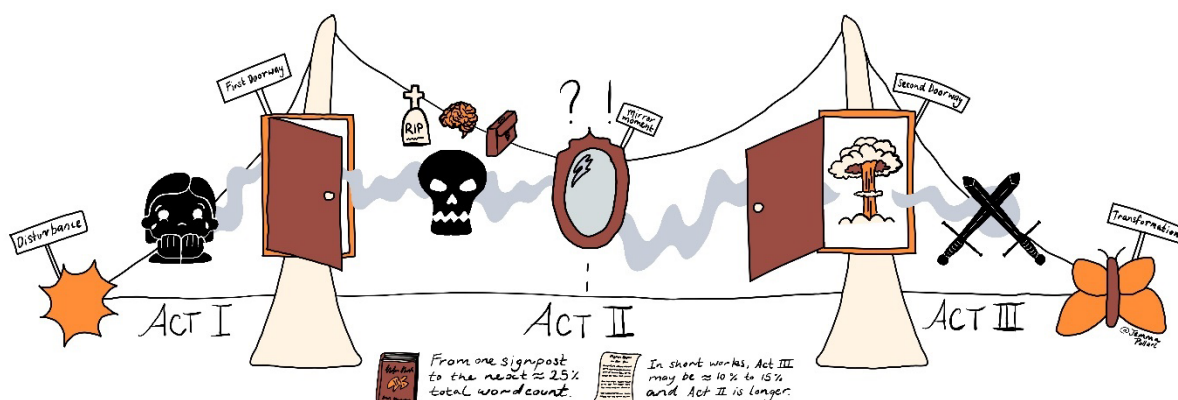


Using the Story Bridge Scribbler to structure your writing

By Jemma Pollari



Whether you're a plotter or a pantsier, good stories have structure. They pull readers into the character's world and won't let them leave. Award-winning, best-selling author James Scott Bell has dedicated his career to understanding what makes stories magnetic. In his model, there are five major signposts that invite your reader into a fictive dream they can't resist: the disturbance, the first doorway of no return, the mirror moment, the second doorway of no return, and finally, the transformation.

The disturbance



A compelling story opens with the character in her normal world, amid a **disturbance**. Create an initial tip out of equilibrium and draw readers in with worry and curiosity. It can be a screaming car chase, the discovery of a dead body, or an unease much more subtle: a hint that something is about to change.

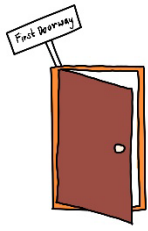
Next, the character resists: change is scary, and she feels too small, too unqualified, too inept to face the danger ahead. In the Hero's Journey framework, this is called **refusal of the call**. The hero is pushed to leave the familiar behind and launch into the unknown of what lies ahead.



This is a chance to show what's important in her world that she can't bear to give up, and counter to that, what she stands to lose if she does refuse. Resistance makes capitulation more impactful.

Throughout the first act, the hero is swept up in **rising action**. Things start to go wrong, the drama heats up, and the stakes start to stack up.

The first doorway of no return



At the end of the first act, the hero passes through the **first doorway** of no return. Remember when Luke Skywalker arrives home to find (spoiler alert) Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen a tad crispy? There's no way he can go back to the way things were before, and that is exactly what the first doorway is: a threshold that changes everything.

Every story needs the hero to face **death stakes**:

- Physical: literal death, e.g., Katniss Everdeen, in the *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins.
- Psychological: death of who they are, e.g., Sebastian Valmont in *Cruel Intentions*.
- Professional: death of their career, e.g., Gregory House in *House, M.D.*

When the hero passes through the first doorway, the death stakes are on the other side as the hero enters the **arena of conflict**. We are off and running; we know what he is fighting for. It's a *Mad Max* kind of road here: a world of danger, pitfalls, conflict and woes (just the way we like it).

In this first half of the middle, there is a lot to do. Explore the setting, connect your characters to each other, give them a past and unpredictable subtleties. But don't lose sight of the next signpost: the plot must toss our hero into one hot frying pan after another, so that when the mirror moment comes, into the fire is the only way forward.

The mirror moment



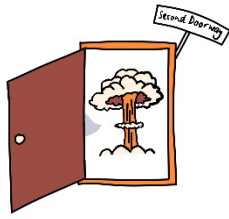
The **mirror moment** comes at the halfway point. The protagonist reflects, seeing not only how far she has come, but how far she has yet left to go before she is safe once more. James Scott Bell says that in best-selling fiction the mirror moment generally takes two forms:

What have I become? **or** I am going to die!

In the first, the hero sees her transformation and no longer recognises herself. She sees the acts that she has committed, and looks forward, knowing what more she must do to win. She questions whether she can do it. Who will she be when this is all over? Is that the person she wants to be?

In "I am going to die!" the hero faces up to the death stakes of the story. The odds are overwhelming, and she can see no way to succeed. From here, as she approaches the second doorway of no return, there is rising action, and setbacks, on top of crises, on top of disasters.

The second doorway of no return



The **second doorway** marks the beginning of the third act. A major crisis, setback, or discovery: a switch flicked that changes everything, propelling the protagonist into the ending. Again, it's impossible to return: resolution must come, no matter the cost. Whatever form the doorway takes, it must be of his making, not a coincidence or deus ex machina solution. Make him work for it, lose for it, pay for it, or all three.

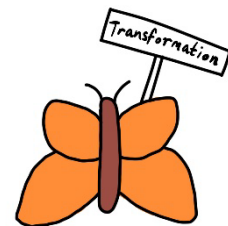
The transformation

Entering Act III, our hero is ready for (or at least, resigned to) the final showdown. The stage is set, the stakes high, the odds overwhelming. Prevailing seems impossible, but prevail they must, for they cannot go back.



In the **final battle** all the threads come together. Foreshadowing is resolved, good versus evil decided, final choices made. The big story question hinted at in the disturbance is answered (even if ambiguously). After the final battle, the hero approaches the transformation in **falling action**: plot elements wrapping up, subplots being resolved, and resolutions made.

After your hero has won (or lost), you need to bring the story to a close. The final **transformation** is that ending. It is a flash, a moment, where we see what your hero has become: who they are now, and why it has all been worth it.



A powerful way to end your story is to reflect the opening scene. A stunning example of this is in the novel *The Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared*, by Jonas Jonasson. The first chapter and the last chapter are word-for-word identical, but so much has happened between these bookends that our experience as reader is completely different.

Use frameworks as a tool

Like any framework: use these rules as tools. If your middle is sagging, look at your death stakes. How can you heat things up? Look to your mirror moment. How far has your character yet to go?

If you're stuck and don't know where the story needs to go next: work out what needs to happen at the next signpost, and then write towards it.



From one signpost to the next $\approx 25\%$ total word count.



In short works, Act III may be $\approx 10\%$ to 15% and Act II is longer.

And when you have practiced the rules of what works, and know them inside and out, break them with intention to create a unique effect that will set your readers reeling – and begging for more.

Notes

A version of this work first appeared as an article "Using the Story Bridge to structure your writing" in WQ 278: Inner Workings (published by Queensland Writers Centre, Sept 2022 - Nov 2022, ISSN 1444-2922).

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