Story Structure Series: #1 — Introducing the Four Parts of Story

Storyfix is proud to bring you a 10-part tutorial on the fundamentals of story structure.

Today's post is #1 in that series.

Introducing the Four Parts of Story

Some writers like things in nice little boxes. Others, not so much. Either way, you can look at your story like a box, of sorts. You toss in all kinds of stuff – pretty sentences, plot, sub-plot, characters, themes, stakes, cool scenes – then stir it up and hope that somehow, by the grace of God, it all ends up in some orderly fashion that your reader will enjoy.

That's one way to write a novel or screenplay. At the very least, you'll have to pour the box out and start over again, time after time, before any of what's inside begins to make sense to anyone but you. You can get there doing it this way… but there's a *better* way.

If fact, if this *is* how you go about telling your story, you'll be reorganizing your box, time after time, until you do finally stumble upon the structure you are about to learn here. Or, more likely, you'll abandon the project altogether, because nobody will buy it until you do.

Tough to hear, but it's true.

Now think of that box as a vessel holding four smaller boxes. Which means, things just got clearer, if not easier. Imagine that each box is different, designed to hold scenes that are categorized and used differently than the other boxes.

In other words, each box has a *mission* and a purpose unique unto itself. And yet, no single box contains the whole story. Only all four, viewed sequentially, do that job. Each scene you write is in *context* to whichever box it goes into.

Imagine that these boxes are to be experienced in *sequence*. There's the first box, the next box, the one after that, and then a final box. Everything in the

first box is there to make the other boxes understandable, to make them *meaningful*.

Everything in the second box is there to make the first box useful by placing what we've come to root for in *jeopardy*. The first box may not make sense until the second box is opened, and when it is, the reader is in there with your hero.

Everything in the third box takes what the second box presents and ratchets it up to a higher level with a dramatic new context. By now we are in full rooting mode for the hero of the story.

Everything in the fourth and final box pays off all that the first three boxes have presented in the way of stakes, emotional tension and satisfaction.

The things that go into any given box go *only* into that box. Each has its own mission and context, its own flavor of stuff. Or, more to the point, *scenes*.

When you lay out the four boxes in order, they make perfect sense. They flow seamlessly from one to the next, building the stakes and experiences of the previous box before handing it off to the one that follows.

If you take something out of one box and put it into another, the whole thing can go sideways. Only by observing the criteria and context of each box with your scenes will the entirety of the collective boxes make sense.

When you add something to the mix – *when you're wondering what to write next* – you need to put it into the right box or the whole thing will detonate.

Because the box tells you what it needs. And it will accept nothing else.

And that, folks, is the theory and opportunity of four-part story structure in a nutshell.

The first box: Part 1 of your story… the Set-up.

The first 20 to 25 percent of your story has but a single mission: to *set-up* everything that is to follow. That job breaks down into a handful of things it needs to accomplish, all under the umbrella of that singular mission. It's not there to fully present the story's main antagonistic force, only to *foreshadow* it. Or, if it does show it at all, it shows only part of it.

Most importantly, the job of Part 1 is to establish *stakes* for what happens to the hero *after* Part 1. Here in Part 1 is where the reader is made to *care* about what happens next.

Part 1's job is to introduce the hero and show us what she or he has going on in their life… not for the remainder of the story, but *before* the arrival of the main antagonistic force (the primary *conflict* of the story).

The more we empathize with what the hero has at stake – what they need and want in their life, and/or what obstacles they need to conquer before the arrival of the primary conflict, the more we care about them when all of that changes.

Which it will at the very end of Part 1. It's called the First Plot Point, or sometimes the *Inciting Incident*. And inciting it must be. Because the story really begins at the point at which Part 1 ends.

Part 1's purpose is to bring the character to that transitionpoint through a series of scenes. Part 1 ends when the hero is made aware of the arrival of something new in their life, often something very scary or challenging. Something that creates an obstacle to what they need to accomplish or achieve, even if that quest is completely new and unknown.

The very end of Part 1 is the first full frontal view of the story's primary antagonistic force. The bad guy, if you will. We may have seen *it* before, but now, at the end of Part 1, we understand what it wants, and how what it wants creates opposition to what our hero wants in response to it.

The rest of the story is about how the hero moves through this new quest. A new journey begins. This is where the story really starts. Everything that happens prior to the end of Part 1 is a SET-UP for what happens to the hero *after* Part 1.

In Part 1 the hero is like an *orphan*, unsure of what will happen to them next. And like orphans, we feel for them, we empathize with them. We *care*.

In a novel this should take 50 to 100 pages, the first 25 to 30 pages in a screenplay. There's more to know about Part 1 – much more – but this is the basic mission and context of what it delivers.

The second box: Part 2 of your story… the Response.

At the end of Part 1 you unveiled the real course and destination of the story: the showdown between the hero and the opposing force that stands in the way of what she or he needs to acquire, achieve or change in order to reach their goals. And not the goals of Part 1, but the new goals created by the presence of the inciting incident.

It could be survival, finding love, getting away from love gone bad, acquiring wealth, healing, attaining justice, stopping or catching the bad guys, preventing disaster, escaping danger, saving someone, saving the entire world, or anything else from the realm of human experience and dreams.

Every story has conflict, or its not a story at all. That conflict is what stands in the way of what the hero needs or wants in the story.

Part 2 is the hero's response to the introduction of this new situation, as represented by the conflict itself. It's too early to have them *attack* the problem; Part 2 is exclusively about a *reaction* to the antagonistic force.

The hero is running, hiding, analyzing, observing, recalculating, planning, recruiting or anything else required before she or he can move forward.

Then, at the end of Part 2, just when the hero thinks they have it figured out, when they have a plan, everything *changes*.

In Part 2, the hero is a *wanderer*, staggering through a forest of options and risks, not sure where to go or what to do next. It comprises roughly the next 100 pages of your novel – which means, there's an entire contextual infrastructure to it… stay tuned – or from page 27ish to 60 in your screenplay.

The third box: Part 3 of your story… the Attack.

