

J.W. Elliot's Three Act Structure

(Adapted from James Scott Bell, *Plot & Structure*, John Yorke, *Into the Woods*, Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, Jessica Brody, *Save the Cat!*; John Truby, *Anatomy of Story*; and David Farland, *Million Dollar Outlines*)

Act I (comprises roughly 20 % of the story)

Ordinary World—Before we can understand the change or threat our protagonist faces, we need to have some sense of what her life is like. Show us the problems the hero faces. Let us experience her flaws.

Disturbance/Problem/Call to Action/Inciting Incident/Catalyst—It can be a problem, catastrophe, or a challenge that awakens a desire in the protagonist. It needs to make remaining in the safe, ordinary world impossible. Remaining = death—either social, psychological, or physical.

Argument Opposed to Transformation—A moment where the lead states a belief or misbelief that will be overturned at the end. This helps establish a clear character arc and provides the opportunity to create resonance later in the story. It allows us to highlight the character's misbelief (what they think needs fixing) and/or their flaw (what really needs fixing) that will be challenged during the course of the story. It should be related to the story's theme or themes.

Debate/Fear or Reluctance Or Simply Refusing the Call—Your character faces uncertainty or fear of the unknown or reluctance to leave the ordinary, safe world. She may debate with herself and/or with other characters the wisdom of accepting the call vs. remaining in the ordinary world.

Care Package—Early on, we need to meet someone the lead cares about. They are a part of the lead's life in the ordinary world. We need to show this connection early in the story.

Trouble Brewing—Things may settle for a bit after the disturbance, but then we get a glimpse of greater trouble hovering on the horizon.

Crossing the Threshold #1 or Doorway of No Return #1 This can come through a change in circumstances or encouragement from a mentor or friend that helps propel the protagonist into the action. The protagonist must be forced to **make a decision** that will thrust her irrevocably into confrontations of Act II. This is the moment the lead finally commits to the adventure. It must be a decision made by the hero and no one else. It proves the hero is worth our time. This also comes with the character forming a new goal.

Act II (comprises roughly 60% of the story)

Kick in the teeth—The lead suffers a significant setback that tests her commitment to the new decision and her courage.

Tests—The lead and her companions learn about the new world and the new circumstances of the story as they pursue their goals and react under stress to the ongoing challenges and confrontations with the antagonist or his cronies.

We watch them demonstrate their knowledge, courage, fighting ability, attitudes, aggressiveness, and/or hostility under pressure. In doing so, we come to understand why the protagonist deserves to win.

An effective way to craft this section is to determine if you want things to improve or get worse for your hero in the Act II world. You can have her appear to be successful (**rising**) until she hits the mid-point crisis that turns everything upside down. Or you can have things get progressively worse (**falling apart**) until the mid-point transformation shifts the direction of the story.

Mid-Point Crisis/Transformation—This is a disaster that forces the protagonist to shift from **reacting** to the antagonist to actively going on the **offensive** by making plans of her own. The hero experiences a false victory (where the hero achieves something she wants), or a false defeat (where the hero loses something she wants). Either way, it's a disaster, and the hero has to start taking control.

MacGuffin—This is something the protagonist seeks. It can be an object, a person, or an emotion. In crime fiction and mysteries, they are often treasures or secrets. In Sci/Fi and Fantasy, it could be a magical object or a new technology. The MacGuffin can appear at the beginning of the story, as in *The Maltese Falcon*, but it serves as a useful tool in Act II to compel the character to continue the journey.

The Mirror Moment—The false victory or false defeat triggers an internal crisis for the hero. She begins to question who she is and if she is capable of continuing the fight. This comes at the midway point of the story and can come in two different forms:

1. The main character asks a question about personhood: Who am I? What must I become? Can I change? Etc.
2. Or she realizes she can't win, that she is probably going to die, and she has to find the strength to go on fighting.

This self-reflection usually comes with a **new goal** that sends the hero in a new direction.

Pet the Dog Moment—The Lead takes time out to help someone weaker than herself—even at the cost of more trouble. This should be in the form of **an act of kindness or self-sacrifice on the part of the protagonist**.

Approach the Cave—She draws near to the villain's lair or the place of the most danger and prepares to confront death or danger.

Mounting Forces #1—The conflict ramps up as the villain and his allies close in. The hero's flaws and misbeliefs get in the way, proving she still has not been transformed.

Cross Threshold #2 or Step Through Doorway of No Return #2—This amounts to another major setback, crisis, clue, or discovery that makes the final battle necessary and/or possible.

Act III (comprises roughly the last 20% of the story)

Mounting Forces #2—The opposition—knowing the battle is really on and that the Lead is committed—Antagonist tries to finally crush the protagonist.

Lights Out/All is lost—This is the darkest part of the plot for the lead. It looks like all is lost. She can't possibly win. This is a moment of personal crisis. The hero blames herself for the loss and failure. A mentor or friend may die. A relationship might end, or the hero realizes her ideas were wrong.

The character experiences a dark night of the soul where the hero reacts emotionally to the attack by the villain. The hero may seek to return to the familiar ordinary world, to give up and turn back. This moment of self-reflection often comes with a revelation the character has about herself or about one of the other characters that changes her inside.

Ticking Clock or Time Bomb of Some Kind—There must be an urgency that forces the lead into the final battle. This can be a literal ticking bomb or any time constraint or deadline by which the lead must conquer or perish. This helps ratchet up the tension as the audience knows time is running out for the lead to solve the problem at hand. We see this all the time in Hollywood films because it is so effective.

Final Battle or Ordeal—The best final battles are both internal and external—the lead and her goals are in mortal peril. She confronts the final ordeal and reaches the brink of death—either physical, psychological, or social.

This includes several beats or scenes:

1. The **lead gathers her companions**, tools, and/or weapons, and they form a new plan.
2. They set out to **execute the plan**. Team members make sacrifices, some might die—either socially, psychologically, or physically.
3. **Reversal: The plan fails**—The hero is betrayed. What they sought is not there. They are captured, etc.
4. **Moral Dilemma**—The lead must be boxed in with no good choices left, forcing her to make a decision between two equally bad options based on who she ultimately is at the core of her being. The decision the hero makes tells who she really is inside and shows that she is worthy of success.
5. **Emotional Punch**: This is an emotional nudge or push that gives the lead the courage to fight on or to make the right choice by recalling or seeing something of emotional impact from Act I or hearing from a trusted character about the need to fight or choose rightly. This can be an emotionally charged object for the character, such as a mother's ring or necklace or a simple memory. She finally overcomes her misbelief, corrects her flaw, and is transformed.
6. **Reversal of reader expectation**. The reader expects the protagonist to do or be one thing or the story to resolve in a particular way, and then the writer flips it or reverses that expectation to show the protagonist is something else.
7. **Transformation or a Resurrection**—The lead returns to the ordinary world. This usually occurs in the last chapter, which confirms that the character has changed to a stronger self or a new self with greater knowledge. This should be done in a way that carries the emotional resonance you want to leave with the audience. The protagonist and her allies experience a **validation** that the journey has been worth it.