

"Practical, visual and effective storytelling magic."

Seth Godin, Author, *The Song of Significance*

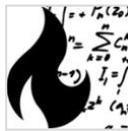
The StoryWheel



J U L E K U C E R A

Art is fire plus algebra.

Jorge Luis Borges



© 2022, 2023 by Jule Kucera

Good news! You have permission to post, email, print, and pass this document along for free to anyone you like, as long as you make no changes or edits. I'd love it if you'd share it with your storytelling friends. However, the right to sell it, whether physically or digitally, is strictly reserved. Use this link for a direct download of this document: bit.ly/TSWmine. For all things StoryWheel, head to the [StoryWheel Garage](#).

Contents

Welcome	4
Greetings, Fellow Storyteller!.....	4
When to Pay Attention to Structure.....	5
A Note About Terminology.....	6
The Unicycle and The Rider.....	7
Building The StoryWheel	8
Foundations.....	8
Introduction to The StoryWheel	14
How The StoryWheel Got Born	15
<i>Gladiator</i> on The StoryWheel	26
The Complete StoryWheel	45
How Do Models Compare?	49
Blueprint for a Book.....	50
Hero's Journey.....	51
Invisible Ink.....	53
Romancing the Beat.....	55
Save the Cat!	57
Story Circle	59
Story Engineering.....	61
Story Grid.....	64
Planning a Story	66
Questions by Quadrant.....	75
Test Your Story.....	82
References	84
Acknowledgments.....	87
Dear Reader	88

Welcome

Greetings, Fellow Storyteller!

Do you have a shelf or a Kindle full of writing craft books? Do you struggle with how much time to devote to getting better at your craft, versus how much time to actually write?

Yeah, me too.

This handbook was born from need, not because I wanted to add one more craft book to the stack. My plan was simply to “write my first novel.” But when I read the opening pages to my mom, her eyes kept falling to the *People* magazine in her lap. My problem wasn’t the characters, the problem was what they were doing. Or weren’t doing. I didn’t have a plot that worked.

What I learned helped me, and I hope it can help you, too. Whether you’re outlining a story yet to be written or revising an early draft, the StoryWheel can be a useful guide.

My hope is that the StoryWheel allows you to spend less time structuring (or reading about story structure), and more time creating. My wish for you is a story born into the world with more ease and assurance.

This document has four main parts:

- This **welcome**, so you know what you’re getting into, and how the StoryWheel can work for pantsers, plotters and everything in between.
- An **introduction to the StoryWheel**, with special emphasis on what powers a story.
- A **comparison** of the StoryWheel to several popular story structure models, so you can align it with what you already know.
- **Planning**, to get you on your way to structuring *your* story.

Now that we’ve got the lay of the land, let’s get going.

When to Pay Attention to Structure



Plotters lay out a detailed structure of their story before they begin to write.
Examples: John Grisham, J.K. Rowling.



Pantsers write and see what happens, writing by the seat of their pants.
Examples: Margaret Atwood, Stephen King.



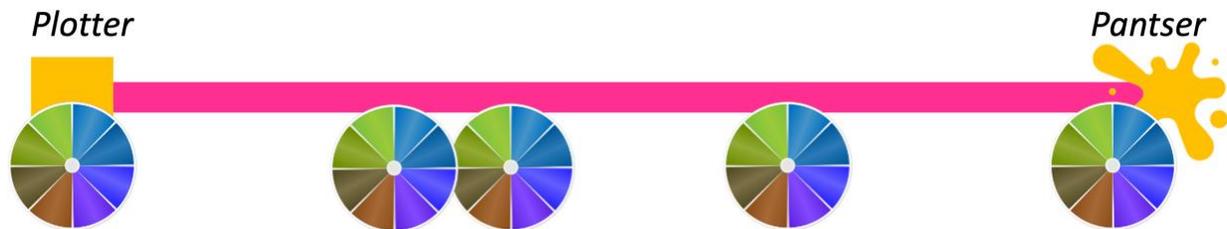
Planters use a hybrid approach. Just like a hybrid vehicle, they start with enough gas (structure) to write, and then as they write, build energy for more structure to support the next section of writing. Example: Toni Morrison.

Which is best?

In the immortal and frustrating words of one of my grad school professors, “It depends.” What is best is what is best for you, whatever gets you to a professional first draft with relative ease and efficiency. “Relative” is the operative word because writing is hard and creating that first draft can take a long time.

Whether you plot before you write, write before you plot, or use a hybrid approach, you must—at some point—do both. This is true whether you write fiction (novels) or narrative nonfiction (memoirs and stories about real people and events).

Good news! Wherever you fall on the Plotter to Pantser spectrum, the StoryWheel can help at any point of the process.



A Note About Terminology

One thing about all those books on story craft—there are lots of different terms, often for the same thing. That’s a problem, because it can lead to misunderstanding. There are three ways I treat terminology:

1. **Use:** When there is terminology that exists in storytelling and in the broader world, and it makes sense, I will use that terminology. Adults learn by comparing what they are learning to what they already know. To change a term simply to have my own special label would be a disservice to you. The best word to describe chaos is “chaos.”
2. **Modify:** When existing terminology could be clearer, a better reminder of its function, I will modify it. For example, the *Whiff~ Whoa!* and *WHAM!* prefixes you will encounter. I’m not being cutesy. Their purpose is to show relationship and increasing intensity. I also modify when existing terminology doesn’t make sense to me. For example, why pair Opening Image and Final Image? Wouldn’t a better pairing be Opening Image and Closing Image? Or Initial Image and Final Image?

I am not blithely changing other people’s well-known terms to use in the StoryWheel. When my friend and psychologist Dr. Laurie Anderson reviewed an early draft, she objected to the label “Dig Deep Down.” Her perspective was that every adult has already dug deep down at some point in their life. Now, they must dig down *deeper*—that’s the point. Because *Dig Down Deeper* conveys this meaning, that’s the label used here.

3. **Create:** When there is an element of the StoryWheel that I haven’t seen elsewhere, I will create a term to describe it. For example: Jolts. (You’re going to love jolts. They power your story.)

The Unicycle and The Rider

Story is more than structure.

Here's an analogy...

Structure is like the wheel of a unicycle: good, and necessary, but without the rider, it doesn't go anywhere. Based on what happens, the rider thinks thoughts (their brain) which creates feelings (their heart). Based on what the rider thinks and feels, they decide what to do next to reach their goal. The rider can change how they're pedaling or change their destination, but if they stop pedaling (taking action), the unicycle falls over and so does the story.

Structure is mechanical—the unicycle. Story is human—the rider, and the connection the one reading or watching or listening feels to the rider. Structure is the *what*, story is the *why*.

I asked artist and illustrator Khrystyna Lukashchuk to create the unicyclist because I wanted it drawn by the human hand. It's the humanity of the story that brings it to life.



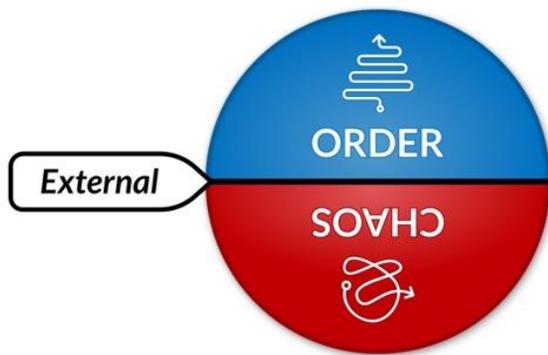
That said, structure matters. Imagine a rider with an oblong wheel on their unicycle, or a wheel that's missing part of the rim. The rider is going to be in serious trouble.

What gives a story meaning is not the wheel, but the rider. But without the wheel, the rider can't get where they want to go. The story can't get to where the author wants it to go. And the reader can't come along for the ride.

Building The StoryWheel

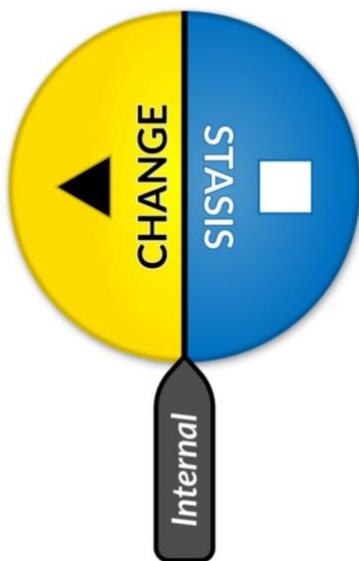
Foundations

The StoryWheel is influenced by concepts from several authors. For more detail, see [References](#) on page 84.



The spokes supporting the circle of the StoryWheel split the wheel in half horizontally, creating two halves: Order and Chaos. These represent the **external** world of the protagonist. The definition for chaos is “a state of disorder.” But the even the label “disorder” is too orderly for chaos. Chaos makes no sense. It feels crazy. We don’t like it, but chaos is necessary for our growth.

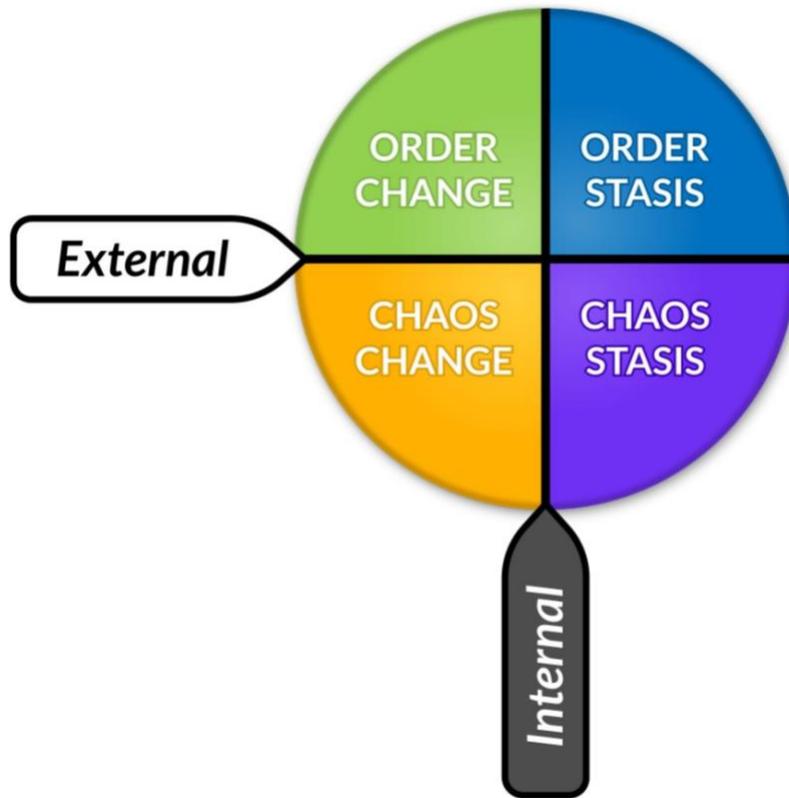
The spokes of the StoryWheel also split the wheel vertically, creating two halves: Stasis and Change. These represent the **internal** world of the protagonist. Stasis is balance, equilibrium. Change is imbalance, disequilibrium.



Newton’s first law of physics states that a body at rest (stasis) tends to stay at rest (stasis). To add to that, a body at rest has no need to change. This is why story physics requires external chaos, to provoke the body at rest to change.

A high school senior may be at equilibrium until a college acceptance letter arrives in the mail. Then the student must decide. *Am I willing to leave my known world to go to the unknown world of college?* What the student doesn’t yet understand is that going to college will not only change their external world; it will transform their internal world. They will emerge from college a different person.

If we take the external and internal views and lay them on top of each other, we get this:

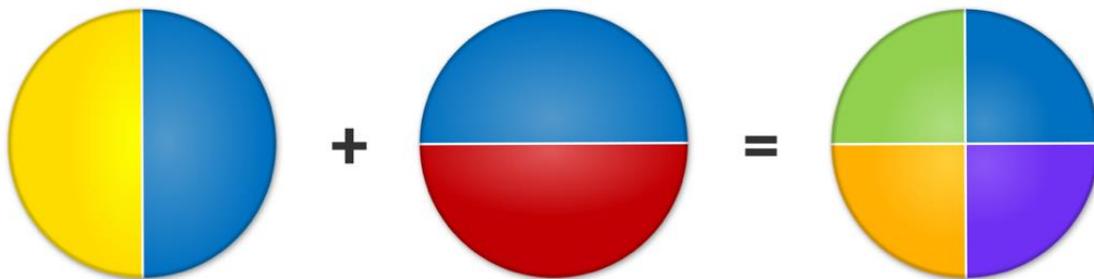


But wait! Why did the colors change?

The colors weren't picked randomly; they changed thanks to color theory. It's worth understanding the color theory because in this case, the colors help explain story theory.

We just laid two circles on top of each other to create a third.

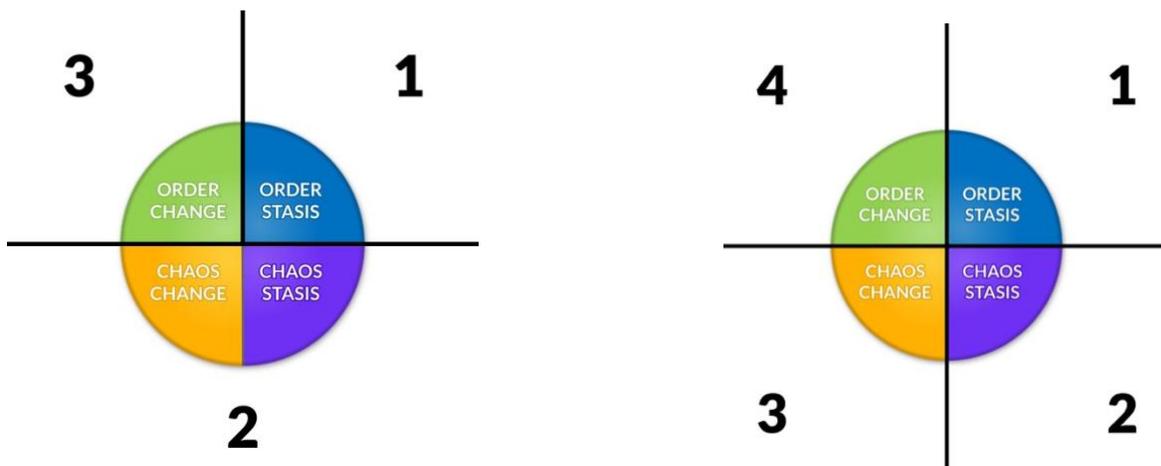
Imagine the colors are translucent, you can see through them, as in a stained-glass window:





The blue of stasis plus the blue of order doesn't change the color on the combined wheel. But once the blue of stasis mixes with the red of chaos, things get shaken up and purple results. The red of Order and the yellow of Change combine to create orange. Green is the combination of the yellow of Change with the blue of Order.

Instead of a 3-act structure, this gives us a four-act structure:

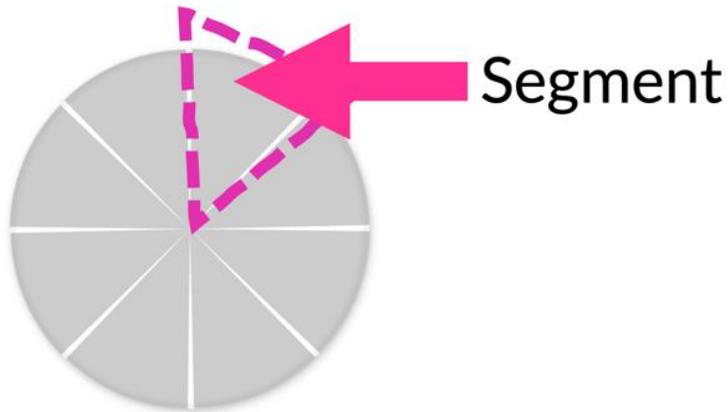


Did you grow up with a three-act structure? I did. The difference between three acts and four is simply that the three-act model combines the second and third quadrants.

Using a 3-act structure, did you ever struggle in that long second act as you wrote or planned your story? I did. The StoryWheel uses the four-act structure because it provides greater support for the author. Going back to the unicycle, a four-act structure offers more frequent milestones on the road of the story.

A quadrant is still a big chunk of story to figure out. But we can slice each of those quadrants in half, like a pizza cut the way pizza oughta be cut. (I'm from New Jersey, where we have strong opinions about pizza.) Just as it is easier to eat a pizza slice that's an eighth instead of a quarter of the pie, it's easier to structure a story with eight slices. But let's not call them slices, let's call them "segments."

What's a segment?



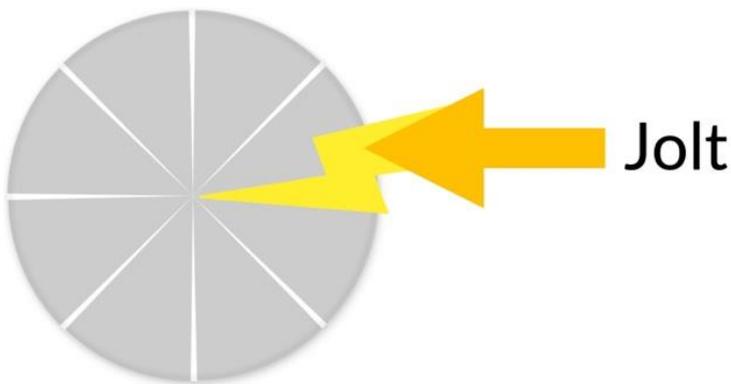
“Segment” is the word I’m using to mean the sections between the spokes of the StoryWheel, because “slices” would have reminded me of pizza, and that would have been a distraction.

