

Story Structure

Your body has bones. Chickens have bones (well, most of them do). Buildings have a structure. And stories do to. There are two major kinds of story structures: *dramatic* and *episodic*.

Dramatic structure is the kind with which you are perhaps most familiar. This is the kind of structure that most movies, novels and TV shows use. It has a protagonist (a main character—or characters) who is trying really hard to get something, and through the story we see her overcome obstacles until finally, by the skin of her teeth, she succeeds. The classic tale of Cinderella has a plot structure like this. Throughout the story, we see her begin in despair, then overcome the odds at a moment of climax to meet and finally marry the prince. Plots like this have suspense and rising action that the audience follows that intrigues them.

An *episodic* structure is a bit different. Rather than have rising action that increases the energy and suspense of a story, this type of structure shows the audience a series of scenes or episodes that show various events. At the end, the routine is still changed by these events, but there is no single driving action that moves the plot forward.

Let's chat about each of these. One thing to remember, though, is that every story has a ***beginning***, a ***middle*** and an ***end***.

Dramatic Structure

The Beginning

The beginning of a plot includes the background, setting and introduces the characters. It is usually called the *exposition*. Most important, the beginning of a play (or story, movie, or any other narrative) lets the audience know the routines of the world of the play. What does Cinderella usually do, for instance? She is a slave in her own house and with her step-family. Of all the information we could give (hair color, how many bugs in the window, the color of the wall paper, etc.), that's the most essential thing to know: her ***routines***.

The End

If the end establishes the routines of characters in a play, what does the end do? Usually, events of plays change routines in plays, so the end of a play usually establishes ***new routines*** of characters. Cinderella's new routine?: She is now a princess and lives with the Prince. In short: She lived happily ever after. In a play, the end is often called the denouement (pronounced "day-new-ma"), which means "falling action." And for action to fall, it must rise. That happens in the middle.

The Middle

Here is the meat of the story. It begins with the Point of Attack—that point in the story when the *normal routines of characters change*. Cinderella's routine changes when there is a knock at the door and a princely messenger brings an invitation to the ball. Suddenly, both we and Cinderella have a hope that things might change for her. This hope leads to suspense. Suspense means our interest in her success increases. As our interest increases with the actions of the story, the plot is said to "rise." More accurately, the events in the story that lead to our interest are collectively called the *Rising Action* of a story. After a while, the stakes become higher and higher, and the chance for success is threatened

more and more until it reaches a "do or die" state: the climax. At the climax of a story, the action and suspense rises to its highest point, the chance for success is slimmest, and the stakes are the highest. Either Cinderella succeeds and becomes a princess, or she is doomed forever to be a slave for her step-family. For Cinderella, this is near the end of the story when she does or does not get to try on the shoe.

Cinderella has a typical dramatic plot. It contains rising action and a climax. We are interested in Cinderella's plight because there is suspense that keeps us wondering if she will succeed.

Episodic Structure

Stories with episodic structures have beginnings, middles and ends, but the suspense and rising action is not as strong as with a dramatic structure.

Take storyteller Bill Harley's story "Soap Soap" from his cassette tape *Wacka Wacka Woo*. In this story, the boy who is going to town encounters certain obstacles, but none is really more exciting or suspenseful than the previous. In each episode, the boy learns a new little song until he happens upon the solution that works in the end. There is really not rising action—the action is more horizontal, but it is still engaging because of the fun songs and ways Mr. Harley tells it. We enjoy anticipating the new episode, but not because it is suspenseful. It has a **beginning**: his mother's problem that the boy wants to help solve, and it has an **end**: he solves the problem. It also has a **middle**: his encounters with people on the street on the way to the store. But the middle does not rise to a climax. Instead, it continues until an epiphany or resolution is reached.

Hercules (not the Disney movie, PLEEEEAASE not the Disney movie!) is another example of an episodic story. Hercules is a special guy with great strength. He is the son of Zeus, a god, and a mortal woman—notably NOT Hera, Zeus' wife. Hera, jealous and spiteful of Hercules and favoring a different mortal, is intent on destroying him. The first episode of Hercules, the **beginning**, portrays Hercules happy at home with his wife and kids. But suddenly (the point of attack), Hera manages to make Hercules insane for a time, and he kills his wife and kids. He is understandably upset by this and seeks to redeem himself as the **middle** of the story starts. Apollo, another god, tells him to visit a certain King who gives him tasks to perform. In one episode, he kills the hydra. In another episode, he cleans some massive stables by diverting a river. He kills a great lion. He kills other beasts. He does other great feats as well. But no feat is any greater than the last one. There is not rising action, only one action after another. At the **end**, the last episode, Hercules is redeemed of his horrible crime, he moves to New Zealand, and he starts his own TV show!

Every story you tell will probably have one of these two types of structures. If you know what kind it has, you will be better able to amplify it, and your story will be more effective.