

STORY STRUCTURE

Adapted from Rob Rosenthal (transom.org/2016/story-structure-e, transom.org/2013/my-kingdom-for-some-structure), Robert Smith (training.npr.org/audio/you-asked-how-do-you-tell-a-story-in-3-acts), and Jessica Abel (*Out on the Wire: the Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio and the Out on the Wire* podcast, more at jessicaabel.com).

The statistician George Box used to say about economic models that “all models are wrong, but some are useful.” It’s the same thing with story structure. In the next few pages you’ll find some visual representations of common story structures, including:

- Chronological story structures
- Teaser-then-chronological story structures
- Stories told in acts

Some of these examples we’ve already seen, like the Story Wheel and the Seven Sentence Story. Some examples are new. Pick a pattern that will help you get to the hard part: writing. Want more? Listen to a podcast episode and map the structure. Does it fit into one of these common frames?

STORY FORMULAS

We’ll begin with story formulas. A story formula can be used to help turn a topic into a story. Use a story formula like a thesis statement. In one or two sentences, you should be able to say what your story is about and why it matters.

- **THE XY STORY FORMULA**
I’m doing a story about X.
And what’s interesting about it is Y.
- **THE FOCUS STATEMENT**
Someone does something... (action)
Because... (reason or motivation)
Even though... (conflict or obstacle)

CHRONOLOGICAL STRUCTURES

In a chronological story structure, your story moves forward chronologically. This happened, then this happened.



- **SEVEN SENTENCE STORY**

Once upon a time
And every day
Until one day
And because of this
And because of that
Until finally
And ever since that day

- **THE STORY WHEEL/HERO'S JOURNEY**

Inciting incident—leave your path
First battle—it's getting real
Point of no return—if you stop now, there's no story
Final battle—face your demons, transform
Claim the prize—ascend to a new path

- **THE "SOREN"**

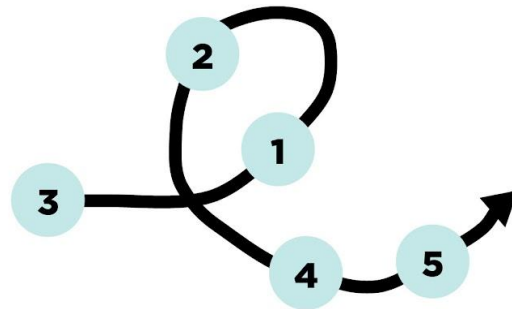
This happened _____, then this _____, and then this _____, and then you wouldn't f—ing believe it but _____. And the reason that is interesting to every single person walking on the face of the earth is _____.

TEASER-THEN-CHRONOLOGICAL STRUCTURES

In this structure, the story starts in the heat of the action.

- **“E” STRUCTURE**

This is the basic “teaser-then-chronological.” You start in the middle of the story (3), go back in time and fill in background information (1,2), move forward past the scene you started with, and move forward in time (4,5).



- **ABDCE STRUCTURE**

Very similar to the “e” structure, this is another way of thinking about “teaser-then-chronological.” This structure explicitly includes an ending or “moment of reflection.”

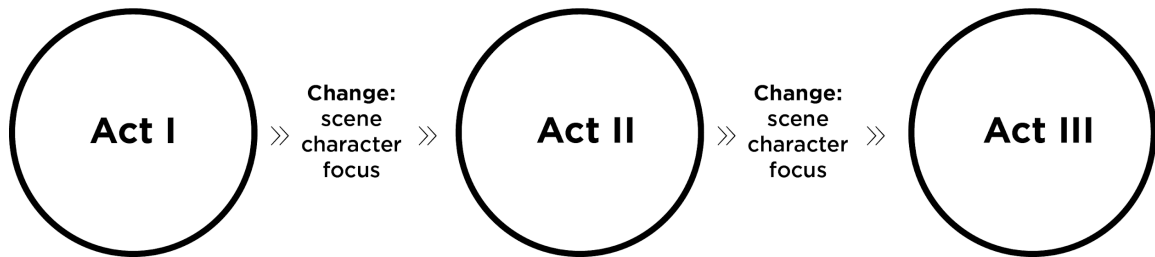
- 3 ACTION
- 1 2 BACKGROUND
- 4 DEVELOPMENT
- 5 CLIMAX
- 6 ENDING

ACT STRUCTURES

Break your story up into distinct acts or scenes.

- **THREE-ACT STRUCTURE**

Structuring your story into three acts is a basic way to propel your story forward.



Here are a few ways to do it:

- **A real person facing a problem » Expert talking about the problem or person taking action » Back to the real person**
 - Zuheera Ali's 2019 RadioActive story about depression memes is a good example (kuow.org/stories/depression-memes-teenagers)
 - **Problem » Solution » Complication » Future**
 - **Why is this weird thing happening? » Reporter goes inside the world » Reporter understands the motivations » Reporter explains to outsiders**
 - **Tell the story geographically – recounting events according to where they took place. Each scene is a different place.**
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- **TROUGH or BUCKET STRUCTURE**

This structure has three or four acts, depending on how you see the moment of reflection at the end. You start with a scene → leave the scene to give background, facts, and information → return to the original scene → and end with an explicit moment of reflection.



STORY STRUCTURE QUICK TIPS

Not sure how to start?

- Make a “Barf Draft!” Record yourself telling the story to a friend. Pretend you’ve called this friend up, and you can’t wait to tell them this story. How do you start? What are the main points you hit? Now transcribe the recording. You have a first draft!
(transom.org/2015/barf-draft-with-an-iphone)
- Make a chronological timeline of events, then decide how you want to structure your story.
- Structure your story around your best pieces of tape.
 - If you have great active tape, consider starting with a scene using that active tape.

Other tips:

- Emotion is catchy, but it has to be earned
 - Let’s say your best tape is of a person crying. If you begin your story with that tape, your listener won’t know who the person is, and therefore will not care about them or why they’re crying.
- There is a fine line between intriguing and confusing
 - Starting with an intense scene may be a great hook, but it may also be super confusing and disorienting to the listener.
- Change and conflict are gold, if you have them
 - Does your main character experience a change throughout the story? Structure your story around that change (before the change >> change >> after change).
- How will you end?
 - Moment of reflection: The listener wants you to finish the piece with a conclusion/moment of reflection. Tell me what I am supposed to know or how I am supposed to feel (end with an explicit moment of reflection). This American Life stories are good examples.
 - No moment of reflection: The listener is smart. Present the facts to them, and let them make their own meaning from the piece (no explicit moment of reflection). Snap Judgement stories are good examples.