



SI Leeds Literary Prize Workshops - Building Your Story

Story Structure

Two things are essential to structuring a fictional story:

First, you have to **fulfil reader's expectations**. For example if your story is one which describes the characters pursuing 'quest' like *Lord of the Rings* your story must involve the recovery of the thing which is sought. The end of a Romantic Comedy is always the leading man and woman getting together forever.

Second, you have to learn to **tell your story in a series of 'scenes'**, rather like a film. Thinking of your work in terms of scenes also helps you plan, especially if you are working on a longer piece, like a novel. (See *Week 2 Download 'Scene Chart'*). A 'scene' is an event, or conversation which happens in a single time period and, usually a single location.

Although literature is NOT film, and there IS space for spending time inside your character's heads, it is a very rare book which does this exclusively. Even when an author uses a formal device such as structuring a book as a series of diary entries or letters there will be scenes created within these to engage the reader, and so that they can SEE what is happening in their mind's eye as they read the story.

It is not only events within a story that readers have expectations of, they also have expectations of story structure. This is because we have all been exposed to thousands of stories over the course of our lifetimes and we are used to a limited number of familiar patterns turning up again and again.

To structure a story we use the elements of fiction we have looked at so far for example, we characterisation, point of view, location and time period, but we use these elements within a series of events which follow the rules of cause and effect.

The main elements of a story are:

The inciting incident. Sometimes this is called the conflict – but, though a fight isn't necessary, an event which starts your narrative off and drives it forward usually is. There needs to be something which leads to the second element of story-telling: This is

Maintaining tension. Some tension in a story is essential (this can be positive e.g. pre-wedding nerves, but usually isn't!). The reader must want to stick with your story in order to find out what happens: will they declare their love for each other? Will the murderer be caught? Will the evil prison guard get his comeuppance? At the end of a story the reader expects the third element of a story.

Resolution. Most stories have a limited number of possible endings. For example, the plot questions I've just asked you can all be answered with 'yes' because you are familiar with these story-types. You CAN innovate but be careful HOW you do this. For instance, readers generally expect some hope even at the end of a tragedy - a totally bleak ending is rare. Also, it is a good idea to keep a surprise back to just before the end, so the reader is both kept interested and is eventually very satisfied by your story.

This could also be described as a **THREE-ACT STRUCTURE** or more simply as a *BEGINNING*, *MIDDLE* and *END*.

By thinking about your story in this way, you avoid your plot simply petering out or grinding to a halt.

The exercise below helps you to practice structuring a story, by challenging you to tell your story in scenes.

Exercise: pick a setting and a simple story and try and tell it in three scenes. Think about the story structure above. Your first story needs something to *happen* which throws up a problem for the characters present. Your next scene - which can be in a different time and/or place - should be something happening as a result of the event in the first scene. The final scene should resolve (at least partially) the tension produced by the event in the first scene. Describe the action in the Scene Chart handout.

Remember, your reader is someone who hasn't heard me give you the task, so make sure you give them enough information so that they know **WHERE** and **WHEN** your action is occurring.

For a plot, use a typical oft-used story like Cinderella.