

## Story Arc for Fiction Writers

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You've invented a great character, one that has strength and honesty and other qualities that readers love. Now what? You know your character will need to entice the reader to follow him to the end of your story. Take a look at these vital ingredients for a strong story arc:

### **Beginning**

**The Inciting Incident** This is the point where your story begins. The inciting incident should be the point in your character's life when something happens and after that nothing will ever be the same. Think of a waiter carrying a glass of red wine across a busy restaurant. Twenty feet from the table, a man jostles the waiter's arm. The waiter steadies the glass to keep it from spilling on his customer's exquisite white gown. Is there a threat? Probably not yet. He comes closer; the wine sloshes about. Threat? Maybe, maybe not. Just as he hands the glass to the patron, the glass tips and the Beaujolais arcs toward the gown. Threat? Bingo. The nearer you start your story to the place where threat is imminent, the more intriguing the story.

### **Middle**

**The Build-up** Each scene that follows the Inciting Incident raises the stakes more. The action rises and falls (see scene/sequel), but the tension gets worse. Conflict should not dip below that of the previous scene, except for narrative sequels to scenes which give the reader time to reflect and process what just happened. "And things got worse" is a good rule to help shape this story arc as a mountain that gets steeper in every chapter. Please note that the outer conflict doesn't necessarily have to be car chases and things blowing up—tensions can rise as a relationship nears the breaking point or a character can no longer avoid a major life decision. Inner conflict should parallel and balance the outer conflict in terms of how threatened the protagonist feels and what he intends to do about it. Each scene pushes the story arc to the next level.

### **End**

**The Pay-off** When you reach the climax in the last third of your story, your character will do something to resolve the main problem. Make your character do the work. The climax should be the "all is lost" "do or die" moment. This marks the highest peak of your story arc. By now readers are rooting for your character and must find out what happens.

**Denouement or Resolution** After your climax, readers need to know what happens to the character, how that character is changed, other subplots and if the character is happy or unhappy with the outcome. "Happily ever after" isn't necessary but you should provide a logical conclusion so readers will feel satisfied. As you round up the horses of your story, provide only the necessary information and then end quickly. Don't drag the arc out into a flat line that chronicles unimportant aspects of characters or things best left for the sequel.

### **Three Questions for Novelists:**

What does your character want more than anything?

What or whom is standing in his/her way?

What is your character willing to do to obtain what he/she wants?