

“Storytelling is the creative demonstration of truth. As story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action. A story’s event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea without explanation.”
- Robert McKee, **Story**

“Storytellers are dangerous people”
- Plato, **Republic**

The structure of story

A story **event** creates a meaningful *change* in the life situation of a character:

- expressed and experienced in terms of a **value**
- achieved through **conflict**

A **beat** is an exchange of behaviour in action/reaction.

A **scene** is a series of **beats** which creates action through **conflict** and must have a **turning point** causing *minor change* in the **values** at stake. Every scene is a story **event**.

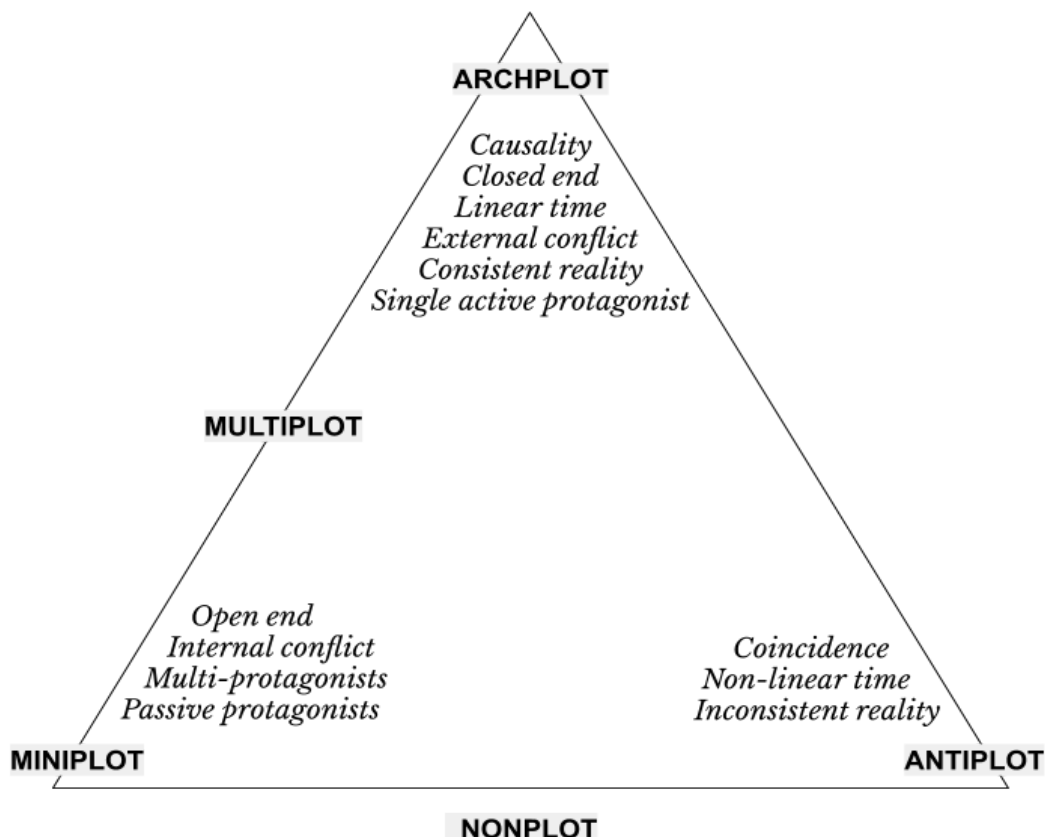
A **sequence** is a series of **scenes** that peaks in a scene with *moderate impact* on at least one **value**.

An **act** is a series of **sequences** that peaks in a **climax** *more powerful in impact* than any previous sequence of scene.

A **story** is a series of **acts** that build to a **climax** which brings about *irreversible change*.

The difference between a basic scene, a scene that climaxes a sequence and a scene that climaxes an act is the degree of impact of the change on the character. All changes may be reversible but *not* the story climax.

Plot is the writer’s strategic choice and chronology of **events** in order to arouse specific emotions and/or to express a specific view of life or philosophy.



Archplot (classical / hero): the story of one *active* protagonist who struggles mostly against *external antagonistic forces* to pursue a *outward desire*, through *linear time*, towards a *closed ending* of absolute change. The reality of the archplot is *consistent* and *causal*. Everyone enters a story with classical anticipation. The archplot is universal.

Multiplot: the story of *many active protagonists* in a *consistent* reality who gravitate towards a *closed ending* of absolute change.

Miniplot: the story of one or *many passive* protagonists who struggle mostly against *internal antagonistic forces* to pursue an *inward desire*, towards an *open ending*.

Antiplot: the story of protagonist(s) who struggle through *non-linear time*. The reality of the antiplot is *inconsistent* and *coincidental*, to emphasise absurdity, fragmentation, lack of meaning.

Setting & Genre

Consists of **period**, **duration**, **location** and **level of conflict**. A story *must* obey the laws and possibilities of the world in which it is set. **Genres** are conventions for specific settings, roles, events and values.

Authors must have *authority* over their world which in turn creates *authenticity*.

A too-complex world dilutes the writer's knowledge about it. Creative choices may seem light and fall into cliché. The creative choices must always be visibly deliberate.

