

An aerial photograph of a coastline, showing a mix of brown, rocky land and vibrant turquoise water. The water has a swirling, marbled appearance, suggesting shallow reefs or sandbars. The land is rugged and uneven, with some white patches that could be snow or light-colored rock.

FOR WRITERS  
AND ROLEPLAYERS

# STORY STRUCTURE

DANCING LIGHTS PRESS



# STORY STRUCTURE

**For Writers and Roleplayers**

**Berin Kinsman**

**Dancing Lights Press**

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# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Stories Have Needs.....	4
Using This Book.....	7
<b>THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Opening Prep Work.....	10
Act I.....	13
Act II.....	28
Act III.....	45
Finishing Prep Work.....	53
<b>THE THREE-TIERED SERIES.....</b>	<b>56</b>
Opening Prep Work.....	60
Phase I.....	63
Act I: The Beginning of the Beginning.....	66
Act II: The Middle of the Beginning.....	71
Act III: The End of the Beginning.....	77
Phase II.....	79
Act I: The Beginning of the Middle.....	81
Act II: The Middle of the Middle.....	86
Act III: The End of the Middle.....	92
Phase III.....	94
Act I: The Beginning of the End.....	96
Act II: The Middle of the End.....	99
Act III: The End of the End.....	103
Finishing Prep Work.....	105
<b>STORY WORKSHEET.....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>EXCERPT: BUILDING CHARACTERS.....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>EXCERPT: SETTING DESIGN.....</b>	<b>115</b>

# INTRODUCTION

We all know that stories need a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hero goes on quest, hero faces obstacles, hero completes quest. Lovers fall in love, antagonist keeps lovers apart, lovers end up together. Things beyond the protagonist's control change, the protagonist faces adversity, the protagonist learns to adapt and achieves greatness. On that basic structure writers and storytellers throughout the ages have woven variations and created masterpieces. We keep coming back to the same foundations today for one very good reason: those structures are versatile and continue to work.

This book will help you to leverage basic story structure and use it to your advantage. You'll be able to say what you want while keeping your audience engaged. The three-act structure and its variations will be discussed in detail, along ways this structure can be expanded beyond a single story and into a series or campaign. In the end, you'll have new tools in your storytelling toolbox, along with the knowledge of how and when to use them in your own creative works.

**Berin Kinsman**

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## STORIES HAVE NEEDS

No matter what the genre or setting are, and regardless of what medium is being used, all stories have the same fundamental needs. There must be at least one protagonist, for a start, the person or persons that the story is about. A story has to have a goal, something that needs to be accomplished by the protagonist that creates the context for everything else that happens. There must be obstacles, things that prevent the protagonist from achieving the goal too easily, so that the story remains interesting. There has to be an antagonist, a rival or a villain that for some reason needs the protagonist to fail. Finally, a story needs to have stakes, both the rewards that go to the protagonist for completing the goal, and the complications that could arise if they fail.

All of those needs are a function of structure. Without those elements, you don't have a story. There's more, though. The story has scenes, and while you can play around with their content and their order to some degree, some scenes have to happen before others. Some scenes have to accomplish specific things. This helps the audience — the reader, the viewer, the listener, the player — to follow the story and understand what's happening. The familiarity of structure creates resonance with their experiences and expectations, fulfills their emotional needs, and keeps them hooked.

### **Creativity and Constraint**

There are people who disavow the need for structure. They feel that it stifles their creativity. Structure isn't story, though, in the same way the map isn't the journey. Knowing where you're going is different from the experience of getting there. It makes sure that you do get there by keeping you from getting lost, and preventing

you from wasting time wandering aimlessly without a purpose. Structure isn't paint-by-numbers; if you hand three different writers the same structure, you can get three different stories, each with the individual writers' voices and intentions intact.

## **The Sandbox and the Railroad**

There are two terms that get thrown around a lot in tabletop roleplaying circles. A *sandbox* is a setting where characters wander around freely and explore the world at their leisure. A *railroad* is a story where the decisions and actions of the characters don't affect the outcome in any meaningful way. Creating a sandbox is praised by many as best thing ever that could happen in a game, while railroading is decried as a cardinal sin. What we're really talking about, if we're allowed to remove some of the hyperbole, are *character-driven* stories and *plot-driven* stories, often taken to irrational and unworkable extremes.

A character-driven story, the sandbox, is about the protagonist's choices and decisions. Its prime virtue is that the characters have a great deal of agency. There can still be structures, and all of the basic elements of a beginning, a middle, and an end, with goals, obstacles, and stakes. While it might seem fun because the audience — the player — gets to do whatever they want, it can also get boring as they wander aimlessly without a clear point as to what they ought to be doing. There are no inherent stakes, and no true sense of urgency. It requires the gamemaster to either create a lot of material that may never be used just in case, or to improvise when the players strike off in unexpected directions, or both.

A plot-driven story, the railroad, is about the story itself. Its prime failing for tabletop roleplaying games is that it robs

characters of virtually all of their agency. The characters are going to do what needs to be done, not because they chose to but because they don't have any other options. There's one solution, there's little room for exploration, and the motivations, goals, and personalities of the protagonists don't have much impact on the events that unfold. This type of story is easy for gamemasters, because its linear nature means there's less to prepare for and virtually nothing to improvise.

### **The Middle Path**

It is entirely possible to strike a balance between the sandbox and the railroad, to walk the line between a purely character-driven story and a strictly plot-driven one. The characters have goals and objectives, but it's up to them to choose how they pursue them. They can wander a bit, but they do so with a purpose. There will be obstacles, serving a thematic purpose and connected to the goal of the story. Characters will still have agency in determining how to overcome those obstacles. Most importantly, there will be stakes. It will be clear what the characters stand to gain or lose in the pursuit of the story's goals, making the entire story much more emotionally engaging and meaningful.

For the gamemaster, this means having a little more preparation than a railroad, but not nearly as much as is necessary to pull off a sandbox. It requires some improvisation to accommodate character agency, but within the scope of what's likely and possible in the story rather than a wide-open, universal realm of possibilities.

## USING THIS BOOK

To get the most value from this book, read through all of the sections in order first. This will give you an overview of the process and the various elements of story structure. Then you can go back through individual sections as needed while you are crafting your stories.

The major sections of this book are:

### **The Three-Act Structure**

More than just the beginning, middle, and end. The three-act structure details what happens in each phase of the story, and what scenes need to be included in those phases.

### **The Three-Tiered Campaign**

How to outline a series of stories or roleplaying campaign with a clear beginning, middle, and end. This includes the types of individual stories and elements that should go into each phase.



## THE AUDIENCE

Throughout the book the word “audience” is used universally to mean the consumer of your creative work. If you’re writing a book, these are the readers. If you’re crafting a screenplay, these are the viewers. If you’re running a tabletop roleplaying game, these are the players. The medium you’re working in and the ways your creative efforts are presented may vary, but some aspects of storytelling are universal.

# THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

The three-act structure divides a story into three parts. Act I, the beginning, is about exposition. It introduces the characters and establishes the goal of the story. The way the world is, or used to be, is shown, and the event that sets the story into motion happens. The challenges the characters face seem harsh in comparison to the status quo that they're used to, but are not particularly difficult in the context of the later parts of the story. Throughout this act, the protagonists are mostly reactive to the things that are happening to them and around them.

In Act II, the middle, the stakes increase. We learn some more about the characters and they begin to understand the ramifications of what has happened. The obstacles become more difficult, and what the characters need to do becomes clearer. Throughout this act, the characters become increasingly more proactive and begin to make more choices which direct the action of the story.

During Act III, all of the elements presented in the first two acts fall into place. The most difficult obstacles must be faced, the stakes will be at their highest, and the characters will need to bring every resource at their disposal to bear. The goal will either be achieved, or the characters will fail spectacularly. This act is entirely about the characters being proactive, developing and carrying out a plan to the end.

## OPENING PREP WORK

Before you begin working on the three acts of your story, there is some basic groundwork that needs to be laid. These are the guiding principles of your story, the road map that you as the creator will use in crafting your story. If you spend a little bit of time on this opening prep work, everything else will be a lot easier.

### **Premise**

Try to sum up the story in a single sentence. Who is the protagonist? What are they trying to accomplish? What's the obstacle that keeps them from doing that? "*A band of adventurers seeks a fabulous treasure, but they have to slay a dragon to get it*" is a premise. "*Homicide detectives try to catch a serial killer before he strikes again*" is a premise. "*Young lovers struggle to be together as their families work to keep them apart*" is a premise. It doesn't have to be complicated, but it does have to be accurate.

**Goals** – What is the objective that the protagonist has to fulfill for the story to be complete? In a love story, the lovers are finally able to be together. In a quest story, the hero returns with whatever objects he set out looking for. In a payback story, the main character exacts revenge against someone who has wronged them. The ultimate goal is how you picture the story ending. Everything else has to build to that.

**Obstacles** – What is stopping the protagonist from achieving the story goal? There are circumstances, physical challenges, mental tests, and antagonists working against them. Come up with about five, from minor and annoying to the worst possible thing that could happen, and order them by severity. The one or two least

challenging will go into your first act, the worst won will be your finale in the third act, and the rest get shuffled into the second act.

## **Genre**

Fantasy? Science fiction? Horror? Or do you prefer romance, magical realism, or crime drama? The genre you set your story in both opens up and limits possibilities. It does a lot of the work of creating boundaries, explaining away certain things and insuring the other things probably won't make sense.

## **Place and Time**

Where and when does your story take place? Like genre, place and time will set some boundaries and do a lot of narrative work for you. It will give you a backdrop for events, cultures, and available technology. Historical time periods provide context and an instant sense of setting.

## **Theme**

What is the story really about? The premise sets the objective, but the theme provides meaning. It creates a universal emotional connection that will hook your audience. Your adventure story could really be about the theme of friendship. A revenge story could really be about humanity versus nature. Theme will give your story depth and texture.

## **Stakes**

What happens is the protagonist overcomes all of the obstacles and fulfills the story goals? What happens if they fail anywhere along the way? Knowing the stakes allows you to create tension, hooking your audience in and keeping the story interesting.

**Rewards** – What does the protagonist get for succeeding? Are the rewards intrinsic, meaning the character gets to feel good? Are the rewards extrinsic, in the form of money, stuff, and general accolades? Do the supporting characters benefit in any way? How will the world become a better place if the story goal is met?

**Consequences** – What happens to the protagonist if they can't overcome the obstacles ahead of them? What happens to them if the story goal cannot be fulfilled? Are there bad things that will happen to supporting characters? In what ways will the world be worse off if the protagonist fails?

## ACT I

The beginning of your story sets up everything that comes afterward. There will be a lot of exposition and description as you establish the main characters and the world that they live in. You'll anchor the audience in the genre, time, and place of the setting. The first act will create a baseline against which later change will be measured and compared. This is where most of the worldbuilding happens.

The stakes within this act will be low compared to what happens later. The obstacles will be relatively easy to overcome, and only seem rough compared to the status quo that's established. The consequences will have far-reaching implications, and the only real rewards may come in preventing things from getting worse. The form of the action means that the protagonist is in a reactive mode, dealing with things as they arise and struggling to catch up.

In addition to laying the foundation with details that will be used later in the story, this act is where you need to create an emotional investment. The audience needs to be interested enough in the characters to care about what happens to them. The questions asked here need to be compelling enough that people want to see them answered. Everyone needs to be hooked in, so that they want to see what happens next.

If you don't have the necessary foundational elements established in the first act, you don't have a story. You will find yourself backtracking to explain things that should have been made clear here. The audience will be confused about what's happening and why they should care, and you'll begin to lose them.

When you do incorporate these elements into Act I, you'll be off to a solid start. The audience will know who the main characters are, be interested in learning more about the setting, and know what the goal of the story is. They'll understand what's at stake, and be primed to root for the protagonist as your tale unfolds.

## ACT I ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

The following things have to happen in Act I:

### **Opening Scene**

The very first scene needs to convey a sense of the setting. It has to establish the time and place of the story, the genre, and the general tone and atmosphere. The audience has to be hooked from the very first image.

### **Introduce the Characters**

The main characters in the story need to be introduced to both the audience and each other. A little bit of each person's back story has to be revealed, with some mystery, as well as their personal goals and aspirations.

