



The Hero's Journey: 12 Steps That Make Up the Universal Structure of Great Stories¹

Part I

The Hero's Journey (HJ) is as old as humanity itself. And over the history of humanity, this single story form has emerged over and over again. People from all cultures have seemed to favor its structure, and its familiar types of characters, symbols, relationships, and steps.

If you want to build or strengthen your writing career and win a following of many happy readers, you want this particular tool in your writer's toolbox.

Why You'll Love the HJ

Like many, I grew up loving *Star Wars*. I especially loved the music and bought the soundtracks at some point in middle school. When my parents weren't home and I had the house all to myself, I'd slip one of the CDs into my stereo, crank the volume up, and blast the London Symphony Orchestra as it laid the epic foundation for Luke Skywalker's unforgettable trench run on the Death Star. I even swung my arms high in the air, pretending I was conducting the violins and timpani myself.

I know it's nerdy to admit. But I love the music of great movies.

In a way, the HJ is like a wonderful soundtrack. It follows familiar beats and obeys age-old principles of human emotion. We can't necessarily explain *why* a piece of music is so beautiful, but we can explain *what* it does and simply acknowledge that most people like it.

As I've come to understand the HJ, I've fallen deeper and deeper in love with it. But it's important to make sure you know what it is, and what it isn't. T

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he HJ *isn't* a formula to simply follow, plugging in hackneyed characters into cliched situations. The HJ *is* a deep set of steps, scenes, character types, symbols, and themes that tend to recur in stories regardless of culture or time period. Within these archetypes are nearly infinite variations and unique perspectives that *are* impacted by culture and period, reflecting wonderful traits of the authors and audiences.

Also, the HJ *is* a process that your reader expects your story to follow, whether they know it or not. This archetype is hard-wired into our D.N.A. To expect anything different would be practically inhuman.

Let me put it this way: To know the HJ is to know the human soul. This may not make sense right now, but I promise it will as this article unfolds. To know the HJ and its steps is to know the human soul. Learn why in this article.

In the beginning, there were stories. These stories were told by fathers and mothers, soldiers and performers. They were inscribed on the walls of caves, into tablets of stone, and on the first sheets of papyrus.

This is how the HJ was born.

Below, we walk through the HJ's twelve steps and how to apply them into your story. We'll also learn additional resources to teach you some other HJ essentials, like character archetypes, symbols, and themes. By the end of this article, you'll be able to easily apply the HJ to your story with confidence.

II. What Is the HJ?

The HJ is the timeless combination of characters, events, symbols, and relationships frequently structured as a sequence of twelve steps. It is a storytelling structure that anyone can study and use to tell a story that readers will love.

The HJ builds on certain character **archetypes**, or story elements that tend to recur in stories from any culture at any time.

And while some archetypes are unique to a genre (such as mystery or fantasy), they are still consistent within those genres. For example, a fantasy story from Japan will still contain many of the same archetypes as a fantasy story from Ireland. There will certainly be notable differences in *how* these archetypes are depicted, but the elements will still appear.

That's the power of the HJ. It is the skeleton key of storytelling you can use to unlock the solution to almost any writing problem you are confronted with.

Why Knowing The HJ Will Make You a Better Writer

The HJ is the single most powerful tool at your disposal as a writer. But it isn't a "rule," so to speak. It's also not a to-do list.

If anything, the HJ is **diagnostic**, not **prescriptive**. In other words, it *describes* a story that works, but doesn't necessarily *tell* you what to do.

But the reason you should use the HJ isn't because it's a great trick or tool. You should use the HJ because it is based on thousands of years of human storytelling.

It provides a way to connect with readers from all different walks of life.

This is why obviously fake stories about fantastical creatures from imaginary worlds can forge true, deep emotional connections with audiences. As an example, *The Lord of the Rings*, by J. R. R. Tolkien, contains mythical creatures like elves and hobbits. Yet it is Frodo's heroic journey of sacrifice and courage that draws us to him like a magnet.

