from the national bestselling author of *The 90-Day Novel*

"Alan Watt is a master teacher, with a brilliant, intuitive understanding of story."

– *Allen Zadoff, Author of* The Unknown Assassin *series*

master your outline

story structure

- ☑ act descriptions
- ☑ structure questions
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Alan Watt

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INTRODUCTION

Story structure is frequently taught by story analysts who are well-versed in deconstructing existing masterpieces as a way of explaining how they were made. But this approach does not allow for mystery. Dissecting a finished story in order to understand how it was created is akin to dissecting a cadaver to understand what it means to be human. *Ultimately, stories are about the human spirit.*
There is magic to this process.

Story structure is not a formula – and the structure being alluded to is not the plot, but rather the key experiences that lead to your protagonist's transformation. In other words, *character suggests plot.* When you let go of trying to figure out your story and begin to explore your protagonist's experiences at key stages in their journey, situations emerge to support those experiences.

In this ebook, I will go over the key stages of your protagonist's journey and explore their experiences through story structure questions. I recommend printing the story outline worksheet pages to follow along as you read through each section.

If you'd like support accessing your subconscious to reveal the story within, my ***Story Structure Meditation*** is for you. It puts you in an alpha state—a state of deep relaxation that allows you to loosen your grip and move beyond your limited idea of your story.

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Overview of the key stages in your protagonist's journey

ACT ONE OVERVIEW

— Opening / False Belief

— Theme / Dilemma

— Inciting incident

— Opposing Argument

— Decision

ACT TWO OVERVIEW

— False Hope

— Midpoint / Temptation

— Suffering

— Surrender

ACT THREE OVERVIEW

— Accepting Reality

— Action

— Battle Scene

— New Equilibrium

STORY-STRUCTURE GUIDE

— Stream-of-Consciousness Questions

— Three-Act Story Structure Worksheet

Act One

Your protagonist wants something.

OPENING/FALSE BELIEF

Without a powerful want, there is no story. Until you have a sense of what your protagonist wants, you will be unclear on the engine that is driving your narrative. Your 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.

THEME / DILEMMA

Your 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.

DILEMMA (cont.)

For example, a character may want love because they believe 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 a partner in order to feel complete, they will be unable to accept that their sense of wholeness comes from within. By introducing the protagonist's apparent "problem" early in the story, we understand the theme, i.e., 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 Romeo first seeing Juliet or Katniss' sister being chosen as a "tribute" in The Hunger Games, something happens that sets your story into motion, thus providing a context for the dilemma.

OPPOSING ARGUMENT

This is a moment about two-thirds of the way through Act One where an antagonist responds to your protagonist thus presenting the other side of the "apparent" problem. This moment is necessary because it illustrates the protagonist's specific dilemma. Until your 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 that the opposing argument can be understood.

DECISION

At the end of Act One your protagonist makes a decision they can't go back on toward achieving their goal. This decision may involve anything from telling a secret to proclaiming your love, to a first kiss, to moving across town, to accepting a promotion, to entering a wizardry academy.

DECISION (cont.)

But remember, it's not simply about what happens, but rather the meaning you ascribe to what happens, that keeps your reader connected to your story. Therefore, pay special attention to the reluctance that comes with your protagonist's decision. This reluctance will help to dramatize the stakes your protagonist is facing. When Romeo sneaks into Juliet's compound and professes his love under her balcony he is certainly not indifferent towards her, however his reluctance at the consequences of being discovered (her father could kill him) illustrates the danger of his action. Without reluctance, we will not have a context for your protagonist's dilemma.

If you'd like to dig deeper into identifying your protagonist's dilemma, read **Unlock Your Dilemma: A guide to the core of your story**

Act Two

Your protagonist lets go of the meaning they make out of their goal.

FALSE HOPE

At this point in the story, your protagonist achieves an initial success towards achieving their goal. Success appears to be within reach. Without this moment we do not have a context for the meaning they are making out of their goal. They are yet unaware of the conundrum besetting them. Consider Cyrano de Bergerac: if Cyrano's desire is to be loved by Roxane, and he has succeeded in getting her to fall in love with his words, he has yet to confront his true dilemma, which is that he must accept himself as he is in order to have the love that belongs in his life. Your protagonist has 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 your protagonist's false hope, an event happens that causes your 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

As you move into the second half of Act Two, the stakes are rising and your protagonist reaches a point where they experience true suffering, a moment where they had no idea it was going to be this difficult and they entertain the notion of giving up. If they had known it was going to be this difficult, they would probably never have set out on this journey. The suffering is a direct result of your 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 your protagonist's old identity. They're going to give it one last try.

SURRENDER

Your protagonist surrenders when they have run out of choices. The end of Act Two is where your 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

Your protagonist reframes their goal, seeing it in a new way.

