Story Mechanics Best Practices

Story Design

Doug Van Horne

STORY MECHANICS OVERVIEW

While much of this may seem like aspects of writing you already know, every writer can use reminders from time to time to revitalize their storytelling techniques. These could be considered Best Practices for our storytelling mechanics or best practices for mass appeal storytelling in general. A great number of successful stories use the conventions below for good reason: they are proven techniques to help create a story that engages audiences, especially western audiences, and makes them invest in the experience. The more you use these techniques effectively, the better chance we have of attracting a wide audience.

None of these techniques should hinder creative freedom; they are guidelines any writer can use to strengthen any story. Many of the techniques or supplemental video links reference storytelling in films. This is used primarily because film is the fastest to consume ubiquitous method of storytelling. These narrative guidelines stretch across all storytelling mediums.

STORY PURPOSE

Your story should not exist simply to entertain the audience. True greatness in storytelling is born out of narratives with meaning and a solid sense of purpose that explore possible ways to live life or raise questions about how to live. Stories have always functioned as guides to living. Storytelling has evolved and become much flashier in the last century, but the core truth about narrative remains: when we look at the values and actions of characters in stories, we begin to examine our own lives.

What is your story trying to say about how people should live?

The Philosophical Conflict

Most writing focuses primarily on the external and internal conflicts of the main character, which will be covered later in this document, but there should be a greater overarching conflict governing the heart of your story: the philosophical conflict.

“Great storytelling isn’t just conflict between characters, it’s conflict between characters because of their values.” - John Truby

A **philosophical (or moral) conflict** is the tenets about how to live life the story is exploring by presenting competing views examining all sides of the issue.

All characters have their own set of beliefs and worldviews. When a character’s views are challenged by other characters’ views on the same topic, a philosophical or moral conflict is created. By extension, the world a character lives in can also challenge their views and is also part of the philosophical conflict. Characters struggle with other characters who hold different worldviews, which creates the **external conflict**. Characters struggle with what they believe and how those beliefs impact other people, which creates the **internal conflict**. External and internal conflict can be engaging, but the story as a whole usually resonates more universally because of what is happening at the philosophical level.

All great stories use philosophical conflict in some form. All of our stories should rely on it as well.

Creating the Philosophical Conflict

One of the easiest ways to create a philosophical conflict is to focus one aspect of it as a core belief of the main character, then build your story around that core:

- Build your MC so that their want and evolution is working toward a very specific goal based on a strongly held, but debatable, belief.
    - If the player can choose between two opposing attributes for the MC to evolve over the course of the story, each attribute should align with a variation of the philosophical worldview, and be consistently presented as such throughout the story.
- Make sure this philosophy fits solidly within the story world and the story you want to tell. If you can find a stronger philosophical belief for them considering the story events, then update their beliefs to match.
- Create supporting characters who challenge, affirm, or explore different versions of this root philosophical argument.
- Craft scenes that prompt these competing worldviews to surface. By simply making these characters feel strongly about their worldview and placing them in events that prompt at least one character to speak their mind, the others will feel compelled to follow suit with their own perspective.

These competing worldviews are strongest if a large section of the population would actually believe them to be true. That is key to making this philosophical competition work. For all the insanity behind what The Joker in *The Dark Knight* does, his belief that people wear morality like a badge of honor when they don't actually possess morality is rather astute and likely true for a lot of people. It's an extreme notion, but still a notion that is easy to believe.

For example, *Heaven's Secret* could have a philosophical conflict focusing on "the importance of rules as the foundation of a balanced society." This is already an existing foundation to how the afterlife supposedly functions in this story. Take that notion and apply it to all of the main characters in varying ways: some characters believe all rules should be followed always, some feel rules are a waste of time, some believe some rules should be followed and others not followed, some think whether you follow rules depends on the circumstances in front of you, etc...

To effectively create this web of competing ideas, you need to attach these high-level differing worldviews to different characters, giving each character a slightly unique (but justified) perspective from everyone else. Make it clear and consistent exactly what each character believes, show them backing up their beliefs with actions, and debating others about which beliefs make the most sense. These debates or discussions can be most impactful when a character is suffering consequences for adhering to their own worldview.

But avoid being preachy by including balanced portrayals. Examine every angle. Have your main character doubt their faith in their own belief system at various times. You can either resolve your philosophical conflict in a way that implies *'this is the way to live'* by presenting a most effective or 'winning' philosophy, or you can leave it up to the audience to interpret the merits of each of the philosophical worldviews in your story for themselves, by treating all (or most) of your moral arguments as equal through the entirety of the story.

PLOTTING

High-Level Definitions

Stories consist of **episodes**. An episode is a 20-30-minute-long contained narrative with its own mini story arc. Approximately 10 episodes make up a **season**. Three to five seasons (possibly more) constitute the entirety of a

series. Each story should have overlapping and intertwined arcs for each episode, season, and the series as a whole. A **scene** takes place in a single location with a singular focus or objective. A **sequence** takes place in multiple locations but overall has a singular focus or objective, often a sequence is made up of interconnected scenes.

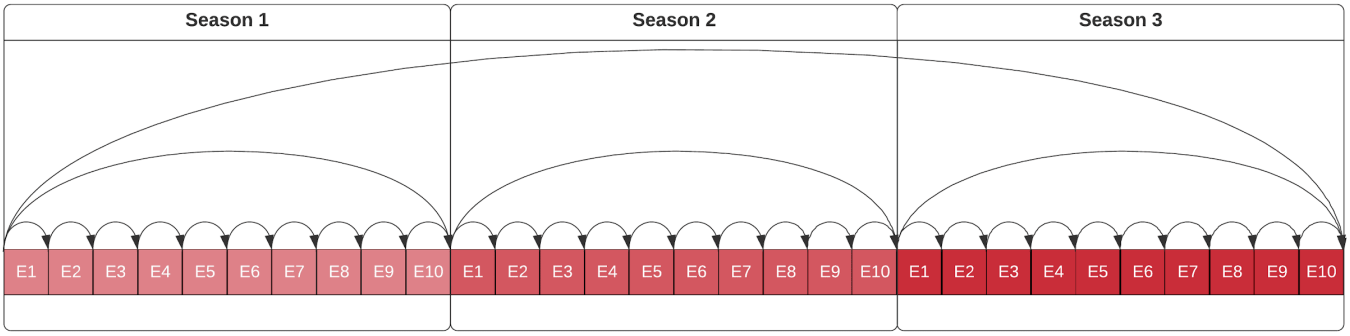
Each of these terms focus on one particular cross-section of the story, from the micro- to macro-level.

Story Arcs

(Character arcs will be discussed later)

Because of the nature of how each story on this platform will evolve and be delivered to the audience, it is best to always think in terms of closed story arcs. Each episode, season, and series should have a **singular focus arc:** it establishes a conflict at the beginning and, through overcoming obstacles, that conflict is resolved at the end.

As illustrated below, these function simultaneously, with smaller arcs feeding into the greater arcs above:



Many writers adopt this arc methodology at the scene or sequence level as well because it's an excellent method for making sure your story stays focused, builds upon itself, and minimizes the chance for narrative loose ends.