The HJ is based on thousands of years of human storytelling. It reflects elements the human soul craves.

A Preview of The HJ Steps

I can't wait to guide you through The HJ. Below is a list of all the topics that will help you master this in your books. Today, let's focus on the *creme de la creme* of what allows the HJ to impact the reader or listener: **The Twelve Steps in the HJ**.

The Twelve-Step HJ Structure

In addition to its character archetypes, Campbell's overarching "myth" is probably best known for its **Twelve Stages of the Hero**. Modern storytellers use this structure to create films that make billions in revenue. If you've enjoyed a film by Pixar, Lucasfilm, or Marvel Studios recently, then you've probably seen the HJ at work.

The Twelve Stages identify twelve actions, situations, or moments that nearly every Hero experiences. These "steps" need not always appear in order, and they can (and often do) repeat themselves.

Remember: these steps are not always scenes. They serve more as checkpoints or beats, marking progress on a familiar path that all Heroes more or less take. Sometimes a story will use steps more than once (*The Lion King*, *The Prince of Egypt*). Other times, a story will skip a step, like when a Hero doesn't have an explicit Mentor (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*).

So let this structure serve as inspiration for your story planning, *not* as a rigid rule that stifles your creativity.

III. The Twelve HJ Stages or Steps:

Step 1. Ordinary World

The Hero lives his or her life in an otherwise peaceful and quiet world. However, danger comes from within (a world that is broken or corrupt, like *The Hunger Games*, or from without, like *The Lord of the Rings*).

Frequently the Hero is itching for some kind of adventure or change; this is why he or she is primed for what is to come. When the danger comes in Step 2, the Hero is ready to take the next step due to their eager, adventurous, or frustrated spirit.

Step 2. Call to Adventure

When the danger comes, or when a Herald (another popular HJ Character Archetype) announces that danger is coming, the Hero must face the choice to stay or go. Both choices have dire consequences, and the Hero must weigh the cost of both.

The Call to Adventure is usually a brief, sudden story beat. It can be in human form (*The Hunger Games*), a letter (*Harry Potter*), the discovery of an ancient treasure (*The Lord of the Rings*), or an act of violence (*Captain America: The First Avenger*).

But the Hero isn't quite ready to go . . . yet.

Step 3: Refusal of the Call

At the beginning of a story, Heroes are human, just like you and me. That makes them frail, fearful, and very mortal. They often have relationships they don't want to leave behind. And at this point in the story, a Hero doesn't realize they are a Hero yet (because no heroic steps have been taken!).

There is a moment of doubt and indecision that plagues almost every Hero. Whether it's self-doubt, fear, or ignorance, many Heroes hesitate before accepting the Call. This is one of the reasons the HJ harmonizes with the human spirit—it's something any reader can relate to.

Step 4. Meeting the Mentor

As long as humanity has existed, there has been an older generation ready to pass on what it knows to the younger. When the Hero cannot move on because they are not strong enough, both physically and mentally, a Mentor steps in and provides the teaching and encouragement the Hero needs.

Due to its prevalence, the Mentor is a character archetype that requires much innovation. To avoid the "wise old bearded man" trope, many stories will make their Mentor questionable in judgment (*The Hunger Games*), or transform the Mentor into

the Shadow (*Batman Begins*). What will you do to innovate the Mentor archetype, and the Meeting the Mentor Step of the HJ?

Step 5. Crossing the First Threshold

Armed with the proper training and support, the Hero sets out on their journey. In order to signal that the Hero is departing the familiar, safe world of the Ordinary, the storyteller will have the Hero cross a boundary of some kind that separates the new world from the old. This is known as the Threshold.

Almost always, the Threshold is physical. This way readers can see it in their minds. Your Hero may cross a bridge or a border; they may board a plane, train, or automobile; they may climb a fence or descend into a chasm. However you depict this step, make sure the journey's beginning is clearly signaled by the Crossing of a Threshold.

