

Great Middles¹

Writers often know where their stories start and end but draw a blank when it comes to all the stuff in between. And unfortunately, common plot structures like the hero's journey aren't as helpful as they seem. While they provide a rhythm of success and failure, they don't offer much guidance on which successes and failures will strengthen the unique story that's unfolding.



To fix this issue, let's look at how to extend your beginning and end into a middle that won't sag. This process can be used on anything from a novelette to a large novel series. The length of your story doesn't change plot structure; it only changes how much content you'll have time to cover.

Checking Your Beginning and End

You can only make a middle that's as strong as your story's frame, so let's start with a quick tour of what that frame should look like.

The core story is called the plot arc (aka throughline, main plot line, or spine). This arc holds the story together and gives events a sense of movement. You'll have other sub-arcs (subplots or sub-stories), but the more these other arcs break from the main plot, the less important they can be in the overall structure. When a story has more than one throughline, they're usually the internal and external conflicts.

Any plot arc starts with a problem and ends with permanent success or failure in solving that problem. So when you're looking at your beginning and end, **identify what problems in the beginning are going to be resolved in the end.** If you have a big problem that's left open, it means your end isn't actually the end of the story. If you are working on the first book in a series, you may want to include the whole series in this process.

¹ By Chris Winkle/Adapted for class by Joseph Sigalas

Three typical types of plot arcs are as follows:

- **Showdown.** Problem: A villain threatens the land and everyone in it. Resolution: The hero defeats the villain.
- **Mystery.** Problem: An unknown villain has killed someone. Resolution: Thanks to the hero, the villain faces justice.
- **Escape.** Problem: The hero is in danger at their current location. Resolution: The hero makes it somewhere safe.

If you find multiple plot arcs that are important, choose the one with the highest stakes to be your throughline. For instance, choose the possible death of the hero over whether the hero learns to believe in himself. All the other problems and resolutions you identify will be subplots. More on those later.

Now that you know your problem and resolution, write down all the antagonists involved. An antagonist is anything—a person, the weather, a character flaw—that stands between the hero and the solution to the big problem. If you are struggling to come up with content, adding another antagonist to the story is often helpful. Just make sure that antagonist isn't creating a new subplot instead of getting involved in the throughline.

Your story opens when you establish the throughline's big problem, showing it to the reader or audience. Your story closes when this problem is resolved. What should you do in between? Build child arcs.

Creating Child Arcs

A child arc is one step in a larger arc—a step that has its own problem and resolution. How many child arcs you create is flexible, just like how many times an author divides up their novel is flexible. Some novelists have fewer large chapters, and some have many small ones. Child arcs can also have their own children, allowing you to create as much depth and structure as you need. Maybe you divide your novel into "books," then sections within each "book," and then chapters within each section.

Our goal in creating child arcs is to provide ways the protagonist and antagonist can interact without ending the story. After each child arc, the hero should be closer to resolving the problem, but even so, the problem should feel as insurmountable as ever. This way, as the story progresses toward the climax, the tension goes up, not down. The basic rule is that whenever the hero has a win, you need to restore the tension.

Let's look at different ways to create child arcs that fit into the throughline.

Steady Progress

Some throughlines come with an easy and intuitive way to divide the hero's big goal into smaller parts. [Travel-focused stories](#) are a common example. If Frodo needs to drop the One Ring in Mount Doom to defeat Sauron, then every mile he travels towards Mount Doom brings him closer to the resolution.

However, every mile he travels isn't a plot arc. To create child arcs in a travel story, the trip must be divided into sections that each have their own obstacles. Problem: Frodo has to get through the mines of Moria, but they are dark and dangerous. Resolution: Frodo escapes out the other side, into the sunlight where all the dangerous creatures of Moria can't venture. With arcs like that one, the story's middle has a structure that keeps it from getting mired in pointless scenes.

To maintain tension in a story like this, the hero's tasks should become more hazardous as they approach their goal. The Lord of the Rings handles this well. The final leg of Frodo's journey is in Mordor, the most dangerous land of all, and he has to travel through it with just Sam and Gollum instead of the whole Fellowship.

In contrast, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows has more trouble escalating tension. Rowling establishes that defeating Voldemort means destroying four magic items, which make for natural child arcs. However, it's hard to justify why destroying the third is more dangerous than destroying the second. Having Harry aim for the easiest items first could have been beneficial, and it was helpful for Voldemort to catch on once an item was destroyed.

Struggles for Advantage

Many throughlines don't have natural progress markers, so you'll need to keep characters busy in early chapters. Often, storytellers make the mistake of letting the hero and villain fight too early. If the villain gets a decisive victory, the story can't continue, but watching the villain fail reduces tension in the story. A great way to fix this is to keep the hero and villain from interacting directly. Instead, they can fight for things that would give them an advantage.

In many stories, the protagonist is outmatched and spends time preparing for the final conflict.

- **Showdown.** Problem: To have any hope of defeating the villain, the hero must get to a legendary weapon protected by a series of obstacles. Resolution: The hero gets through the traps, but the weapon has already been taken by the villain.

