstacle is the problem. However, if the obstacle is that they work for diametrically opposed organizations (she's a gun-toting Minuteman, he's a coyote) then the resolution will proceed differently than if the obstacle is that she's already engaged to be married.

So look at your problem and identify the main steps to how it might be resolved.

Sometimes it's helpful to work backwards. If you know what the resolution is, then describe the situation the character is in at the end of the story and reverse it. That's what you present at the beginning.

For example, if Spiderman is confident and single-minded at the end, present him conflicted and doubting at the beginning. Then think about the types of things or steps that would help the hero get from point A to point B. What kinds of experiences would force him to look at things in a new way or make a decision or come to realize what's really important?

However you work, forwards or backwards or both, it often helps to map out all the main steps you see to someone resolving the issue. And don't feel your story must have the same number of steps as another story.

For example, *The Hunger Games* has seven parts to its structure:

1. Present problem – 8%
2. Preparation for the games – 31%
3. First round of fights – 12%
4. Rue – 11%
5. Peeta – 22%
6. Climax – 12%
7. Aftermath – 8%

The exact wrong thing to do would be to conclude that all awesome stories (which I thought *Hunger Games* was) must have seven parts with the proportions shown above, including the hero going on the offensive around the 53% mark.

Why do I say this? Because a lot of awesome stories don't.

Let's look at the idea that the hero should go on the offensive at the 50% mark. In Dean Koontz's *The Good Guy*, the hero goes after the villain at the 19% mark. Then he flees, even as he's working to solve the problem. Only at the 85% mark, does he actively go after the killer again. In Lee Child's *The Enemy*, the hero is actively trying to solve the murder mystery from the start. In Louis L'Amour's *Ride the River*, the heroine is being chased for the whole novel. Not until the very end does she turn the tables.

I could list many more examples. The point is that having the hero go from reacting to acting at the 50% mark is only ONE pattern. Maybe it fits your story, maybe it doesn't. The same applies to the seven parts.

Instead of trying to fit your story to one pattern, put yourself in your character's shoes and think about the main steps that would be required to solve the type of problem your character faces. This should give you a general sequence of events.

Once you have that sequence, you have a general idea of how the story will progress, but that's not enough because this phase is not about solving a problem. It's about making the problem harder to solve. It's about throwing increasing troubles at the main character and making them struggle. So while you think of the general steps to solving the type of problem your character faces, you also need to think about the types of troubles you'll throw at the character and how those troubles progress.

## **Trouble Progression**

Each story will feature different types of conflicts and obstacles (as well as different types of help and aid along the way). I can't find any pattern in the stories I've looked at to suggest you must include certain types of conflicts and obstacles. What I can see is that the troubles need to get worse the further the character goes.

Form follows function. We're trying to build reader tension to a high point and then release it.

One way to approach this is to think about some of the key things that can go wrong—our hero's car breaks down, he gets shot, someone informs the villain about the hero's plan, a key member of the team turns traitor, the hero's sidekick is killed, etc.—then sequence them from least to most dire.

Another approach is to think about a point where the character must face his worst fears, the dark moment when everything seems to be lost. Then work toward that moment.

If one of your obstacles is a dilemma (and I'm not saying all awesome stories must feature this), then one approach is to think about the major dilemma the hero must face, the point where he has to choose between two terrible options, e.g. break his moral code and win or keep his code and lose horribly, save his mother or save his son, etc. Then think about how the hero will get into that position.

Another option is to think about how the hero's options begin to disappear.

A common pattern of trouble progression is to give the character a huge set back. Over the next few scenes the character works to get back on top. Except when he does, he is thrown for another bigger loop. He reacts to that and works to get back on top, but just as he does, he's encounters another killer setback. So you have a big disaster and some scenes to recover and catch up, and we think the hero's rolling, and wham, another disaster. How many of these big setbacks/reversals you have and how far apart they are spaced depends on your taste and the type of story you're writing.

Another common pattern in the trouble progression is for the hero to encounter a dark moment just before the victory. Of if you're writing a tragedy, he experiences a bright moment just before he loses. Why alternate the ultimate and penultimate plot turns this way?

