

ODDFISH GAMES

The Shine

Storytelling Engine

Finding the Story That Wants to Be Told

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VERSION 1.0

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Introduction

All stories demonstrate common patterns of human behavior — not because all stories are about humans, but because all stories are created *for* humans. These patterns aren't a formula. They're a way of seeing.

Shine is a storytelling engine for fiction writers. It grew out of a simple observation: writers get stuck not because they lack talent but because they lack a way to *see* what their story is trying to become. The cards and this companion book exist to help you find the story that wants to be told — the one already forming in your imagination, waiting for a structure to hang itself on.

This is not a method that tells you what to write. It's a method that asks you the right questions until your own answers reveal the shape of your story.

What Shine Is

Shine is a card-based storytelling system. There are forty-one cards organized into a Setup phase and four Acts. Each card represents a common pattern in storytelling — a moment, a dynamic, a turning point that appears across stories because human minds find these shapes satisfying.

The Setup cards help you develop your story idea from a fragment into a foundation: characters, conflicts, worlds, themes, and a premise that holds them together. The Act cards guide you through the major movements of your narrative — from the shattering of your character's world through trials, darkness, transformation, and resolution.

Some cards are recommended. Some are optional. All of them are, ultimately, suggestions. Your story has the final word.

What This Book Does

This book is organized around the Shine card set. For each card, you'll find:

- 🌀 **The original card** — a full-page reproduction so you can see the card as it was designed
- 🌀 **Teaching content** — expanded discussion that goes deeper than a card ever could, exploring the *why* behind each pattern and the nuances of applying it
- 🌀 **Story prompts** — the original prompts from the card, plus additional questions to push your thinking further

🌀 **Think Outside the Box** — permission and encouragement to break the pattern when your story demands it

You don't need the physical cards to use this book. Everything on the cards is reproduced here. But if you have them, they make excellent quick-reference tools while writing — spread them on a table, rearrange them, pull the ones that speak to your story.

Four Ways to Use Shine

As a development tool. You have an idea but it's raw. Work through the Setup cards to develop characters, conflict, world, and premise. Then walk through the Act cards to discover the shape of your story before you write it. This is the most common use.

As a diagnostic tool. You've written a draft but something isn't working. Fan through the cards and look for the patterns you're missing. Is there no clear core story focus? Is Act III pulling its punches? The cards can show you what's absent.

As a creative prompt. You're stuck. You don't have an idea at all. Pull cards at random. Let the questions spark something. Shuffle, draw, and see what happens when you answer prompts for a story that doesn't exist yet.

As a reference library. You know what you're doing and don't need to be walked through anything. Browse the teaching content for the specific topic you're wrestling with — character construction, worldbuilding, pacing, the mechanics of a midpoint reversal — and ignore the rest.

There is no wrong way to use this. The cards serve you, not the other way around.

The Three Rules

Before anything else, know these:

1. **Shine Is Not a Formula.** Choose the patterns that fit your story. Discard the rest.
2. **Your Creativity Wins.** When your instinct conflicts with Shine's guidance, trust your instinct. Always.
3. **Nothing Is Literal.** Every card name is a metaphor. A "cataclysm" can be lost car keys. A "dark night of the soul" can be a quiet afternoon where everything goes numb.

Everything in this book is optional except these three rules. They are the foundation that keeps the rest of the system from becoming a cage.

A Note on Structure

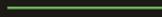
This book moves through Setup, then Act I through Act IV. That's the order in which most writers will encounter the cards. But stories don't always develop in order. You may find yourself jumping to Act

III cards while you're still in Setup, or returning to the Shadow card halfway through your draft when you realize your antagonist needs rethinking.

That's fine. The book is designed to be read front-to-back once, then used as a reference forever after. Dog-ear the pages. Scribble in the margins. This is a workshop tool, not a sacred text.

PART ONE

Philosophy



The principles that keep Shine from becoming a formula

The Golden Rules

Every writing system risks becoming a cage. The moment a tool starts telling you what your story *must* do, it stops serving the story and starts serving itself. These three rules exist to prevent that.

They are the foundation. Everything else in this book — every card, every beat, every structure — is optional. These rules are not.

Rule 1: Shine Is Not a Formula

Choose the patterns or advice that you want in your story and abandon the rest. Even cards that are recommended can be discarded if they do not fit your story.

This is the most important rule. Shine describes common patterns in storytelling — patterns that emerge because stories are made for human minds, and human minds find certain shapes satisfying. But *common* does not mean *required*. Your story is not obligated to follow any pattern.

Warning

If you use Shine as a story structure formula, your writing will be formulaic and boring. The patterns are descriptive, not prescriptive. They tell you what stories often do — not what your story must do.

Rule 2: Your Creativity Wins

Your creativity is more important than Shine's guidance. If your story departs from Shine's suggestions, go with what's in your head. Always.

The cards exist to help you think, not to override your thinking. When a card says "this is where the cataclysm usually happens" and your gut says "not here, not yet," trust your gut. The card will still be there if you need it later.

Rule 3: Nothing Is Literal

Shine cards are abstractions of story patterns, not concrete rules. A "cataclysm" doesn't have to be an actual apocalypse. It could be something mundane but problematic, like car keys lost in a parking lot. A "dark night of the soul" doesn't require literal darkness or literal souls.

Every card name is a metaphor. Every concept bends to fit your story's needs.

Breaking the Rules

For practiced and innovative writers:

- ✦ Rearrange beats, steps, and even acts
- ✦ Use steps and acts more than once — particularly useful for multiple protagonists
- ✦ Write your own cards to include your favorite dramatic patterns
- ✦ Discard entire acts if your structure calls for it

The rules exist so you can learn them, internalize them, and then break them with purpose.

Three Ways to Write

The Plotter Method

Love outlines? Record brief answers to questions and story prompts as you proceed through the setup and main story stages. Once done, rewrite the outline in greater detail.

Benefit: Writing a much longer outline siphons off some of the difficulty of writing your first draft.

The Pantser Method

Not a fan of outlines? Take one Shine card at a time, review the card, and decide if it belongs in your story. Map out a loose structure in your head or just write. Come back to Shine whenever you finish scenes or segments and look at more cards for what's next.

Benefit: Your plot will unfold organically as your characters make decisions. Shine exists only for inspiration and guidance when stuck.

The Shine Method

Jot down brief answers to questions and prompts from each card. Once done, move immediately to the first draft. As you write, watch for rifts between your Shine notes and the ways your characters will organically want to take the story.

Key Principle: When that happens, the characters win. Go back and align your Shine notes to the organic decisions of your characters.

Recommended

The Shine Method is recommended for new writers. It gives you enough structure to maintain momentum while leaving room for your characters to surprise you.

Series Writing

Novel Series: Create an outline at the series level first and divide the beats amongst the desired number of books. Then create Shine outlines for each novel.

Television Series: Do a Shine outline for the series, an outline for each season, and an abbreviated outline for each episode.

Story Structures

Story structure is both a helpful tool and a trap. While structure may be considered a best practice, it can also lead to formulaic writing if you're not careful.

Journey of the Hero

Paradigm: Conflict (problem to be overcome)

The main character has their mundane world turned upside down by the core story focus during the first act cataclysm. They spend the rest of the story attempting to solve this problem and are forced to grow and change to do so.

Recommended Cards:

- 🌀 **Act I:** Calm Before the Storm, Cataclysm, Call to Adventure
- 🌀 **Act II:** The Extraordinary World, Road of Trials, False Summits
- 🌀 **Act III:** Undone, Descent to the Cave, Dark Night of the Soul, End of the Inner Journey
- 🌀 **Act IV:** Resurrection & Boon, The Final Battle, Resolutions

Planning Order:

1. **Act I:** Start with the problem. Who is your main character, what problem are they asked to solve, and how do they respond?
2. **Act IV:** Jump to the end. Is the main character able to solve the core story problem? What are the consequences?
3. **Act III:** What great change or lesson must they face to succeed or fail? How is this the most challenging part?
4. **Act II:** How is the main character unsuccessfully addressing the problem, yet learning and growing through trying?

Kishōtenketsu

Paradigm: Situation (perspective to be transformed)

The main character experiences a situation to be endured or understood, rather than conquered. They begin with a perspective and have it radically altered by a chaotic twist near the story's midpoint.

In this form, the core story problem *is* the Act III twist, not an Act I cataclysm, and there is no final battle to defeat it. The character must reconcile what they thought they knew with the reality presented.

The Four Acts:

- ✦ **Ki 起**: Introduction of characters and status quo
- ✦ **Shō 承**: Deepen understanding of world and characters, subtly set up the twist
- ✦ **Ten 轉**: Unveil the true nature of the core story focus in a cataclysmic twist
- ✦ **Ketsu 結**: Reconcile what was thought true with what was discovered

Key Difference: It's okay to leave a certain amount of lingering tension at the end and not wrap up every storyline.

Story Circle

Paradigm: Want → Get → Consequences → Change

A symmetrical and momentum-sustaining structure where a main character wants something, gets it, suffers the consequences, and then changes or learns something from the experience.

The Eight Stages:

1. **You** (Mundane World): Who is our main character, and what situation do they start in?
2. **Need**: What motivates them? What do they want?
3. **Go** (Enter Extraordinary World): What happens once they decide to go after their desire?
4. **Search** (Adapt): What trials do they undertake to get what they want?
5. **Find** (Gain Desire): How do they achieve their desire (in whole or in part)?
6. **Take** (Pay Price): How does achieving the desire backfire or what are the consequences?
7. **Return** (To Mundane): How do they adjust for mistakes or adapt to problems caused by their desire?
8. **Change**: What have they learned? How are they transformed?

Key Feature: Can be applied to your entire manuscript, to individual acts, to character arcs, and even to individual scenes.

Tension and Release

A successfully written story requires an interplay of questions and answers.

The Components

Hook: A question that forms in your audience’s mind, such as “what is going to happen next?” Hooks are created when you reveal something intriguing, surprising, or exciting.

Tension: Built from the expectation that a hook’s question is about to be answered. As the number and potency of your hooks grow, so does the tension.

Release: When you answer one of those questions in a truly satisfying way. A great release generates a “wow” reaction, drains a little tension, and creates more questions that drive the cycle onward.

Pacing: The art of timing hooks and releases to keep your audience emotionally engaged. A well-written story builds more tension than it releases until its climax.

Interwoven Storytelling

You could take each story pattern card one at a time, outline or write the associated events, and then move on to the next. However, this can be clunky and formulaic.

A more natural approach: interweave events from different cards organically.

The cataclysm and call to adventure could happen simultaneously — the cataclysm begins, your main character is immediately called to adventure, perhaps they resist the call, the cataclysm worsens, and the hero finally accepts.

A cataclysm could extend into Act II, interweaving elements of Cataclysm, The Extraordinary World, and the Road of Trials simultaneously.

Yes, But / No, And

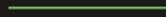
A method for maintaining momentum through the middle:

1. Present your main character with a problem
2. Decide what they would believe to be the most intelligent and reasonable solution
3. Determine if their solution attempt is successful

4. **If successful:** Say “yes, but.” Progress happens, but something else bad keeps the story moving
5. **If unsuccessful:** Say “no, and.” The character stumbles, and matters are worse

PART TWO

Setup



Finding the story that wants to be told

Before You Begin

The ten Setup cards take a story idea — no matter how small or half-formed — and develop it into something you can write. By the time you finish this section, you'll have a main character, a conflict or situation, a world, a shadow, an inner journey, and a premise that ties them all together.

The cards are presented in a deliberate order. Each one builds on the last: your initial idea gives rise to your emotional engagement strategy, which reveals your core story focus, which demands a shadow, which requires characters capable of carrying the weight, and so on. You *can* jump around, but if this is your first time through Shine, working the cards in sequence will give you the strongest foundation.

How Setup Works

For each card, you'll find teaching content that explains the concept, followed by the card itself with story prompts. The prompts are questions — not assignments. Write down whatever comes to mind. A few words is fine. A paragraph is fine. The goal is to externalize what's in your head so you can see it, turn it around, and test it.

Some writers answer every prompt for every card. Some skip prompts that don't resonate. Some use the prompts as a jumping-off point and end up writing something the card never asked for. All of these are correct.

What You'll Have When You're Done

At the end of Setup, you should be able to say:

- ✦ *This is what my story is about* (core story focus)
- ✦ *This is who carries it* (main character)
- ✦ *This is what opposes them* (shadow)
- ✦ *This is what they need to learn or accept* (inner journey)
- ✦ *This is the world it happens in* (mundane and extraordinary worlds)
- ✦ *This is the shape of the whole thing* (premise)

You don't need perfect answers. You need working answers — good enough to write from, loose enough to change when the story surprises you.