By now we've had enough of the hero stumbling around, being fearful and hesitant, being clueless, basically trying to figure out how to fix things and move forward and coming up empty. In fact, the hero may not be remotely heroic at this stage.

In Part 3 the hero begins to try to *fix* things. To attain the goal. They get *proactive*. It is here where they *attack* the obstacles. They conquer their inner demons to do things differently than before. They summon courage and apply creative thinking. They lead. They move forward.

Meanwhile, the plot thickens – the antagonistic force is moving forward, too – and what the hero thought would work isn't quite enough. They need more. More courage. More creativity. A better plan.

And that's the next 100 pages or so of your story (30 pages in a screenplay). That's Part 3.

The wanderer has now become a *warrior*.

And then, the final piece of the puzzle arrives at the end of Part 3 (the Second Plot Point). And everything changes again. The chase is on, and the hero is not to be denied.

The fourth box: Part 4 of your story… the Resolution.

The thing to remember about Part 4 is that no new information can enter the story here. Everything the hero needs to know, to work with, or to work alongside (as in, another character) is already in play.

Part 4 shows how the hero summons the courage and growth to come forward with a solution to the problem, to reach the goal, to save the day or even the world, to attain the fame and riches associated with victory, and to generally beat down and conquer the story's antagonistic force.

Sometimes the hero can actually die in the process. But before they do, they need to have solved at least a major element of the problem they were facing. When heroes die it is because they must in order to save others.

And that's why the orphan, then the wanderer, and then the warrior now becomes the *martyr*. Because they do what must be done in order to reach the goal.

The Whole of the Four Parts

Each part of this structure is of roughly the same length, though you do cheat the first and fourth Parts to a fewer number of pages, made up for in the middle two parts. In 3-act movie structure, Parts 2 and 3 as described here are simply combined – but with the same unique contextual essences – to comprise Act 2, known in Hollywood and beyond as The Confrontation.

Rent some DVDs tonight and watch this 4-part paradigm play out before your eyes. Sometimes it's subtle, but I assure you, it's there. Same with the books

you're reading. Four parts, four contexts, four completely separate missions for their scenes.

Clarifying as all this is, it gets even better when you throw in a whole menu of story milestones and mid-Part structural elements that help you along the way.

Story Structure Series: #2 – Milestones Along the 4-Part Storytelling Road

Storyfix is proud to bring you a 10-part tutorial on the fundamentals of story structure.

Today's post is #2 in that series.

#2 — Milestones Along the 4-Part Storytelling Road

My approach to story structure is a little like learning about surgery. Which, by the way, I know little about other than it's a killer analogy. Besides yanking — and I do mean that literally — a few spectacularly gross veins out of my left leg, I've thus far managed to steer clear of the O.R.

Yesterday we took on the four major parts of a story – that's like learning about anesthesia, scalpels, catheters and cardiac monitors. Now its time to cut into the patient and muck around a bit, see what makes the machine tick. Because…

… it's what's *inside* story structure that counts.

Each of the four parts of your story has specific elements – milestones – within and between their allotted pages. Each of the transitions between the four parts is a major story milestone, establishing context for the part that follows it.

But there are others. Five others, in fact.

Like the four story parts themselves, each milestone has a specific mission and function, and they are non-negotiable if your goal is to write a story that adheres to the expectations of standard story structure.

Like I said yesterday, mess with them at your own peril. Because agents and editors *don't*.

Milestones are points in your story where new information enters the narrative and changes the direction, tension and stakes. A plot twist is often a milestone, but not always – it's not a milestone, per se, if it doesn't occur at a *specific* place in the structural sequence.

Which is perfectly fine, by the way. You can pepper your story with plot twists to your heart's content. But you *must* account for the major story milestones – the ones you are about to learn here in this series – no matter how subtle they may appear to be.

Many writers understand plot twists. But too few know where to put them, and why.

The nature and purpose of milestone scenes.

Milestones can be easy to miss from the reader's perspective. They can be nothing more than a whisper, a glimpse of shadow, a seemingly innocent reference, a fleeting glimpse of a weapon, a peek behind the curtain.

Or, they can be huge, like a ship hitting an iceberg. Which, by the way, was the First Plot Point – the most significant milestone in any story – in a little movie called *Titanic.*

But I'm getting ahead of myself here. We're still solidly in introductory mode.

Milestone scenes are critical, not only because they are the tent poles that support the weight of your story, they are also the lynchpins for most of the other scenes in your novel or screenplay. Without them you have no plot.

Without them, your story has no chance.

For every major milestone scene there are often several scenes leading up to it and several that spring forth *from* it. And that, dear writers, is what answers the question: *what do I write, and where do I put it*? The milestones tell you.

A reasonable length for a story is about 60 scenes (give or take depending on length), some of which are strung together as sequences. So in principle at least, the creation of the five major milestone scenes in Parts 2 and 3 alone accounts for half or more of the entirety of your story.

When you throw in the Part 1 set-up and the Part 4 resolution, which are by definition *completely* in context to the major milestone scenes, your story is 80 percent or more directly connected to and dependent upon these milestones.

The milestones *are* the story.

Here's the magic pill of sequencing your story: if you know the general conceptual direction of your story, and if you then focus on determining what those five major Part 2 and Part 3 milestone scenes are, in addition to how to open your story and how to close it — all of this, by the way, *can* be determined *before* you've written a word – then

you've evolved your story to a solid and structurally sound place, before you even start writing it.

I imagine some organic writers are throwing staplers at their screen right about now. But here's the deal with an organic process – you *will* square off with the need to come up with these major milestone scenes as you write your drafts. No way around it.

And, you will need to decide how to open and conclude your story. You're not done drafting until you do. If you use your drafts as *exploratory* vehicles for that purpose – a process some organic writers claim is the *only* way they can discover their stories – then you condemn them to a major rewrite. Because every milestone requires a set-up, and many require foreshadowing.

Outline or no outline, the creation and crafting of your story's milestones is the most important element of the storytelling process.

