Middles and Ends

Week 1: Overview

I link to articles and podcasts for each week. Not all resources need to be listened to or read, but they help deepen the topic and provide other perspectives. However, I gathered a lot of notes from the following places:

Main Sources:
The Great Courses – Writing Great Fiction
The Great Courses – How to Write Best-Selling Fiction

Other Sources:
Steering the Craft by Ursula K Le Guin
"The Carrier Bag Theory," by Ursula K. Le Guin

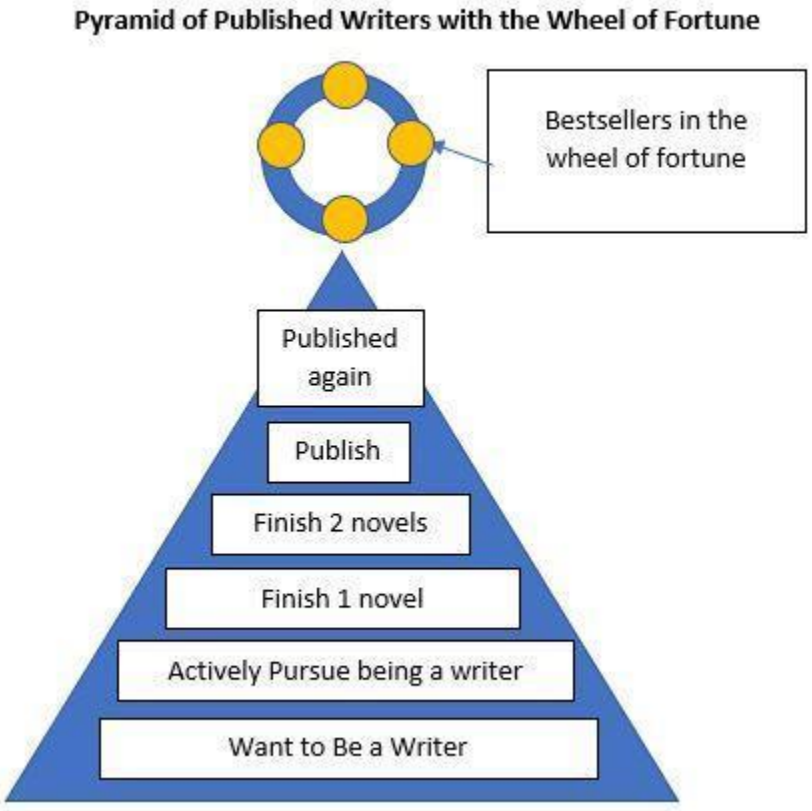
Craft Books Referenced in The Great Courses:
Aspects of the Novel by E.M Forester
The Art of Fiction by John Gardner
The Emotional Craft of Fiction by Donald Maas
The Simple Art of Murder by Raymond Chandler

Welcome!

Welcome to this study group! In order to get to know everyone, have a go at answering the following questions:

1. What is your goal as a writer?
    - Traditionally published author
    - Self-published author
    - Hobby author
    - Another goal?
2. Where do you feel your skills stand as a writer?
    - Beginner – Have not written many stories and have submitted one or two for review (or none).
    - Intermediate – Have written quite a few stories/novels and submitted them to one or two workshops/groups
    - Advanced – Have written many stories/novels and have submitted to multiple workshops/groups/publications
    - Or does this matter to you?
3. What kind of writer do you consider yourself to be?
    - Literary? Commercial/genre?
    - If genre, which one (romance, fantasy, sci-fi)?
    - If literary, what kind (modernist, experimental, etc.)?

A representation of the author's journey (according to The Great Courses: Writing Commercial Fiction):



Overview of topics in this study:

- Week 2: Middles
    - The Tricksy Middle
    - Creating Interesting Middles
    - Middles in Novels
    - Middles in Short Stories
- Week 3: Endings
    - Achieving Surprising but Inevitable
    - Twists
    - Satisfying Endings
    - Types of Endings
    - The Building Blocks of a Good Ending
- Weeks 4: Suspense and Tension (Part 1)
    - Using Suspense and Tension to avoid a saggy middle
    - The Gap between expectation and reality
    - Release of suspense/tension to create satisfying endings
    - A brief note on types of tension
- Weeks 5: Suspense and Tension (Part 2)
    - Using Suspense and Tension to avoid a saggy middle - More techniques
    - Creating Tension by withholding information
    - Careful balance between withholding and revealing information
    - Creating tension with an inner yearning or underlying need
    - A quick note on theme

- Week 6: Plot and Structure
    - The structure of a story
    - Common types of Structure
    - A note on consequences
    - Story level structure is a promise
    - Progression, pacing, and reader engagement
    - Progressing too quickly
    - The non-plot-driven novel
- Week 7: Promises and Expectations
    - Building Trust with the reader
    - How does one set up promises or expectations?
    - Fulfilling promises at the end
    - How to identify where you are setting expectations and making promises
- Week 8: Study Conclusion

Week 1 Homework:

- Think of one story that had an ending that you felt was incredibly satisfying or perfect. Then, find one story that had an ending that disappointed you. Compare them. Where do you think the stories you enjoyed went right? And where do you think the stories that disappointed you went wrong?
    - In 3000 words or less, summarize what the author did right, and what they did wrong in your opinion.

Week 2: Middles

Week 2 Resources:

Article
The Middle Is the Biggest Part of Your Novel: Keep it Lively

Podcast:
Writing Excuses 10.27: Why Can't I Just Jump to the Ending? | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.30: Q&A on Middles, with Marie Brennan | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.36: How Does Context Shape Plot Twists? | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.42: How In The World Do I Tie All This Together? | transcript

The Tricksy Middle

Middles are difficult because they include some of the most skillful aspects of storytelling. You must use a combination of practices to keep a reader interested beyond the opening scenes. The following are tools that can be used:

- Tension, Intrigue, suspense
- Try/Fail cycles
- Making promises to a reader and keeping them
- Careful balance of withholding and revealing information

Character, however, is key. Everything in the middle should serve to deepen a reader's appreciation for, or loathing of, a character (or multiple characters.)