## **State the Theme**

The overall theme of the story, what it's really about, has to be presented early on. This is either the overt central conflict, or what the overall conflict of the story represents.

## **Establish the Goal**

Before the end of the first act, the goal of the story has to be established. The characters need to know what's at stake, and what needs to be accomplished. All of this also needs to be clear to the audience as well.

## **Teach the Rules**

In a tabletop roleplaying game, the first act is where the players become acquainted with the rules. Scenes need to be designed to provide opportunities to try out the core mechanic and other systems that will be used a lot.

## **Reach a Turning Point**

For most of the first act the characters will be reacting to what's happening as they figure out what's going on. Before moving into Act II, the need to have reached a turning point where they are committed to achieving the story goal.



## OPENING SCENE

There's a lot riding on the first scene in your story, so you need to put a lot of preparation into it. Start as close to the beginning of the story as you possibly can, leaving out trivial events and information that can be explained or clarified later; a bit of mystery to hook the audience in so they want to learn what's going on isn't a bad thing.

A good opening image that establishes the genre, time, and place will do a lot of the work for you. Show the audience when and where they are. You can very quickly establish the tone of the story with an opening image as well; will the story be grim and serious, lighthearted and fun, or silly and comedic?

The purpose of the opening scene is to show the status quo, and present the world in its current state. This is the way things are, before events later in this act create change. If things are good, the characters will be working to return the world to this status quo; if things are bad, they'll be trying to improve the status quo. The audience will get a general feel for the goal of the story, if not the specifics.

Either the protagonist or the antagonist needs to be established in the opening scene. They don't necessarily need to appear, but their presence has to be felt. Maybe we get to see the protagonist in action, without knowing who they are. The events in the scene might have been set in motion by the antagonist. We get a feel for the sorts of people involved in the story, even if we don't yet know who they are.

There are a number of techniques that can be used in an opening scene. It may be simply be the first scene chronologically. It could

be a prologue or flashback showing the status quo of the world, or a piece of the back story of a main character that's relevant to the overall story. You can begin *in media res*, smack in the middle of an action sequence. You might begin with a scene from somewhere in the second act, or the beginning of the third, making the rest of the story a flashback until the audience catches up. There are a number of possibilities to play around with.

The important thing to remember is that the opening scene is a promise. You're setting the audience's expectations as to what everything that comes next will be like. You're giving them information that they'll need to know later, without a lot of fluff or filler. It's about establishing what the story needs, no less, and very little more.

## INTRODUCE THE CHARACTERS

The next essential function of Act I is to introduce the characters. We may have seen the protagonist in action in the opening scene, but we don't know anything about them yet. The outcome of the antagonist's actions may have been felt, but we don't know their goals and motivations. Having scene where the audience gets to learn a bit about the main characters keeps things interesting and deepens the story.

Every single character that's important to the story needs to be established in the first act. We must see the protagonist, learn what they do, and see what their relationship to other characters is. Their personal needs and motivations have to be established, and a scene might exist just to illustrate their personal problems and personality. There absolutely has to be some action in the first act that makes it clear that the protagonist is the hero of the piece, not just the viewpoint character the audience is following but the person who is going to be able to fulfill the story's goals.

We may not see some supporting cast members until the second act, or even the third, but their existence needs to be confirmed here. Their name can be dropped, or their existence implied by their handiwork being on display, but when they do show up the audience has to be able to connect the dots. You need to create context. In the first act it needs to be clearly established what the supporting characters can do. If they have an important role in the second act, it can't come out of the blue that they have some specialized skill; that information needs to be planted here, to be harvested later.

The same goes for the antagonist. Even if you don't know who the bad guy is or what their motivation could possibly be, you know that someone is behind the events that are occurring. The protagonist and the audience are clearly aware that an antagonist exists. If they appear in the first act, it can't be in a situation where they can be defeated. Their role may not be known, there may not be clear evidence, or the protagonist is in no position to take any sort of action.

By introducing all of the important characters in the first act, you're saving yourself time later. When you, and the audience, understand who they are, what they do, and why they do it, you won't need to justify or rationalize their decisions and actions later. You're settling what's "in character" for them up front, and establishing a blueprint for their later behavior.

## STATE THE THEME

Every great story, arguably, has a theme. It's what the story is really about, and it can change a lot of elements. It might be a doomed romance plot, in the science fiction genre, set in South Africa in 1863, but if the theme is friendship you'll have a different story than if it's about humanity versus nature, or good versus evil.

Unlike other elements of story and setting, themes are universal. They are things that everyone can connect with on some level. Theme transcends genre, time and place, and even plot archetypes. You may not be able to relate to the fantasy genre or have an interest in westerns. Knowledge about certain historical time periods or geographical locations might not be part of your education. Particular types of stories may be unfamiliar. But themes, like the power of love, or the importance of family, are things that nearly everyone can understand.

Personally, I don't believe in being subtle about it. You need to hit the audience over the head with your theme in the first act, and reasonably early on; you can ease off later, being more nuanced and delicate in the second act, and then come back a little more obviously in the third. The first major conflict in the story should highlight the theme. If it's not one of the protagonist's personal needs or goals, it should be the antagonist's. Nearly every obstacle in the story has to be adjacent to it, at least.

If you don't have a theme, your story is going to feel flat. Your audience isn't going to find as much resonance. They'll like the trappings of the setting, the characters, and the twists and turns of the plot, but it might not feel personal. It might not speak to them

in a meaningful way. When you have a theme, though, you've got something they can connect with emotionally.

## ESTABLISH THE GOAL

At some point in the first act, something happens that upsets the status quo. The change is obvious, and stems from a clear inciting incident. Nothing will ever be the same again. This sets the story in motion, and gives make clear what the characters are supposed to do. This is where the story's goal is established.

Most story goals come down to three options, which carry nearly infinite variations:

- *fix it*, which includes undoing or preventing the change;
- *stop the change from getting worse*; or
- *accept it*, and adapt to the changed status quo.

In addition to establishing the goal, the first act also has to establish what the stakes are. What does the protagonist personally stand to lose? What negative, undesirable changes will occur within the setting if the goal is not met? Conversely what, if anything, might the protagonist gain by attaining the story goal? How will the world benefit if the goal is met? And what does the antagonist get out of all of this?

The stakes at this point might be high, but the obstacles aren't. They should feel difficult, they can even be difficult because they're outside the protagonist's comfort zone, but they aren't insurmountable. The protagonist should be able to accomplish what they need to rather easily, without any major setbacks, defeats, or serious injuries. There's plenty of time to smack them around, physically, emotionally, and socially, in Act II.





## TEACH THE RULES

The first act is also where you need to lay down the rules, so the audience understands the way things work. For readers, this can mean learning how the setting operates. If the genre is fantasy, for example, you need to establish what sort of fantasy. Display the tropes that will become important to the story, and make it clear what sorts of genre elements do not exist in this story. Any tools and technology that will be vital to the story have to be introduced, and possibly explained. Items about the time and place where the story occurs that will weigh heavily on the resolution of the plot have to be laid out clearly, so they don't feel like they've been sprung on the audience out of the blue later on when they're needed.

For roleplayers, the first act is where all essential game rules have to be taught, demonstrated, and tried out. Core mechanics, ability use, and common die rolls have to be understood now, while the stakes are low and the challenges are relatively easy. When things escalate in the second act and the obstacles get harder, you don't want people making poor tactical decisions or doing things that are dangerous to their character's health because they don't know how the system works.

When the audience isn't clear about how things work, and you don't provide them with that information, they'll fill that gap with assumptions. When things don't work the way they've decided they should work, they'll be disappointed. You'll start to lose their attention. They'll be focused on why you aren't upholding their perception of how the rules work, rather than on the story.

By being clear and concise about the rules up front, whether they're the rules of the setting or the rules of the game, you're allowing those elements to fade into the background where they belong. There is less disruption as the audience tries to make sense of things during part of the story where they should really be paying attention to what's going on. They'll be engaged, and the second and third acts will go a lot more smoothly.

## REACH A TURNING POINT

The protagonist should be challenged enough to have some doubts about their ability to face what's happening. The obstacles felt hard compared to the status quo, the stakes seemed high, and they didn't want to fail. By the end of the act, though, they need to reach a turning point. They need to make the decision to stop merely reacting to what's being done and go on the offensive.

Usually, something really big happens that makes the character realize that there is no going back. Things are going to continue to get worse, for them, for people they care about, or for the world. They can theoretically choose to do nothing, but it's clear that would be a bad choice.

In a tabletop roleplaying game, this is where things can go wrong. The player has to choose for their character to take action. If they don't, the whole story comes to a halt. Some people will be tempted to call this railroading, but it's not; the character doesn't have a single course of action that they need to pursue. They just have to do something. Hopefully something that insures their continued participation in the story, and the game.

When the protagonist makes the choice and answers the call to adventure, that officially ends Act I. We know who all of the characters are. We've seen the theme of the story played out. We've established the goals and learned the rules. We have all of the information necessary to move forward, and the protagonist has stepped up to lead the way.



## ACT II

The middle of your story is where you start using all of the information you've set up in the first act. There will be less exposition and more description as you show more of the world that the protagonist moves through. The second act will show the changes from the status quo established on the beginning, and the impact those changes are having on the characters. People, places, and things mentioned in the first act will be shown here. This is where worldbuilding will be reinforced, clarified, and slightly expanded upon.

The stakes within this act will be higher compared to the first act. The obstacles will be possible to overcome, but will require the protagonist to put forth effort and use their resources. There will be enough success to build up hope, but enough challenge to make it clear that fulfilling the goal of the story won't be easy. The consequences will become clearer to the audience, but by the end of the act some rewards will become available. The protagonist begins to move from a reactive mode to a proactive one, anticipating what may happen and getting ahead of problems before they can have an impact.

Building emotional investment in the characters is a large part of what the second act is about. The audience learns more about the characters, and hopefully cares about what happens to them and whether they succeed. Some questions about the story are answered, but more questions will arise in order to keep people hooked for the finale.

If you don't have the necessary elements established in the second act, you'll be struggling to find an ending that makes sense.

You will find yourself backtracking during the finale, trying to explain things that should have been made clear here. The makings of a great ending are set up here in the middle.

The shape of the story is pretty clear by the midpoint of the Act II, and is definitely locked down by the end of the act. The audience will have been reminded of the inciting incident, and what the goal is. They should be able to see that fulfilling the goal is possible, but still not be absolutely sure how things will work out. Everything should logically lead the protagonists into Act III.

## ACT II ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

The following things have to happen in Act II:

### **Introduce Subplots**

Secondary stories involving the characters and their personal goals and conflicts provide breathers in the second act. This allows you to adjust the pacing of the story and give characters some spotlight time.

### **Have a Winning Streak**

For most of the second act the characters will be challenged, but will experience a lot of small victories. This gives the audience a chance to cheer, and will make the emotional blows later in the act more effective.

### **Hit Rock Bottom**

At some point the characters will realize that the obstacles they face in pursuit of their goal are much larger than they suspected. The only direction left to go is up.

### **The Antagonist Strikes Back**

The earlier winning streak will not go unanswered. The antagonist will regroup and come back at the protagonists with a vengeance. Along with hitting rock bottom, this will reinforce the notion that reaching the goal will not be easy.

### **Meet Death Head On**

This is either a literal death, or the figurative destruction of a place, an ideal, or a plan. A main character or beloved supporting

character will bite the dust. It has to be an emotional moment for the audience.

### **Face the Darkness**

The characters have to feel that they can't win. They need to be demoralized. It has to be done in such a way that the audience doesn't know how things will work out, but still want to know what happens next.

### **Reach a Turning Point**

Something happens that gives the protagonists a new chance at victory. They gain some resource, piece of information, or insight that makes them realize that they can still win. This sets everything up for the third act.



## INTRODUCE SUBPLOTS

A subplot is a secondary story that runs parallel to the main story. The goals and stakes are usually personal for the individual characters involved. The function of a subplot is to provide the audience with a breather, a change in pace, and a bit of a break from the main action. It's also where you can reinforce your theme in more subtle and nuanced ways.

Subplots are a great way to fill in the back stories of the protagonist and key supporting characters. It provides an opportunity to learn about them, and allows them to pursue their other interests and tackle personal problems. A subplot can also help to flesh out relationships between major characters, by having them do things that are tangential to the plot.