I'm not necessarily advocating pre-draft outlining here. It's not for everybody. What I *am* advocating is *story architecture*, the foundation of which is story *structure* built around a handful of key milestone scenes. The more you know about those scenes and how to connect them with bridging narrative – at whatever point you know it – the closer you'll be to writing a submittable first draft.

When you know about them is completely up to you.

Here are the story milestones you'll need to conceive, construct and execute in your story, no matter how you go about it:

- the opening of your story.
- a hooking moment in the first 20 pages (10 pages for a screenplay).
- the first Plot Point, at approximately the 20th to 25th percentile mark.
- the first Pinch Point (don't worry, I'll define it later) at about the 3/8ths mark.
- a context-shifting Mid-Point.
- a second Pinch Point, at about the 5/8ths mark.
- the second plot point, at about the 75th percentile mark.
- the final resolution scene, or scenes.

If you allow for four (or more) scenes that surround these milestone moments, that's at least 40 scenes. Or about two thirds of your entire story.

None of these critical scenes exist in a vacuum. You will, at any given moment in the process be writing *toward* them and/or *from* them, setting them up and then being propelled forward because of them.

Everything else in your story is just connective tissue. People talking to each other, mulling over options, stopping to rest, making love, analyzing, licking their wounds, studying maps, calling for help, searching for answers.

Once you know your milestones, those scenes practically write themselves.

Story Structure Series: #3 – Five Missions for the Set-up (Part 1) of Your Story

Storyfix is proud to bring you a 10-part tutorial on the fundamentals of story structure.

Today's post is #3 in that series.

#3 — Five Missions for the Set-up (Part 1) of Your Story

At this point in our journey we encounter a paradoxical cart and horse moment. Because Part 1 of story structure is all just a *set-up* for the arrival (and beyond) of what connects Part 1 to Part 2 – the infamous *Inciting Incident*, or as it's known in the movie biz, *Plot Point One*.

It is the most important moment – or *milestone* – in your story.

It's challenging to discuss one without the other. Which we'd do if space wasn't an issue on this venue. So allow me to go over the structure and content of Part 1 first – because it comes first in your story sequence – with the understanding that it will make even more sense (tomorrow, as a matter of fact) when we rip into a definition of the much-fabled First Plot Point.

Because one cannot succeed without the other.

The Seduction that is Part 1

An understanding of the four parts of story structure provides a contextual mission for each scene the various parts contain. All four contexts are different – setup, response, attack, conclusion – which means the context of the scenes is unique to the part in which they appear.

You wouldn't go to a basketball camp wearing shoulder pads, and you wouldn't go to a rock concert in a tuxedo. So it is with your scenes.

Which means, you don't throw plot twists and character arc into your first act.

Two words define what Part 1 is all about: *set… up*. Everything you write here, every scene, is either an introduction of a *character* – the hero/protagonist – or a *situation* that later becomes a proverbial can of worms.

But you're only *prying* open that lid here in Part 1. If you pour out too many worms, they'll eat away at your story and render it out of balance.

Part 1 has *five missions* to accomplish. All of them must be accomplished before the first Plot Point makes an appearance. If you address them after that point your story will tank like… well, a tuxedo at a Stones concert.

Setting a Killer Hook

It's well known in screenwriting circles that you have but 10 pages to hook the reader. Who, one imagines, is a wannabe writer/director working for peanuts between shifts at Bob's Big Boy in Pasadena, and has a stack of scripts yeah-high that need to be covered by morning.

The same is true of novels. The best stories offer the reader – an agent who hasn't eaten in a Bob's Big Boy since the Reagan years – something they can sink their teeth into in the first 25 pages or so. That something is the *hook*.

What is this wondrous little tease? Doesn't matter, as long as it's visceral, sensual, emotionally resonant, and makes a promise of an intense and rewarding experience ahead. It can relate to the *landscape* of the story ahead, rather than the story itself. Or not, that's your call.

Example: In *The DaVinci Code*, the dead priest found in The Louve has left a message scribbled in his own blood. Smells like a plot point, but it's within the first few pages. It's a *hook*, and a good one.

Something gets our attention early. Tickles us. Intrigues us. Seduces us. Makes us want to hang in there until the promise of that moment is fulfilled.

You need to deliver it somewhere in your first three to four scenes.

Introducing Your Hero

Your hero must enter the story early. Long before the arrival of the First Plot Point, which occurs at about the 20 to 25th percentile of the stories length. Or, after about 10 to 14 scenes.

We need to see the hero in her or his pre-Plot Point life. What they are doing, what they are pursuing, what their dreams are made of. In the movie *Titanic*, for example, Leo Dicaprio boarded the doomed ship (that's *context*) to pursue a new life. We invested in that dream with him, which lent gravity to what happens to him later. Robert Langdon (who looks a lot like Tom Hanks) was just a simple professorial symbologist when he was summoned to solve the crime of the millenium in *The DaVinci Code*.

As your story opens we drop in on the lives of its cast, especially the hero. We see them in lousy jobs and complicated marriages, in failing health and with frustrated plans. We see them wistfully dreaming of better days to come. We see them giving up. Or maybe starting over.

Or maybe they're happy as hell. At least for now. Because Plot Point One is just around the corner.

And while we're at it, we readers need to recognize something of ourselves. We need to *empathize*. We don't necessary need to *like* the protagonist all that much, that can come later when their inner hero emerges to win the day. Or not.

Most of all, we need to get a sense of what the hero's *inner demons* are. What is their backstory, what are the worldviews and attitudes and prejudices and fears that define them and hold them back? What are their untapped strengths, their unwitting secrets? These are the things the hero must later, when squaring off with the antagonistic force, be forced to acknowledge in order to step up as the primary catalyst in the story's conclusion.

It's called *character arc*, and it begins in Part 1 of your story.

Establishing Stakes

It is critical that somewhere in the first part of the story we come to understand *what the hero has at stake*. The reader may not understand in this at the time, but when the plot turns and trouble arrives we feel the weight of those stakes in the mix.

And lest I remind you, the purpose of the First Plot Point is to set the story on its ear. To begin the *real* story at hand. The First Plot point changes everything we've just learned about the hero's plans. They now have a new objective, a new need – survival, rescue, justice, wealth, whatever – as they are launched on a new quest, all of it in opposition to an antagonistic force that just dropped into their life… right at Plot Point One.