Creating Interesting Middles

What makes a middle interesting is different to different writers. Writers of commercial and most genre fiction say that middles are interesting due to:

- Subplots
- A series of cat-and-mouse interactions with the antagonist
- Raising the stakes
- Throwing more and more obstacles into the character's path
- Building tension

Characters should have a goal, a wound, or a misbelief about the world, and the story should ask a binary question, such as "who will win the fight?" or "will the band of thieves escape?"

Literary writers say that middles draw the reader forward with psychological intrigue, using tactics such as:

- Mixing up chronology
- Changing POV, or how the scenes are written
- Painting beautiful pictures with language and sentences

Ursula K. Le Guin defines this type of fiction as “a narrative of events (external or psychological) that moves through time or implies the passage of time and involves change.” The story has a *focus* and a *trajectory*. Change, in either the reader or the character, is the driving force.

How a writer approaches the middle of their story depends on where they stand on the story-plot continuum.

Story-Plot Continuum

Chronological Story (And then?) Binary resolution (Does this* happen, or doesn’t it? Asks a question and answers it in the resolution)	Mix (more complicated story) Backstory plus binary resolution (Complex world, POV, chronology, but does this* happen, or doesn’t it?)	Subtle Plot or no plot (Why?) More literary (Modernist) A narrative of events (external or psychological) that moves through time or implies the passage of time and involves change.

* “This” examples: Good triumph over evil, One noble house wins throne over others, etc.

- Children’s stories
- Breaking Bad
- Die Hard

- Harry Potter
  - Events before Harry’s birth drive narrative
  - Information provided in non-chronological order
- A Song of Ice and Fire
  - Preceding history of events
  - POV is more complex
  - Complex chronology
  - Rich evocation of a fantasy world
  - Access to the thoughts of very interesting characters
  - Lets “good guys” lose and “bad buys” win, answering the “why?”
  - Characters we thought were heroes begin to show weakness, bad judgment, and cruelty, while characters we hate show flashes of tenderness and compassion.

- Lord Jim by Joseph Conrad
  - Told out of order chronologically
  - Uses POV changes (third to first) to suggest that the reader is learning second-hand information about Lord Jim
  - The narrative unfolds so that the reader gets an understanding of Lord Jim the way one may get to know a stranger who becomes a friend
  - The reader is tasked to piece the bits of Lord Jim’s life together as one would when getting to know someone

Middles in Novels

Because there’s a lot more room in a novel, there are a lot more chances to include subplots, extra characters, and other information. There are lots of try/fail cycles in which the protagonist tries to get the thing they want and keeps failing (or succeeds, but causes other trouble).

Here is an example of breaking down a novel’s middle into sections (commercial fiction):

- Beginning of Middle
    - Exploring Problem
    - Introduce sub-plots (love interest, professional obstacles, etc.)
    - Give challenges
    - Character's reactions create new problems
    - Good place for foreshadowing
    - Heighten tension
- Mid-Point
    - Mini-climax (another life changing event or huge problem)
    - Takes new direction from first half of the story
- Second Half of Middle
    - Tries to resolve the new problem
    - Sees need to change but doesn't know how
    - Protagonist/antagonist begin to understand one another
    - Wrap up subplots
    - Protagonist makes a wrong decision
    - But tries again
- Climax and Falling Action – beginning of the end

Some suggested metrics for novels; each with their own try/fail cycles:

- How many subplots does a novel need (a suggestion)?
    - 60k words: 1 or 2 subplots
    - 70-80k words: 2 or 3 subplots
    - 90-100k words: 3 or 4 subplots
    - 100k+: As many as you need

Middles in Short Stories

In short fiction, there's not enough space for much to happen. These stories still have beginnings, middles, and ends, but they are often too short to encompass more than a single focus. For example, having a character trying to rescue a lost spacecraft (main plot) while also falling in love with their partner (subplot) is probably the most you can fit into the short story. Another subplot may turn the short story into a novella/novelette.

A short story will also feature a series of try/fail cycles—often no more than three. In literary fiction, these cycles can be interpreted as waves of "understanding/realization."

Beginning

- Exploring problem
    - Introduce the character and demonstrate their "problem."
        - Example problems: A search for romantic love, a desire to please a difficult family

Middle

- Try/fail cycles 1, 2, and 3 (the middle of the short story)
    - A character tries multiple times to chase their desire, but these attempts end in failure.

    - The failures often need to connect—this is the "causal chain."
        - Example: Disappointing the brother leads to the brother taking opportunities away from the protagonist (kicking them out of the family business)
        - Example: The character tries unsuccessfully to make a partner to whom they are attracted respect them

Beginning of the end

- Climax
    - The problem reaches its boiling point—moment of highest stress, or breaking point for the character.
        - Example: Character's parents impose an impossible choice: Marry a first cousin to please them
        - Example: The protagonist horrifically embarrasses their potential partner, who breaks up with them
- Falling action
    - The character has to come to terms with what happened in the climax and make a final choice.
        - Example: Protagonist realizes that nothing will please the unpleasable family, even if they do marry their cousin
        - Example: The protagonist realizes that their partner was the wrong person for them all along
- End
    - This is where the story ties itself up, describing what happened to the character because of their choice.
        - Example: Character decides to stop pleasing their family and moves away
        - Example: The protagonist decides to invest in a business instead of spending all that energy dating

In literary fiction, these moments are more subtle. For example, in the story *The Dead* by James Joyce:

Beginning

- A husband and wife go to Christmas parties all night, meeting family, colleagues, and friends. The husband catches his wife listening to a song before they leave a party for their hotel.
    - Exploring problem and setting up—though we won't know what the true problem is until the end of the story.

Middle

- The husband has a series of awkward conversations at these parties, and talks with his wife. He considers his career and retreats into himself. After the parties, the husband gets excited about the prospect of spending a night alone in a hotel with his wife.
    - Glimpses of the problem and try/fail cycles

Beginning of the end

- But the husband realizes his wife is not interested in sex. When he presses her, she tells him that the song she was listening to reminded her of a boyfriend who died when she was younger—a boy who used to sing the song she heard at the party outside her window in the cold. She thinks he became ill and died as a result. The husband is dismayed that he never knew this about his wife.
    - Climax/moment of realization

End/Resolution

- The husband considers the countless dead in people's lives, realizing that he himself, and everyone he knows, will one day be a memory.
    - Falling action and end, where the character's entire perspective is changed. Now the problem is revealed—the husband was living a life he didn't really understand until this moment.

