

ACT 1 – THE SETUP

HOOK

INTRODUCTION TO PROTAGONIST'S INNER CONFLICT

The hook is internal conflict, which is simple: desire vs fear. Despite popular belief, the internal conflict starts long before the inciting incident shows up to destroy your protagonist's life. In fact, that conflict has been boiling just below the surface this whole time — otherwise, your inciting incident wouldn't matter. See, external conflict (the plot) is all about what happens; but internal conflict (the story) is about why it matters.

Ask yourself: What does my protagonist think will bring her true happiness or contentment? And how is her fear stopping her from going after it?

INCITING INCIDENT

PROTAGONIST IS PUSHED OUTSIDE COMFORT ZONE

This is the event that really sets your story in motion. Your inciting incident doesn't have to be some big, epic, crazy call-to-adventure. It just has to be something that pushes your protagonist outside their comfort zone. A conflict surfaces — something the protagonist has to face head-on. It's really as simple as that. Don't overcomplicate it, as many writers do. If you know why the inciting incident matters to the protagonist and you let them react to it as a normal person would (running for cover because of their fear!) CONGRATULATIONS. You nailed it.

Ask yourself: Why does this inciting incident matter to my protagonist? How does it push her outside her comfort zone?

BUILD-UP

FACING THE CONSEQUENCES

Protagonist is going to have to face this thing head on. The reader can now see what the protagonist's internal struggle really is, and how this whole situation is going to be especially tricky for her to navigate.

Ask yourself: What internal conflict is going to arise for my protagonist in wake of the inciting incident?

FIRST PLOT POINT

PROTAGONIST MAKES A DECISION WHICH DETERMINES WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Your protagonist is a conflicted person — torn between desire and fear. So when the inciting incident steps in and shoves them outside their comfort zone, their fear takes over and they respond all wrong, which sets up more obstacles for the rest of the book.

Ask yourself: How is my protagonist going to react to the inciting incident, given their fear and misbelief about the world? What decision are they going to make now to avoid the most pain? (And get what they want while steering clear of the thing they're afraid of?)

FIRST PINCH POINT

OPPOSITION/ANTAGONISTIC FORCE LOOMS IN THE DISTANCE

You can have a pinch point even if you don't have a "villain" character in your story. It doesn't have to be a villain — it doesn't have to be a person. It just has to be something that is ultimately going to come back to haunt the protagonist later. (It can even be the protagonist's misbelief.)

Ask yourself: What is the opposition/antagonistic force my protagonist is going to have to face head-on later? How can I show the reader that it's already looming in the distance?

ACT 2 – THE CONFRONTATION

PRE-MIDPOINT REACTIONARY HERO

PROTAGONIST PURSUES THEIR FEAR-BASED GOAL

Thanks to the decision your protagonist made at the end of act one, they are now a man (or a woman) with a plan. They have a goal now that they are actively pursuing. Essentially, they're going after the thing they think will make them happy while still steering clear of the thing they're afraid of. Whether they're running away from something or running *to* something, their motivation is the same: avoid as much pain as possible, and get to the finish line where happiness awaits.

Ask yourself: how is my protagonist going to execute their plan (achieve goal, avoid fear)? What is their step-by-step plan for making this happen? (Even if they don't know every step themselves).

GAME-CHANGING MIDPOINT

PLOT TWIST!

A game-changing midpoint doesn't have to be some epic and crazy twist of fate. In fact, the only thing a game-changing midpoint has to do is surprise the protagonist and shift their goal. (Bonus points if you can surprise the reader at the same time!)

Ask yourself: What unexpected thing is going to upend my protagonist's plan (and entire life)? Why does it matter to my protagonist, given their desire and fear? How is it going to change the game for my protagonist?

POST-MIDPOINT ACTION HERO

PROTAGONIST APPROACHES THEIR GOAL FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE

Figure out how your protagonist is going to handle the plot twist. It's sort of like another inciting incident, shoving them further outside their comfort zone and presenting a new and unexpected challenge. Give your protagonist a plan going forward – and a sense of where this is going. Your readers want to know what happens next because they can foresee what MIGHT happen.