Remember the analogy I made in the post on plot about being thirsty, and that the time the water tastes best is when we're bone thirsty dry? This is what we're talking about. Snatching victory from the jaws of defeat is so much more powerful than snatching victory from the jaws of victory.

Taking the readers to the point where it seems their worst fears will be realized and then turning it around only makes the victory sweeter. Giving the reader great hope, just before everything falls apart, makes the loss feel so much more terrible.

Another common pattern is the alternating of positive and negative plot turns. One turn gives us hope. The next raises our fears. I do not mean that every plot turn must be the opposite of the one that precedes it. Only that the hero makes progress, and then runs into troubles, gets some aid, and then runs into more troubles, etc. To create this type of pattern you will use all four types of troubles (no, no-furthermore, yes-but, no-but) discussed in the last post.

To see what I mean, we can look at *Hunger Games*. I counted 30 major situation changes in that story. The average size of each of those 30 sections was 17 pages or about 5,000 words. In the list below I mark turns that introduce something that makes it seem more likely she'll win with a + (positive) and those that set her back or make it seem more likely she'll lose with a - (negative). I've tried to keep it as general as possible so I don't spoil the book for those who haven't read it yet.

1. -
2. -
3. +
4. +
5. -
6. +
7. -

8. -
9. -
10. +
11. +
12. +
13. +
14. -
15. +
16. -
17. +
18. -
19. +
20. +
21. -
22. -
23. ?
24. -
25. +
26. -
27. +
28. -
29. +
30. -

Notice there were a lot of times when the – and + alternated. But there were quite a few where the main character faced a few +’s or –’s in a row. Again, the point isn’t to follow this exact pattern or the sizes of story sections. It’s simply to see the variability in the back and forth.

One last thought. Some people find the middles of stories the hardest part to write. I suppose they can be. But I’ve found that when I think about troubles, the scenes roll out in front of me. I think this is so because trouble begs for reaction and action.

For example, I was recently outlining *Dark God’s Glory*. I had parts of the story, but there was large section of the middle where I could envision only about two scenes. That was not nearly enough. And those two scenes weren’t very interesting anyway. I realized I needed some kind of disaster, so I asked myself “What’s the worst that could happen at this point? What would totally screw my hero over? What could go terribly wrong?” I generated a few options and very quickly ran into one carrying a few hundred watts of zing. Boom! Scenes galore, all the way up to the climax and beyond.

So if you find yourself stuck, check to see if your main character is actually having to deal with any immediate troubles. If not, think up some gnarly setback or twist and see if that doesn’t shake something out of the plot tree.

### **Actions the villain takes to oppose the hero**

Directly related to the progression of trouble are the actions the villain or opposition takes to thwart the hero. I made this its own topic because I’ve found it’s incredibly useful in coming up with great troubles to play the story cycle from both points of view, like a one-man chess game.

So my hero takes an action. I switch in my mind to the antagonist’s point of view and ask myself what I would do. How would I react? The antagonist has his own goal and motives and resources and suggests a course of action. This action, of course, causes trouble for the hero. So I switch back to the hero’s point of view and ask myself how

I would react as the hero. This causes trouble for the villain. So I switch back to the villain's point of view, and back and forth I go.

In coming up with troubles, it's sometimes helpful to think of how the villain's actions might escalate. So when the hero pops up, maybe he sends a henchman to give him a stern warning. When that doesn't work, maybe a smart villain might send the henchman back to quietly remove him. When that doesn't work, maybe I call in some favors from the chief of police who I have dirt on. When that doesn't work, maybe I decide to go take the hero's family hostage. When he comes to save them, I'll get him then.

Thinking about the situation from the villain's point of view always helps me come up with lots of troubles for my hero. Again, as with all troubles, the one thing you want to keep in mind is that you want the villain to gradually escalate the measures used to remove his problem, which translates to a trouble progression for the hero.

### **Number of stories and plot turns**

There are, on average, 40 to 70 or scenes in a novel. Some of these will be reaction scenes, others will be action scenes. Each will usually move the plot forward with a decision, revelation, help, or a troubling result—a plot turn.

Some subset of those scenes will contain major plot turns, huge setbacks or revelations that dramatically change the situation. For example, someone close to the hero may betray him. Or some significant part of the hero's plan fails. Or the hero learns that he's totally misunderstood the problem. Or the hero finally decides to overcome his flaw. Etc.