Character

The role of **structure** is to incrementally build pressure that force characters into dilemmas; the role of **character** is to bring to the story the qualities required to authentically act out choices in response to those dilemmas.

Characterization is the sum of all observable qualities of a character, but isn't character. **True character** is *revealed* in the choices made under *pressure*. The choice between good and evil or between right and wrong is no choice at all.

Fine writing not only reveals true character but arcs or changes that nature over the course of the telling - irreversible **value** changes.

Classical protagonist

- *willful* character with a *conscious desire*
- the **value** of their desire directly proportional to the **risk** they would take to achieve it
- may also have a self-contradictory *unconscious desire*
- has the *capacities* to convincingly pursue the desire to the limit established by setting (and genre)
- must have at least a chance to attain his desire
- must be *empathetic*, may not be sympathetic / likeable
- readers and audiences always dissociate themselves from hypocrites

The principle of antagonism: a protagonist and their story can only be as fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them.

Conflict

The law of conflict: nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict. *Boredom* as a lack of desire invites *inner conflict*.

Three levels of **conflict**:

- *inner* (mind, body, emotions) => novel
- *personal* (family, lovers, friends) => theatre
- *extra-personal* (environment, institutions, status quo) => cinema

In story, we concentrate on the moment in which a character takes an action expecting a useful reaction from the world, but instead it provokes *unexpected* forces of antagonism, which create **conflict**. This reaction must push the character further away from their desire, broadening the **gap** between expectation and reality.

The character must **react** to the unexpected.

Characters must *differentiate* themselves through their choices and reactions. Two characters that react the same to whatever occurs reduce the potential for conflict.

Meaning

The **controlling idea (theme)** is the story's *meaning* that shapes the writer's strategic choices.

Controlling idea = value + cause

Story values are quantitative universal qualities of human experience that may change (from positive to negative or vice-versa) from a moment to the next. The main values of the story must change irreversibly.

Cause refers to the primary reason why the changes in the values occurred.

Progressions build by moving between the positive and negative charges of the **values** at stake in the story, by the **idea** confronting the **counter-idea**. "*The spirit of creation is the spirit of contradiction.*"

Dramatising only the positive idea falls into preaching and didacticism. You must willingly entertain opposite, repugnant ideas.

Irony gives the story a life-like quality. An ironic ending combines optimistic with pessimistic values, making both a positive and negative statement.

The **substance** of story comes from the **gap** between expectation and result. This gap is opened and closed through **set-up and pay-off**.

Classical story design

1. Inciting incident

Upsets the balance of the protagonist's world inviting reaction and creating a desire. The energy of his conscious desire forms *the spine of the story*. If the character has an *unconscious* desire then that becomes the spine instead.

2. Progressive complications

Generate more conflict as the characters face *greater* forces of antagonism, require *greater* willpower, face *greater* change - a succession of events that passes the point of no return.

Progression:

- *Social progression*: widen the impact of character actions into society.
- *Personal progression*: drive actions into the intimate relationships and inner lives of the characters.
- *Symbolic ascension*: subtly build the symbolic charge of the story from the particular to the universal, the specific to the archetypal.
- *Ironic ascension*: verbal irony comes from the discrepancy between words and meaning; irony in story plays in the gap between expectation and results

Transition: progress from a scene to another requires something in common or a clear counter-point between the two.

Subplots: may be used to complicate the Central Plot and contradict the Controlling Idea (thus enriching the story with irony) or to build up to the Central Plot's inciting incident.

Backstories: can be revealed at critical moments to create *turning points*. **Flashbacks** must be dramatised and only brought in after creating the need to know.

3. Crisis (obligatory scene)

The **crisis** is a story event in which the protagonist, faced with the most powerful and focused antagonistic forces, must make a decision in a last effort to achieve his desire. The *decision* must be a deliberately *static* moment. If the decision is a *turning point* then the impact of the climax is increased.

The prime component of *foreshadowing* is the projection of the crisis by the inciting incident.

4. Climax

The **climax** is caused by this decision. A story event that causes a major *reversal* of values (with or without irony) and brings about absolute and irreversible *change*. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience.

5. Resolution

The resolution may have three uses:

- closing all subplots
 - showing the aftermath/effects of the climax
 - allowing the audience to breathe and process the emotional baggage of the climax.
- "An ending must be both inevitable and unexpected" - Aristotle

McKee: There is only one story - the quest of the protagonist for his desire, which may succeed or fail

Aristotle: 2 stories - comedy and tragedy

Foster-Harris: 3 stories - happy ending, unhappy ending, tragic

Booker: 7 stories

Tobias: 20 stories

Polti: 36 dramatic situations

Vonnegut: many stories share the same shape - the shapes change slightly with the particular story. The shape of story cannot be solely used to judge it.

What is common to all stories is not the plot itself but the conflict, contradiction and progression.

Using many act climaxes of similar impact invites cliché, and result in repetitiousness. A story cannot progress through actions of lesser magnitude. Melodrama arises from passionate, powerful events that are undermotivated. Deus ex machina arises from usage of coincidence at turning points. Holes are a missing link in the chain of cause and effect.

The law of diminishing returns: the more often we experience something the less effect it has. If stories were all the same then they would be ineffective. Instead they surprise by subverting expectation.