Week 2 Homework:

- Take stock of novels or short stories that kept you turning pages. Pick your favorite one and review the middle portion. Make note of events that move the story along. Can you map out some try/fail cycles? What changes occur in the protagonist's life that continue to challenge them?
    - Write out these events and notes and try to make correlations between them. See if you can identify the elements of the character trying and failing. These can be very subtle or very obvious.

Week 3: Endings

Not all resources need to be listened to or read, but they help deepen the topic and provide other perspectives.

Week 3 Resources:

Podcasts:
Writing Excuses 15.42 - Writing the End | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.40: What's the Difference Between Ending and Stopping? | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.43: Q&A on Endings, with Delia Sherman | transcript
Writing Excuses 9.16: Coming up with a New Ending Halfway Through | transcript

Articles:
How to Write the Perfect Ending for Your Novel by Masterclass
Book Endings: The 6 Ways That All Stories End

Achieving Surprising but Inevitable

Good endings depend on individual taste and the tastes of the times. This is, unfortunately, very subjective. An ending that satisfies one person may not satisfy everyone. A good rule of thumb is to achieve an **inevitable** or **believable** ending, while striving for **satisfaction**.

The ultimate reaction a writer hopes to achieve is:

I didn't see it coming, but of course it would end that way.

Surprising, but inevitable.

Twists

However, there is a danger in not following convention. This goes for "twist" endings that seem to appear out of nowhere. There's also the suggestion that an idea may be "ahead of its time," and as such, will be difficult for people to understand. Consider Van Gogh, or Ursula K. Le Guin.

If your goal is to write and sell commercial fiction, it may be better to follow convention than to shake it off, at least at the beginning of a career. If your goal is to work with traditional publishers, then it may be better to write with the audience in mind. If your goal is to self-publish, then you need to find your dedicated readers and write for them.

Structuring a story in an unfamiliar way can also cause this disconnect. For example, people who are used to Western story structures may resist non-Western structures simply because they do not understand the structure. A reader's expectations rely on their general understanding of human character (and story structure), applied to the understanding they have of the character you are writing.

Some of these are things a writer cannot control and may not be able to predict until they have discovered their own audience and niche.

Satisfying Endings

Satisfaction is a wholly subjective judgment.

- In matters of taste, there can be no dispute
- Accept that an ending cannot be everything to all people.

If one cannot have a satisfactory ending for everyone, one can always strive for inevitable and believable endings.

How does one achieve inevitable/believable?

- Get readers to play along with the premise of your narrative
- Play fair by obeying the rules of your created world
- Respect your own characters (and readers)

Another way of thinking about it is to have a goal of **fulfilling the reader's expectations**. One does this by:

- Making promises in the story
- Setting up expectations
- Delivering on them

For example:

- In a mystery novel, there is an expectation that there will be a killer and that the killer will be apprehended by the end.
    - If the killer is not apprehended, the story is still believable, but it is unsatisfying.
    - If the killer is caught because of a blatant contrivance, then the story may not be believable.

Types of Endings

Depending on the type of work you are writing, you can have a binary (commercial fiction: question/answer), or an epiphany (literary fiction: realization/change) ending.

Binary Endings (Commercial/genre)

- Resolves either/or questions or answers a simple question posed at the beginning of a story.
- Binary endings can be layered, and when answered, create a sense of satisfaction.

Logical exhaustion (Epiphany ending/Literary)

- We've reached the stage of infinite repetition (where things remain the same. They stop changing).
- Point where a narrative reaches its deepest understanding of a character or situation.
- No plot, but leads to a sort of epiphany within the reader or the character by the end.

Mixed Ending (mix of binary and epiphany ending)

- These stories ask a binary question.
- But the ending leads to a radical change of perspective. Instead of finding the ending unbelievable, it alters your understanding of everything that came before.

Commonalities in these endings are that they:

- Are prepared for early in the narrative (by making promises and setting expectations).
- Leave the reader with nothing left to know.

The Building Blocks of a Good Ending

There are writers who outline and writers who make up the story as they go along (discovery writing/seat of your pantsers). Both methods have pros and cons. However, both methods can be used to achieve good endings.

Outliners

In the case of the outliner, the story structure and direction is decided in advance, and the writer works toward the goal they laid out. Promises and expectations can be planned and decided ahead of writing.

Discovery Writers

In the case of discovery writers, they do not know the direction their story will take, and so write toward it. However, once they finish their story, they can apply a structure to the story in revision, identify the binary questions/epiphany moments, and then revise toward them. In revision, they can locate the promises and expectations they set, and shore them up.

A few other items of note:

- Not knowing where you're going may lead to a more satisfying ending.
    - For example, Agatha Christie may not have decided who the killer would be in her novels until she wrote the last chapter. She would write so that anyone could have done the murder. Then, after she decided, she would revise and add clues and promises.
- Ending of a narrative is where meaning is most sharply defined.
- The secret: Nothing left to say

Week 3 Homework:

- Take a story or novel that you really love and imagine a different ending for it. Then work back to see what you would have to change to make the new ending believable and satisfying. What promises/expectations will you have to set up?
    - Example: Jane Eyre. Outline everything that leads to Jane's marriage to Mr. Rochester, then imagine a different ending. Does she marry someone else? Live on her inheritance? Then go back to the outline and see what you'd have to change in the novel to make that believable.

Week 4: Suspense and Tension – Part 1

Not all resources need to be listened to or read, but they help deepen the topic and provide other perspectives.

Week 4 Resources:

Videos:
Lecture #7: Short Stories — With Special Guest Instructor Mary Robinette Kowal

Podcast:
Writing Excuses 16.41: Middles and Conflicts with M.I.C.E. Structure | transcript
Writing Excuses 12.41: Raising the Stakes | transcript
Writing Excuses 18.09: Unpacking the Tension | transcript

Articles:
The Gap: How to Make Your Story a Page Turner

Using Suspense and Tension to avoid a saggy middle

One key to avoid a saggy middle is by building suspense and escalating tension throughout the middle of your story. Continue building suspense and escalating tension until they reach their highest point at the climax.