In a story, a segment is several scenes. For example, in the movie

Gladiator, the first segment starts with a hand grazing the tops of wheat, then goes into a battle with a fierce but outmatched enemy, then ends with a request from the emperor. (This handbook uses *Gladiator* to explain the StoryWheel. If you haven’t yet seen the movie, there are spoilers ahead.)

Now that we know what a segment is, let’s talk about jolts.

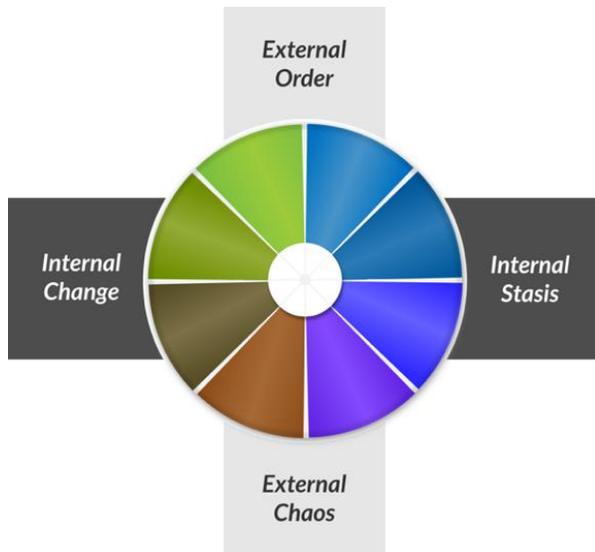
What's a jolt?



A “jolt” is an infusion of energy, the power that moves the wheel—and the story—forward.

A jolt is most powerful when it directly connects to the theme, when it zaps all the way to the hub of the wheel.

Between every segment, there is a jolt. Although other story models have names for individual transitions (e.g., *inciting incident*), I’m not aware of any term for all the transitions. I made up *jolt* because it fits for an electric shock, a zap of energy. Sometimes the jolt zaps the wheel and the rider must figure out how to respond (pedal harder? change course?). Sometimes the rider causes the jolt.



Here is the four-act structure broken into eight segments. The External and Internal, Order and Change labels are moved off to the side. Also, the colors of the segments are modified to reflect that the internal and external worlds of the protagonist change from segment to segment:

Wait a minute! What happened to the yellow/Change + red/Chaos = orange?

Excellent question! It has to do with being pushed vs. pulled, reactivity vs. proactivity.



(1) At the beginning of the story, the protagonist is being pushed. They are reactive.

(2) The blue of Order becomes a deeper blue in the push into the second segment.

(3) In the third segment, the protagonist is pushed from the blue into the red of Chaos. Now the protagonist's world turns from blue to purple.

(4) In the fourth segment, the amount of red (Chaos) in the purple has increased, the world is a violet-red.

(5) So why doesn't the protagonist move into an orange world in the fifth segment?

Here's why not: at the midpoint, the protagonist becomes more of a *pro*-tagonist. They shift from being re-active to pro-active.

In the fifth segment, the protagonist pulls down the green (Change/Order) of Act 4 into Act 3 (Change/Chaos). Instead of being *pushed* through life, the protagonist is being *pulled* by their own agency, their own self-determination. At first, there is just a little green in the protagonist's world, a little green mingled with the red of Chaos (the blue of Stasis has been left behind). The world of the fifth segment is a maroon.

(6) But in the sixth segment, there is even more green and the combination of the red of Chaos plus the increased green of Act 4 yields a rich muddy brown—the perfect color for slowing action, deep reflection, and change. Life begins in the swamp. Lasting change begins in the mud.

(7) When the protagonist emerges from the mud and steps into Act 4, the world is green. They have changed, and they are about to change their world. Green is the color of Spring, of new growth. But there's still a little mud in the green. The protagonist has not been tested. When the going gets rough, will the protagonist prove they truly have changed, that they won't break under pressure?

(8) Proof! The protagonist *has* changed. The world is bright green, fresh, renewed. The world is orderly again, but it's a new order brought about by a transformed protagonist.

Whew! That was a lot of work but worth it. In any area of expertise, it's worth understanding underlying principles because it helps you later, when you get stuck. Understanding the foundations makes you smarter.

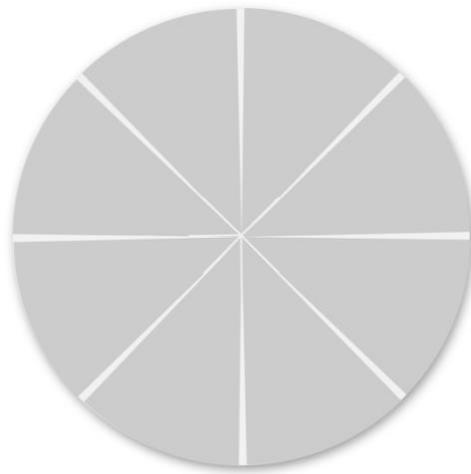
One more thing... about that "protagonist." That's not the word I'm going to use. Instead, I'm going to call them the "**avatar identity**." Most of the time, for short, just "**avatar**." The reason I'm being persnickety about a different word is because it matters.

"Protagonist" is at a distance from the reader or viewer. But that's not how we experience story. Thanks to the benefit of our amazing brains and their mirror neurons, when we are fully engaged with a story, we enter the story. It's a Vulcan mind meld. We become the person we're watching or reading about. We become them. They become our avatar. And we learn from what the avatar does. They are our Avatar Identity, our AI.

Introduction to The StoryWheel

The easiest way to learn the StoryWheel is to see how it works with a small story. But what story should we use? Let's make it easy for me (because life is hard enough) and use the story of how the StoryWheel got born.

This will be a simple way to illustrate each segment (the sections of the wheel that look like slices of pie) and jolt (the spokes, the transition from one segment to the next). It also illustrates the motivations of the avatar that drive the narrative.

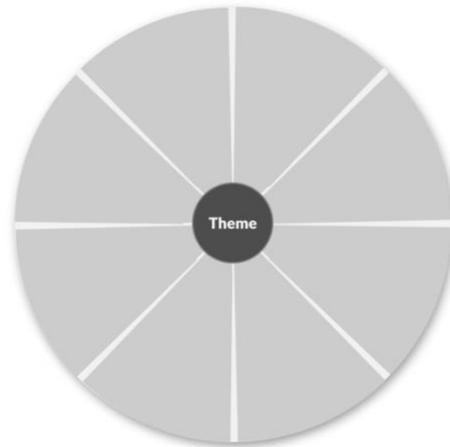


We'll build the wheel one segment or jolt at a time, so you can see how all the components fit together to create the StoryWheel.

Here we go!

How The StoryWheel Got Born

Theme

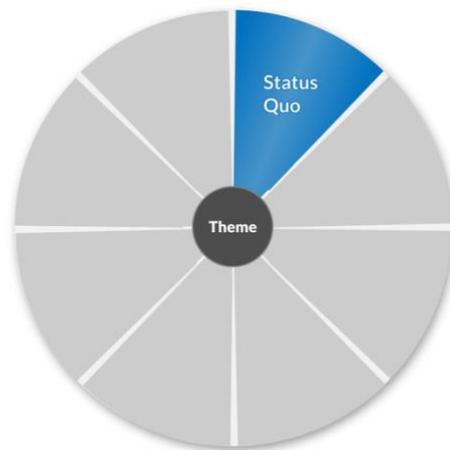


Theme is the hub of the wheel that holds your story together. Everything in the story revolves around the theme—characters, plot, even setting. There are many labels and definitions for this element of story. For our purposes, we'll go with “a core message the author is so passionate about they'll do whatever it takes to tell it.” If the theme is unclear or inconsistent, the wheel will wobble and may fall off.

Example: Jule Kucera knows that to write anything, the author must know what they're writing about. She decides her theme, for now, is *Understanding the underlying structure of story helps writers write better stories.*

She picks up a Sharpie and writes the theme on a big yellow post-it, and sticks it on the wall next to her desk.

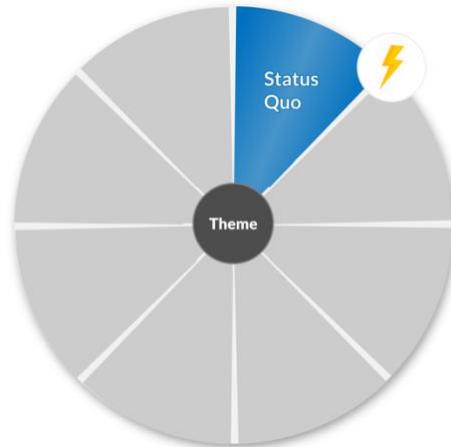
Status Quo



Status Quo is the current world of the avatar identity. To see how someone changes, we need to know where they're starting from.

Example: Jule sits at her desk, happily typing the words she has drafted. She is excited to be working on her novel! (She does not yet know what she doesn't know.)

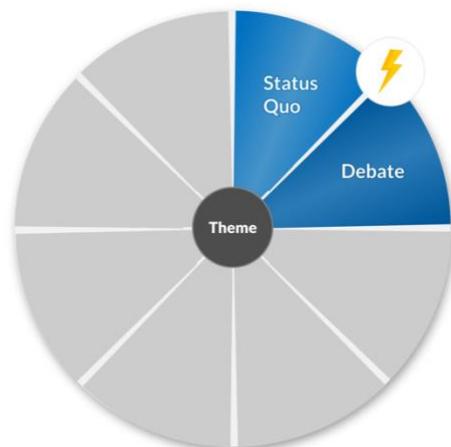
Jolt



This jolt gets the story rolling. It incites the action and is the first indication that "somethin' ain't right." This jolt offers an invitation to the avatar.

Example: Going to visit her mom for the holidays, Jule brings along the first three chapters of her novel. She can't wait to see her mom's reaction! But as Jule reads, her mother's eyes keep dropping to the *People* magazine in front of her. Jule stops reading. It felt good to write it but it doesn't feel good to read it. The story doesn't work.

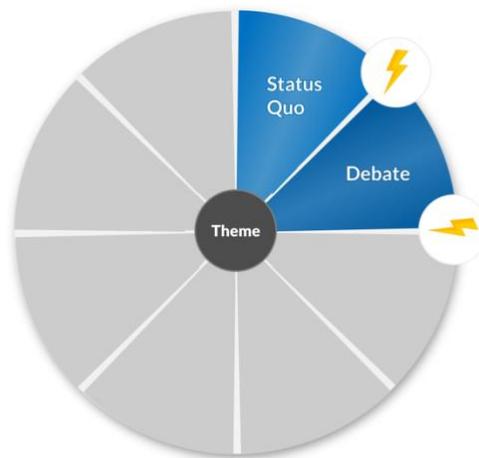
Debate



In the Debate, the avatar wrestles with the invitation offered by the initial jolt. They know they should do something differently, but they don't want to.

Example: Back home, Jule thinks, "maybe I should just keep going, get to the end, and then figure out why it's boring." But she can't write the next scene. She's not sure what should happen. Or why. She knows she has interesting characters, but she doesn't have a plot that works.

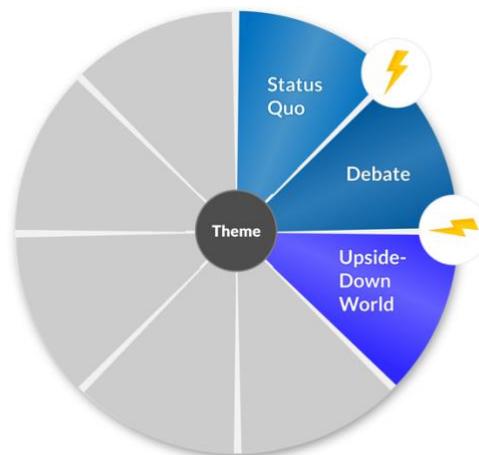
Jolt



In this Jolt, the avatar decides to take up the invitation, to take action. (If they don't, we don't have a story.) It's a good thing the avatar doesn't yet know how difficult the trip will be, or they might decide not to take it.

Example: Jule decides, "I need to stop writing words and study plot. I need a better understanding of story structure." She stops writing words. She starts studying.

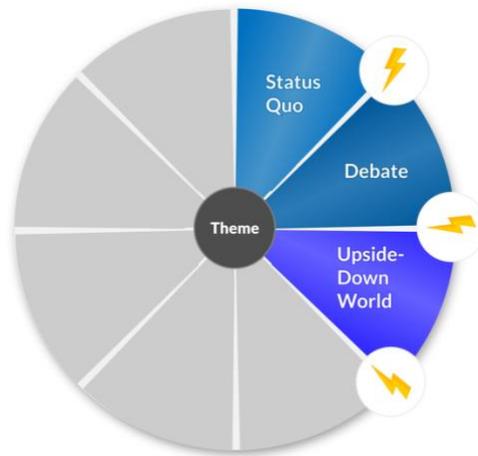
Upside-Down World



In the Upside-Down World, the avatar is out of their element. They're confused and things aren't working as expected. Things seem to be getting worse.

Example: Jule studies Vogler and *Save the Cat*. An editor friend recommends *Story Engineering* and she studies that, too. She studies Truby and *The Story Grid*, and many others. They don't always align, and that bothers her.

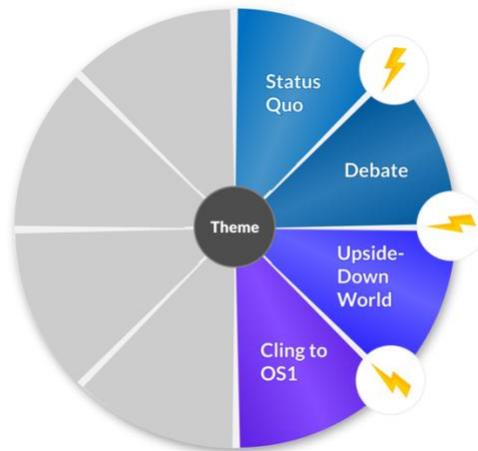
Jolt



In this Jolt the avatar has a realization and it doesn't feel good. The avatar realizes the task is more difficult than imagined, the antagonistic force is more powerful than realized, and the job is much harder than the avatar thought.

Example: As Jule studies, she realizes how much she doesn't know. She is overwhelmed by the number of books and methods. She thinks, *I am a writer who doesn't know as much as I thought I did about story structure. I have a loooong way to go.*

Cling to OS1



First, what's an OS1?

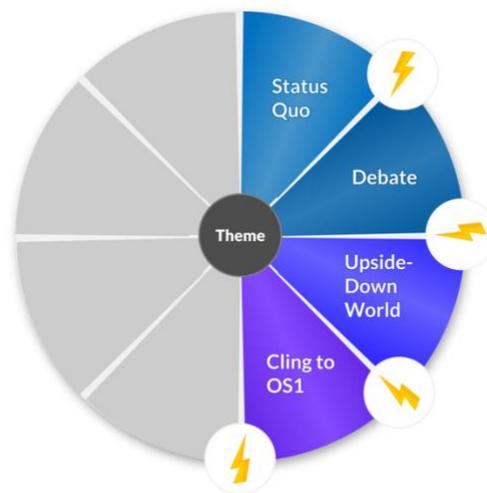
OS stands for Operating System. Just as computers have operating systems, so do humans. Our OS is our way of seeing and interacting with the world, our way of interpreting input and choosing our output. When the story begins, the avatar operates from their OS1. They live in an orderly world and their OS1 works well for them—or they think it does. (The avatar actually needs an upgrade but doesn't realize it.)

In Cling to OS1, the avatar persists with doing things the way they always have, even though their methods are increasingly failing them. They work harder, not smarter.

Example: Jule keeps studying, taking in more and more books, blog posts, and YouTube videos. Although her head feels so full it might fall off, she has learned something: story structure is for stories of all kinds. Not just books, but movies, plays, musicals, TV shows, podcasts, campfire tales, etc.

Based on this, Jule modifies the theme: *Understanding the underlying structure of story helps storytellers tell better stories*. She pulls the yellow post-it from her wall and replaces it.

Jolt



In this Jolt, the avatar learns something that changes everything. This knowledge shatters their OS1 and is the beginning of their upgrade to OS2. They shift from being reactive to proactive.

Example: As Jule sits with her research, trying to make the various models line up, a lightbulb goes off: there is a lack of content related to the transition from the *Upside-Down World* to the *Cling to OS1* segment, and a lack of understanding about the jolt that drives that transition. Many models don't even have a transition in the second quadrant. It's all one big chunk of story.

If Jule wants to capture what she learns so she can use it and share it with others, she must go beyond being a synthesizer and make contributions of her own. She must make her own claims about story structure.

Jule decides, *I am no longer only an instructional designer, synthesizing the ideas of others. I will also be a contributor to the understanding of story structure.*

Plan A: Change You



In Plan A: Change You, the avatar comes up with a plan to address what they think is their problem, but the plan does not require them to change and is therefore destined for failure.

Example: Jule decides that if geometry matters, then every segment of the wheel matters, and so does every transition between them.

She decides on the terms *avatar identity* and *segment*. She adds *jolt* to the lexicon to describe the movement from one segment to the next. She describes the jolt between the *Upside-Down World* and *Cling to OS1* and considers the relationships between jolts.

Excited by her new freedom with the content, Jule writes like crazy. She writes past her bedtime, and when she wakes up, she walks to her desk, pulls out her composition notebook, and keeps writing (even before breakfast). She wants to finish so she can get back to her novel!

Jolt



In this Jolt, the plan fails. And not only does the plan fail, but everything else is worse as a result. The avatar has had their legs knocked out from under them.

Example: Jule flips through a full-color printed copy of *The StoryWheel*. It's finally done and she can finally get back to her novel. Jule is proud of all twenty pages and can't wait to share it with her writer friends. (She secretly hopes they will applaud.)

They don't.

One writer friend tells Jule it's not ready. Another says it takes too long to get to the meat. Another says it needs a simpler version. They say some parts are overexplained, some are underexplained, and some are confusing.

The feedback hurts.