I saw a great movie yesterday in which the First Plot Point was so quiet I almost missed it. It was a love story – *500 Days*… see it soon, it's a perfect structural model to study –

and the deliriously happy hero heard his true love mention something vague about not being sure of her future. Changed everything. Hello Plot Point One.

Stakes cannot be undervalued in storytelling. The more the hero and others have at stake as they pursue their new goal, the more tension the story will have.

Foreshadowing Events to Come

Somewhere in the first of the four parts we must *sense* impending *change*. Often that change is a dark turn, but not always. But even if it's the dawning of a wonderful opportunity, the first Plot Point identifies some opposition to the attainment of that goal. And we need to *feel* it coming.

Also, it isn't just the First Plot Point that is foreshadowed here. You can, and often should, foreshadow the major events of the story to come, as well. The best foreshadowing is not recognized as such when it occurs – in *500 Days* you could tell, especially in retrospect, that the girl wasn't into it as much as he was – but only in retrospect when something in the story harkens back to that moment.

The Fifth Mission – Preparing for Launch

The other Part 1 goal: the pace and focus of the scenes need to unfold in context to, if not directly pointed at, the First Plot Point. A sense of foreboding or shifting winds needs to accelerate to the point at which everything suddenly – or subtly – changes.

If you approach the first part of your story – the first 25% of your novel or screenplay (roughly) a story in it's own right – then you can focus on its conclusion (the First Plot Point) with the same resolution that you'll naturally bring to bear on the story's final outcome.

Story Structure Series: #4 – The Most Important Moment in Your Story: The First Plot Point

The following is the 4th installment of our series on story structure. Prior posts are available under the *Story Structure Series* tab in the *Categories* menu.

#4 — The Most Important Moment in Your Story: The First Plot Point

Any time you label something *the most important* of anything you'll get folks crawling out from behind their keyboard to argue the point. And they may be

right, especially in the avocation of writing fiction, where hard and fast rules about the rules are always up for grabs. It is *art*, after all.

But I'll stand hard and fast behind this one: the First Plot Point of your story *is* the most important moment in it.

Because the First Plot Point is the moment when the story's primary *conflict* makes its initial center-stage appearance. It may be the first full frontal view of it, or it may be the escalation and shifting of something already present. In either case, nothing about the story is the same from that moment forward.

There is a time and a place to introduce the reason your hero/protagonist sets off down the appointed path of your story – at roughly the 20th to 25th percentile. That moment is the *First Plot Point* (FPP), sometimes referred to as the *Inciting Incident*.

It is the bridge between Parts 1 and 2. Which means, everything that comes before is a *set-up* for it, and everything that comes after is a *response* to it.

The Role of the First Plot Point

Without conflict there can be no story. And since the core conflict shouldn't enter the picture until the reader is a quarter of the way into it, it can be said the story doesn't really even start until Part 1 concludes with the FPP.

This is absolutely true. The FPP is when your story *really* begins.

The purest definition of the First Plot Point is this: *the moment when something enters the story in a manner that affects the hero's status and plans and beliefs, forcing her or him to take action in response*.

Inherent to that moment is the call for the hero to do something they weren't doing before – react, attack, solve, save, speak out, intervene, change, rebel, grow, forgive, love, trust, believe, or just plain run like hell…, etc. Those actions commence upon the arrival of the FPP, which defines the hero's journey and need, as well as her/his actions, for the remainder of the story.

The Essential Introduction of Conflict

Just as inherent to this sudden new journey is the presence of *opposition* to whatever the hero now needs or wants or does in response to the FPP. And *that* becomes the story's conflict.

The FPP is the moment when everything changes . We meet our protagonist early in Part 1, dropping into her/his life to see where they are and where they're going. What their agenda is, their inner demons, their dreams, their world view.

We understand what they have at stake in their life. When the FPP arrives, all of it is suddenly up for grabs… and you now have *stakes* in place.

If the antagonistic force was already in the story during Part 1, something happens at the FPP that makes it darker, more urgent, or more deadly, thus forcing the hero to take action. Because something important to the hero is now in jeopardy.

Or, from a more positive spin, the FPP makes things more real and meaningful, — as in, a forbidden love story – thus forcing the hero to go after it.

But in either case, something must stand in the hero's way moving forward. Better yet something within them holds them back (the conquering of which becomes *character arc*) in addition to the exterior conflict at hand.

The Nature of the First Plot Point

The FPP can be huge, like a ship hitting an iceberg, a meteor striking the earth, or a murder. It can be personal, like getting fired or catching your spouse having an affair or your child dealing drugs. It can be devastating, like a terminal diagnosis or a sudden kidnapping. Like the roulette ball landing on black when you put it all on red. It changes everything, and in a huge way.

Or it can be subtle, like the sudden chill in a lover's kiss. Like the hiring of a worthy foe in the battle for a promotion. Like the offer of seduction on the night of your wedding rehearsal. Again, it changes everything, not necessarily in a huge way, but in a way that alters the course of the hero's actions.

Tension and stakes *can* be present from the outset. Happens all the time in thrillers. But notice that the nature of the FPP doesn't change, because at roughly the 25th percentile or earlier, everything changes when something new and even more sinister spins the story in a new direction.

In the movie *Collateral*, for example, Jamie Fox's taxi driver discovers his passenger, Tom Cruise, is a contract killer. This happens in the middle of Part 1. Lots of sudden tension, and certainly Jamie's near term plans changes. It looked and smelled like the FPP, but it wasn't. It was too early.

It isn't until Tom Cruise informs him that he's not finished with the evening's killings, and that Jamie must drive him from victim to victim if he is to survive, that the full nature of the conflict is revealed, again changing the protagonist's need and ratcheting the stakes to unthinkable levels of urgency and risk.

What the First Plot Point Means

The arrival of the FPP means that what the hero thought was true may not be. It means safety is being threatened. It means everything must stop until this problem is addressed. It means dreams go on hold until this is solved, or it can mean that new dreams are suddenly within reach.

