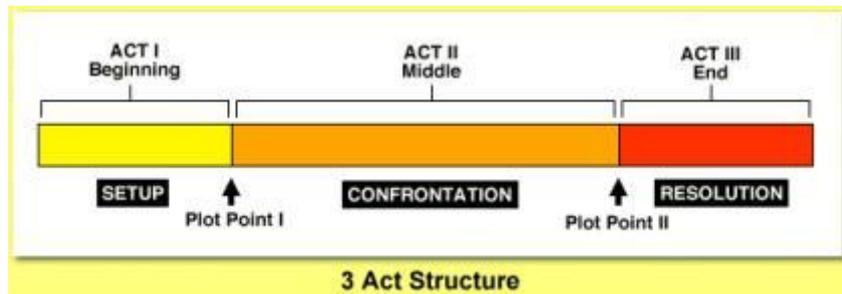


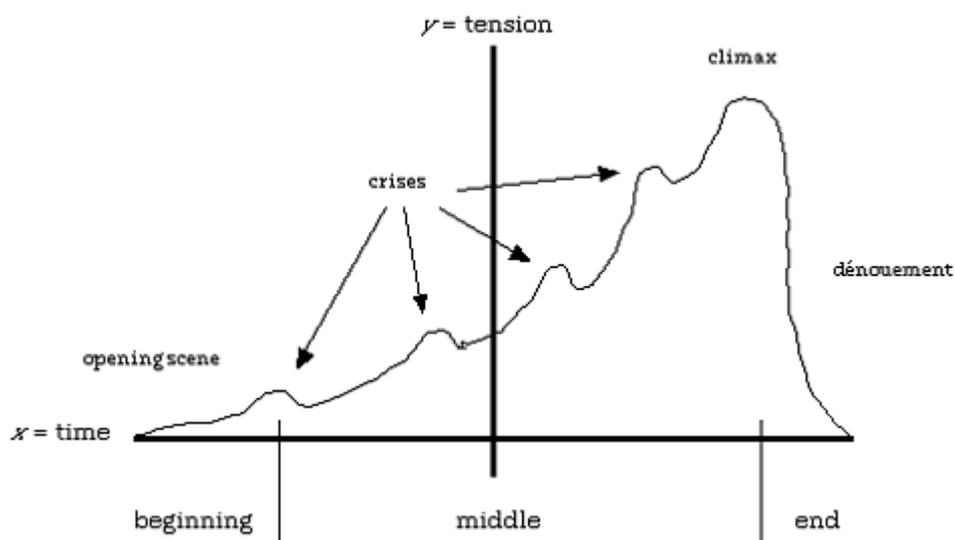
Conflict and Character within Story Structure

The Basic Three Act Structure

The simplest building blocks of a good story are found in the Three Act Structure. Separated by Plot Points, its Act 1 (Beginning), Act 2 (Middle), and Act 3 (End) refer not to where in time in the story they lie but instead fundamental stages along the way.



- In the **Beginning** you introduce the reader to the setting, the characters and the situation (conflict) they find themselves in and their goal. Plot Point 1 is a situation that drives the main character from their "normal" life toward some different conflicting situation that the story is about.
 - Great stories often begin at **Plot Point 1**, thrusting the main character right into the thick of things, but they never really leave out Act 1, instead filling it in with back story along the way.
- In the **Middle** the story develops through a series of complications and obstacles, each leading to a mini crisis. Though each of these crises are temporarily resolved, the story leads inevitably to an ultimate crisis—the Climax. As the story progresses, there is a rising and falling of tension with each crisis, but an overall *rising tension* as we approach the Climax. The resolution of the Climax is **Plot Point 2**.
- In the **End**, the Climax and the loose ends of the story are resolved during the Denouement. Tension rapidly dissipates because it's nearly impossible to sustain a reader's interest very long after the climax. Finish your story and get out.



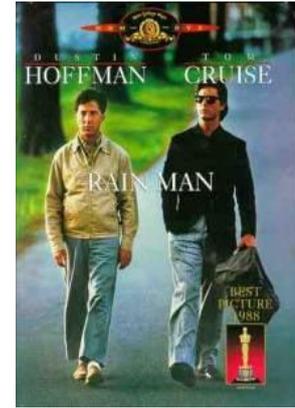
Character Arc and Story Structure

- **Act 1**

- In the Beginning of a story the main character, being human (even if he or she isn't), will resist change (inner conflict). The character is perfectly content as he is; there's no reason to change.

- **Plot Point 1** – Then something happens to throw everything off balance.

- It should come as a surprise that shifts the story in a new direction and reveals that the protagonist's life will never be the same again.
 - In Star Wars this point occurs when Luke's family is killed, freeing him to fight the Empire.
- It puts an obstacle in the way of the character that forces him or her to deal with something they would avoid under normal circumstances.



- **Act 2**

- The second Act is about a character's emotional journey and is the hardest part of a story to write. Give your characters all sorts of challenges to overcome during Act 2. Make them struggle towards their goal.
- **The key to Act Two is conflict.** Without it you can't move the story forward. And conflict doesn't mean a literal fight. Come up with obstacles (maybe five, maybe a dozen—depends on the story) leading up to your plot point at the end of Act 2.
 - Throughout the second act remember to **continually raise the stakes** of your character's emotional journey.
 - Simultaneously advance both inner and outer conflicts. Have them work together—the character should alternate up and down internally between hope and disappointment as external problems begin to seem solvable then become more insurmountable than ever.
 - Include reversals of fortune and unexpected turns of events—surprise your reader with both the actions of the main character and the events surrounding him.