Dark Night of the Soul



In the Dark Night of the Soul, the avatar wallows in defeat. They lick their wounds, count their losses, but they also see how they contributed to the problem. This is the mud where a new OS is built.

Example: Jule goes to bed. She cries and wails that her writer friends are stupid. But even as she says the words, she knows it's not true. She caused the problem. She was the one who wanted to be done, so she could get back to her novel.

With a background in instructional design, Jule knows you never really know if learning materials are any good until they get into the hands of people who think about how they would use them, not just review them. Jule knows better. But the reverberations from the WHAM! still hurt. Jule takes a hot bath and stays there until the water cools. She pulls a cupped handful of water to her face to rid the tears, then turns the faucet for more hot water.

Jolt



In this Jolt, the avatar returns to the challenge that has dogged them from the beginning. But this time, they come with a fully formed OS2. The avatar may have been fighting or avoiding this battle throughout the story, but here they face it as a different person.

Example: Jule decides that instead of making a document, she is making a gift. Instead of focusing on her external want—to write a novel—she focuses on her internal need—to be the kind of writer who takes time with the process rather than rushing to the product. A writer who focuses on what readers want. Jule will slow down and enjoy the process, however long it takes. She returns to her computer.

Plan B: Change Me



In Plan B, the avatar shows how they have changed. Before they changed tactics. Here they have new strategy. They keep the vows they made in the Dark Night. They hold fast to Plan B even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard.

Example: Jule works patiently on the document until she believes it's finished. She prints out all sixty pages and sits in her big chair to admire it. Jule sends it to some writer friends, with her fingers crossed.

They love it.

They spread the word. Jule is asked to present the StoryWheel on a webinar. In a pre-webinar test run with some writer buddies, she realizes additional information would be helpful. Jule creates a supplemental document and includes it as a separate resource. After the webinar, Jule realizes the supplement should be in *The StoryWheel*, so it's all one document. She adds it as an appendix. The document is now ninety-seven pages long.

When Jane Friedman asks Jule if she would like to partner on a webinar about the StoryWheel, Jule is ecstatic. As a final check, Jule sends *The StoryWheel* to three fellow writers from the weekday sprint group. She looks ahead to the webinar. It's in three weeks.

Jolt



In this Jolt, the avatar faces the ultimate test, their opportunity to prove that yes, they have changed.

Example: Over the next week, the writers send back their comments. One loves it and suggests a minor change. One really likes it and suggests several bigger changes, especially to some graphics. The third, who is seeing the *The StoryWheel* for the first time, says it provided a ton of value. Then he asks for a two-hour Zoom call to talk through how it could be improved.

Jule dreads the call.

She doesn't know this guy. He's newer to the sprint group. Will his feedback be valuable? What does he think should change? How much work would it be? But instead of fearing the feedback, she (thanks to a gift from her friend Katie) encourages herself to "swan dive into this seed of possibility."

On the call, the writer says *The StoryWheel* is good to go for the webinar, but it could be even better. His feedback addresses Jule's growing sense that the document had become bloated, lumbering in parts, repetitive. He asks Jule who her SAM is, the Single Audience Member she's writing for. SAM will dictate the scope of the document, everything else can be linked. Jule's first task is to determine how much she is willing to change before the webinar.

Jule faces her biggest crisis yet. *"Do I go ahead and make major changes that will make The StoryWheel significantly better, and risk not being able to get it done in time and not being able to get done all the other things that need to happen before the webinar, or do I wait to change it until after the webinar, and risk all those people not getting the version of The StoryWheel that could be most helpful?"*

Proof of Change



In Proof of Change, the avatar fully demonstrates their change. If they were mud in the *Dark Night of the Soul*, and clay in *Plan B: Change Me*, the *Dig Down Deeper* serves as the kiln to fire the finished vessel.

Example: After the call, Jule’s head is buzzing, so she goes for a walk. She wonders, who is my SAM (Single Audience Member)? The answer comes in an instant. SAM is Jennifer Kelly, a writer buddy from the sprints who is an advocate for the StoryWheel. She’s a story nerd but super busy. Don’t waste her time. Be practical. Be visual. Be quick—she’s got another novel to write! Jennifer is the perfect SAM to help guide what goes in/comes out of *The StoryWheel*.

Jule walks back to her desk and checks her calendar. The webinar is in sixteen days and she’s out of town on vacation for seven of them. She makes her decision about how much to rework before the webinar:

All of it.

Jule makes the changes. [The webinar](#) goes well. Jule smiles as she thinks of all the people downloading the document, the gift she made for them. In twenty years of designing learning materials, *The StoryWheel* is the best thing she’s ever done.

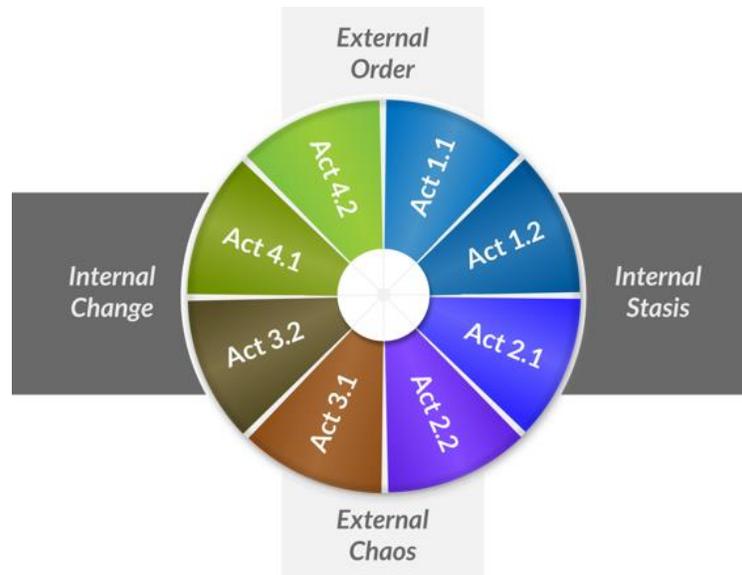
But this isn’t the end of Jule’s learning about story. It’s the end of her beginning.

Congratulations! You now know the essential elements of the StoryWheel and can use this understanding to help shape your plot. Next, we need a better understanding of the jolts. We’ll use the feature length film *Gladiator* as our example.

Gladiator on The StoryWheel

Gladiator, 2000. Directed by Ridley Scott; written by David Franzoni, John Logan, and William Nicholson, with significant contributions by others, including Russell Crowe. Read the [transcript](#) or find [watch options](#)

Using our four-act structure, we'll number the eight segments so we have an easy way to reference them:



If theme is the hub of the StoryWheel, we must understand the theme of *Gladiator*. David Franzoni authored the story. He said, “I wanted to tell a story that reaffirms that we as human beings must stand up and fight for what we believe.” And what did he want to fight against? According to another quote, “the impossible machine.”

Going back to the internal and external dimensions of story, the internal dimension of *Gladiator* is the honor or shame of living by one’s values or not, and the external dimension is societal power or powerlessness.

Let’s use this for a working theme for *Gladiator*: **Personal success and societal power result when you hold to your honor with all your strength—even to death.**

If we want to turn that into a motto, it could be “*Strength and Honor.*”

Note: Spoilers ahead. If you’d like to watch the movie first, now’s a good time.

Gladiator

Theme



Theme is the story's broad message about life, the unifying element that makes the story meaningful. Theme drives the characters and therefore the plot. If the story is a wheel, theme is the hub. Theme generates the torque that turns the wheel and moves the story forward. Theme also drives the author—it's what they care about most.

Strong wheels have a strong theme, with every segment and jolt tightly connected to that theme. If the connection is loose, the wheel wobbles and could fall apart.

Gladiator

Personal success and societal power result when you hold to your honor with all your strength—even to death.

A General Who Became a Slave

1.1 Opening Image



Notice the gold square at the twelve o'clock position. This square represents what we see in our minds as we read the first page, or the first image we see after the opening credits, the first words we hear in a podcast or story told over coffee. The square represents stasis. Circles roll, triangles encourage us to look up, but squares stay put.

The opening image grabs attention and sets the tone. It paints a picture for the reader/viewer/listener (hereafter referred to as “us” or “we”), so we mentally prepare ourselves to engage with this type of story. Imagine if you were expecting a Rom Com, but the opening image was of a bloody knife.

From here on out, the icons for the jolts will change as we work our way around the wheel. The new icons will more directly relate to the intention of the jolt.

Gladiator

A rough, weathered hand lightly brushes the tops of wheat; the leather sleeve bears ornamentation; the fourth finger wears a signet ring.

1.1. Status Quo

External Order

Internal Stasis



The *Status Quo* segment allows us to see the current world, state, and [mental operating system \(OS1\)](#) of the avatar identity. We'll clearly see the avatar's **want** and see hints about their **need**. Other important people are introduced, as are essential aspects of their status quo world. There will also be a hint regarding the lie the avatar believes. Two key bits happen early in this segment to help us connect to the story and the avatar:

(1) The theme is stated. Most often, this is done by someone other than the avatar and the avatar's reaction is to reject the statement. The exception is a story about an avatar we admire unflinching throughout their journey (e.g., *Gladiator*).

(2) There is a moment of shared humanity between the avatar and the audience. Often, the avatar shows a kindness to someone or something weaker than themselves. Blake Snyder named this a "save the cat" moment.

Gladiator

Maximus, an admired general, prepares to lead his men in battle. A bedraggled barbarian army comes out of the woods to fight.

Theme: Maximus cries "Strength and honor!" as he leads his troops to victory. The emperor Marcus Aurelius observes from his elevated position of safety.

Save the Cat: Quintus directs the exhausted soldiers to reposition the heavy cannons before the battle begins, but Maximus spares them this effort.

1.1 Whiff~ Inciting
to Incident
1.2



Notice the small gold triangle at the 1:30 position—so small, an avatar could easily fail to notice it, or minimize it.

Like the faint odor of something on the stove starting to burn, the *Whiff~ Inciting Incident* is a clue to the avatar that “somethin’ ain’t right.” This jolt comes from the antagonistic force and is the first hint of their power. Unfortunately, the avatar fails to realize its significance.

Side note: I’m not being cutesy with the addition of “Whiff~” to a common term. It’s there for a reason. There are three jolts that start with a “W.” The purpose is to show their connection and increasing intensity.

Gladiator

Marcus Aurelius asks Maximus how he can reward Rome’s greatest general. Maximus tells Aurelius he wants to go home. Instead, Aurelius asks Maximus to become the protector of Rome after he dies, saying he will empower Maximus to give power back to the people.

Maximus asks if Commodus (Aurelius’s son) will rule, but Aurelius rejects Commodus as “not a moral man.” Maximus tells Aurelius he will consider his request, and Aurelius hopes he will accept by sunset.

When Marcus Aurelius tells Commodus his plan—that Commodus will not be emperor, but that Maximus will return Rome to the people—Commodus tightly embraces, suffocates, and kills his father the emperor.

1.2 Debate

External Order
→ *Chaos Awakes*

Internal Stasis



In the Debate segment of the StoryWheel, the avatar, although not fully understanding the stakes, debates the crisis question, which boils down to “Do I do X and risk Y, or do I do Z and risk W?” The crisis question of the *Debate* segment is some version of *Do I stay, or do I go?*

Crisis questions are strongest if there are only two choices, mutually exclusive. The avatar must pick one. There’s a case to be made for each—it’s not a crisis if the decision is easy. Strong avatars are formed by strong conflict.

Gladiator

Maximus returns to his quarters to ponder Marcus Aurelius’s request. He asks Cicero, his loyal servant, how someone decides whether to do what they want or do what someone else wants them to do.

1.2
to
2.1

I Gotta Go!



Notice the gold arrow pointing to the *Upside-Down World* segment. This arrow represents the avatar's internal decision and external choice to move forward.

In response to an escalation of the *Whiff~ Inciting Incident*, the avatar makes their choice and takes an action that demonstrates that choice. No one else can make this decision for the avatar. The choice will send them into a new world. And like the spikes at the entrance to a car rental return lot, there is no going back. If the avatar doesn't choose to step into the new world, there is no story. If the avatar could easily turn back (no spikes), there will be a weak story that leaves us scratching our heads asking, "Why didn't they just...?" If someone makes the choice on behalf of the avatar, we will lose interest and empathy for an avatar who lacks agency.

Gladiator

Commodus offers Maximus the opportunity to kiss his ring to show his fealty to the new Emperor. *"Take my hand. I offer it only once."*

Crisis question: Will Maximus take Commodus's hand in loyalty and risk sacrificing his values, or will he seek justice for Marcus Aurelius's murder and risk losing his life?

Suspecting that Commodus murdered his own father, Maximus refuses. Commodus has Maximus arrested. When Maximus asks his friend Quintus to look after his family, Quintus tells Maximus his family will meet him in the afterlife.

Gladiator

The general has become a captive. The hero of the state is now an enemy of the state.

Maximus is taken to the woods to be slain but escapes. He drives his horse to death, then stumbles from the fallen body to press home, barely able to walk. Maximus arrives in time to see dark smoke rising from his fields and his wife and son burned and hung.

Maximus tenderly touches their bodies, then collapses on the ground from grief and exhaustion.

Maximus is not allowed his desire to follow his family into death. As he lies unconscious on their graves, he is captured by a slaver and carried to a foreign land, a desert.

2.1
to
2.2 **Whoa! Shake
Up a Belief**



Notice the gold triangle. It's bigger. The avatar paid little attention to the *Whiff~ Inciting Incident*, but cannot disregard the larger jolt of *Whoa! Shake Up a Belief*.

The source of this jolt is the antagonist. What gets shaken is an aspect of their identity the avatar holds dear. This action from the antagonistic force displays their power and persistence. The avatar now realizes the antagonist is more powerful and their task more difficult than they thought.

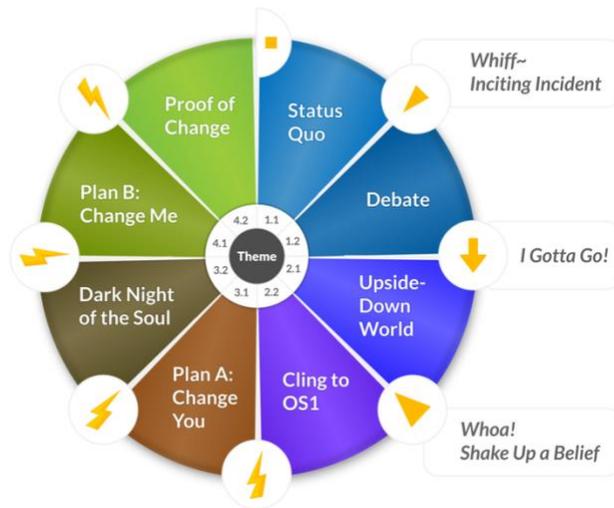
Gladiator

As Proximo purchases Maximus to become a slave-gladiator, Maximus learns his life is worth less than the lions Proximo also purchases. The belief *I am a general of Rome who leads legions* becomes *I am a prisoner who cannot lead myself from captivity*.

2.2 **Cling to OS1**

External Chaos Strengthens

Internal Stasis Fights to Rule



Although the avatar's world and experiences have entirely changed, the avatar persists with their OS1 thinking, their mental Operating System, and their **want**. Even though it is increasingly failing them, they double down on their approach.

The avatar will continue to fail for two reasons: (1) Their OS1 thinking is not suited for this new world, and (2) they must evolve. To successfully navigate the wheel, the avatar must change their thinking and change their actions. So far, they have done neither.

Gladiator

Although he is a general with the skills to win, Maximus refuses to fight, even after Proximo has him beaten by the trainer Hagen. Maximus clings to his want to die and join his family.

Maximus uses a sharp stone and tears his flesh to remove the mark of the legion from his arm. The powerful general we saw at the beginning of Act 1 is gone.

A Slave Who Became a Gladiator

2.2 to 3.1 Context- Shifting Midpoint



Note the change in the icon: the circle is now gold, the interior image is white. This flipping of colors represents how new information flips the avatar's thinking. The world isn't what the avatar thought it was. And often, the antagonistic force is shown to be more powerful than believed.

This new information shatters the avatar's OS1 thinking. First, their *external* world was turned upside down. Now, their *internal* world is turned upside down.

This shattering of the old allows the avatar to begin a new way of thinking with OS2, and to begin to shift from a goal that reflects their **want**, to a goal that reflects their **need**. New external behaviors will demonstrate the avatar's internal shift, but the lie they believe will continue to dog them.

Gladiator

Maximus learns successful gladiators are brought to Rome to appear before the emperor. This new information flips Maximus's internal world upside down. Instead of wanting to die, he vows to live and become a great gladiator who is brought to Rome. There, Maximus can kill Commodus to avenge the murders of his wife, his son, and Marcus Aurelius.

3.1 **Plan A: Change You**

*External Chaos
Reigns*

*Internal Change
Awakes*



The avatar enacts Plan A and unsteadily tries new behaviors. This plan will fail for two reasons: (1) it is based on vestiges of OS1 thinking, and (2) it does not require the avatar to change.

Gladiator

Maximus proves himself a valiant gladiator. In Rome, after a stunning victory, Commodus enters the arena to meet the gladiator. Maximus bends to pick up an arrowhead from the dirt. When he is forced to reveal his identity, Commodus and Lucilla are stunned to see Maximus still alive.

When Lucilla's son Lucius steps between Commodus and Maximus, Maximus's plan for the arrowhead is thwarted. Commodus orders his guards to arms but allows the crowd to determine the gladiator's fate. Maximus has won the crowd and they spare him.

Lucilla brokers a new plan and Maximus faces another crisis: Will Maximus continue to seek revenge and risk dishonor by failing to fulfill Marcus Aurelius's request, or will he seek to fulfill Aurelius's request and risk death?