How many major and minor plot turns you have is up to you. However, the scenes and plot turns don't all have to focus on one problem. Many stories are actually made up of a group of stories—a central story and a bunch of other smaller stories that relate in some way.

One of these subplots might require two scenes to tell, another might require ten, while another might be told by inserting a few paragraphs worth of interaction into scenes that are focused on another problem (think of a love story that progresses as the two characters work on the central problem).

You can start a subplot before, during, or after the presentation of the central problem. So in one story you might start the love story subplot before the villain shows up with the central problem. Or you might insert the love subplot after the villain shows up and let it be the thing that locks the hero into dealing with the problem. Or you might raise the subplot in the same scene as the one where the villain shows up—the hero falls in love with the villain's henchman.

You can also start subplots during the first half of the central problem's struggle phase. I don't know of any stories that insert them in the latter part of that phase, but I don't know there's any reason not to.

Some of these subplots will be resolved before the resolution of the central problem. Some of them will be resolved after. Some, if you're writing a series, will be resolved in a book later in the series. All three options can be satisfying.

The key thing to remember here is that the sequence of events in your struggle phase also depends on the number of stories you're telling, the number of plot turns each of those stories has, and where you weave in each of the three problem-solving phases for the subplots.

Do you see now why it's impossible to prescribe ONE sequence of events for every story?

### **What leads the hero into the final showdown**

The next thing you want to think about is what locks the hero into the final showdown and moves the story from struggle to resolution. I see three things that will do this:

- An insight & decision
- Some piece of information or a tool
- An external pressure

Which it will be often depends on the main obstacle the character faces.

The stories that use insight and decision are usually those where the main obstacle is the character's internal problem. For example, in stories where love and friendship is on the line and the obstacle is the main character's values, it may be that the hero has to make a decision to place love above something else. So the hero, as in *Sabrina* with Harrison Ford, finally comes to the insight that no amount of business success can compensate for a lack of love. Of course, his actions before this point have made a mess of the relationship. He's betrayed and humiliated her. Struck her to the core. Will she have him back? We don't know. But he decides to make one last attempt to win her love and heads to the resolution.

In another type of story, the chief obstacle may be a lack of information. So maybe the hero has the power to deal with the problem, but doesn't know who the villain really is. A lot of murder mysteries are structured this way. At the point when the hero finally learns the identity of the villain, he immediately heads to the climax to expose or capture the criminal. Or maybe what the hero lacks is knowledge about the location of the villain. Now that the hero knows it, he can go in to take him out. In another story of this type, the main obstacle might be finding a cure for a virus. Once the hero obtains the lacking information, she can head to the resolution.

Sometimes it's not information the hero lacks, but some object—a weapon or tool. Until he gets it, he can't possibly beat the opposition. For example, in John Grisham's *The Firm* the hero needs to get documentation he can use as blackmail to make the partners of the firm back off. Once he has this, he can go face them and resolve the problem for good.

Finally, in some stories the thing that thrusts the hero into the final confrontation is some external force. For example, in *Hunger Games* the hero is holed up and surviving just fine. But because the gamers want the last battle, they force all the remaining contestants together. Likewise, in *Star Wars*, the empire finds out the location of the rebel base. Our heroes probably would have stayed hidden or on the run if they could have, but the empire forces them to act.

Please note: some folks maintain that all awesome stories feature the hero facing a certain type of ultimate obstacle, which affects what locks the hero into the final showdown. For example, some say the only way to write an awesome story is for the hero's internal flaw to be the real obstacle to his solving of the external problem. And so the lock is him overcoming the inner obstacle so he can solve the external problem. *Spiderman 2* is an excellent example of this type of story. And this type of problem can be very delicious.

But there are so many other awesome stories where a character's flaw isn't the main obstacle or even an obstacle at all. *The Good Guy*, *Ride the River*, episodes of *The Mentalist* and hundreds of other stories fall into this category. Don't feel forced to use one type of obstacle. Use whatever makes the story most interesting to you.

Once your character is locked into the final showdown, the struggle phase ends.