It means survival, or not. Happiness, or not. Justice, or not. *Stakes*.

The FPP begins the hero's new journey in pursuit of this new need. It begins a response to whatever the FPP brings to the party. It means the sudden need for safety, for understanding, for relief, for an answer, for a new approach, a new paradigm, a new set of rules.

Once you know what a FPP is and what it means to a story, you'll never again read a book or view a movie in quite the same way. It'll pop off the page or off the screen and slap you silly with awareness. It's always been there, but now you'll sense it coming and see it appear before your eyes, and the wonders of story structure will suddenly manifest in a way you've never comprehended before.

Because you'll *see* it. You'll finally understand that everything that happened before the FPP moment was a set-up for it. And that everything that happened after was a response to it, and the launching of the hero's new quest.

In *Titanic*, the FPP was the ship hitting the iceberg. It was foreshadowed in Part 1, right when Leo was flirting with Kate. After the FPP, everything about what the characters needed and wanted and believed was completely different and urgent. They needed each other as much as they needed survival.

In *The DaVinci Code*, the stakes are plenty high early in Part 1. But at the FPP, when we see that someone is out to kill Robert Langdon before his investigation leads him to the truth… *that* is when the story really begins, the moment Langdon's need and purpose changes and shifts into an even higher gear.

In both stories, the real conflict doesn't show until the FPP arrives. Which is classic story architecture in full glory.

What is the First Plot Point in your story? Does it meet the criteria? Does it appear in the right place? Does it define and shift the need and quest of the hero from that point forward? Does it create high stakes and sudden risk and consequence that wasn't there moments before?

All this for one moment in your story. One scene. Amazing.

Story Structure Series: #5 — Part 2 of Your Story… The Response

The following is the 5th installment of our series on story structure. Prior posts are available under the *Story Structure Series* tab in the *Categories* menu.

#5 — Part 2 of Your Story… The Response

There's no turning back now. You've opened a dramatic can of worms, and your hero is in the thick of it. Welcome to Part 2 of your story, where the fun really begins.

By now you've introduced the hero. You've shown us where she or he is in their life, what their agenda is, their dreams, their issues, their immediate plans. You've foreshadowed where the story is headed by giving us a glimpse of the forthcoming change. And you've pulled back the covers and shown us the dark shadows that hold your hero back.

You've established stakes for the story. We care. In fact, we don't even know how much we care, because those stakes are not yet in jeopardy.

But of course all that changes. You drop the bomb. You bring in the heavy dramatic artillery. You pry open that can of worms and let us see the writhing creatures within.

Plot Point One changes everything. Something whacks the hero upside the head. What they thought was real, isn't. What they thought they'd be doing and thinking tomorrow won't happen quite that way. You've given them a new quest, the pursuit of new goals, the need to solve a new problem.

And just possibly, the need to save their own ass.

Part 1 is over. The story begins right here.

Now what?

As complex as the context of the Part 1 set-up is – you need to tell us everything while actually telling us nothing – the context of Part 2 is comparatively simple: everything about Part 2 is about the hero's reaction to the new journey you've just launched for them. And that includes their reluctance to accept it.

What would you do, in real life, if everything changed? If someone was out to get you? If the world was about to crash around you? Would you immediately jump in and try to save the day? Would you be the hero right off the bat? Would you make the best decision the first time out? Would you try to make it go away overnight?

Probably not. No, you'd first and foremost seek shelter. You'd run. You'd hide yourself and those you love from danger. You'd protect them and yourself. You'd flee to safety to take stock of what just happened.

You'd seek information. You'd explore options. Research possibilities. You might try something, test the water. Chances are it wouldn't work as well as you'd planned, so you'd drop back and regroup.

That's what Part 2 of your story is all about. All of that, and more.

Of course, the specific *response* of your character depends on the specific nature of the changes wrought by your First Plot Point, and the stakes you've put into play. Your choices here need to make sense, we need to understand and respect the decisions and actions your hero makes in those first tension-filled moments after the First Plot Point.

If your lover tells you that you are not the one, you retreat in pain. You seek an explanation. You try harder to win them back. Or perhaps tell them to buzz off and leave town.

If your lover or someone else tries to kill you, you defend yourself. You hide. You report them to the FBI. You seek to understand. You make a plan.

If the airplane you are in loses an engine and begins spiraling to the ground, you scream. Then you pray. Then you comfort the person next to you.

What you don't do is rush the cockpit and take over. That comes later. For now, your hero is still very human. And their reactions need to be in context to that humanity.

Give us something to care about.

If you've done your job in Part 1, we're already caring for and empathizing with the hero as they face this new antagonistic force and the call to a new quest. And because you've established stakes by now, we feel the risk and the potential loss or gain at our own core.

In which case we, the reader, are completely hooked. That's why you wait until now to unleash the darkness. We need to care before we feel their fear.

You have 12 to 15 scenes to concoct in Part 2. All of them come from within a context of *response*. If you're tempted to have them start saving the day, it's too early for that. You can – and sometimes should – allow them to try, but it can't work. Not yet. It's too early.

If they do try, they must learn something from that failure. The antagonist seems to only be growing stronger, getting closer. The hero faces their own shortcomings – their inner demon – during this first failed Part 2 effort to bring about a solution.

What they learn from that attempt, both about themselves and the antagonistic force, will be applied to their next attempt to fight back in Part 3.

Introducing the concept of the Pinch Point

Somewhere toward the middle of Part 2 something important needs to happen. You must remind the reader of the nature and intention of the

antagonistic force. We need to see what it is that's threatening and/or standing in the way of our hero.

It's called a *Pinch Point*, and it's very simple: show us the bad guy – again, the same thing that appears at the First Plot Point – in full glory.

Give a flash of the storm. Show us the disgust of the withdrawing lover. Remind us of the cost of losing a job. Have the pursuing killer come close to succeeding. If it's a bear chasing your hero through the woods, show us that bear chewing up another camper, just as it will if and when he catches up to her/him.