THE INITIAL IDEA

STORY SETUP • STEP ONE
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE INITIAL IDEA

You probably have at least some idea of what you want your story to be about, no matter how small. That idea of yours likely comes from one of the categories below.

CHARACTERS: the human-like agents that your audience will attach to and/or be repulsed by.

PLOT: the events that happen to your characters or are caused by them.

SETTING: the world in which your characters live, breathe, and adventure in.

MEDIUM: the specific form by which your audience ingests the story (print, tv screen, etc.)

GENRE: a familiar pattern your story follows (yet is not slave to), such as fantasy, horror, etc.

Often when we have a new story idea, we have just a few elements from the list above. Maybe you want to write a story about a certain person you know (character). Or you have a cool idea for a redemption story (plot) in a sci-fi world (setting). Or, perhaps, you've always wanted to write a romance (genre) for television (medium).

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

At this point in the history of storytelling, there won't be many genuinely new combinations of ideas. It is your voice and perspective on a combination of ideas that will be distinctive.

How can you twist this idea of yours to make it extraordinary, unexpected, and fit your unique human perspective?

Can you take a few of your favorite books, movies, etc, and mash their best parts into your story idea? Can you look around you at the people, places, and situations in your own life and draw ideas from there?

The Initial Idea

Every story starts somewhere. Usually it's a fragment — a character who won't leave your head, a situation that fascinates you, a world you want to explore, a scene you can see but can't yet explain. The Initial Idea card is about capturing that fragment and then deliberately complicating it until it becomes something worth writing.

Jot down the basic idea — no matter how small or undeveloped — that inspired you to begin this story. Then add ideas that complicate it and make it truly interesting.

The Five Categories

Your initial idea likely comes from one of these:

1. **Characters:** The human-like agents that your audience will attach to and/or be repulsed by
2. **Plot:** The events that happen to your characters or are caused by them
3. **Setting:** The world in which your characters live, breathe, and adventure in
4. **Medium:** The specific form by which your audience ingests the story (print, tv screen, etc.)
5. **Genre:** A familiar pattern your story follows (yet is not slave to), such as fantasy, horror, etc.

Often we start with just a few elements. Maybe a story about a certain person (character), a redemption story (plot) in a sci-fi world (setting), or a romance (genre) for television (medium). Most initial ideas live in one or two categories. The magic happens when you start pulling from the others.

Complication Is the Engine

A single idea is a starting point. Two ideas in tension are a story. The most important thing you can do at this stage is complicate your initial concept — add elements that create friction, contradiction, or surprise. A soldier returning from war is an idea. A soldier returning from war to find that nobody remembers the war happened is a story.

Don't worry about whether your ideas are "original." At this point in storytelling history, there won't be many genuinely new combinations of ideas. It is your voice and perspective on a combination that will be distinctive.

The Initial Idea

Jot down the basic idea that inspired you to begin this story.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What is your initial idea? Don't edit it — just capture the raw impulse.*
2. *Can you pull ideas from the category list that would make your original idea more engaging, complicated, mysterious, dramatic, hilarious, or enjoyable?*
3. *Could you get at least one idea from each category?*
4. *What's the most interesting contradiction or tension within your idea? Where do two elements rub against each other?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

How can you twist this idea to make it extraordinary, unexpected, and fit your unique human perspective? What would happen if you inverted one of your core assumptions?

Now that you have an idea with some texture, the next question isn't "what happens?" It's "why would anyone care?"

ENGAGEMENT

STORY SETUP • STEP TWO
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Your story should tickle your audience's curiosity, engage their emotions, immerse them in fantasy, and otherwise give them a reason to keep watching, listening, playing, or reading. This **emotional engagement** comes from your story having three things:

1. **Outer Journey:** Events and situations that are dramatic, entertaining, and filled with some kind of tension.
2. **Inner Journey:** Characters with authentic motivations, perspectives, emotions, and relationships.
3. **Philosophical Journey:** Values, themes, motifs, or philosophies - often competing - that engage your audience at a higher level.

Tension is the presence of a question in the audience's mind that they want answered in a satisfying way. There are numerous ways to get your audience asking questions:

1. Fashion a main character that your audience likes, are intrigued by, or can identify with. Provide that character with motivations and desires that make the audience ask *what will they do next?*
2. Craft a fascinating world, bizarre situations, and dynamic supporting characters that affect your main character physically, mentally, and emotionally. These cause your audience to ask *what will happen to them next?*
3. Build your story around themes, often competing ones, that challenge your audience to see different perspectives or philosophies. These cause your audience to ask *why did that happen and what can be done about it?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Are there any movies, games, or books that successfully engaged your emotions that you can analyze and learn from?

Can you take two or three of your favorite stories and find a way to combine them to make a unique setup for your story idea?

Emotional Engagement

Your story should tickle your audience's curiosity, engage their emotions, immerse them in fantasy, and give them a reason to keep consuming it. This card is about figuring out *how* — what emotional channels your story will use to connect with its audience.

The Three Journeys

Every story comprises three journeys, whether the writer intends them or not:

Outer Journey: Events and situations that are dramatic, entertaining, and filled with tension. The plot — what happens and to whom. Write down a few big events and dramatic situations that will make your story dynamic.

Inner Journey: Characters with authentic motivations, emotions, perspectives and relationships. The character story — who they are, what they want more than anything, and what they are willing (and not willing) to do to get it.

Philosophical Journey: Values, themes, motifs, or philosophies — often competing — that engage your audience at a higher level. The thematic story — what values and themes will get your audience thinking?

Most writers naturally gravitate toward one of these. Plot-driven writers think in events. Character-driven writers think in feelings and relationships. Theme-driven writers think in ideas. Shine asks you to develop all three, because the best stories make them resonate with each other.

Creating Tension

Tension is the presence of a question in the audience's mind that they want answered in a satisfying way. The three journeys each create tension differently:

Character-driven questions: Fashion a main character your audience likes, is intrigued by, or can identify with. Provide motivations and desires that make them ask *what will they do next?*

Situation-driven questions: Craft a fascinating world, bizarre situations, and dynamic supporting characters. These cause the audience to ask *what will happen to them next?*

Theme-driven questions: Build around competing themes that challenge perspectives. These cause the audience to ask *why did that happen and what can be done about it?*

Notice the difference. The first is about a person. The second is about a world. The third is about an idea. Your story will lean on one more than the others, and that's fine — but all three should be present.

CARD 02 SETUP

Emotional Engagement

Your story should engage your audience's emotions and give them a reason to keep reading.

STORY PROMPTS

- 1. How do you want your audience to feel throughout your story? What are some ways you might grab their attention and hold it?*
- 2. Is this a conflict-oriented story where a main character tries to overcome an obstacle? Or a story where your character experiences a situation, with struggles as secondary importance?*
- 3. Which journey is strongest in your idea right now — outer, inner, or philosophical? Which is weakest? What would strengthen the weak one?*
- 4. Think of a story you love. What made you unable to put it down? Can you identify which journey was pulling you forward?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

What movies, games, or books successfully engaged your emotions that you can analyze and learn from? Can you combine two or three favorite stories to make a unique setup?

You have an idea with complication. You know which emotional channels you want to use. Now comes the single most important card in the entire Shine system.

THE CORE STORY FOCUS

STORY SETUP • STEP THREE
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

JOURNEYS

As mentioned previously, our tale has three distinct levels. The chronicle of your characters' actions is the **outer journey**, and emphasizing these will make for a plot-driven story. The narrative of your main character's inner feelings, growth, and motivations is the **inner journey**, and emphasizing these will make for a more character-driven story. The moral and philosophical implications of both are the **philosophical journey**.

THE CORE STORY FOCUS

Shine's core philosophy is that every story revolves around repeating human patterns. These patterns involve our behaviors, our desires, our relationships, and our beliefs. The core story focus is the center of the story and the thing around which all of these patterns will revolve. This focus often involves our main character solving a problem, attaining something they desire, experiencing something incredible, or simply surviving.

PARADIGMS

Much ink has been spilled on the use of conflict in stories and whether or not its fundamental to storytelling. Story structures such as the Journey of the Hero are based on the idea that conflict is an absolute requirement. Others, such as Kishōtenketsu, disagree. You must decide for yourself what structural paradigm you wish to use.

In stories based on a conflict paradigm, the main character faces a core story focus that they must achieve, solve, or defeat. These stories emphasize the trauma the core story focus causes and how to fix it through trial and growth. In stories based on a perspective paradigm, a main character experiences a situation, develops an understanding of it, and then discovers that they are completely wrong when a mid-story twist changes their perspective irrevocably.

Core Story Focus

Take your three journeys and wrap them around a single core story focus — the single thing that your story is about. Not the plot. Not the theme. The *focus*: the gravitational center around which everything else orbits.

This is the card that changes how you see your story. Before Core Story Focus, you have fragments — interesting characters, compelling situations, vivid worlds. After Core Story Focus, you have *direction*. Every decision you make from here forward can be tested against this single question: does it serve the core story focus?

What the Core Story Focus Does

The core story focus is the organizing principle of your story. It's what makes a collection of events into a *narrative*. Without it, you have things happening. With it, you have things happening *for a reason*.

The outer journey details the events around it. The inner journey details the main character's motivations in relation to it. The philosophical journey details its broad thematic implications. All three journeys orbit this center.

Often it involves your main character:

- ✦ Solving a problem
- ✦ Attaining something they desire
- ✦ Experiencing something incredible
- ✦ Simply surviving

Two Paradigms

The paradigm you choose shapes everything that follows — not just structure, but the emotional contract with your reader.

Conflict Paradigm: The main character faces a core story focus they must achieve, solve, or defeat. Stories emphasize the trauma the focus causes and how to fix it through trial and growth. This is the engine behind most Western storytelling — there's a problem, and the story is about what happens when someone tries to fix it.

Perspective Paradigm: The main character experiences a situation, develops an understanding of it, and then discovers they are completely wrong when a mid-story twist changes their perspective

irrevocably. This is the *kishōtenketsu* approach — there may be no villain, no problem to solve. The story is about *seeing differently*.

Most stories lean one way or the other. Some do both. Neither is better. But knowing which paradigm you're working in will fundamentally change how you use the cards that follow.

CARD 03 SETUP

Core Story Focus

The center of the story around which all patterns revolve.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What is your core story focus? Is this a problem to be overcome or simply a situation to be experienced?*
2. *Who is your main character and how does this core story focus impact them? Could they be changed by this impact?*
3. *If the core story focus is a problem to be overcome, will they succeed or fail? What could be the price they pay? What could be the unexpected consequences?*
4. *If the core story focus is a situation to be explored, how does your main character feel as the story begins? What could change their perspective as the story progresses?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Not every story has a single core story focus. Some stories deliberately fragment focus — ensemble pieces, braided narratives, experimental fiction. If that's your story, this card still helps: use it for each thread, then find the resonance between them.

The Three Journeys Aligned

Once you have your core story focus, the three journeys snap into alignment:

- ✿ **Outer Journey:** The chronicle of characters' actions — what happens, who does what, the plot as event sequence. Emphasize this for a plot-driven story.

- ❖ **Inner Journey:** The narrative of the main character's feelings, growth, and motivations — how they change in response to what happens. Emphasize this for a character-driven story.
- ❖ **Philosophical Journey:** The moral and philosophical implications of both — what the story says about being human. This journey is always present whether you intend it or not. Readers will find meaning. You can choose to guide that meaning or let it emerge.

The Secret

The best stories don't choose between outer and inner and philosophical. They find a core story focus that naturally generates all three. When your focus is right, the plot creates character pressure, the character growth illuminates theme, and the theme deepens the plot. It's a flywheel. Core Story Focus is the axle.

Your story has a center. Now it needs friction. Every focus implies resistance — something that makes the focus *matter* by making it *difficult*.

THE SHADOW

STORY SETUP • STEP FOUR
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

AN OPPOSING OR INEVITABLE FORCE

The **shadow** that which adds tension in the form of darkness, difficulty, or complexity to the story. The shadow can be a person, such as the proverbial "bad guy." It can be an object, such as an asteroid about to obliterate the planet. It can also be a concept, such as the main character's repression or mistreatment by society.

The shadow is often an **opposing force** when the core story focus involves overcoming an obstacle or achieving a goal. The opposing force stands in the way of, or actively works against, the main character's efforts to overcome the core story focus.

The shadow is often an **inevitable force** for stories where the core story focus is a situation to be experienced. The inevitable force may drive the situation that the main character is experiencing, but - while it may be investigated or better understood - it ultimately must be accepted.

THE STAKES MUST BE HIGH

The more a shadow is terrifying, fascinating, or worthy of respect, the more tension it creates. The main character and their world must stand to lose everything due to the machinations of the shadow. If a shadow is so physically, mentally, or emotionally overwhelming that you, as the writer, aren't sure how you would handle it, then you've done your job well.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you devise a shadow your audience is tempted to understand or agree with? Could the shadow have your main character's best interests at heart - even if their methods are dangerous or problematic?