Maximus gives up his goal of seeking personal revenge and instead will lead the army to overthrow Commodus and return Rome to the people. This plan demonstrates the OS1 thinking of the former general. But Commodus learns of the plan.

3.1 **WHAM!**
to
3.2 **All Is Lost**



Note the change to the icon. The gold triangle fills the circle and knocks the avatar on their back. The *WHAM! All Is Lost* jolt will send the avatar into the *Dark Night of the Soul* segment.

This is the final “W” of the first three jolts owned by the antagonist: *Whiff~*, *Whoa!*, and *WHAM! All* connected, with increasing intensity.

The antagonistic force sends a massive jolt, Plan A fails, and the avatar loses what they value most. Although this happens to the avatar it is also, at least in part, caused by the avatar. The avatar must in some way be responsible, otherwise there is no lesson to be learned during the *Dark Night of the Soul*, no realization that OS1 thinking must be completely discarded in favor of OS2.

Gladiator

Commodus swiftly and violently thwarts the rebellion. Instead of killing Maximus, Commodus uses Cicero as bait to trap him. Cicero is killed and Maximus the general is jailed.

Maximus’s Plan A failed because it was born of OS1 thinking. With OS1, Maximus is the general who leads warriors to battle. But this victory cannot be won with OS1 or a legion.

3.2 *Dark Night of the Soul*

*External Chaos
Fights to Rule*

*Internal Change
Stretches*



The *Dark Night of the Soul* segment is the lowest point of the story. The avatar is worse off in every way than they were at the start of Act 1.

But there is good news! This complete defeat allows the avatar to change, because they now: (1) have a complete view of the full power of the antagonistic force, (2) see themselves more clearly and honestly, and (3) realize what they **want** is not what they **need**.

An avatar protagonist who does not have these revelations and does not change, serves as a warning in a cautionary tale.

Gladiator

Maximus is in the dungeon, hanging from chains as if crucified. Commodus tells Maximus of his plan for the two of them to battle each other in the coliseum. Maximus is incredulous. "You would fight me?" Commodus calls him "Maximus the Invincible." Maximus doesn't claim invincibility or reference his victories. Instead, he quotes Marcus Aurelius: "Death smiles at us all. All that man can do is smile back."

Commodus all but assures his victory when he embraces Maximus and stabs a dagger into his back. This echoes Commodus's deadly embrace of Marcus Aurelius in Act 1.2.

A Gladiator Who Defied an Emperor

3.2
to
4.1

**Return,
Changed**



Notice that the icon colors are the reverse of the icon for *I Gotta Go!* This is because the avatar is now operating from their fully operational OS2.

The avatar has abandoned their **want-goal** and has fully shifted to their **need-goal**. The arrow is also much larger, representing the greater agency and energy with which the avatar returns to face the challenge that has pursued them throughout the story.

No one can force the avatar to step into this jolt or rescue them from it. With the conclusion of *Return, Changed*, no new information or new players can enter the story. The avatar moves forward with what they have, knowing they are about to encounter the full force of the antagonist.

Gladiator

He has led armies into battle and gladiators into the arena, but this time the wounded, dying Maximus enters the arena alone. His opponent is not another gladiator, but the emperor. Maximus will fulfill his duty and fight, even though he is likely to die and fail.

4.1 Plan B: Change Me

*External New
Order Awakes*

*Internal Change
Strengthens*



The *Plan B: Change Me* segment is a synthesis. The avatar synthesizes what they knew how to do in Act 1, what they learned how to do in Act 2, and the OS2 thinking they created in Act 3.

The avatar demonstrates full commitment to their **need-goal** instead of their **want-goal**. In the avatar's actions, we see how they have changed (or not, if this is a cautionary tale).

Gladiator

Maximus synthesizes his commitment to strength and honor from Act 1, his gladiatorial skills from Act 2, and his new OS2 to return Rome to the people from Act 3. Maximus gives up his first **want-goal** – to reunite with his family, and his second **goal** (born at the *Context-Shifting Midpoint*), to kill Commodus for revenge. Instead, Maximus fully embraces his **need-goal** – to return Rome to the people, as Marcus Aurelius directed and as Maximus's honor requires.

Maximus and Commodus fight. During their battle, Commodus loses his sword and signals to Quintus for another, but Quintus will not give it, and directs the praetorian to sheath their swords. Quintus and the crowd have seen that Commodus doesn't fight fair and have aligned with Maximus. Commodus reaches for the dagger hidden in his boot.

4.1 **Dig Down**
to **Deeper**
4.2



Notice how the icon is now a target, representing the moment of greatest conflict, when the antagonistic force mightily attacks the avatar at their weakest point—the wound that birthed the lie they believe. The avatar must dig down deeper to cut loose from the lie, freeing themselves to fully fight the antagonistic force.

Victory will require supreme effort—both internally and externally. Internally, the avatar fights to allow OS2 to rule rather than OS1. Externally, the avatar fights to establish a new order, at least in their life and possibly in the world.

This is the moment we’ve been waiting for, the story point of greatest tension. We hope for the avatar’s ultimate best but fear for their absolute worst. In action stories, this is a physical battle with physical death as the stakes, but it need not be. The battle may be interior, where the avatar meets their greatest fear and does (or doesn’t do) something under OS2 they never would have done under OS1. It is the ultimate test of personal change.

Gladiator

Maximus, close to death, has visions of his family. Instead of allowing himself to die and be with them, he rallies his strength. Unarmed, Maximus grasps Commodus’s hand to twist the dagger to Commodus’s throat. In a brutal test of strength, Maximus slowly plunges the dagger until it will go no farther. Commodus falls to the ground. The emperor who snuck a dagger into battle is killed by his own duplicity.

4.2 Proof of Change

*External New
Order Stretches
Internal Change
Reigns*



The *Dig Down Deeper* battle results in visible success (or failure). If successful, the avatar has been transformed, the antagonistic force has been vanquished, and order—a new order—has been restored. With failure, the avatar doesn't change, the antagonist rules, the status quo is strengthened, and the avatar serves as a cautionary tale. The *Proof of Change* is proof of the theme.

Gladiator

Maximus, unsteady on his feet, has a vision of pushing open the gate that leads to his home. When Quintus calls to him, Maximus regains consciousness and directs that his men be freed, Senator Gracchus reinstated, and the dream that was Rome realized according to the wishes of Marcus Aurelius, the true Emperor of Rome.

As Maximus falls to the ground, he again has visions of his wife and son. Lucilla runs to him and drops to her knees at his side. Maximus tells her that Lucius is safe.

The story that began with a command from Maximus to “unleash hell” ends with a command from Lucilla to “go to them” in heaven. Maximus expires and Lucilla closes his eyes, saying, “You are home.”

We see that “strength and honor” is not dependent on armies, but on the individual, to fight for what they believe, to fight against the impossible machine.

4.2 Closing Image



Notice how the icon is the reverse of the icon for the *Opening Image*. If the *Opening Image* is the before, the *Closing Image* is the after. Ideally, these are mirror images of each another. The scene is similar, but the journey around the wheel has transformed the avatar and the avatar's world.

Gladiator

We see a hand, an arm clad in a leather sleeve, the same ornamentation, the same hand, the same signet ring we saw at the beginning. But this time, the man is met by his wife and son. After fulfilling his duty as a son to Marcus Aurelius, Maximus receives the reward he requested in Act 1 – to go home to be with his family.

If you'd like to see how the StoryWheel is present in a quieter story, check out this StoryWheel analysis of [Me Before You](#).

Now that we've built the model to include the detail of the jolts, Let's give the StoryWheel its own page, so we can see it more clearly.

The Complete StoryWheel

Here we have the complete StoryWheel, in a larger, more legible size. You may want to bookmark this page.



The StoryWheel depends on color to convey meaning. There's one more color enhancement we can make for additional meaning. It has to do with the jolts, those hits of energy. With the *Gladiator* example, we learned that ownership of the jolts alternates between antagonistic force and avatar.

Let's modify the StoryWheel (because we can!) to show the alternating ownership of jolts, and that the antagonistic force is the one that gets the wheel rolling.

In an externally driven story, the antagonistic force is external to the protagonist (e.g., Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, Lord Voldemort in *Harry Potter*). In an internally driven story, the antagonistic force is the devil that resides between the avatar's ears (e.g., Louisa Clark in *Me Before You*, Eleanor in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*.)

- Antagonist** Jolts with black text on a gold background are owned by the **antagonist**.
- Avatar** Jolts with black text on a white background are owned by the **avatar**.



A Caveat

Now that we have the StoryWheel built, I need to tell you something. If you prefer to make your own rules, and if the StoryWheel is feeling a bit restrictive, you're going to like this part. If you like rules to help you efficiently stay on the right path, and if the StoryWheel is feeling comfortable, you might not like this part so much. We'll see. (I've got my fingers crossed.)

Here's the deal: We've looked at the StoryWheel as a model with eight equal segments and seven skinny lines for jolts. **It's not drawn to scale.** In every story, jolts are going to take up more story space than they do on the wheel graphic. And the jolt scenes (because a jolt is only one scene) are often the longest scenes, because these are the parts of story we relish!

Also, the size of the segments can vary, depending on the story. They might not all be equal. Say what? Hear me out.

Here's one example. If you're writing Fantasy or Historical Romance, you're going to need more story space to build the *Status Quo* world. We need time to understand the external conditions of the avatar identity, and who they are within those conditions.

If you're writing a contemporary novel about a Chicago attorney, not so much. And if the first act of that novel is almost 40,000 words, you've got a problem. (Which is why my mom kept glancing at her *People* magazine.)

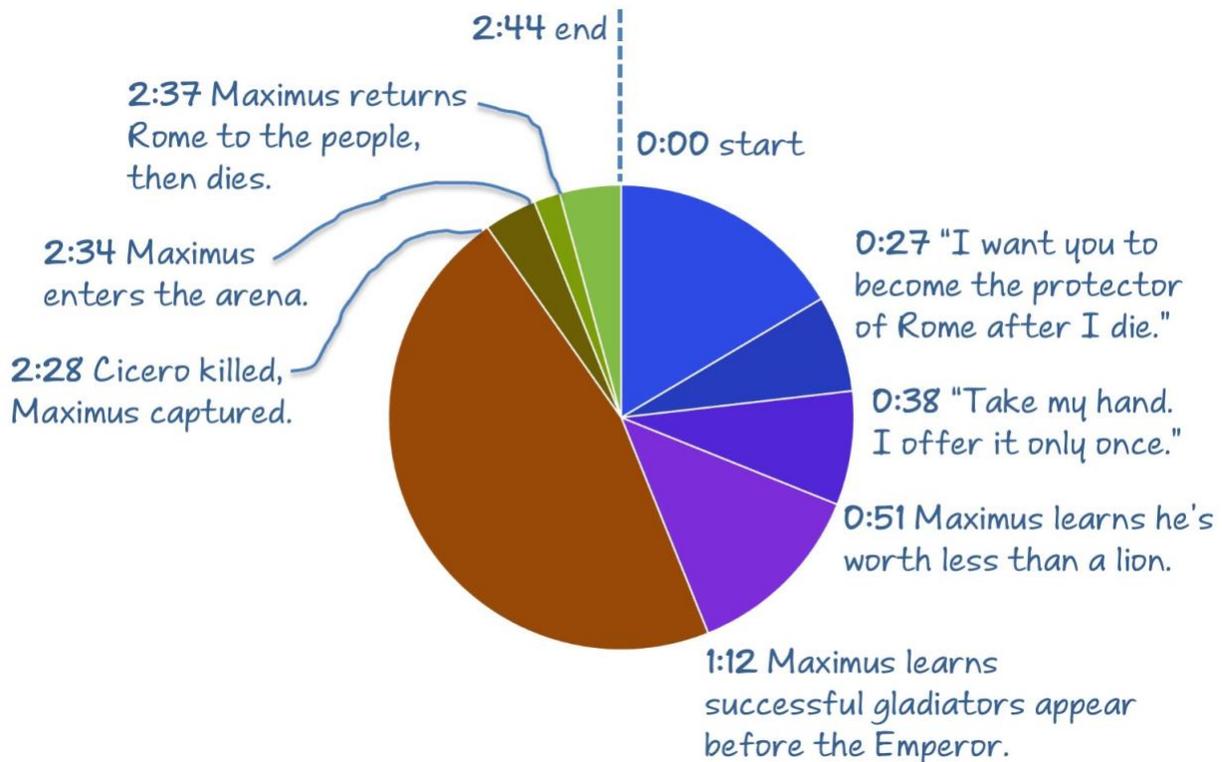
When I first started working with the StoryWheel, I expected that most novels would have the size of their segments pretty evenly distributed. I even made a [StoryWheel Balance Calculator](#) to see the balance. But the segments weren't equal. (I was shocked!)

The *Balance Calculator* shows how you can calculate the balance for your own story. It also includes the balances for *Me Before You* and *Star Wars: Episode 4*.

We just spent a looong time examining *Gladiator*. What do you think the *Balance Calculator* looks like for that story?

Gladiator has a lot of action, but it's a Validation/Status-Admiration (internal genre) and Society story (external genre). It's historical. Which segments might need more time? Where might we need less? When you're ready to see how the actual balance compares to what you think it might be, go to the next page.

Here's what *Gladiator* looks like on the [Story Wheel Balance Calculator](#):



This is a perfect example of how the unicycle metaphor doesn't exactly fit. We know *Gladiator* is a solid story. It won the Academy Award for best picture in 2000. The Academy doesn't always get it right, but this was a movie audiences loved. So, we know the story works.

If you had a real unicycle where each spoke wasn't paired with one directly opposite, the wheel would be crooked. But in the magic world of story, if your story needs those spokes in different places, the strength of the story can make it work. In this story, one reason that long *Plan A: Change You* segment works is because there are other values at stake, and positive and negative shifts are occurring along the spectrums of those values.

The one spoke/jolt I would be cautious is with the midpoint. In general, the *Context-Shifting Midpoint* works best when placed at or near the middle. Even in a wheel as unbalanced as *Gladiator*, where *Plan A: Change You* takes Maximus through multiple battles until his final rebellion in Rome, the *Context-Shifting Midpoint* is close to the middle. Exact middle would have been 1:22, so this is off by 10 minutes, not much in a film that's almost three hours long.

How Do Models Compare?

During the first webinar for the StoryWheel, people wanted to know how the StoryWheel compared to other story structure models. This is a logical question because it's a shortcut for learning. When we know how something compares to something we already know, we can say, "Oh, they're similar in these ways, but different in these ways."

Therefore, this section includes some of the more common story structure models compared to the StoryWheel. But it leaves out so many! It doesn't even include all the ones listed in [References](#). (At some point, I have to get back to my novel.)

If there's a story structure model you know and love, you may want to do a comparison yourself, then maybe talk with some writer buddies about what you found. The [StoryWheel Garage](#) is a gathering place for StoryWheel-relevant information on a webpage that's easy to get to. Maybe you'd like to post your analysis in the garage, to share with others. Just send it my way, I'd love to see it.

These are the models included here. Flip to the ones that most interest you.

Blueprint for a Book	50
Hero's Journey	51
Invisible Ink	53
Romancing the Beat	55
Save the Cat!	57
Story Circle	59
Story Engineering	61
Story Grid	64

Blueprint for a Book



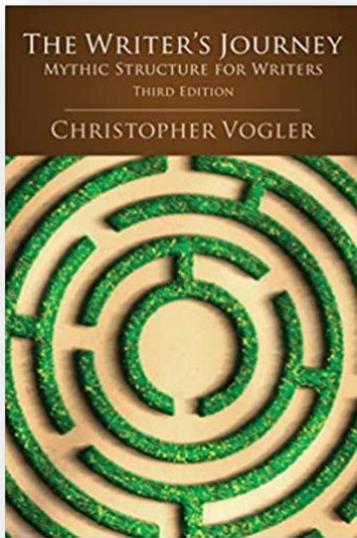
The biggest difference between Jennie Nash's [Blueprint for a Book](#) and the StoryWheel is that Nash doesn't recommend a particular structure, and Nash's book isn't about story structure.

Nash says the place to start planning a story is with the fundamentals, such as the author's motivation to tell this story, the theme, the genre, the ideal reader, etc.

She first recommends telling a "super simple" version of your story. Based on the point of your story, tell your story in two sentences, the first about what's happening at the beginning of the story and the avatar's erroneous belief that's causing them to act the way they do, and a second sentence about how the story ends.

Nash's next recommendation to add additional detail to the plot is to use the seven-step model Pixar learned from Brian McDonald, author of [Invisible Ink](#).

Hero's Journey

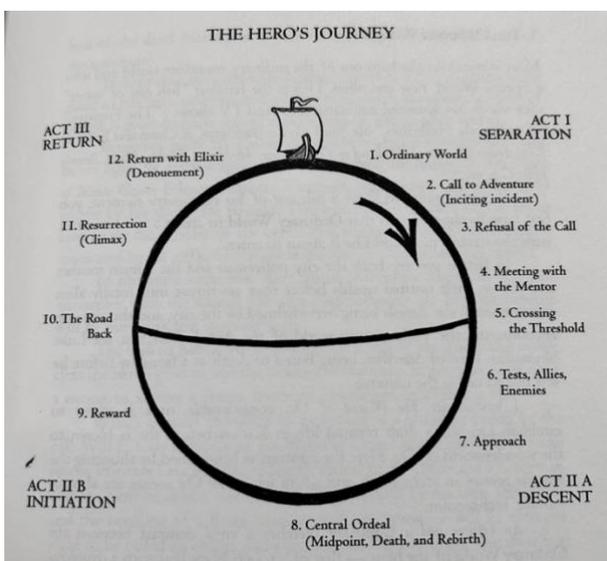


Christopher Vogler, [The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers, 3rd edition](#). Note that this edition came out in 2007 and is the one I'm using. There is a [25th anniversary edition](#) published in 2020, but sometimes you just gotta stop buying books. Vogler's work is heavily dependent on [The Hero With a Thousand Faces](#), by Joseph Campbell.

