

Two Narrative Arcs¹

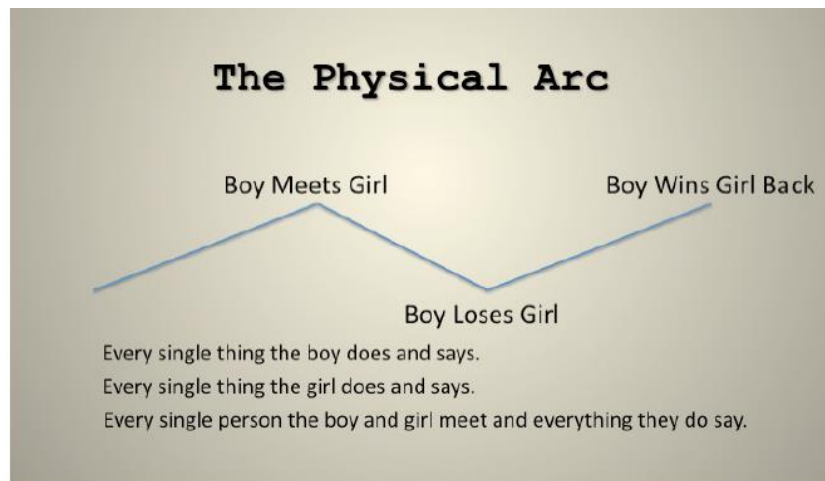
Every story has two narrative arcs, as we will see below. But before we describe these arcs, remember: these arcs are not rules.

Stories are not formulas or fill-in-the-blanks exercises. They are not recipes for cakes. The blank page is blank for a reason—**you are to fill it with whatever you want**. Do you want to fill it with nutty ninja cats? Then do so. Do you want to fill it with ponies learning to share? You can do that.

Although stories often fall into certain patterns—the quests, for example—there are always stories that do not follow these rules and yet are wildly successful anyway.

The Two Narrative Arcs, then, are not so much rules as they are frames you can bend or twist to hang your story on.

I. The Physical Arc

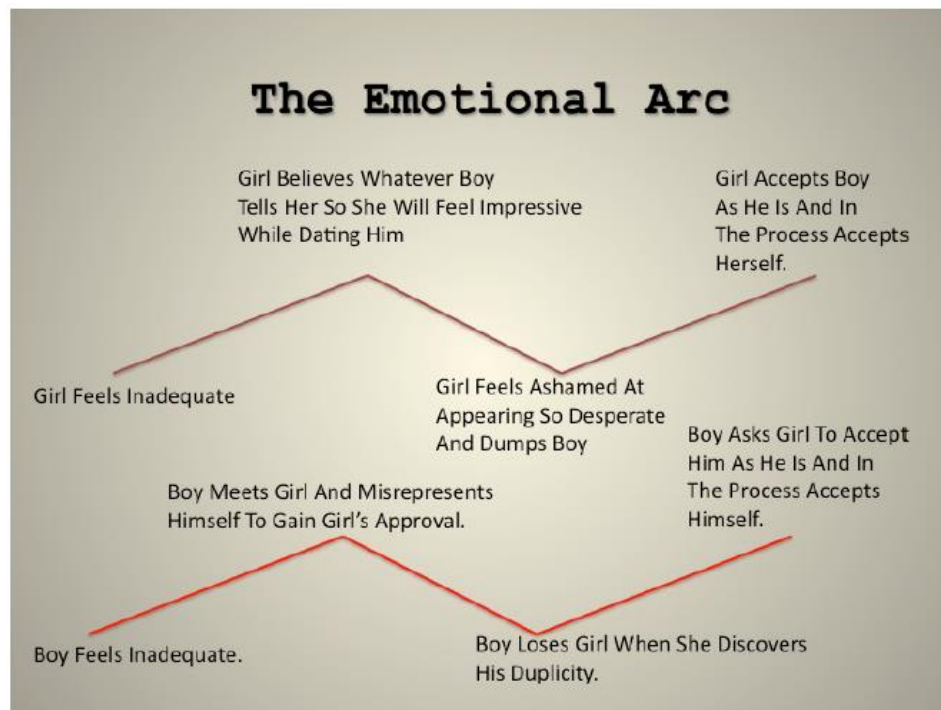


The physical arc is simply the *plot*—that is, it's every single thing that happens in a story. When we read or watch a story, it is what we see, the top layer. Often when people ask us what our books are about, we tell them about the physical arc, the first arc.

We might not want to do that. Why? The physical is the least important arc. All of these things being said and done are being said and done by *people*. Everyone who does anything does it for a reason. These reasons make up the second arc.

¹ Adapted from http://www.williamkenower.com/uploads/7/8/5/2/7852659/the_three_narrative_arcs.pdf.

II. The Emotional Arc



The emotional arc is the trace of every single character's emotional progress. What do they begin the story believing, and what do they end the story believing? As your characters move or do not move through their beliefs, their feelings and motivations change.

Remember, every single action is preceded by motivation, if only by a split second. No one does anything in a vacuum. Behind every action is the belief that that action will make your characters' lives better. This is how human beings operate. Human beings all want to be happy, and they do things that they believe will make them happy. Often, they are wrong, but that is not the point.

If I had only one question to ask about my characters, it would be, "What does he/she believe she needs to be happy, and why does he/she believe she cannot have it." This is the story of most people's lives. What's more, it's useful to remember when you are stuck. Whenever you don't know what a character should do or say in a scene, it may be because you do not know what she wants. **Every character always wants something—human beings always want something, and usually that something is to be happy.**

Actually, stories are never about *what happens*; stories are about what it *feels like* when something happens. As an author named E. L. Doctorow once said, we are not reporting on the existence of rain, but creating the experience of standing in the rain.

What does it *feel like* to be chased by a knife-wielding killer? What does it *feel like* to see the man you will marry for the first time?

The physical arc, then, is merely what happens as a result of the emotional arc. Stories are about feelings. Stories look like a string of events, but they are really a string of feelings represented by actions and events.

In this way the emotional arc is far more important than the physical arc. If you try to understand your story merely by pushing chess pieces around the board of your narrative, the story will make no sense. **On the other hand, if you focus on the emotional journeys of the characters, you will begin to see the story's arc.**