

HOW TO READ NARRATIVES

Narratives are a foundational form of literature as they lay an essential cornerstone for reading and writing in other genres. This resource is designed to introduce you to the classic elements of stories and help you engage with the narrative story arc.

Thinking in story form enables you to engage and understand information better, as well as remember it more accurately (Haven, 2007, pp. 72-73). This is because the human brain is designed to inherently understand and process information through story (p. 22).

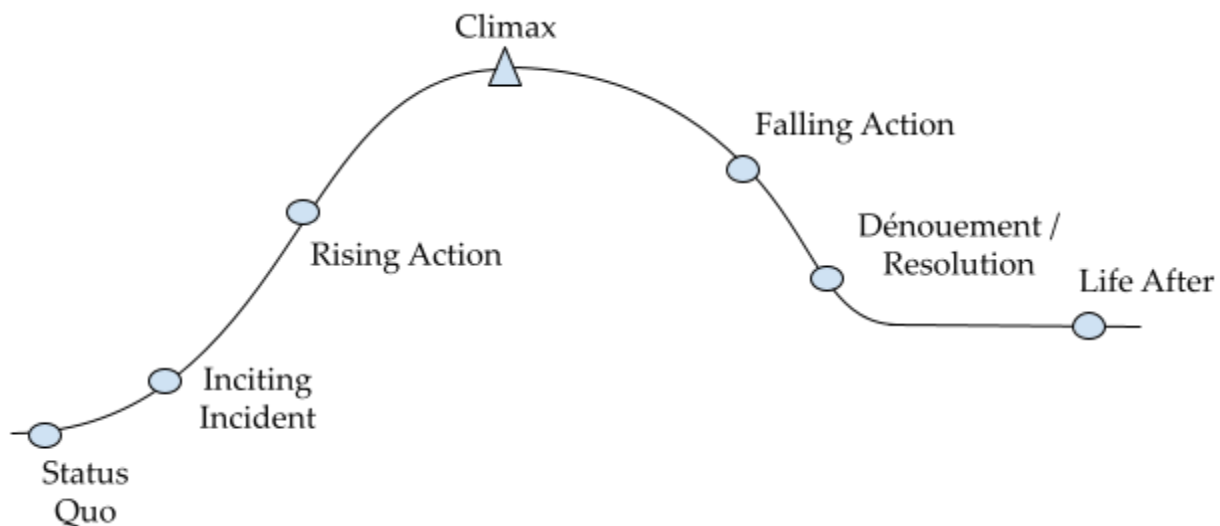
CLASSIC ELEMENTS OF STORY

1. **Status Quo** – This is the beginning of the story.
 - a. Meet the main character – the *protagonist* – and see him operate in his sphere.
 - b. At this point, all is right in the world.
2. **Inciting Incident** – The beauty of the world is then shattered by some unforeseen problem.
 - a. The protagonist is faced with a choice – will he embark on a journey to solve the problem, leaving what is comfortable to make the world right again?
 - b. The motivation that sways the protagonist’s decision to go is called the *object of pursuit*. The protagonist values this object enough to sacrifice everything.
3. **Rising Action** – As the main character embarks on his journey, he meets his *antagonists*, stands up to *obstacles*, and faces *inner turmoil*.
 - a. *Antagonists* are the villains of the story, standing between the protagonist and his object of pursuit. They are often another person, nature, or fate.
 - b. *Obstacles* also rise in the protagonist’s path. Additionally, the protagonist will find that his own “inner issues” stand against his mission to make things right (Cron, 2012, p. 84). You will notice the protagonist’s character morph and develop as he faces these obstacles within himself.
4. **Climax** – At this point, the protagonist faces off against the antagonist once and for all.
 - a. The protagonist will have to choose whether to let his inner turmoil get the best of him or whether to lay it down in order to achieve the object of pursuit.
 - b. In this moment, the protagonist must make a stand against evil, sacrificing much, often to the detriment of his very life. Who will be victorious?

5. **Falling Action** – The battle is over and the victor is clear.
 - a. Often the protagonist wins out, although in narrative genres like tragedy no one wins - the antagonist may even achieve the prize.
 - b. The effects of victory begin to fall into place for all involved.
6. **Resolution/Dénouement** – At this point in the story, the reader feels they can take a sigh of relief.
 - a. A protagonist’s victory means the world is made right again, and furthermore it is even better off than in the beginning of the story. The journey has changed not only the protagonist’s surroundings but also his character.
 - b. Often, the *overarching theme* of the story can now be identified: look at the protagonist’s motives and decisions throughout the story as well as the way he changed.