## Proportion

We already know the 25-50-25 proportion is bogus for the presentation phase. So how big are the struggle phases of the books you love? They might be different from the ones I love. Still, I think it's useful to see the variety that's out there. Here are a few from books that work for me:

- *Hunger Games*: 79%
- *The Good Guy*: 74%

- *Servant of a Dark God*: 68%
- *Monster Hunter International*: 66%
- A random episode of *The Mentalist*: 51%

Clearly, there is a wide range of proportions that work. Your job is to look at the stories that you love, the ones that have an struggle phase that works for you (and the ones that don't work at all), and see how long it takes to build reader tension to the levels you want before you head into the resolution. Don't follow it slavishly. Use it simply to give you a general idea of proportion.

### 3. Patterns for the Resolution

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Readers want their tension to build to a pitch. Then they want to feel a release. The resolution phase is where you deliver that delicious release.

The resolution isn't something completely different from what you've done before. It's just another trip around the story cycle. As such, you have:

- Reaction
- Action
  - Preparation
  - Approach
  - Climax
- Aftermath

At the end of the struggle phase something locks the hero into the final showdown. The hero reacts to that thing. The reaction might be short or long, and includes what any reaction would—emotion, thought, discussion, motive, and decision. In *Star Wars*, this is the sequence where the rebels react to the fact that the empire knows where their base is and is going to obliterate it. It includes the scene where they discuss how they're going to blow up the death star.

Because it's just another trip around the story cycle, once the hero decides what he's going to do, he begins to act on his decision. This may include some preparation. In action movies, he straps on his guns, says farewell, etc. In a crime drama, he may get his team organized. Then he approaches the villain. In *Star Wars*, the preparation was when Luke and the others were getting into their fighters. The approach, obviously, was them flying to the death star.

At some point, the hero engages. He fights the villain, chases after the girl, executes his plan. This is the climax. It should be hard. There should be a struggle.

At the moment when all seems to be lost, the hero resolves the problem. As with any action, it's important to know what the ultimate obstacle to victory at this point is. Is it cowardice, knowledge, power? Once I know this, it's easier to write the resolution. So the hero removes that last obstacle and vanquishes the opposition. The lovers remove the last obstacle to their everlasting commitment and ability to be with one another.

At that point readers want to see the consequences. They want to bask in the triumph and tragedy for a while. Let the feeling slowly mellow. And so we show what this means to the character's future life. We show the rewards or the punishments of having solved the problem. Maybe we resolve an outstanding subplot or two.

So the resolution phase is just another trip around the story cycle, but one where the result is final. Here are some patterns I've seen that work in the resolution phase.

#### Twists

As with any scene or sequence, there will be back and forth, stimulus and response—the hero will go around the story cycle a couple of times and run into troubles until the odds for winning look pretty slim.

The hero can go in and try to win with his original plan. This is like Luke flying in to blast the death star’s garbage chute. That’s the plan and the question is whether that plan will work or not. Or the hero can go in with his big plan and, twist, it completely fails! I won’t ruin *Hunger Games* for anyone, but there’s just such a twist there. There’s another in *The Good Guy*. The same in *Servant of a Dark God*.

Sometimes, at a moment when all seems lost, logical but unexpected help comes to the hero’s aid. This is what happened in *Avatar* when the animals stampede the opposition forces. And what happened in *Star Wars* when Han Solo comes roaring back. It doesn’t resolve the problem for the hero, but it sure helps. And it makes the readers cheer!

## Tests

In stories where the hero has an insight and makes a decision to change, the showdown will test his resolve. It will often present a situation similar to one shown in the beginning that established the character’s flaw. So if the hero was a coward then and sacrificed his buddies to save his own skin, it will present a similar situation at the end. But this time the hero damns his own self-interest and charges in to save his friends.

## Aftermath

As for the aftermath, I’ve seen some that are quite abrupt others that are longer. I personally favor a slow curtain.

I’ve seen aftermaths that show the reward and end. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* does this. We see the fish in a living stream and know things will be alright. There are no remaining lines of tension. My short story “Bright Waters” does this. You can read it in the fiction area of my site.

