



## The Dramatic Sentence: An Introduction To Basic Story Structure

By Peter Rubie and Gary Provost

*Gary Provost and Peter Rubie were the co-authors of **How to Tell a Story: The Secrets of Writing Captivating Tales**. Thank to Gary's wife Gail for granting permission to share this article.*

My friend Gary Provost and I created what we teasingly called the Gary Provost Sentence (with some help from Aristotle). Here it is:

*Once upon a time... something happened to someone, and he decided that he would pursue a goal. So he devised a plan of action, and even though there were forces trying to stop him, he moved forward because there was a lot at stake. And just as things seemed as bad as they could get, he learned an important lesson, and when offered the prize he had sought so strenuously he had to decide whether or not to take it, and in making that decision he satisfied a need that had been created by something in his past.*

This is classic dramatic structure. It works because it's story telling that is most satisfying to the reader. Aristotle defined good drama as storytelling that defined character, created atmosphere, and advanced the action of the plot. No one has ever really substantively improved on this beautifully simple yet profound definition, though I think Norman Mailer came close when he said in a TV interview, "The best fiction is where art, philosophy, and adventure all meet."

Let's go through Gary's paragraph again. This time we'll stop along the way and I'll talk about the elements of plotting. Once you understand these elements whether you're a literary novelist or a writer of non-fiction, or a genre writer you'll be able to plot any story you like.

**Once upon a time . . . something happened to someone . . .**

This is what we call the inciting incident. In other words, it's what caused the story to kick in. Say your story begins on Thursday. Don't begin it on Wednesday, just to set the scene and introduce the characters, a classic amateur flaw. Plunge us right into the action the moment it

starts. Why? Because nothing significant happened on Wednesday. You're not writing someone's life, you're writing the story of a watershed moment in that life. The thing that happened to upset the equilibrium or the balance in his life is the thing that begins the story. That's the inciting incident. That's where your story should start.

**. . . and he decided that he would pursue a goal.**

There's something this person wants. What is it? It's the prize, the thing he's trying to get through, all through the story. What is it that your main character wants? In the long run what does he hope to achieve?

**So he devised a plan of action . . .**

Let's call this The Strategy. How is our hero going to go about pursuing his goal, or prize? What's he going to do? What's his plan?

**. . . and even though there were forces trying to stop him . . .**

This is the opposition, the conflict. Conflict is the basis of all drama. Our hero wants something, and he's figured out a way of getting it. Something has to get in his way, something or somebody has to have a conflicting goal, and a conflicting plan C something has got to try and stop him. Nobody's interested in reading a story about an guy who wanted a million dollars and got it. They want to read about a guy who wanted a million dollars and had a lot of trouble getting it. There are forces coming against our hero, there is conflict.

**. . . he moved forward because there was a lot at stake.**

Ah, The Stakes! What our hero wants, what plan he's devised to get it, and what this effort will cost our hero? In chess, every move forward gains something, but it also loses something as well. Nothing of any importance in this life is free. In one form or another we always pay a price for what we most desire. In a story the stakes have to be very high. What are they in your? Life or death, lovers lost forever, friends becoming implacable enemies, something very important we can all relate to. You don't want to write a story about a guy who is going to lose his typewriter or his comb. It's got to be something very important, something big enough to disrupt his life, to change him from what he was into someone else by the end of the story.

**And just as things seemed as bad as they could get . . .**

This is known as the Bleakest Moment. Things are dark and dreary for this person. Everything has gone wrong and it seems as if the forces of opposition arrayed against him have won. But somehow, from the darkness of his despair and depression, from his failures, he finds the strength to persevere and overcome against overwhelming odds.

**. . . he learned an important lesson,**

Aha, a revelation. Our protagonist comes through his Bleakest Moment with a gift C understanding. At last he sees, he understands something about life that he didn't understand before. Stories, whether fiction or non-fiction, are about people growing and changing, about their insights into the human condition. By the end of the story, this new knowledge has changed our protagonist for the better. He is a little wiser, and a little stronger, he has a little more faith in himself, or in others, or in the bountiful nature of life. He has grown and learned a lesson.

**. . . and when offered the prize he had sought so strenuously he had to decide whether or not to take it . . .**

He makes The Decision. The important thing to remember about this decision is that when he makes it, he gains something, and he gives something up. It isn't much of a decision if someone says, "Hey, here you are. Here's a million dollars, you can take it or leave it." But if someone comes along and says, "Congratulations, now you can get your million dollars. But there's one catch: if you take it you'll never see your daughter again. And if you want to keep on seeing your daughter, you'll never get another chance to get your million dollars you've just earned." This now, is an important decision our hero must make.

**. . . and in making that decision he satisfied a need . . .**

Let's call this The Hole. It is the Aengine that has been driving him to do stuff the whole of his life, and certainly for the duration of the story, though he may not even be aware of what that hole is.

**. . . that had been created by something in his past.**

This is the importance of the Backstory. The backstory simply means his past, whatever happened in his past relevant to the story you're telling about our hero. The need or hole is something that happened to our hero before the story began. Something perhaps that haunts him. The enigmatic reference to the boyhood sled Rosebud, in Citizen Kane, for example. In someway the hero is still incomplete. He's been injured, or he's had a part of him taken away. Perhaps he's lost his faith, or rejected love. Perhaps he's a loner, someone who's not good at sharing himself with others, and he comes into this story carrying this thing with him, needing this hole filled. And in the process of the story, the hole is filled as he comes to his realization.

If interested in the full book, it's available by Crossroads Press at:

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