TAKE IT WITH YOU

As you read, think through these elements and ask yourself how the text fits into the narrative arc.



EXAMPLE

We may use narrative elements to understand the trajectory of other genres as well. For example, we could use the above chart to better understand Christ’s sacrifice in the context of God’s story.

1. **Status Quo:** God’s newly created world flourishes and thrives under His hand.
2. **Inciting Incident:** God’s people fall away from Him, turning towards their own path.
 - a. Here, humanity’s inner issue of sin develops, driving a wedge between Creator and creation and forging a bond between humanity and Evil.

- b. The natural consequence of this sin is death. The question at hand for God, the protagonist, is “What will you do to set things right?”
3. **Rising Action:** God works with humanity to make a way for His truth and light in the wilderness of sin.
 - a. Beautifully, God’s object of pursuit is *humanity*: His greatest desire is to know and love His creation and for them to know and love Him deeply.
 - b. Evil is the abstract antagonist standing in between God and His people, personified in Satan. Some humans choose to put God on the throne of their lives while others choose to give in to sin, be god unto themselves, bond to Evil, and lead to their deaths.
 - c. God overcomes the challenges moment by moment, but throughout the course of the rising action, it becomes clear that sin is too strong for humanity to overcome on their own. A great sacrifice will be needed to save people from their sin.
4. **Climax:** God comes to Earth in human form to defeat Evil once and for all.
 - a. Jesus, God’s own son, feels but *denies* human kind’s inner issue of sin - despite being fully man, Jesus does not give into the pull of the flesh to disregard God. Instead of partnering with Evil, Jesus Christ dies a gruesome death at the hands of Evil. He sacrifices himself on behalf of humanity, so sin may be vanquished.
 - b. Because Jesus is also fully God, He resurrects from the dead, literally coming alive to show the power of God’s love over hatred and His light over darkness. The truth is victorious!
5. **Falling Action:** The falling action of God’s story continues to this very day.
 - a. In light of Jesus’s death and resurrection, Satan’s power no longer has a deathgrip on humanity. Instead, mankind lives in the power of Christ’s love and sacrifice, which softens their hearts and enables relationship with God to flourish now and forever.
 - b. God’s people spread the Good News of what He has done, empowered by His Holy Spirit, and God’s victory falls into place for more and more people as they come to know and love Him.
6. **Resolution/Denouement:** The resolution to the story is yet to come.
 - a. All followers of Jesus look forward to the day when He returns, rebuilds His Creation, and rules as the just, merciful, and loving King for eternity. There, humanity will see the unknitting of all that has been tangled in wrongs, and they will see God’s object of pursuit (relationship with them!) absolutely fulfilled in the flesh.

- b. God’s character and decisions show the themes of His story, such as love, justice, sacrifice, and reconciliation.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AS YOU READ NARRATIVES

To engage with the text as you read it, ask yourself the following questions, as applicable. Many of these questions are adapted from the writing instruction found in Cron’s book, *Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (2012).

1. **The Protagonist**

- a. What emotions influence the protagonist’s decisions?
- b. Is the protagonist likable? Why or why not?
- c. What do the protagonist’s words tell you about what kind of person he or she is? What about what he or she doesn’t say?

2. **The Protagonist’s Object of Pursuit and Inner Turmoil**

- a. What are the protagonist’s goals? Are they met? Do they change? Why do you think the protagonist does what he or she does?
- b. What problem does the protagonist need to face within himself or herself to achieve the goal he or she pursues (emotional/psychological)?

3. **The Climax**

- a. What does achieving the goal cost for the protagonist? Is it worth it?
- b. How does the protagonist’s struggle and victory remind you of your own life, if at all?
- c. In the hardest moments of the story, picture yourself as a friend at the protagonist’s side. What advice would you give him or her in those moments?

4. **The Resolution**

- a. What changes are evident to you in the protagonist from beginning to end?
- b. How is life different for the main characters from beginning to end?
- c. Are you satisfied with the ending? Why or why not?

References

Haven, K. (2007). *Story proof: The science behind the startling power of story*. Libraries Unlimited.

Cron, L. (2012). *Wired for story: The writer’s guide to using brain science to hook readers from the very first sentence*. Ten Speed Press.

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