On the other hand, other stories show the reward and then take it a step farther and not only show life moving on, but also raise another line of tension. For example, in *The Incredibles*, the story ends with the Underminer (another villain) rising up from below, presenting future story possibilities. My short story “Loose in the Wires” does this. You can read it in the fiction area of my site. Even though I wanted to make sure *Servant of a Dark God* ended with a satisfying finality, it also projects the reader’s mind forward.

## Proportion

Stories often spend a bit more time in the preparation, approach, and climax phase of this trip around the story cycle than they might in other revolutions. They do this so that the reader’s suspense and anticipation can build. Again, it’s like drinking water when you’re bone dry. You can drink it all in one gulp. Or you can savor the quenching of your thirst. Readers want to enjoy it. So we don’t want to rush this phase. However, how much time you spend all depends on your tastes and the type of story you’re writing. The stories below show the variety.

- *The Good Guy*: 22%
- A random episode of *The Mentalist*: 15%
- *Servant of a Dark God*: 15%
- *Hunger Games*: 12%
- *Monster Hunter International*: 6%

Let’s look at those stories again with their proportions side by side.

- *The Good Guy*: 4-74-22
- A random episode of *The Mentalist*: 2-83-15



- *Servant of a Dark God*: 17-68-15
- *Hunger Games*: 8-79-12
- *Monster Hunter International*: 28-66-6

Clearly, there's a wide variety of sizes that work. You might find other stories with resolutions that last much longer. The key is to look at the patterns in the stories you like.

## Putting it all together

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Let's pull back for just a moment and review the key points of this post.

1. Structure is all about problem solving, not a mystical journey or form.
2. There are three phases to solving a problem in a way that will raise reader tension. These three phases form the structure of our story.
  1. Present the problem
  2. Main character struggles to solve the problem
  3. Main character resolves the problem
3. There are a number of options for what happens in each phase and so a whole range of event sequences can be successful.
4. Choices that affect the presentation phase include:
  - Number of scenes required to present the problem
  - Whether you present the problem with a twist
  - Whether you start with the central story or a subplot
  - The reason the hero can't walk away
5. Choices that affect the struggle phase include:
  - The type of problem your character has to solve
  - Trouble progression
  - Actions the villain takes to oppose the hero
  - Number of stories you're trying to tell
  - Number of plot turns in each story
  - What locks the hero into the final showdown
6. Choices that affect the resolution phase include:
  - Twists
  - Character tests
  - Subplots resolve in the aftermath
  - How the ending raises possibilities about how the future

My challenge to you is to start looking at the stories you read and watch through the lens of the model above. Start to notice patterns.

## Other patterns

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I've shared a number of plot patterns and options above. But they are by no means all that are out there. The best place to see these are in the stories you love. Break them down into problem resolution phases and story

cycle revolutions. I promise that you'll begin to see patterns that you can use in your own writing.

In the meantime, other authors explain their models of story structure. I suggest you look at their models then test them against the stories you love. Some of the models will be helpful to you, some of them won't be.

And if one of us maintains that all great stories follow a specific event sequence or feature a certain type of problem, make doubly sure you test it. My experience is that such statements rarely hold up. Here are some resources to get you started, but remember—the best place to look is in the stories you love.

- ***Techniques of the Selling Writer*** by **Dwight V. Swain** (chapters 4-6)
- ***Writing and Selling Your Novel*** by **Jack Bickham** (chapters 6-9, 16)
- ***Scene & Structure*** by **Jack Bickham** (whole book)
- ***How to Build A Great Screenplay*** by **David Howard** (the chapters on basic dramatic structure)
- ***Story*** by **Robert McKee** (chapters 7-13)

Again, don't look for the one magical plot. There isn't one. Think instead of objectives, problem-solving, patterns, and options. And, always, always, always about what effect the form has on the reader.

## What's Next?

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Up to this point in the series we've examined principles of problem, character, plot, and structure that lead to reader suspense. These are all big concepts. How do they translate to the actual text on the page? That's the topic of the next post in the series where I discuss scenes.

Until then I challenge you to test the thoughts I've expressed above. Test them. And come back and let me know your results.

Also, if any point in any of these essays is not immediately clear to you, that means I haven't done my job. Please let me know if you have any questions.

## Parts in the The Key Conditions for Reader Suspense Series

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- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
5. Scene (coming soon)
6. Development Tips