If you have no subplots, the story can feel very plot-driven even if it's not. With no exploration of the character's needs and relationships, it's easy to come away with the perception that the story is on rails and the protagonist has no true agency. It also doesn't provide the audience as much of an opportunity to bond with the characters and develop any deep emotional connections.

Subplots fit squarely in the second act. They can be foreshadowed or hinted at in the first act, when basic story information is being established, but they can't really be explored there. The third act is about resolving the main plot, so subplots only get resolved there in passing or with an acknowledgment in the epilogue.



## HAVE A WINNING STREAK

Early in the second act, the protagonist will have a string of successes. The stakes won't be raised, the obstacles won't be much harder than in Act I, but the audience will have a lot of fun. In a movie or TV show, this is where most of the exciting stuff that makes it into the trailers and commercials happens. In a book, this is where the sample chapter or the teaser scene used for marketing and advertising is pulled from. The winning streak is where the hero gets to look cool, show off their skills, and build confidence in the idea that they are in fact the right person to fulfill the goal of the story.

The real shift is that the characters are able to become more proactive. They begin to understand what's going on, and don't just respond to things being done to them, at them, or near them by the antagonist. An increasing level of knowledge and awareness of the story goal makes it possible to get out in front of things. They begin addressing problems before they happen. While the protagonist isn't in a position to take out the antagonist just yet, they can work over their agents and proxies.

If you're looking running a roleplaying game and you're looking for a "sandbox moment", this is it. The characters can wander around and explore things to their hearts' content. They can continue to pursue subplots and have side adventures. If they are intentionally or unintentionally avoiding the main story, let them do it for a while. Allow them to get it out of their system. You'll start to pull them back on track a little bit later in this act.

While the winning streak is a blast, if you allow it to go on too long it becomes boring. Drama stems from conflict, and if the

protagonist does nothing but win all of the time, you have no real conflict. You want the protagonist to become confident, but not necessarily overconfident or even arrogant. Not because you'll need to knock them down a peg or two, because in the next sequence of scenes you're going to do that anyway. You need to not let them become cocky or conceited because you need them to remain likable. You don't want the audience to tune out because the hero is too much of a jerk.

When you properly utilize the winning streak, what you're really doing is building credibility. You're showing that the protagonist is capable, and worthy of being the focus of this story. You're letting the audience know that there will be upbeat moments in the story, following the disruptive nature of Act I, the gut-punches later in Act II, and the tension of Act III. You're also setting everyone up to want a change of pace and a little more dramatic tension, at about the point that the winning streak begins to get stale.

## **HIT ROCK BOTTOM**

At the midpoint of the second act, you need to pull the rug out from under the protagonist. When everything seems like it's going to be easy, and the story goal can be achieved with little resistance, you have to knock them down hard. If the hero is starting to get a smug or even a bit lazy, they get a rough reminder that they need to take things seriously. Things get worse.

There are two ways to accomplish this. The first is to deal the protagonist the first big loss since Act I. It should be shocking,

given that there was a nice winning streak going on, but while the stakes are raised the consequences shouldn't be dire. It's an emotional setback, but not a serious logistic one. No one dies yet, but leave them feeling that the only place left to go is up.

The second way is to put a cherry on the top of the winning streak and let them think they've won. Then show them that it's a false victory, and make it clear that they've barely gotten started. Don't hit them with increased stakes just yet, but show them that there are obstacles and complications that they didn't even dream of.

If you don't knock the protagonists down, your story will get boring. You'll end up with a winning streak going into the finale in the third act, and it will feel as if victory is assured. The audience won't be as emotionally invested, and the stakes won't feel as if they really matter anymore. There have to be some changes in the dramatic tension.

The reality is, this isn't rock bottom. It only feels like it following the winning streak. It even feels like it in comparison to Act I, because things have gotten worse since the original disruption of the status quo. What this section of the story has to do is motivate the protagonist to work harder. It's where they get to remind us why they're the hero, because they don't give up with things get more difficult.

## ANTAGONIST STRIKES BACK

Now it's the bad guy's turn. The protagonist had a winning streak, which meant defeat on some level for the antagonist. If it didn't impact the antagonist directly, they at least haven't enjoyed hearing about the protagonist's success. After delivering the message that achieving the story goal isn't going to be a walk in the park, the antagonist reaches out and smacks the protagonist where it counts.

What this section needs to be is a reminder of what's at stake, and why the protagonist started on this journey in the first place. If the protagonist is feeling defeated after hitting rock bottom, this is where they strengthen their resolve. They may lose again, but it reminds them of why they have to win in the end.

Overlooking this section means you're not milking the emotional stakes for all they're worth. The audience needs to fear for the protagonist and worry about the story goal being achieved. They need to really learn to fear and hate the antagonist. There has to be a reminder of what the story is actually about, with a commensurate reinforcement of the theme. The relationship between the protagonist and antagonist is cemented.

The stakes are raised again here. If the enmity between the protagonist and antagonist wasn't personal before, it is now; if it already was, those feelings deepen. Those two characters are no longer just after the story goal or their personal goals, they're actively out to get each other.



## MEET DEATH HEAD ON

Someone important dies. Not the protagonist or antagonist, obviously, because without them there is no story. They need to die to illustrate to show that there can be serious fallout from failing to meet the story goal. It needs to be shown that the stakes are a lot higher now than in Act I or the start of Act II. Most importantly, the death has to somehow reflect the protagonist's failure, or the antagonist's success. It should further the villain's cause in some way, and represent a major setback for the hero.

The key is that it has to be someone that the audience already knows and cares about. Remember when you were introducing the characters back in Act I? If you established some positive quality about the protagonist by showing how they treat a supporting character, or how a supporting character is somehow a rock or anchor in their life, that might be the character to kill off here. If you introduced a sick supporting character, their illness overtakes them here. If, in a tabletop roleplaying game, the players are relying a little too heavily on a supporting character for help, they might need to die.

The further away from the protagonist that the death is, the bigger it needs to be. Killing off an immediate family member, beloved mentor, or significant other is huge. Bumping off a character that didn't exist until this scene is nothing. If you're going to kill off strangers, there either have to be a lot of them, or it has to be someone famous or important. No mastermind schemes to assassinate a waiter, a grocery store clerk, or a single random bystander.



The death doesn't have to be literal; it can be a metaphorical death. A close relationship might be shattered for some reason. Something important, an heirloom, useful gadget, or McGuffin, is lost. A plan completely unravels and becomes unusable. A vehicle breaks down and leave the protagonist stranded, unable to get somewhere in time. Whatever it is, the point is to hurt the protagonist, help the antagonist, or, ideally, do both.

## FACE THE DARKNESS

This is the real low point of the story. After a long winning streak, the characters have been handed a significant defeat, seen the antagonist rise up even stronger than they were before, and encountered real or metaphorical death. They've got to be demoralized. The audience has to be wondering where the story goes from here, and even how the story can possibly continue.

In a tabletop roleplaying game, this is where the players are scratching their heads trying to figure out what to do next. Never end a game session here. This is a terrible breaking point, because this is where you can lose people and never get them back to the table.

This is the moment where the protagonist and their supporting character allies have to regroup. They need to review their resources, look at the situation as it really is, and make a plan. Don't linger here too long. It's depressing. It's supposed to be depressing, but don't wallow in it.

Rock bottom was about reminding the audience what the story is about. The antagonist striking back and the death scene were about reminding the audience what the stakes are. This scene is about reminding the audience why the hero is the hero. Even though they don't know the way forward, they're still looking for it. Although they're feeling defeated and demoralized, they're still going. They might not know what the next step is, but they're not willing to give up.



## REACH A TURNING POINT

At the lowest possible point in the story, when all seems lost, new possibilities for success present themselves. The protagonist has a sudden revelation. Pieces that have been set up throughout the story suddenly fall into place. A path to victory reveals itself, and the protagonist realizes they have no choice but to confront the antagonist directly.

The turning point is where the character develops new skills, or demonstrates mastery of the skills that they've been developing throughout the story. This is where the training montage goes. It's where someone gives the inspirational speech that boosts morale and convinces the protagonist that they can finish the story successfully.

The light bulb moment, where the protagonist figures it all out, should connect to the subplot somehow. The solution to the subplot mirrors the way the main story can be resolved. One of the supporting characters from the subplot returns, and they have the missing piece of information. It should also tie into the theme of the overall story, reinforcing the point.

What is difficult to avoid sometimes is committing a *deus ex machina*. The turning point can't come out of nowhere. It needs to be the logical extension of everything that has happened up to this point. No new characters, fantastic gadgets, or incredible strokes of luck can fall out of the sky. It needs to have been carefully set up, and preferably foreshadowed, so that it makes sense in the context of the whole story.

Here at the turning point is where the accusations of railroading may come back. In a tabletop roleplaying game, the players might

need to be nudged a bit if they can't put the pieces together or come up with a solution on their own. This might lead them to feel that they don't get to make meaningful choices, or that events must unfold according to some prepared script. Don't penalize them for not coming up with a plan on their own, or following your trail of clues. Go with whatever they attempt and work with it.

The turning point should leave the audience feeling as good as they did during the winning streak earlier in this act. The protagonist has gone through the worst and come out the other side. Everyone is confident that they have what it takes to fulfill the story goal. Now we all get to sit back and enjoy watching the hero win.

## ACT III

This is the end of the story. The protagonist drives the action, faces down the antagonist, and completes the story goal. By following the path to its conclusion, the hero can end the suffering that began with the changed status quo in the first act. The obstacles the protagonist faces are the hardest. The possibility of failure exists. The stakes are nothing less than life or death, literally or metaphorically. They have to be extremely careful, use every bit of creativity they have, and call every resource available to them into play.

There is no new exposition in the last act. No new information is provided, and no new characters are introduced. It's time to use the elements that you've established in the prior acts. The worldbuilding is validated by making the hints and glimpses of things relevant to the story. The character shows growth due to the journey they've been on, if only to display that they've adapted to a new status quo and learned to overcome all of the obstacles that have been thrown at them.

If you don't have these elements in Act III, you're not going to have an emotionally satisfying ending. The good guy wins — so what? If they don't win because of their own actions, it's a cheat. If they coast across the finish line, without some significant final challenge, it's boring. If the protagonist hasn't been changed by the story somehow, then what was the point?

When you set up the finale correctly, you'll build up to a thrilling climax. You'll resolve all of the issues the story has presented. Then you can slow things down to show how all of the main characters, and the world, turn out as a result of the events in the story.



## ACT III ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

The following things have to happen in Act III:

### **Finale**

The protagonists gather every resource available and have their final confrontation with the antagonist. The story goal will be achieved, or the characters will fail spectacularly.

### **Epilogue**

All of the loose ends from the first two acts are tied up. All of the stakes, both rewards and complications, are resolved. We get to see what happens to all of the characters as a result of the finale.

### **Final Scene**

The last scene has to show what the characters and their world look like now. The theme has to be reinforced, and change and growth in the world demonstrated. Any loose ends need to be pointed out as hooks for a potential sequel.



## FINALE

The final obstacle is overcome. The antagonist is defeated. The goal is achieved. We've reached the big ending of the story.

The biggest obstacle of the story has to be overcome. It has to be the logical last step in the series of increasingly difficult obstacles the protagonist has faced throughout the story. You've set it up in the previous acts, so the protagonist more or less knows what to expect. The theme is repeated and reinforced in the final challenge, just to smack everyone in the head with the point you're making one last time; there's no subtlety or nuance here as in the second act.

Antagonists have to be taken down in order, from the lowliest lackey to the ranking mastermind. This is not only to provide rising levels of tension, but to demonstrate that the protagonist's abilities have grown to the point that only the main antagonist presents any challenge. Think of it as a parallel to the winning streak in Act II, where the audience gets to have some fun and cheer the hero on before the dangerous confrontation takes place.

If you haven't structured your story correctly throughout the first two acts, no one is going to understand what's happening here. The audience will be confused about why the protagonist is doing what they're doing. The protagonist probably won't be clear about what they're doing either. It will very much feel like railroading, as the story rolls to a stop just because it's the end of the story.

When things are structured correctly, it will be clear what has to happen. It will be character driven, because even if there's only one option the protagonist knows it has to be done. The suspense comes not from ambiguity about what happens next, but in waiting

to see how the protagonist does it. The audience should be on the edge of their seats not wondering so much about whether the protagonist will succeed and story goal will be met, but what rewards will be gained and what sorts of sacrifices and complications the protagonist will be faced with as a result of their success.