ACCEPTING REALITY

By reframing their relationship to their goal, your protagonist accepts the reality of their situation as opposed to the appearance of their situation. This is where the meaning shifts. For example: if your protagonist's cry into the void is, "I've failed," they begin to accept that all of their attempts at succeeding were, perhaps, misguided, and they let go of their old definitions of success and failure. There's a saying: The truth will set you free, but first it will kick your butt. That is where your protagonist is at this point. They are getting their butt kicked, but it is leading them to a new understanding of how things really work.

ACTION

This is the bulk of your third act. As a result of your protagonist accepting the reality of their situation, they take action towards giving themselves what they need as opposed to what they want. It doesn't mean that they've surrendered their outward desire, but only the meaning they've made out of it. They've come to recognize that they can no longer hold out hope that their desire will provide them with their true inner need, thus they take action towards fulfilling their heart's desire while knowing it may cost them everything they initially thought they wanted.

BATTLE SCENE

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

NEW EQUILIBRIUM

This is the ending of your story where your 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? It is important to find a way to dramatize this experience through action. It isn't enough to say that a character lives happily ever after, we must understand and experience specifically what that means.

STORY STRUCTURE QUESTIONS

In building your story, you are moving from the general to the specific. It is important to understand that you are not “plotting out” your story, but merely becoming more familiar with the key stages in your protagonist’s journey.

It is through exploring your 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? Is there some kind of antagonistic response to my protagonist?

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?

STORY STRUCTURE QUESTIONS (cont.)

ACT TWO:

6. False Hope: Where does my protagonist experience success or false hope as the result of making their decision?

7. Midpoint: What event happens that forces my protagonist to commit fully to their goal? Notice the temptation they experience at this point of the story.

8. 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? Do you see how the dilemma is becoming conscious?

9. Surrender: What does it look like when my protagonist realizes that what they wanted is impossible to achieve based on their current approach, or their current identity?

ACT THREE:

10. Reality: What is the truth of my protagonist's reality that they finally accept? How does this galvanize them to take action?

11. Action: What action does my protagonist take toward getting what they need?

12. Battle Scene: What happens when my protagonist's want and need collide? What choice does my protagonist make?

13. 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?

Story Outline Worksheets

Despite what you may have been taught, story structure has little to do with plot. In fact, the structure being referred to is the underpinnings of your theme, a primal drive that is going to get reframed through your protagonist's quest. Story structure is not a formula, it is an immutable paradigm that guides your audience through the journey to an inner transformation.

I recommend printing the following story outline worksheets for ease of use.

Marry the wildness of your imagination to the rigor of structure to tell compelling stories.

Story Outline Worksheets

ACT ONE:

OPENING / FALSE BELIEF

THEME / DILEMMA

ACT ONE:

INCITING INCIDENT

OPPOSING ARGUMENT

ACT ONE:

YOUR PROTAGONIST MAKES A DECISION

ACT TWO:

YOUR PROTAGONIST EXPERIENCES FALSE HOPE

MIDPOINT:
YOUR PROTAGONIST EXPERIENCES TEMPTATION

ACT TWO:

YOUR PROTAGONIST SUFFERS

YOUR PROTAGONIST SURRENDERS

ACT THREE:

YOUR PROTAGONIST ACCEPTS REALITY

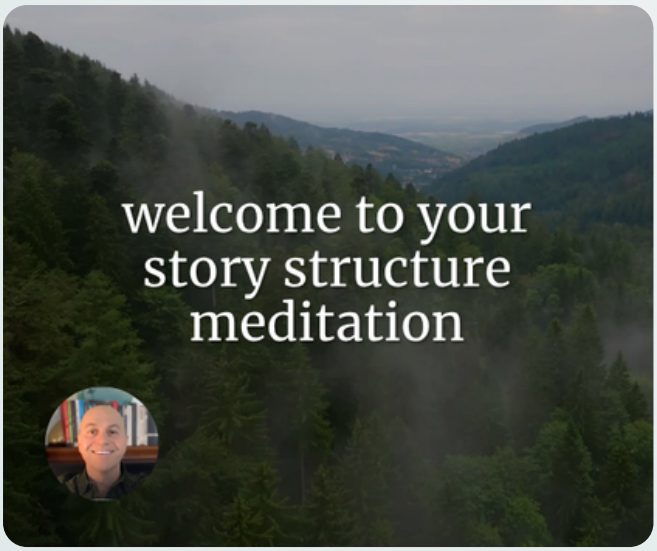
YOUR PROTAGONIST TAKES ACTION

ACT THREE:

THE BATTLE SCENE

YOUR PROTAGONIST RETURNS HOME

Marry the wildness of your imagination to the rigor of structure to tell compelling stories.



Ready to dive deeper?

Join me in this one-hour guided story meditation.

Enter a state of deep relaxation that allows you to loosen your grip and move beyond your limited idea of your story.

GET THE MEDITATION

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