Step 6: Trials, Allies, and Enemies

The middle of every heroic journey is filled with adventures of every kind. Usually, though, the Hero will encounter three types of people: a friend, an enemy, or something in between.

These encounters serve to develop the Hero as a character. They simply cannot be heroic from the start, and must earn that title by helping the weak, overcoming enemies, and outlasting a road of trials and series of tests that come their way. It's important to create a variety of tests, as well, where the hero meets mysterious or treacherous characters, powerful monsters, or his/her greatest fear. The hero must grow and change as a result of all these tests.

Step 7: Approach to the Inmost Cave

Eventually the Hero must arrive at the destination, and that destination is frequently a fortress, cave, or dungeon crawling with monsters, enemies, or traps. This will lead to the story's climax, but the best heroic journeys include a step before the big fight. It's called the Approach, and it gives your Hero (and their companions) a moment to pause, breathe, and truly weigh the stakes of what's about to happen.

In this scene, the Hero's loyal companion might abandon them (at least for awhile); it could be when the Shadow reveals a new weapon, minion, or threat; it could be when the Hero completes some final training, often depicted in film as a montage. There are many ways to force your Hero to stop and think, and your reader will thank you for doing it.

Step 8: The Ordeal

Every heroic journey features a unique Shadow with a unique “fortress,” and yours will, too. As your Hero enters this place, it’s time to clash swords!

There must be a scene where the Hero (and possibly their companions) sneaks in, attacks, parachutes down . . . whatever is true for the world and story you’re telling. And it is usually one of the most fun scenes to write. While this may not be the actual final battle, you want the stakes to be high and absolutely thrilling.

Step 9: The Reward

For their valiant efforts, the Hero must acquire the goal, yet the goal, as acquired, must be revealed to be inadequate. Usually this takes shape by the Hero reaching a crisis in their inner journey, where an inner need (for justice, peace, morality, etc) comes into conflict with the reality of the physical goal and what it provides (like wealth, fame, comfort, etc).

The point of this step in the HJ is that the Reward is *never* enough. As much as we believe they will, the physical rewards of life never satisfy as deeply as we hope. The HJ reflects this universal human truth by continuing the story even after the Hero seems to get what they want.

Step 10: The Road Back

Another way to identify the Road Back could be the **Response to the Reward**, whether it is the Hero’s response (disgust, disappointment, resolve, etc) or the Shadow’s (vengeance, change-of-heart, etc). After the Hero acquires the goal, there must be a flight or return back to the Ordinary World.

The key to the Road Back is that it creates a false sense of peace, safety, and finality. Because the Hero has seemingly gotten what they wanted all along, the reader may be left with a sense of completeness, but not a deep thematic satisfaction. Some readers might even wonder why the book isn’t complete yet.

Step 11: Resurrection

Everything in the HJ leads up to this climactic step: the Resurrection. In this scene, the Hero must face the story’s evil in an ultimate way, often in the actual final battle (after the fake-out ending in Step 10). Then the Hero *must* suffer a form a death. It may not be literal, actual death; but it must be a death, regardless. During this death, the hero is often trapped somewhere, like a dungeon or the “belly of the whale.”

Then the Hero must be resurrected. This is not easy to pull off. It requires careful planning and revision when the details don’t add up exactly as you’d like. But through

their own power, skill, righteousness, cleverness, or kindness to others, the Hero must earn a resurrection that brings them back into the fight.

Step 12: Return With the Elixir

The conclusion of your HJ necessitates some kind of return. This is a return to the original Ordinary World, or a return to the community of the world if it has had to relocate.

When they return, the Hero brings back gifts and blessings, an ultimate boon that usually takes physical form, like food, rain, or safety. However, it also takes spiritual form, as in hope, faith, and love. The Hero *must* bring these gifts back and share them with their community. It is essential to your reader's experience of catharsis, and represents the apotheosis of the story's themes and values.

[End Part 1]