## EPILOGUE

The protagonist has completed all challenges. The antagonist has been defeated. The story goal has been achieved. Now you have to show the aftermath. The epilogue shows the new status quo.

Act III is really all about the stakes. Ideally, the audience wants to see that the protagonist gets their deserved rewards, and the antagonist has to face the consequences of their actions. It's not always that clean. The villain didn't completely achieve their objective, but that doesn't mean they haven't gallingly gained a little something. All of the major supporting characters have to be accounted for, to show who is okay and who's hurting. Certainly the hero is better off somehow for winning, but that doesn't mean they haven't suffered loss; this is where you show that.

If you don't include an epilogue, you're not acknowledging the emotional connection that the audience has hopefully built with these characters. It becomes a plot-driven ending; the story goal has been achieved, the end. We've reached the end of the railroad line, now you can go home. It's not particularly satisfying.

The epilogue reinforces the reality that the story was actually about the characters all along. It was about things that happened to them, but it was also about the choices they made and the changes that came as a result of those choices. It's a form of reward for the audience, thanking them for sticking with you throughout all of the ups and downs in the story.



## FINAL SCENE

The very last scene of your story presents the evidence that the story goal has been fulfilled. It is one last look at the world you've created. It might show that the antagonist has conclusively been defeated. You may want to assure the audience that the protagonist has ended up where they belong. It could be as simple as making it clear that all is right with the world once again.

If you're doing a series or campaign, you can do the opposite. Your final scene can shine a spotlight on that one loose end that hasn't been resolved. You can create a sense of ambiguity, that maybe the story goal wasn't achieved after all. It sets up the sequel by denying the audience complete closure and leaving them to wonder what's going to happen next.

The final scene provides the audience with closure. In the same way that the epilogue shows what happened to the characters, this scene makes it clear that the story goal really has been fulfilled. If you don't put at least a strong image here, you're leaving room for the wrong kind of ambiguity.

When you've got a strong, memorable final scene, the audience is going to remember your story as something incredibly cool. Think of the last scene in a great movie. You know exactly where the story stands, how things have ended up, and that it is in fact over.

## FINISHING PREP WORK

Once you know what happens in all three acts, you can go back in fill in the blanks. You'll know what elements you need to create in order to tell the story effectively. Names, statistics, and other details can be fleshed out.

### **Characters**

What sorts of people do you need to populate the story? What roles do you need to fill? Are there people that might be able to fill more than one role, eliminating some preparation? Can you have fewer supporting characters that are more tightly tied to the story? Make sure every character has a distinct purpose; otherwise, you can probably cut them out.

### ***Protagonist***

Who is the hero of the story? What is the most appropriate type of character to fill the role of protagonist? In a tabletop roleplaying game, what archetypes are best suited to the story you intend to tell. They should have the sorts of abilities and personalities required to fulfill the story goals.

### ***Antagonist***

Who is the bad guy in the story? What is the most appropriate type of character to fill the role of the antagonist? They should balance out the protagonist, being either their opposite or a dark mirror image. The antagonist has to have the personality and abilities suited to foiling the story goals.

## ***Supporting Characters***

What supporting characters do you need? Look at what abilities the protagonist may be missing, and create people they can rely on for those things. Examine the subplots, and figure out who you need to execute them. Look at the scenes you have planned and the locations you want to use, and determine the types of people that would be there.

## **Locations**

Every scene has to take place somewhere. If you plan things out, you can create some recurring locations, like a home, workplace, or hangout where the major characters can congregate. Look at what has to happen, and figure out the most interesting possible place to have those things happen.

## **Props**

What objects will you need in the story? How do people get around? How do they communicate? Are weapons needed for fight scenes? Are there McGuffins needed to move the story forward? Look at character backgrounds to see what sorts of things they'd need for work or for their hobbies. Look at scenes and locations and decide what types of interesting objects might be laying around.

## **Worldbuilding**

Look at the story as it unfolds over the three acts, and decide what information about the world you need to establish. What things took place that are prologue to the story? What cultural, political, or religious beliefs or traditions provide context for the actions of certain characters? What elements of the world itself do

you need to explain to make the story's goal, obstacles, and stakes make sense?



# THE THREE-TIERED SERIES

You don't want to write a single story; you want an ongoing, episodic epic. The vision you have for your game isn't for one adventure; there's a whole campaign inside of you, dying to get out. You're in luck. The three-act structure scales up to a series.

Instead of acts, divide the larger story that you want to tell into phases. Your series will have a beginning phase, a middle phase, and an ending phase. The elements intrinsic to each phase will be split out into separate stories, or episodes, rather than scenes.

The challenge of doing a three-tiered series is getting the pacing right. Things need to be mixed up a little bit. If you do five stories built around nothing more than introducing each major character, things will get bogged down. We'll address those sorts of issues momentarily.

Expanding the three act structure to the series level allows you to plan things out more efficiently. You know where you're going, and what you're building up to. You don't run the risk of wandering aimlessly. You'll deliver a more satisfying experience to your audience, because you have a complete vision of what the overall series is.

## **Continuity**

Do you have one big story that you need to tell over the course of the series, or do you want to do a set of stand-alone stories featuring the same characters? Is there a strong continuity from story to story, or are they all relatively self-contained aside from a handful of common elements?

This is the difference between, say, a series of mystery novels featuring the same detective, and series of epic fantasy novels. In each mystery book, the protagonist is working on a different case. The supporting cast, location, and other elements might be the same, but you don't need to have read any other books to understand what's going on in any single volume. Fantasy novels tend to build on one another, so the previous books have to be read if you want to have any idea of what's going on.

You need to decide up front which approach you're going to take. Once you've made that decision, it's hard to change your mind. There really is no turning back. You'll confuse your audience's expectations.

There are pros and cons to both stand-alone stories and true interconnected series. Stand-alones can be developed one at a time, with no idea what has to happen in later books. Interconnected and continuing stories require you to think bigger and do a lot more planning. Making things up as you go along rarely results in an overall story that holds together well.

## **The Trilogy**

Structuring a trilogy is pretty clear-cut; the first story in the series is the beginning, the second story is the middle, and the third story is the end. Rather than just being one piece of the overall story, each phase can have a separate story that contributes towards the progress of the series.

The trilogy is the easiest type of series to put together. Other than the single story, it has the fewest moving parts and requires the least amount of planning and preparation. It's a format that's

familiar to both readers and moviegoers, so there is a build-in resonance with this type of structure.

One of the problems with trilogies is that they can feel bloated. Could this story have been told in one book, one movie, or one tabletop adventure? Is there a lot of unnecessary filler in there just to make the story longer? Can the story possibly be too large for a trilogy, and be better served with a longer series rather than the arbitrary three phases?

When you're doing a trilogy, your path is clear. The audience knows what to expect. The structure is convenient to work with, yet flexible. There's a reason it's used so often in a variety of media.

### **The Ongoing Series**

An ongoing series is anything larger than a trilogy. It might be a fixed number of stories, like episodes in a television season, or theoretically infinite, like the entire run of a television series or issues of a long-running comic book.

A typical series will have one or two stories in the beginning to establish the setting, situation and characters; the bulk of the stories comprising the middle; and as few as one or two stories making up the end. If you know how many stories, or episodes, or game sessions, you want to have, you can distribute the phrases with as few or as many stories in each phase as you think you'll need.

Try to avoid completely open-ended series. Think in terms of seasons or story arcs instead. Too many television shows have suffered from having a short beginning (the pilot), a long middle, more middle, still more middle, and total avoidance of the end.

There's only so long that you can stall. Tell one story to completion, then tell another one, and don't try to milk one premise forever.

The benefit of an ongoing series is that you have more time to develop and explore characters. Your plots can become more complex, and your worldbuilding much more detailed. The opportunity to lay the groundwork for story elements that won't pay off for a while, and the foreshadowed important events that won't appear until much later, can be a lot of fun.

## OPENING PREP WORK

If you think of your series or campaign as a single story arc, with three distinct phases covering the beginning, middle, and end, it make preparation easier. Do your planning at the series level first. Many of the elements that you'll use in individual stories will already be fleshed out, ready to reuse and recycle.

### **Premise**

Your series will have its own premise, and individual stories will each have their own premise. Your show about detectives might not feature them hunting killers every single episode; your hearty adventurers may not kill a dragon every week. The series premise has to be unique enough to set it apart, but broad enough to allow for a range of story type so things don't become boring and predictable.

**Goals** – There should be an overall goal that the series is working toward. This can either be something that guides the vision of individual stories, or something that the stories within the series build toward. If the goal is exploration, it might be that every story within the series has some element of exploration. They might also be some specific discovery that the protagonist is trying to make, and the stories show progress toward the premise goal.

**Obstacles** – The obstacle present in your series premise will also appear in individual stories. The series' antagonist, for example, should be the antagonist in a significant number of episodes, if not all of them. While obstacles in each episode will differ, the obstacles in the series' premise will set the precedent and establish some expectations around the form episode obstacles should take.

## **Genre**

The series will have a clear genre designation. Episodes may stray from that, but will retain elements of the series' genre. A science fiction series might have a romance episode, a western episode, or a crime thriller episode, built on elements from those genres, but it will remain in essence science fiction.

## **Place and Time**

The place and time of the series is most like going to be the same as in the individual episodes. This will make research easier, and allow you to build upon the sense of when and where with each episode. If your episode will see the protagonist moving around a lot the place of the series will need to be broad, like the United States or the modern world or the galaxy as opposed to, say, New York City. Unless your series is about time travel, the time of the series and its episodes will be the same.

## **Theme**

The theme of the series should appear somehow in every episode. That's not to say that individual episodes can't or won't have their own themes, but they have to somehow acknowledge or reinforce the theme of the series. It may be that the only place the series theme appears within an episode is in a subplot, or even a single theme, but it has to be there.

## **Stakes**

The stakes in an episode should have an impact on the stakes of the series. If the protagonist fails to meet a story goal, it ought to somehow be a setback in achieving the series goal. A success in an

episode should move the protagonist forward toward accomplishing the series goal. It's all interconnected.

**Rewards** – In a series, rewards in one episode can contribute toward the success of the next episode. The intrinsic confidence earned from success will propel the protagonist forward. Extrinsic rewards like new resources allow the character to continue pursuing the series goal and overcome increasingly difficult obstacles.

**Consequences** – Failure within an episode will have ramifications in future episodes. It will be harder to meet the story goals of the next episode, and the obstacles between the protagonist and the series goal will be more difficult to overcome.

## PHASE I

The first episode, and possibly the first few, will comprise beginning of the story. The exact number of episodes will depend on how long your series is planned to be, and how much information you feel you need to present up front. The setting has to be established, the characters need to be introduced, and the premise of the story needs to be explained.

As with the first act of a single story, the stakes in these early episodes will be relatively low. The status quo will be established, and then some inciting event will change it. The protagonist will be in a reactive mode, responding to what's happening as they, and the audience, get a handle on what's going on.

### PHASE I ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

The stories in Phase I episode have to fulfill all of the requirements of a single story's Act I, while also being interesting in their own right. To do this, you need to keep in mind the goals of a story's first act.

#### **Opening Episode**

The very first episode needs establish all of the essential elements of the series. It has to convey a sense of the setting, communicate the time, place, and genre, and provide a feel for the tone and atmosphere. The first episode can be built around the status quo, the way the world is prior to the inciting incident, or the catalyst that creates the main change in the story itself.



## **Establish the Characters**

The main characters need to be introduced in the first episode. A little bit of each person's role has to be revealed, with some mystery. More information about their personalities, goals, and aspirations can be expanded upon in other Phase I episodes. Subplots elements can be introduced as well, to be explored when you reach Phase II.

## **State the Theme**

The overall theme of the series, what it's really about, has to be presented in every Phase I episode. You can lay it on a bit thick to start, and then ease off in later phases, but it should be there. The theme should what the series, or at least the first season or story arc, is about.

## **Reveal the Goal**

Before the end of the first episode, the goal of the series has to be hinted at. Not all of the details have to be presented yet. There can be a little mystery about what the actual story goal is, but it should be clear by the end of the Phase I episodes.