Develop *all* of your arcs as:

- Simple to explain contained story sections
- Causally linking to the next arc
- Satisfying on its own and propelling the story forward

Through-Lines/Storylines

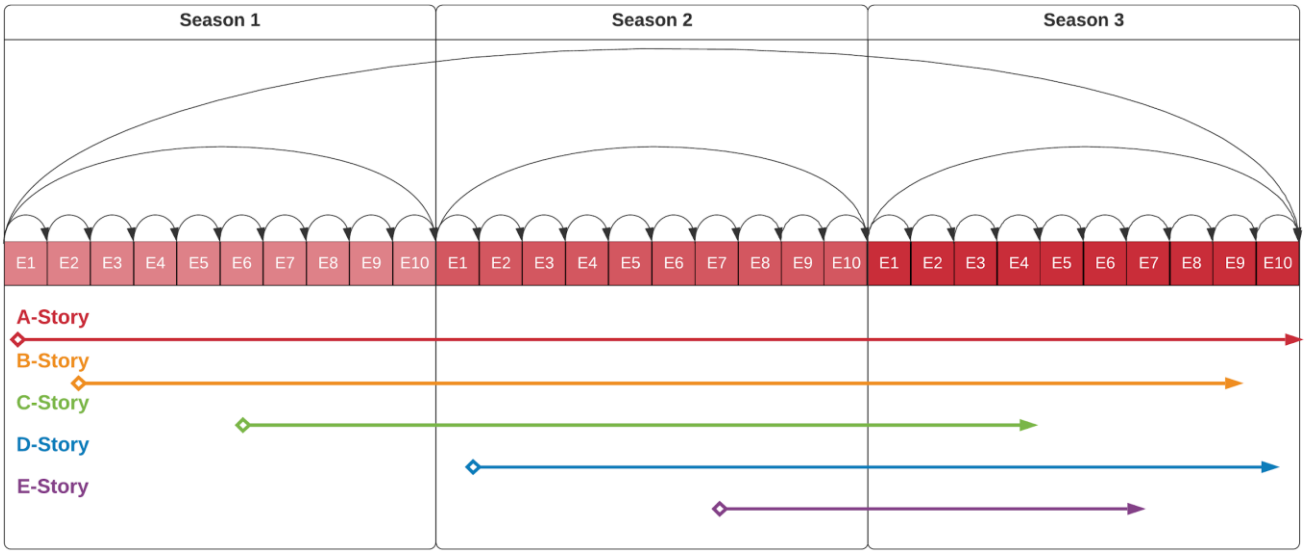
These are sometimes referred to as the main plot and subplots but are also known by alphabetical names: A-Story, B-Story, C-Story, etc. Each of these are an overarching contained narrative almost always focused on a dynamic between the protagonist (MC) and either their obstacles or their relationships with other characters.

Most commonly, the A-Story is the external and internal struggle of the MC and what the story is really *about*. It focuses on the main journey the MC is embarking on, whether it's forced by an inciting incident and antagonistic forces, or if it is a slice-of-life narrative walking you through the ins-and-outs of their daily life. Any subsequent storyline or subplot should relate to or feed into the main plot. They can link to the A-Story through direct

connection or only thematic connection, but there needs to be *some* connection or the subplot will feel superfluous.

Secondary storylines often are most often relationships with mentor figures, love interests, specific friends/groups, or series of unique events (i.e. flashbacks, time jumps, etc.) One of the easiest ways to look at these storylines is if the A-line is the obstacles, and the secondary storylines offer the MC advice or knowledge on how to overcome those obstacles.

It is useful to separate, map them out, and consider them individually to understand when they start and end, to quantify how often they appear in the story, how they intertwine with other storylines, and how they relate to or impact climaxes in arcs.



Storylines and our Platform

With our stories, each love interest would be its own storyline that needs to be maintained and intelligently crafted to work with everything else. On top of that, each mentor relationship, and flashback sequences or recurring time jumps would constitute their own storylines as well. While a movie or a novel might have only 2 to 4 storylines, our stories will likely have 6 to 10, so mapping them out and managing them will be imperative.

One of the more common theories about how storylines work best involves the B-story feeding directly into either the MC change arc or empowering them in some way that helps them get what they want or need in the A-Story. Since B-stories are often love interest relationships, if the MC needs to learn something from a love interest to allow for success in the A-story, all the love interests would need to be structured to provide that information. Once the information is given by the love interest you have connected with the most, all other characters would skip over giving you that information. This would be a rather complicated way of utilizing a subplot to impact the main plot, but it might be the most effective.

The other way to deal with this is to force the MC to be close to whatever character will give her the information, whether or not the player chooses to be romantically involved with them.

Structures, Templates, and “Acts”

I'm sure all of you have extensively studied variants of the Hero's Journey or the customary 3-Act Structure, as well as many other story maps on your journey to becoming a skilled writer. Kudos to all that learning. But one thing I have noticed the longer I have been writing is that the masters of storytelling never talk about 3-Act Structure. They don't often reference the Hero's Journey, and only rarely use the word like inciting incident or pinch point. Almost all stories have setups, rising complications or obstacles, and a resolution. That backbone to storytelling is a given and basically the most common templates have already burned those notions into your psyche.

Instead of spending time on those foundations, masters evolve past that and talk about other high-level story structures and conventions, usually a combination of time-tested ideas and their own innovations or interpretations cultivated over years of studying everything and coming up with theories which work best with their methods. We all should be moving our understanding of story structure into that realm where we define it for ourselves.

On that path, be open to new ideas for structure. Templates are not inherently bad, unless it becomes obvious you are writing with one because the repetition of events echoes in every episode of your story. If the audience can predict events too easily, your template or method of structure is doing more harm than good.

- Steven Spielberg structures stories using 10-15 minute long sequences as his guide, arranging them in a rising system of urgency and obstacle. Viewing the story through this lens keeps the story from dragging with any location or conflict for too long, and allows for entire chunks of the story to be easily removed or altered if they are not as effective as planned. If you adopt a sequence-related structure, consider them lasting 5-10 minutes each because of the nature of our episodes are 20-30 minutes of storytelling.
- Dan Harmon sermonizes about his "story circle" theory where every story and any significant element of it can be broken into 8 parts. This circle is a version of the Hero's Journey and Joseph Campbell's ideas on storytelling. Link here.
- JK Rowling used her own "series grid" methodology that worked wonders for her and could be extremely useful in our long-running stories with numerous interwoven plotlines and relationships. Link here:

No one story structure methodology will work for everyone. Find or develop the methodology that works best with the way you think and the stories you want to tell, and use it consistently.

Plotting Mysteries

There is a youtube video that outlines the 96 (or so) unanswered mysteries of the tv show *Lost*. 96. The show lasted 6 seasons and failed to answer more mysteries than most tv shows of that length even have. Mysteries are, of course, a key component of storytelling but they must be intelligently controlled or they can get away from any writer.

Mysteries should be created with quality over quantity in mind. It is better to have a few compelling mysteries than dozens of mediocre ones.

When writing a mystery on this platform, keep the following tenets in mind:

1. Keep the number of mysteries manageable
2. Make them fair to the reader, providing clues that allow them to solve the mystery on their own.
3. Resolve the mysteries before they grow stale
4. Make the answer to the mystery worth the time invested

Mysteries are about setting up questions and gathering answers. But more than that, they should be about actively encouraging the audience to solve the mystery as well. This means playing fair and giving them enough information so they actually have a chance to solve the mystery before it is revealed if they're paying attention and interpreting all the clues correctly.

- Establish the question a mystery is asking (i.e. who killed the victim?)
- Establish the elements crucial to answering that question; the who, how, when, why, etc..
    - Separate those elements into smaller mystery arcs, each with a start, twists, and a resolution
    - Determine what order they will be solved
    - Determine if they link to each other—if one reveal starts or feeds into another mystery arc
    - Determine clues and misinformation for each smaller mystery arc
- Map out where on your overall story timeline each of these mysteries start and end
- Reread through the mapped out clue/suspicion progression in order, to ensure the audience *could* potentially solve it if they were paying attention.

Does it feel a little too difficult to solve? Add in another clue. Be a little less vague about information. If information is buried deep within other misleading clues, remove some of those red herrings.

Does it feel possibly too easy to solve? Obfuscate the truth with vague descriptions or hiding important information amongst lots of other information or important events.