> Suspense is uncertainty about the outcome.
> Tension is unmet desire. Tension (often) equals conflict.

So, how do you create suspense and tension?

The Gap between expectation and reality
The Gap is the distance between a character's anticipation and reality, between a character's expectation and result.

Let's say our character wants an apple that's sitting on the table, so they reach out for it, expecting to grab it (expectation). But when they do this, the apple grows legs and scuttles away (result). Suddenly there is a gap between what they understood about the world, and what they now realize the world is actually like.

> The character doesn't get what they want, and this unmet desire creates tension.
> This gap between what the character expected to happen and the completely different or more powerful result that they got makes future outcomes uncertain and creates suspense.

So, the character has failed to meet their desire. What next? How do we keep up suspense and tension?

Try-Fail cycles

To keep up suspense and tension and avoid a saggy middle, the character needs to keep trying and failing to close the gap between expectations and results (via try-fail cycles).

A quick note on try-fail cycles. When a character takes an action, the result can be:

> Yes, but: YES, they succeed, BUT there's a complication or obstacle.
> (YES, they win the fight, BUT they got critically injured in the process.)
> No, and: NO, they fail, AND there's a complication or obstacle.
> (NO, they lose the argument, AND their comments cost them their friend.)

Note that for it to be satisfying, these conflicts should have consequences (the BUT and AND parts). Otherwise, with conflicts only (the YES and NO parts), the story would be lacking in suspense and tension.

But on top of keeping up, how do we increase suspense and escalate tension?

By increasing stakes, increasing uncertainty, and delaying gratification.

> To escalate the tension, increase the stakes.
> Increase the stakes by making them more specific and personal. The greater the character's desire, the greater the stakes.
>
> To increase suspense, increase uncertainty and delay gratification.
> Add uncertainty by making promises. A promise is anything that creates reader expectations.
> Delay gratification by avoiding paying off reader expectations for as long as possible to maintain anticipation.

To raise stakes, make the stakes more specific or more personal.

- More specific
    - You can still have the same thing that can go wrong, but you can make the failure point of that worse by having a specific consequence for their life
        - Less specific: popular kid is afraid that people are going to discover that they are homeless.
        - More specific: popular kid is afraid that people are going to discover that they are homeless, AND as a consequence to people discovering that they are homeless, that could lead to them being put into foster care and taken away from their family.
- More personal
    - Have the stakes be more personal
        - Less personal: if we don't do this, the drinking water could become contaminated.
        - More personal: if we don't do this, the drinking water could become contaminated. The main character then meets one of the little kids who's drinking that water. This makes the failure point worse because it has become personal for the main character.
    - To have personal stakes that evoke emotion, ask: what do you care about, what do you fear? What do your characters fear? (This is different for everyone.)

Note that we will discuss promises in Week 6. For further examples of how to escalate tension and add suspense, see the lists in the linked Bookdun notes on: Suspense and Tension (Chapter 7 of Intuitive Editing by Tiffany Martin Yates), and Escalation (Chapter 4 of Story Trumps Structure by Steven James).

So, after keeping up suspense and tension, how do we release them to create satisfying endings?

Release of suspense/tension to create satisfying endings

Satisfying endings are about the release of suspense and tension after a long period of increasing suspense and escalating tension. Before the point of release, suspense and tension should be at their highest point.

Unless the intention is to do an external plot only, note that suspense and tension ideally exist for emotional, internal plot as well as for external plot. This is because what makes a satisfying ending is often more about the emotional payoff for the character than the plot payoff.

To build then release tension for a satisfying ending, use try fail-cycles in the middle of your story. At about 2/3 or 3/4 mark of story, switch try-fail cycles to try-success cycles.

A quick note on try-success cycles. When a character takes an action, the result can be:

Yes, and: YES, they succeed, AND there's a continuation towards their goal.
(YES, they win the fight, AND they've obtained the final piece of the puzzle.)
No, but: NO, they fail, BUT they still get something towards their goal.
(NO, they lose the argument, BUT the friend they were arguing with forgives them.)

Whether your story has an ending that's binary, mixed, or literary, try-fail and try-succeed cycles are useful tools that are worth trying.

A brief note on types of tension

When talking about tension, we often talk about conflict. For example, if each character in a scene has opposing goals, then that puts them in conflict with each other when they try to get what they want at the expense of the other. But there are other types of tension.

Some other types of tension are:

- Anticipation: the tension of knowing what will happen. For example, the fear of that bad thing happening, or the hope of that good thing happening.
- Juxtaposition: the tension of contrast. For example, an army riding in battle contrasted with a general masticating, hinting at violence.
- Unanswered questions: the tension of not knowing the answer, of mystery.
- Microtension: the mundane, small tensions that happen within a larger scene, often with lower stakes.

Playing with types of tension outside of conflict can make a story feel more subtle and satisfying.

Week 4 Homework (pick one or more):

- The Gap: Write a paragraph or short scene where your POV character wants something from another character. Have the POV character take the action, with a certain expectation for how the other character will react. Have the other character react in a way that is unexpected for your POV character.
- Take a look at your synopsis. Does your story build up suspense/tension with try-fail cycles in the middle and release suspense/tension with try-success cycles at the end? If not, try and introduce some.

Week 5: Suspense and Tension – Part 2

Not all resources need to be listened to or read, but they help deepen the topic and provide other perspectives.

Week 5 Resources:

Podcasts:
Writing Excuses 10.19: Intrigue | transcript
Writing Excuses 9.6: The Experience of Time | transcript
Writing Excuses 15.02: Writing Between the Lines (Theme) | transcript

Articles:
Writing Suspenseful Fiction: Reveal Answers Slowly (Sections: Let Suspense Linger, 3 Techniques to Set Up Slow Reveals) from Jane K. Cleland
Infused by Donald Maass
The Tyranny of Motive by David Corbett

Using Suspense and Tension to avoid a saggy middle - More techniques

The notes this week consist of a collection of techniques that are more subtle and/or require an understanding of a character's motive. The first half consists of the withholding of information to create suspense and tension. The second half consists of using inner yearning or an underlying need to create suspense and tension. Hopefully you can pick and choose what is of interest to you for your story and do a deeper dive into the relevant resources.