Finally, someone who could make me understand Campbell! After reading the book, I've never been able to see *Star Wars: Episode IV* the same way, because it is such a clear-cut example of the stages of the hero's journey. And no wonder—a few years back I learned that George Lucas consulted with Joseph Campbell on the plot.

Both Christopher Vogler and Dan Harmon credit Joseph Campbell as the inspiration for their work. My assessment is that Vogler's is the more faithful representation of the heroic journey as described by Campbell, Harmon's is more innovative. Therefore, I'll cover my impressions of Vogler's model here, and Harmon's separately.

I should like this model more than I do, given that it is the ancestor of so many others. But maybe those others exist because their authors were looking for ways to make it more practical.



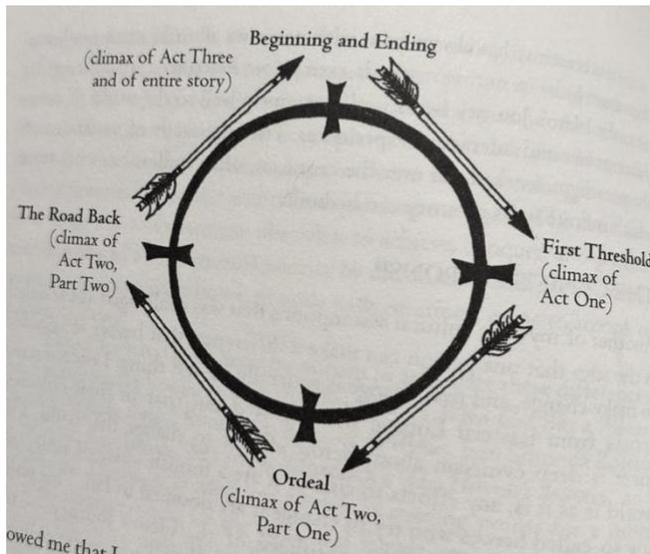
It's called the "monomyth" for a reason. It follows a mythic structure and moves forward on the power of myth. But there are two areas where I struggle with that myth, structurally. I'll leave the discussions of cultural imperialism to others.

The first challenge for me is the imbalance of the journey. Vogler has twelve stages (Campbell has nineteen). The eighth stage takes place at the midpoint, leaving seven stages before the midpoint and four after it. Having only four mileposts for the back half of the story is less direction than I like.

The second challenge is the back half of the model. Yes, because of less frequent milestones but also because those milestones make less sense to me. There is a stage Vogler calls the Ordeal. To compare it with the StoryWheel, the Ordeal includes the *Context-Shifting Midpoint*, *Plan A: Change You*, *WHAM! All is Lost*, and the *Dark Night of the Soul*. As an example, Vogler offers *Star Wars: Episode 4*, on pages 161-163. He says that Luke's near-death experience in the giant trash compactor and his witnessing of the death of Obi-Wan Kenobi are both part of the Ordeal. That's a lot of story with only one milepost, and it doesn't call out the shattering of OS1 at the midpoint. Then, the next stage is the Reward. Vogler gives external (e.g., seizing the sword) and then internal examples (e.g., epiphany) but I prefer the way Brody and Brooks make the point: the hero has realized they are partially to blame for the problem, and concludes that they must change. This also fits with the foundations of story, Stasis—Change.

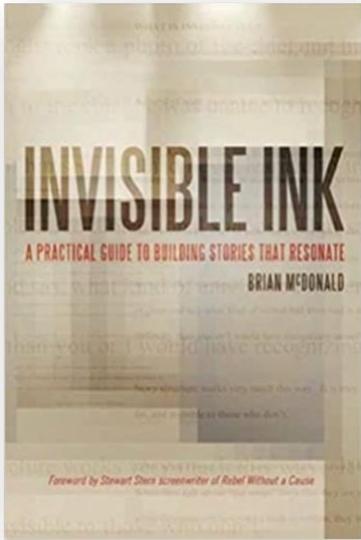
Because I tend toward the practical, by this point I have set aside Vogler and moved on to other models for story structure. But there is a section in Vogler I return to repeatedly: the archetypes. Vogler lists eight archetypes that have helped me develop the set of characters for my novel: Hero, Mentor, Threshold Guardian, Herald, Shapeshifter, Shadow, Ally, and Trickster.

Interestingly, Vogler refined his model over time to bring it closer to a four-act structure. As he wrote on page xxiv, "Occasional puzzled looks on the faces of students taught me that I hadn't completely thought through some aspects of the pattern." So, he added this model.



Vogler wrote, "Trying to explain this led me to a new realization. Each act is like a movement of a symphony, with its own beginning, middle, and end, and with its own climax (the highest point of tension) coming just before the ending of the act. These act climaxes are the major turning points of the circular diagram...." Brooks and Soth couldn't agree more. Me, too.

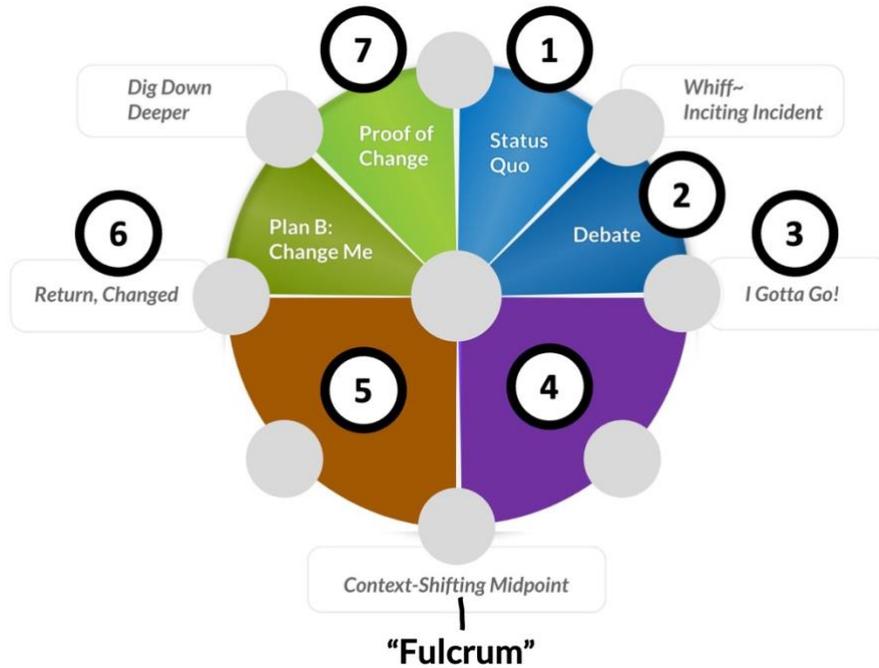
Invisible Ink



Brian McDonald, author of [Invisible Ink](#), taught Pixar “the seven steps that make up all narratives,” and Pixar is spreading the word. This is plot distilled to its essence.

1. Once upon a time _____
2. And every day _____
3. Until one day _____
4. And because of this _____
5. And because of this _____
6. Until finally _____
7. And ever since that day _____

McDonald, using a 3-act structure, places the first three steps in Act 1, the fourth step in the first half of Act 2, the fifth step in the second half (after the ‘Fulcrum’) of Act 2, and the sixth and seventh steps in Act 3. Placing the steps on the StoryWheel gives us the graphic below. The grey circles hide the jolts and theme so they’re less distracting.



As much as I like the simplicity of McDonald's seven steps, I don't work in chronological order. When I broadly sketch a story, I like to "begin with the end in mind." Here's the order I prefer, because deciding endings and major turning points (jolts) helps me know what to do with the rest. This is my approach, using the StoryWheel:

- Status Quo
- Proof of Change
- Context-Shifting Midpoint
- Return, Changed
- I Gotta Go!
- Dig Down Deeper
- Whoa! Shake Up a Belief
- WHAM! All is Lost
- Whiff~ Inciting Incident

Bonus points if you noticed that after I got the beginning and ending segments determined, I worked diagonally across the wheel, and backward.

Romancing the Beat

This structure is described in Gwen Hayes's [Romancing the Beat](#). If you're writing a romance novel, I highly, highly recommend you read this book. If you're writing a story with a love subplot, I highly recommend you read this book. Because the Romance novel has two major avatars, there are some specific plot requirements.

The chart highlights several differences, but the two models are more closely aligned than they may initially appear. Hayes uses Hero 1 (H1, the avatar identity) and Hero 2 (H2, the love interest) to refer to the two main characters.

Romancing the Beat	StoryWheel
Set up	Act 1
	Opening Image
Intro H1	Status Quo
Intro H2	
Meet Cute	Whiff~ Inciting Incident
No Way 1	Debate
Adhesion Plot Thrust	I Gotta Go!
Falling in Love	Act 2
No Way 2	Upside-Down World
Inkling This Could Work	Whoa! Shake Up a Belief
Deepening Desire	Cling to OS1
Maybe This Will Work	
Midpoint of LOVE Plot Thrust	Context-Shifting Midpoint
Retreating From Love	Act 3
Inkling of Doubt	Plan A: Change You
Deepening of Doubt	
Retreat	
Shields Up	

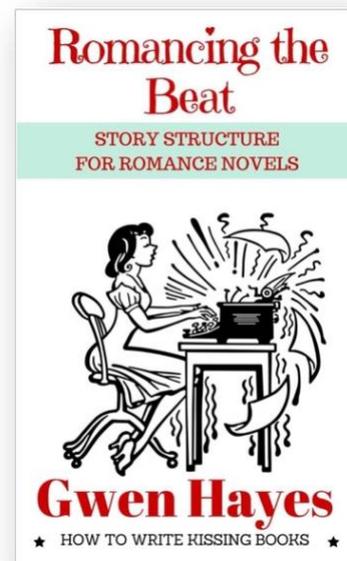
Romancing the Beat	StoryWheel
Break Up	WHAM! All Is Lost
	Dark Night of the Soul
	Return, Changed
Fighting For Love	Act 4
Dark Night of the Soul	
Wake-up/Catharsis	Plan B: Change Me
Grand Gesture	Dig Down Deeper
What Whole Hearted Looks Like	Proof of Change
Epilogue	Closing Image

The biggest difference is the placement of the *Dark Night of the Soul*. Hayes has it as the beginning of Act 4, the StoryWheel has it at the end of Act 3. I'm not worried about this because I believe both are true. Let me explain.

If we create a model that shows all the elements as equal (segments are all identically sized and jolts are just a line), then the Dark Night falls in Act 3.

But, if we calculate the balance of an actual story, the Dark Night may fall in the fourth quarter of the page count or the time count.

If you'd like to see two examples, check out the [StoryWheel Balance Calculator](#). The wildly popular *Me Before You* and *Star Wars: Episode 4* are very different stories, yet both have the Dark Night in the final quarter. Interesting, yes?



Save the Cat!

This structure is described in Jessica Brody's [Save the Cat! Writes a Novel](#). It's based on Blake Snyder's [Save the Cat!](#), with the added distinction of the 5-point finale.

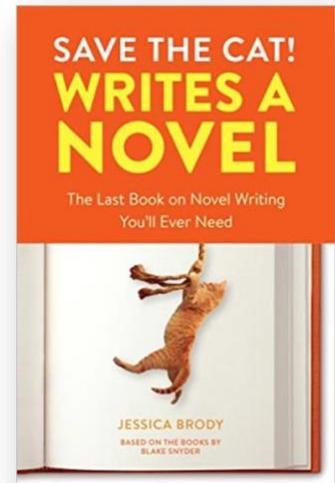
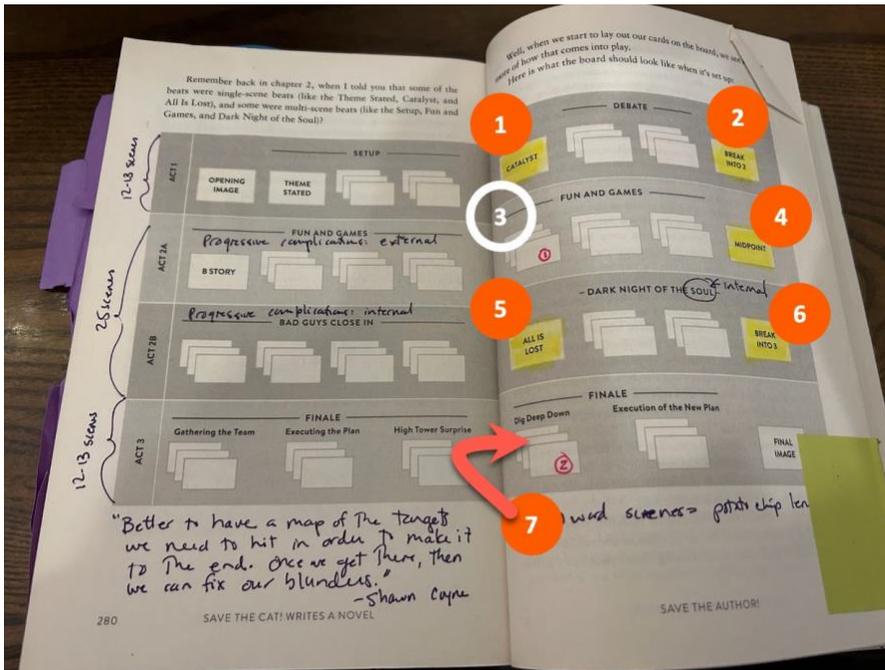
Instead of using a circle like Campbell and Vogler, Brody, working from Blake Snyder's model, uses what they call beat sheets. I haven't read Snyder's books, but his website lives on with wonderful beat sheets of stories, mostly films. It was the examples from Brody's book and Snyder's [Save the Cat website](#) that made the concepts of story structure more tangible to me.

Save the Cat! Writes a Novel	StoryWheel
Opening Image	Opening Image
Theme Stated—usually part of Set Up	Described in Status Quo but not called out on the StoryWheel
Set Up	Status Quo
Catalyst	Whiff~ Inciting Incident
Debate	Debate
Break Into 2	I Gotta Go!
Fun and Games	Upside-Down World
	Whoa! Shake Up a Belief
	Cling to OS1
Midpoint	Context-Shifting Midpoint
Bad Guys Close In	Plan A: Change You
All Is Lost	WHAM! All Is Lost
Dark Night of the Soul	Dark Night of the Soul
Break Into 3	Return, Changed
Finale: Gathering the Team, Executing the Plan, High Tower Surprise	Plan B: Change Me
Finale: Dig Deep Down	Dig Down Deeper
Finale: Execution of the New Plan	Proof of Change
Final Image	Closing Image

The biggest difference between *Save the Cat!* and the StoryWheel is the length of the *Fun and Games* section. This is one large component, Act 2A of the Snyder/Brody model, but is two segments and a jolt in the StoryWheel. If I could make one request of Brody, it would be to offer a breakdown for the *Fun and Games* component as she has done for the *Finale*.

Because I think visually, my favorite view of the *Save the Cat!* model is the *Save the Cat!* (STC) Storyboard.

The StoryWheel says there are seven story-level jolts in a story. If we number them 1-7, you can see that the STC Storyboard lacks a jolt in the *Fun and Games* section (3). It also shows multiple scenes for the *Dig Deep Down*, but one of those is the climax of the story, the *Dig Deep Down/ Dig Down Deeper*.



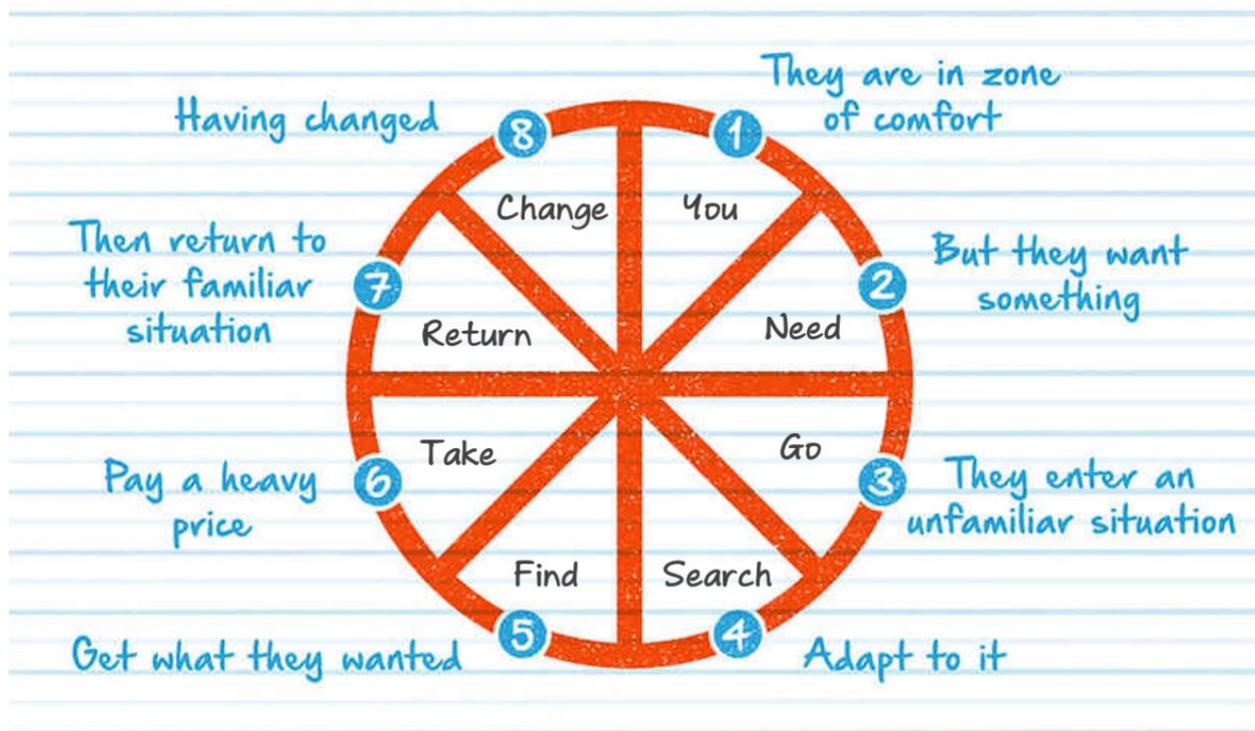
© 2018 by Jessica Brody Entertainment, LLC and Blake Snyder Enterprises, LLC

One of the things I especially appreciate about Brody is her description of why the avatar struggles after the midpoint. It's not shown on the storyboard, but in Act 2B, the avatar fails because they are trying to solve the problem the wrong way. It's wrong because they are trying to change others or the environment rather than change themselves.