Establish a lot of potential suspects or theories about the mystery. A suspect pool should be rather easy to create with the number of characters in each of our stories. But make sure the mystery is presented as something *anyone* could have done. When your characters are providing theories about what really happened, run the gamut of all the possibilities, It's often useful to put in theories that are close to the truth, but still miss on key rationale or logic, so the audience will discredit that possibility.

If you start exonerating some suspects, it's safest to exonerate them all. Exonerating only one feels like reverse psychology where you're trying too hard to prove the culprit didn't do it. What seems common in mysteries is either disproving all theories, or disproving none of the theories. Exonerate all your suspects, or exonerate none of them. Consistency keeps the playing field appearing to be fair and even, and when you disprove them all, it makes the audience look back and wonder "where did the investigation make a mistake?" Again, this gets them invested in the resolution even more. Of course, this means in scenarios where you exonerate all the suspects or disprove all the theories, misleading or withheld information led the investigation astray.

Be wary of having too many mysteries. One large mystery for the entire series, comprised of smaller mysteries that each must be solved will likely be enough if executed well. No one wants a youtube video outlining the dozens of mysteries your story forgot to resolve because you chose quantity over quality.

Smaller, contained mysteries about the life or backstory of a love interest could be an excellent addition to your story and the romance aspect of character dynamics. People almost never tell their full truths, deepest desires, or greatest failure without an established and meaningful connection. Coaxing the truth out of characters about the intimate details from their life should take caring, patience, and true connection, but it can very much be presented as a mystery of its own.

Mysteries and Our Platform

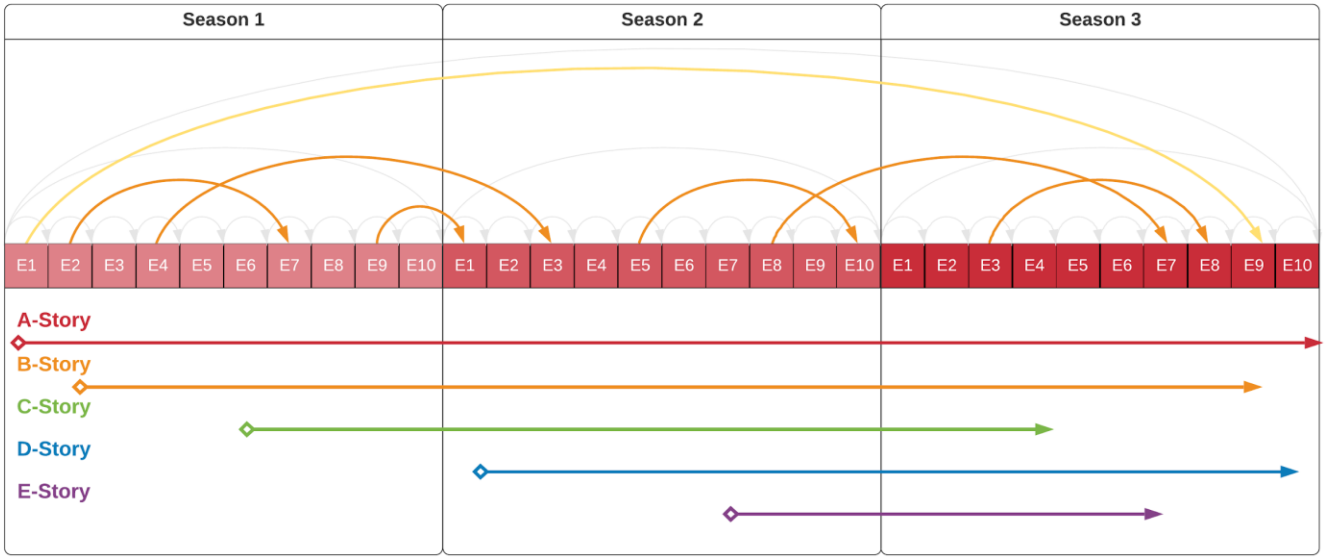
Looking at our chart of story arcs and storylines below, we can overlay onto that mystery arcs as well (in yellow and orange). Much like how season arcs work toward building the series arc, smaller components of a mystery (the orange arcs) work toward solving the overall mystery of the series (the yellow arc).

For example, in a classical murder mystery, the yellow arc represents 'Who killed the victim?'. The orange arcs would represent mysteries such as "What was the murder weapon?", "Who owned the weapon used in the murder?", "Does the prime suspect's alibi hold up?", "Who had a motive to kill the victim?" Etc.

While each arc will have start- and end-points, the smaller arcs should have many red herrings, dead-ends, and false deductions on them to make them true mysteries. The larger arc does not necessarily need twists and turns on it, because the twists of the smaller arcs already provide that rollercoaster ride for the mystery as a whole..

You don't need to map out exactly when each element of the mystery will be unveiled and resolved, but you do need to quantify what parts of the mystery need to be established and how they will be solved. This is for two extremely important reasons: all of these mystery arcs **must be scalable** and **parts of the mystery will be published before the entire story is finished.**

First point: the arcs must be scalable. We do not know how long any of these series will last. If we plan for a series to last 2 seasons but it becomes a huge hit, we may need to extend it to many more seasons. If that happens, the mysteries would need to be scaled up and spaced out to fill the extra duration. The converse is possible as well: a story might need to be resolved far sooner than originally planned, requiring all the mystery arcs to be condensed dramatically.



Second point: part of the mystery will be published before the entire story is finished. You cannot get deep into a mystery and realize some of it doesn't work. We can't go back and alter elements in the already published first season to fix an error in plotting the mystery so that the season 4 resolution works better. **You need to know how each mystery will be resolved before you start writing any aspect of them.**

Returning to the *Lost* reference once again, you can create **mystery fatigue** either through creating so many mysteries the audience cannot keep track of them all and loses interest out of a version of mental attrition, or by

taking *forever* to resolve a mystery. Lost took almost 90 hours of storytelling to answer some of its biggest questions. That is too much for the average viewer to invest in a mystery.

Try to determine the shelf life of each of your mystery arcs. What is the optimal duration of each element of the mystery? How long is too long for the audience to wait for an answer? How short is too short to build up suspense and give the audience a chance to actively solve the mystery on their own?

Answers to these questions will give you a good understanding of how to shift their start, end, and waypoints around if it becomes necessary to do so.

Further Study:
Harry Potter Mysteries: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_Y0NFHNhgg
The video title includes a reference to Rowling's self-proclaimed and controversial public activism stance. The video is intended to be academic lessons from an extremely successful author; not support of her personal beliefs.

Cliffhangers

Every episode should end with a strong hook that leaves players wondering what will happen next. This is especially important in the first few episodes of a series. We want players to dive into a new series and get invested. If they finish a chapter and aren't dying to know what happens next, how are you going to get them back into your story? Remember that players didn't buy the entire story. Your story is competing with every other piece of entertainment that players have available to them.

Good Cliffhangers:

- Are logical events that could plausibly happen in the story's world
- Present an urgent question or situation that is relevant to the story's progression
- Present questions and situations with impactful resolutions that have consequences for the story

Throwaway cliffhangers are cheap gimmicks, and your players can tell. Respect your players by presenting situations that will spark speculation. We want players going onto forums to discuss what they think will happen next between updates.

However, avoid cliffhanger fatigue. Don't end every episode with a character about to die, someone getting kidnapped, or a bomb about to go off. Allow arcs to resolve. Alternate between dramatic questions about characters, exciting events, and mysteries that may be revealed. Something as simple as arriving in a new location can be very exciting, given the proper context.

CHARACTERS & CONFLICT

Always remember characters and conflict should support the philosophical conflict of your story.

