**Three-Act Structure:**

**A Practical Approach to Story Craft**

**Modified from James Scott Bell, *Plot & Structure,***

**John Yorke, *Into the Woods;***

**Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey***

**Larry Brooks,** *Story Engineering.*

**Act = a unit of action in which the protagonist pursues a goal or desire; acts show major change.**

**Scene = a smaller unit of action in which the protagonist pursues a goal or desire and is opposed by external and internal forces; scenes show minor changes.**

**Signpost Scenes:**

**Act 1 (roughly 20 % of the story):**

**Ordinary World**—Before we can understand the challenges/trauma of the protagonist and sympathize with the protagonist, we need to have a glimpse of the world they inhabit.

**Disturbance/problem/call to action/inciting incident**—Something disrupts the ordinary world such as a problem, catastrophe, or challenge that awakens a desire in the protagonist.

**Fear/reluctance/refusing call**—The protagonist faces uncertainty or fear of the unknown or reluctance to leave the ordinary/safe word.

**Care Package**—Someone the protagonist cares about as the story begins, part of the lead’s life in the ordinary world. Show the care happening early in the story.

**Trouble Brewing**—Things may settle for a bit after the disturbance, but then a glimpse of greater trouble coming or hovering in the air.

**Argument Opposed to Transformation**—A moment where the protagonist states a belief that will be overturned at the end. This is a “thematic line.” Show somewhere in Act 1.

**Crossing the Threshold #1/Doorway of No Return #1**—Change in circumstances, encouragement from a mentor or friend helps propel the protagonist into the action. This should come in the form a decision that thrusts the protagonist irrevocably into the confrontations of Act II. This is the moment the protagonist finally commits to the adventure.

**Act II (roughly 60% of the story):**

**Kick in the shins**—The protagonist suffers a significant setback that tests their commitment to the new decision, and their courage.

**Tests:** The protagonist and her companions, if there are any, learn about the new world/circumstances of the story as they pursue their goals and react under stress to ongoing challenges and confrontations with the antagonist/villain or his cronies. We watch them demonstrate their knowledge, courage, fighting ability, attitudes, aggressiveness, and or hostility under pressure.

**Mid-Point Transformation:** a disaster strikes which forces the protagonist to shift from reacting to the antagonist to actively going on the offensive by making plans of their own.

**The Mirror Moment—**Comes at the midway point as part of the mid-point transformation. (1.) The main character asks a question about personhood: Who am I? What must I become? Can I change? Or (2.) They realize that they can’t win, that they are pr**obably going to die, and they have to find the strength to go on fighting.**

**Pet the Dog**—During the troubles of Act II, the protagonist takes time out to help someone weaker than himself—even at the cost of more trouble **(i.e., kindness and self-sacrifice on the part of the character)**

**Approaching the Cave**—The protagonist approaches the villain’s lair or the place of the most danger and prepares to confront death or danger.

**Crossing the Threshold #2/Doorway of No Return #2**—Major setback, crisis, clue, or discovery that makes the final battle necessary and/or possible.

**Act III (roughly 20% of the story):**

**Mounting Forces**—The opposition—knowing the battle is really on and that the protagonist is committed—mounts larger force.

**Climax/Lights out**—The darkest part of the plot for the protagonist. It looks like all is lost. They can’t possibly win.

**Ticking Clock**—There must be urgency that forces the protagonist into the final battle. This can be a literal ticking bomb or any time constraint by which the protagonist must conquer or perish.

**Moral Dilemma**—The lead must be boxed in with no good choices facing a moral dilemma that forces her to make a decision between two equally bad options, based on who she ultimately is at the core of her being.

**Emotional Punch—**Emotional push that gives lead the courage to fight on or make the right choice, by recalling or seeing something of emotional impact from Act I (can be an emotionally-charged object such as family ring) or hearing from a trusted character about the need to fight or choose rightly.

**Final Battle/Ordeal**—Outer and/or Inner—the lead and her goals are in mortal peril. She confronts the final ordeal and reaches the brink of death (psychological, social, or physical).

**Reversal of reader expectation**—The reader expects the protagonist to do or be one thing, and then the writer flips it or reverses that expectation to show the protagonist is something else. (Ex. a character is accused of plagiarism and murder. We learn at the end of the story that he has split personality disorder and has been accusing himself. From Stephen King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*.)

**Transformation/Resurrection**—The lead returns to the ordinary world. The last chapter confirms the character’s change to a stronger self or a new self with greater knowledge, the treasure, the woman, the power, etc. Should be done in a way that carries the emotional resonance you want to leave with the audience.