Story Circle

I love Dan Harmon's [Story Circle](#), which was influenced by Joseph Campbell's [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#).

At last, a graphic that showed the internal and external dimensions underlying Campbell's hero's journey! The steps of the journey weren't random; fundamental shifts were occurring, and Harmon explained why.



Concept by Dan Harmon, red and blue graphic by Reedsy, black text added by Jule Kucera based on Harmon's posts and videos.

I wish Dan Harmon had written a book. He does have [four blog posts](#) to explain his Story Circle, but three of them are short. It's easier to find other people describing Harmon's model (especially on YouTube) than it is to find Harmon explaining it. There are tons of videos about Harmon's Story Circle. *Every Story is the Same*, by Will Schoder, is my favorite, because it made me see the elegance and intelligence of Harmon's geometry.

My other wish is to put Harmon and Vogler in the same room and ask them how they developed their different models from the same ancestor, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. My impression is that Vogler worked more from the surface of Joseph Campbell's work, and

Harmon worked more from the foundations. The Story Circle differs from the StoryWheel in two primary ways:

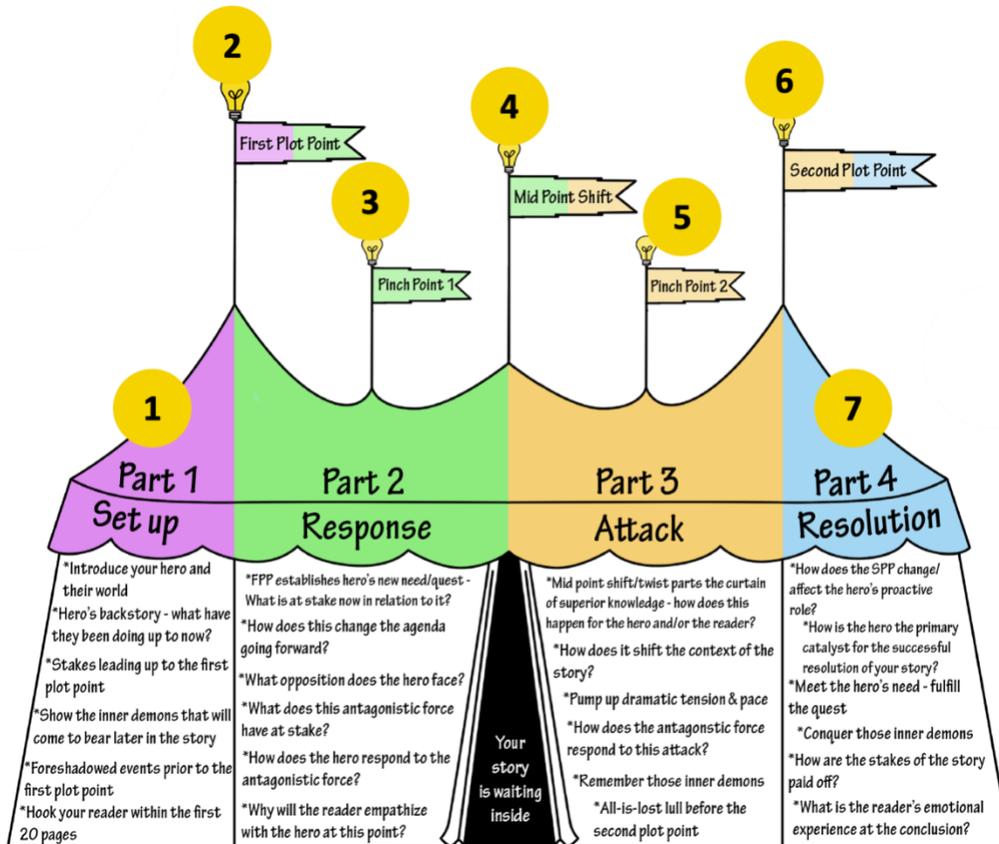
1. Harmon says that Order—Chaos is the rhythm of society. He adds two additional rhythms, Life—Death as the rhythm of biology, and Conscious—Unconscious as the rhythm of psychology. Because I have a bent for simplicity, I prefer to use one rhythm for the external dimension, Order—Chaos, because it applies to more than just the rhythm of society. It's also the rhythm of science. I believe the principles of story are scientific, that they reflect the process it takes for one human (or a bunch of humans) to change.
2. To use StoryWheel language, the Story Circle doesn't differentiate jolts from segments. For example, the third step in the Story Circle is "Go," described as "they enter an unfamiliar situation." My preference is to separate the decision to go (the *I Gotta Go!* jolt) from the entry into the *Upside-Down World* segment.

One last note about Will Schoder's video about Harmon's Story Circle: he periodically revises it. I preferred an earlier version that gave more examples from *Die Hard*, because it is easier to see John McClane's internal arc than Luke Skywalker's. I'm guessing it was easier to show the full arc of the Story Circle with one consistent example. In the current version of the video, that's *Star Wars: Episode 4*. (Again. I know. I'm getting tired of that one, too.) Schoder made a great video. It has over a million views for good reason.



Story Engineering

Larry Brooks, in [Story Engineering](#), uses a four-act structure, which he terms a four-part structure. It was his “Pinch Point 1” halfway through Part 2 that drove me to reconcile various story structure models. Brooks doesn’t have a visual model, but Rachel Savage created an infographic, based on the book. Brooks endorses this graphic and has it [posted on his website](#).



First Plot Point:

- The single most important event in your entire story.
- Drives your hero through the ups and downs that will follow. This is where the story starts - where the primary conflict in your story makes its initial appearance front and center.
- Should come approximately 25% of the way through at the end of your set up section.

Mid-Point Shift/Twist:

- The curtain of knowledge is parted here, for your hero and/or the reader.
- Doesn't change the story so much as it changes the understanding of what's going on for the hero and/or the reader.
- If the hero is privy to this knowledge, it will change their course of action from response mode to attack mode.

Second Plot Point:

- Final point to inject new information in your story that gives your hero everything they need to be the catalyst in the story's conclusion.
- No new expository information can come after this point. Only use info and characters already in play.
- Should be placed approximately 75% of the way through your story.

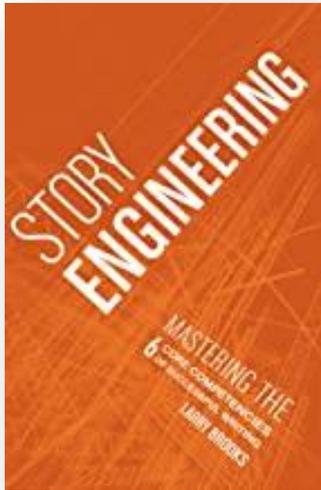
Pinch Point 1:

- Something rather simple and quick given to the reader from the point of view of the antagonistic force. Remind them that this force is still out there gunning for our hero.
- Placed in the middle of Part 2, approximately at the 3/8th mark in your story.

Pinch Point 2:

- In the same vein as pinch point 1, give the reader another look at the antagonistic force. Either how good or bad things might be going for the hero that they don't know about yet.
- Placed in the middle of Part 3, approximately at the 5/8th mark in your story.

Concept by Larry Brooks, [graphic](#) by Rachel Savage.



Major props to Larry Brooks for his identification of Pinch Point 1, or in StoryWheel language, *Whoa! Shake Up a Belief*. This shake up prepares the avatar for the brutal rattling that will occur at the *Context-Shifting Midpoint*. In hindsight, I'm surprised more story structure experts don't note it.

A significant difference between *Story Engineering* and the StoryWheel is that Brooks condenses the first and last quadrants. If we compare Plot Points and Pinch Points to jolts, the jolts of *Whiff~ Inciting Incident* and *Dig Down Deeper* are missing from the Brooks model. There are no

flags flying above the tent for those.

Match the numbers on the StoryWheel to the numbers on the tent graphic to see how the models align.



To me, the most valuable aspect of Brooks's work is his deep understanding of the three jolts owned by the avatar: First Plot Point (*I Gotta Go!*), Midpoint contextual shift (*Context-Shifting Midpoint*), and Second Plot Point (*Return, Changed*). Where I think Brooks errs is an over-focus on these areas and an under-focus on others. This imbalance is seen in Chapter 39, "The Single Most Powerful Writing Tool You'll Ever See That Fits on One Page." The tool includes three questions related to the conceptual hook, two related to theme, and six on the story opening.

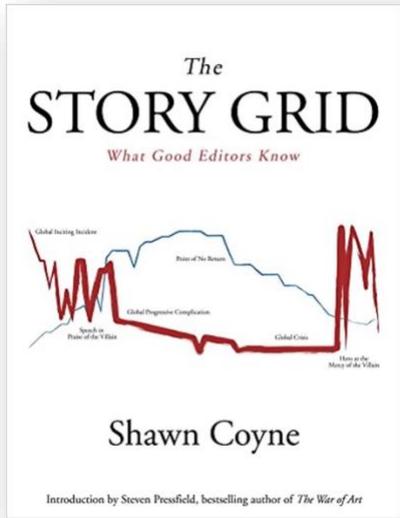
The remaining twenty-one questions relate only to the First Plot Point, Midpoint contextual shift, and Second Plot point, numbers 2, 4, and 6 above. Selecting only those points leaves out much of the story.

Also, Brooks and I have a difference of opinion over what part of the story is most significant. He argues for the First Plot Point/*I Gotta Go!* jolt, because if you haven't engaged someone by this point in the story, you're not going to. You're going to lose them. That's why it's the highest flag on the tent graphic. I'd argue for the *Dig Down Deeper* jolt because it's the point of greatest conflict that proves the theme. Brooks would counter that if the First Plot Point doesn't engage us, we're not going to care about the *Dig Down Deeper*. In that respect, he's got a point. (Maybe that was one too many points.)

But Brooks and I can both be right. Brooks is right about the importance of the first quadrant to engage an individual in the story. I'm right about the importance of the fourth quadrant to cause that individual to spread the word to others.

Lastly, a quibble. I'm not fond of Brooks's terminology. Yes, it's great if you like alliteration. But the labels don't convey meaning. Quick, tell me the difference between Plot Point One and Two. What about Pinch Point One and Two? Why are they "Parts" and not "Acts"? I prefer terms that offer a clue.

Story Grid



I encountered Shawn Coyne’s work on story structure at two separate points, about five years apart. The first was in 2015, with his book [The Story Grid](#). It’s a tome and it’s excellent. Take your time with it. It’s worth it, especially the sections on genre and the Five Commandments (5C’s).

In *The Story Grid*, Coyne adopts [Norm Stahl's 'Foolscap'](#) to structure a story. It’s well described in the book. The alignment of the Foolscap with the StoryWheel is based on notes I took during a webinar Coyne held with his Story Grid Guild members in 2020.

Story Grid Foolscap			
QUADRANT 1 Beginning Hook	1	1. Inciting Incident	1
	2	2. Turning Point PC	
	3	3. Crisis	
	4	4. Climax	
	5	5. Resolution	
QUADRANT 2 Middle Build 1	6	1. Inciting Incident	2
	7	2. Turning Point PC	
	8	3. Crisis	
	9	4. Climax	
	10	5. Resolution	
QUADRANT 3 Middle Build 2	11	1. Inciting Incident	3
	12	2. Turning Point PC	
	13	3. Crisis	
	14	4. Climax	
	15	5. Resolution	
QUADRANT 4 Ending Payoff	16	1. Inciting Incident	4 5
	17	2. Turning Point PC	
	18	3. Crisis	
	19	4. Climax	
	20	5. Resolution	
These are the 5 Commandments of the Global story			

© 2020 by Shawn Coyne, <https://storygrid.com/resources/>

Note that this is a simplified version of the Foolscap and omits crucial columns.



Match the numbers on the Foolscap with the numbers on the StoryWheel to see how the two models align.

Unfortunately, my brain struggles with filling in spreadsheet cells during the ideation phase of a project. Grids work for me in analysis, and I have “storygridded” my novel. But in the ideation phase, my right brain shuts down and my left brain

takes over, looking for the right answer to put into the cell. The Foolscap works for others (e.g., [Steven Pressfield](#)), it just doesn’t work for me.

Then, in 2020, Coyne held the first offering of [Heroic Journey 2.0](#), a three-day webinar. His model is similar to the Campbell/Vogler model, but with more emphasis on the avatar’s mental operating system and deep research into the multidisciplinary roots of the heroic journey. Coyne’s model begins at the three o’clock position and moves counterclockwise. I’m not matching it up against the StoryWheel because I don’t believe I understand it well enough to do so.

The *Heroic Journey 2.0* information is available as a [four-part podcast series](#) and an [82-lesson video training program](#). After a foray into linear story models, Coyne’s *Heroic Journey 2.0* led me back to a circle and to my continued study of story structure.

Also, Coyne is the source for [SAM, the Single Audience Member](#), the question I was asked in the [two-hour Zoom call](#). Yes, many people talk about “your ideal reader,” but when you get so specific as to imagine one person as your SAM (whether they’re a real person or an imagined composite), you’ll have even more clarity as you plan, write and edit your story. Who’s the SAM for your story?

Planning a Story

Writing is an iterative process where you move between the right brain to ideate and the left brain to build. Some people like to write their way into a story and then add the structure. Some start with structure and then write. No matter where you start, you'll do both: write+structure. If you think of it like building a house, writing gets you the raw materials. Structure tells you where to put them.

Let's plan a story. We can use the one that stumped me at the beginning, the one that drove my mother to steal glances at her *People* magazine. If we use my work in progress (WIP), we won't have the false start (and easy going) of looking backward at a story already written.

1. What is the theme of the story?

Rationale: This is the hub of your wheel. You may refine it, but it helps to start with a general idea of the story's overarching message, that thing you care so much about.

WIP: Worth isn't earned. It's owned. You are the hero of your own life! Listen to your heart, figure out who you are, and go live a life that fits you.

2. Why do you care about this theme in your head, heart, and guts? Why will others care about it? Why does it matter?

Rationale: You must care with your whole self! If you don't, you won't have the fuel to finish your story. If others don't care about it, they won't be interested.

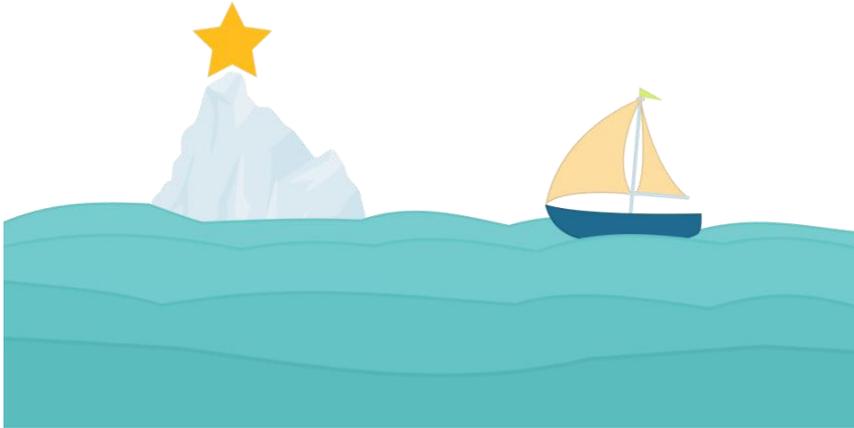
WIP: I care. I'll leave out the deets, but I've lived most of my life, as Brené Brown describes, hustling for worth. Started around age four. Maybe earlier. As for others, I know plenty of people who struggle over life choices, self-worth, and parental (or other authority) approval. It matters because if we don't make life choices that fit, we will live unhappy lives.

3. Who is the Avatar Identity?

Rationale: This is the person with whom we will identify. Make them someone we care about.

WIP: Ann Tobias, Chicago attorney, daughter of a former supermodel and sister to a model. Her sister looks like her mother but Ann takes after her father.

4. What does the avatar Want?

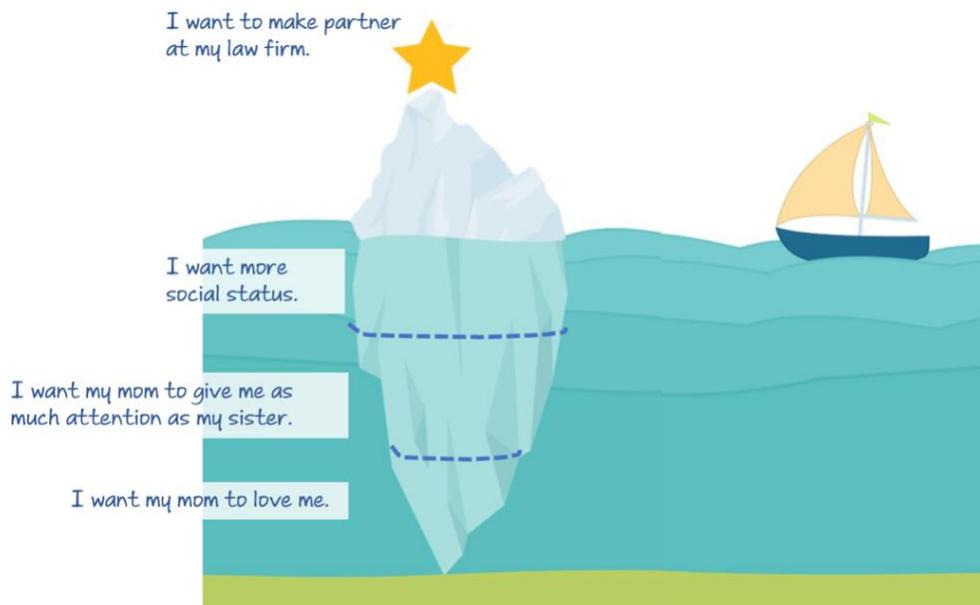


Rationale: This **want-goal** drives the avatar's behavior, like a boat, sailing toward a golden goal. Remember Psych 101, "behavior is goal-directed."