Engaging Characters

We want our audience empathizing with the MC from the start. It will help invest them in the story and the choices of their avatar. If there is a disconnect between the audience and the MC and they fail to latch onto the story, they may give up on the story and never return. Empathetic playable characters needs to be a backbone of all of our stories.

Empathy with a character means to care and understand them at some level. We can empathize with characters who are both good and bad – often because we see something in them that we want to possess. We can empathize with the kindness and optimism of an altruistic character, or the freedom and power of an evil one.

Our goal should be to create empathy with your MC as early as possible in the story – early within episode 1 is ideal. At a high-level, empathy can be achieved through the MC exhibiting a combination of these traits:

- A kind and good-hearted nature
- Suffering an unfair or undeserved misfortune
- Being in jeopardy
- Well-liked by others
- Funny
- Highly skilled
- Being in control or powerful (even better if that power is respected)
- The will to do what needs to be done
- Standing up for what they believe against major opposition
- Superpowers
- A sacrificial nature; rescuing someone or something

Each of these is a tightrope act of sorts, though. In each example, you *could* create a person who is unlikable if their version of being funny isn't universally funny, if they sacrifice for something not worth saving, or exert power by killing an innocent person, just as examples. Be thoughtful and creative as to how best to attract people to a character. We can help guide you with character empathy during creation of your Story Design Doc and while writing the first episode.

Wants & Needs

Dramatic situations require a character – essentially almost all characters in a story – to want to achieve something. So a **WANT** is a clear external desire or goal to achieve a certain thing, often opposed by forces of antagonism. Forces of antagonism can be forefront in the conflict or diminished and in the background, the latter is common in slice-of-life type stories. But something preventing the MC from having what they want is almost always key to a good narrative. We've also described want as the **goal** that requires a strong **motivation**.

When creating a want/goal/desire ensure it is something easily summed up in a clear sentence: "The MC wants to get x (want), because y (motivation)".

Expanding on that idea is also giving the character a **NEED**, which is mainly useful in character arcs. A want is external and obvious; a need is internal and something hidden or unrecognized by the character. A need is what the character must discover about themselves or the world to become complete, balanced, or whole. Your character will spend most of the story pursuing their outer goal – the thing they want. But what the story is really about, on a deeper level, is their growth into a place where they, first subconsciously, then consciously, recognize and pursue their inner goal, the thing they need. **Both want and need will always be in service of the philosophical conflict.**

Developing the Need

For there to be a need, a character must believe a lie about their world or their existence. Belief in that lie prevents the character from achieving what they truly need to become complete.

In stories with both, want and need are intertwined and, to make it painfully clear once again, related to the philosophical conflict. At some point in the story – it doesn't have to be near the end – characters usually realize that if they get what they want, their life will still be lacking – until they recognize and accomplish their need. This conflict between the external and internal versions of character is effective fuel for drama if you want to utilize it.

While a character's wants will change in each scene or each episode, their overall want will always remain the same. Smaller wants should always feed into the overall want of the story. If you're familiar with Robert McKee's Story, he refers to this as **Scene Objective** and **Super Objective**: the immediate want in a scene, and the overall consistent want of the entire story, respectively.

Further study:

Wants, Needs, and Engaging Characters https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BxfV1sBRJs

Character Arcs

The internal change a character makes between the beginning of the story and the end is their **character arc**. Some think that inner journeys are the entire reason why fiction exists – to chart a course from one spiritual, intellectual or emotional place to another as a lesson for everyone in the audience. Arcs are not necessary, but it is rather clear that a well-told inner journey can seriously improve a story.

The most common versions of character arcs are:

- **The Positive Change Arc** – character is changed for the better by the events of the story
- **The Flat Arc** – character changes the people and the world around them
- **The Negative Change Arc** – character is changed for the worse by the events of the story

The majority of stories are positive change arcs. Negative charge arcs are the least common. All are effective, but must be reinforced by the story and your characters as a whole.

A character's **wants** and **needs** feed directly into their arc. A character's need is based on believing a **lie** about their world.

The Positive Change Arc

In the positive change arc, a character believes a lie about their world or their existence to the extent it blinds them to a *truth* that would actually make them balanced and whole. This refers to balanced and whole in terms of the dynamics in this story, but not necessarily a perfect person, of course. A positive change arc can be summed up as:

Character believes a lie ⍰ Character encounters the truth ⍰ Character overcomes lie by accepting the truth

In many stories, the arc takes place over nearly the entire progression, with accomplishing the need being one of the last elements of character growth before reaching the climax.

1. **Establish the lie the character believes.** The audience must clearly understand the lie that character believes to see the evolution of the character over time.

2. **Establish the characters that impact the lie**, showing the character that either they believe a lie or showing the character what the truth or other truths might be.

The Flat Arc

Flat arc characters have no need and therefore no lie, and make no internal change during the story. Their stories focus on their want, which usually includes changing the people and the world around them, even if they don't realize it. The main character acts as the mentor figure to other people in the story. Since the main character will not change with this type of arc, you need to understand which other characters will change and how.

They already believe the Truth at the beginning of the story, and they use that truth to overcome various external tests. The flow of events in a flat can be summed up as:

Character believes the truth Character belief in the truth is tested Character holds onto the truth.

Negative Arcs

Negative arcs are the most complex, are less common, but as impactful as any of the other types of character arcs. There are three types of negative arcs:

The Disillusionment Arc

Same as the positive change arc, but when the character finds the truth, the truth is negative. A disillusionment arc can be summed up as:

Character believes a lie Character encounters the truth Character overcomes the lie, but the truth is tragic

The Fall Arc

At the beginning the character is not aware of the truth, but once they learn it they reject it, falling into a darker existence from where they started. A fall arc can be summed up as:

Character believes a lie Character clings to the lie Character rejects truth Character believes stronger lie

The Corruption Arc

At the beginning the character must be aware of the truth, and over time, reject the truth and believe in a lie and, in turn, adopts or clings to a different lie.

Character sees the truth Character rejects truth Character believes new truth is a lie

Character Arcs and Our Platform

With the variation of selected choices and developed character traits inherent to our platform, we should be open not only to the idea of vastly different endings, but of different character arcs as well. The compounded choices could lead to a positive change arc, while other choices lead to one of the negative change arcs. If you do this be sure to structure the progression so every arc feels earned and the result of all the events.

We do run the risk of alienating our audience and negatively impacting the success of our app if we create stories that reach unsatisfying conclusions. While negative arcs can provide interesting perspectives into life in films and some novels, attachment to our platform is a substantial investment for many members of our audience, both in

terms of time and money. If you are planning to end a series (that could equate to 2-3 novels worth of reading) with a negative change arc, you should discuss the idea with management.

Further study:

Creating Character Arcs by K.M. Weiland

Character Arcs: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvgeXm8HAzU

Writing Characters Without Arcs: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot02hMJ6Hkk

Stakes

While not every story needs to threaten the entire world, it should threaten your main character's world. **Simply put, *the* world isn't at stake; *their* world is at stake.**

Their - your main character's - world can be the town they live in, their family (bloodlines or chosen), their friends, or an ideology they stand for. If they lose, their "world" will crumble and their life will be irrevocably altered. While stakes used to be an enormous buzz-word in writing, I believe it has been superseded by greater concepts at this point, but it still will be something every writer should take stock of and may need to strengthen.

Define your stakes for the main character. Test your stakes by trying to make them bigger. Push them to the extremes. Does the story feel stronger, or do these increased stakes seem false and not in-line with the rest of the story you're telling?

Unfold your stakes over time. Make earlier notions of what's at stake feel real and threatening, then step it up a notch numerous times over the course of the series as part of keeping the audience invested.