Could there be more than one shadow? What if there were a deeper shadow that the initial shadow is a mere lieutenant of? When and how would you reveal this deeper shadow?

The Shadow

The shadow darkens your main character’s world, opposes them in their efforts, or complicates their story. From the classic antagonist to an impending doom, the shadow adds tension to your narrative.

The word “shadow” is deliberate. It’s broader than “villain” or “antagonist.” Not every story has a bad guy. But every story has something that creates pressure, resistance, or darkness — something the main character must contend with, even if they can never defeat it.

Types of Shadow

Opposing Force: Stands in the way of, or actively works against, the main character’s efforts. Common when the core story focus involves overcoming an obstacle or achieving a goal.

Inevitable Force: Drives the situation the main character is experiencing, but must ultimately be accepted rather than overcome. Common for situation paradigm stories.

The shadow can be:

- ✦ A person (the proverbial “bad guy”)
- ✦ An object (an asteroid about to obliterate the planet)
- ✦ A concept (the main character’s repression or mistreatment by society)
- ✦ Internal (the main character’s own fear, addiction, or self-destructive pattern)

Stakes Must Be High

The more a shadow is terrifying, fascinating, or worthy of respect, the more tension it creates. The main character and their world must stand to lose everything.

Test: If a shadow is so physically, mentally, or emotionally overwhelming that you, as the writer, aren’t sure how you would handle it, then you’ve done your job well.

The Shadow and the Core Story Focus

The shadow should have a direct relationship to the core story focus. It may be the *cause* of the focus, an *obstacle* to resolving it, or a *mirror* of it. The tighter this relationship, the more naturally your story’s tension will build.

CARD 04 SETUP

The Shadow

The shadow darkens your main character's world, opposes them, or complicates their story.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What oppositional, dangerous, or other negative forces exist in your story? Are they opposing forces, inevitable forces, both, or something else?*
2. *What impact does the shadow have on the main character's inner, outer, and philosophical journeys? On the core story focus? On other characters or the world at large?*
3. *What are the consequences of the shadow and its actions? What are the consequences of failing to overcome, bypass, or accept it?*
4. *What is the shadow's relationship to the core story focus? Are they the cause, an agent, a symptom, or a mirror?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you devise a shadow your audience is tempted to understand or agree with? Could the shadow have your main character's best interests at heart — even if their methods are dangerous? Could there be more than one shadow?

You have a focus and a shadow. Now: who populates this story? The next two cards — Characters and Main Character — work as a pair. Characters gives you a framework for building anyone. Main Character applies that framework to the single most important person in your story.

CHARACTERS

STORY SETUP • STEP FIVE
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

CHARACTER ASPECTS

The following five aspects are a good starting point for developing each of your major characters. Note, however, that this is only the beginning of character development.

Our **inner nature** is how we behave alone, the recursive thoughts that arise when we are in our own head, the feelings that consume us in quiet moments, and the vulnerabilities we fear to expose.

Our **social mask** is how we behave when around others, how we communicate and relate, the social identity that we wear as armor to protect our vulnerabilities, and our relationships. Our social mask is often in conflict with our inner nature.

Our **stress response** is how we think, feel, and behave under intense pressure - including the extremes of what we are capable of. Our stress response conflicts with our inner nature and social mask, causing complex behavior that depends on circumstance.

Desires are what we want from the external world and cause us to take action. Needs are internal, often barely understood, and are at the core of our inner world. **Needs** and **desires** also conflict with inner nature, social mask, and stress response to create the great engines of character: motivation and internal conflict.

Finally, our **arc** includes where we come from (family, culture, experiences), where we are as the story begins (marital status, socio-economic class), and where we are going over the course of the story. The key question of a story arc is whether or not the character will experience some change or shift in perspective.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you write a brief dialogue between one of your characters and someone close to you? How would that conversation go?

What relationships are important to your story? Do the characters in these relationships have conflicting aspects?

Characters

Character development begins with these questions but does not end until you've written your manuscript. Characters are not built in Setup and then frozen. They are discovered through writing — through the choices they make under pressure, the words that come out of their mouths unbidden, the moments where they surprise even you.

What Setup gives you is a starting point: enough understanding of who these people are to begin writing them. The rest they'll tell you themselves.

The Five Aspects

Every character can be understood through five aspects. No one is only one of these. The tension *between* them is what makes a character feel real.

- 1. Inner Nature** — How we behave alone. The recursive thoughts that arise when we are in our own head, the feelings that consume us in quiet moments, and the vulnerabilities we fear to expose.
- 2. Social Mask** — How we behave around others. How we communicate and relate, the social identity we wear as armor to protect our vulnerabilities, and our relationships. Often in conflict with inner nature.
- 3. Stress Response** — How we think, feel, and behave under intense pressure — including the extremes of what we are capable of. Conflicts with inner nature and social mask, causing complex behavior that depends on circumstance.
- 4. Desires & Needs** — *Desires* are what we want from the external world and cause us to take action. *Needs* are internal, often barely understood, and are at the core of our inner world. Both conflict with the other aspects to create the great engines of character: motivation and internal conflict.
- 5. Arc** — Where we come from (family, culture, experiences), where we are as the story begins (status, class), and where we are going. The key question: will the character experience a meaningful change or shift in perspective?

The Gap Between Mask and Nature

The most interesting characters have a visible gap between who they appear to be and who they actually are. This gap is where story lives. A confident leader who is privately terrified. A gentle person capable of shocking violence under the right pressure. A liar who desperately wants to be honest.

Your audience doesn't need to see all five aspects spelled out. But *you* need to know them, because they determine how a character behaves when the story puts them under pressure — and story is nothing but pressure.

CARD 05 SETUP

Characters

Character development begins with these questions but does not end until you've written your manuscript.

STORY PROMPTS

- 1. How does this person think, feel, and behave when they are alone? What makes them vulnerable?*
- 2. How does this person think, feel, and behave in the presence of others? How does this social mask conflict with their inner nature?*
- 3. How does this person think, feel, and behave when under intense pressure? How might they act in an unexpected way?*
- 4. What external desires does your character hope for? What powerful internal needs do they have? Why haven't they reached out and grabbed this desire before now?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you write a brief dialogue between one of your characters and someone close to you? What relationships are important to your story? Do the characters in these relationships have conflicting aspects?

Now apply that framework to the one character who matters most.

THE MAIN CHARACTER

STORY SETUP • STEP SIX
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

A RELATABLE NARRATOR

It is the main character who most potently experiences the core story focus and thus acts as the audience's lens into events and the emotions they evoke. For a main character to effectively attract and hold an audience, they must be *somewhat* relatable, have a unique perspective on the story, and be believable. The following is but a sample of ways to make a relatable main character.

SYMPATHETIC: The main character is someone the audience likes, identifies with, can understand, or is intrigued by.

POTENTIAL: Main characters have an external, often limiting, identity and an internal, often powerful, inner nature. They are often unaware, afraid of, or refuse to accept this underlying nature.

FALLIBLE: Everyone has self-limiting beliefs that prevent them from achieving desires or potential. Often, this weakness masks a strong inner nature or hinders their inner need and becomes the focus of the inner journey.

MORE NEEDS & DESIRES

Looking back at the previous step, expand on your main character's internal needs and external desires. In a typical story, the main character's external desires drive the plot of the story (the outer journey). The inner journey of your story is going to be a reflection of your main character's inner needs. And just as a main character should be relatable, so should their wants and needs.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you find a way to have more than one character that your audience uses as a lens? Can you tell a story from multiple, divergent perspectives?

Can you get your audience to relate or become intrigued by your other characters, particularly ones that may oppose your main character or their views?

The Main Character

Your main character serves two important roles: the lens and the driver.

The Driver

The main character's desires and motivations provide the velocity and direction of the story's outer journey. Their inner needs become the core of the inner journey. Without a character who *wants* something, a story has no forward momentum. Without a character who *needs* something (often something different from what they want), a story has no depth.

The Lens

Your audience witnesses the story through the main character's eyes, experiences their feelings, and shares in their triumphs and tribulations. To do this, the main character must be someone the audience can make some connection to: unique, relatable, and authentic.

"Relatable" does not mean "likeable." Some of the most compelling main characters in fiction are difficult, abrasive, morally compromised, or deeply flawed. What makes them work as a lens is *authenticity* — the audience believes in them. They feel like a real person, not a construct.

Making a Relatable Main Character

Sympathetic: Someone the audience likes, identifies with, can understand, or is intrigued by.

Potential: An external, often limiting identity and an internal, often powerful, inner nature. They are often unaware, afraid of, or refuse to accept this underlying nature.

Fallible: Self-limiting beliefs that prevent them from achieving desires or potential. Often this weakness masks a strong inner nature or hinders their inner need, becoming the focus of the inner journey.

The interplay of these three — someone we root for, who could be more than they are, but who gets in their own way — is the engine of most compelling fiction.

The Main Character

Your main character serves two roles: the lens through which your audience witnesses the story, and the driver whose desires propel the plot.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Who is your main character? Are they relatable enough that your audience will attach to them and witness the story through their lens?*
2. *How do your main character's desires drive the bulk of the plot (outer journey)?*
3. *How do your main character's inner needs drive the bulk of the inner journey?*
4. *What impact does your main character have on the thematic or philosophical journey?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you find a way to have more than one lens character? Can you tell a story from multiple, divergent perspectives? Can you get your audience to relate to characters who oppose your main character?

You know who your main character is, what they want, and what opposes them. But there's a deeper question: what do they *need*? And will they be able to accept it?

INNER JOURNEYS

STORY SETUP • STEP SEVEN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

MOTIVATIONS

The inner journey is the internal story of your characters' needs, emotions, motivations, inner conflicts, and perspectives. Needs are sometimes unspoken or unrealized by your characters. These needs are primal, appearing in a character's behavior as external wants and desires. Altogether, this motivation is what drives the actions of every single character at every single junction.

Needs are universal to all people, fundamental to the human condition, often subconscious, and something we cannot live without. When our needs are unmet, we frame that feeling of discontent as either desire (I want something) or aversion (I want to be rid of something). While you can live without desire and aversion, few this side of enlightenment can pull it off. The most powerful desire is a longing, something we cannot have. Often, in stories, a character cannot have what they desire due to self-limitation, and much of the tale is about how they overcome that limitation. Similarly, an aversion we cannot get rid of becomes hatred, and these stories are often about conflict or acceptance.

LESSONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

If the only constant in life is change, then the thing that unites all characters are the changes that shaped them in the past, the changes they face in the present, and the changes they will face in the future. Every inner journey is centered around this dynamic. Change can be challenging, can be forced on a character, or can be sought out. Many narratives center around a character initially resisting the change, then finally succumbing to it.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

What happens to a character who never overcomes their resistance to change?

Could you reverse the paradigm and have a character feel the need to change, only to discover that they actually should remain true?

The Inner Journey

Inner journeys reflect the emotional rollercoasters, inner processes, and powerful lessons a character faces. Inner drives are the well that external desires come from — needs ultimately determine the direction a character takes.

The inner journey is what separates a story from a sequence of events. Events happen *to* a character. The inner journey is what happens *inside* them as a result.

Motivations

The inner journey is the internal story of your characters' needs, emotions, motivations, inner conflicts, and perspectives.

Needs are universal to all people, fundamental to the human condition, often subconscious, and something we cannot live without.

When needs are unmet, we frame that discontent as either:

✿ **Desire:** I want something

✿ **Aversion:** I want to be rid of something

Longing: The most powerful desire is something we cannot have. Often a character cannot have what they desire due to self-limitation, and much of the tale is about overcoming that limitation.

Hatred: An aversion we cannot get rid of. These stories are often about conflict or acceptance.

Lessons and Transformations

If the only constant in life is change, then what unites all characters are the changes that shaped them in the past, the changes they face in the present, and the changes they will face in the future.

Every inner journey is centered around this dynamic. Change can be challenging, forced on a character, or sought out. Many narratives center around a character initially resisting change, then finally succumbing to it.

This is what the Act cards will put pressure on. The inner journey you sketch here is the one that will be tested, strained, and ultimately resolved (or not) by the end of Act IV.

Inner Journey

Inner drives are the well that external desires come from.

STORY PROMPTS

- 1. As the story unfolds, how do your main character's needs drive or hinder them? What forces prevent the need from being met?*
- 2. How do your main character's needs translate into external desires?*
- 3. How do each major character's needs impact their story? How does it impact the main character's story?*
- 4. How would you like these needs, emotions, perspectives to change throughout the story?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

What happens to a character who never overcomes their resistance to change? Could you reverse the paradigm and have a character feel the need to change, only to discover they should remain true?