WIP: Ann is gunning to make partner before she turns fifty.

5. How would you describe the avatar's Iceberg of Wants?

Rationale: The **want-goal** is the visible goal, but it rests on an *Iceberg of Wants*. There are invisible wants beneath the visible want-goal. These layers of want relate to the lie the avatar believes.



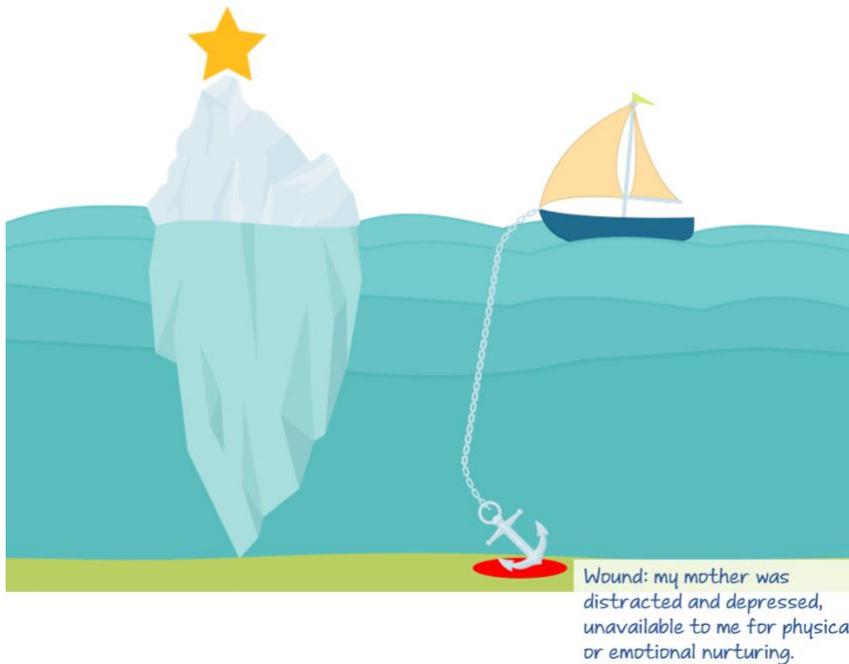
6. What is the lie the avatar believes?



Rationale: This is the anchor, the hindrance, the chain that must be cut.

WIP: "I am unlovable but worth can be earned. (And when I earn it, maybe then my mother will love me.)"

7. What is the avatar's wound that gave birth to the lie they believe?



Rationale: We tell ourselves lies not to deceive ourselves, but as a way of making sense of the bad thing that happened to us, the injury that created a wound that has never healed.

Especially when we are children, the lie feels better than truth, for example, "I am at the mercy of

messed up people who are doing such a poor job of raising me that if anyone knew, I might be placed in foster care."

8. What does the avatar Need? What will be their new need-goal?

Rationale: To demonstrate change, and the full shift from the Act 1 mental Operating System (OS1) to the Act 2 upgraded Operating System (OS2), the avatar will pursue a new goal. We'll call this the **need-goal**. For a successful outcome, the avatar must cut the chain that anchors them to the lie they believe.

WIP: Ann needs to believe “I am worthy of love. I get to choose the life I truly want, not the life I hope will make me worthy in the eyes of someone else.” Her need-goal will be something related to new work and new friends that she can't have unless she leaves the law firm—evidence that she's cut the tie to her anchor.



Side note: The reason this **want-goal**, **need-goal** matters is because sometimes writers get confused and think identifying the want is enough, e.g., “the avatar wants to be loved.” But being loved is intangible. The **want** must be made tangible in a **goal** we can see, one we can tell whether the avatar succeeds or fails, e.g., “the avatar wants to be in a loving relationship with Parker.”

9. What is the avatar's condition at the start of the story? Where and how do they live, work, love, and play?

Rationale: With a robust picture of the avatar's life, we can appreciate their coming struggles and change.

WIP: Ann is exhausted, working 60+ hour weeks at a prestigious Chicago law firm, one rung away from partnership. She's single, her former partner broke up with her eighteen months ago. She lives in a small downtown condo that gets almost no sunlight. It looks like a barren hotel room but Ann tells herself it doesn't matter because she's hardly ever there, she lives at the office (yes, even during Covid). Ann rarely plays but sometimes volunteers at a dog shelter. She tells herself she doesn't have time for a dog.

10. At the start of the story, what is the avatar's OS1?

Rationale: Just as we have a clear view of the avatar's external world, we need a similarly clear view of their internal world and their mental Operating System (OS1).

WIP: "If I just keep working hard enough, I'll make partner, and then I'll have the respect I never seem to get. Partnership will prove that my life choices were the right ones, that all this work was worth it."

11. Is this a prescriptive story or a cautionary tale?

Rationale: This drives the avatar's choices and the outcome.

WIP: A prescriptive story.

12. What must the Proof of Change include to show how the avatar has changed (if prescriptive) or not changed (if cautionary)?

Rationale: If we can't see it, we have no proof. Without proof, there is no emotional catharsis.

WIP: It must show Ann relaxed, laughing, with people rather than alone. She'll have a 'found family' that looks very different from the family she grew up with. She'll be out of the cement walls of Chicago and in a place with sunlight, more nature. She won't be a partner but she'll be doing work she cares about. Maybe she joins a small law office in a small town so she can do work the community—and eventually Ann—cares about: pro bono law to advocate for fair funding for schools. She won't be wearing suits anymore and she won't keep her unruly hair pulled back. We'll need to see her reject an offer of partnership so she can have the life she really wants. The choice must be hard, not just partnership, but something super status-y about it. It has to be whatever would most appeal to her OS1 and make the life she truly wants impossible if accepted. Rejecting it will be proof of her change to OS2.

13. Who is the antagonist/antagonistic force?

Rationale: This is the person or force that will create conditions that put pressure on the avatar's OS1, forcing them against a wall where the avatar must change (or not).

WIP: The antagonistic force is the lie Ann believes, because the greater threat to Ann's life is not external, but internal. The lie is personified in her mentor, Royce, the head of the law firm. But her mentor is not the mentor she thinks he is. (She's being played.)

14. In what ways must the antagonist/antagonistic force be different from and more powerful than the avatar, to exert the most pressure?

Rationale: Diamonds are made from coal under intense pressure.

WIP: Royce must have the power to control Ann's future at the law firm. It would be good if he also had status/power in other ways, to have more power over her. Maybe these places are things Ann's mother cares about. He must have minions who do his bidding. He must be decisive. He must know exactly what he wants and be smoothly ruthless about getting it. He must be a great actor (Ann has no poker face). He must in some way be a father figure to Ann, to appeal to her wound from her dad leaving the family when she was three (and her mother was twenty).

15. What is the lie the antagonist/antagonistic force believes? What wound caused the antagonist to invent the lie?

Rationale: Everybody has a lie. The lie is the point of vulnerability of the antagonist.

WIP: Royce: The ends justify the means. What is best for the firm is best for everyone at the firm. Using the firm, I can amass enough power to protect my family the way my father couldn't protect his.

16. In what setting does the story begin?

Rationale: Every story must start somewhere.

WIP: Ann at work. Something cutthroat happening or Ann finding out that someone is getting ahead of her in the marathon to partnership.

17. How does the setting reinforce the avatar’s OS1?

Rationale: This setting must reinforce the avatar’s OS1 so that the setting of the Upside-Down World can challenge it and be the reverse of it.

WIP: The firm runs on status and status is quantifiable everywhere—finishes and square footage, clothing and accoutrements. What you drive, what you eat, and who serves you (inside and outside the office).

18. What are special information, tools, clues, or skills to include in Act 1?

Rationale: If you need a gun in Act 4, it’s best to plant it in Act 1.

WIP: Ann’s first impression with clients is always that she’ll be “okay,” but after they work with her, they love her because of her commitment to them through the work she does for them. Her power comes from her clients, but she doesn’t realize it. Also, there should be something restrictive about partnership, like the firm never grants more than one partner in a year or something. (@@@need to find out what’s realistic.) *Side note:* @@@ is the symbol I use instead of TK. It’s easier to see and just as searchable.

19. What is the setting for the Upside-Down world?

Rationale: This is the arena that will challenge the avatar’s OS1.

WIP: Colson, Indiana. A small town about 45 minutes south of the University. The town is currently banding together with a few other communities across the state to sue for fair funding for schools. The town is rural and blue collar. Also, Indiana and Illinois don’t like each other. Especially Chicago-Indiana.

20. How does the setting of the Upside-Down world challenge the avatar’s OS1 and cause them to stumble?

Rationale: Seeing the avatar stumble shows us the avatar’s OS1 is insufficient and the avatar will fail if they don’t change.

WIP: Ann treats people according to the status she grants them, and this doesn’t work in a small town with people she views as lower-status. She’s all about Task and bad at Relationship. Ann will meet people living lives they are happy with even through their lives don’t meet her OS1 criteria for happiness. They will have great friendships which she doesn’t have. They will have a purpose they believe in.

They are also good drivers from all their time on rural roads. Ann is not a good driver.

21. What other characters will display different aspects of the theme? Who are the foils and supports?

Rationale: As we see the avatar in interaction with other characters with different approaches to the theme, we refine our thinking about the theme. We get to see if the avatar will come to similar conclusions.

WIP:

Constance	Living the life that fits her and loving it. Integrates her mind and her gut and lives from her heart. Serves as a mentor to Ann.
Ed	Living the live that fits him. Serves as a love interest to Ann but has the opposite of her problem—is overly trusting.
Ellie	Loving life, fit is not a concept. Has Down Syndrome and challenges Ann’s OS1 regarding who has worth and who doesn’t.
TBN	Lives from her gut. Demonstrates unconditional friendship with Constance. Wants to be friends with Ann.
Martha	Lives from her head. Demonstrates semi-conditional friendship with Constance. Not interested in being friends with Ann.
Daniel	Ann’s best friend at work. Serves to show she doesn’t trust people. May be a shapeshifter.

There! By answering these 21 questions, you have the key elements to get your StoryWheel rolling. And even though I’ve answered these questions previously, revisiting them here helped me with my story. Thank you!

Now, this is the part in planning where I put the StoryWheel aside and pick up [Blueprint for a Book](#) by Jennie Nash. I work my way through the Blueprint and then Nash’s Inside Outline. Having done the work of the StoryWheel gives me a great head start.

It's almost time to go our separate ways, but I'm not leaving you high and dry. You have these tools on the following pages:

- [Questions by Quadrant](#). Useful for planning, orientation while writing, or as an editing tool while evaluating your zero draft.
- [Test Your Story](#). Mad Libs for storytelling.
- [References](#). Information on the resources that influenced the StoryWheel.

Also, here's something you can do for me. Since what's posted on the internet continually changes, if you find a link that is now broken, please let me know. I'll thank you profusely and fix it. Thanks!

Check out those tools (so far, everybody loves [Questions by Quadrant](#) best), and I'll meet you on page 88 for an until-we-meet-again farewell.





Questions by Quadrant

Note: These questions are for a prescriptive story.

Opening Image. *External Order, Internal Stasis*

- Does the Opening image reference the avatar identity in some way, who they are and what they want?
- Does this image support the theme of your story?
- Does this image support the tone of your story?

Act 1.1, Status Quo. *External Order, Internal Stasis*

- Is there one clear avatar identity, the character we will emotionally latch on to and mind-meld with?
- Has the avatar done something (or had something done to them) to earn our empathy?
- Have we seen the avatar in their current world? Can we describe where, how and with whom they live, work, play, and love?
- Do we know the avatar's **want-goal**? If the avatar achieves this goal, how will we know?
- Are we already seeing problems with this **want-goal**? Can we envision a problematic outcome—death, disaster, or racking disappointment?
- Are we beginning to get a sense of lie the avatar believes?
- Has someone or something other than the avatar stated the theme? Does the avatar reject the statement?
- Do you, the author, know this avatar inside and out, well enough to write convincingly about them? Do you have empathy for the avatar?
- Do we know the setting, in place and time? Will this setting be the photo negative to another setting (the upside-down world) that will put maximum pressure on the avatar?
- Do you, the author, know this setting well enough to write about it, with all your senses?

Act 1.1, Whiff~ Inciting Incident. *Antagonist*

- Is there a clear inciting incident that happens to the avatar? If this were video, what would we see?
- Is the antagonistic force the power behind the inciting incident?
- Is this inciting incident a wonderful match to start the challenge to the avatar's **want-goal** and the lie they believe?
- Is this inciting incident an indicator of a larger problem, that "somethin' ain't right"? Does the avatar underestimate the importance of the inciting incident?
- Do you, the author, know the antagonist (or antagonistic force) inside and out, well enough to write convincingly about them?
- Do you have empathy for the antagonist (or antagonistic force)?

Act 1.2, Debate. *External Order to Chaos Awakes, Internal Stasis*

- Does the avatar debate the invitation offered by the inciting incident?
- Can you state the avatar's debate in this format, filling in the blanks: "Do I do _____ and risk _____, or do I do _____ and risk _____?"
- Is the debate realistic—are there equally powerful reasons to stay in the status quo vs. respond to the challenge raised by the inciting incident?
- Do the events of the debate segment raise the stakes to encourage the avatar to say, "I gotta go!"?

Act 1.2, I Gotta Go! *Avatar*

- Does the avatar make the choice to take up the challenge offered by the inciting incident?
- Does the avatar make the choice—no one has forced them into it?
- Is making this choice like the spikes at the entrance of a car rental lot—there is no going back?
- Is the choice made obvious? If this were video, what would we see?

Act 2.1, Upside-Down World. External Chaos Stretches, Internal Stasis Persists

- Is this new world very different from the status quo world, especially in ways that matter to the theme? Are the differences in place and people obvious?
- Will this world put pressure on the avatar's **want-goal** and the lie they believe? Is it perfectly suited to illuminate the defects in the avatar's OS1?
- Do you, the author, know this world well enough to write about it, with all your senses?
- Does the avatar demonstrate that they are out of their element, ill-equipped for this new world? Can we see them stumbling and failing?
- If you were to rate the avatar's failure on a scale from 1 to 10, with one being "Fine" and 10 being "Epic Fail," how would you rate it?

Act 2.1, Whoa! Shake Up a Belief! Antagonist

- Does something surprising happen to the avatar? Is it impossible to ignore?
- Does this surprise show the power of the antagonistic force?
- Does this surprise put pressure on the avatar's lie they believe, their **want-goal**, and their OS1? Does it challenge an aspect of their identity they hold dear?
- Does the avatar realize accomplishing their **want-goal** will be harder than they thought?

Act 2.2, Cling to OS1. External Chaos Strengthens, Internal Stasis Fights to Rule

- Does the avatar continue to cling to their OS1 thinking, even though it is continually not working?
- Does the avatar double down on their approach, doing things the way they always have, but with more effort and/or resources?
- Do we see the avatar flail and fail?
- If you were to rate the avatar's failure on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate it?
- Is your rating a higher number than the rating for the *Upside-Down World* segment?

Act 2.2, Context-Shifting Midpoint! Avatar

- Does the avatar learn new information that changes everything?
- Does this new knowledge shatter the avatar's OS1? Has their internal world been turned upside down?
- Has the new information increased the tension?
- Does the avatar choose a new **goal** as a result? Is this new goal more closely related to the avatar's **need** to cut their anchor and less closely related to their former **want-goal**?

Act 3.1, Plan A: Change You. External Chaos Reigns, Internal Change Awakes

- Does the avatar shift from reactivity to proactivity?
- Does the avatar try new behaviors and tactics but maintain their strategy? Said differently, are they trying to accomplish their **need-goal** by changing others, without changing themselves?
- Do the avatar's new behaviors demonstrate attempts at OS2 thinking?
- Is the avatar inconsistent, awkward, and unskilled with OS2 thinking and behaviors?

Act 3.1, WHAM! All Is Lost! Antagonist

- Does a WHAM! happen to the avatar?
- Does this WHAM! cause the avatar to lose something/someone they hold most dear?
- Is the WHAM! caused by the antagonistic force and in some way, partly caused by the avatar?
- Does the WHAM! make the avatar's goal seem impossibly unattainable?
- Is the avatar shattered by the WHAM!? Is the avatar's loss big enough to cause the avatar to wallow?
- If you were to rate the avatar's loss on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate it?
- Is your rating a higher number than the rating for the *Cling to OS1* segment?

Act 3.2, Dark Night of the Soul. *External Chaos Fights to Rule, Internal Change*

Stretches

- Does the avatar show their wallowing with every aspect of their being (physical, mental, emotional)? Do they process the loss and their part in causing the loss?
- Does the avatar now have an unfiltered view of the full power of the antagonistic force?
- Is the Dark Night experience significant enough to cause the avatar to, at last, change?
- Does the avatar choose a new **need-goal**? Will success require the avatar to cut their chain to the lie they believe?
- Will success or failure be obvious?
- Does the avatar choose to exit the Dark Night? Is the exit from the Dark Night obvious?

