

The Story Grid

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Need to identify the target audience and why they should care about you.

A story either works or it doesn't work. It either engages the reader or it doesn't. It's alive or it's dead.

Foolscap Method. A technique for story organization. (The Story Grid is the larger version of the Foolscap Method.)

In the Foolscap Method, we ask 6 questions:

1. What's the genre?
2. What are the conventions and obligatory scenes for that genre?
3. What's the point of view?
4. What are the protagonist's objects of desire. What do they want? And what do they need?
5. What's the controlling idea/theme?
6. What is the beginning hook, the middle build, and the ending payoff?

Genre. The only way to write a story that works is to know exactly what genres you are exploring and deliver exactly what is required from those genres.

Genres have obligatory scenes.

A genre is a label that tells the audience what to expect. They simply manage audience expectations.

There are 5 primary expectations of the audience. We expect to know ...

1. how long the story will last (time genres)
2. how far we'll need to suspend our disbelief (reality genres)
3. the style (style genres)
4. how the story will be structured (structure genres)
5. what the general content of the story will be (external or internal content genres)

Classic story form. It's called the arch-plot.

Characteristics

- single active protagonist pursuing an object of desire while confronting primarily external forces of antagonism.
- story ends with an absolute and irreversible change in the life of the protagonist.
- Arch-plot is the human life story.
- It's the hero's journey.

Change, no matter how small, requires loss.

Experiencing stories that tell the tale of protagonists for whom we can empathize gives us the courage to examine our own lives and change them.

So if your story doesn't change your lead character irrevocably from beginning to end, no one will deeply care about it.

Stories give us the courage to act when we face confusing circumstances that require decisiveness. These circumstances are called conflicts.

What we do or don't do when we face conflict is the engine of storytelling.

Arch-plot is often used for external conflict genres (like superhero movies), but it can also be used to explore inner conflict, too.

2 other plot styles: mini-plot (literary fiction; internal conflict); anti-plot.

Objects of desire. Storyline A is the external story to achieve the conscious object of desire. Storyline B is the internal story to achieve the subconscious object of desire.

After an inciting incident that throws your character's life out of balance, he will go on a quest to achieve his object of desire. But once they take up the quest, forces of antagonism ally against them. Plans go wrong. They adjust. Plans go wrong. They adjust. The stakes escalate until they're at the point of no return.

There are 3 levels of conflict that can thwart the plans:

- inner conflict
- conflict with another person
- conflict with social forces (like ostracization) or natural forces

The quest for the external and internal objects of desire is the heart and soul of story. What the character wants vs. what the character needs.

Focusing on the struggle to get objects of desire will make up for almost every other kind of story misstep.

The reader has to attach and invest themselves in the story's protagonists. And the way they attach is through the character's pursuit of objects of desire.

External content genres.

Action

Core value: life/death. Core emotion: excitement. Core event: Hero at the mercy of the villain.

1. Human against nature.
2. Human against the state.
3. Human against human.
4. Human against time.

Horror

Core value: life/death, fate worse than death. Core emotion: Fear. Core event: Victim at the mercy of the monster.

1. Uncanny. Evil is explainable.
2. Supernatural. Evil isn't "real."
3. Ambiguous.

Crime

Core value: Justice/injustice. Core emotion: Curiosity. Core event: exposure of the criminal.

1. Murder mystery.
2. Organized crime.
3. Chapter.
4. Courtroom.
5. Newsroom.
6. Espionage.
7. Prison.

Western

Core values: individual inside and outside society; good/evil; strong/weak; wilderness/civilization. Core event: showdown between the hero and the villain.

1. Classical. A stranger comes to town.
2. Vengeance. A stranger wants to right a wrong and moves from outside society to inside it.
3. Transition. A hero moves from inside society to outside it. High Noon.
4. Professional. Heroes making a living outside the law. Butch Cassidy.

Thriller

A mashup of action, horror, and crime, with a strong internal conflict.

Core value: life/fate worse than death (damnation).

1. Serial killer.
2. Legal.
3. Medical.
4. Military.
5. Political.
6. Journalism.
7. Psychological.
8. Financial.
9. Espionage.
10. Woman in jeopardy.
11. Child in jeopardy.
12. Hitchcock.

War

Core value: Victory/defeat; honor/disgrace. Core emotion: Excitement, fear, intrigue.

Core event: The big battle.

Society

Core values, emotions, and events depend on subgenre.

1. Domestic.
2. Woman's.
3. Political.
4. Biographical.
5. Historical.

Love

Core value: love/hate. Core emotion: love. Core event: proof of love of one character for another.

1. Marriage.
2. Courtship.
3. Obsession.

Performance

Core value: respect/shame. Core emotion: Suspense. Core event: the big game/big performance.

1. Sports.
2. Music.
3. Business.
4. Art.

Internal content genres.

The choice of global internal genre is driven by your lead character's subconscious object of desire, your character's unknown (to them at the beginning) inner quest. Remember that the quest is most often a two-front journey. There is the external quest for a conscious object of desire like justice or survival or companionship or a prize of some sort like the rave review or victory. Then there is the internal quest, the one the lead character doesn't know he is in need of until a critical moment in the telling. The interplay of these two quests for objects of desire is what provides narrative drive on the one hand (the external) and insight into the human condition on the other (the internal).

