

7 Story Archetypes

How To Write a Book: The 7 Story Archetypes

A Write Practice Resource

by Liz Bureman and Joe Bunting



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The Story of a Story

A few years ago, an Italian writer named Bandello was living in France and published a book of stories, most of which he “borrowed” from other writers he had known.

Not long afterward, one of his stories was translated into French with the title “The third story of two lovers, where one died of poison, the other of sadness.”

It was a sad, but very beautiful story.

Eventually the story was translated to English, when it fell into the hands of a young writer based in London. The writer added a little to the story, cleaned it up a bit, and then handed it off to a local theater company. Not long afterward, it turned into one of the biggest hits of the century and of the English language.

The young English writer’s name was William Shakespeare and the story was called *Romeo and Juliet*.

Great Writers Steal

Good books share similar structures.

Romeo and Juliet shares nearly the same structure as *Aladdin* and Aragorn and Arwen’s story in *The Lord of the Rings* and even *Pretty Woman*.

Two young lovers from different worlds? It's a tale as old as time.

What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

The above is from a poem that is over 2,300 years old. If there were nothing new under the sun two millennia ago, then that is even more true today, when over 1,000,000 books are being published every year.

Writing and storytelling has been around for thousands of years. Your goal shouldn't be to write something new. Your goal should be to transform something universal into something that speaks to, inspires, awes, and entertains the people you're writing to.

There is nothing new under the sun. Take something universal and make it yours. ([tweet that](#))

This Is True for Nonfiction Books, Too

Non-fiction books share similar structures too. After all, what is a non-fiction book but a story someone is telling *about themselves*, that they can be more successful, that they can overcome their obstacles and fears, that they can be the hero of their own lives.

Whether you write narrative based non-fiction or how-to, the story structures we're talking about in this resource will help you.

The Seven Archetypes

A lot of our books are similar. They share similar structures, similar character types, and even similar key events. The details might change, but the foundation is often the same.

Christopher Booker had this same idea in 2004, and wrote *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Write Stories*, which argues that all stories told in any medium can be categorized into one of seven archetypes.

If you want to write a better story, a universal story, these seven archetypes can help.

How To Use This Resource

Most writers find one of these story archetypes by instinct. However, sometimes you need a set of guidelines to make sure your book is as good as it can be.

You can use this resource however you want, but if you're working on a book of your own, here's how I suggest using it:

1. Scan through the seven plots to find the archetype that most closely matches your story.

2. Read through the archetype description, taking careful note of each stage. Where does your story or idea follow the stages? Where are the holes?
3. Write a one-page outline of your story, combining what you learned about your story's archetype with your initial idea. (HINT: Good stories are about problems. Do what Randy Ingermanson suggests and "end each paragraph in disaster.")

Also, note that while most books will only use one archetype, some books are "compound stories," meaning they have more than one story, and therefore more than one possible archetype.

The Plot Types

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Plot Type I: Overcoming the Monster

Overcoming the Monster is an underdog story where the hero sets out to destroy an evil of some kind. Generally, this evil is something larger or greater than the protagonist, and will take great courage and strength to defeat (the story would be over rather quickly otherwise).

This archetype is common among nonfiction books, for example with some memoirs (*American Sniper*, for example) and health books (e.g. *Wheat Belly* and *The Food Babe Way*).

There are five stages in an Overcoming the Monster plot:

1. Anticipation Stage and Call

The reader learns about the monster from afar, including its powers and reign of terror over the nearby community, and the hero accepts the call to defeat the monster.

2. Dream Stage

The hero prepares to fight the monster while it is still a comfortable distance away, although the distance between the two is decreasing. In film, a training montage usually fits in right about here.

3. Frustration Stage

It's here! The monster! And it's even worse than we thought! The monster's power is revealed in all its terrible glory, and it looks like our hero is in way over his or her head.

4. Nightmare Stage

Cue the epic battle music, because it is ON. And it's not going well for our hero, who is being absolutely pummeled by the monster. But wait! Just as all hope is lost, the major chords start peeking through on the background score, because the tide of battle is about to turn.

5. The Thrilling Escape from Death, and Death of the Monster.

Monster is defeated, hero emerges victorious, and the grateful people present him/her with treasure, a kingdom or something to rule over, and/or the local village hottie who is the hero's perfect other half.