You have your people. You have their inner lives mapped. Now: where does all of this take place? The next two cards — Worlds and Settings — work as a pair. Worlds gives you the *narrative* function of your setting (how it shapes the story). Settings gives you the *craft* of building it.

TWO WORLDS

STORY SETUP • STEP EIGHT
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE MUNDANE WORLD

Most stories begin in an ordinary setting or situation for the main character. Even if they have a hard life, this is the life they understand or are accustomed to. Even though this term is borrowed from The Journey of the Hero-based story structures, every story starts in a state of quasi-normalcy to create a contrast with the rest of the story. We call this quasi-normalcy the **mundane world**.

THE EXTRAORDINARY WORLD

Once our main character is exposed to the core story focus, things are never quite the same. We call this the **cataclysm**. The main character is left in a literal or figurative place where old patterns, comforts, limitations, and rules no longer apply.

The new world, unfamiliar, exciting, and terrifying, is known as the **extraordinary world**. Contrasting with the mundane, the extraordinary world is full of danger, mystery, fear, and uncertainty. Yet, it's also full of opportunity and excitement.

Often, the resolution of the core story focus at the end of the story destroys this extraordinary world and a new mundane world or situation takes its place.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Is the mundane world truly mundane, or does it have its own dangers?

If your core story focus is subtle, can you find a way to make the extraordinary world dynamic and compelling for your audience? For instance, when the factory worker loses their job (cataclysm), how can the world of unemployment appear both fantastic and terrifying?

Mundane & Extraordinary Worlds

The Mundane World

The main character's world or situation before the arrival of the core story focus. Their status quo — comfortable, known, and understood.

Most stories begin in an ordinary setting or situation. Even if they have a hard life, this is the life they understand or are accustomed to. This quasi-normalcy creates contrast with the rest of the story.

The mundane world isn't just a backdrop. It's a promise to your audience: *this is what normal looks like*. You establish normal so that when you shatter it, the audience feels the break.

The Extraordinary World

The world or situation after the arrival of the core story focus turns everything upside down.

Once exposed to the core story focus, things are never quite the same. The main character is left in a literal or figurative place where old patterns, comforts, limitations, and rules no longer apply.

The new world is unfamiliar, exciting, and terrifying — full of danger, mystery, fear, and uncertainty, but also full of opportunity and excitement.

Often, the resolution of the core story focus at the end destroys this extraordinary world, and a new mundane world takes its place — similar to the first, but irrevocably changed.

The Contrast Is the Point

These two worlds don't have to be literal different places. In a contemporary drama, the "mundane world" might be a marriage that functions, and the "extraordinary world" might be the same house after an affair is discovered. Same kitchen table. Completely different world.

CARD 08 SETUP

Mundane & Extraordinary Worlds

Two worlds define the shape of your story.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What is your main character's situation as the story begins? Does it both comfort and limit them?*
2. *If you want to start "in the middle of the action," how will you introduce what is "normal" for your main character?*
3. *What are some defining characteristics of the extraordinary world? How does this reality uniquely challenge the main character?*
4. *What is the final resolution? What impact does the resolution of the core story focus have on the world?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Is the mundane world truly mundane, or does it have its own dangers? If your core story focus is subtle, can you find a way to make the extraordinary world dynamic and compelling?

Now that you know the *function* of your world — how it shapes and is shaped by the story — the next card gets into the craft of making that world feel real on the page.

WORLDBUILDING

STORY SETUP • STEP NINE
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

ANOTHER CHARACTER

Worldbuilding is the art of building settings for your story. Detailed settings add richness and possibility that your audience will want your main character to explore. In short, they are another way to add tension to your story and drive it forward, just as any other character would.

Worldbuilding occurs in your story through artful and slow revelation of world details using one of two methods. You can create deep and detailed rules about the world which immerse your audience, or you can limit explanations, disregard logic, and entice your audience into using their imaginations to fill the gaps.

GENRE WORLDS

Worlds, genre or otherwise, are a rich mesh of two primary ingredients: systems and texture. Texture is the detail and feel of the world - the sensory images of the place and the unique personalities of people who exist there. The key to rich textures is to make them unique but with a hint of detail that your audience is familiar with. Without this frame of reference, your genre world can become too alien.

Story worlds also have complex systems that affect realism and immersion - things like magic, science & technology, or cosmology. They may also include anthropological systems, such as societal groupings, languages, mores, or hierarchies.

If your world systems have concrete rules, your audience can manipulate those rules in their imaginations to solve problems. If those systems have fewer rules, it can evoke a sense of endless possibility or mystery. Just watch out for deus ex machina solutions to problems.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Could your setting grow and change over time, like your characters?

Settings & Worldbuilding

Your settings place your characters into a physical and social context. Every world, even if you're writing about our own, has details that matter and "systems" that detail the rules characters must follow. A well-crafted setting can be like another central character who impacts the story.

Settings as Character

Worldbuilding is the art of building settings for your story. Detailed settings add richness and possibility that your audience will want your main character to explore. They are another way to add tension and drive the story forward, just as any other character would.

Worldbuilding occurs through artful and slow revelation using one of two methods:

- ✿ Create deep and detailed rules that immerse your audience
- ✿ Limit explanations, disregard logic, and entice your audience to use their imaginations to fill the gaps

Both approaches work. The choice depends on your story. A hard science fiction novel needs concrete rules. A fairy tale needs mystery. Most stories fall somewhere in between.

Systems & Textures

Worlds are a rich mesh of two primary ingredients:

Texture: The detail and feel of the world — sensory images of the place and unique personalities of the people. Make textures unique but with familiar details your audience can latch onto.

Systems: Complex systems that affect realism and immersion — magic, science and technology, cosmology. Also anthropological systems: societal groupings, languages, mores, hierarchies.

- ✿ Systems with concrete rules let your audience manipulate those rules in their imaginations to solve problems
- ✿ Systems with fewer rules evoke endless possibility or mystery

The Worldbuilding Trap

A warning: worldbuilding is seductive. It's possible to spend months building a world and never write the story that lives in it. The world serves the story, not the other way around. Build what you need. Discover the rest as you write.

CARD 09 SETUP

Settings & Worldbuilding

Your settings place your characters into a physical and social context.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What world does your story take place in, and what are its most critical details and systems?*
2. *What minimum information does your audience need to buy into the world?*
3. *What mood does your setting create? What are your world's essential sights, sounds, smells, and textures?*
4. *What are the essential systems in your world, and how do they intersect?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Could your setting grow and change over time, like your characters? What would your world look like if it were a character with its own arc?

You've built the pieces. This final Setup card asks you to hold the whole thing in your hand and state, simply, what it is.

STRUCTURE & PREMISE

STORY SETUP • STEP TEN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

FIND A PREMISE

By now, you should be able to draft your story's premise: a single sentence that states what the story is about. A common template for a premise would be:

WHEN [MAIN CHARACTER] EXPERIENCES [CORE STORY FOCUS],
THEY TAKE ACTION [OUTER JOURNEY], INTERNALLY FEEL [INNER JOURNEY],
THE THEME OF [PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNEY] IS EXPLORED,
AND IN THE END [HOW THE STORY RESOLVES]

The entire point of a premise is so you can hold in your head the basic understanding of the story while writing the manuscript.

STORY STRUCTURE

Story structure is a tool that helps us craft stories using known patterns that have worked for other writers. It is both a helpful tool and a trap. While structure may be considered a best practice, it can also lead to formulaic writing if you're not careful.

In the next step, you may optionally choose from one of the three sample structures: Journey of the Hero, Story Circle, or Kishōtenketsu. Each of these structure cards will list the Story Pattern cards that will form the foundation of your story. You may add or subtract Story Pattern cards that fit your story concept.

You can also ignore the provided story structures and choose which Story Pattern cards you want to appear in your story. Review each pattern card, one act at a time, and then select those that work for your tale. Once you have selected them, go through each pattern card again and answer the story prompts and questions.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Does your story have the same premise in its first half as its second?

Does your story have to be told using structure at all?

Premise & Story Structure

Write a clear premise for your story and optionally choose a structure to guide you.

Find a Premise

By now, you should be able to draft your story's premise: a single sentence that states what the story is about.

Template

When [main character] experiences [core story focus], they take action [outer journey], internally feel [inner journey], the theme of [philosophical journey] is explored, and in the end [how the story resolves].

The entire point of a premise is so you can hold in your head the basic understanding of the story while writing the manuscript. It's a compass, not a cage. Your story will evolve, and your premise may evolve with it. That's fine. A working premise now is better than a perfect premise never.

Story Structure

Story structure is a tool using known patterns that have worked for other writers. It is both helpful and a trap — it can lead to formulaic writing if you're not careful.

You may optionally choose from:

- ✦ **Journey of the Hero** — Conflict paradigm, problem to overcome
- ✦ **Kishōtenketsu** — Situation paradigm, perspective to transform
- ✦ **Story Circle** — Want → Get → Consequences → Change

Or you can ignore structures entirely and choose which pattern cards work for your tale. Review each pattern card, one act at a time, and select those that fit.

See Part One for detailed breakdowns of each structure and which cards they typically use.

What Comes Next

You now have a developed story idea with a core focus, characters, a shadow, inner journeys, worlds, and a premise. The Act cards that follow will help you shape this raw material into a narrative arc —

from the shattering of your character's mundane world through trials, darkness, transformation, and resolution.

You can approach the Act cards the same way you approached Setup: sequentially, reading the teaching content and answering prompts that resonate. Or you can scan ahead, pull the cards that speak to your story, and work with those. Both approaches work. The story knows what it needs.

CARD 10 SETUP

Premise & Story Structure

Write a clear premise and optionally choose a structure.

STORY PROMPTS

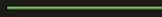
1. *What is the premise of your story? Can you reduce the key points to a single sentence?*
2. *Which story structure template are you going to use? Or will you skip this step entirely?*
3. *Read your premise back to yourself. Does it excite you? If not, what's missing?*
4. *Can you state your story's premise to another person in thirty seconds and see their eyes light up? If not, what would make it land?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Does your story have the same premise in its first half as its second? Does your story have to be told using structure at all?

PART THREE

Act I



Establish the world and break it

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

ACT I • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE MAIN CHARACTER

In fiction, the main character is often the audience's window to the story. Even when the main character is alien, diabolical, or mysterious, your audience needs something to connect to.

Your main character begins the story in a world they understand and are vaguely comfortable with, even if it is a dangerous or difficult life.

For many stories, one of the most important elements of introducing your character is to give them a motivation. There is something they want more than anything, and this is often at the heart of their story. In most cases, there is a reason that our main character has not pursued this motivation before now.

THE MUNDANE WORLD

The purpose of starting the story in some kind of status quo or mundane existence is to contrast with the fear and excitement that will develop later in the story. It also gives us an impression of our main character on a "normal day" and sometimes exposes areas where they are discontent or limited.

THE OPENING IMAGE

Stories often have an opening scene or image that makes certain promises to your audience as to what this story is about and how it will be told.

This opening image is often matched with a similar closing image - visually and thematically - at the end of the story.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you introduce a main character who is challenging to your audience's affections, but still manages to hold on to their attention? What can this character do later in the story to regain that affection?

Calm Before the Storm

Most stories begin with a look at your main character and the mundane world they inhabit. The main character provides a focal point for your audience — they view the world, events, and implications through these characters. As your characters feel and react, so will your audience.

The Main Character

In fiction, the main character is often the audience’s window to the story. Even when alien, diabolical, or mysterious, your audience needs something to connect to.

Your main character begins in a world they understand and are vaguely comfortable with, even if it is a dangerous or difficult life.

For many stories, one of the most important elements is giving them a motivation — something they want more than anything. In most cases, there is a reason they have not pursued this motivation before now.

The Mundane World

The purpose of starting in some kind of status quo is to contrast with the fear and excitement that will develop later. It also gives us an impression of our main character on a “normal day” and sometimes exposes areas where they are discontent or limited.

The Opening Image

Stories often have an opening scene or image that makes certain promises to your audience as to what this story is about and how it will be told. This opening image is often matched with a similar closing image at the end of the story.

STEP I ACT I

Calm Before the Storm

THE CATACLYSM

ACT I • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

CHANGE COMES

An event occurs that presents the main character with the core story focus or problem that the rest of the story is about. These problems or situations include external events or the realization of internal desires or needs. Thus cataclysms can be problems, opportunities, or both. Either way, this is a difficult or demanding situation for the main character.

This cataclysm - directly or indirectly - destroys the main character's status quo and pushes them into a place of fear and uncertainty. If this situation is an opportunity, remember that change is hard. Even a tough main character is going to feel something. Having one's status quo ripped away is traumatic and leads to a sense of loss or other negative emotions.

Often you can find a glimpse of their inner essence and qualities in the main character's reaction to this upending of the status quo. You also will see their flaws.