Creating Tension by withholding information

There are many ways to create tension by withholding information from the reader. For example:

- The author withholding information from the character and the reader.
    - This is common when both character and reader are trying to solve a mystery. This can mean withholding the identity of a killer. But withholding can be done more subtly too. For example, in Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin, the story begins with Giovanni's execution, which is actually the end of the story, but it "withholds" the full effect and meaning of Giovanni's impending death on David, which comes at the very end of the book. The reader eventually learns that David and Giovanni were lovers.
- The author withholding information from the characters but not the reader.
    - Take for example a scenario where there is a bomb under a table. If the writer doesn't show the audience or characters the bomb, there is no suspense, and when the bomb is revealed, it is a surprise. On the other hand, if the writer shows the bomb to the audience, but not the characters, then the bomb will be a surprise only to the characters, but the reader will feel suspense. Suspense is the reader anticipating when the truth will come out.
- The author withholding information between characters but not the reader.

    - When there's intrigue in a story, that often stems from having characters withholding information from each other, but letting the reader in on the secret by revealing what's going on in each character's head. This is common in political intrigue stories where we often see characters lying to each other to get what they want. The tension of lying is what intrigue is about.
- In some cases, we can even have characters "withholding" emotional information from themselves.
    - This is more difficult to pull off, but can come in the form of denial, not understanding the self, or other inner conflicts. (This is touched on in the emotional plot subsection)

For these techniques to feel satisfying, whatever happens should have consequences and affect the character in some way. Damage from a bomb going off is an obvious example, but in other examples, such as intrigue, it might come out in a more subtle way, such as each lie having a consequence.

An important thing to remember is that you want to avoid frustrating the reader when withholding information. So, don't withhold information to falsely build suspense. Have a good motive for why a character withholds information, and make sure this motive is expressed well in your story.

Careful balance between withholding and revealing information

Creating tension in a story involves withholding information until the point at which you want to deliver it for maximum impact.

One way to let suspense linger is to reveal answers slowly. Here are some techniques from Cleland's Article.

Some line-level techniques to set up a slow reveal:

- Using statements that have multiple meanings
    - For instance, "he was such a nice, quiet young man" can mean someone is polite and shy, or someone who is a loner who keeps secrets.
- Using statements that are open to interpretation
    - Ambiguity can lead to useful misunderstandings. If someone mutters "you better stay away from me," this can mean that they want to avoid you, or that you better avoid them. Having a listener assume one meaning and having it turn out to be another later on can feel satisfying.
- Using statements that beg questions
    - The set up of "the make-up didn't quite cover her black eye" allows your characters to move in any direction you choose. How did she get her black eye–did someone attack her or did she start a fight? Why was she covering it up–is she afraid of feeling like a victim, or is she trying to hide a secret identity?

A story level technique to execute a slow reveal (an example is in Cleland's Article):

1. Let your readers see a specific side of your character, either positive or negative.
2. Select one or more incidents that force or allow the character to act in a way that opposes the positive or negative image.

3. Show the incident in an opposing light.
4. Reveal the truth.

A story can also play with flashforwards, flashbacks, and foreshadowing to create tension:

- Flashforwards
    - Glimpse of something that happens to a character in the future
    - Often gives a glimpse of a dire outcome (as in Giovanni's Room), then returns to the beginning to show how the story worked its way up to that point.
    - Can come across as a mechanical effect
- Flashbacks
    - Usually takes place before the story started
    - Can help the reader understand the significance of what is happening and add tension
- Foreshadowing
    - Hints, or a series of hints, planted to prepare for later events
    - Play fair with the reader (can't have a character waving a pistol around without hinting that waving a pistol around was a possibility)
    - Pay attention to the details you include: If you show a pistol on the wall and no one uses it, you've set up an expectation and then thwarted it (Unless it was a red herring, or false foreshadowing).

Note: when playing with chronology, signposting is an important tool to cue readers on how much time has passed, otherwise they may get confused. Some of the ways you can cue them are:

- Telling:
    - "Since yesterday, she had done…"
    - "In the past three months…"
- Showing:
    - "Autumn leaves outside… "
    - "And now, the golden sun of summer…"

Creating tension with an inner yearning or underlying need

What a character feels can be different from what a reader feels. To make a reader feel tension, a writer has to evoke emotion. They have to give the reader a reason to care.

Just as the outcome of a scene can be in doubt, a character's emotional outcome can also be a source of suspense. Often, the outer journey excites our interest, but the inner journey excites our emotions.

Here, we move into the realm of a character's inner journey.

What keeps us (and our characters) in emotional suspense is the uncertainty of not knowing who we are and/or where we're going, a tension created by an inner yearning or an underlying need to:

- Relieve inner anxiety
- Prove something
- Love and be loved
- Rage at what's unfair
- Fit in
- Stand out

- Find what will make us happy

When it comes to a character's outer goal, it is best to be specific. For example, Ahab wanting to kill the White Whale, or Gatsby wanting Daisy. This gives the character something to do while the story dives deeper into the characters. However we start caring about a character when we feel what they feel, we yearn for what they yearn for.

Sometimes in a novel, we come across scenes which seem to have no plot purpose but work anyway because it makes you feel. These scenes are infused with the character's fundamental, underlying, and unmet need. So how do we achieve this effect?

The key is to express this inner yearning or underlying need without outright saying it. One way to do this:

1) Figure out the character's inner yearning or underlying need and capture it with a sentence or a short paragraph. Alternatively, if you find it difficult to translate that into emotion, try using an image, a work of art, or a piece of music that captures the feeling.
2) With the underlying need just below the surface of your protagonist's awareness, write a scene (or rewrite an existing scene).

Hopefully, using this technique, the scene would make the character's inner motivation and yearning feel rich and complex.

A quick note on theme

It is helpful to think of theme as the underlying meaning of a story. Ask, what is the reason you're telling this story? What is the point of the story? What was the point of the character's inner journey? Giving the reader a sense of the answer by the end of the story can help make the story feel more satisfying.

