

Week Two: The Five-Sentence Story and Basic Story Structure

Reading

1. What STORY does each of the readings tell us? What do we know about the message (Dickinson)? the plot (Hemingway)? the characters (Scripture)?

In-class exercise: Create a five-sentence story.

Five-Sentence Story

1. **The balance:** the normal world. What is normal? Who is our hero? What does he normally do? *Suzy walks down the street with her dog.*
2. **The unbalance:** something happens that upsets the normal world. It must be an event—something has to happen to the central character that you set up in the balance. *The dog breaks the leash and runs into the park.*
3. **The quest:** the central character does something to restore the balance; he attempts to make the world go back to normal. It must be an action done by the central character and directly related to restoring balance. *Suzy runs into the park yelling, “Fifi! Come back!”*
4. **The crisis:** something happens that prevents the quest from working. It must be an action and it must be directly related to the quest (something new can’t happen). *A policeman grabs Suzy and says, “You can’t run on the grass.”*
5. **The new balance:** a new balance of some sort is put into place. It must resolve the crisis and it must be new. It cannot end with the original balance; we have gone on a journey and must end in a new place. *Suzy and the policeman gaze into each others’ eyes, fall in love, get married, and buy a dog.* (But wait! What about Fifi? Fifi’s story does not need to be resolved, because it’s not Fifi’s story: it’s Suzy’s story.)

Story Structure

The Balance: The Beginning

- establish central character
- world of the story, the rules
- style
- set-up, balance, stasis: a series of events that establish the normal world

The Unbalance: The Inciting Incident

- the catalyst or inciting incident moves you from the normal into the unknown. But your character is not on the journey yet. Don’t rush the quest.
- the big event that sets the character on his quest

The Quest: The Middle

- events (plot, action, turning points, transition points)
- something happens that causes or permits something else to happen
- a whole series of events: the hero tries something, it fails or succeeds; he tries something else, it fails or succeeds, etc.

The Crisis: The Climax

- the worst has happened, all is lost
- *crisis* comes from the Greek *krisis* meaning “judgment” or “moment of distinguishing”
- a point so bad that you *cannot* come back from it
- this goes hand-in-hand with a moment where the protagonist feels the *weight* of the crisis. This reveals the true value of the crisis. It’s so real that moving on becomes a bigger deal. You give the character and the reader a moment to feel the emotional impact, to feel the weight of what you have just gone through. Then the main character makes a decision: am I going to get up again or not?

Climax

- the final showdown
- drives the resolution

New Balance: Resolution

- reconciliation, solution, answer, new balance
- complete the pattern, fulfill your promise. Whatever you “promise” or set up in the beginning, fulfill it. It doesn’t have to be tidy or happy. Show what the world looks like now.
- new balance has to be new. We’ve gone on a journey. There’s a realization—the character knows something about himself he didn’t know before.
- knowing your ending guarantees you won’t get lost along the way

Homework

Taking into account my comments on your first assignment (and your own preference), pick the story idea you will develop over the semester. Using the 5-sentence story outline as a guideline (refer to the attached lesson for details), break your idea into a 5-sentence story. Come back to this several times. Are your word choices strong and vivid? Are your characters clear? Does your character go from point A in sentence one to point B in sentence five? Attempt to include all the major plot points of your story.