Shakespeare's Five Act Structure: Learn It, Live It, Love It

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**The More They Stay the Same** **The More Things Change**

If you have spent any time at all learning about the art of writing, especially [creative writing](http://hubpages.com/literature/Destroy-Writers-Block-Once-and-For-All), then you have no doubt heard about "the 3 Act Structure." Act I introduces the characters, world, and plot. In Act II, the action "rises" until we reach the climax. Finally, in Act III, the story is completely resolved.

Unfortunately, this formula is egregiously simplified and leaves too much to the imagination. Act I and Act III are obvious in their purpose, and the easiest parts of the story to write, but the crafting and execution of the gaping hole known as "Act II" is wholly crucial to your story's success.

Think back: how many times have you lost interest in a film before the 60-minute mark? Odds are, that film doesn't follow Shakespeare's 5 Act Structure.

**Act I: Exposition or Introduction**

In classical music, the Exposition is the part of the movement in which the principal themes are introduced. The same can be said for your script or screenplay.

Not only are you introducing your main character in Act I, and establishing the world in which the action takes place, but you **must** introduce any/all thematic elements that are going to resonate throughout the story, and any problems or goals your protagonist is facing, i.e. the conflict.

The trappings of power, the futility of vengeance, the fickle nature of love - all of these are classic examples of popular conflicts and themes, and must be established in some capacity before the action takes off.

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**Act II: Rising Action**

During the Rising Action, the basic conflict introduced in Act I is complicated by secondary conflicts and obstacles designed to keep our protagonist from reaching his or her goal, including lesser antagonists that can work together with or without the main antagonist.

You may already know that your main character is going to live happily ever after, but she's going to have to work for it and this is where it starts.

Don't forget: an antagonist is not always a living being. Substance abuse, hunger, disease, and flaming space rocks are all examples of antagonists that can shape your character along his journey.

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**Act III: Climax**

Also known as the "turning point," the Climax marks a notable change, for better or worse, in the protagonist's journey towards their goal. This point begins Act III, accelerating the roller coaster ride of events your character must experience before her story is resolved.

With tragedy, the protagonist begins the story on top of world before everything begins to unravel, while comedies generally do the opposite.

Quite simply, this is where the bulk of the drama or action takes place.

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**Act IV: Falling Action**

During the Falling Action, the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist finally comes to a head, and a clear winner and loser are determined.

The main character often experiences a 'False Victory' or 'False Defeat'. As you may have deduced, a 'False Victory' is punished with a final defeat, while the 'False Defeat' is rewarded with a true victory. This is readily apparent in tragedies, action, horror, and romantic films.

This Falling Action may also contain a final moment of suspense, in which one or more possible outcomes are in doubt until the Resolution.

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**Act V: Dénoument or Resolution**

The Dénoument or Resolution ties up all the loose ends and concludes the story. All of the conflicts are resolved, the characters return to normalcy, and the viewer experiences an emotional release (catharsis).

In traditional comedies, the Dénoument leaves the main character better off than she started, while traditional tragedies end in a catastrophe that leaves the protagonist a shell of his former self.

Much like life, your story must be a roller coaster ride of action and emotion. A good rule of thumb is, for every positive event your protagonist experiences, it must immediately be followed up by a negative event. This dissonance must begin in Act II and reach a crescendo in Act III, before the Falling Action and Dénoument resolve your story and restore order to the world.

**Reaction Annotation:**