The other key component of stakes is proving the threat against them is real. You *must* show off the result of potential failure through other characters or earlier events. Think of how hollow the end of Star Wars might have felt if the Death Star didn't destroy Alderaan earlier in the film. We needed to see what that weapon could do to be afraid of the cost of failure in the end. Be sure to blow up the Alderaan in your story, early and impactfully.

Event Mapping and Contrasting Extreme Events

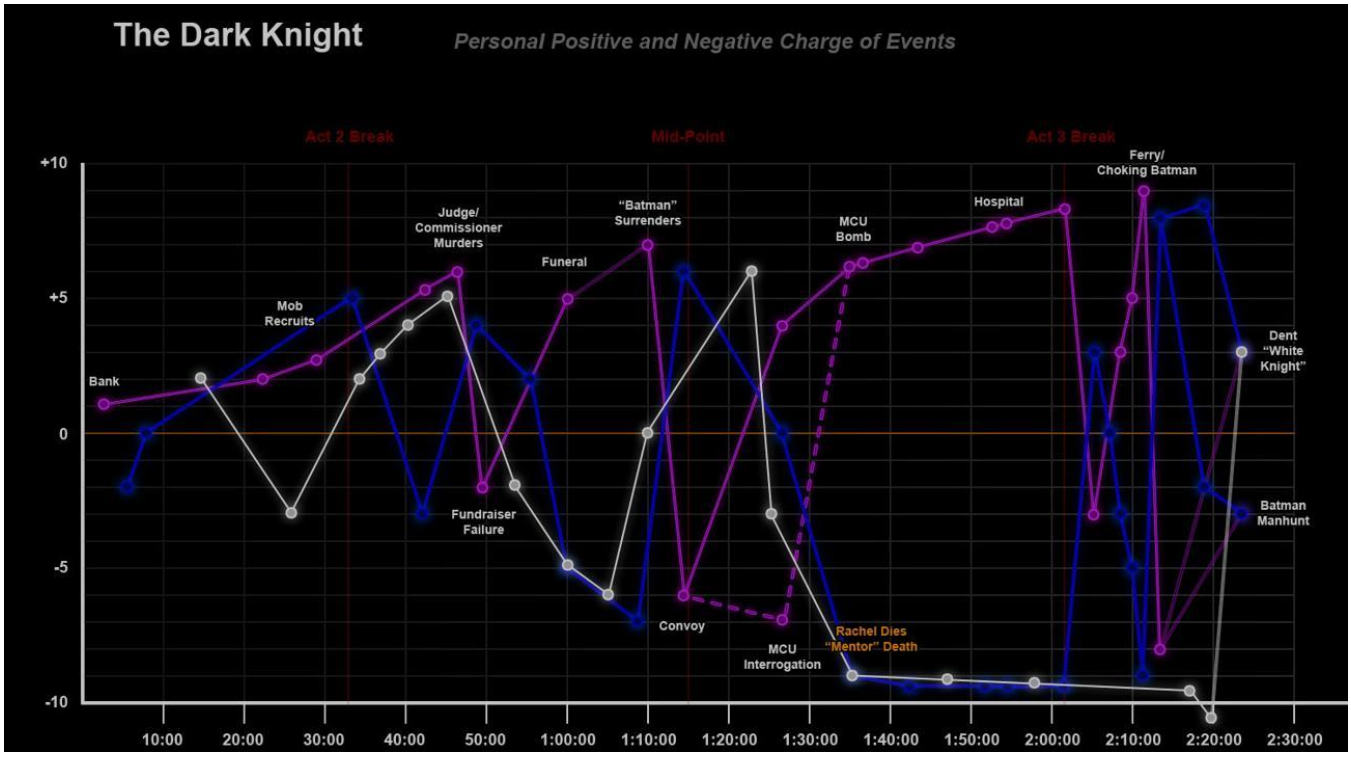
One technique for creating the 'roller coaster' effect for the audience is to visually map out the key moments of the story. This is by no means a mandate or necessarily a best practice, but if your mind tends to work visually and you like to plot everything ahead of time, this technique can be very useful.

Decide on a scale you will use as your metrics, say, for example, how close or far away the MC is from achieving their goal, or how positive or negative the story is at key moments, or the intensity or pace of the story from low- to high-tension. Any metric will work if you can map elements of the story to it, and the information will be useful to see if it is creating the ups and downs of the roller coaster in a way that you intended.

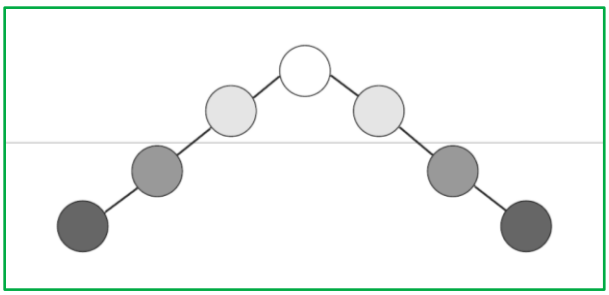
Below is a flowchart study of the key events in the film *The Dark Knight*. ** SPOILERS AHEAD**

The blue line represents Batman, the purple line represents The Joker, and the white line represents Harvey Dent. Higher on the scale means closer to their individual goals; lower on the scale means farther from their individual goals. From this you get a sense of how the severity of the conflict rises over time, how characters flip flop from

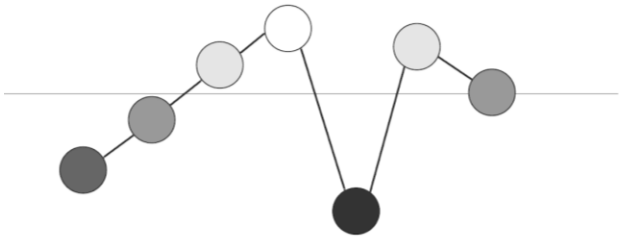
positive to negative events relative to their wants, how events may seem bad but actually be part of their plan (dotted line), and how they can impact scenes they are not in or after their death (translucent line). This is a complex and extreme example, but if you're a visually-minded plotter, you can use this sort of tool to pinpoint errors or missed opportunities in your progression of events.

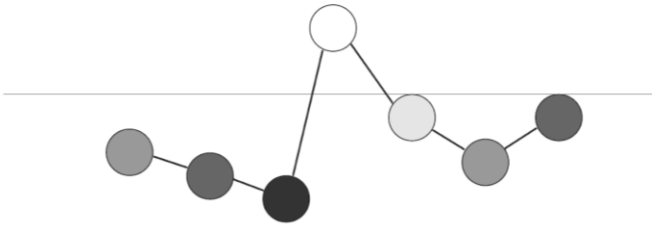


In general, when looking at story events as either positive or negative in the overall flow of events, the rise and fall of their severity, of course, is key to great storytelling. But you likely want to avoid your events ever progressing like in the image to the right too often. While the severity of the events may fluctuate from really good to really bad, if we can see the changes coming their impact will be minimized. This gradual shift from bad to good and vice versa will water down your conflict because it removes the element of surprise.



Create contrast and resonating change by either sandwiching an extreme event between events of the opposite value, or by creating a severe change in tone by an abrupt change in value, such as these:





For example, if things are going great for your MC and their love interest, they just got matching tattoos and professed their devotion to one another, then suddenly your love interest's secret wife shows up, that revelation is shocking because you were caught up in the exact opposite feelings a second earlier. Utilizing this contrast trick over and over throughout your story will place the severity of your extreme events in the right context.

"The Gap" Between Expectation and Result

As an extension of the previous guideline about contrasting extreme events, one of the simplest way to keep obstacles engaging is:

- Establishing a clear route to a goal
- Throw in an obstacle that forces the character onto another route, which you then clearly establish once again as the route to get to the goal
- Throw in another obstacle on this route, forcing them to adjust again to a third route, and so on...

