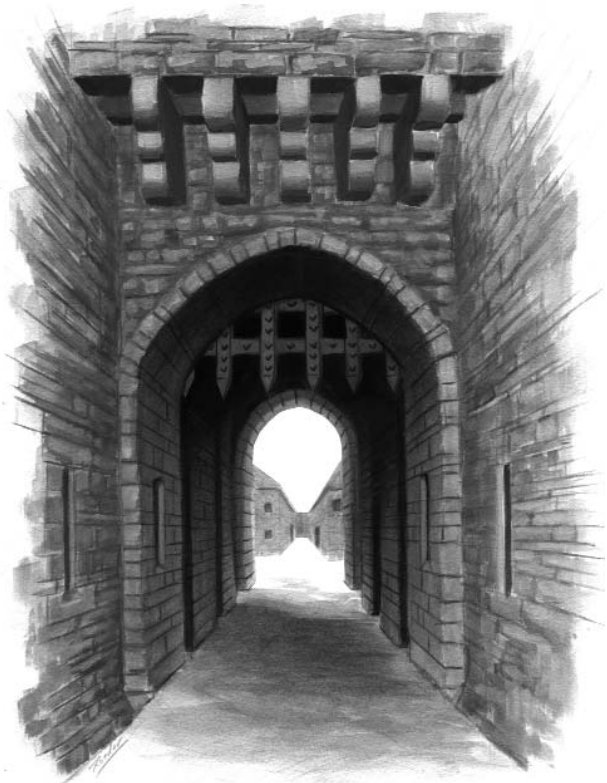


How to Tell a Story



By Mark O'Bannon

Storytelling is one of the oldest pastimes. Everyone loves a great story, but it is often difficult to find someone that is good at telling one.

The best way to learn how to tell a story is to read books on the subject, such as “How to Tell a Story” by Peter Rubie and Gary Provost, or any other book published by *Writers Digest Books*. Most people, unfortunately never take the time to learn basic storytelling techniques, and when they try to tell a tale, they find themselves losing their audience.

Others refuse to study storytelling techniques because they fear they will lose their creativity by following formulaic story structures.

However, like building a house, there are definite things that you need to know in order to tell a story. Learning how to read blueprints, how to swing a hammer, and how to install a roof are as essential to a carpenter as learning how to set up a story, how to write a basic plot outline and how to write a scene are to the storyteller.

So here is a quick primer on how to tell a story. Hopefully, those reading it will be able to gain some insight into the subject, to the pleasure of their future audiences.

Stories consist of three parts. The beginning, the middle, and the end. Traditionally, this is why stories are broken down into three acts.

There are six parts of a story contained within these three segments:

Act I

1. Introduction.
2. Rising Action.

Act II

3. Complications.
4. Crisis.

Act III

5. Climax.
6. Resolution.

The beginning (Act I) has three goals.

The first goal is to get the ball rolling by ***introducing the main characters***, & the ***setting*** they are in.

The second goal is to ***hook your audience*** with something that is exciting and interesting.

The third goal in the start of a story is to ***introduce the villain*** and the main ***story goal***.