Theme often works better when it's subtly hinted at and the reader has to think about it after they finish the book rather than having it hitting them over the head with direct statements. For example, rather than explicitly stating the theme in the text, a writer could use subtext to hint at the meaning beyond that.

How to refine the theme? Through revision. It is not unusual for earlier drafts of a story to have no discernable theme, and if desired, it is possible through revision to tease out meaning or to make meaning subtle and satisfying by asking the questions stated above.

Week 5 Homework (pick one or more):

- Withholding and revealing information: Take a situation and tell it first as a surprise, then take the same situation and retell it using suspense.
- Write dialogue in which each of the speakers has a different subtext and motive. Without explicitly stating those, try and make them clear to the reader.
- Write a paragraph or passage that takes us inside your protagonist or shows us what is going on there. Capture not what is happening in the plot, but rather your protagonist's inner yearning.

Week 6: Plot, Structure, and Pacing

Not all resources need to be listened to or read, but they help deepen the topic and provide other perspectives.

Week 7 Resources:

Podcast:
Writing Excuses 12.32: Structuring a Short Piece | transcript
Writing Excuses 12.40: Structuring a Novel | transcript
Writing Excuses 16.52: Structure is a Promise | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.32: How Do I Control the Speed of the Story? | transcript
Writing Excuses 12.14: Controlling Pacing with Structure | transcript

Articles:
Plotting the non-plot-driven novel by Donald Maass
Story Structures: The Fundamentals You Need to Know

Video:
Beyond Hero's Journey: Non-Western Story Structures

The structure of a story

Readers are looking for different types of satisfaction from different story lengths. A short story is about an emotional gut punch. A novel is about a sense of immersion.

In flash fiction, there's usually just one problem to solve. In short stories, usually two. Novels often have much more going on, thus need more worldbuilding, characters, and subplots. If a story doesn't feel satisfying because it feels like too much or not enough is happening, it might be worth seeing if the story needs some problem threads pruned or added.

When a story is longer and a writer has to introduce more events, it helps to remember that readers may feel dissatisfied if a story is just a collection of events.

- To keep the reader going, a story should lead somewhere. This feeling of a story progressing can be achieved by tying the events together with a thread of progression. There are many ways to do this.
    - An example is having a map like in Dante's Inferno, so that the reader knows the story is moving to the center.
    - Another example is having actions with consequences that will keep the reader going.

Common types of Structure

Some of common Western story structures are the following:

1. The Hero's Journey
2. The Seven-Point Structure
3. The Three-Act Structure

4. Freytag's Pyramid

And there are many more. Many stem from classical Greek drama structures and more modern storytelling methods, such as screenwriting.

Some non-western structures include:

1. Oral traditions
2. Kishoutenketsu
3. Katha (Religious storytelling in Hinduism)
4. Folk narratives

And more. Every region of the world is full of stories, and they all have their own structure to them.

A note on consequences

In story terms, a consequence is a negative result of performing an action (e.g. because you went into the burning house, now you've burnt your writing hand). A consequence will affect later events in the story, thus tying events together and giving the story a satisfying sense of progress.

A story can also have delayed consequences. One way to do this is to introduce a new problem that has been caused by a previous solution (e.g. character solves a problem by putting on a bandaid - but you know the bandaid will come loose, and this will be a dangerous thing later on.)

Story level structure is a promise

There are many types of plot structure. It is important to remember that the structure you pick is going to set expectations for the reader, and this will determine how satisfying the story is to them. For example, if your story uses the hero's journey story structure, then the reader may be expecting the mentor to die at some point. If the mentor doesn't die, then the reader might be dissatisfied.

When it come to understanding what a reader is expecting from plot structure, It's helpful to pay attention to your audience:

- For some, if you follow the beats too closely, that will feel predictable and formulaic
- For some audiences, the beats are brand new and will feel fresh (e.g. middle grade)

For readers that enjoy mixed endings or more literary endings, the chronology imposed by something like the hero's journey may feel too predictable. In these instances, if desired by the writer, it might be worth playing with the chronology of the story to see what other types of tension could be teased out, for example by adding flashforwards or flashbacks.

Progression, pacing, and reader engagement

It can be a satisfying feeling to read a story that is progressing at a steady pace. One structural technique to control how fast the story is progressing is to use chapter and scene breaks to control pacing. For example:

- If you add in a break after a cliffhanger, this will ramp up tension in your story and make the reader want to move on to the next part faster.

- If you add in a break after something is explained or described, this will relieve tension in your story and may cause your reader to slow down.

Punctuation can also be used to control pacing.

- With audio narration, each time the narrator hits punctuation, they count for x seconds.
    - Mechanically speaking: Comma = 1 second, period = 2 seconds, paragraph = 3 seconds.
- That's how two paragraphs with the same wordcount could naturally progress at different speeds. For example:
    - Many short sentences with many periods will be read slowly
    - A long sentence with many commas will be read quickly

Beyond using structural techniques, a writer can also use reader engagement to control the reader's perception of how fast the story is progressing. Consider this scenario:

- Reading two sentences that are not engaging
- Reading two paragraphs that are very engaging

The reader may in fact feel like time passed quicker with the two paragraphs because they were immersed in what was happening in a satisfying way.

Progressing too quickly

It is possible for a story to feel like it is progressing too quickly. In this case, it is useful to have things down so readers have a chance to take a breath and feel immersed again. There are a few ways to do this:

- The scene and sequel technique
    - When some big action has just happened in your story, giving your characters a chance to react and recover can help your reader stay engaged in the story
    - Scene is when action is happening, Sequel is when recovery is happening
        - Recovery can be just a line or two. It can also be a giant chunk
        - How to find appropriate length for recovery? Trust your own tastes and emotional responses, and listen to reader feedback
- Ask: what feeling do you want to evoke with this scene/setting/etc?
    - Often, newer writers will need to add more words to evoke feelings that will immerse the reader.
- Beat chart:
    - Beside each point in your outline, explain what emotion you want to invoke. Should the reader be interested about what is happening with the plot here? Should the reader be feeling emotion for this character here? Should the reader be having a stand up and cheer moment, here? Etc. Aiming for this sense of emotional engagement will help keep the reader satisfied.
- Don't raise stakes too high, too fast
    - Spacing out how fast you raise stakes, and starting out with lower stakes at the beginning of a story, can help make it feel like the story is progressing and escalating in a satisfying way.