## **Teach the Rules**

In a tabletop roleplaying game, the first sessions are where the players become acquainted with the most important rules. Episodes can be designed to highlight different aspects of the rules system, while the stakes and the obstacles are still relatively low. By the end of Phase I, everyone should be clear on how things work.

## **Reach a Turning Point**

For most of the first phase the characters will be reacting to what's happening. They'll be trying to figure out what's going on

and comprehend the story goal. Before moving into Phase II, the series needs to have reached a turning point where the protagonist is committed to achieving the series goal.

## ACT I: THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING

This is the first act of an episode in the first phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for the beginning of the episode's story, as well as elements for the beginning of the series' story. What's established here will pay off in this story, but also lay groundwork for events later in the series.

### OPENING SCENE

The very first scene needs to convey a sense of the setting. It has to establish the time and place of the series, the genre, and the general tone and atmosphere. The audience has to be hooked from the very first image.

The opening scene can begin to introduce character that won't be significant, and might not even appear, until later in the series. You can name-drop people to establish their existence, hint at subplots, and put down the roots of relationships that will be explored in future episodes.

If possible, try to work the series' theme into the opening scene as well. You can be subtle at this point. There will be opportunities to hit them over the head with the meaning of the series a little bit later in the episode.

You don't want to overwhelm the audience by throwing in the goal of the series just yet, but you should already be building toward that reveal. A few foreshadowing elements here can't hurt. The idea is to give the audience a taste of what the premise of the series will be right up front. You need to be leading up to the turning point and the change in the status quo that will drive the overall series forward.

If you're running a roleplaying game, don't hit people over the head with a lot of rules just yet. Hint at the sort of things that are possible, though, so players are thinking about what their characters might do when you begin to teach the rules a little bit later.

## **INTRODUCE THE CHARACTERS**

The main characters in the series need to be introduced in the first episode. Even if they're not seen, they have to be mentioned or their presence has to be felt. The spotlight should be on the characters in this episode, but everyone who will become important later should at least be encountered in passing.

Later episodes in Phase I can go into more detail. The audience should learn more about the protagonist's back story, as well as the needs, goals, and motivations of major supporting characters and the antagonist. Something in the character introductions should hook into and reinforce the series' theme somehow. The goal of the series' main story should be reflected in the individual character's personal goals. When the status quo is disrupted and the opening phase of the series comes to a close, it should be clear how the characters are affected by these changes.

In a roleplaying game, character introductions are a good way to showcase how abilities work, and what is possible within the rules. As with the opening scene, it's a passive way to plant some seeds ahead of teaching the ins and outs of the game system.

## **STATE THE THEME**

The theme of the series should also be the theme of the first episode. You should strongly consider allowing it to be the theme of

most of the episodes in the first phase, just to hammer the point home. You can be more subtle and nuanced after the first episode, but the theme should resonate throughout this entire phase.

Since themes often represent a point of view, during the beginning phase of the series you can establish what all of the main characters think and feel. Their approaches to the theme can be the point of conflict in relationships, and the focal point of subplots. The way the characters approach the story goal can also be a reflection of their stance toward the theme topic.

As you begin to teach the rules, you can begin to explore ways that the game system can be used to express the theme. The types of abilities that characters are called upon to use, the specific challenges you provide, and the difficulty of certain types of tasks, can serve as a metaphor for a stance on a thematic topic.

When you reach the last episode in this phase and the protagonist reaches the turning point, the theme of the series should be punched hard. As the status quo is clearly seen to be changed and hard, irrevocable choices need to be made, each character's stance toward the theme should be solidified as well.

## **ESTABLISH THE GOAL**

Before the end of the first episode, the goal of the season has to be established. The objective of the series needs to be clear to the audience, and the episode's story has to tie directly into that. All of the episodes in Phase I have to be connected to the series goal in some way.

Throughout Phase I, you can also explore how the main characters are tied to the series goal as well. The ways that individuals are influenced by the potential rewards, and how they

will be impacted by the consequences of failure, can be developed and demonstrated. Those personal connections are also a good way to tie the series goal to the series theme a well.

In a tabletop roleplaying game, you begin to teach the rules that will be required to fulfill the goal right here in the first phase. Think of these early episodes as training missions, to get the characters ready for the challenges and obstacles in the later phases.

By the time you reach the turning point at the end of this phase, the goal should be well established. You won't need to smack the audience in the face with it in every episode, and in Phase II it's even okay to forget it a bit and allow the protagonist to wander off course.

## TEACH THE RULES

In a tabletop roleplaying game, the first phase is where the players become acquainted with the rules. You can build entire stories around mastering one specific set of abilities or memorizing a particular type of mechanics. If you want to bookend things, the first episode should highlight whatever rules the players will need to know thoroughly to complete the final episode in the series.

The beginning episodes in the series also provide the perfect place to showcase character abilities. Players need to learn what they can do. Knowing how things work will be a benefit to them when the obstacles get bigger and the challenges become harder in the series' middle episodes.

By the time you reach the turning point episode and prepare to move into Phase II, no one should have any doubts about how the core mechanic works. The rules should be second nature. There

can't be any doubt about what characters can do and how, mechanically, the players execute how they do it.

## **REACH A TURNING POINT**

For most of the first phase the characters will be reacting to what's happening as they figure out what's going on. Before moving into Phase II, they need to have reached a turning point where they are committed to achieving the series goal. The individual Phase I turning points in each episode should contribute the large epiphany and commitment that the protagonist must have before moving into Phase II.

Each episode can also use the Act I turning point to reveal something new about a particular character. It's a way to fulfill the Phase I mandate of establishing the characters, and creates a nice emotional beat moving into the middle of the episode.

The first and last episodes of this phase should also punch the series theme here. You can be softer about it in other Phase I episodes. The turning point of an episode should also reinforce the episode goal, as well as remind the audience what the series goal is.

## ACT II: THE MIDDLE OF THE BEGINNING

This is the second act of an episode in the first phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for middle of the episode's story, as well as continue to contribute elements to the beginning of the series' story. This act will build on what's already been established in this episode, and continue to lay groundwork for events later in the series.

### INTRODUCE SUBPLOTS

Subplots in Phase I stories won't be particularly complex or in-depth, but continue to serve the purpose of introducing the characters. The audience should get to see what the protagonist's day-to-day life is like, and what their relationship to supporting characters is.

Early subplots should reinforce the theme of the series, and possibly spring from the series goal or the episode goal; the subplot is a personal complication that arises for the character because of the main plot. The character's personal goal should be worked in, along with how the series goal furthers or hinders their attaining that goal. This will create some tension and conflict that can be leveraged as the subplots are expanded.

Subplots in the beginning of the series can also serve as places to demonstrate roleplaying system rules. Characters can practice abilities relevant to their occupation. They can be shown engaged in their hobbies. It's a safe way for them to fail at tasks with very low stakes and virtually no consequences.

By the end of Act II of this episode, and as the series progresses into Phase II, it's often the things that happened in the subplots



that bring the character to their turning point. It could be a situation that parallels the main plot that the protagonist has managed to resolve, which gives them ideas on how they can overcome the obstacles of the main plot. It might be that the subplot reminds them of the stakes by establishing how supporting characters they care about are at risk. The turning point may just come about because the subplot gave them a break in the action to let the stakes sink in.

## HAVE A WINNING STREAK

During Phase I, the winning streak is all about the episode. It might foreshadow the series-level winning streak in Phase I, but during these episodes the characters are still supposed to be in a reactive mode and getting their feet under them.

What you can do is have the episode's winning streak tie into reinforcement of the series' theme, and the protagonist's discovery of the series' goal. As they're feeling some success in attaining the episode's story goal, they're learning more about what's going on, making connections and acquiring resources that they can leverage during the series-level winning streak in Phase II.

Beginning episode winning streaks are also good places to help establish character abilities and teach the rules. The audience gets to see what they're good at. The players get to do things that play to their characters' strengths without a great deal of risk. The whole point of the winning streak is to build up confidence and credibility by the time you reach the turning point into Phase II.

## HIT ROCK BOTTOM

Rock bottom during Phase one is meant to establish the gravity of the series goal. The protagonist has to feel the consequences, and realize that there are far worse things that are going to happen if they fail. It's all about reinforcing what's at stake.

Over the course of these beginning episodes, you can help to establish things about the main characters by showing the audience how they react to their failure. It can go a long way toward showing the type of person they are, but making it clear how they are affected by their own failures.

Rock bottom in the beginning of the series is about reinforcing the series goal. That's what the protagonist is really not succeeding with, and that's where the long-term consequences are going to be felt. Beginning episodes should really punch the theme during the rock bottom sequences.

While it seems cruel, in a tabletop roleplaying game this is a good place to teach some new or complicated rules. This is where characters should be failing, so poor tactics, bad die rolls, and a general unfamiliarity with the system actually supports the story. The characters, and the audience, are supposed to be off-balance and stumbling around at this point in both the story and the series.

## THE ANTAGONIST STRIKES

This early in the series the antagonist is being proactive and is probably winning. They aren't going to be taking the protagonist particularly seriously. If they do, they won't think that it will take a lot of effort to sideline them. There's not going to be a lot of pushing back until Phase II, when the tables turn and the protagonist goes into proactive mode, forcing the antagonist into reactive mode.

Most of the conflict in this phase will be between the protagonist and the antagonist's agents and allies. There won't be any sort of face-to-face until at least Phase II. What you can do is use these scenes to establish the antagonist's reputation, even if they don't physically appear. The types of people working with them, and the things they ask those people to do for them, can be very revealing.

Because we're still in the beginning, the way the antagonist takes action in these episodes should reflect the theme of the series. It should also be in direct service to the greater series goal, making progress toward the antagonist getting what they want. Every time the antagonist strikes during Phase I, it should reveal some clue about their motivation and what the series story goal is.

In a roleplaying game, this is a good place to demonstrate the antagonist's capabilities, so the players can see how they work and begin to figure out ways to counter them. This is part of teaching the rules, similar to allowing the players to learn about their own characters' abilities.

When you reach the turning point at the end of this phase, these scenes where antagonist strikes should serve as motivation for the protagonist. They will know what the antagonist is capable of, and what they want. They will have some experience in dealing with the antagonist, making them the best possible person to deal with the problem.

## **MEET DEATH HEAD ON**

This early in the series, death will probably be metaphorical. If an actual character dies this soon, it has to be someone incredibly important to the protagonist, providing the motivation to propel them through the darkness and into the turning point.

More than likely, it will be thematic. Something that represents the old status quo will be destroyed. The death and destruction will symbolize the goal of the series, in that the achievement of the goal on Phase III will constitute revenge, resurrection, or restoration of what was lost here at the beginning.

How you handle this in early episodes will establish the tone of the entire series. If you're squeamish about raining hell down upon the protagonist and making the audience emotionally uncomfortable, you'll demonstrate here that things will be relatively safe. If you really want to be brutal and graphic, here is where you show that you're willing to go there. Getting through this has to make the protagonist look truly heroic when they reach the turning point.

## **FACE THE DARKNESS**

This is the hardest thing to pull off this early in a series. If you beat the protagonist down so far that they don't feel they can get back up, the audience feels cheated and wants to tune out. In a tabletop roleplaying game, if you totally demoralize your players, they'll just quit. You have to rely on the earlier winning streak to keep everyone's chins up.

The best way to deal with this in Phase I episodes is to remember that the protagonist is in a reactive, rather than proactive, mode. Things are happening to them. You're not giving them a break, an opportunity to regroup, or a chance to breathe. Make them feel stressed and frustrated, rather than totally defeated.

Facing the darkness will show that the characters are made of, which ties into establishing who the characters are. It should also go toward revealing the goal, because they're going to be looking for

a way out of the darkness and achieving the series' goal is going to be that path.

## **REACH A TURNING POINT**

In the beginning of a series, there are a number of turning points that can be spread out across several episodes. You can spot light each major character's turning point as they come to grips with what's going on, as a means of establishing that character and leading into subplots in Phase II. You can create turning points about the protagonist and supporting characters having epiphanies about the series goal. A turning point can be a character realizing they have a stance on the theme of the series, drawn from their experiences in these episodes. The only thing that matters is that all of these episodic turning points eventually add up to the major turning point that drives the series out of Phase I and into Phase II.

## **ACT III: THE END OF THE BEGINNING**

This is the third act of an episode in the first phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for the finale of the episode's story, as well as reinforce elements for the beginning of the series' story. What happens here will conclude this story, but will also continue to lay groundwork for events later in the series.