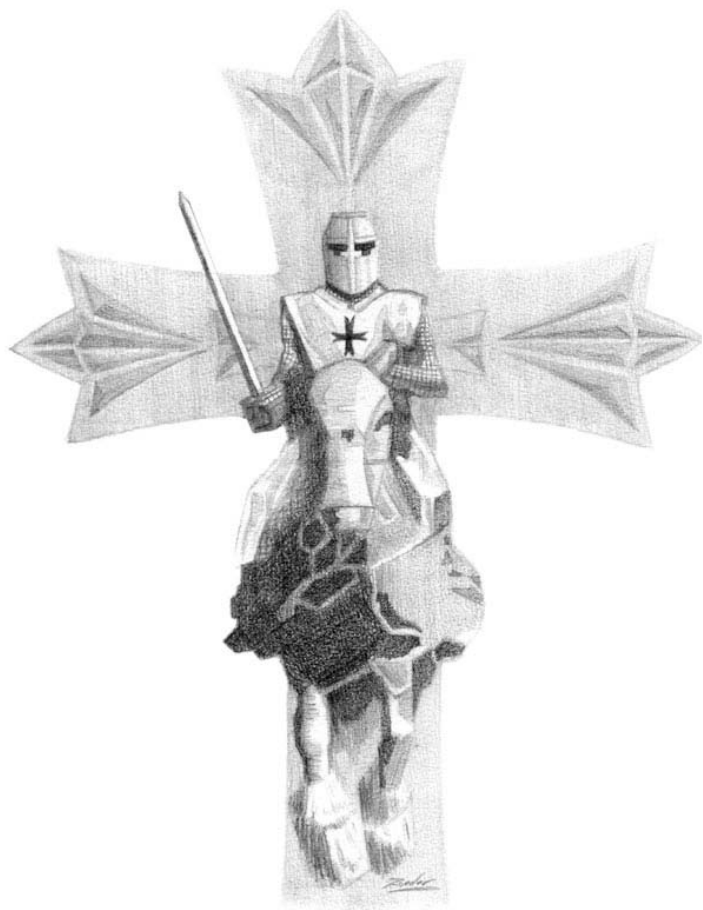
All three goals should be accomplished very quickly, often in the first scene.

Choosing a **setting** depends of the kind of story that is being told, and the desires of the *Storyteller*. For instance, a gothic adventure could take place in Hungary or Transylvania, and could be set in the 15th or 16th century. Arthurian tales would take place in England, in an earlier time period. The setting will have a large affect on the way the story is told.

The **characters** will often take up a large part of the opening of a story, and this can slow things down considerably. Care should be taken to avoid lengthy character introductions, as it can kill a story before it has begun. One of the marks of an amateur *Storyteller* is to use up a large part of the early story introducing characters.

Characters are defined by what they do, not by who they appear to be. A person's actions speak louder than everything else. Many people begin describing a character by their appearance, but in reality these physical traits are the least important things about a person. *Characters should enter a story doing something.*

Good characters will have an **inner need**, such as a need to fall in love, and this internal goal will



influence all of the character's actions. Characters also need to have a ***main character flaw***, such as a distrust of the opposite sex. Characters may have many flaws, but one will override the others, and ***it will block the character's inner need***, preventing the character from getting what he truly wants. Character flaws can be such things as a quick temper, a desire to become rich and powerful, cowardice, etc.

It has been said that ***a story is not what happens, but who it happens to***. A story is about how a character changes by the events in the plot, or said another way; a story is about how a character overcomes his failings.

Many have argued over which aspect of a story is more important, the plot or the characters. In a good story, they will both support each other.

The ***plot*** consists of the events that take place in the story. The plot directs what happens in the ***outer story***. It is often called the ***spine*** of the story.

The characters control what happens in the ***inner story***, by how they react to events of the plot. This part of the tale is also called the ***heart*** of the story.

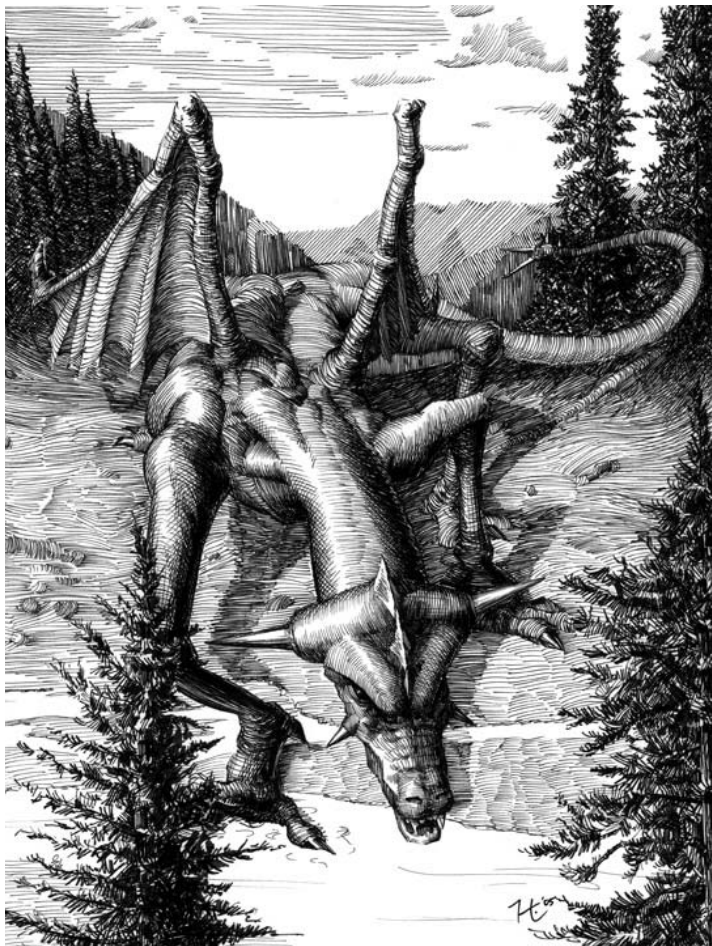
In this way, a good story will consist of two stories being told at once, in parallel to each other.

