

Notes on Plot Structure

Epics such as “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey” were *told—oral recitations*. They had no linear plot with a climatic storyline, as modern readers understand it. Oral poets started “in medias res” in the middle of things, not as a consciously contrived ploy for arrangement, but as the easiest way they knew how to start putting together all of the *episodes*. They used mnemonic techniques for memorization and to keep the characters and the actions ordered. They also used the *flashback*, *foreshadowing*, and other episodic techniques, but these had no continuous and causal connection in a linear plot structure.

Except for *classical Greek Drama*, the climatic plot, as we understand it now, did not evolve until the late 18th and early 19th Century with the novels of *Jane Austen*. Because of the increased conscious creative control, the storyline starts developing a tighter, more organized climatic structure in place of the old oral episodic plot. Focus on events (episodic structure) is a more natural way to “talk out” a story because real life is more like a string of episodes than it is a continuous causally related experience dealing with a central plot and leading to a climax like Gustav Freytag’s *Pyramid of climatic structure*. This plot structure is carefully controlled to provide a beginning, a middle, and an end in which the rising action leads to a climatic moment and then falling action leads to an unavoidable conclusion. In modern writing, this common narrative arrangement is seen most obviously in the short story.

Edgar Allen Poe was instrumental in developing and defining the format of the short story. He outlined some requirements for short story writing which still characterize descriptive narration today.

- The most important point that Poe makes is the necessity for producing upon the read a unified, definite (dominant) impression. Before the writer begins, he should determine what effect would be and all other elements of the writing will be shaped or controlled by this (joy, horror, grief, disgust, shock, etc.) Nothing should be put into the story that does not help advance it toward an unavoidable conclusion.
- Once the material has been carefully selected, there should be only one possible order of arrangement. It is Poe’s idea that the omission or displacement of any of the parts of a story injures the work as a whole.
- A short story should be brief enough to read in a single sitting. If the attention of the reader is interrupted, the unity of the dominant impression is immediately shattered and the effect diminished.
- Finally, he implores that the short story must have a striking originality. It requires real art to make familiar people and events seem unusually interesting or attractive. An author may show originality in the invention of his plot, development of characters, choice of setting, style of writing, point of view or even the treatment of material or theme.

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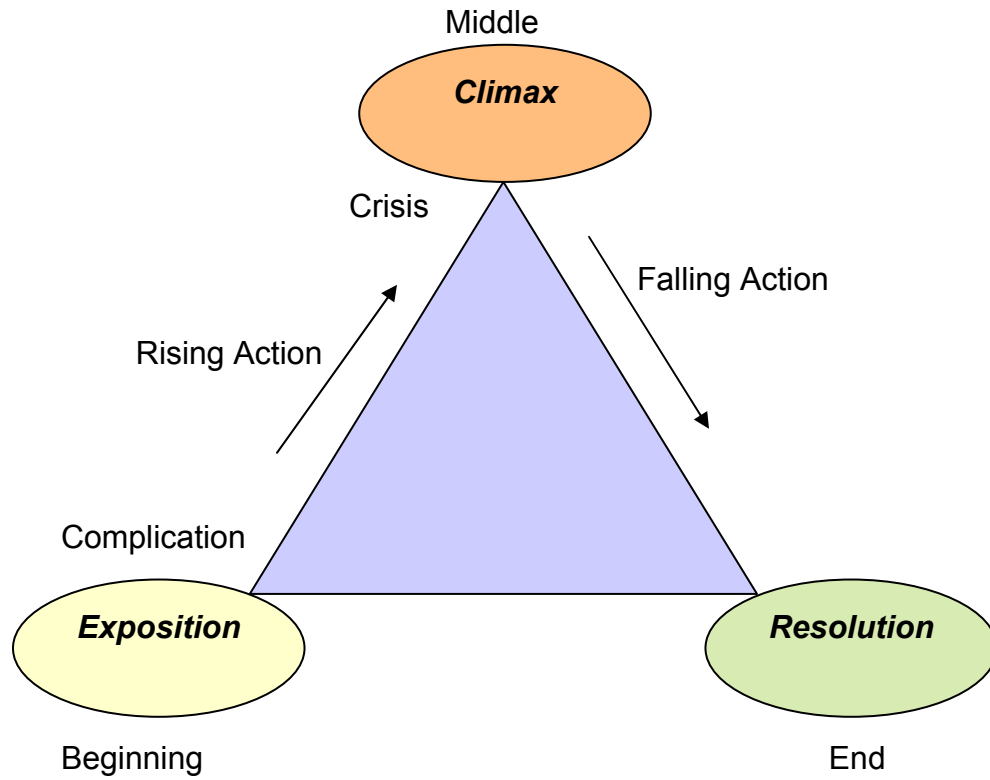
Oral narration is strongly dependent on episodes to create structure. Episodic structure consists of little more than a series of incidents that are together because they happen in chronological order to a single character. As a rule, a work with episodic structure has little or no central plot. However, literate narration is usually centered on a specific conflict which creates a cause and effect structure to the sequence of the events giving a plot not only incidents but also their motivation.

In connection with the idea of a beginning, middle, and an end, modern writers also often find that Poe's guidelines are natural extensions of the linear plot. **Exposition** refers to the opening phase of a story, which presents background information needed to understand the characters, setting, and plot that will subsequently unfold. **Complication** refers to the event or situation which is a minor turning point to the exposition and provides the onset of the major conflict. **Crisis** refers to the major turning point; usually a decision or action is needed to resolve the major conflict, which separates what has come before and what will come after (closely followed by climax and often considered the same thing). **Climax** refers to the high point of the story as a consequence of the crisis; the decision/action has been undertaken or the protagonist has reached illumination/realization and no new major developments or actions will follow. **Resolution** refers to a statement of summary or ending to firmly place characters and circumstances in the mind of the reader; the results of the climax.

Conflict refers to the opposition of characters or forces and must be seen as plausible and interesting. A central conflict forms the basic premise of the plot in a short story. **Elemental or Physical conflicts** are characterized by struggles of *Man vs. Nature* or environment. **Social conflicts** are characterized by discord of *Man vs. Man* as individuals or as a society. **Internal or Psychological conflicts** arise from turmoil within the character in *Man vs. Himself* issues.

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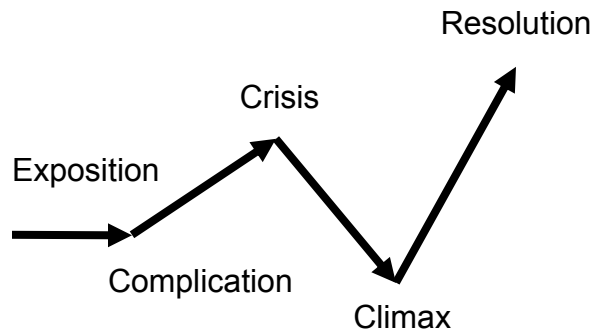
Plot Components as described by Aristotle and refined by Gustav Freytag



Notes on Plot Structure

Plot Structure of comedy

A Comedy typically takes a Protagonist through a variety of complications that seem to be leading to disaster. The climatic turning point, however, leads to good fortune/return to favor/enlightenment which ends happily; often with characters in a better position than that in which they began.



Plot Structure of Tragedy

Tragedy typically begins with a Protagonist in a fairly favored status and moves through complications which turns fortune against the characters and leaves them in disaster or a significantly lower state of being.