1. Worldview: a change in perception of life experience.

- Education. Tender Mercies.
- Maturation. Saturday Night Fever.
- Revelation. Oedipus Rex.
- Disillusionment. Gatsby.

2. Morality: a change in the character's inner moral compass.

- Punitive. Wall Street.
- Redemption. Drugstore Cowboy.
- Testing. Cool Hand Luke.

3. Status: a change in social position.

- Pathetic. Little Miss Sunshine.
- Sentimental. Rocky.
- Tragic.
- Admiration. Gladiator.

Foolscap Method. Take out a piece of paper. Draw 2 lines on it.

Top third is your first act. The second third is your second act. The third is your third act.

In the simplest way possible, write down your "What if?" inciting incident at the top of act 1. Say it's a murder mystery. Your inciting incident will be the discovery of a body. If it's a romance, it's the lovers meet scene. If it's a horror novel, it's the scene where the monster attacks.

Now at the very bottom of the page, write down the climax of the entire novel. If it's a murder mystery, it could be the core event identifying the murderer -- bringing him to justice or his getting away. If it's a romance, it could be the lovers reunite after falling out in the second act scene. If it's a horror novel, it could be the vulnerable victim overcoming the monster.

After you have the global inciting incident and the global climax of your story, all you have to do is fill in the rest.

Foolscap Global Story Grid. It's Coyne's take on the Foolscap Method.

As a reminder, here are the essential questions to ask about any story:

1. What's the genre?
2. What are the conventions and obligatory scenes for that genre?
3. What's the point of view?
4. What are the protagonist's objects of desire. What do they want? And what do they need?
5. What's the controlling idea/theme?
6. What is the beginning hook, the middle build, and the ending payoff?

From Coyne:

1. Global story

- External genre.
- External value at stake.
- Internal genre.
- Internal value at stake.

- Obligatory scenes and conventions.
- Point of view. Who's telling the story?
- Objects of desire.
- Controlling idea/theme. The takeaway message the writer wants the reader to discover. (More below.)

2. Beginning hook

- Inciting incident.
- Complication.
- Crisis.
- Climax.
- Resolution.

3. Middle build

- Inciting incident.
- Complication.
- Crisis.
- Climax.
- Resolution.

4. Ending payoff

- Inciting incident.
- Complication.
- Crisis.
- Climax.
- Resolution.

Notes:

- Story distilled is: hook, build, payoff.
- There are about 15 scenes.
- Beginning is about 1/4; middle is about 1/2; end is about 1/4.

Story value. A story value is simply a human experience that can change from positive to negative or negative to positive.

Examples: alive/dead; truth/lie; love/hate; justice/injustice; hope/despair; good/evil; right/wrong; naive/experienced; young/old; smart/dumb; rich/poor; freedom/slavery; honor/shame; chosen/ignored, etc.

Note: They aren't polarities. There are always degrees.

Controlling idea/theme. The takeaway message. What would you say if you had to boil down all of the events in your story to one sentence?

E.g.: Justice prevails when an everyman victim is more clever than the criminals. (The Firm.) Narcissistic self-abuse annihilates all forms of human love. (The Shining.)

Kubler-Ross model and change. The bottom line with change is that it requires loss.

Five elements that build a story. Inciting incident, progressive complications, crisis, climax, resolution.

1. Inciting incident. Upset the life balance of your lead protagonist. How? Either via cause (a conscious choice) or coincidence (something random happens). Note: It's good to mix them up throughout the story.

It can stem from the golden "What if?"

2. Progressive complications. They always move life forward by making life more and more difficult (in positive and negative ways) for the lead character. Push them toward what they fear, toward the point of no return.

Complications are driven by turning points, and events can turn with character action or revelation.

3. Crisis. The crisis is the time when your protagonist must make a decision, the point when they must do something. And the choice they make will determine whether they get closer to or further away from his objects of desire.

When constructing a crisis question, think in terms of:

- the best bad choice
- a choice between irreconcilable goods

4. Climax. You must have a climax in every unit of your story, because the climax is the truth of character. A climax is the active answer to the question raised by a crisis.

5. Resolution. The resolution is essential for the reader to metabolize the story. What the resolution moment does is tells the reader exactly what the climax of the story *means*. How the worldview has shifted.

Story units

- Beat. An identifiable moment of change.
- Scene. Movement from one value state to another. The driving force is conflict. Scenes must turn.
- Sequence. Large stages of the global story journey. E.g.: getting the job, winning the race, first kiss, etc.
- Act. A major life stage in a story. The act brings explosive change. Act climaxes move closer and closer to the limits of human experience the further along you move into the global story. They must progressively complicate, moving from big to huge to shocking.
- Subplot. They're used to amplify the theme/controlling idea or to counterbalance the story with irony.
- Global story. Brings it all together.

All have the five elements.

Remember: Don't overanalyze to begin with. Start with just enough to get going.