

## Narrative Arc

We have talked about Great Beginnings and the importance of *Evocative* (showing) writing, but what about that thorny problem of structuring the story as a whole? More writers may abandon their stories due to this problem than any other single issue.

Plotting out the whole book's narrative arc can seem overwhelming to even the most experienced writers, but by learning a few basic principles, you will be able to plot stories with dramatic tension; this will be the focus today and enhanced and rehashed in later sessions.

Plotting a story in advance does not mean planning out every little detail before you set fingertips to keyboard. Sometimes stories and characters surprise us along the way, and the story takes on a life of its own. But you should ensure at the outset that you are actually telling a story and not just listing a series of events and characters. In a good narrative arc, **actions have consequences** and **everything that happens contributes to the story.**

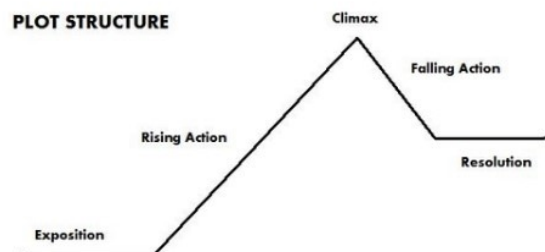
Narrative structure is a craft problem that all writers have to manage. Certain narrative structures can only do certain things. Each has advantages and disadvantages and each creates reader expectations. If you do not think through your narrative arc before you start writing, you may have a major problem halfway through the book that requires major revisions. The trick is to find the structure that will let you tell the story and fulfill reader expectations; if you are reading a mystery novel, you expect to learn *who did it* by the end.

There are often many ways to tell a story. Generally, the best narrative structure to use is the simplest and most direct one that will do the job. A narrative structure must do at least two things at once: It has to give the writer the space to tell the story, and it has to meet the reader's expectations.

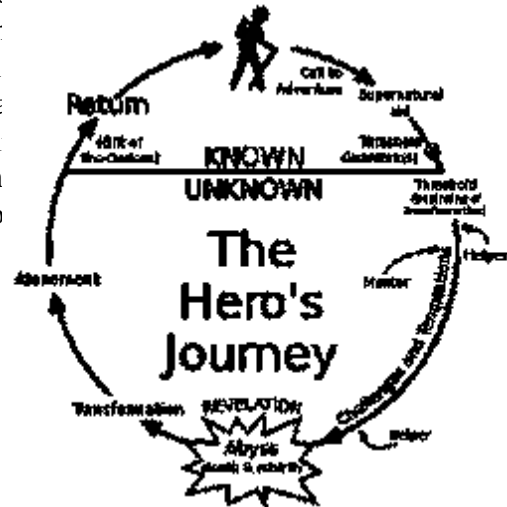
It helps to think of narrative structures in three broad categories:

1. Linear narrative
2. Circular narrative
3. Frame narrative

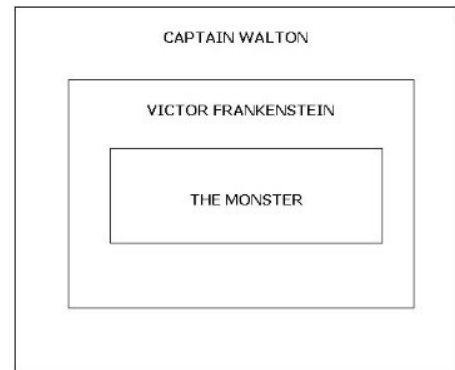
A **linear narrative** has a **protagonist** with some sort of conflict. That conflict might be internal, but can come in the form of another character -the **antagonist**- who thwarts the desire of the protagonist. Linear narratives consist of *rising action*, a *crisis point*, *falling action*, and a *resolution*. It is about the tension and release of narrative desire, and a satisfying ending is vital. [Romeo and Juliet](#), like many romances, follows a linear narrative structure.



The hero's journey, or the **quest narrative**, is a **circular narrative**. The protagonist sets out to accomplish, or resolve something. The obstacles and people he encounters along the way give the story its dramatic tension. Sometimes there is a turning point where the protagonist changes or his perspective on the problem or goal changes. At other times, the climax is just a final obstacle. But in the end, the protagonist returns to the original desire or problem and finds some kind of resolution to it. Circular narratives are ideal for telling character-based stories, like family memoirs or travel narratives. [Homer's \*Odyssey\*](#) and Sharon Wynn's *Warrior of the Heart* are examples of circular narratives.



The **frame narrative**, sometimes known as the **Russian doll narrative**, emphasizes the perspective of the narrator by letting characters become storytellers. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (not like the movie) is a frame narrative told through letters, but the most famous example in literary history is *1001 Nights-in* which a princess, threatened with death at dawn by her tyrannical husband, tells a series of tales-within-tales each night, so she has no choice but to let her live to hear the outcome. As wonderful as her individual stories are, she, the narrator, is the character we fall in love with.



**Terms (NOTE: These are easy to Google for details and further study – just click the link.)**

**protagonist:** The main character of a narrative, whose conflict is central to the story.

**linear narrative:** A narrative structure where events follow on events to build to a climax and resolution and where the plot is emphasized over the character who experiences it.

**circular narrative:** A narrative structure where the end and the beginning meet and where the story focuses on the transformation of the character during the experience of the events in it.

**quest narrative**: A narrative structure in which the main character goes on a journey in search of knowledge, experience, or some concrete object.

**frame narrative**: A narrative structure in which the essential story is bracketed at the beginning and end by a second perspective on it.

### **Home Work**

Think about stories you have written and/or favorite stories you have read (even movies you have seen or tales you have been told). Make a list for each of the three broad categories.

Be prepared to discuss these at the meeting.

Consider:

Could the story/(stories) have been written using a different narrative arc?  
What would be the impact?

What have you learned today? Do you think it will make you a better writer/reader?

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**Please Note:** I have added Hyperlinks to this paper to take you different related places on the internet if you are reading this on your computer (tablet or phone/internet device).

I would appreciate your [comments](#). –Charles