This may sound extremely obvious, but if you leave out any of the steps, the illusion falls apart. If you forget to establish the intended route well enough, an obstacle or disruption might not be interpreted as a problem. Your audience might not realize what they characters are doing after that obstacle is actually a new path.

McKee is famous for describing this as **the gap between expectation and result**. But to make it work, in each instance you must have conveyed clear expectations to know the obstacle diverted away from the expected result. "The Gap" term refers to an unexpected chasm in the trail ahead. Give the characters a path, then throw in a chasm to make things interesting.

Of course, these can be physical roads the character is traveling to get someone, a simple conversation that didn't go as planned, or a list of chores a character wanted to get done. This rule applies to every course of action or interaction in the story. If a character says they need to go from point A to point B, there better be something that keeps it from being that easy.

Characters as an Ensemble

In writing, an "ensemble" usually refers to a cast with multiple protagonists. For our purposes, we only have one protagonist, so our use of the term will be to evoke the same notion that a large cast with many important characters needs a strong sense of balance between all characters, with no redundancy. Each character is in the story for a unique purpose and embody a unique aspect of the philosophical conflict, or to provide allies or obstacles for the narrative threads.

If you look at *Guardians of the Galaxy, Game of Thrones, The Hunger Games*, or *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* each are filled with an ensemble of characters, each fully realized in a way where any one of them *could* be the protagonist of a similar story in that conflict or in that world. In many cases, that becomes true. But a similar depth of traits in our ensemble cast is what we want to strive for in all our stories because it elevates the character dynamics and elevates the storytelling as a whole. No character is throwaway. No character is just a cog in the story machine. Take one character out and the story should be a different story entirely if your ensemble was crafted well.

When you write the character bios for your player character, all love interests, and all main characters in your story, you will be asked to fill in numerous attributes like their demeanor, unique voice, appearance, goal, and philosophical conflict worldview among other things. If you made a matrix cross-referencing each of your main character's attributes, every one of them should have a unique demeanor. A unique voice. A unique appearance, goal, and worldview, and so on.

Redundancy in character design will weaken your story. We need to avoid it, unless that redundancy is a key part of your story.

To create unique characters as part of your philosophical conflict ensemble:

- Start by defining their unique worldview, which should challenge or (partially) affirm the MC worldview
- Develop their other attributes based on this worldview

Starting with traits that typically align with a worldview is a great place to start. If their worldview is unique enough on its own those traits may create an interesting character. If it feels too expected or cookie cutter, start playing with attributes or picking the opposite of what is expected here or there to see what that gives you. People appreciate well-executed archetypal characters and unique mixes they have never seen before. Explore the possibilities.

If the point of a particular character is to echo or reflect your MC, start with the MC's attributes and tweak them. **Echoes** tend to be the exact same type of character, only distorted. Reflections in real life are similar but backward, so a **reflection** character will be a reverse of the MC, with enough similarities entact to see them as a "version" of the same person.

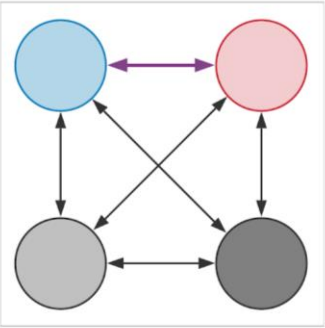
When developing this ensemble remember other useful conventions:

- Our potential **love Interests** should offer different versions of love, different versions of connection, different futures, or a combination thereof.
- A **mentor** character doesn't give the MC the answers to their problems, they show a way of living that *can* help them triumph, usually if the MC adopts a personal interpretation of that way of living.
- **Antagonist(s)** worldviews should most directly oppose the worldview of the MC.
    - The MC will likely never adopt an antagonist's worldview
    - The MC *could* adopt a love interest's opposing worldview if it is a catalyst for personal growth.

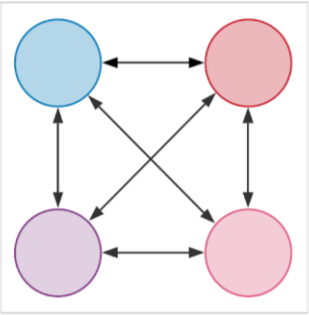
4-Corner Opposition

The original theory behind 4-Corner Opposition is relatively simple. If a story is simply good versus bad, the conflict will exhaust itself rather quickly. If you create a matrix of slightly different worldviews (in this case, four) and put them all in conflict with one another, the combinations of competing ideas gives you far more conflict to work with.

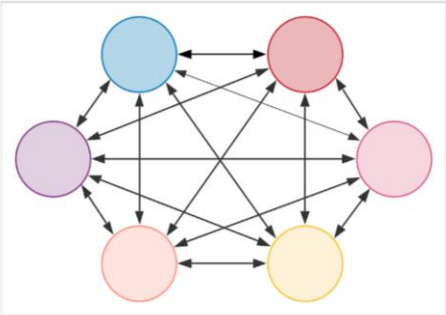
This technique could be valuable in terms of solidifying and, more importantly, prioritizing your philosophical differences between characters, which in turn define how they interact with one another in scenes they share.



So, we have four characters with slightly different worldviews, meaning all four are in ideological conflict with everyone else in this diagram in some way. If the blue circle represents the MC and the red circle represents the primary antagonist, their ideological conflict - the purple line - would be the strongest. It would dominate more of the story either directly or indirectly than all other conflicts on this chart. The two gray circles represent lesser, but still significant, conflicting ideologies held by those individual characters. Considering the possible combinations of which characters share scenes, and the reality that the tension will continue to rise during the course of the story, you can see how this greatly expands conflict potential.



While the first example was more indicative of an antagonistic relationship, the same methodology could be applied to friendly or romantic relationships as well. If each circle in this diagram represents characters with different views of love, varying attachments to others, varying desires, and offer different paths if you connect with them, those ideological differences also apply here as well. They don't need to be hostile towards one another to possess a different outlook or offer different things to a lover. But if they all are potential love interests, they could have connections with everyone else on that chart, in the form of rivalry, friendship, or attraction.



4-Corner Opposition was originally conceived as a tool for film and television storytelling. Our platform landing somewhere between a novel, a game, and an episodic television series, we have much more time to develop more central relationships than films often do. As long as you can keep track of the dynamics between characters, I see no reason why we couldn't have 5- or 6-Corner Opposition setups as well. If they help you define differences in ideology and scene dynamics with multiple characters, go for it!

It is important to remember that as many characters as you want can have ideologies that will challenge or affirm your MC's worldview(s) in various ways. If you use 4-, 5-, or 6-Corner Opposition, it is only to define the most significant worldviews to the story. The other worldviews have merit, of course, but will play a lesser role in the story and the conflicts.

Further Study:
The Daddening of Video Games (3:27-8:50) https://youtu.be/5pG7Wc5TUTA?t=207

STYLE, VOICE, & DIALOG

Economical Writing

A critical element in keeping the audience riveted to your story is to write as economically as possible. It is painfully obvious when you're reading narration or dialog that meanders or isn't important. Wheel spinning in a story quickly becomes obvious. Every single line of dialogue and line of narration should be integral to the story or character development. If you remove a line, you should feel its absence.

Not only are the guidelines about line length for short and long narration/dialog prompts necessary from a technical standpoint, they are useful from a writing standpoint as well. If a dialog exchange cannot fit in one large dialog prompt, or four smaller dialog/narration prompts, there is a good chance it is not written economically enough.

When reviewing and iterating on your lines, in each case ask:

- Is there a simpler way to convey this message?
- If I remove this line, will the story suffer?

Search for ways to say things with the fewest words possible that keep the message intact. Remember that people talk in sentence fragments or one word answers all the time. Remember you don't always need to spell out everything -- there is strength in relying on subtext (more on that later). And remember people can get lost in long expositions.