- **Plot Point 2**

- Act Two ends with the second plot point, which thrusts the story in another unexpected direction.
- Plot Point 2 occurs at the moment the hero appears beaten or lost but something happens to turn the situation around. The hero's goal becomes reachable.
 - Right before this unexpected story turn, the hero reaches *the Black Moment*—the point at which all is lost and the goal cannot be achieved.
 - In order to have a "Climax", where the tension is highest, you must have a "Black" moment, where the stakes are highest and danger at its worst.
 - During this moment, the hero draws upon the new strengths or lessons he's learned in order to take action and bring the story to a conclusion.
 - Dorothy's gotta get a broom from the Wicked Witch before she can go home.
 - Luke's gotta blow up the Death Star before fulfilling his destiny.
 - Professor Klump's gotta save face with the investors of his formula and win back Jada.

▪ **Act 3**

- The third Act dramatically shows how the character is able to succeed or become a better person.
- Resolution/denouement ties together the loose ends of the story (not necessarily all of them) and allows the reader to see the outcome of the main character's decision at the climax. Here we see evidence of the change in a positive character arc.



Story Structure & the Buddha

Great novels—great stories—existed long before there were books about something called Story Structure. The pattern of an enchanting yarn has been recreated again and again through time and around the world in myths and tales. The rhythm of these stories that so captures our imaginations reflects not marketing trends but our collective struggle through life. Things that deeply resonate do so because they tug at our inner workings. Structure is not a prison—use tips and advice on it only as a map, but go down deep within yourself to find the road. Finding the road is the most pleasurable part of writing.

[>> Find out more with *The Hero's Journey* in the Good Links Section](#)

A Word on Plot

Don't let your focus be the Plot, which is the series of events and situations that occur along the route of your story. The Plot is a natural outcome of the seeds of your story—it *emerges* from your setup of the characters, their conflicts and the setting they occur in. You'll write a more powerful, believable story if you focus on seed planting long before you worry about the harvest.

If your Dialogue fails, so will your story

Writing effective dialogue is often what distinguishes the professional writer from the not quite. This is no surprise because dialogue is probably the most difficult novel element to master.

And everything hinges upon it—if your dialogue fails, so will your story.

What is Dialogue used for?

People in real life often ramble on for no particular reason. Characters in stories, however, never do. Dialogue must do one of the following:

- Establish the tone or mood
- Provide exposition or back story
- Reveal character and motivation
- Create immediacy and intimacy (build reader empathy)
- Move the plot forward and/or increase its pace
- Create or add to existing conflict
- Remind the reader of things they may have forgotten
- Foreshadow

If your story's dialogue does none of these, delete. If it does only one, try for two. Does two? Can it do three? The richer its meaning, the richer your story.

How Dialogue shouldn't be used

Although it's on the list above, be very careful when using dialogue to introduce exposition and back story. Always ask yourself: would *I* say this in a conversation? We usually don't go on and on about the past, especially with friends who probably already know it. Back story and exposition should be hinted at and slowly drawn throughout the progression of a story.

Dialogue should "sound" Real

Dialogue *emulates* but does not replicate real speech. It's a condensed, distilled version of real talk, thick on meaning, thin on chatter. The trick is to preserve the spontaneity required by a "real" conversation while instilling the meaning required by a story.

- Most people don't speak in perfect grammar. Real speech is sloppy. People leave out words, compress phrases into single words, use contractions, interrupt each other and talk in slang. Your dialogue should be the same.
- Go out of your house and listen to the many different ways different people talk, and notice that how a person talks depends on whom they're talking to. Incorporate any appropriate juicy bits you hear in your own writing.
- Write dialogue in a quick fury but in editing make sure every line has a purpose.

Words echo Emotion and Conflict

Dialogue is brought to life by the underlying emotion and conflict that's driving it. If you're having trouble with a scene or the words sound stilted, drop down and get your bearings on the emotional context that underpins the characters and their situation. Use it as a basis from which to build. Do so and your character's language will have more guts and honesty and your story more focus and resonance.

Characters, like real people, should each have their own voice.

- Use language particular to a character and organically reflective of their background and personality.
- People often have habitual phrases and/or mistakes that they tend to repeat.
- Create distinctions through a character's vocabulary, accent, what they talk about and what they don't.
- Open up a good book and you'll be able to easily distinguish the words of the Harry Potters from those of the Hagrids without need of a tag line.

Break it up

- Never have long stretches of dialogue. Break up large blocks at strategic places with physical action, replies, description and other story elements. This both enriches the rhythm of the dialogue and brings the conversation to life in your reader's mind.
- Also space the conversation within the page by giving each person their own paragraph. This makes the page less overwhelming (not an endless scroll of words) and also gives readers a spatial beat between speakers that makes following the conversation easier.

TAGS—he said, she said

- Always clearly indicate who's speaking using 'he said', 'she asked', etc. Never force your reader to stop and have to figure out who's saying what. This is especially crucial when several characters are conversing.
- Never let attributions get in the way of your story. Cute tags like "he barked" or "she whimpered" pull the reader's attention out of your novel's spell and aren't needed when dialogue is strong. The tone of a character's language should emerge from both the words themselves and the dramatic context.
- Use dialogue and the description around it to more powerfully convey what you might be tempted to describe by attaching adverbs to tags. Don't write dialogue like "I'm going home," she said happily.

Is the dialogue I wrote any good?

The classic way to test dialogue is to read it aloud. Even better, have someone else read it (just as they would in their head if they were reading your novel). You'll hear any cracks in rhythm and authenticity and can make sure your characters don't sound like actors in a bad movie.