Ask yourself: What is my protagonist's NEW plan going to be, based on the game-changing midpoint and what it means to them? How does my protagonist think their new plan is going to actually work and bring them to their goal while STILL avoiding their fear?

SECOND PINCH POINT

OPPOSITION/ANTAGONISTIC FORCE GETS CLOSER

Remember, your “opposition” doesn't have to be an actual villain or person — it can be the protagonist's misbelief always looming in the background, getting ready to attack them come act 3. Whatever the major “opposition” your protagonist is going to face off with at the climax of your story, that's what you want to give the reader a taste of at this story beat.

Ask yourself: how can I show the opposition/antagonistic force now getting closer to disrupting the protagonist's life?

ACT 3 – THE RESOLUTION

SUPPOSED VICTORY

PROTAGONIST THINKS THEY HAVE OVERCOME

Making progress with their new-and-improved plan, the protagonist feels confident they will be victorious. Or perhaps they have already overcome the smallest of the challenges and feel pretty good about their plan. Little do they know, disaster is on the way. (NOTE: this plot point is optional, but awesome.)

Ask yourself: Why does my protagonist think they will be victorious? What's happening to make them feel SO CLOSE to achieving their goal and finding happiness at last?

DISASTER

EVERYTHING GOES WRONG

Bring your protagonist to their knees by rooting the disaster in their greatest fear and misbelief. It might be something that's terrible for *anyone* to experience, but go beyond that and make it something *especially bad* for your protagonist because of their fear and misbelief.

Ask yourself: what does this disaster specifically mean to my protagonist? How does it force them to realize that they're the one to blame for this crisis? How does it completely disarm them and make them face off with their fear and misbelief?

DARK MOMENT

PROTAGONIST IS HOPELESS

It's always darkest before the dawn. Your protagonist needs a rock-bottom moment in order to have an "aha" moment — and that's what makes the revelation so satisfying. But right now, in wake of the disaster, your protagonist is feeling utterly and completely broken, confused, lost, and disappointed.

AHA MOMENT

RENEWED HOPE

This is the biggest pivotal moment in your whole story. After your protagonist has been brought to their knees by the disaster, they have a revelation — an aha moment. They can suddenly see how their fear and misbelief has led them to make the wrong decisions about everything. They realize how wrong they were — but most importantly, they see that they'll have to overcome their fear and make the RIGHT decision in order to achieve their goal: true happiness.

Ask yourself: how is my protagonist going to overcome their fear and continue to the climax, therefore developing as a character? What lesson are they going to learn (and simultaneously teach the audience?)

CLIMACTIC CONFRONTATION

PROTAGONIST FACES THEIR BIGGEST CHALLENGE YET

This is the moment everyone has been waiting for, where the protagonist is going to face their most difficult challenge yet. It's a true test of their character — and how they respond to the confrontation is the proof that they've TRANSFORMED...as a *result* of their journey. So your protagonist has already won the internal battle (in their "aha" moment) but now it's time for them to win the external battle (which of course will force them to face off with their greatest fears.)

Ask yourself: how does my protagonist prove their transformation by crushing their misbelief and facing their greatest fear with courage?

VICTORY

PROTAGONIST OVERCOMES

This doesn't necessarily mean the protagonist wins the external battle or that things turn out exactly how they hoped. But the protagonist *does* experience a *personal* victory — because they overcame their fear and destroyed their misbelief. Here's my rule of thumb: if your reader doesn't know how the character has transformed as a result of their journey, you need to rewrite your book until they do.

Ask yourself: how has my protagonist changed as a result of their journey?

RESOLUTION

WRAPPING UP LOOSE ENDS

This is the part where all the loose ends are tied up. The reader should be left with no missing information or silent questions. If the book is part of a series, then you may want to end on a cliffhanger by swapping out the "victory" story beat with another "plot twist." If the book is a standalone, make sure the reader's questions are answered when they reach the final page.