Rework your writing until it is the most concise version of the story that is true to the world and the characters in it.

Dialog & Real-World Conversational Voice

Dialog should be viewed as characters using language to move closer to their goal. A character wants something, and they need to talk to someone else to get it. Dialog and physical action are both tools for moving characters closer or farther from their goals.

The best dialog in the world cannot make a great scene on its own. The context feeding into the scene and or coming out of the scene is what makes dialog impactful. Your dialog must be rooted in story context.

The watch story in Pulp Fiction is an excellent example of this point. On its own, it's an interesting and impactful story that pertains directly to Butch's life, upbringing, keeping promises, and the pain of losing a loved one to war and captivity. But without greater context, it's just an interesting and messed-up story. The watch story's meaning and importance isn't clear when we hear it, but it's thematic context becomes clear rather quickly and continues through the rest of his story: the grown-up Butch is about to enter into a series of wars and will be held prisoner – things his father went through to keep his promise to get said watch to his son. The watch story also gives context to why Butch's external goal to retrieve the watch before he escapes the 'captivity' of his old life is so important to him.

Of course, not all dialog will ripple through the rest of the story the way that watch story does, but the point is all dialog should ripple. It should create context, reinforce context, or evolve context of the story.

David Mamet once said when you're writing dialog in a scene you should be asking yourself:

1. "Who wants what from who?" Or "What does my character want and who is stopping them from getting it?"
2. What happens is they don't get it?
3. Why is this dialog happening now?

These are questions about the story and how dialog will move the story forward. The exact style and choice of wording is not important at this point, because the foundation of why dialog exists must be solid first. Your dialog will flow much better and feel more important once you know why the scene exists.

Dialog should first and foremost serve the scene and the progress of the story. Don't feel compelled to create snappy dialog or funny quotes if that isn't your style. You don't need to overthink every line of dialog to ensure it's fitting a ton of rules about being rooted in action verbs or always including subtext. **Ignore all those rules and simply write good dialog that serves the purpose of the scene tied to moving the story forward. Embellish dialog only if that's your natural writing style.**

Writers who are known for their snappy or memorable dialog exchanges are usually masters of scene conflict and intent. They aren't simply writing amazing dialog to write amazing dialog; the genius of their dialog is fueled by understanding the value of the conflict in each conversation and how that moves the story forward.

Stylistic dialog, very human and realistic dialog, and every type of communication method in-between are all just tools in the writer's toolbox. Pick your own personal dialog tool and use it consistently. Find the purpose of each scene and use dialog to move the story forward always using your brand of dialog.

1. Focus on the purpose of the scene, referencing the questions above:.
    a. Who?
    b. What?
    c. Why?
2. Focus on your characters sounding fluid and natural.

The latter is something you either naturally have a talent for or can develop through practice.

For all the rules about on-the-nose dialog or quips or a dozen other dialog conventions being inherently bad, there are countless examples to the contrary. It all comes down to writing effective dialog rooted in story progression. Great dialog is a learned skill. Keep working on it.

Unique Character Voices

Each character should have a unique voice to reinforce the differences between characters and give your entire ensemble a well-rounded and diverse gestalt. Most differences will be subtle and based on very common methods of speaking. Only sparingly should your character voices venture into the outlandish or cartoonish; Jar-Jar Binks is a cautionary tale, if nothing else.

Be wary of overuse of intentional misspelling or severe grammar errors to denote a character is from a specific region or possesses a lower level of intelligence. Dialog using extremely poor grammar or intentional misspellings can easily venture into offensive stereotypes and tropes which hurt the story overall. Just in the United States there are hundreds of dialects specific to various regions. While many people believe some dialects imply a lower level of intelligence or other negative personality traits, that is simply not true. Dialects should never be used to imply someone is "lesser" in any way. If you are using a dialect, remember that they all have distinct rules, structures, and manners of speaking which you will want to learn to represent them correctly and respectfully.

Voice can and should evoke a sense of how a character views the world, how they regard themselves and others, and how they persuade those around them. In some cases, how someone speaks is very indicative of their intelligence level or education, but this is not *always* the case. Use it wisely.

One useful method for assigning a unique voice to each character is to describe their voice with three keywords and a sample sentence or sentences reinforcing those definitions:

> Aloof, Confident, Sardonic Wit
> Sample: "Whatever. Do what you want. We both already know I'll win. But, hey, maybe this time you won't completely embarrass yourself."
>
> Boisterous, Brash, Wordy
> Sample: "Pull up a chair! I know what you're gonna say, 'you've got places to see and people to do', but you always have time to drink with an old friend! Here, have mine, I'll whistle down the barkeep and get another for myself. How the hell have you been? I wanna hear everything. But, oh, wait, have I got a story for you...! "
>
> Shy, Thoughtful, Astute
> Sample: "Oh, no, you go first. I'm sorry. Oh, ok, yeah, I get what you mean. Most animals like me, but I think what the little fella is trying to say is he's hungry."

Simply by mixing and matching key attributes you can come up with thousands of ways a character could typically speak. This will function as their default way of speaking because it should be born out of their common demeanor. Everyone is pushed out of their comfort zone and reacts in kind, so once you have a solid sense of how they speak normally, ask yourself how they would speak if they feel threatened, if they need help, if they're talking with someone they love, or talking with a parent. Examine how they would react in extreme situations of joy, anxiety, anger, and fright. If it helps, write sentences for a cross-section of these reactions to gain an in-depth understanding of their voice before you start writing them.

Subtext

Subtext is the hidden meaning behind actual spoken dialog; what the speaker really means, because they feel they cannot, or choose to not, say it directly.

Subtext can be vastly overused, so be wary of using it too often. It's a solid remedy if a dialog feels too on-the-nose and very useful in romantic courtship where people are either trying to present their best self or protecting their vulnerability and insecurities.

When you use subtext, make sure it is fueled by reason. People obfuscate the true meaning behind their words because:

- they don't want to hurt someone; (i.e. sugarcoating the truth)
- don't want to expose their own vulnerability
- they need or want to keep something a secret
- they're trying to lure, trick, or accuse someone
- they're trying to prevent something from happening
- Passive-aggressiveness and hiding deeper emotions (i.e. anger, guilt, fear, anxiety, etc.)

You can create subtext through disconnections between action and words. If a character says one thing but their described body language says something else, that contradiction generates subtext. This is a very effective juxtaposition to use in situations of flirting or desire.

MC thoughts will play well into our desire to create meaningful subtext. When you write dialog, and then expose the true thoughts of the MC as something deeper than what they said, you not only generate subtext, but you're

letting the audience in on the trick. This could heighten the enjoyment of seeing how other characters catch the subtext and if they can see through the charade and somehow understand what the MC was thinking. Could be a great way to add more depth to character connections and dynamics.

The key takeaway is to only use subtext when it adds depth, meaning, and intrigue to the character conflict the story already needs.

Further Study:

Writing Subtext in Dialog https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMMpmlraoDo

Environmental & Passive Storytelling

Environmental or passive storytelling is using parts of the environment to visually illustrate aspects of the story, changes or evolutions to the world, or convey information not spoken by characters or narration.

Treat the environment as an effective part of your storytelling toolbox. Even in this platform where the environment is mostly static, we should be pushing to innovate how much passive storytelling we can bring into our stories.

Environment Descriptions as Storytelling

Whenever you can, introduce your environments as though you were introducing one of the most important characters in the story. Even with mostly static environments like ours, they play an enormous role in the interpretation of the story world. See them as context validating the presentation in the foreground. Enhancing it. Giving the world a sense of life and wonder the audience can be drawn to as much as any character or conflict.

Your initial introduction to Heaven's Secret is the somewhat familiar but definitely mystical floating land masses of the afterlife. Its uniqueness draws you into the setting and they hold on that for a few narrative beats so you have time to appreciate and absorb how different this world is and the anticipation for what that might mean for the story itself.

