

Structure Questions & Worksheet

OVERVIEW OF THE KEY STAGES IN THE PROTAGONIST'S JOURNEY

ACT ONE

OPENING/FALSE BELIEF: Our protagonist wants something. Without a powerful want, there is no story. Until we have a sense of what our protagonist wants, we will be unclear on our throughline. Our protagonist also carries with them a false belief, a mistaken idea of themselves and/or their world. Since the purpose of transformation is to reveal a wider perspective, the story often begins with a false belief that is founded on a set of incontestable facts, but as the story progresses, the interpretation of these facts evolves. For instance, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the man believes that the world is unsafe and that he must destroy anyone who crosses his path. In fact, he is prepared to kill his own son if he perceives that the boy might suffer at the hands of another. And he is right. The world is a post-apocalyptic nightmare, yet in the end the father is dead, and a family happens upon the boy and takes him into their fold. It most certainly is a dark and terrifying world, but it is not without hope, as the father initially believed.

DILEMMA: Our protagonist's desire is wrapped up in a false belief about what their goal actually means, which creates a dilemma. This dilemma is often called the dramatic problem of the story because it appears that they have a problem, but in fact, they have a dilemma. For example, a character may want love because they believe that it will complete them. Through the story they may learn that their desire for love actually prevents them from ever having it. As long as they believe that they require love in order to feel complete, they will be unable to accept that they are already complete. By introducing the protagonist's apparent "problem" early in the story, we understand the nature of their struggle in universal terms.

INCITING INCIDENT: This is sometimes called the "Why is this day unlike any other?" moment. Whether it is Toto being taken away in *The Wizard of Oz*, or Katniss' sister being chosen as a "tribute" in *The Hunger Games*, something happens that causes our protagonist to respond, thus providing a context for the dilemma. It might originally have been universal, but now we understand how it is personal to the protagonist.

OPPOSING ARGUMENT: This is a moment somewhere in the middle or two-thirds of the way through Act One where an antagonist responds to our protagonist thus presenting the other side of the "apparent" problem. This moment is necessary because it illustrates the protagonist's specific dilemma. Until our reader understands the nature of the dilemma, as opposed to the appearance of the problem, there will be no context for the protagonist's decision at the end of Act One. Conversely, it is only as a result of the Inciting Incident where our protagonist is galvanized to take action that the opposing argument is understood.

DECISION: At the end of Act One our protagonist makes a decision that they cannot go back on toward achieving their goal. A decision that they cannot go back on may involve anything from telling a secret to

proclaiming their love, to a first kiss, to moving across town, to agreeing to a promotion, to entering a wizardry academy. Notice the reluctance that precedes this decision. Without reluctance, we will not have a context for the dilemma.

ACT TWO

FALSE HOPE: Our protagonist achieves success toward achieving their goal. It appears to be within reach. Without this moment we do not have a context for the meaning that they make out of their goal. They are yet unaware of the conundrum facing them. If their desire is to be loved and they succeed in getting someone to fall for them, they have yet to confront the real problem, which may be the meaning that they have made out of that love. They have an idea of what their success should look like, but until they shed the meaning they have attached to it, they will be in bondage to their goal.

MIDPOINT – TEMPTATION: As a result of our protagonist's false hope, an event happens that causes our protagonist to respond through temptation. They are pulled in two different directions between what they want and what they need. They have come a long way and have made great strides, but now are faced with a crisis of conscience. They can take a shortcut or they can risk everything for their dream.

SUFFERING: My God, they had no idea it was going to be this difficult! If they had known they might never have begun this journey in the first place. The suffering is a direct result of the protagonist's dawning suspicion that what they want is impossible to achieve, based upon the meaning they have attached to their goal. In other words, they sense that what they are facing is not a problem, but rather a dilemma which is impossible to solve. The suffering is the death rattle of our protagonist's old identity. They're going to give it one last try.

SURRENDER: We surrender when we have run out of choices. The end of Act Two is where our protagonist recognizes the impossibility of ever achieving their goal, and they let it go. The end of Act Two is like a coin with two sides. On one side is the dark night of the soul, and on the other side is a wider perspective. This is where they reframe their relationship to their goal.

ACT THREE

ACCEPTING REALITY: By reframing their relationship to their goal, the protagonist begins to accept the reality of their situation. There's a saying: The truth will set you free, but first it will kick your butt. That is where our protagonist is. They are getting their butt kicked, but it is leading them to a new understanding of how things really work.

BATTLE SCENE: This is the climax of our story where our protagonist makes a choice between what they want and what they need. This is an extremely difficult choice for the protagonist. Through this choice they prove to the gods that they have earned their transformation, and thus resolve the dilemma.

NEW EQUILIBRIUM: This is the ending of our story where our protagonist is returned home. How are they relating differently to the other characters in the story? What have they come to understand through their journey?

STORY-STRUCTURE QUESTIONS

In building a story, we move from the general to the specific. It is important to understand that we are not “plotting out” our story, but merely becoming more familiar with the key stages in our protagonist’s journey. It is through exploring our protagonist’s experiences that the plot emerges.

Write for five minutes, (stream of consciousness) on these questions.

Act One:

1. Beginning: What is the mood, time, and place in which my story exists?
2. Dramatic Question: What is the dilemma at the heart of my story?
3. Inciting Incident: What event happens that sets my story into motion?
4. Opposing argument: What is the opposing argument to the Inciting Incident?
5. End of Act One: What decision does my protagonist make that they can’t go back on? Where is there reluctance in this decision?

Act Two:

1. False Hope: Where does my protagonist experience success or false hope as the result of making their decision?
2. Midpoint: What event happens that forces my protagonist to commit fully to their goal? How does this moment involve temptation for the protagonist? They could go back to where they were in the beginning or forge into the unknown and risk losing everything.
3. Suffering: What does it look like when my protagonist realizes that this is more difficult than they had imagined? Do they consider giving up? What does it look like when they suffer?
4. Surrender: What does it look like when my protagonist realizes that what they wanted is impossible to achieve?

Act Three:

1. Reality: What is the truth of my protagonist’s reality that they finally accept? How does this galvanize them to take action?
2. Action: What action does my protagonist take toward getting what they need?
3. Battle Scene: What happens when my protagonist’s want and need collide? What choice does my protagonist make?
4. New Equilibrium: What is the final image in my story? What does it look like when my protagonist is returned home? How are they relating differently to other characters? What have they come to understand?

THREE-ACT STORY STRUCTURE WORK SHEET

ACT ONE

Opening/False Belief

Dilemma

Inciting Incident

Opposing Argument

Protagonist Makes a Decision

ACT TWO

Our Protagonist Experiences False Hope

Midpoint: Our Protagonist Experiences Temptation

Our Protagonist Suffers

Our Protagonist Surrenders

ACT THREE

Our Protagonist Accepts the Reality of Their Situation

Our Protagonist Takes Action

The Battle Scene

Our Protagonist Returns Home