STORY STRUCTURE

While Story Circle and Kishōtenketsu do not call this card in their first act, that doesn't mean you can't include it. If you have an inciting incident that launches the story in Kishōtenketsu, the cataclysm will never be as explosive or disorienting as the Act III twist. In a Story Circle structure, this card works to either give the main character the opportunity to go after what they want, or the core story problem acts as the catalyst to give them that motivation.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you come up with a mundane cataclysm (such as losing one's car keys) and then explode that into a much bigger problem or situation?

Can you break up your cataclysm into multiple parts, exposing new levels of difficulty over time?

Cataclysm

The cataclysm is the moment when your main character is abruptly forced to deal with something that shatters their mundane world. This inciting incident reveals the core story focus as a problem to be solved.

Change Comes

An event occurs that presents the main character with the core story focus or problem that the rest of the story is about. These can include external events or the realization of internal desires or needs. Cataclysms can be problems, opportunities, or both. Either way, this is a difficult or demanding situation.

This cataclysm — directly or indirectly — destroys the main character’s status quo and pushes them into a place of fear and uncertainty. If the situation is an opportunity, remember that change is hard. Even a tough main character is going to feel something.

Often you can find a glimpse of their inner essence and qualities in the main character’s reaction. You also will see their flaws.

Structure Notes

Story Circle and Kishōtenketsu don’t require this card in Act I, but you can still include it. In Kishōtenketsu, any inciting incident will never be as explosive as the Act III twist.

STEP II ACT I

Cataclysm

The moment that shatters the status quo.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Is the cataclysm an internal realization or an external event? How do they react?*

THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

ACT I • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE CALL AND ITS REFUSAL

In the Journey of the Hero story structure, two things happen to protagonists when they encounter the core story focus. First, they are mentally and emotionally tested. Second, they are presented with a huge problem to fix, an enormous opportunity to take advantage of, or both.

These stories often revolve around people coming to grips with the emotional impact of a cataclysm (the inner journey) and solving the problem it presents (the outer journey). While accepting the call to adventure is often the definition of a hero, even the bravest of us hesitate before doing the right thing. Thus it is common for there to be some reluctance. They may resist the call to adventure for a short time, clinging to the hope that “this will all just go away.”

In a Kishōtenketsu story structure, where there typically is no cataclysm in the first act, there still needs to be movement and tension. Rather than starting with a bang, these stories build more slowly, adding depth to the characters and the situation they are experiencing. However, there is still an inciting incident, and the main character is still called to do something.

In a Story Circle story structure, there is something that the main character wants. That want can be as simple as wanting to fix the problem revealed by the cataclysm. That desire can be apparent, such as wanting to obtain or achieve something. Or it can be subtle, as when a main character begins a journey to attain something without knowing why. Make sure, however, that your audience understands why.

Call to Adventure

The call to adventure is the moment when our main character is called to take some kind of action due to a cataclysm or inciting incident. This is when our main character steps outside their status quo and goes on a journey worth reading about.

The Call and Its Refusal

In Journey of the Hero, two things happen when protagonists encounter the core story focus: they are mentally and emotionally tested, and they are presented with a huge problem to fix, an enormous opportunity, or both.

While accepting the call to adventure is often the definition of a hero, even the bravest hesitate before doing the right thing. It is common for there to be some reluctance — they may resist, clinging to the hope that “this will all just go away.”

Structure Variations

Kishōtenketsu: Typically no cataclysm in Act I, but there still needs to be movement and tension. These stories build more slowly, adding depth to characters and situation.

Story Circle: There is something the main character wants. That want can be wanting to fix the problem, wanting to obtain something, or subtle — a journey without knowing why.

STEP III ACT I

Call to Adventure

The moment of decision.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What pressures push the main character to pursue the core story focus? What pressures cause them to hesitate?*

CUR PUGNAREMUS

ACT I • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

GIVING THE STORY A CONTEXT

The prologue is an optional storytelling tool that sets up or foreshadows major themes and struggles - all before meeting the main character. Focus on creating questions in your audience's mind for which they will want answers.

Questions about your characters will often motivate your audience to keep reading better than detail about the world. Try to avoid filling your prologue with too much worldbuilding and backstory.

One standard method of introducing a conflict or theme in your story is to use the prologue to demonstrate how that conflict or theme affects an innocent or otherwise relatable person or group. Another use of a prologue is to introduce an element of backstory or history that is key to understanding the core story focus.

IN MEDIAS RES

Stories begin, for the sake of engaging the reader, in the middle of tension in some form. In medias res helps you grab your audience's attention from the outset and not let go.

This does strictly mean starting with violence or action. Too much action in your opening scenes results in characters and situations that have little meaning or interest to your audience.

Balance is the key: the goal is to grab attention without leaving your audience completely confused about what is happening.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Do you really need a prologue? Is there something that you just can't accomplish without it?

Could you fold the tone setting, world introduction, and engaging action after the introduction to the main character? Or could your prologue function better as a flashback later in the story?

Prologue

A prologue sets the tone, foreshadows your story's main focus or conflict, or introduces major themes before you meet the main character. Leave it out if you don't have a compelling reason to have one.

Giving the Story Context

The prologue is an optional tool that sets up or foreshadows major themes and struggles — all before meeting the main character. Focus on creating questions in your audience's mind for which they will want answers.

Questions about your characters will often motivate your audience to keep reading better than detail about the world. Avoid filling your prologue with too much worldbuilding and backstory.

In Medias Res

Stories begin, for the sake of engaging the reader, in the middle of tension in some form. This doesn't strictly mean starting with violence or action. Too much action in opening scenes results in characters and situations that have little meaning or interest.

Balance is the key: Grab attention without leaving your audience completely confused about what is happening.

OPTIONAL ACT I

OPTIONAL

Prologue

Sets tone and foreshadows before the main character arrives.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What themes or conflicts are you foreshadowing?*
2. *What tone are you setting?*
3. *How is your prologue adding tension rather than postponing it?*

THE HERALD OF APOCALYPSE

In the beginning, particularly in a conflict paradigm story, the main character is often like a child who doesn't know they are about to become an orphan. A forthcoming event or problem in their world will forever change their safe or comfortable existence. The herald, be they a person or event, signals the main character that their life is about to change - though the message is not always received or understood.

Sometimes, that problem is an internal need the main character is unaware of or hiding from. The herald points out the need or an opportunity to overcome it, even if they don't realize what they are doing. The main character is sometimes thankful for the insight, and sometimes they are not.

The main character's inner journey, significant themes, future relationships, larger glimpses of a coming conflict, or some inevitable event are possible topics to be foreshadowed.

In a Kishōtenketsu story, foreshadowing is often integral as it slowly and subtly hints at the Act III mega-twist. The key word here is subtle. The twist is wasted on your audience if they predict it.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

After writing more of your outline or manuscript, can you return to this card and insert subtle hints and foreshadowing that hint at (but does not reveal) the events or themes in question?

Herald

A herald is someone or something that forewarns or foreshadows the coming core story focus or problem. They either know or suspect that the main character’s mundane existence is about to end.

In the beginning, particularly in conflict paradigm stories, the main character is often like a child who doesn’t know they are about to become an orphan. The herald signals that their life is about to change — though the message is not always received or understood.

What Can Be Foreshadowed

- ✦ The main character’s inner journey
- ✦ Significant themes
- ✦ Future relationships
- ✦ Larger glimpses of a coming conflict
- ✦ Some inevitable event

In Kishōtenketsu: Foreshadowing is often integral as it slowly and subtly hints at the Act III megatwist. The key word is *subtle*. The twist is wasted if your audience predicts it.

OPTIONAL ACT I

OPTIONAL

Herald

Someone or something that forewarns of the coming change.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What person or event portends the coming core story focus?*
2. *Does the main character understand or heed the warning?*
3. *What other story elements or themes are foreshadowed here?*
4. *What about the main character’s coming inner journey is hinted at?*

CUSTOS LIMINIS

ACT I • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

APPROACHING THE THRESHOLD

The threshold is the transition between the main character's old reality (the mundane world) and the new, extraordinary one created by the core story problem or focus. Sometimes this threshold is literal, such as stepping out of your door into the hellish landscape of your neighborhood wrecked by a tornado. Sometimes it's more thematic, such as your main character's close friends treating them as a pariah after the cataclysm of a terrible choice.

Sometimes a main character may cling to hope that they can return to the way things were. Either way, this threshold typically occurs at the end of Act I, after they have chosen to move forward and face their new reality.

THE THRESHOLD GUARDIAN

In the Journey of the Hero story structure, like the first punch in a boxing match or the first day on a demanding new job, your main character will have to take their first step in facing the core story focus or problem. This first task is sometimes symbolically referred to as a **threshold guardian**. This obstacle could be anything from a difficult task, to a significant sacrifice, to someone telling the protagonist to "give up."

The main character's ability to manage this first obstacle is what demonstrates their worthiness, grit, or commitment. Sometimes a character is proving themselves to a higher authority, an enemy, an ally, or themselves.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

What symbolic first step might a character take in their adventure, and who might they be proving themselves to? What environmental factors can you tweak to make it clear that the main character's world has indeed changed?

Threshold

Our main character crosses a literal or metaphorical threshold as they pass from the world they knew to a strange new reality. Sometimes, the first big step on the path is one where they have to prove themselves.

Approaching the Threshold

The threshold is the transition between the main character's old reality and the new, extraordinary one.

Literal thresholds: Stepping out of your door into the hellish landscape of your neighborhood wrecked by a tornado.

Thematic thresholds: Your main character's close friends treating them as a pariah after the cataclysm of a terrible choice.

The Threshold Guardian

Like the first punch in a boxing match or the first day on a demanding new job, your main character will have to take their first step in facing the core story focus.

This first task is sometimes symbolically referred to as a threshold guardian — a difficult task, a significant sacrifice, or someone telling the protagonist to give up. The main character's ability to manage this first obstacle demonstrates their worthiness, grit, or commitment.

OPTIONAL ACT I

OPTIONAL

Threshold

The transition from mundane to extraordinary.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *As a result of this decision to move forward, what is the main character's clearly stated desire?*

PART FOUR

Act II

Explore and escalate

THE EXTRAORDINARY WORLD

ACT II • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

A DANGEROUS NEW REALITY

Having survived the drama thus far, the main character has a moment to take a breath and look around. They are struck by the sheer scope of how much their life has changed in a short time. This world, created by the core story problem and stripped of comforts and known patterns, is called the **extraordinary world**. The hero will have to survive in this world until that core story focus is resolved and the world returns to a more mundane form.

Particularly in a Journey of the Hero structure, everything is strange and new to the main character. Further, perhaps for the first time, the main character may see that there is something positive that could come from the trauma of the Act I cataclysm.

FEAR TAKES FORM

In myths and some fiction genres, this extraordinary new world may be a metaphor for either the main character's fears, the conflict with the opposing force, a personification of the core story focus, or the change the main character will need to undergo in Act III. For example, if you have a character who values honesty, they could find themselves in a world full of liars and thieves.

This is also a place where you can do a little world-building. As always, avoid extensive descriptions of lore. Try to find a way to weave it into the dialogue and action.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

How might you highlight the change in our main character's reality, given the story's events so far? Could the change be reflected in the other characters of the story? Could the change be demonstrated in a thoroughly surprising and dramatic way?

Can you come up with an extraordinary world that impacts your audience as much as it impacts the main character?

The Extraordinary World

Whether Act I involved a literal cataclysm or not, as our main character enters Act II, they experience a marked change in their reality. Something is different, and that difference matters.

A Dangerous New Reality

Having survived the drama thus far, the main character has a moment to take a breath and look around. They are struck by the sheer scope of how much their life has changed in a short time.

This world, created by the core story problem and stripped of comforts and known patterns, is called the extraordinary world. The hero will have to survive here until the core story focus is resolved.

Particularly in *Journey of the Hero*, everything is strange and new. Further, perhaps for the first time, the main character may see that there is something positive that could come from the trauma of the Act I cataclysm.

Fear Takes Form

In myths and some fiction genres, this extraordinary new world may be a metaphor for the main character's fears, the conflict with the opposing force, a personification of the core story focus, or the change the main character will need to undergo in Act III.

STEP I ACT II

The Extraordinary World

The new dangerous reality after the status quo shatters.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *How does this world look now that the main character takes a moment to look at it fully?*
2. *What do they see that is potentially positive in this experience?*

THE ROAD OF TRIALS

ACT II • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

TRIAL, EXPLORATION, EXPOSURE, AND GROWTH

The Road of Trials is the heart of Act II and involves our main character exploring the new situation presented in Act I. In stories where our main character needs to rise to the challenge of the core story focus, this is where they begin to develop the strength to do so. In stories exploring a theme or idea, we deepen that exploration here.

Act II is also where the fun happens in the story - if fun is to be had. Adventures can be exciting and highly addictive. They can involve all kinds of challenges, opportunities, and travels.