### **FINALE**

The finale of each episode not only has to wrap up that episode's story, it should contribute something toward establishing the elements of the series. Something about a character might be revealed, if they all upon a resource that no one knew that had or use an ability previously unseen. The theme of the series might be stated or reinforced. Something about the goal of the overall series, and how it might be accomplished, could be revealed. It should drop some small bit of information that hooks the audience and makes them want to come back for the next episode.

### **EPILOGUE**

The epilogue of an individual episode is the perfect place to build on the needs of the series. What the characters do after the story is resolved reveals something about them. A statement can be made about how the theme was expressed in the episode, almost like providing the moral of the story. A reveal can be made that shows how this episode's goal ties into the larger series goal, if that wasn't readily apparent.

## FINAL SCENE

In the earliest episodes of your series, you really want the final thing the audience sees to be a strong hook. You have to hit them with a mystery that they'll want answered, a twist that makes them question what really just happened, or some reveal that will need to be explained in the next episode. The object is to make them want to come back for the next episode, so see how the series plays out.

## PHASE II

This is the middle of the story. The protagonists encounter obstacles while taking steps to accomplishing their mission, achieving their goal, or defeating the antagonist. More information is revealed, some of which gives the protagonists confidence to carry on, some of which escalates the tension. Some elements introduced in Act I pay off, while new elements that will be necessary in Act II are introduced. The shape of the story is pretty clear, and is definitely locked down by the end of the act. Everything should logically lead the protagonists into Act III.

### PHASE II ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Phase II stories have to fulfill all of the requirements of a single story's Act II, while also providing interesting stories in their own right. To do this, you need to keep in mind the purpose of a story's first act.

#### **Develop Subplots**

Secondary stories involving the characters and their personal goals and conflicts provide breathers in the second act. This allows you to adjust the pacing of the story and give characters some spotlight time.

#### **Show Winning Streak**

For most of the second act the characters will be challenged, but will experience a lot of small victories. This gives the audience a chance to cheer, and will make the emotional blows later in the act more effective.



### **Hit Rock Bottom**

At some point the characters will realize that the obstacles they face in pursuit of their goal are much larger than they suspected. The only direction left to go is up.

### **Antagonist Strikes Back**

The earlier winning streak will not go unanswered. The antagonist will regroup and come back at the protagonists with a vengeance. Along with hitting rock bottom, this will reinforce the notion that reaching the goal will not be easy.

### **Encounter Death**

This is either a literal death, or the figurative destruction of a place, an ideal, or a plan. A main character or beloved supporting character will bite the dust. It has to be an emotional moment for the audience.

### **Face the Darkness**

The characters have to feel that they can't win. They need to be demoralized. It has to be done in such a way that the audience doesn't know how things will work out, but still want to know what happens next.

### **Reach a Turning Point**

Something happens that gives the protagonists a new chance at victory. They gain some resource, piece of information, or insight that makes them realize that they can still win. This sets everything up for the third act.

## ACT I: THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE

This is the first act of an episode in the second phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for the beginning of the episode's story, as well as build upon elements for the middle of the series' story. What's established here will pay off in this story, but also reinforce and expand upon information that already exists in the series.

### OPENING SCENE

The very first scene needs to remind the audience what they already know about the series setting. The episode should introduce some new setting information, in the form of what's pivotal to the episode's plot. A Phase II opening scene should highlight how the status quo has changed since Phase I. It has to establish the time and place of the episode, the genre of this individual story, and the general tone and atmosphere. The audience has to be hooked from the very first image.

As we move into the middle of the series, opening scenes can also focus on subplots. Character stories can be featured more prominently, because so many details about the setting have already been set up. The information necessary to make the episode work can still be embedded here, or move to the second scene.

The opening scene can also highlight the winning streak the protagonist is on during this phase of the series. It can lay the groundwork for eventually hitting rock bottom late in the second phase, and establish that the antagonist has been harmed by the antagonist's actions and is preparing to strike back.

Foreshadowing can be incorporated in the opening scenes to show that death and darkness are around the corner as well. Create tension by making it clear to the audience that things are going to fall apart at some point. They're already beginning to unravel. In later episode on phase II, the opening scenes will show that things have in fact taken a turn for the worse.

## **EXPAND THE CHARACTERS**

In Phase II the audience already knows a little bit about the main characters. Take the opportunity here to remind them of what they already know, and begin to expand upon it. Mysteries and unanswered questions can be explored. Relationships between the characters, including their past histories together, can be revealed. Origins of character goals can be unveiled, and the reasons behind their motivations can be deepened. Phase II is where subplots begin to shine.

As the series begins to put the audience on an emotional roller coaster, you can show how the characters deal with these highs and lows. Early in Phase II they'll be on a winning streak, and we can see if they remain grounded or start getting sloppy. When they start to hit rock bottom, and the antagonist strikes back, you can show their resilience. When they go through the turmoil of death and darkness, and finally reach a turning point in the series, everything that you've established will allow you to guide them through and make their journey believable.

## **REINFORCE THE THEME**

You can ease up on the series' theme in the second phase, even relegating it to subplots, exploring other related themes in

individual episodes. The main theme should still be there in the first episode of this phase, and be hammered home when the protagonist reaches the turning point going into Phase III.

Throughout the middle phases of the story, different characters' approaches to the theme can be reflected in the emotional beats. The winning streak could validate their stance, but the turn toward rock bottom, facing death, and walking through the metaphorical darkness, causes them to have doubts. Or maybe it's the other way around; good fortune makes them rethink things, but the downturn later in this phase makes them realize they were correct in the first place.

## **REINFORCE THE GOAL**

After repeating the goal of the series during every episode in Phase I, you can let it go a bit here. As you explore and develop subplots, the protagonist will be distracted, and so will the audience. When the winning streak takes hold, the audience will be having a good time and won't care. It's a good way to pack an emotional punch when the character starts losing and hits rock bottom; they realize that they've lost their way.

When the antagonist strikes back, the protagonist and the audience will know that they've lost site of the goal. Encountering death and facing the darkness will keep them off balance while they're trying to refocus and become proactive again. Reaching the turning point happens when the protagonist realizes that they can't lose sight of the goal again, and redoubles their efforts to achieve it.

## REVIEW THE RULES

By the middle of the series everyone should be comfortable with the rules. Players should have the bits relevant to their characters memorized. Gamemasters should be comfortable enough that they can locate obscure thing quickly if needed, or just wing it and make rulings off the cuff rather than bring the game to a halt.

Where you can fine tune your understanding of the rules is in the subplots. It's a place to continue to explore some of the more esoteric rules permutations with little risk. Subplots are also a place to clarify any mechanic that players might still be struggling with, before throwing them into tougher challenges.

When the characters go on the winning streak, it will serve double duty by allowing the players to feel confident about their knowledge of the rules. At the point they hit rock bottom and come up against death and darkness, they should be having a difficult time because the obstacles are harder, not because they're still unclear about how the rules work. Once you reach the turning point and move into Phase III, no one should have any questions left about the rules.

## REACH A TURNING POINT

For most of the first phase the characters will be reacting to what's happening as they figure out what's going on. Before moving into Phase II, the need to have reached a turning point where they are committed to achieving the series goal.

In the middle of the campaign, those turning points can also be epiphanies and commitments that the protagonist makes toward pursuing and resolving subplots. It can become unrealistic to make the turning point of every episode a big emotional moment or a re

dedication to the story goal; subplots carry that emotional baggage and make the episode feel a little more organic.

When you're doing winning streak episode, you likewise don't need to punch the turning point as hard. The protagonist is succeeding with style and ease; why would continuing be a hard decision? This changes when the later episodes in this phase become about hitting rock bottom, encountering death, and facing the darkness. The only turning point that matters in Phase II is the one in the final episode, before heading into Phase III.

## ACT II: THE MIDDLE OF THE MIDDLE

This is the second act of an episode in the second phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for the middle of the episode's story, as well as reinforce elements needed in the middle of the series' story. What's expanded upon here will pay off in this story, but also expand upon information that already exists in the series.

### INTRODUCE SUBPLOTS

In Phase II, the audience is already familiar with the main characters. This means you can start to go a little deeper, tie up any loose threads left unresolved in Phase I, and set up some situations to be resolved in Phase III.

Subplots are essential to the pacing of the protagonist's winning streak. In early episodes during this phase, they should have a winning streak in their subplots as well. You can then start mixing things up to vary the emotional beats, introducing the idea that winning streak might not last, or allowing them to have some minor losses, within the subplots. By the time the protagonist hits rock bottom, the subplots should be hitting a darker tone as well.

This all inverts when the antagonist strikes back, the protagonist encounters death, and the main characters all have to face the darkness. As they lose in the main plot and things go bad, subplots can show that the character has a support system. Relationships might be rocky and personal problems might be difficult, but there is hope that they can be resolved. If the obstacles in the subplots can be resolved, and the supporting characters have the protagonist's back, then you have a solid foundation for a turning

point. By the final episodes of this phase, it will be the people and events in the subplots that allow the protagonist to find the resolve to move forward into Phase III.

## HAVE A WINNING STREAK

The winning streaks in these middle episodes of the series will align with the winning streak period of the series itself. The characters are succeeding in nearly everything they do, building credibility and confidence. The more you can tie the two together, so that episode successes affect the series success, the better.

The protagonist's winning streak will carry over to their subplots. If you want to introduce some different emotional notes you can include the antagonist's subplots, because they're on a losing streak. Subplots with supporting characters can be used to lay the groundwork for future defeats and the coming period of darkness later in this phase.

The winning streak can also set up their fall. It's not just about keeping the obstacles relatively easy to overcoming. It's about not giving them challenges in areas where they have little or no ability. Play to their strengths, and make it clear. When the protagonist is confronted with something they don't know how to do, or aren't very good at, let the audience worry for a moment and then present an easier alternative. When they hit rock bottom and have to face death and darkness, those alternatives won't be there. When the antagonist strikes back, it won't be to present challenges to the protagonist's strengths, but to exploit their weaknesses.



## HIT ROCK BOTTOM

Rock bottom during the middle phase of the series is a true rock bottom. The protagonist is facing challenges that are harder than they've been so far. The stakes are higher than anything previously seen. The audience has to really question whether the protagonist can succeed or not. Even if they're confident the good guys will win, they won't have any idea how they're going to do it.

In these episodes, you not only have to make the protagonist feel that they're not good enough to succeed in accomplishing the episode's story goal, you need to make them question whether they're good enough to take on the much bigger challenge of achieving the series' story goal. If the audience isn't afraid, you need to turn up the heat more.

## THE ANTAGONIST STRIKES BACK

In the early episode of Phase II, the antagonist's response will amount to little more than putting up resistance. The protagonist's winning streak will have the villain on a reactive, rather than proactive, footing. If they do strike out, it will be at the protagonist's resources, rather than directly. The antagonist will try to restrict the hero's capabilities by taking out friends, allies, equipment, safe locations, and other things useful in their campaign against the bad guy.

After the winning streak, the audience and the protagonist might be a little overconfident. Hitting rock bottom and failing is the opportunity the antagonist waits for. This section is really about the antagonist taking advantage of the protagonist's failure and exploiting it. They see a crack and work at widening it. During the middle phase of the series, the antagonist's strikes are about trying

to regain control of the plot while minimizing any advantages the protagonist has gained. Hit the protagonist while they're down, witnessing death and doubting their own abilities.

When the turning point comes, it will be after the antagonist has thrown increasingly more difficult obstacles at the protagonist. Somehow, the protagonist is not only still standing but getting stronger. The ineffectiveness of the antagonist strikes in the final episodes of this phase will signal the transition into Phase III.

## MEET DEATH HEAD ON

This is the point in the series where, if the protagonist is going to kill people and destroy things, the protagonist has to kill people and destroy things. If they did such things in Phase I, it was reactive; they did what they had to do. By Phase II, when the protagonist is becoming proactive and going on the offensive, such acts are premeditated.

During the winning streak, literal or metaphorical death will just be counting coup. The protagonist is getting back at the antagonist for what happened in Phase I. Even if what the protagonist does is relatively awful, the audience can forgive them. Emotions are supposed to be running high.

