

Plot and Structure

What is plot? What is structure?

Plot is the series of events that make up your story, including the order in which they occur and how they relate to each other.

Structure (also known as narrative structure), is the overall design or layout of your story.

While plot is specific to your story and the particular events that make up that story, structure is more abstract, and deals with the mechanics of the story—how the chapters/scenes are broken up, what is the conflict, what is the climax, what is the resolution, etc.

You can think of plot and structure like the DNA of your story. Every story takes on a plot, and every piece of writing has a structure. Where plot is (perhaps) unique to your story, you can use an understanding of common structures and devices to develop better stories and hone your craft.

Essential Devices for Plot and Structure

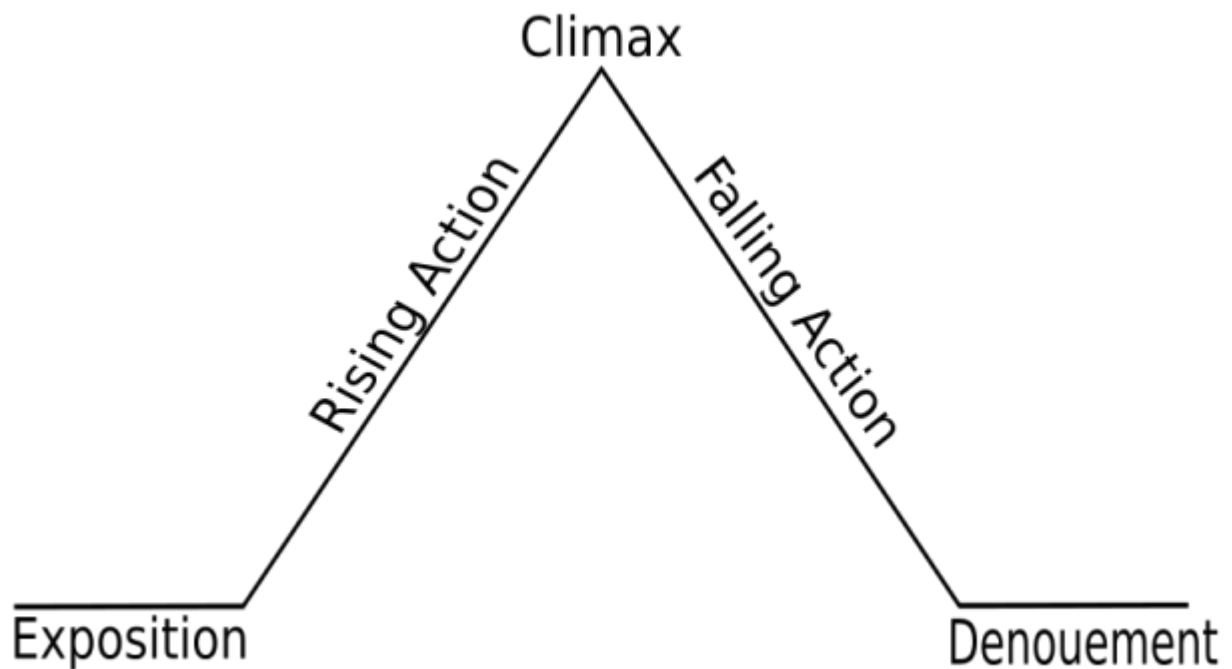
Here are three common devices essential to fiction—but especially important in writing novels—that will help frame any current story you're working on, and give you a jumping off point to learn more about plot and structure.

Three Act Structure

This idea goes back to ancient Greek dramatic theory, so you know it's been time-tested. Aristotle said that every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end (in ancient Greek, the protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe), and ancient Greek plays often follow this formula strictly by having three acts.

Still commonly used in screenwriting and novels today, the [three act structure](#) is as basic as you can get: every story ever written has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Narrative Arc



Also called [Freytag's pyramid](#), the narrative arc is made up of the following pieces:

1. **Exposition** — The opening of the story, including a reader's introduction to characters and settings.
2. **Rising Action** — A series of events that complicates matters for your characters, and results in increased drama or suspense.
3. **Climax** — The big showdown where your characters encounter their opposition, and either win or lose.
4. **Falling Action** — A series of events that unfold after the climax and lead to the end of the story.
5. **Resolution** — The end of the story, in which the problems are resolved (or not resolved, depending on the story.) Also called the denouement, catastrophe, or revelation.

Again, this is an abstract device used to describe the narrative arc of all stories, which is why it's so powerful and commonly used in dramatic structural theory. Ask yourself how your story fits into this framework. If it doesn't, what's missing?

A Disturbance and Two Doorways

(This concept comes from *Plot & Structure* by James Scott Bell)

The disturbance is whatever happens early on in your story that upsets the status quo. It can be a strange phone call in the middle of the night, news of the death of a close relative, or anything that is a threat or a challenge to your protagonist's ordinary way of life.

But a disturbance isn't enough. Something has to propel your protagonist from the beginning into the middle of the story, and from the middle to the end. Bell suggests:

"How you get from beginning to middle (Act I to Act II), and middle to end (Act II to Act III), is a matter of transitioning. Rather than calling these plot points, think of these two transitions as 'doorways of no return.'"

Take Your Novel's Plot and Structure to the Next Level

An understanding of narrative structure and plot are essential to the creative writer's understanding of craft. If you can master them, you can use them as a foundation for your work. Mix a good plot with solid structure, pour in your characters, toss in a dash of setting, and you're most of the way to a fully cooked story.

PRACTICE

For today's practice, you have five different options. Here they are:

1. Identify the narrative arc of your story. Where does the rising action start? What is the climax? What is the falling action? Do you already know the resolution, or is that something you have yet to work out? (250 word minimum)
2. Divide your story into three acts (even if you don't divide the story into acts in the final product.) Where does each act end and the next begin? (250 word minimum)
3. Write down what the disturbance is in your story. Identify the two doorways of no return. What is the propellant that pulls your protagonist through the first doorway? Through the second? (250 word minimum)

4. Outline a new story following the three act structure. Look at it from a 50,000 foot view. What can you improve? How? Explain. (250 word minimum)
5. Outline a new story by starting with the disturbance and two doorways. Think about what pulls your character through each doorway. Remember, a disturbance isn't enough! (250 word minimum)

*Thanks to Matt Herron, from <https://thewritepractice.com/plot-structure/>