STORY STRUCTURE

In the Journey of the Hero story structure, the main character chips away at the core problem posed in Act I's cataclysm. Every problem is different, and your protagonist will face a series of lesser obstacles and adventures to gain experience, allies, knowledge, strength, and other qualities necessary to tackle the core story problem.

Some story beats in this act are successes, and some are failures. The protagonist may lose a few minor battles without losing the entire war.

In a Kishōtenketsu story structure, we are focused on developing further the story, idea, or theme presented in Act I. We use this space to build tension and have the characters develop an understanding of the core story focus. The important part is that their understanding will be entirely wrong, and in Act III, we introduce the twist that shows it.

In a Story Circle story structure, our main character is chasing something they desire and have been thrown into an unfamiliar situation. This unfamiliar situation is either part of the cause of their desire or has been caused by complications in their quest to achieve it.

Road of Trials

During the Road of Trials, our main character takes a series of actions related to the core story focus. These actions can vary wildly and include exploration, investigation, gathering strength, initial attempts to resolve the core story focus, and generally exploring the extraordinary world.

Trial, Exploration, and Growth

The Road of Trials is the heart of Act II and involves our main character exploring the new situation presented in Act I.

In stories where the main character needs to rise to the challenge of the core story focus, this is where they begin to develop the strength to do so. In stories exploring a theme or idea, we deepen that exploration here.

Act II is also where the fun happens — if fun is to be had. Adventures can be exciting and highly addictive. They can involve all kinds of challenges, opportunities, and travels.

Structure Variations

Journey of the Hero: The main character chips away at the core problem. Some beats are successes, some are failures. The protagonist may lose minor battles without losing the entire war.

Kishōtenketsu: Focus on developing the story, idea, or theme. Build tension and have characters develop an understanding of the core story focus. Important: their understanding will be entirely wrong.

Story Circle: The main character is chasing something they desire and have been thrown into an unfamiliar situation.

STEP II ACT II

Road of Trials

Exploration, testing, and growth in the extraordinary world.

FALSE SUMMITS

ACT II • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

SETTING UP THE REVERSAL

As the act draws to a close, the main character may either feel they are winning against the opposing force or see a path to solving the core story problem. If the core story problem is about our main character seeking some desire or need, they are set to acquire it.

However, in the next act, they will discover that the core story problem was more challenging or different than expected. Or, they will discover that their desire was incomplete, ill-advised, or not what they needed. This story sequence is about the last time the main character feels that they are making progress in their efforts (until much later in the story).

What the main character has not realized yet, or is possibly avoiding, is that they must change in some significant way - via the inner journey - before they are worthy or eligible to solve that core story problem. For now, they appear to be on the right path.

As with other story structures, in a Kishōtenketsu story, this is the moment immediately before the incredible twist or perspective shift. All will seem well.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

What minute detail can you provide that foreshadows the coming downfall without totally giving the twist away?

False Summits

At the end of Act II, your main character may experience a situation that gives them hope for a resolution of the core story focus. However, this apparent impending victory is false.

The purpose of this pattern and Act III's "Undone" is to set up the mid-story twist, reversal, or change.

Setting Up the Reversal

As the act draws to a close, the main character may either feel they are winning or see a path to solving the core story problem.

However, in the next act, they will discover that the core story problem was more challenging or different than expected, or that their desire was incomplete or ill-advised.

What the main character has not realized yet is that they must change in some significant way via the inner journey before they are worthy or eligible to solve the core story problem.

In Kishōtenketsu: This is the moment immediately before the incredible twist or perspective shift. All will seem well.

STEP III ACT II

False Summits

Apparent impending victory — before everything unravels.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Why does the main character feel they could resolve this story now?*
2. *What can the main character attain that feels like they have achieved their desire?*
3. *In what way are they tragically wrong, even if they do not yet see it?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

IN OPUS CONSILII

ACT II • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

PLANS

This story pattern works in narratives where the main character is aimless, lacks focus, or spends their efforts on the wrong actions.

In a Journey of the Hero story, our main character faces a massive problem, a formidable opposing force, or both. They might lack a clear plan or have a faulty one. It's a familiar story trope for a main character to have someone or something in their life that will communicate this lack to them.

Similarly, a plan in the second act of a Story Circle narrative could be made to help the main character gain what they seek. The second act is about the main character entering a zone of discomfort, and a plan may be just the way to get out of it.

In a Kishōtenketsu story, a plan in Act II could be the very thing that propels our main character into action, only to see that action has disastrous consequences in the Act III twist.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you think of a way to indicate to the main character that they need a plan, without going with the basic trope of someone telling them so?

Planning

In this story pattern, a person or situation informs our main character that they need a plan to proceed. Even if our protagonist has been taking action, efforts are either misdirected or unfocused. This creates for your audience a roadmap of what is potentially to come.

This story pattern works in narratives where the main character is aimless, lacks focus, or spends their efforts on the wrong actions.

OPTIONAL ACT II

OPTIONAL

Planning

Someone or something communicates the need for direction.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Does your main character have a plan at this point? Has it been nullified or doomed to failure?*
2. *Or is the main character on auto-pilot, acting without clear direction?*
3. *Who or what explicitly states they need to figure out a path forward?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you indicate to the main character that they need a plan without the basic trope of someone telling them so?

SCANDERE QUAESTIONEM

ACT II • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE SCALE OF THE THING

While every beat during the road of trials should be important to the story in some way, not every beat will specifically involve the core story focus or the opposing force. The main character, however, will need to be reminded of the power and danger these present.

If your story is one where the main character is trying to solve a problem, then in this story pattern, they are reminded of the difficulty of the task.

If it involves defeating an enemy of some kind, then the enemy strikes back in a potent way. The counterattack should be more significant than the main character expects, though not yet to the full strength of the opposing force (which will be revealed in Act III or IV.)

Suppose your story involves a situational paradigm, where your hero is coming to terms with the core story focus. In that case, this story pattern could involve a reminder of the difficulty of that task.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you remind the main character of the core story focus in a subtle way - one that inspires a feeling of dread instead of awe?

Instead of creating a single situation where they encounter the core story focus, could you find a way to weave in hints throughout this act that things may not be as they seem?

If you plan on a mid-story twist that changes the core story focus in some dramatic way, can you foreshadow that here?

Scale of the Thing

While every beat during the road of trials should be important, not every beat will specifically involve the core story focus or the opposing force. The main character, however, will need to be reminded of the power and danger these present.

If the story is about solving a problem: They are reminded of the difficulty of the task.

If it involves defeating an enemy: The enemy strikes back in a potent way. The counterattack should be more significant than expected, though not yet to full strength.

If it's a situational paradigm: This pattern could involve a reminder of the difficulty of coming to terms with the core story focus.

OPTIONAL ACT II

OPTIONAL

Scale of the Thing

A potent reminder of the overwhelming challenge ahead.

STORY PROMPTS

- 1. Is the main character reminded of the potency and difficulty of the core story focus?*
- 2. What is the nature of this reminder? How is it still not the full spectrum of what they face?*
- 3. How badly is the main character chastised by this display of power?*
- 4. How is the main character handling the enormity of their problem?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you remind the main character of the core story focus in a subtle way — one that inspires dread instead of awe? If you plan on a mid-story twist, can you foreshadow that here?

PART FIVE

Act III

Destroy and transform

UNDONE

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

TWISTS & REVERSALS

However the main character feels about their progress at the midpoint of the story, this act often begins with the rug being pulled out from underneath them. Whether through a significant victory of the opposing force or the discovery that the goal is much harder to achieve than initially thought - the main character is further from success than ever before.

Sometimes Act III is about the main character realizing that their goals or desires in Act II are superficial, problematic, or a trap. What penalty are they now paying for chasing their motivation? You can even change the core story focus and have the main character realize something else is more important or pressing.

In a situational paradigm story, the twist demonstrates that the perspectives of the main character or those around them were fundamentally wrong. This tends to come with a significant dose of physical, mental, and moral danger as chaos consumes them and the story.

REACTIONS

The core story focus and any interference of the opposing force will emotionally impact the main character. During Act III, this emotional impact, tension, internal conflict, etc., crescendos. Even iconic characters - often defined as characters that do not change - will have to dig deep into their wells of virtue or power here.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you find a way to tell your story so that the audience knows that a vast twist or reversal has happened but keep the main character in the dark?

Can you find a way to stretch out the unraveling of the main character's efforts (or understanding of the core adventure focus) across the entire act?

Undone

Our main character experiences a reveal, twist, reversal, or change of the core story problem that completely resets the tone and direction of the narrative.

Twists & Reversals

However the main character feels about their progress at the midpoint, this act often begins with the rug being pulled out from underneath them. The main character is further from success than ever before.

Sometimes Act III is about the main character realizing that their goals or desires in Act II are superficial, problematic, or a trap. You can even change the core story focus and have the main character realize something else is more important.

In a situational paradigm story, the twist demonstrates that the perspectives of the main character or those around them were fundamentally wrong.

Types of Twists

Reveals: New information changes the story entirely.

Twists: Situations that cast previous events in a new light.

Setbacks: Events that demonstrate the main character is further from resolving the core story focus than ever before.

STEP I ACT III

Undone

Everything the character built comes apart.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *How does the story morph here? Is this a straightforward setback or a plot twist?*

DESCENT INTO THE CAVE

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

DESCENT INTO THE UNDERWORLD

Literally interpreted, the descent into the cave involves a journey to a dark place - physically, mentally, or emotionally. The difficulty of the obstacles here is beyond anything our main character has dealt with before.

Some caves are literal, such as those found in myths and classic quest stories. Most often, they are metaphorical. The main character may be forced to make an impossible choice, forced to survive a beat down by the opposing force, or forced to endure misfortune. Sometimes, the dark place we enter is self-inflicted, such as when we refuse to accept some terrible truth. Either way, the story is no longer fun and games (if it ever was).

STORY STRUCTURE

In a Journey of the Hero style story, at the end of the downward spiral that is Act III, the main character will face some phenomena, event, or teacher that brings about or reveals a great and traumatic change. The change or lesson is often synonymous with destruction: actual death, the annihilation of identity, the death of limiting beliefs or ignorance, etc. During this story pattern, we begin the main character's downward spiral.

In a Story Circle style story, our main character is paying the price for achieving their desires or goals in Act II. In this story pattern, they are becoming fully aware of the price they must pay for their previous actions and efforts.

In a Kishōtenketsu story structure, we are in the thick of the Act III twist, which has both an emotional impact on the main character and, often, a chaotic effect on the world around them.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you find a way to ratchet up the tension your audience is experiencing without taking it so far that they simply stop reading?

Descent into the Cave

The main character has just experienced the big Act III change, twist, or revelation. Things are harder, stranger, more complex, or darker than ever before.

Descent into the Underworld

Literally interpreted, the descent into the cave involves a journey to a dark place — physically, mentally, or emotionally. Some caves are literal. Most often, they are metaphorical:

- ✦ Forced to make an impossible choice
- ✦ Forced to survive a beat down by the opposing force
- ✦ Forced to endure misfortune
- ✦ Self-inflicted, such as refusing to accept some terrible truth

Either way, the story is no longer fun and games (if it ever was).

STEP II ACT III

Descent into the Cave

Journey to the darkest place.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Is the main character's cave an actual place or a metaphor for a darkening mindset?*
2. *Are they facing destruction, a titanic change in identity, an impossible choice, or a tragic lesson?*
3. *What thematic questions is your audience perceiving in the gathering gloom?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you ratchet up the tension without taking it so far that your audience simply stops reading?

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

STRIPPED BARE

Conflict, failures, betrayals, and other nasty events keep piling on the main character until they hit the proverbial rock bottom. In addition to external struggles, the main character is in the final stages of their inner journey and dealing with those internal struggles. The external and internal struggles are indelibly linked, and unless our main character solves the internal problem, they will never be able to solve the external ones.

Particularly in Journey of the Hero story structures, the dark night of the soul represents our main character's last resistance to the necessary internal change (or lesson) that must happen before they can solve the core story problem.

When we are stripped of our pride, ego, comfort, and thoughts of frivolous things, we are most open to whatever lesson the universe is trying to cram down our throats. The main character must reach this point of no resistance before they face their great lesson.

They must give up something - identity, happiness, comfort, cherished beliefs, loved ones, their own life, etc. - to be a fertile ground for the lesson or change. They have to be raw and stripped of all resistance to the transformation.

In a Kishōtenketsu story structure, the above remains essentially true. The perspective change has the power to strip the main character of their understanding of the entire world. Only by being receptive to that change can they reconcile their old beliefs with the new.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

What other characters could be experiencing this phenomenon in Act III? Or in other parts of your work?

Dark Night of the Soul

As Act III draws to a climax, our main character is beaten down by the difficulty of the story. Often, they are stripped bare of misconceptions so that they are ready for the great lesson or change.