Pacing and Scene Selection

Pretty much anything you concoct in the way of retreating strategies or doomed attempts to strike back will eat up more than one scene. You'll need a sequence of scenes, each logically building toward something. With three things to go for here – a retreat and regrouping, a doomed attempt to take action, and the reminder of the nature of the antagonistic force – those sequences pretty much consume the 12 to 15 scenes you have to work with.

Just as you were heading toward a destination called the First Plot Point for the entirety of Part 1, you are also heading for a destination during all of your Part 2 scenes. The context is *response*, and the dramatic destination is the *mid-point*, where once again something new will enter the story and change the nature of the game, both for the hero and the reader.

A final note of reassurance: your ability to fill in the blank spaces where your scenes will be will grow as you progress into the story. It won't quite write itself, but what the story needs will become increasingly clear as you move forward.

That's what happens when you write from a context of understanding the generic model of story architecture – knowing the mission of what must happen, and where to put it. As you fill in the blank spaces with specific scenes early on, your inner storyteller will be suggesting ideas for future scenes as you go.

If they aren't, perhaps you should consider taking up painting or competitive body building.

The trick is to know where to place those elements – not too early, not too late – to maximize pacing and dramatic tension. And once you understand story architecture, and whether you're outlining or writing organically, it's much harder to make a mistake.

Story Structure Series: #6 — Wrapping Your Head Around the Mid-Point Milestone

#6 – Wrapping Your Head Around the Mid-Point Milestone

A funny thing happened on the way to the ending of the story. Everything changed. Right in the middle of it, in fact. A big fat unexpected twist.

It's called the *Mid-Point*, and it's one of the major milestones in story architecture.

The Mid-Point is easily defined and an extremely flexible tool to use. In fact, that's its undoing for newer writers and those who don't write from a context of solid story architecture – it's too easy. Which makes it easy to skip altogether.

Here's the Mid-Point defined: *new information that enters the story squarely in the middle of it, that changes the contextual experience and understanding of either the reader, the hero, or both.*

Before the Mid-Point both the hero and the reader experience the story with limited awareness of the real truth behind what's going on. Because it reveals significant new information, everything after the Mid-Point carries new weight and dramatic tension.

Plot Points vs. Mid-Points

Like the two Plot Points, the Mid-Point *can* be what appears to be a simple plot twist. And because the use of plot twists isn't restricted to the Plot Points and the Mid-Point – in other words, these three places are not the only opportunities to toss in a plot twist – is it often undervalued and not recognized as the major milestone that it is.

Also like Plot Points, it can be either a sludge hammer to the reader's head, or a subtle whisper that seems to have little significance at the time.

But also like the two Plot Points, it needs to be there, squarely in the middle of the story. No matter how many other plot twists you have in place. You gotta give us a Mid-Point context shift.

Think of the First Plot Point, the Mid-Point and the Second Plot Point (which we haven't covered yet) as three thick poles that hold up the tent of your story. Miss any one and the thing is lopsided, susceptible to blowing over in a stiff wind and unable to support the weight of the narrative canvas.

The best way to understand the Mid-Point and how it differs from the Plot Points other than location, is to think of it as *the parting of the curtain*. It allows either the hero, the reader, or both, to peek behind the curtain of what's been going on, seeing for the first time what's at hand, who is pulling the strings, and what it all really means.

It may not change the story, per se, but it does change the hero's and/or the reader's understanding of what's been going on. Because if you've done your job thus far, chances are neither really knows the whole picture.

If the hero is privy to the new information, though, it will certainly change their course of action. Remember, the difference between Parts 2 and 3 is the hero evolves from *response* mode into *attack* mode, and the new information gained at the Mid-Point is often the catalyst for that change.

Mid-Point Examples

In the book and movie *Coma* by Robin Cook, the hero was running around trying to determine who is killing off patients in her hospital, making it look like routine surgeries gone south, for the purpose of selling their organs on the black market. Terrifying. In Part 2 of the story she has brought her superiors in the hunt, hoping for their support. After all, it's *their* hospital.

Meanwhile, someone is trying to kill her to stop her from discovering the truth. At the Mid-Point, we pull back the curtain to reveal – to the reader only, not her – that the people behind it all are, in fact, her superiors at the hospital. Everyone is in on it but her.

Meanwhile, she continues to confide in her boss in the belief she has an ally, when in fact she's handing the bad guys everything they need to know to eliminate her.

Later she also learns who is behind it all, but that's actually the Second Plot Point of this story. At the Mid-Point the curtain parts only for the reader.

Another example, this one from a love story, and generic: two people are planning on getting married. At the First Plot Point the girl confesses to the guy she's been having doubts and wants to put the whole thing on hold. Everything changes, the hero suddenly has a new need and quest… a classic FPP.

Then, in the response that is Part 2, the guy tries to find out what's wrong and up his game. By the book story architecture so far.

Then, at the Mid-Point, the curtain parts. He finds out something that changes the context of his understanding, and thus informs his ensuing attack on the problem in Part 3. He finds out she's been seeing another guy on the side.

Same story, higher tension, more urgent stakes, with a powerful new context for both the hero and the reader.

It's almost impossible to change context for the hero and not the reader, but like I said, changing it for the reader *before* it changes for hero is a great way to really crank the tension in your story.

Either way, the Mid-Point kicks your story into a higher gear.

Story Structure Series: #7… the Part 3 Attack

The following is the 7th installment in our series on story structure. Prior posts are available in the Story Structure Series tab in the Categories menu.

#7 – The Part 3 Attack

They don't call them heroes for nothing. But thus far, through the Part 1 set-up and the Part 2 response, we haven't seen many heroic chops from our

protagonist. In fact we've watched our hero respond to her or his calling and the forces that oppose it with very human decisions and actions.

It is the humanity of their agenda in Part 1, and the empathy toward their response in Part 2, that hook the reader into your story. This is where we cement the relationship between hero and reader, because readers a) see part of themselves in this character, b) can feel what they're going through, and c) are strapped in for a vicarious ride that allows them to escape their boring real life existence. That's why they're reading your story, and it's incumbent upon you to deliver on these counts.