Unless the setting should be gray and drab, or you need it to disappear into the background to not compete with a character moment, always strive for your environment descriptions to entice the reader into the scene by bringing more than they might have expected.

Also, consider shifts in perspective as a wonderful tool in our toolbox for thwarting audience expectations, echoing the viewpoint or mindset of a character, or working as part of a metaphor, as in this scene from *Into the Spiderverse* where Miles has a transformational moment both physically and spiritually about his new powers, which was written as:

"Miles walks to the edge of the roof, the wind buffeting... and LEAPS! The camera turns UPSIDE DOWN.

Miles isn't falling through the frame. He's RISING."

Environment Change as Storytelling

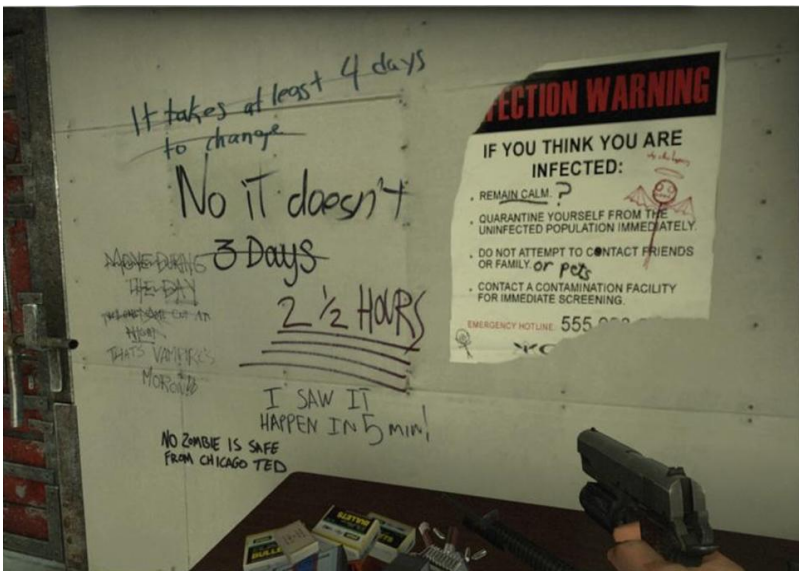
Think of when the streetlights went out in succession in Shadows in Saintfour. Drawing it out raised tension in the scene. The streetlights actually going out in the background helped immensely to evoke a sense of foreboding, and maybe even a touch of impending doom.

Another obvious tactic is to revisit the same environment at least twice, before and after a major change. Rebuilding. Destruction. Signs of civil unrest. The aftermath of neglect or abandonment. All of these tell a story in and of themselves. Just make sure it makes sense: people don't mow lawns in war zones and vines don't overtake a building in only a few months. Pay attention to the details at that level, because a good percentage of your audience will as well.

Always bring the environment into the story as a character whenever you can, and especially when the art and design teams will be able to support you with unique visuals to sell the illusion.

Past Event Storytelling in the Environment

The example below is from Left 4 Dead is not something we can achieve as easily as they did, but environmental or passive storytelling like this may be something we can incorporate into some found items and some background environments. Of course, for messaging as complex as this example, it would need to be on a large billboard to be legible in our platform, but you can storytell through the environment with much fewer words, symbols, destruction, rebuilding, etc.



Passive storytelling like this really breathes life into the world and makes it feel lived in. We get insight into the struggles of people we never even meet, like a time capsule version of storytelling.

You can set the stage for this type of storytelling any number of ways. Take, for example, if you came across a ballroom with a banner saying “Happy 50th Anniversary”. Balloons. Streamers. Ornate centerpieces and plates full of food and glasses filled with champagne at every table. But the chairs are in disarray. It looks like one of the tablecloths was pulled down hard by someone, spilling the contents of that end of the table all over the floor. There appears to be a smear of blood running down the tablecloth and bullet holes in the wall nearby.

You don’t know exactly what happened in that room, but you can infer a series of events that likely happened. That is passive storytelling. Just looking at the scene tells you at least *some* of the story without anyone saying a word.

If your characters will talk about an event where the visuals can help sell the drama, work with the art team to have that be part of the environment visuals in that scene. It will greatly amplify the effectiveness of the drama you want to create.

Mise-en-Scene

Mise-en-scene is a relatively overused and somewhat esoteric term in storytelling, but it basically refers to setting the scenery to maximize narrative impact and flow with character movement. Whether you’re utilizing environmental storytelling in a scene or not, always direct the environment to play a role in the story as more than just the background. The foreground and surroundings should always work together in harmony.

In Media Res & Time Jumps

In Media Res (or “in the middle of things”) refers to starting the story with a quick glimpse into a later part of the story, usually past the midpoint or near the climax. The technique is used to set up a mystery or start the story with a cliffhanger as a way of pulling the audience into the story quickly by making them ask “How did the character get to that point?” or “How will they get out of that problem?”.

The main advice with using in media res is:

- Be sure you choose a compelling point in your story to start; it must prompt questions and attachment

- Use a key moment in the *main* storyline, or a highly impactful moment in a secondary storyline
- Choose a point you can revisit a few times throughout the story in some way, if necessary

The last point is critical. In films, tv shows, and novels the viewing/reader experience is so short term there is a good chance the in media res scene will be fresh in their mind by the time they reach that scene the second time in the main plot. Our stories will be delivered over such a long period of time, the audience could forget exactly where the story started by the time they revisit the in media res scene once again.

- If the in media res scenes are contained inside the same episode, you don't need a reminder, but foreshadowing it likely won't hurt.
- If the in media res scene is at the beginning of a season and not concluded until a later episode, you will need one or two reminders or revisits to the in media res scene to remind the audience.
- If in media res is used as the opening of the series and not concluded until many seasons later or near the end of the series, you must revisit it numerous times over the course of the series. In each case, these revisits can be simple flashes, bits of foreshadowing, or full revisits to the original scene where you spend more time there and learn additional information.

One very useful way to double-up on effective narrative techniques is to use in media res to create immediate empathy for a protagonist the audience is meeting for the first time. Of the types of situations that create empathy for characters, "suffering an undeserved misfortune" or "being in jeopardy" could go hand-in-hand with in media res rather nicely.

Flashbacks/Flash-Forwards

If your story requires moving around in time, be sure to coordinate with the art and design teams to find all the ways possible to present the two time periods in a unique way. It must be clear when you're hopping around in time -- give the audience multiple cues that they're now in a different time. A quick notification subtitle saying "June, 1984" could be missed if the player looks away for a moment. Consider how the locations, clothing styles, and appearances of the characters would be different in this different time.

If the time jump isn't in a completely different era, consider other visual cues such as screen tints, color palette changes or desaturations, and vignetting to make it clear when you're in a different time.

Another tool in the time travel toolbox is always rooting the time change in relation to significant events or objects. The background can be drastically different in the two time periods (i.e. a pristine versus destroyed version of the same location), or a character who is dead in a later time line is alive in the earlier timeline. It can be anything from tiny to significant, but **you want to remind the audience every single time you jump so they don't get confused**, unless the fact that you are jumping through time is a specific element in a mystery that will be answered later.

Even if you convey time jumps with complete clarity, remember that the longer someone has been away from a time period in the story, the fuzzier it will be in their mind. They may not remember the 'current events' or conflict at the center of a time period if you move back and forth in time and spend long stretches in each time period. Shadows of Saintfour includes very long visits to the past and the present, and each time you swap the audience needs to be reacquainted with the conflict of their present location. You know it well because you're writing it, but the audience may be picking up the story again after being away from it for a month or a week. There's every reason to refresh the understanding of the immediate conflict every time you switch time periods.