

## Story Structures

Story structure helps writers shape that change in a way that keeps an audience emotionally engaged. Different structures suit different kinds of stories, but all of them are really about one thing:

### Who or what is different by the end?

#### Beginning – Middle – End

This is the most basic and widely understood story shape.

**Beginning:** We meet the characters and understand the world they live in.

Something happens that disrupts normal life — a problem, opportunity, conflict, or decision.

**Middle:** The character responds to the challenge.

Things become more complicated. Obstacles appear. Mistakes are made. Tension rises.

**End:** The conflict is resolved in some way. The character, relationship, or situation has changed.

#### Why it works

This structure mirrors how humans naturally process events:

What was life like? What happened? What changed?

Even the shortest stories use this shape. A good ending does not necessarily mean a “happy” ending — it simply means the audience can feel that something has shifted.

## The Hero's Journey

A Story of Transformation

Popularised by Joseph Campbell, the Hero's Journey is a structure often used in films, novels, and myths. It focuses heavily on personal growth and transformation.

#### Key stages include:

- The Ordinary World – the hero's normal life
- The Call to Adventure – something forces change
- Crossing the Threshold – they enter a new world or challenge
- Trials and Obstacles – they struggle, fail, and learn
- The Crisis – a major setback or moment of truth
- Transformation – the hero changes internally
- Return – they return different from how they began

#### Why it works

The Hero's Journey resonates because audiences recognise themselves in it. Most people experience moments where life pushes them into unfamiliar territory and they have to adapt.

The external plot matters — but the emotional journey matters more.

The real question becomes:

Who has this person become because of what they experienced?

## **The Circular Story Structure**

In a circular structure, the story often ends in a similar place to where it started, but with a crucial emotional or thematic difference.

For example:

- A character returns home
- A conversation repeats in a new context
- The same location appears at the beginning and end
- Daily life continues — but the audience understands it differently

## **Why it works**

This structure highlights internal change rather than dramatic plot twists.

It can be especially powerful in:

- coming-of-age stories
- social realism
- documentary storytelling
- stories based on lived experience

The audience notices how perspective has shifted. The world may look the same on the surface, but the character is no longer the same person.

## **Robert McKee's Core Story Structure**

In a McKee-style structure, the story is built around a chain of cause and effect, where each event creates pressure that forces the character into change.

Rather than a straight line of plot, it is a sequence of turning points that steadily disrupt the character's world until they are forced to make a decisive choice.

### **1. The Inciting Incident**

Something disrupts the protagonist's normal world and creates imbalance.

This moment launches the story and gives the character a conscious or unconscious desire to restore order, solve a problem, or pursue something new.

From this point, the original "normal life" is no longer stable.

### **2. Progressive Complications**

The character pursues their goal, but obstacles grow more difficult.

Each attempt to solve the problem makes the situation more complex.

Pressure increases — emotionally, practically, or morally — and the stakes rise with it.

### **3. Crisis**

The character reaches a point where they must make a difficult choice.

McKee often describes this as:

"The question the climax answers."

It is usually a dilemma between two competing values or two uncomfortable outcomes, where there is no easy path forward.

### **4. Climax**

The character makes their choice and acts on it.

This is the moment where internal decision becomes external action.

It is the peak of the story's tension — where everything that has built up is released.

### **5. Resolution**

We see the consequences of the climax.  
The character, relationships, or world have shifted in a clear way.  
Something has been gained, lost, understood, or irreversibly changed.

Why it works

This structure is powerful because it is built on progressive change under pressure.  
Each scene should move the story into a new emotional or psychological state, often by shifting values such as:

- hope to despair
- trust to betrayal
- control to chaos
- fear to courage
- ignorance to understanding

The key principle is that nothing remains static. Every moment has an impact.

McKee's core idea is that story is not just:

"Then this happened..."

but instead:

"Because this happened, something changed."

That chain of consequence is what creates momentum, meaning, and emotional weight for an audience.

### **Why Change Is Essential in Storytelling**

A story is not just a sequence of events.

It is a sequence of events that causes change.

That change might be:

- emotional
- relational
- moral
- psychological
- societal
- physical

The scale can be huge or incredibly subtle.

A person might:

- gain confidence
- lose innocence
- change their opinion
- repair a relationship
- fail to change at all — and suffer because of it

Even in stories where the plot is quiet, audiences are looking for movement underneath the surface.

A useful question for any storyteller is:

**“What is different at the end compared to the beginning?”**

If the answer is clear, the story usually has direction, purpose, and emotional impact.