This plot type is ancient, with Gilgamesh and the story of David and Goliath following this structure, although it still is common in contemporary films and literature, like Terminator, most of the Redwall series, and the Star Wars films.

Keep in mind that these plot types are not bad. Storytelling in one form or another has been around for thousands of years, so you're bound to reuse a few plot points, and there are still opportunities to play with the identity of the monster. Instead of a physical monster,

it could be an abstraction, like fear, or a mundane monster, like finals week at a university. There's still room for creativity.

Plot Type II: Tragedy

These two basic plot types make up the two halves of the drama masks that represent classic theatre, and you can categorize most of Shakespeare's plays into one of the two.

What Is a Tragedy?

In sixth grade English, when I was first exposed to Shakespeare, I was taught essentially that a tragedy is a play where everyone dies in the end. Clearly there's more depth than that, but you have to start small with eleven-year-olds.

A tragedy focuses on a villain protagonist, and the reader sees them delve further into darkness and evil before their ultimate death or destruction at the hands of the hero. His prime example is that of *King Lear*, in which the title character recognizes his error, but it's too late to repent by the time he figures it out, and he dies.

Here are the stages of a Tragedy:

1. Anticipation Stage

The tragic hero gets it into his or her head that something is missing, and they want it. This might be power, fame, a specific love interest, or something else, but the protagonist has their motivation for the disaster dominoes that are about to fall.

2. Dream Stage

The tragic hero sets out on their path to obtain their MacGuffin. Something occurs that tells the reader that this is a no-turning-back situation (i.e. Faust's deal with the devil), and things start to go strangely well for the protagonist. He might be well on his way down the path of evil, but no one is calling him out on it, or no one can stop him, so he proceeds further into the depths.

3. Frustration Stage

Right about here is where the tragic hero hits his first roadblocks. They might be small annoyances, but in dealing with them, the protagonist commits additional dark acts that seal his fate and alert the reader that the only way this can end is badly.

4. Nightmare Stage

The tragic hero's plan is unraveling, and he can sense that an opposing force or fate is closing in. He's increasingly paranoid and living in fear of what's to come.

5. Destruction or Death Wish Stage

Our protagonist breathes his last, whether at the hands of his enemies or due to some final act of violence. Either way, his death isn't mourned much, and the darkness that surrounded him dissipates, and there is much rejoicing.

In a way, Tragedy is a much more cynical version of the Rebirth, or the flip side of the Overcoming the Monster story, since most monsters follow this trajectory.

Classic examples are *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, and a lot of films about organized crime also follow this trajectory (*Goodfellas*, *Scarface*, *The Departed*).

Plot Type III: Comedy

A Comedy is a work in which the hero and heroine are destined to be together, but something is preventing them from doing so.

Over the course of the story, whatever is keeping them apart is removed from the equation, usually after a great deal of increasing confusion and miscommunication, which usually results in mass hilarity. In the end, the confusion is cleared up, the bad guy is punished, and everyone gets married.

The structure of a Comedy is less rigid than the other six plot types, but for the most part there are three acts to the story.

1. The “Shadow of Confusion”

We’re introduced to the hero and heroine, who are clearly marked as destined to be together (along with possibly a few emerging beta couples), but they’re being separated.

This could be physical separation (maybe they haven’t met yet), or emotional separation (see *A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s* Demetrius and Helena for a good example of this). Either way, there’s confusion, miscommunication, and frustration, and the designated couples aren’t hooking up.

2. It Gets Worse

The confusion previously mentioned gets even more convoluted. The darkness separating everyone is at its thickest, and the tension for the characters is at its peak. Things are going disastrously for our hero and heroine.

3. The Confusion is Lifted

Someone or something explains the misunderstandings, all the characters breathe collective sighs of relief, weddings are arranged, and the bad guy is either punished or repents in time for the engagement party.

The key in Comedy is the execution and transition between the stages.

Also, it's important to keep in mind that Comedy in this definition isn't necessarily funny; the name just indicates that everyone lives happily ever after.

But as anyone who has seen *Singin' In the Rain* or read *The Importance of Being Earnest* can attest, confusion is a great mine for humor.