Act 3.2, Return, Changed. *Avatar*

- Does the avatar actively step into the *Return, Changed* jolt?
- Does the avatar look different in a way that reflects their internal change?
- Does the avatar have a new strategy and plan to accomplish their **need-goal** and the challenge that has been dogging them through the whole story?
- Will the avatar's plan fail if the avatar doesn't change? Will the avatar suffer loss if their plan fails? Will others? (The greater the potential for loss, the higher the stakes.)
- From here to the end of the story, are there no new characters, information, or tools? Is the avatar forced to work with what and who they have?

Act 4.1, Plan B: Change Me. *External New Order Awakes, Internal Change*

Strengthens

- Does the avatar demonstrate synthesis—what they knew in Act 1, what they learned in Act 2, and their new OS2 thinking gained in Act 3?
- Do we see the avatar change as required for Plan B, do we think they've cut their anchor?

- Does the avatar persist with Plan B, despite increasing external resistance?
- Are we hoping for the avatar to win but fearing the consequences if they lose?

Act 4.1, Dig Down Deeper. Antagonist

- Is there a direct conflict between the avatar and the antagonistic force? The conflict must be direct: avatar vs. antagonist (even if the antagonist is in the avatar's own head.
- Does this conflict show that the avatar has rejected the lie they believed, their previous **want-goal**, and their OS1 thinking? Is the avatar now in whole-hearted pursuit of their **need-goal**, using OS2 thinking? Can we tell they have cut loose their anchor?
- Does this conflict require everything the avatar has to defeat the antagonistic force?
- Is the avatar's victory and the antagonistic force's defeat obvious? Does the resolution of the conflict feel good—is there emotional catharsis?
- If you were to rate the level of conflict on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate it?
- Is this the highest rating yet? Is your rating at least an 8? How can you make the rating higher, even if it's already an 8?

Act 4.2, Proof of Change. External New Order Stretches, Internal Change Reigns

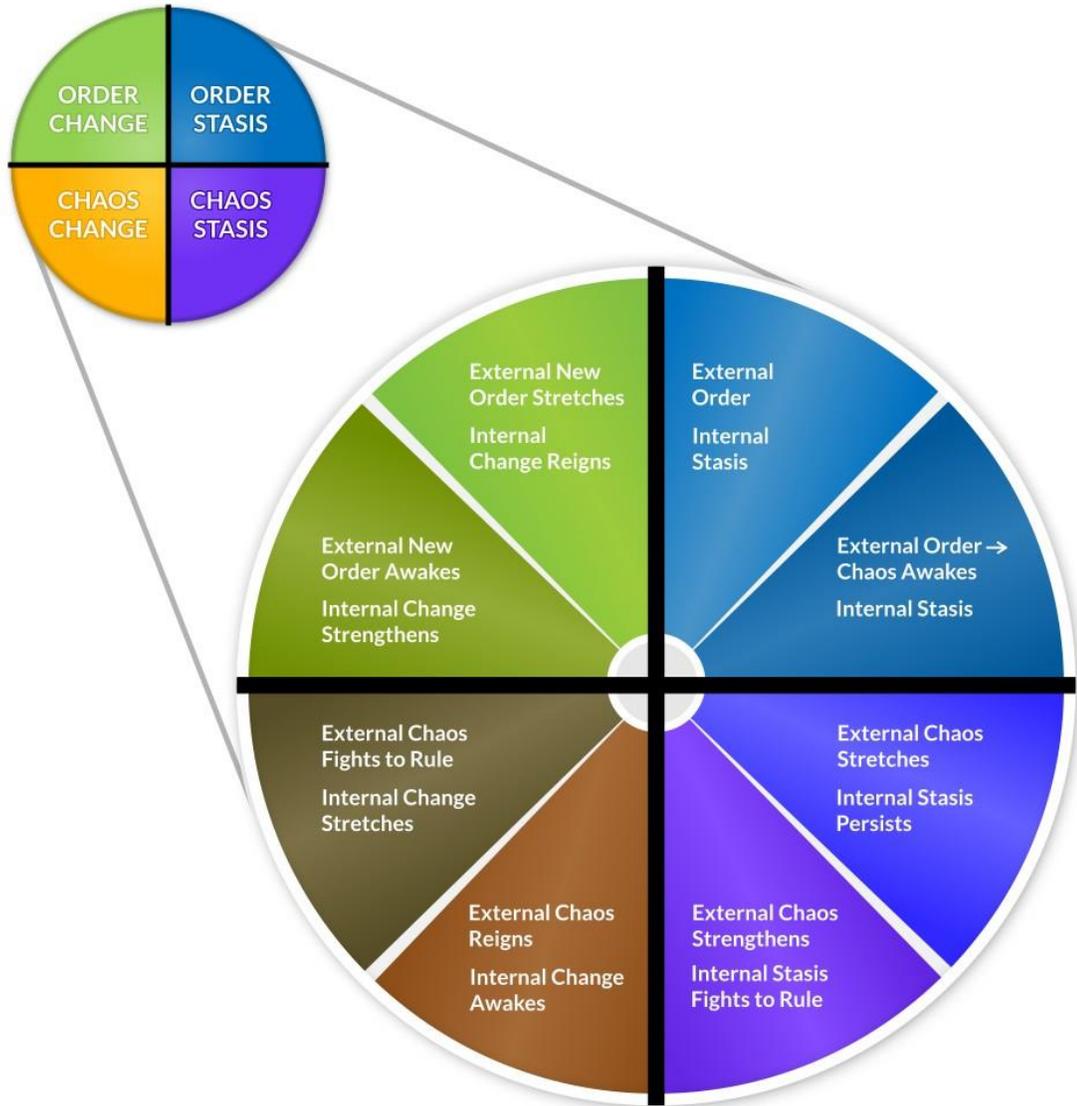
- Do we have evidence of the avatar's success with OS2? If this were video, what proof would we see?
- Is there emotional catharsis?
- Is there time for us to savor the victory—a *dénouement* rather than an abrupt end?
- Does ending the story here, in this way, support the theme of your story?

Closing Image. External New Order Stretches, Internal Change Reigns

- Does the closing image reflect the opening image, but show how the avatar has changed internally, and changed their world externally?
- Does the closing image offer a final feeling of pleasure (for example, elation at the conclusion of *Star Wars*, or relieved admiration at the end of *Gladiator*)?
- Does ending with this image support the theme and tone of your story?

Story Overall.

- Do the external conditions and internal condition of the avatar align with what is going on at the foundations?



Test Your Story

What follows is the structural framework of a story, with blanks to fill based on your story. This forces you to distill your story to its essence, which will uncover any structural weaknesses. It's an odd exercise but an excellent test of your story structure.

Warning!

Filling in the blanks based on your story idea is not a method by which you develop a plot. If you try to invent a story from this form, you will likely end up with the same problem Disney has with *Moana*—inconsistent behavior from the avatar and others, characters making choices that don't make sense, and *deus ex machina* rescue operations.

Tell Your Story

Once upon a time, there was [*avatar*] who [*status quo life: work, love, health, play*]. Avatar wanted [*conscious want*] and needed [*unconscious need*]. Avatar believed [*OS1*].

One day, [*Whiff~ Inciting Incident*] happened. This created a crisis question for avatar: Do I do [*X*] and risk [*Y*]? Or do I do [*Z*] and risk [*W*]?

Because of [*another rumble that poked at avatar's want*], avatar decided to [*decision made visible*]. This decision took avatar to a whole new world.

The new world wasn't just different; it was the opposite of the avatar's world. This new world was [*ways the new world is the opposite of the Act 1 world.*] In this world, avatar went [*new places*] and met [*new people/beings*] and did [*new things*]. Avatar remained focused on getting [*avatar's want*].

Things were going [*well/badly*]. And then there was a [*Whoa! Shake Up a Belief*]. This made things even [*better/worse*] for our dear avatar, and this caused avatar to work even harder to get [*avatar's want*]. Through it all, avatar still clung to their belief that [*OS1 belief*], as evidenced by [*action as evidence*].

But then, in the immortal words of *The Big Lebowski*, "[new sh*t has come to light!](#)" Avatar learned [*new information that turned avatar's internal world upside down, breaking OS1 to pieces*]. In response to this, avatar realized [*realization that will form the basis for OS2*] and changed course. Now, instead of pursuing [*avatar's want-goal*], avatar began to pursue [*a goal closer to avatar's need*].

Avatar enacted [*Plan A*], which was a good plan. Avatar liked it because it didn't require personal change. But then, because avatar's OS1 reared its ugly head, [*something really bad*] happened, and it was partly the Avatar's fault. Avatar lost [*the thing avatar holds most dear*]. Avatar was bummed out and wallowed, as evidenced by [*evidence of wallowing*].

Then, in the [*something that evidences a descent into the unconscious*], avatar realized, "Oh, sh*t! The problem is me!" With this realization, avatar stopped wallowing and went [*back to some semblance of the world of Act 1.*] Avatar changed their approach and enacted [*Plan B, which requires avatar to change, and incorporates all the lessons avatar has learned on their journey*].

[*Plan B*] was a mighty struggle with [*the antagonistic force*], but avatar dug down deeper than they ever had and [*succeeded if prescriptive / failed if cautionary*]. As a result of this struggle that demonstrated avatar's belief, [*evidence of OS2 if prescriptive / clinging to OS1 if cautionary*], avatar [*established a new world order if prescriptive / changed nothing but their own circumstances for the worse if cautionary*].

THE END.

References

Just as Harmon references Campbell and Coyne references McKee, I reference Harmon, Coyne, and others. All innovation occurs in the milieu of what has gone before.

This list is in the order in which I encountered each. Those included in the model comparison section are described there, the rest are described here. As for the links, I don't make any money from any links that aren't my own work. They're here for your convenience.

If you're reading this as a hard copy and would like to access the links, the StoryWheel PDF is available here: bit.ly/TSWmine.

Joseph Campbell, [*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*](#).

I checked this out of the library twice and then again a few years later, but never finished it, although I did like the pictures. I'm not saying you or I should read this book. I just want to give credit to the source that inspired so many.

Christopher Vogler, [*The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*](#).

Jessica Brody, [*Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*](#).

Dan Harmon, [*Story Circle*](#).

Larry Brooks, [*Story Engineering*](#) (specifically part 5, story structure).

Shawn Coyne, [*The Story Grid*](#) and [*Heroic Journey 2.0*](#).

Brian McDonald, [*Invisible Ink*](#).

Rachael Herron, [*90 Days to Done*](#) and [*90 Day Revision*](#).

In her workshops, author Rachael Herron provides a marvelous mix of warmhearted and enthusiastic support coupled with a rock-solid understanding of story. Her own story structure model is, in her words, "a mash-up of methods including those of Larry Brooks, John Truby, Jessica Brody, Michael Hague, and my own methodology."

What was so helpful about Herron's workshops was that they made the principles come alive for me. Brooks wrote that story structure is form not formula, *storytelling physics*. Herron echoes that perspective when she describes structure as *literary gravity*.

I also appreciate Herron's holding firm on the term *context-shifting midpoint*. It's a subtle distinction from *midpoint shift*, but it matters. Thanks to Coyne, I understood that the avatar's mental operating system is forced to change at the midpoint, but what I hadn't understood was that the avatar's understanding of the world completely changes. Others described it, but Rachael made me understand it. As students shared the plots of their stories, I got very good at identifying it (especially when it was absent). Thanks to [Dr. Laurie Anderson](#) for recommending Herron.

Gail Carriger, [The Heroine's Journey](#)

Can we have trumpets and a chorus of angels for Carriger? This is the first time someone explained the yin journey of the heroine as fundamentally different from the yang journey of the hero. Other heroine's journey books read like the hero's journey with different labels. Carriger explains that while the hero's journey is essentially a solo endeavor, with a mano-a-mano finale of hero vs. villain, the heroine's journey is a collaborative one, where partnership achieves victory. Carriger shows that the Harry Potter series is a heroine's journey.

Interestingly, Neal Soloponte, in [The Ultimate Hero's Journey](#), shows how Luke's journey in *Star Wars: Episode 4* and Harry Potter's journey are essentially the same, which would mean that both are hero's journeys or heroine's journeys. So, I'm going to take the modern approach and go non-binary. Just as we all have aspects of the sacred feminine and the sacred masculine, stories have aspects of the heroine's and the hero's journey. Instead of concerning myself with gender, I'm going to focus on creating an avatar people root for. Thanks to [Carole Wolfe](#) for recommending Carriger.

Eric Nuzum, [Make Noise](#)

Nuzum wrote his book for audio storytellers (podcasters), but as he says, the principles apply in any story format. His chapter "How to Tell a Story, aka Don't Be Boring" is a solid summary of the principles. I love his suggestion to tell your story to six people as you're creating it. As much as I'd like to skip blithely over this recommendation, I know if I had done this with the novel I'm working on now, I would have saved months and maybe years of effort. Thanks to [Bruce Devereux](#) for recommending Nuzum.

Story Grid Editor Roundtable Podcast

[Gladiator episode](#), story analysis by Anne Hawley, Kim Kessler, Jarie Bolander, and Leslie Watts.

David Franzoni interviews

[Franzoni's quote](#) about honor, from the *LA Times*.

[Franzoni's quote](#) about fighting against the impossible machine, from *CreativeScreenwriting*.

[Anne Hawley and Rachelle Ramirez](#) of Pages & Platforms

Their specific structure to phrase the *Crisis Question*, their deep understanding and thoughtful sharing of story structure and story type (AKA genre), and their ability to simplify and make approachable the complexities of story.

Anne Hawley and [Danielle Kiowski](#)

The idea of working backward to figure out a story, and working out from the climax.

Jennie Nash, [Blueprint for a Book](#)

Because I was stuck with how to revise the first draft of my novel, I attended a 3-hour workshop with Jennie Nash that gave an overview of her recommended process, and a try-out on three scenes. Because I saw how effective it was, I signed up for her 12-day workshop. It was an investment I'm glad I made. The workshop didn't just give me a book coach's feedback on the Inside Outline of my novel, it gave me a "do these first, then do those" plan for my revision. Side benefit: it made me realize that structure isn't story, and that's how the unicycle (and the rider!) rolled into the picture. Jennie was also my source for the Borges fire + algebra quote.

Matt Stone & Trey Parker

In a two-minute YouTube video, the creators of *South Park* give NYU students writing advice with their simple rule for story: causation between each beat. Connect beats with *therefore* or *but*, never *and then*.

Chris Soth, [Million-Dollar Screenwriting: The Mini-Movie Method](#)

Just when you think you're done, you're not. When I shared *The StoryWheel* with fellow writers in an online community, their response was appreciative. Two writers added their favorite structure source: Chris Soth. *What? There's another revered source I haven't heard of?* There is, and it's excellent. Soth pointed out two things others hadn't (or they had, and I missed). First, the jolts (my term, not his) are driven alternately by the antagonist and the avatar. Second, if you want to write an engaging story, every section must be fully engaging, its own "mini-movie." He's right. Soth's model (no graphics) includes eight mini-movies, just as the Story Circle has eight steps and the StoryWheel has eight segments. Thanks to [Barbara Jacksha](#) and Randall Hendee for recommending Soth.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to...

Mike Austin, for hanging that two-page model on the wall behind his desk, visible on our Zoom sprints. Mike was the first indication that the StoryWheel could be useful to others.

Rachelle Ramirez, for asking a question that turned a two-page model into this document.

Dr. Laurie Anderson, for providing a psychologist's perspective and for helping me see the forest for the trees, and **Linda Rasins**, for reviewing an early draft and giving me hope when I was despairing.

Ginger Blackwell, for reviewing a later draft, then waking up, getting out of bed, and walking straight to her desk to let me know specifically how the document needed to change to make it useful to more people. The simplified version of the StoryWheel exists because of Ginger.

Jennie Nash, for coaching me to see the difference between story and structure, and **Anne Hawley**, for bringing needed flexibility to the StoryWheel. The [StoryWheel Balance Calculator](#) exists because of Anne.

Katie Robleski, for her both-hands-in-the-air enthusiastic support, her ability to see with the eye of a designer, and her gift that connected me to the swan dive into possibility.

My writing gurus and buddies, who provided kind encouragement, with a mighty shout out to my fellow virtual coffeehouse sprinters. Special thanks to Jill Harris for her radical compassion, John Cook for tech testing and consistent generosity, and Jennifer Kelly (AKA Carole Wolfe) for spreading the StoryWheel to her writerly world. For the 2023 edition, special thanks to Cathy Ryan and Julie Hartig for seeing things to fix, Pete Mousseaux for seeing what could be, and PK Wiggins for taking the unicycle for a test ride.

[Oms Creations](#), who did the StoryWheel graphics, [Khrystyna Lukashchuk](#), who did the unicycle graphic, and [Lori Paximadis](#), who did an early editorial review.

Seth Godin, who made me realize the tools of production are in our hands. Ta-da!

Dear Reader

I hope you enjoyed *The StoryWheel*. I like to make things, especially things that bring clarity to my thinking. Then I like to share what I've made with others. It's icing on the cake if they like it, too.

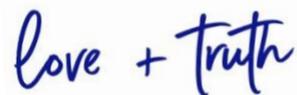
To stay in the loop, sign up for my Sunday emails at julekucera.com. I also hang out on Instagram [@jule.kucera](https://www.instagram.com/jule.kucera) and would love to connect with you there.

For more StoryWheel tools, check out the [StoryWheel Garage](#). If you have writer buddies who would like *The StoryWheel*, please share it! Here's a handy link to a direct download (no email required): bit.ly/TSWmine. You may freely distribute this handbook as long as you don't sell or change it.

Best wishes to you and your stories!



fire + algebra



love + truth



Jule

The StoryWheel

Use this space to map your story.

