

# The Hero's Journey: *12 Steps That Make Up the Universal Structure of Great Stories*<sup>1</sup>

## Part II

To distill the Hero's Journey structure into an easy checklist, writers need to learn how to plan and draft five scenes that are the building blocks of a well-written HJ:

**Scene One:** "Choice to Go"

**Scene Two:** "Initiation"

**Scene Three:** "Task"

**Scene Four:** "All Hope is Lost"

**Scene Five:** "Hero Returns with the Ultimate Boon"



## A Guide to Structuring Your Hero's Journey

Structure is an extremely subjective matter to storytellers. It is the source of the schism between so-called "Planners" (those who write with a plan) and "Pantsers" (those who write by the seat of their pants).

No matter where your preference lies, there are principles of storytelling that can benefit you on your mission to write a great story with a solid, timeless HJ at its core.

In order to help you apply the HJ Twelve Steps to your story, consider these three (practical!) principles of solid story structure:

### 1. Divide Your Story Into 3 Acts

How does Three-Act Structure overlap with a Twelve-Step HJ? It's actually not that complicated. Usually, the Three-Act HJ looks like this.

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<sup>1</sup> Original by David Safford; adapted by Joseph Sigalas

### **Act 1 = Steps 1 through 5**

The Beginning of your story shows the reader the Hero's Ordinary World, their Call to Adventure and Refusal, the introduction and early work of the Mentor, and the Hero's "Choice to Go," or Crossing of the Threshold.

### **Act 2 = Step 6**

Yup. All of Act Two, the Middle Build, is a single Step: Trials, Allies, and Enemies. This is why it's essential to realize that this Step uses the entire twelve-step structure within itself, and must put the Hero to the test a number of times on their journey toward the final goal.

### **Act 3 = Steps 7 through 12**

The Ending of the story begins when the Hero pauses to Approach the final Ordeal. It then proceeds to the major Ordeal, the Reward and consequential false ending, any Road Back that may be involved, the ultimate showdown resulting in Resurrection, and the Hero's triumphant Return with the Elixir.

## **2. Use Word Counts to Plan Your Drafting**

There are benefits to generating an idea of how many words and chapters you should be writing. If that sounds like too much planning for you, consider this question: *Do you like wasting time?*

I don't. And I'd prefer to waste as little as possible. That's one of the great benefits of planning your writing with word counts in mind.

Knowing a rough estimate of how a HJ could break down by the numbers can help you plan, write, and edit a novel with a steady and strong pace. And simultaneously, it's likely that this road map will give you even more motivation to finish your story.

You might also consider devoting certain percentages of your time to the Beginning, Middle, and Ending of your book, which I'll cover more in a future article.

## **3. Specifically Plan Your Steps**

Once you've made upon a rough word count estimate, you can plan your steps quite deliberately. As you complete this process, you can alter your estimate as well.

With this kind of plan in place, you can determine when it's time to move on to the next step as you draft. This isn't to "follow the rules," but to stay attuned to the kind of stories that readers love and have loved for thousands of years.

With this in mind, you'll be able to use the HJ as a guide that provides a massive canvas for you to freely paint upon—and one that will come in extreme convenience as you study and apply the Twelve-Step HJ.

## HJ Examples

Learning these concepts one-by-one is certainly useful, but might not help you see the power in a well-told, well-structured HJ story.

In order to really master the HJ, you can explore popular books and films that use these steps and archetypes with expert artistry.

These three examples were a turning point in my writing career while studying the HJ:

### Example #1: Toy Story

Few Hollywood studios regularly utilize the HJ to incredible effect more than Pixar. In its first outing, *Toy Story*, Pixar successfully told *two* HJs for both Sheriff Woody and Buzz Lightyear. In subsequent sequels, it would recapture the magic, taking its cowboy protagonist along a sequence of heroic steps that resonant with the human experience.

For example, Woody begins in an **Ordinary World** in which he comfortably runs Andy's bedroom; he's **Called to Adventure** when a new toy arrives and challenges him for the role of Andy's favorite toy; and he **Refuses the Call** by choosing a crooked path, in which he attempts to have Buzz knocked into a corner where Andy won't find him.

As you can imagine, the story continues from there, with Woody and Buzz split between two worlds, and our heroes choices seem to perfectly follow the HJ as they attempt to reunite with Andy and forge a relationship that isn't purely antagonistic.

Beloved by generations of audiences, *Toy Story* is an ideal work to focus on.

### Example #2: The Hunger Games

The dystopian genre is filled with unlucky heroes who realize that their worlds are broken, only to rise up against invincible forces. In one of the most popular of these stories, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, follows a dirt-poor girl on a quest to unseat a tyrant and bring justice to Panem. As you certainly expected, *The Hunger Games* is a perfect case study of the power of myth to bring a fantastic world into stark reality.

For example, Katniss Everdeen, the story's hero, follows in the footsteps of many other protagonists by bearing a **Magic Weapon**, or object that seems to heighten the hero's powers and reveal his/her greatness.

Once out of her comfort zone, she endures numerous **Tests and Trials**, including the lengthy **Task** of surviving the Hunger Games themselves. Along the way she enters a **Belly of the Beast**, or cave, where she must nurse her partner Peta back to health. And in the story's gripping conclusion, Katniss must survive an onslaught of **Creatures of Nightmare** as the "Mutts" swarm the Cornucopia where she and Peta must make their last stand.

These situations, symbols, and more appear all throughout the Hunger Games trilogy, and I'll share exactly how these HJ essentials apply in a future article.

### **Additional Examples of The HJ**

These three stories are by no means the only examples of the monomyth executed to perfection. Some other stories great for analyzing the HJ could include:

- The Lord of the Rings, by J.R.R. Tolkien
- *Harry Potter*, by J.K. Rowling
- Pixar's *Ratatouille*
- Pixar's *WALL-E*
- Back to the Future
- The Great Gatsby
- *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen

### **It's Time to Tell Your HJ**

*Toy Story* and *The Hunger Games* are just two members of a near-limitless collection of stories, new and old, that use the HJ structure and archetypes to thrill readers.

The next, let's hope, will be written by you!

Use the HJ Twelve Steps to outline, write, and/or edit your book—and touch all your readers on a human level.

[End Part II]