

# The Three-Act Plot Structure for the Short Story<sup>1</sup>

The plot isn't a series of events that move forward in a *random* way.

The events are connected by cause and effect and have a very definite structure to them. The plot for the short story can be structured like a Three Act play and, as in a play, the acts are divided into scenes. Within each scene the structure is like the play itself with a beginning, middle and end, culminating in a high point.

Let's take a closer look at this Three Act structure.

## Act 1

Start with a set-up. A **set-up** can be viewed in a simple way: introduce a protagonist within a setting where a problem is about to hit him. What triggers the conflict's story and kicks the plot into gear at the same time is known as the **inciting incident**. This incident or problematic situation will be something that both disturbs and challenges the protagonist. It comes as close to the beginning of the story as possible. Once character and setting are introduced in the set-up, the inciting incident should happen. The end of the inciting incident signals the end of the first act.

## Act 2

This is the main body of the story. Here we are placing scenes that develop character, plot and **conflict** in a smooth and logical manner and the **tension** must always be **rising**, even in quiet periods of reflection; which means that the stakes are rising for the protagonist and that everything is heading toward a final and inevitable clash with the antagonist.

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We have two or three events here where the protagonist and antagonist clash to keep the tension rising, bearing in mind that the inciting incident may be the first clash. The last event in this act will have a **high point** and the **darkest moment**. At the high point, it may look like our hero has got one over on the opposition, but then unexpectedly, the darkest moment arrives, and all he has tried to achieve now looks to be undone. It seems as if he has completely failed in his quest to sort out the challenge of the story. This is an essential moment that forces the tension even higher. It is the nail-biting moment in the horror film when it looks like the monster is dead but then it rises up sneakily behind our hero getting ready to devour him. Our hero is surely doomed now.

### **Act 3**

The **climax** is where our hero turns round in time and has his last battle with the monster. It is an all or nothing moment where everything the hero has striven for will turn to dust if he loses at this point.

In the **resolution** all the loose ends are tied up.

### **Three Act Play**

A short story plot arc covers the set-up through to the resolution and the overall objective/problem to be tackled.

- Act 1
  - Set-up
  - Inciting event
- Act 2
  - Conflict (rising tension)
  - High point and darkest moment
- Act 3
  - Climax
  - Resolution

The 3-act plot arc structure is a common formula that works for many popular films and novels really well, so for the short story we may need to tweak it a bit or even quite a bit. But to do this successfully we need to understand the underpinning psychology of why the formula creates rising tension and holds the reader or audience spellbound to a high degree. We can use a sporting analogy as a reference point to explain this underpinning psychology. Let's think of a tug of war contest.

### **Act 1 is the set-up and the inciting incident or challenge.**

The two teams get ready. The game begins. One team screams out a challenge to the other and tugs hard on the rope (antagonist does the challenging) pulling the other team (protagonist) toward the line. It is aggressive and confrontational but exciting for the spectators (reader, in our case).

### **Act 2 is the middle part with conflict and rising tension, and has a high point and darkest moment.**

The challenged team (protagonist) might manage to pull the other side a few feet forward, but then the challengers (antagonist) dig deep and pull the challenged team forward close to the line. This exciting to-ing and fro-ing is constantly forcing up the tension. The most exciting moments come round possibly three times, so it's like three little scenes of conflict within the overall match. The challenged team (protagonist) pull the other side right to the line (high point) and it looks like they've got it won. But the challengers recover, and soon drag the challenged team toward the line. One of the members of this team slips and falls, releasing his hold on the rope. Surely they've lost now. (Here is the darkest moment for the protagonist.)

### **Act 3 is the climax and resolution.**

The losing team (protagonist) suddenly finds its second strength. It pulls back hard and regains a step. The other side pulls back hard. Another fierce struggle ensues, but this time the challenged team (protagonist) pulls its opponents over the line in a nail-biting finish (climax). The winning team get their medals and everyone shakes hands (resolution).

This tug of war analogy gets the basic points across clearly. If you were just to have a match, where within the opening seconds one team pulled the other over the line, or a match that lasted minutes but one team looked like it would win right from the start with no real balance in the struggle between the contestants, it would not be anywhere near as exciting. Of course, you can't plan the most exciting outcome for a sport, but you can for a story.

The same rules apply to the emotional plot. The emotional plot in a story has its challenges, its conflicts, its ups and downs, and its bruises and tears—just like in the physical plot.