- **Mystery.** Problem: A key witness is too afraid to talk to anyone. Resolution: The hero takes the witness somewhere safe and earns their trust, but the witness has some really bad news about the case.
- **Escape.** Problem: To navigate through the treacherous labyrinth, the hero needs a special key. Resolution: The hero successfully tricks the Minotaur into giving the key away, but it turns out this key is dangerous to mortals.

You might notice that none of these scenarios goes entirely well for the hero. If the hero gained power without anything bad happening, the tension would go down too much. Plus, these disasters open up a new arc for the hero to engage with.

Instead of the hero working to gain something they need, you can also have an arc about preventing the antagonist from getting an advantage.

- **Showdown.** Problem: The villain is besieging the high temple. Once the temple falls, the kingdom's magical protection will fail. Resolution: The hero gets the high priestess to safety, but the temple still falls.
- **Mystery.** Problem: The killer has friends in high places, and they want to close the official investigation. Resolution: The hero fails to convince their bosses to keep the case open. Now the hero has to investigate outside the law.
- **Escape.** Problem: The villain's agents have attached a tracking device to the hero. Resolution: The hero manages to remove the device, but bounty hunters have already closed in.

If the villain is aiming for an advantage, it's usually most beneficial if the villain wins. Early victories will ensure that the villain stays threatening and balance out the growing abilities of the hero.

Conflicts With Lesser Antagonists

As I mentioned earlier, any plot arc can include more than one antagonist. Most notably, many villains have minions that fight for them. However, you can also use a lesser villain that acts independently or a non-villain antagonist such as a character flaw or an environmental hazard. Whatever the case, dealing with this antagonist should feel like the next step in resolving the throughline, not a side trip to deal with separate issues.

- **Showdown.** Problem: The villain's minions are pillaging the land to feed the villain's army. Resolution: The untested hero tries to scare the minions off, but after watching a friend die, they lose their nerve.

- **Mystery.** Problem: Someone has sabotaged evidence of the crime. Resolution: The hero hunts the saboteur down and finds the culprit is a corrupt officer covering their tracks, but not the killer.
- **Escape.** Problem: A thick mist has made it difficult for the hero to navigate. Resolution: When the mist lifts, the hero has no idea where they are.

Regardless of how a child arc unfolds, it should make a difference to the story as a whole. That means if your detective chases a **red herring**, they shouldn't end up exactly where they started. An easy way to get the hero closer to the story's resolution is for them to learn something important from the conflict. Maybe the red herring isn't the killer, but after getting caught they provide more evidence. In my earlier example, a hero that fails to get a magic sword could still gain skill and confidence from besting the obstacles guarding it.

Failed Attempts

Last, you can have your protagonist go for the goal and then fail. This attempt must cost the hero dearly. If they can try to defeat the antagonist over and over again until they succeed, the story's tension will go out the window.

- **Showdown.** Problem: After seeing the results of a brutal attack on a nearby village, the hero runs off to fight the villain before they are ready. Resolution: The hero only lives through the attempt because their mentor comes to save them, and the mentor dies as a result.
- **Mystery.** Problem: The detective discovers the culprit and arrests them, but doesn't have admissible evidence. Resolution: The killer is released, and the detective is taken off the case because of this failure.
- **Escape.** Problem: The exit to the labyrinth looks deceptively close, and the hero breaks cover to run for it. Resolution: It turns out the exit is an illusion created by the villain to get the hero to break cover.

Unless you manage to place this attempt right before the climax, your audience will probably know it's doomed to fail. There's too much story left for the hero to succeed! Use the looming failure to increase tension, and don't draw it out. This is a great place for the hero to make an impulsive move; it's not a great place for grand speeches.

Working in Subplots

Ideally, your characters will participate in subplots while they are also engaged with your throughline. This is why character arcs and relationships arcs make great subplots. Your characters can face their fears or have a romance while they are

preparing for battle, on a stakeout, or arguing over which route to take. The slower reflection scenes that take place between action scenes are ideal for focusing on these internal arcs.

The stronger your child arcs are, the more you can get away with creating additional scenes to focus on subplots. However, the subplot should be convenient. Characters shouldn't have to travel somewhere to get involved in a subplot, and switching to a viewpoint character who's not involved in the throughline is asking for a bored audience. Stick to viewpoint characters who're already important and don't let it last more than a scene at a time.

Avoid placing subplots so they are obviously preventing the throughline from moving forward. If your hero receives an invitation to dine with the villain, the audience will get frustrated if they decide to put that off to find a neighbor's cat. This isn't a video game where the hero can complete all the side quests they'd like before proceeding to the next cut scene.

Bringing the Story to a Head

You've gotten all the middle stuff in, and now you need to transition to the story's climax. The key is to ask why the final conflict between the protagonist and the big antagonist must happen now. Some possibilities include:

- The villain is ready for her big attack; this is the hero's last chance to prevent it.
- The hero has been cornered by the villain; she has no choice but to engage in a fight she was avoiding.
- A cosmic event provides the hero with his only opportunity to defeat the villain.
- The villain has captured the hero's loved one, forcing his hand.

Because the climax is the highest point of tension in a story, it's best if the hero is forced to struggle directly against the villain, and this conflict will inevitably lead to success or failure. That gives your story a great finish.

Middles can be difficult to write just because we have so many options. While these choices may be bewildering at first, they also offer a lot of room for creativity.