Stripped Bare

Conflict, failures, betrayals, and other nasty events keep piling on until they hit rock bottom.

The external and internal struggles are indelibly linked — unless our main character solves the internal problem, they will never be able to solve the external ones.

The Purpose of Being Stripped

When we are stripped of our pride, ego, comfort, and thoughts of frivolous things, we are most open to whatever lesson the universe is trying to cram down our throats. They must give up something — identity, happiness, comfort, cherished beliefs, loved ones, or their own life — to be fertile ground for the lesson or change.

They have to be raw and stripped of all resistance to the transformation.

In Kishōtenketsu: The perspective change has the power to strip the main character of their understanding of the entire world.

STEP III ACT III

Dark Night of the Soul

Stripped bare, rock bottom.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What situation of intense pressure are you putting your main character into?*
2. *How is the hero finally reduced to rock bottom? What happens when they truly feel all is lost?*

END OF THE INNER JOURNEY

ACT III OR IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

The Inner Journey is about change, realization, transformation, or learning in many stories. Regardless of whether a character changes, they have thoughts and emotions about the story's events. Those emotions crescendo towards the end of the story, and this story pattern is the culmination of that.

FACING THE OGRE

In a Journey of the Hero-style story, the end of the inner journey is the bridge between the third and fourth acts. The main character finally overcomes the internal block, weakness, or issue that kept them from solving the core story problem. Often, this block has been there from the beginning of the story, and they either did not want to face it or did not know it existed.

The main character must change, learn, or surrender to lose this weakness. The raw and emotional state caused by Act III's trials is called facing the ogre, and it will be one of the hardest things they have ever done. The main character often learns to submit to some inevitability or toss aside old, useless identities and dualistic notions. They may also undergo a physical transformation. Either way, our main character is as ready to take on the core story problem as they will ever be.

NEW UNDERSTANDING

In a Kishōtenketsu or Story Circle story structure, the end of the inner journey is often in the fourth act, sometimes at the end of the story. Kishōtenketsu emphasizes that the fourth act is about the characters reconciling what they thought they understood (in Act I and II) with the new realizations presented in the Act III twist. This reconciliation leaves them understanding the core story focus, the world, and themselves better.

In Story Circle, the main character's full realization, change, or lesson is the final stage of the cycle. As the drama and action of the story wind down, the full weight of their transformation becomes apparent.

End of the Inner Journey

Eventually, the main character must succumb to the great change, learn the great lesson, or reconcile the great truth at the core of the inner journey.

Facing the Ogre

In *Journey of the Hero*, the end of the inner journey is the bridge between Acts III and IV. The main character finally overcomes the internal block, weakness, or issue that kept them from solving the core story problem.

Often this block has been there from the beginning, and they either did not want to face it or did not know it existed. The main character must change, learn, or surrender. The raw and emotional state caused by Act III's trials is called "facing the ogre," and it will be one of the hardest things they have ever done.

New Understanding

Kishōtenketsu: The end of the inner journey is often in the fourth act. Characters reconcile what they thought they understood with the new realizations presented in the Act III twist.

Story Circle: The main character's full realization, change, or lesson is the final stage of the cycle.

STEP IV ACT III

End of the Inner Journey

The great change or lesson.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What is the thing that kept the main character from overcoming the core story problem from the beginning?*
2. *How is the main character now ready to undergo the change required of them?*

IN EXTREMIS

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE WARRIOR

The main character becomes increasingly willing to do what is necessary to solve the central problem of the story. This seems like a positive reaction, at first. These attitudes are militant, disciplined, and aggressive.

RADICALIZATION

Act III is often about the hero being stripped bare, beaten down, and hitting rock bottom. If the main character adopts an aggressive mindset, they may reach a point where they take things too far. This militant thinking can also happen unconsciously as the main character finds themselves increasingly under pressure that they can't handle.

In this situation, your characters may begin to develop radical views and take extreme actions. Their desperation forces them to darker and darker paths and a win at all costs mentality. These extremes cause rifts in relationships throughout the story.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

What kind of mindsets exist in your character's world that they could easily slip into when under extreme pressure?

How can you show a new and alien side of your character without breaking the bonds your audience have with them?

Or should you break those bonds and change another character so that your audience has someone new to engage with and root for?

Radicalization

Under pressure, your main character is radicalized into a warrior mindset. At first this seems positive — militant, disciplined, aggressive. But as pressure mounts, they may take things too far, developing radical views and extreme actions. Their desperation forces them to darker paths and a “win at all costs” mentality.

OPTIONAL ACT III

OPTIONAL

Radicalization

Warrior mindset, extremes under pressure.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *How will you show that this conflict is now deadly serious?*
2. *How do they try to pull out of despair through militant thinking?*
3. *What desperate acts or extreme mindsets will they adopt?*
4. *How do these mindsets fracture relationships?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

What kind of mindsets exist in your character's world that they could slip into under extreme pressure?

PERTINAX INNOCENTIA

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

Note: the difference between *pertinax innocentia* and *induratus stultum* is that this card is about refusing to accept the events that launch Act III. The latter is about refusing to accept the culminating events of Act III.

HOW COULD I BE SO WRONG?

In this story pattern, the main character does not deal well with the realization that their goal, desire, or the core story focus from Act I turns out to have been false.

A form of this story has the main character's actions in the first two acts - ostensibly to solve the original core story problem - actually causing the real core story problem. In this case, what the main character deals with in Act III is often a subconscious, but overwhelming, sense of guilt.

This pattern is pervasive in Kishōtenketsu-style stories as one of the key themes is an Act III twist that challenges the presuppositions of characters. The characters develop an understanding of the core story focus, themselves, or the world in Acts I and II. They then have that understanding shattered in Act III. This story pattern would fit a main character who refuses to accept the twist to their detriment.

In Story Circle-style stories, this is also a common third-act element. When our main character achieves their desire and discovers that it is either incomplete, incorrect, or otherwise problematic, they might cling to the notion that they have achieved their goal and the problems they now face are unrelated.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you find a way to trick your audience into stubbornly resisting the change in realization or core story focus alongside your main character?

What other characters might suffer from this refusal to accept and thus impact your main character adversely?

Pertinax Innocentia

Stubborn Innocence

Our main character refuses to accept the reversal of fortune, climactic twist, or change that launches Act III. They cling to the notion that their original goals from Acts I and II were correct.

In Kishōtenketsu, this pattern is pervasive — characters develop an understanding in Acts I and II, then have it shattered. This card fits a character who refuses to accept the twist.

OPTIONAL ACT III

OPTIONAL

Pertinax Innocentia

Refusal to accept the events that launch Act III.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What happened that altered the core story problem, and why is the main character so attached to their original views?*
2. *What actions do they continue to take that show their lack of acceptance?*
3. *When they finally reach rock bottom and accept the real problem, how will being so wrong affect them?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you trick your audience into stubbornly resisting alongside your main character?

INDURATUS STULTUM

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

FEAR & AVOIDANCE

The main character has some inkling - whether conscious or not - of the coming change or lesson at the end of Act III. Either way, they are so determined to avoid this transformation or sacrifice that they will go to almost any length.

Characters in this situation can often be incredibly destructive to themselves and those near them. A character in this state will wreck close relationships, even if they and their loved ones don't know why they are doing it. Just as addiction can cause someone to do anything to get something, this state will cause your character to do anything to avoid something.

In these stories, the goal of the opposing force or some other powerful character is to break down the main character's fear and avoidance. The aggression, injustice, or other harmful acts inflicted on the main character begin to serve a purpose and culminate in the main character's avoidance finally breaking.

Once again, the pattern is similar to someone suffering from an addiction disease: it's only when they hit rock bottom do they even have the ability to accept the reality of the situation - and change it.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you make the change or lesson that the main character avoids so onerous that your audience will possibly understand and agree?

Can you mask the actual transformation or realization behind a lie or misdirection that - once cleared - suddenly reveals the change to be positive to your character?

Could you make the change actually harmful, possibly making the main character correct in avoiding it? In this sort of story, it is the character who stays true to their beliefs that turns out to be correct.

Induratus Stultum

Hardened Foolishness

Your main character stubbornly refuses to accept the coming lesson or transformation at the *end* of Act III. They are so determined to avoid this change that they will go to almost any length — often incredibly destructive to themselves and those near them.

The pattern is similar to addiction: it's only when they hit rock bottom do they even have the ability to accept reality and change it.

OPTIONAL ACT III

OPTIONAL

Induratus Stultum

Fear and avoidance of the coming change.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What is your main character willing to do to avoid the change coming at the end of this act?*
2. *What is it about this change that they can't handle?*
3. *What ultimately pulls them into acceptance? Or will they resist to the end?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

*Can you make the change so onerous that your audience understands the resistance?
Could you make the change actually harmful, making the character correct in avoiding it?*

MORTALEST

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

DEATH

Some main characters don't wait until they are stripped raw of their comforts, illusions, and beliefs before adopting a "go down fighting" mentality. In a sense, this sort of character readily accepts the Act III lesson, change, or truth and is willing to do what it takes (even die) to realize it.

These characters know death (literal or metaphorical) is the only option, and they try to face it head-on. Facing the destruction of something precious (ourselves, for instance) reminds us of our mortality and the impermanence of all things.

MEANING

The more a person faces annihilation, the more things like friendships, love, family, heritage, legacy, children, service, and the other emotional trappings of life become precious. The main character will often desire connection, substance, and meaning like never before.

This can manifest as a touching scene where the main character says goodbye to their old life or connects with someone or something they have always wanted to connect with.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Even if your story is not about conflict and death, is there a dramatic non-violent equivalent to the idea of dying well?

Will you make your character's desire to go down fighting a virtue to be admired or one to be touted as foolish?

Mors Certa

Certain Death — Going Down Fighting

Your main character does not expect to succeed (or even survive) and thus chooses to die well. This connection with death evokes strong feelings about mortality, their past life, and the impermanence of all things.

The more a person faces annihilation, the more things like friendships, love, family, heritage, and legacy become precious. The main character will often desire connection, substance, and meaning like never before.

OPTIONAL ACT III

OPTIONAL

Mors Certa

Going down fighting.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What doom is the hero facing that made them decide to go down fighting?*
2. *What meaning is the main character suddenly connecting with?*
3. *How does it motivate them to handle the increasing darkness?*
4. *What opportunities is the main character suddenly ready to grab hold of?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Even if your story is not about conflict and death, is there a dramatic non-violent equivalent to dying well?

DESPAIR

The main character, having at least maintained a modicum of hope up to a point, is overwhelmed by loss and despair.

This despair is similar to the powerlessness felt during the arrival of the core story problem and brings back terrible memories and feelings that this whole adventure was all for naught.

This distress often manifests as a very raw feeling, sometimes combined with an "I miss home," "why me," "what was it all for," or "why did I do this" sentiment.

The key to this story pattern is that something must exist to bring the main character back into the story.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

What details can you add to the story that reinforce your main character's despair?

Can you find a way for the main character to give up but then find a way for them to be forced back into the story through some event or action?

Desperatio

Despair

Your main character despairs so greatly over their failures that they consider quitting entirely. This distress manifests as raw feeling: “I miss home,” “Why me?,” “What was it all for?”

The key: Something must exist to bring the main character back into the story.

OPTIONAL ACT III

OPTIONAL

Desperatio

Despair and thoughts of quitting.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What is the main character’s alternative to the narrative path? What consequences come from quitting?*
2. *How are their early successes rendered hollow?*
3. *How do their feelings manifest as actions?*
4. *What convinces them to keep going?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you find a way for the main character to give up but then force them back into the story through some event?

NOVI UMBRA

ACT III • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

HERO AND SHADOW, BRETHREN

There are many ways that the main character and opposing force can mirror each other. They may have similar goals. The opposing force may experience an inner journey similar to the one of the main character - undergoing their own deep, meaningful, and challenging lesson or alteration.

Sometimes, the difference between the two is that the opposing force previously faced the same inner journey but made a different choice. It's also possible to make our main character and the opposing force approach the same inner journey from two different perspectives and make opposing choices irrevocably set them at odds.

The differences and similarities between the two inner journeys intensify the emotion of their conflict. The pair may alternate between understanding each other, attempting to recruit each other, and frustration over their opponent's recalcitrance or stupidity.

A DARK NIGHT ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Sometimes in Act III, the opposing force faces a transformation similar to the main character's that shakes them out of their opposition. They become allies or bystanders, making way for a new opposing force.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you find a way to make the inner journey that the opposing force is on be understandable and relatable to the audience?

Can you create a situation where some audience members root for the opposing force rather than the main character? What will you do, if anything, to bring them back to the viewpoint of the hero?