A good character will always have some level of ***internal conflict***. *Inner conflict is created by the character's inner need rubbing against a main character flaw.* This conflict can often be expressed as two emotions fighting against each other. For instance, a character may be greedy, but will also have a need for people to trust him. In a treasure hunting story, the character could be confronted with a situation where his greed will come in direct conflict with his need to be trusted. A good *Storyteller* will often design his plots to affect the characters internal conflicts, so that the characters will be able to overcome their flaws.

Stories are about how a character changes over time by the events in the plot.

The second goal in the start of the story is to hook your audience with an interesting event. This event is often called the ***inciting incident***.

The inciting incident is an event that drastically alters the character's reality, propelling them into the story. The event must be something that will practically force the characters into the story. Some examples could include the destruction of the character's town by a marauding army or an angry dragon, the kidnapping of the characters girlfriend by a band of vikings,



the murder of the character's family, etc. Inciting incidents will affect how the story is told, and will provide the characters with motivation to pursue the goal of the story.

Character *motivation* is one of the most important aspects of a story. The inciting incident must be compelling enough to give the characters a strong desire to do something. Once the characters become emotionally involved in the story, then they will pursue the story goal without feeling like they were forced into it. For instance, imagine a story where the characters are hired to do a job. Then compare it to a story where their sister is kidnapped by an evil necromancer. Which story would motivate them more?

The third goal in the start of a story is to *introduce the villain and the story goal*. Villains are often introduced secretly in the start of a story without anyone realizing that they are the main antagonist. These kinds of stories are often mysteries, but they can also be stories where the *Storyteller* wishes the villain to remain secret. In any event, the villain must always be introduced, even if they are simply appearing on stage just to say hello. Often they are brought into a story discretely, simply appearing in the background.

In other cases, a villain may be shown as the obvious antagonist in the story. Sometimes the best way to motivate a character is to have the villain appear, take something valuable from the character and then leave. This can be tricky, since the characters should not be rendered completely helpless by the villain. If this approach is taken, it can show the characters that they need to acquire some kind of object or artifact in order to overcome the villain.

The main story goal should be obvious to everyone. It should be clear enough so that the characters will understand what to do. *Stories are about characters that are trying to solve a problem.* There will always be something blocking the solution to the problem, creating conflict. For instance, if the characters are trying to pass through a gateway, it could be guarded by the villain's henchmen.

Every scene should have an obvious goal, and something that interferes with the accomplishment of that goal.

Stories could have many goals, but one goal will be the overriding concern.

Minor goals could include subplots such as love stories or minor intrigues between characters.

The beginning (*Act I*) will consist of two parts: The Introduction, and Rising Action.

The *Introduction* will introduce the characters, the setting, the goal of the story, and the main villain, or antagonist.

Rising Action is the second part of the story, and it will be a set of scenes that get the characters moving in the direction of the story goal.

Often a *mentor* will be introduced to help the character learn some truth that they will need to accomplish the goal or to give the characters some kind of aid.

Usually there will be some sort of conflict in the early stages of a story as the characters pursue the story. *Threshold guardians* are sentinels that guard some kind of doorway into a deeper level of the story.