The non-plot-driven novel

If your novel does not or cannot have a plot, then you might be dealing with a protagonist who is blocked, wandering, or lost and unable to become whole or happy. What gives this sort of book narrative tension is not what needs to get done, but what needs to change for the character to transform themselves.

In this case, a character needs a reason for why they can't transform themselves. One example is that there is something difficult a character needs to do to become whole and happy. In that case, the 'plot' is step-by-step showing why this thing is so difficult.

At the story level, it may be helpful to ask:

- What big thing could my protagonist do to get the big thing that he wants?
- What big thing has to happen before the big conflicts can be talked out?
- Not what, but who, is actively holding back my protagonist?
- My character could change but before that, she must do or experience what?

At the scene level, it may be helpful to ask:

- What could my protagonist do—right now– to get what he wants? (objective)
- What's getting in the way—right now– of talking things out? (outer conflict)
- Who—right now–is holding back my protagonist and how? (antagonist)
- My character is avoiding herself for what reason—right now? (inner conflict)

Answering these questions is a way to help a non-plot-driven novel feel more satisfying.

Week 7 Homework (pick one or more):

Structure Homework

- Choose a story structure that you are not familiar with. Do some research on the structure, and then try writing a story that contains all the elements of that structure.
- List all the major plot points of a story you admire (or your own story). Write them on index cards or in bullet points. If they are not in chronological order, put them in that order and see the effect of the story. If the story is already chronological, try rearranging the cards/bullets and see what happens. Optional: Shuffle the cards and try retelling the story in whatever order they end up in.

Plot Homework:

- Create a plot diagram using any method of plotting that appeals to you. Choose a story that you love, or a story that you wrote. Then, use the plot diagram methods you chose and fill it out using the story you chose.

Plotless or Subtle Plot Homework:

Exercise 9, Part 2 of Le Guin's Steering the Craft: Being the Stranger
Write a narrative of 200-600 words, a scene involving at least two people and some kind of action or event. Use a single viewpoint character, in either first person or limited third person, who is involved in the event. Give us the character's thoughts and feelings in their own words.
Rules:

- The viewpoint character (real or invented) is to be somebody you dislike, disapprove of, hate, or feel is extremely different from yourself. The situation might be a quarrel between neighbors, a relative's visit, or somebody acting weird at the checkout counter—whatever will show the viewpoint character doing what that person does, thinking what that person does.
- By "different from yourself," Le Guin means in the psychological sense. Someone you don't empathize or sympathize with easily. A person who is different socially, culturally, by language, or by nation shouldn't be chosen unless you know enough about their life to write about them from the inside. Stick closer to home. Examples:
    - Young writers writing as an adult, parent, or grandparent
    - Writing as a parent instead of the child
    - A person with a different worldview than you
    - Revive a memory of someone you disliked, or who felt alien to you. Tell the story from that person's POV. How might they have regarded you?
- Try to avoid waking sleeping demons—this isn't for therapy, it's just an exercise, but it does demand a lot of a writer.
- Try to suspend your judgement of the person; avoid depicting them satirically or hatefully.
- **In critiquing:** Questions to ask: Are we really inside this character? Or did the writer stay outside, sitting in judgement? If there's spitefulness or vindictiveness, whose is it? Is the voice convincing? Are there places where it rings false or true? Can you discuss why this is so?
- **Afterward:** Consider why you chose that person. Did you find out anything about yourself as a writer? Will you try is again?

Week 7: Promises and Expectations

Not all resources need to be listened to or read, but they help deepen the topic and provide other perspectives.

Week 6 Resources:

Podcasts:
Writing Excuses 16.29: Building Trust | transcript
Writing Excuses 17.2: It Was a Promise of Three Parts| transcript
Writing Excuses 10.31: How Do I Control the Reader's Sense of Progress?| transcript
Writing Excuses 12.34: Fulfilling the Reader's Fantasy, with Brian McClellan| transcript
Writing Excuses 17.1: Genre and Media are Promises| transcript

Articles:
Why Authors Should Always Keep Their Promises
8 Promises You're Making to Readers–and Then Breaking
The Secret to Earning Your Readers' Trust: Consistency
How to Build and Maintain Reader Trust

Building Trust with the reader

You are inviting a reader into a space that you've made for them. You want to make the reader feel comfortable. You want to indicate with the beginning that:

- This is the kind of story you are reading (a horror, fantasy, romance, etc.)
- And that you know what you're doing as a storyteller.

You don't want to get on a roller coaster when you weren't expecting one.

Another tool you can use to build trust with a reader is to raise a few questions in your story, and then answer those questions immediately. Then, when a question to which you want to withhold the answer appears, the reader will think "oh, this is one answer I will have to wait for." Because you answered those previous questions, the reader will be more willing to trust that you will answer another question later, when they need to know the answer.

Example:

- In a murder mystery, if there is a dead body on the floor, you don't want to immediately tell the reader why the body is there because they have to figure it out.
- But you CAN answer how the person died (gunshot).

When you ask the question, how did they die? to the reader, you are promising that the answers will be forthcoming.

How does one set up promises or expectations?

Once a writer has the reader's trust, it's time to make some promises to the reader (in the form of questions) in order to set up a good ending. You will ask these questions throughout the story—ideally in the beginning and the middle.

In a fantasy book, for example, a writer will probably introduce magic. This is a promise to the reader that there will be supernatural things happening in the book. So, if a dragon shows up in the middle, gives the protagonist a gift, and then disappears, a reader may not consider it unbelievable. Introducing magic is a promise that fantastical things may happen—the dragon may not have to appear again, especially if you answered the question "do dragons exist?" already.

On the other hand, if the story is a romance about two wall street bankers who fall in love and start a business in the modern day, but suddenly a dragon shows up, gives them money, and then never appears again, the writer has made a promise and broken it. By having a dragon show up in New York and then disappear, the writer has created an unfulfilled promise. In order to satisfy new expectations, the dragon will need to become part of the story—probably a large part.