You can build subplots around changes in character, whether the protagonist is creating loss or suffering it. Losing someone and witnessing carnage is can drive them toward rock bottom; realizing that they've inflicted it can do the same. That will resonate throughout the scenes where the antagonist strikes back, and the way the protagonist deals with all of the dark, uncomfortable ramifications of meeting death. Part of the turning point can be the

protagonist realizing that the only way to put a stop to the destruction is to finish the story goal.

## **FACE THE DARKNESS**

This is as dark as it gets in the whole series. The protagonist realizes that absolutely everything rests on their shoulders. It's a lot of pressure. There's a lot of responsibility. Subplots are going to be about how scared they are, which gives the supporting characters the chance to both give them pep talks and weigh them down by reminding them of the consequences.

We know what they're feeling down about. It's coming off the euphoria of the winning streak and walking right into failure, a revitalized antagonist, and literal or metaphorical death. Facing the darkness isn't succumbing to it, though. It's figuring out what went wrong so you can do better. That's what these sections during this phase have to be about — figuring out how to improve so the protagonist can keep going.

## **REINFORCING THE TURNING POINT**

Throughout Phase II, the protagonist's resolve to complete the story goal has to be nurtured. At some point they're going to make the commitment — because, let's face it, if we think the protagonist is going to bail we have no series — so you need to keep reinforcing that they're committed.

To keep this from becoming repetitive, you can work it into subplots. Make the protagonist explain to people why they're doing what they're doing. Have the resolution to the subplot be dependent on the resolution of the series goal, making it clear why the turning point was reached.

During the winning streak, the protagonist is going to keep going because they're winning. When they bottom out, that will make the turning point harder to swallow. The antagonist striking back, and the presence of death, destruction, and doubt during Phase II's descent into darkness, will make getting to the turning point and recommitting to the story goal essential.

## **ACT III: THE END OF THE MIDDLE**

This is the third act of an episode in the second phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for the finale of the episode's story, as well as reinforce elements for the middle of the series' story. What happens here will conclude this episode, but will also continue to lay groundwork for events later in the series.

### **FINALE**

The finale to an episode in the middle of the series is where you show where in Phase II the overall story is. If you're into the winning streak, the finale has to be a glorious and exciting victory for the protagonist. If the protagonist is hitting rock bottom, they need to fail and it has to be felt. When the antagonist strikes back, the protagonist might win or lose, but there will probably be a cost; that cost is clearly defined in the episode finales where the protagonist encounters death. When they battle their own doubts and fears, the finale should influence those feelings. As the protagonist heads into the turning point prior to Phase III, they should be winning or at least have a vision for how they're going to be able to win.

### **EPILOGUE**

If the finale is about resolving the story, the epilogue is about the characters' reactions to the finale. In a series, they're not just responding to what just happened, but looking forward to what comes next. Because Phase II has the protagonist moving from a reactive to a proactive mode, this is where they can announce what

they're going to do next, rather than waiting for the next thing to happen to them.

The epilogue is also a good place to touch on subplots. You might resolve a subplot here, or introduce a new one to be fleshed out more in the next episode. The tone can match the overall tone of the episode, or might provide an emotional counterpoint; give them an upbeat epilogue to a downbeat finale, or vice-versa.

As with the finale, the epilogue is a good place to reinforce where in Phase II the series is. When the winning streak is going, the characters are going to be celebrating. When they hit rock bottom, they're going to be consoling one another. When they experience loss and have to face doubt, you might show them dealing with their emotions individually. At the turning point, the epilogue should show the protagonist and their closest allies gathering together.

## FINAL SCENE

As in Phase I, the last thing you leave the audience in an episode should make them want more. The question they should have in their heads is, "Now what?" The protagonist is on a winning streak — now what? Will they go after the antagonist now? They've hit rock bottom — now what? Are they going to give up? They've faced destruction and despair — now what? How are they going to be able to move on? The protagonist has reached a turning point — now what? How are they going to defeat the antagonist and accomplish the story goal? Keep pulling the audience forward.

## PHASE III

This is the end of the story. The protagonists take the final step to accomplish their mission, achieve their goal, or defeat the antagonist. The final pieces of information are revealed. Elements set up in Act II and Act III pay off. The shape of the story should be solid, with the connection between all three acts forming a seamless whole by the end. Everything should logically lead to a satisfying closure.

### PHASE III ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Phase III stories have to fulfill all of the requirements of a single story's Act III, while also providing interesting stories in their own right. To do this, you need to keep in mind the purpose of a story's first act.

#### **Finale**

The protagonists gather every resource available and have their final confrontation with the antagonist. The story goal will be achieved, or the characters will fail spectacularly.

#### **Epilogue**

All of the loose ends from the first two acts are tied up. All of the stakes, both rewards and complications, are resolved. We get to see what happens to all of the characters as a result of the finale.

#### **Final Scene**

The last scene has to show what the characters and their world look like now. The theme has to be reinforced, and change and

growth in the world demonstrated. Any loose ends need to be pointed out as hooks for a potential sequel.



## **ACT I: THE BEGINNING OF THE END**

This is the first act of an episode in the third phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for the beginning of the episode's story, as well lead toward the conclusion of the series' story. What's established here will pay off in this story, but also progress toward the finale of the series.

### **OPENING SCENE**

The opening scene in a Phase III episode is all about housekeeping. You need to remind the audience of what they already know, and what has gone before. The protagonist needs to be put into position to confront the antagonist and complete the story goal. The stakes need to be reviewed, so the audience remembers what rewards and consequences are on the line.

### **GIVE THE CHARACTERS CLOSURE**

All of the things we've learned about the characters in the first two phases need to pay off. Heading into the finale, all unanswered questions have to be addressed, and mysteries about characters' pasts need to be resolve. Subplots need to be completed with the same clarity and finality as the series' main plot. The epilogue should show that the characters' individual stories are over, and where they fit into the new status quo.

### **STATE THE THEME**

If Phase II offered a chance to be less over about the series' theme, and to explore it in more subtle and refined ways, that's over. In the episodes leading up to the finale, you'll be beating the

audience over the head with the theme again. The epilogue and even the final scene can make a definitive statement about the conclusion series ultimately wants to make about the theme.

## **COMPLETE THE GOAL**

In Phase III, every episode's story goal should further the cause of achieving the series goal. The protagonist is calling in favors and gathering the resources needed for the final confrontation with the antagonist. Every episode finale whets the audience's appetite for the ultimate series finale in the last episode. Every episode's epilogue should recap what progress has been made, and what has to happen next. You're crossing things off a list, tying up loose ends, and getting ready to end the series with a bang.

## **MASTER THE RULES**

If the players have not mastered the rules by this point, they're doomed. Just as the characters will shift from a reactive to proactive mode throughout a story, the players should become more proactive across the course of a campaign. They should not only know how the rule work, but be coming up with creative uses for abilities and plotting strategies. Going into the finale of Phase III episodes, they have to have confidence, and in the series finale episode should be putting their knowledge of the rules on display.

## **REMEMBER A TURNING POINT**

You really don't need new turning points in Phase III. If the audience isn't clear that the protagonist is committed to the cause, you failed a while back and probably can't fix it now. What you can and should do here is remind everyone of the past turning points.

Insert scenes that flash back to the end of Phases I and II, and bring up the issues that drove the protagonist forward at those points. Rekindle the old inspiration, rather than looking for new motivations to heap on.

## ACT II: THE MIDDLE OF THE END

This is the second act of an episode in the third phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for middle of the episode's story, as well as build to the finale of the series' story. This act will build on what's already been established in the episode, and continue to lay groundwork for the conclusion the series.

### INTRODUCE SUBPLOTS

The end phase of the series is when you need to be resolving subplots. The only groundwork to be laid is to show what the characters' plans are after the finale. Who's moving on? Who's going to fulfill their personal goal? Who's going to be stuck with unattainable dreams? This is when characters profess their love for one another. This is when people ask for a divorce. This is when people get accepted into the university of their choice, or get offered their dream jobs.

What it really does is increase the stakes and makes them more personal. Everything the character has ever wanted can be theirs — if they can attain the story goal and come through it in one piece. It gives the protagonist one more thing to fight for. It provides the audience with one more reason to root for the hero.

Epilogue scenes in these episodes are tick boxes, showing the closure is achieved for the supporting cast. Handle the least important characters first. The next-to-last episodes will deal with the protagonist's likely fate. The antagonist will be in there as well. The epilogue of the absolute final episode will deal with how subplots involving the antagonist and protagonist get resolved.

## **HAVE A WINNING STREAK**

It can be argued that Phase III is nothing but winning streaks. In the finale, the protagonist is going to face progressively bigger challenges, just to increase the stakes and the dramatic tension, but they're probably going to win. In the epilogue, you'll cover the rewards that are being reaped from the winning streak, and in the final scene you're going to cement the idea that the protagonist has definitively won.

## **HIT THE FALSE BOTTOM**

There is no rock bottom in Phase III episodes. It's not exactly a winning streak, either. What you have a false bottoms and fake-outs. The thing that needs to work doesn't immediately work. The thing that needs to happen in order for the whole plan to come together doesn't happen. The person you need to show up isn't there. The protagonist will need to improvise. When it look like they're about to lose, then the thing works, the stuff happens, and supporting character shows up. The suspense is all in the timing.

Anything connected to the series' epilogue scenes will also be fake-outs. It may look like something bad happened, but wait, it wasn't that at all, it was a good thing. It's cheap, and it amounts to jerking people around, but if at the end of the series everything feels like it comes too easily the audience will lose interest. Play with them a little bit.

## **THE ANTAGONIST'S ULTIMATE STRIKE**

This is where the antagonist pulls out all of the stops. They had a good run toward the end of Phase II, but now the protagonist has rallied. In the final episodes of the series, the antagonist is going to

raise the stakes and increase the difficulty of the obstacles. In an act of desperation, they will do things that they weren't willing to do in Phase I and didn't think were necessary in Phase II. Nothing is off the table. They want to win.

The final strike isn't just going to represent the biggest challenge to the protagonist. It's going to be based on everything the antagonist has learned. By the end of the series, the antagonist will know all of the protagonist's weaknesses. They know what they're good at, and what they aren't. They know what the protagonist cares about, and what distracts them. You have to create as much drama as possible and milk it for emotional effect.

## **MEET DEATH FOR COFFEE**

Literal or metaphorical deaths that occur in Phase III probably aren't unexpected or shocking. It's familiar. You're closing story loops and snipping off loose plot threads, after all. If someone dies, or something important gets destroyed, their purpose in the story has already been fulfilling. Their passing is only to remind the protagonist and the audience of the stakes.

The epilogues in Phase III episodes should acknowledge important characters that have fallen throughout the series. This is a way to fulfill the emotional beats of meeting death without generating more death. You're wrapping things up, not creating more events that you need to resolve.

## **REMEMBER THE DARKNESS**

Darkness in the final phase of a series is another fake out. The possibility that the protagonist could fail exists! No, wait, never mind, they're okay. False alarm. Don't beat them down here; we're

not introducing new things this late in the series, we're resolving things. Remind the protagonist of the doubts and defeats they've had in the past. Recall those moments of darkness they experienced back in Phase II. Then allow them to get over it.

In the epilogue, and possibly in the final scene, you can have some sort of call back to the darkness the character faced earlier in the story. This will show character growth. It will also add some emotional resonance to the end of the story, and make them seem even more heroic for having not only survived but thrived.

## **REMEMBER THE TURNING POINT**

Turning points in Phase III episodes are essentially recaps of how the protagonist got her. Remember the thing that happened in Phase I of the series, and everything you went through in Phase II, and how you swore you were going to fulfill the story goal because of that? There are no new epiphanies, just some emotional resonance so that when the protagonist does win, it feels really, really good.

## **ACT III: THE END OF THE END**

This is the third act of an episode in the final phase of the series. It has to provide the elements necessary for the finale of the episode's story, as well as the finale of the series' story. What happens here will conclude this episode, but will also build toward the conclusion of the series.

### **FINALE**

One of two things has to happen in the finale of a Phase III episode: the protagonist has to make progress toward the series goal, or the antagonist needs to suffer a setback that makes them easier to defeat. You can have some fake outs in there, where the protagonist suffers a minor setback or the antagonist makes some small gain, but you need to be building to the finale of the series.

### **EPILOGUE**

Epilogues to Phase III episodes are a good place to start tying off loose threads. Show what happens to minor characters. Resolve subplots. Explain away plot holes that might adversely affect the series finale.