In the early stages of a story, the conflict will slowly rise, creating a greater sense of urgency. The stakes should become greater, further motivating the characters. Every *Storyteller* should ask himself, “what’s at stake here?” in every scene.

Act I could consist of a single scene, or it could be two or more scenes in length, depending on how much time the *Storyteller* wants to spend on the story, & the desired *pace* (how quickly the story progresses).

The ***middle of the story (Act II)*** is the largest part of the story, taking up about 50% of its time. The function of this part is to develop the characters and the conflict.

Tests or challenges will often confront the characters in this section. Each of these small goals could provide an element that is needed to defeat the villain or an object to complete the quest.

Allies are new characters that are introduced to aid the characters in their quest.

New ***enemies*** are also introduced in this section of the story, as the plot becomes more complicated.

Act II consists of two parts: Complications and the Crisis.

Complications in the story make things more interesting for the characters. Often a major plot twist is introduced here which will force the main character to change, becoming fully committed, strengthening or clarifying his motivation. This will often be a point of no return.

The ***Crisis*** is the lowest point in the story, where everything looks hopeless. This will force the characters to make a crucial decision, leading to the climax of the story.



The end of the story (Act III) is where the main villain is finally overcome and the quest is completed.

The final climax of the story is a scene that everything in the story has been pointing towards. It can be a surprise, but it should be a logical progression of the events in the past. Sometimes in a short story, the climax will be the first (and perhaps the only) scene. The most important parts of a story are the first scene, where the villain and goal are introduced, and the climax.

There are many ways to end a story, but the end of a story will be of two main kinds.

An ***open ended story*** is where the quest has been completed, but not everything has been finished, leaving the audience to imagine their own ending.

A ***closed story*** is where everything has been completed, leaving an obvious ending for the audience.

Characters should be presented with some kind of ***moral choice*** at the end of a story, *which forces them to finally overcome their character flaw.*

This will create a fundamental change in the nature of the character.

After the villain is defeated and the character has changed, the story will be over.

Act III will consist of two parts. The climax, and the resolution.

The *climax* is a final scene that will often take place in the villain's home, but it could be anywhere else. This scene is where the characters fight and defeat the villain, and obtain the goal of their quest.

The *resolution*, also called the denouement, is a final scene that shows the outcome of the events of the story. This is where the *Storyteller* shows the consequences of the actions taken in the story.

There will usually be some kind of *elixir* that is given to the society at large, brought back by the characters, which will change their world forever. The item brought back will put everything back into balance that was thrown out of whack by the inciting incident. A simple example could be a quest for fire. In the start of the story, the primitive town has lost their fire. The characters could go on a quest to “steal fire from the gods,” returning with the object of their quest (fire), which will restore the balance of their world.

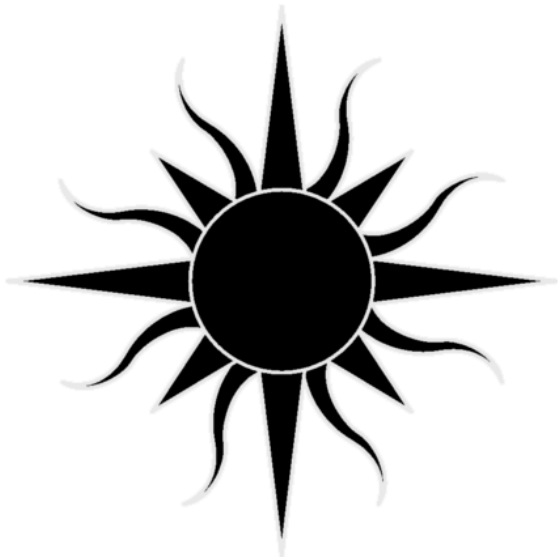
This part of the story is also *where the character is shown to have overcome their main character flaw*, often expressed by the accomplishment of a simple task that was impossible before. Their inner need will then be satisfied.

Hopefully, you will have enjoyed this short treatise on *How to Tell a Story*.

More details on the art of storytelling can be found in the upcoming book, “The Storyteller’s Guide” by Shadowstar Games, Inc.

Shadowstar Games, Inc.

Better Storytelling



www.shadowstargames.com