And it's time for your hero to step up. Because now we're in Part 3 of the story, and now is when the hero really gets down to business.

While Part 2 was about the hero's *response* to Plot Point One (just as Part 1 one was a *set-up* for it), Part 3 is a full-on *proactive attack* to solve the problem at hand. It's a pretty simple mission, really, but one with a few subtleties that empower it.

You may already have had your hero attempt to do something proactive back in Part 2, in fact it's not a bad way to create momentum and tension. Hitting back is certainly a logical response to things that affect us. If you've had children you know this is so.

But none of that worked very well, at least in your story. In fact, it mainly just showed us how committed and powerful and cunning and sinister and complex the antagonistic force really is. The tension goes up because we know the hero is going to have to go deep and wide to meet their goal and smack down the bad guy.

Quick aside: I keep referring to an *antagonistic force* in these posts. That can take many forms – the bad guy, a sinister organization, the weather, a crappy boss, aliens who want to enslave earth, a cheating spouse, etc. But not all stories are about squaring off with evil. Just as many are about finding love or solving a problem for the betterment of mankind. About redemption and justice.

But in every story there *must* be *opposition* to what the hero wants and needs to accomplish in response to the First Plot Point – which, by definition, launches them on a new path – be it the avoidance of darkness or the attainment of something wonderful. It is that opposition, or obstacle, that *is* the antagonistic force. It's usually a person – the bad guy, or someone

who is not so bad but has a different agenda blocking the hero's way – but it *can* be a force of nature or some social pressure.

Or the I.R.S. We can all empathize with *that.*

Back to Part 3.

Whatever the antagonistic force in your story is, it's about to confront the emerging hero in your protagonist. Part 3 is where the hero literally fights back, hatches a plan, enlists assistance, demonstrates courage, shows initiative.

This is when they step up. They evolve from responder to *attacker*. From wanderer to *warrior*.

And just as importantly, this is where they begin to really fight about against their *inner demon*. Back in Part 1 you established some inner dialogue or programming for the hero that holds them back, and you've seen that weak link in play as a factor in whatever influenced and/or foiled the response efforts in Part 2.

But a good hero sees and acknowledges their own flaws, and here in Part 3 they begin to adjust and accommodate. They get over themselves in order to do what they must to reach their goal.

As in Part 2, these twelve-ish Part 3 proactive attack scenes – beginning at the Mid-Point and leading into the Second Plot Point, which arrives at about the 75th percentile mark – must once again show us, front and center, what stands in the hero's way. And that flash of opposition should be pure and dramatic.

In fact, you need to devote entire – if not economical – scene to that mission.

It's the Second Pinch Point, and it happens squarely in the middle of Part 3. It's yet another demonstration of the nature, power and very essence of the antagonistic force. And it's more frightening and unwavering than ever.

And like the hero, the antagonist has evolved, too. They've learned how the hero is fighting back, they've overcome their own weaknesses in pursuit of their own quest. This is how tension and pacing increases, because everybody's picking up their game by this point.

We'll cover these Pinch Points in more detail in entry #9 of this series, but for now put a placeholder in the middle of Parts 2 and 3 for it.

A quick example from *The DaVinci Code*: Robert Langdon spends the majority of Part 2 dodging those who are trying to kill him. You remember, the albino guy with the spikes strapped to his thigh to remind him of his mission: eliminate people who are getting too close to the truth. Preferrably in a church. But in Part 3 Langdon begins to wise up. He's chasing leads into dark places, including churches, instead of escaping into them as refuge.

Read the book again, or rent the DVD. You'll see this story structure in its full 4-part glory, complete with plot points and pinch points that might as well have sub-titled announcement graphics. That, and the conceptual juice at the heart of it, not to mention its themes, is the reason *The DaVinci Code* is the most successful single piece of commercial fiction in history.

Story Structure Series: #8 – The Second Plot Point

This is the 8th installment in our series on story structure. Prior posts are available in the *Story Structure Series* tab in the *Categories* menu.

#8 – The Second Plot Point

Back in entry #4 of this series we introduced, defined and explored the First Plot Point, which is without reasonable argument the most important and pivotal – literally – moment in your story. We've been referring to it ever since, as all things dramatic and wonderful flow from it.

One might assume that the Second Plot Point (SPP), then, is the second most important milestone in a story. And while a case could be made for that opinion, the SPP doesn't always pack quite the same narrative punch. But it *is* a major milestone, and as such it deserves our rapt attention and utmost writerly respect.

Because our stories will tank without one.

The definition of the Second Plot Point: *the final injection of new information into the story, after which no new expository information may enter the story, and which puts a final piece of narrative information in play that gives the hero everything she or he needs to become the primary catalyst in the story's conclusion.*

Man, that was a mouthful, I know. Nobody said this was easy.

Here's a better one: it's when the chase scene starts.

The USP of the SPP

Something about the information delivered at the SPP changes the story (it has that quality in common with the First Plot Plot) in such a way that the hero's quest is accelerated. There are new doors opening, new strategies to be hatched, new risks with more immediate rewards.

At the SPP you can smell the ending just around the corner, whereas in the scene before you couldn't. And yet, you're not sure what it will be. At least, if you're the reader… if you, the writer, aren't sure yet, then you're in a deep pile of trouble at this point.

The SPP separates Part 3 from Part 4, at about the 75th percentile of the story. Which means the hero transitions here from an attacking warrior to a selfless, heroic and even martyr-like champion of all that is good. At least in terms of solving the inherent dramatic problem the story is portraying.

At the SPP the hero learns something – or not… the reader may be privy to new information here that the hero doesn't yet know or understand, but which surfaces later on in Part 4 – that will take them one step closer, the final step, in fact, toward doing whatever needs to be done in Part 4 to bring the story to satisfactory closure.

The pre-SPP lull.

Here's a little screenwriting trick that works great for novelists, too. Even if you've been going to movies for years you may not have noticed this, but you certainly will now going forward.

There's an all-hope-is-lost lull right before the SPP appears.