Plot Type IV: Rebirth

Rebirth stories generally focus on villain protagonists who redeem themselves over the course of the story, after spiraling deeper into villainy and meeting a redemption figure.

Redemption figures usually come in the form of a child or the protagonist's other half, and they serve to remind the villain-hero what compassion or love feels like.

They also help the villain-hero see what the world alignment is actually like, instead of the warped perception that the protagonist has that has given them the proclivity towards villainy.

The Structure of the Rebirth Plot Type

Unlike the other six plot types, Booker does not give a list of stages for stories of Rebirth. Instead he provides a basic sequence (listed here):

- A young hero or heroine falls under the shadow of the dark power.
- For a while, all may seem to go reasonably well. The threat may even seem to have receded.
- Eventually the threat returns in full force, until the hero/heroine is seen imprisoned in the state of living death.
- This continues for a long time, when it seems like the dark power has completely triumphed.

- But finally comes the miraculous redemption, either by the hero (if the imprisoned figure is the heroine), or by a young woman or child (if the imprisoned figure is the hero).

A Christmas Carol is probably the best-known example of a Rebirth story, with Scrooge as the villain-hero, and the three ghosts as redemption figures. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is another example (a lot of holiday stories, it seems, fall under this umbrella).

Basically, most stories where the hero is morally ambiguous and does an about-face by the end of the story are Rebirth plots.

Plot Type V: The Voyage and Return

The Voyage and Return is very common archetype, and it's especially popular in children's literature because it generally involves a journey to a magical land that pops up out of nowhere.

The magic element is pretty sunny and light to start with, and then the darkness shows up for the hero to conquer. Once it's vanquished, the hero leaves the magical land and returns home, probably having learned a valuable lesson, or having discovered something about themselves that they didn't know before.

Here are the five stages of the Voyage and Return:

1. Anticipation Stage and “Fall” into the Other World

We see the protagonist in their dreary, dull, humdrum life, and then all of a sudden, something happens to escort them to the other world. This could be a rabbit hole, a wardrobe, or just a blow to the head, and the protagonist regains consciousness in the other world.

2. Initial Fascination or Dream Stage

Wow, the clouds are made of cotton candy! Or there's a talking rabbit! Or everything is suddenly colored in ways that it shouldn't be! Our hero is aware of the fact that they are no longer in Kansas,

and they take the opportunity to explore their surroundings and the strange laws of physics that might be in this new place. However, no matter how awesome the new world is, the hero never feels completely at home there, foreshadowing their return.

3. Frustration Stage

This is where the dark magic starts to creep in. The hero starts feeling a little more uncomfortable, and the wonder of the world starts to feel a little more oppressive. In *The Phantom Tollbooth*, this is where Milo and his companions start heading towards the Castle in the Air, over the Mountains of Ignorance, and they start meeting the demons of the Lands Beyond. Chaos hasn't completely set in, but things are looking more sinister for our hero.

4. Nightmare Stage

The Queen of Hearts has unleashed her armies, Aslan has been killed on the Stone Table, and Dory is stuck in a net with a bunch of tuna. For the love of all that is good and holy, our hero better run for his life, because the shadowy element of the magical land is coming in full force.

5. Thrilling Escape and Return

We can all breathe a sigh of relief, because the cavalry has arrived! Our hero has escaped from doom and makes the return home, having learned a valuable lesson about their home or themselves.

In addition to *The Phantom Tollbooth*, other examples of *Voyage and Return* plots include *Alice in Wonderland*, *Finding Nemo*, and most of the *Chronicles of Narnia* series.

It's usually a good idea to implement some character development in the protagonist over the course of the voyage, because if he or she doesn't learn anything, what was the point of all that hard travel?

Plot Type VI: The Quest

The Quest is the plot type most likely to have a group of main characters rather than one protagonist in the main eye of the story. The rest of the party generally takes one of four appearances:

- A close friend who is loyal to our hero, but doesn't have much else going for him or her;
- A sidekick who is the polar opposite of the hero mentally, physically, and emotionally;
- A generic mass of identity-less bros who don't get names because they're not alive long enough to matter; or
- A balanced party of brains, heart, and strength who support the hero, or who count the hero as one of their own.