Fulfilling promises at the end

The ending to a story becomes satisfying when a writer fulfills the promises they've made. Since promises are reader expectations, you'll want to meet or exceed reader expectations. To exceed reader expectations, you want to not only meet their expectations by giving them what they want, you want to meet their expectations in a way that surprises them. Hence, the ending becomes surprising, but inevitable.

For example, in a romance, the promise is that your story will end happily ever after. So it is inevitable that this will happen. But if you do this in a way that the reader hasn't seen before, then it becomes surprising but inevitable.

How to identify where you are setting expectations and making promises

Sometimes a writer may not be aware of what promises they are inadvertently making. Keeping track of a whole narrative is hard! This is where a writer can enlist help by using alpha readers and beta readers.

Alpha readers:

- Read a novel/story as it's being written.

Beta readers:

- Read the entirety of a novel/story once it is complete.

When sending stories out to alpha/beta readers, a writer can ask their readers to list what they feel they have been promised in the story.

If a reader identifies a promise that the writer wasn't aware of making, the writer can go back and remove that promise, or tie it in to the story.

Week 6 Homework:

- Think of some stories that had endings that you felt were incredibly satisfying or perfect. Then, find some stories that had endings that disappointed you. Compare them. What were some

promises that were made by the author? And where do you think the stories that disappointed you broke those promises, or failed to deliver on them?

- Create a list of promises the writer made in these stories. Then try fulfilling these promises yourself.

Week 8: Study Conclusion

Week 8 Homework:

Choose a homework assignment from one of the previous 8 weeks that you did not choose previously. Have fun with it!

This week there will be no reading or other resources. Instead, we will reflect on our journey and discuss any lingering confusion or concerns.

Questions to consider:

1. Which topic of this study was the most difficult for you?
2. Did you have any "ah hah!" moments during the course of the study that helped a writing struggle become simpler?
3. Were there any homework assignments that were particularly difficult?
4. What are some of your biggest takeaways for this study?

With that said, we hope you enjoyed your time in this study group! We hope it helped shed some light on dark, confusing writing questions, and that you were able to make some friends along the way.

Below I have provided a list of all the resources and articles used over the course of the study. I've also included an "extras" section with articles and things that didn't particularly fit into this writing group. We hope that it helps you continue your studies!

Middles and Ends Resources

Main Sources:
The Great Courses – Writing Great Fiction
The Great Courses – How to Write Best-Selling Fiction

Book Recommendations Sources:
Steering the Craft by Ursula K Le Guin
"The Carrier Bag Theory," by Ursula K. Le Guin
Aspects of the Novel by E.M Forester
The Art of Fiction by John Gardner
The Emotional Craft of Fiction by Donald Maas
The Simple Art of Murder by Raymond Chandler
Manga in Theory and Practice: The Craft of Creating Manga by Hirohiko Araki
Storyteller: Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of the Clarion Writers' Workshop by Kate Wilhelm

Week 2 Resources:

Article
The Middle Is the Biggest Part of Your Novel: Keep it Lively

Podcast:

Writing Excuses 10.27: Why Can't I Just Jump to the Ending? | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.30: Q&A on Middles, with Marie Brennan | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.36: How Does Context Shape Plot Twists? | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.42: How In The World Do I Tie All This Together? | transcript

Week 3 Resources:

Podcasts:
Writing Excuses 15.42 - Writing the End | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.40: What's the Difference Between Ending and Stopping? | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.43: Q&A on Endings, with Delia Sherman | transcript
Writing Excuses 9.16: Coming up with a New Ending Halfway Through | transcript

Articles:
How to Write the Perfect Ending for Your Novel by Masterclass
Book Endings: The 6 Ways That All Stories End

Week 4 Resources:

Videos:
Lecture #7: Short Stories — With Special Guest Instructor Mary Robinette Kowal

Podcast:
Writing Excuses 16.41: Middles and Conflicts with M.I.C.E. Structure | transcript
Writing Excuses 12.41: Raising the Stakes | transcript
Writing Excuses 18.09: Unpacking the Tension | transcript

Articles:
The Gap: How to Make Your Story a Page Turner

Week 5 Resources:

Podcasts:
Writing Excuses 10.19: Intrigue | transcript
Writing Excuses 9.6: The Experience of Time | transcript
Writing Excuses 15.02: Writing Between the Lines (Theme) | transcript

Articles:
Writing Suspenseful Fiction: Reveal Answers Slowly (Sections: Let Suspense Linger, 3 Techniques to Set Up Slow Reveals) from Jane K. Cleland
Infused by Donald Maass
The Tyranny of Motive by David Corbett

Week 6 Resources:

Podcasts:
Writing Excuses 16.29: Building Trust | transcript
Writing Excuses 17.2: It Was a Promise of Three Parts | transcript

Writing Excuses 10.31: How Do I Control the Reader's Sense of Progress?| transcript
Writing Excuses 12.34: Fulfilling the Reader's Fantasy, with Brian McClellan| transcript
Writing Excuses 17.1: Genre and Media are Promises| transcript

Articles:
Why Authors Should Always Keep Their Promises
8 Promises You're Making to Readers–and Then Breaking
The Secret to Earning Your Readers' Trust: Consistency
How to Build and Maintain Reader Trust

Week 7 Resources:

Podcast:
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Writing Excuses 12.40: Structuring a Novel | transcript
Writing Excuses 16.52: Structure is a Promise | transcript
Writing Excuses 10.32: How Do I Control the Speed of the Story? | transcript
Writing Excuses 12.14: Controlling Pacing with Structure | transcript

Articles:
Plotting the non-plot-driven novel by Donald Maass
Story Structures: The Fundamentals You Need to Know

Video:
Beyond Hero's Journey: Non-Western Story Structures

Extra Resources:

Story Beats:

10 Keys to Writing Story Beats in Novels (with Exercises)
Action Beats, Dialogue Beats and Beat Variation
Writing Powerful Emotion Beats in Fiction

Progression in Story:

How to design stories that keep people hooked
Narrative Arcs and Progressions