In the movie *Tombstone* with Kurt Russell, a favorite of many, Wyatt Earp (Russell) and his crew are basically being run out of town by the Clanton Gang, lead by Powers Booth (who does a great bad guy). There's a tense goodbye as they ride away in wagons with long faces, after which the Booth sends a scruffy henchman out to finish the job.

The pace draws slack. The lights dim, the music goes all fugue in D minor. All is lost. This is the pre-Second Plot Point lull.

Then, next scene at the train station, we see only the elder Earp brother on the train waving to brother Kurt standing on the platform. But wait, wasn't Wyatt leaving town, too? Could it be that something is up his heroic sleeve?

The scruffy Clanton arrives with an accomplice , but Earp takes them from surprise (shooting one in cold blood, wounding the other), and informs the downed baddie that there's a new sheriff in town – literally, I kid you not – and that the poor schlubb is to go back and tell his cronies that *hell's a comin'*. Again, literally.

They may as well be flashing a graphic saying: Plot Point Two! Plot Point Two!

In Titanic, Plot Point Two was the moment the ship sank. Clean out of sight, leaving Leo and Kate floating among a field of debris and screaming survivors. Everything that happens after that is Part 4 of the story, which becomes a burning fuse leading to the inevitable conclusion, followed by an epilogue that bookends with the movie's Prologue.

Planning for the SPP

If you write organically, the SPP can give you fits. You really need to know what new information you're saving for this moment in your story exposition in order to make this milestone both powerful and meaningful.

It's the last piece of the puzzle, the final ingredient. You can still surprise the reader in Part 4, you just have to use what's already in play rather than insert new information.

Part 4 is the beginning of the end of the story. You have 10 to 12 scenes to wrap it up, using your SPP as the springboard for those sequences.

The SPP can be difficult to describe, even generically, because it can be just about anything. In a love story it could be the hero quitting a job that cost him his marriage, and now he has to find his long-departed ex before she hitches herself to a new 401K.

In a thriller it could be the arrival of the fleeing hostages at a port in the storm, where they are able to place a call to the authorities, leaving Part 4 to the business of keeping them alive until help comes. Which won't matter, because the hero will dispatch the baddies by herself before they get there, anyhow.

The SPP is one of those three major tent poles – along with the First Plot Point and the Mid-Point – that are supporting the weight of the story. Everything else sags from one of those poles or rises toward one.

Spring it on the reader too soon and the tent becomes lopsided. Wait too long and the suspense and dramatic fabric of the final act (Part 4) is compromised.

Story Structure Series: #9 – Pinch Points

This is the 9th installment in our series on story structure. Prior posts are available in the *Story Structure Series* tab in the *Categories* menu.

#9 – Pinch Points

Actually, it's the most simplistic and efficient of the story structure milestones.

By now it's clear that your story must have an antagonistic force – a *bad guy*, if you will, though bad *girls* are much more interesting to this writer, which if

you've read my books you already know – and that its first full frontal appearance in the story occurs at the First Plot Point, which closes out Part 1 of your story.

That antagonistic force defines the nature of the hero's ensuing need, quest or journey. It needs to remain, at least contextually, front and center in the story at all times after Part 1.

But sometimes context isn't enough. We need to see that ominous force in its purest, most dangerous and intimidating form. Or if it isn't dangerous and intimidating, then at least we need to feel it for *ourselves*, rather than through the eyes of the hero.

Pinch Points, defined.

Definition of a pinch point: *an example, or a reminder, of the nature and implications of the antagonistic force, that is not filtered by the hero's experience*. *We see it for ourselves in a direct form*.

There are two Pinch Points in your story. The only difference between them is where they appear in the sequence of the story.

Let's say you're writing a love story. At Plot Point One, the hero's girlfriend dumps him like an empty can of Red Bull. A nice buzz, now she's done. We're not sure why she's running away, but the hero's need and quest from that point forward is to win her back. And because he doesn't know why either, his first mission is to find out.

The antagonist here is the girlfriend. The antagonistic force is her disinterest in him.

Through the narrative sequence we experience the antagonistic force through the perceptions of the hero. We feel his pain, we empathize with his confusion and we invest in his hopes. We've all been there, and it sucks.

At the Pinch Point, though, we need to see and experience the antagonistic force for ourselves. So a good pinch point might be a quick cutaway scene showing us the girlfriend in Aspen, wrapped in the arms of another lover against a backdrop of falling snow through a picture window in their suite at the Ritz-Carlton.

Yeah, we would *feel* that one. Especially if the writer had done a good job of getting us emotionally invested in the hero and his plight.

Location is everything… in real estate and with story milestones.

Pinch Points can be very simple and quick. It can be one character reminding the other of what's going on. A glimpse of an approaching storm – take that literally or metaphorically, one *will* apply to your story – and the havoc it is capable of bestowing on all in its path.

It can be a kidnapper beating the captive just for the fun of it. Or to play the screams over the phone to pressure the person paying the ransom.

The simpler and more direct it is, the more effective it is.

The first Pinch Point comes squarely in the middle of Part 2. The second, squarely in the middle of Part 3. The 3/8^{ths} and 5/8^{ths} marks, respectively.

A pinch point may require a set-up scene, it may not. That's why this isn't a formula, it's a format. You get to choose.

In the movie *Top Gun*, the antagonist force was Tom Cruise's backstory: he's trying to live out from the under the disgrace of his father in the military, and in doing so he becomes a "Maverick" (his pilot nickname) who plays loose with the rules, sometimes at the peril of his peers, not to mention his career.

In the set-up sequence for the first Pinch Point, we see a flying exercise in which Cruise screws up by being careless. The actual Pinch Point moment occurs in the locker room afterwards, with a simple 30 second conversation in which Val Kilmer, wrapped in a towel, says to him: "It's not your flying. It's your attitude. You may not like the guys flying with you, they may not like you… but whose team are you on?" Then he just walks away.

Cruise and his co-pilot discuss this, admitting that, yeah, this is the problem all right. It's also the Pinch Point – we've just seen the antagonistic force in its full glory, and we are reminded of what it is capable of doing and the stakes of it doing so.