There five stages in the quest archetype:

1. The Call

If you've read either of the other two entries in this series, you've probably got an idea of what this entails. Kickstarts the plot and gives the hero and the rest of the party a mission to accomplish.

2. The Journey

Obviously our heroes are not going to get to their end goal that easily. Most of the journey is over enemy territory or hostile land, and obstacles pop up left and right, like dandelions in the spring.

Obstacles come in several flavors, like monsters (kill/escape, rinse, repeat), temptations (see a good portion of the Odyssey for examples), a rock and a hard place (Scylla and Charybdis being the classic example), or a journey to the underworld. Amid these tests come periods of rest where the party can regain their strength (or count the bodies, if the party is the third type).

3. Arrival and Frustration

They're so close! Our heroes can see the Emerald City! They're almost there! Oh, wait, the Wizard won't actually help them until they kill the Wicked Witch of the West. Damn. Well, that's annoying. Our heroes still have some work to do before they actually complete their Quest.

4. The Final Ordeals

Now come the final tests of our heroes. Often these come in sets of three, like in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Usually our main hero is the only one who can complete the final test. Success! And then our intrepid band of heroes (or just one hero, in case everyone else is dead) makes an amazing escape from death, either by running away or by killing whatever bad guys are left.

5. The Goal

Huzzah! Our hero(es) have completed their quest, and get their treasure/kingdom/princess/trip home.

Most stories involving the Holy Grail are Quests, as is the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Princess Bride*. If information is considered to be the sought-after item in the Quest, most police/legal procedurals could be considered miniature quests. By varying the elements of the Quest story, the plot type can still stay fresh.

Plot Type VII: Rags to Riches

Rags to Riches is essentially the story of how someone with humble origins, through hard work and a bit of luck, works his or her way up to huge power and wealth.

Many self-help and business nonfiction books follow this archetype, whether the author is aware of it or not.

A child grows up with oppressive living conditions or authority figures, usually in poverty, and overcomes them to end the story with wealth, status, a companion, and usually a kingdom of some kind.

One key to the story is the point where the protagonist seems to have achieved success, but he or she isn't ready for it, and everything comes crashing down around them.

A Rags to Riches story has five stages:

1. Initial Wretchedness at Home and the Call

The introduction to the physical, mental, and/or emotional squalor that is the protagonist's early life.

This more than anything else defines our hero from the beginning, since this plot type hinges on the hero's personal growth and maturation.

We see the terrible conditions that the protagonist lives through until he/she receives the call to leave, and sets out (or is forced out) into the world.

2. Out Into the World, Initial Success

Some minor struggles hit our hero, but it looks like everything is coming up roses. Our hero may have already met their prince/princess, and have experienced some victories that foreshadow their future success and glory, but overall, the hero hasn't fully matured yet, so these victories will be short-lived.

3. The Central Crisis

The “oh crap” moment hits. Some dark figure from the hero's past might return, or the hero might lose their prince/princess, either through physical separation, or from a mental or emotional standpoint. The small victories are stripped away, and the protagonist is at their lowest point in the story.

4. Independence and the Final Ordeal

No more genies or fairy godmothers; the protagonist has only their wits and strength to pull himself or herself back up. And by golly, it's done with style, with the hero realizing his/her independence and proving to all the haters that he/she is capable and worthy of reaching the final goal. There's a final confrontation with whatever is standing between the hero and the end goal, but we all know how that ends.

5. Final Union, Completion, and Fulfillment

The hero wins! For real this time, not like the fake-out in stage two. As a reward, the protagonist claims the treasure, kingdom, and local royal stud of the preferred gender.

Disney is especially fond of this plot type, bringing *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, and *The Princess and the Frog* to life on the big screen. The early books of the *Harry Potter* series contain elements of this story type as well.

As a reminder, just because a plot type is pervasive does not mean it is bad. We all love fairy tales, and they've been around for ages, and they are clearly not going away anytime soon as long as the Magic Kingdom is still in Orlando. Tweak character goals, or play with different definitions of initial wretchedness; there's room for experimentation in these types.

What are your favorite rags to riches stories?

Which Plot Type Are You Writing?

Share your plot archetype and one-page outline in [the comments section of the second lesson in our How To Write a Book series](#).

[Go back to Lesson II >>](#)

After you share, give feedback to at least three other writers.

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