You also need to show how the characters feel about the progress they've made toward the series goal. Talk about their plans, not just for the next episode or the series finale, but what comes after the series ends. Make it clear that their lives will go on after the series ends. Give them goals that will reinforce the audience's connections to the characters.



## FINAL SCENE

The last thing the audience sees in a Phase III episode should pull them forward into the next episode. It should be a clue, or even an overt statement, about what's going to happen next. The final scene in the last episode has to make it clear that the story is over. The series goal has been resolved, all of the subplots have been tied up, the movie's over, go home!

## FINISHING PREP WORK

Once you've worked out the stories you plan to tell over however many episodes your series will run, you can begin to work out other details. You may have had some of these things in mind before you started planning your series. Some details may have changed as the story and the supporting element you'll need became clearer. For at least some of these elements, planning and preparing them before you knew what your needs were would have been wasted effort.

### **Characters**

Now that you have an idea what will happen in your series, you have a much better idea of who your characters need to be. You know what they need to be able to do, and the kind of backgrounds they have to have in order to fit. Now you can start working on developing their individual back stories, and working out relationships between them.

**Protagonist** – You may have started your idea for a series with a protagonist in mind; now you know what abilities they'll need to have, and can expand their back story to explain them. If you're running a tabletop roleplaying game, you now know what types of characters will be appropriate and which won't, and the types of abilities that will be crucial in order for players to be able to accomplish the story goals. This will allow you to steer players in the right direction and facilitate character creation so you end up with protagonists that will work in the context of the story.

**Antagonist** – The antagonist is largely a function of the story. You need someone to facilitate the obstacles that get thrown at the protagonist. How you create them is also influenced by the

protagonist. It's best to custom-build your antagonist after you are clear who your protagonist is, so you have a foe that plays off against the hero's strengths and weaknesses.

**Supporting Characters** – When you know what's going to happen in the story, you know what sorts of people you'll have to populate it with. As you work out who the protagonist and antagonist are, you'll see where they need support and assistance. Start with the gaps in the story that need to be filled with a person, then tweak the story a bit to accommodate the personalities you discover hidden among the supporting characters.

## **Locations**

Every scene has to happen somewhere. When you're planned out a series, you can work out recurring locations for a lot of scenes. Think about TV shows, and how there are sets that get used in every episode. Only create additional locations when they're absolutely necessary to the story. Cut your prep work by recycling locations whenever possible.

## **Props**

You need to think about unusual objects that will appear in your stories. You should have a passing familiarity with ordinary, everyday things as well. A lot of this will fall back on the genre, time, and place of your story. Think about how people in the story live — what objects are required to eat, sleep, and so on. Think about how they work, what sorts of jobs they have and the tools and technologies necessary for that to happen. How do people travel? How do they communicate? How do they access information? How do they fight?

## **Worldbuilding**

What other details about the world do you need to establish in order to tell these stories and run this series? What events have to have happened in order for the things in the story to take place? How has the world influenced the attitudes and motivations of the characters? What information do you need to provide to the audience in order for them to have the right context for the story, so everything makes sense?

# STORY WORKSHEET

A quick reference to the steps required to assemble a clear yet engaging story.

## OPENING PREP WORK

These things need to be determined before you can begin to flesh out the story.

- **Premise** – To meet the story goal, the protagonist must overcome an obstacle.
  - *Goals* – What is the objective that has to be accomplished by the end of the story?
  - *Obstacles* – What keeps the protagonist from accomplishing the story goal?
- **Genre** – What type of story is it, and what are the tropes and trappings?
- **Place and Time** – When and where is the story set, and what boundaries exist?
- **Theme** – What is the story really about, and what ideas or statements repeat
- **Stakes** –What could be gained or lost, depending upon the outcome of the story?
  - *Rewards* – What does the protagonist gain for success? Does the world benefit?
  - *Consequences* – What does the protagonist lose if they fail? Is the world harmed?

## ACT I

The main plot is introduced, and the protagonist reacts to changes in the status quo.

- **Opening Scene** – Establish the genre, time and place, and tone of the story.
- **Introduce the Characters** – Establish all of the major characters in the story.
- **State the Theme** – Establish what the story is really about.
- **Establish the Goal** – Establish what has to be done to complete the story.
- **Teach the Rules** – Establish how the both world and the game system work.
- **Reach a Turning Point** – Establish that the protagonist is committed to the goal.

## ACT II

The protagonist begins to shift from reactive to proactive mode in the story.

- **Introduce Subplots** – Learn more about the characters and their relationships.
- **Have a Winning Streak** – Showcase the protagonist's strengths and have fun.
- **Hit Rock Bottom** – Introduce doubt that the story goal can be met.
- **The Antagonist Strikes Back** – The antagonist makes things personal.
- **Meet Death Head On** – A literal or metaphorical death occurs.
- **Face the Darkness** – The worst case scenario occurs.
- **Reach a Turning Point** – The protagonist rallies to bring the story to an end.

## ACT III

The protagonist becomes fully proactive and seeks to achieve the story goal.

- **Finale** – The protagonist confronts the antagonist and completes the story goal.
- **Epilogue** – Show what happens to all of the major characters after the story ends.
- **Final Scene** – Prove that the story is over, or set up a continuation or sequel.

## FINISHING PREP WORK

These elements need to be created now that you know your story's needs.

- **Characters** – The people required to tell the story effectively.
  - *Protagonist* – The hero of the story tasked with accomplishing the story goal.
  - *Antagonist* – The person, organization, or other force opposing the protagonist.
  - *Supporting Characters* – Other people who might affect the story goal.
- **Locations** – Where all of the necessary scenes will take place.
- **Props** – Any physical that are required to tell the story.
- **Worldbuilding** – Background information to provide context for the story.



# EXCERPT: BUILDING CHARACTERS

*The following is an excerpt from the Dancing Lights Press best seller, **Building Characters**, available where you bought this book.*

Begin with a character in mind. Work through the book from beginning to end. Following each step until you've created what you want. You may end up with someone different than you intended. You'll discover things you hadn't imagined. That's okay. That's part of the process of creating a three-dimensional character.

## **Types and Roles**

Know the part the character will play in your story. Is she intended to be the hero, or at least the star, of the story? Is he the villain or provider of obstacles and difficulties for the protagonist? Or are they a supporting character? Ones you know their role, you can decide on one of the many ways they might fill that role.

## **Stages of Life**

At the beginning of your story, where is the character along the journey from birth to death? How has the past shaped them into the person they are at this moment? In what ways has the life they've lived so far prepared them for what's yet to come? What stage of life are they transitioning out into?

## **Dimensions**

Every character has three dimensions. *Physiology* is the collection of advantages or drawbacks their body provides, including their looks. *Sociology* is the environment that they've lived

in, and the impact it's had on her or him. *Psychology* is how they deal with all of the influences and implications of the first two.

### **Motivations**

Knowing where the character has been and who they are, what drives them forward? Can you identify their present needs? Do they have hopes, dreams, and aspirations? What do they stand to gain or lose in pursuing their goals? What forces, whether people, events, or resources, keep them from getting what they truly want?

### **Aptitudes**

An aptitude is something that a character is naturally good at. Technically, these talents are part of their *physiology* dimension. It's called out separately because there are numerical ratings attached, for easier adaptation to roleplaying games.

### **Experiences**

These are skills acquired from things the character has done. Experiences include education, jobs, and hobbies. Technically part of the *sociology* dimension, experiences are called out separately and ranked descriptively for use in roleplaying games.

### **Resources**

These are the assets that the character has available to draw upon. They may also be things they lack. Resources include money, possessions, reputation, and people they can call on for help when they need it. They're the spoils the character has accumulated from their life story so far. As with experiences, resources are ranked descriptively.

## **Wonders**

A wonder is any sort of special ability, like magical spells or super powers, that the character has. They're weird because they can be an aptitude, an experience, or a resource. Not all characters have wonders. Not all stories need them. It depends a lot upon the setting, the time and place, and the genre your character exists in.

## **Telling Their Story**

Finally, you're going to want to record all the elements about your character. This gives you both a starting point, and a reference going forward as their story unfolds. You'll want to keep track of their history, and update it as they experience the world and new and exciting things happen to them.

## EXCERPT: SETTING DESIGN

*The following is an excerpt from the Dancing Lights Press best seller, **Setting Design**, available where you bought this book.*

One of the greatest challenges that both writers and roleplayers face is preparation time. Before you can sit down to write a novel or run a tabletop campaign, you will need to do some research. One of the risks of traditional worldbuilding is the tendency to gather more information than you actually need, or can ever possibly use. You begin to feel a need to be sure you know absolutely everything about your setting, no matter how trivial, just in case it comes up. You don't want to have to stop right when you're in the middle of the action to have to look something up, or even to make something up. It's normal to want all of the pieces have to fit together neatly, so that your official canon has no embarrassing continuity holes.

The other worldbuilding option is to just wing it. Start writing, start playing, and make it all up as you go. If you're well-versed in a particular genre, or know an established setting like the back of your hand, you can make this method work. That's not really worldbuilding, though; that's rote memorization and repetition. You can craft something from whole cloth as your story unfolds, but that's not worldbuilding, either. It's random chance and happenstance.

Setting design, as we'll be discussing it in this book, means doing things on purpose. It means that every element of your setting is there for a reason. You made a decision to include some things, and leave out others, because they somehow contribute to the story

that's being told. You only do as much work as is necessary to tell that story, and maybe set up a couple of future stories.

## TOP-DOWN DESIGN

There are two prevailing approaches to traditional worldbuilding. The first is *top-down*, or *outside-in*, design. You start big, often with a map, and make generalizations about geography, climate, major cities, politics, ecology, and other broad topics. From there the creator can scale down incrementally, filling in increasingly finer and more specific details. Everything is created with no specific use in mind; purpose for those tiny details can be found later, possibly in character backgrounds or story hooks.

The strength of top-down design is that you, as the creator, are able to see a big picture. You know how and why everything fits together because you began with a larger whole and then zoomed in. One of the drawbacks is that it's tempting to make things fit together too well. Any inconsistencies are intentional, and might feel forced. Those inconsistencies are important, because they create conflict. As we'll see, conflict creates drama, gives characters purpose and depth, and drives stories. There may be a lot of potential in the world for many stories, and a myriad of types of stories to be told, but it will take tremendous amounts of work to mine them out of all the raw details required to define the top-down world.

## BOTTOM-UP DESIGN

In *bottom-up* or *inside-out* design, you start small and work your way up to larger elements. The characters may begin in a tavern, and that's all that you or they know of the world. They may be hired

to guard a caravan traveling to a distant city, at which point the creator will need to fill in the details of the city and everything leading up to it. Every element is determined on a need-to-use basis, and they in turn suggest other elements, and the setting grows organically from there.

The strength of a bottom-up approach comes from the inconsistencies that inevitably creep in. Having to reconcile contradictory details that you thought up on the fly makes good story fodder. The downside is that it requires strong improvisational skills. You're either making things up as you go along, or you're stopping and starting to do sporadic bits of research. It's sort of like building an airplane while you're flying it. This approach can be as much work as crafting an obsessively detailed top-down design.

## STORY-DRIVEN DESIGN

There is another option, and that's to follow story-driven design. First you determine the sort of story you want to tell. Then you design as much of the world as you think you'll need in order to tell that story. Every element can justify its existence somehow. It encompasses some components of top-down design, but since you know what you need to focus on, you create less excess. There may still be elements that you won't use, placed there just for color or to make the setting feel more real, but there will be fewer of them. It also uses aspects of bottom-up design, with the added bonus of needing to improvise less. Even when you have to make things up on the spot, you'll have existing elements to serve as a foundation that you can build upon.

The strength of story-driven design is that it's just as creative and intellectually stimulating as the other approaches, but it's far

more targeted and efficient. You're neither woolgathering and generating reams of material that you'll never use, nor fumbling to come up with some element on the spot. You can fly by the seat of your pants when you feel the need to let loose creatively, but you also have a master plan filled with structure and discipline to guide you. What needs to fit together will fit together. What's inconsistent will be small enough to ignore, or novel enough that it will be fun to reconcile or explain away. Best of all, it will allow you to get down to what you've really set out to accomplish: writing a novel, composing a script, or running a tabletop roleplaying game.