Gemini

Parallel Journeys

The main character and another character — often the opposing force — are shown to be on the same inner journey. Like two sides of the same coin, they share something in common and face the same critical choice. The key difference is that they make different choices.

The differences and similarities between the two inner journeys intensify the emotion of their conflict.

OPTIONAL ACT III

OPTIONAL

Gemini

Parallel journeys with the shadow.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Who is on a parallel journey with the main character?*
2. *What similarities exist between them? Does this put a more human face on the opposition?*
3. *Does the opposite character stay the course or reconsider and become an ally?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

*Can you make the opposing force's inner journey understandable and relatable?
Can you create a situation where some audience members root for the opposition?*

THE PARAGON

In some stories, particularly coming-of-age stories, our main character encounters a creature representing an absolute ideal. This paragon is someone of extreme ability or virtue, or they have something that our protagonist desires intensely. It's not uncommon for this paragon to also be a romantic interest, if a problematic one.

Paragons, like all ideals, can inspire us to both positive and negative actions. The role of the paragon, in this case, is to teach our protagonist that there is something wrong with being so attached to this picture of simplicity, virtue, or perfection.

In a Story Circle structured story, this paragon may be the thing that our main character desires to emulate or attain the attention of. In this case, when they obtain that emulation or attention near the story's midpoint, the Act III twist revolves around the paragon not living up to those standards.

Often this paragon has a fault of some kind that will usually shatter our main character's worship. Perhaps the paragon is not so perfect after all. Perhaps the idea behind the paragon has a tragic or malignant flaw. Sometimes the main character surpasses the paragon and realizes their idol's limitations or simple humanity. Or, perhaps, our main character simply realizes they want something else in their life.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Could you merge the character of the Paragon with another major force in the story? What if they were also the opposing force, giving our main character an uncomfortable attraction to the very thing that is making their life difficult?

What conflict might arise if the main character met a paragon while already in a relationship with another love interest?

Paragon

The main character meets with a powerful, if flawed, paragon of some desired virtue, ability, or situation. This paragon is someone they admire, desire, or wish to emulate — at least until they discover the flaw.

Paragons, like all ideals, can inspire both positive and negative actions. Their role is to teach the protagonist that there is something wrong with being so attached to a picture of simplicity, virtue, or perfection.

OPTIONAL ACT III

OPTIONAL

Paragon

Meeting a flawed ideal.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Who is this paragon, and why are they extraordinary?*
2. *What is the main character willing to do to be like the paragon?*
3. *What shatters the main character's faith in the paragon and their ideal?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Could you merge the Paragon with the opposing force, giving the main character an uncomfortable attraction to the very thing making their life difficult?

PART SIX

Act IV

Earn the ending

RESURRECTION & BOON

ACT III OR IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

RESURRECTION

The main character has done it: they have survived the twist, performed the transformation, learned the lesson, or accepted the sacrifice. They have (literally or metaphorically) died and are ready to be reborn a changed person. Or at least a wiser one.

This process of change and acceptance leaves them in a bad state, however, and the main character may need to be “resurrected” - sometimes literally.

THE BOON

The result of the main character’s inner journey is that they walk away with a boon, the gift they get for accepting the necessary internal change or lesson. The boon is often knowledge, an item, ability, power, strength, understanding, or tactic. In a conflict paradigm story, the boon gives the main character a leg up in the final battle.

Sometimes, the main character possesses a unique quality that makes them suitable for solving the core story problem. That unique quality was hidden, suppressed, blocked, or undeveloped until now. The boon doesn’t always have to be that dramatic and can be as simple as surviving and returning to the task.

Another common motif concerning the boon is the chase scene or conflict that arises as forces move against the main character before they can use their newfound power.

In less conflict-oriented stories, this stage can simply be about the main character recovering their wits, energy, or strength after the events of the previous act.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you find a way to make the boon something not so obvious?

Resurrection & Boon

Act IV opens with your main character reborn from the challenges, changes, and lessons of Act III — with a new opportunity to resolve the core story focus once and for all.

Resurrection

The main character has done it: they have survived the twist, performed the transformation, learned the lesson, or accepted the sacrifice. They have died and are ready to be reborn a changed person.

The Boon

The result of the main character's inner journey is that they walk away with a boon — the gift they get for accepting the necessary internal change. The boon is often knowledge, an item, ability or strength, or understanding.

In a conflict paradigm story, the boon gives the main character a leg up in the final battle. Sometimes they possessed this unique quality all along, but it was hidden, suppressed, or undeveloped until now.

STEP I ACT IV

Resurrection & Boon

Rebirth and the gift of change.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *After Act III, what state was our main character left in?*
2. *What brings the character back to life and back to the fight?*
3. *What is the nature of the benefit from their Act III transformation?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

THE FINAL EFFORT

ACT IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE FINAL BATTLE BEGINS

The final effort of our story is where the audience will finally find out whether our main character succeeds or fails. Will our main character achieve their physical and worldly goals? Will our main character realize the emotional and relationship states that our audience wants for them? And, will our main character's final efforts highlight our story's themes?

On a base level, you have two major story points to wrap up: they must overcome the opposing force in some final struggle, and they must overcome the core story problem. This story pattern is necessarily oriented toward conflict-type stories.

This is typically the part of the story where our hero uses the boon gained at the bridge from Act III to IV. The boon - be it real or metaphorical - is a prize that the main character has had to go through hell to get, and it is the key to this final effort.

Despite any preparation by our main character - and as tough as Act III was in terms of difficulty - this final effort is still the most challenging part of the entire story. To maintain the necessary tension in your audience, there must still be a significant chance of failure. A common way to do this is for our main character to suffer last-minute setbacks and appear to fail right before they pull off an impossible victory.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Even in a story that does not rely on conflict as its core motivator, can you find a way to require your main character to take one more supremely consequential step before the story ends?

Can you find a way to orient the nature of the final effort to the nature of the boon?

Or can you find a way to make the boon merely the gateway to the final effort, but our main character must still resolve the core story focus on their own?

The Final Battle

Our main character tackles — for the last time — the core story focus, the opposing force, or both.

The Final Battle Begins

Three things to wrap up:

1. **Physical/worldly goals:** Will they achieve them?
2. **Emotional/relationship states:** Will they reach what the audience wants for them?
3. **Themes:** Will the final efforts highlight the story's philosophy?

Using the Boon

This is typically where our hero uses the boon gained at the bridge from Act III to IV. The boon is a prize they went through hell to get, and it is the key to this final effort.

Maintaining Tension

Despite any preparation — and as tough as Act III was — this final effort is still the most challenging part of the entire story. There must still be a significant chance of failure.

STEP II ACT IV

The Final Battle

Last effort against the core story focus.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *What steps does the main character take to initiate this final battle?*
2. *How are these challenges even more difficult than Act III?*

RESOLUTIONS

ACT IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

DENOUEMENT

Endings are strangely tricky to write, particularly since most writers have a pretty good idea of how they want to end their story. Your resolution is the culmination of three primary story foci: theme, emotions and relationships, and events.

Go back to your notes from the engagement setup card and look again at the three types of tension. Think about the questions you have created (or want to create) in your story. As your story draws to a conclusion, you will want to ensure all of the questions your audience asks are well resolved.

A key question when writing an ending is its length. Stories that end immediately after the final effort feel abrupt and can leave incomplete threads and unanswered questions. On the other hand, stories that go on too long after the climax can ruin an otherwise fantastic narrative by irritating or boring the audience.

CONSEQUENCES

A story is a collection of actions taken by the main character and the rest of the cast. As we all know, actions have consequences, and for an ending to be authentic, we must understand what those are given the story's events. Two kinds of consequences matter at the end of your story: intended and unintended.

A great way to spruce up an ending is to spend at least a little time outlining the unintended consequences of our main character's efforts. These can aid you in keeping your ending from being too overly rosy and cartoonish. Conversely, stories that end as tragedies can benefit from positive consequences.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can you find a way to resolve the various threads of your story in a satisfying yet surprising way?

Resolutions

“Resolving” the core story focus doesn’t always mean overcoming an obstacle. Sometimes what is resolved is the main character’s understanding of the situation, of their world, or of themselves.

Denouement

Your resolution is the culmination of three primary foci:

1. **Theme:** The philosophical implications
2. **Emotions and relationships:** The impact on characters and their connections
3. **Events:** The plot threads and sequences

As your story concludes, ensure all questions your audience asks are well resolved.

Pacing the Ending

Too quick: Stories that end immediately after the final effort feel abrupt and can leave incomplete threads.

Too slow: Stories that go on too long after the climax can ruin an otherwise fantastic narrative.

Consequences

Actions have consequences. For an ending to be authentic, we must understand what those are.

Intended consequences: The outcomes characters were trying to achieve.

Unintended consequences: A great way to spruce up an ending. These can keep your ending from being too rosy, or add positive notes to tragedies.

STEP III ACT IV

Resolutions

Wrapping up all threads.

FINIS EXTRAORDINARI

ACT IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

END OF THE EXTRAORDINARY WORLD

In many myths and legends, when the opposing force is defeated or the core story problem is solved, the extraordinary world comes to an end, and a new mundane world takes its place. In some cases, the destruction of the extraordinary world is a physical decimation that can put the main character in danger.

Having mastered this extraordinary world, the main character now gifts the world with a new mundane situation. It's not the same world from Act I - that can never return - but it's something.

In stories that do not follow a conflict paradigm, the end of the extraordinary world comes about due to the end of the Act III twist. The new mundane world is based on our main character's understanding after reconciling the events of the twist.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Particularly if you are thinking about series or sequels, can you come up with a new mundane world that already has the seeds of the following story built into it?

Could there be something about the old extraordinary world that our main character does not want to destroy (but has little choice)? How will this impact them?

End of the Extraordinary World

As our main character resolves the core story focus, they are effectively destroying the extraordinary world. This can be more than metaphorical and result in actual destruction to make way for a new mundane world.

Having mastered this extraordinary world, the main character now gifts the world with a new mundane situation. It's not the same world from Act I — that can never return — but it's something.

OPTIONAL ACT IV

OPTIONAL

End of the Extraordinary World

Destruction and new mundane.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Is the destruction of the extraordinary world an event in itself?*
2. *Why can the old mundane world never be completely resurrected? How is the new one different?*
3. *How are the main character and their allies responsible for shaping this new world?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

If you're thinking about sequels, can you come up with a new mundane world that already has the seeds of the following story built in?

RECUSATIO REDITUS

ACT IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

REFUSAL OF THE RETURN

Sometimes the main character resists the ending of the story. The hero that doesn't let go of the fight stands to betray their role in the story as much as the hero that refuses the call to adventure in Act I. Refusing to let go of the excitement and other positive aspects of the extraordinary world is akin to a form of selfishness.

Cultures used myths and stories for millennia to teach the lessons of selflessness, group cohesion, and acceptance of change - particularly the change associated with a given stage of life. The main character must, to maintain mental and emotional health, let go of this adventure and move on to the next stage of their existence. The resistance to allow the adventure to end could come from many things. Change is terrifying, being a hero is addictive, power corrupts, and there may be more battles to fight.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Are there other characters that could experience this resistance to the end of the story?

What philosophical themes can you tie into the ending of the extraordinary world and our characters' reactions?

Refusal of the Return

The main character does not want their adventure to end. Something about the extraordinary world attracts them and they don't want things to return to mundane.

Refusing to let go of the excitement is akin to selfishness. The main character must, to maintain mental and emotional health, let go and move on to the next stage of their existence.

OPTIONAL ACT IV

OPTIONAL

Refusal of the Return

Resistance to ending.

STORY PROMPTS

- 1. How does the main character feel about the end of the story? What prevents them from letting go?*
- 2. What reason could they have to finally allow the story to end?*
- 3. How will you make it important to your audience that the main character should let go?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

What philosophical themes can you tie into the ending of the extraordinary world and the characters' reactions?

MILES REDIT

ACT IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE CURSE OF THE VETERAN

The conflict, trauma, tragedy, and chaos are over, the story is resolved, and a new peaceful, mundane existence settles in.

Often, characters who have passed through fire are forever scarred by these events. Whether hero or invisible veteran, this character has seen and experienced things that most have not, and when they look at the comparative bliss around them, they are reminded of the pain it took to achieve that.

Everyone else is blissfully under-aware of the sacrifice required to bring that peace. They are also often unaware of or do not understand the main character's continuing pain. A wall tragically appears between our main character and the new reality they helped to forge.

Even in stories that do not follow a conflict paradigm, the trauma of experiencing the events of tragedy and extremes of difficulty can produce similar results.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Are there other characters who might fit this pattern in addition to, or instead of, the main character?

Will you end your story with this tension hanging on as a statement, or will you try to find a way to quickly begin to resolve it?

Master of Two Worlds

The Veteran's Alienation

Like any veteran of tragedy or conflict, the main character is left to reconcile their trauma while adapting to the new mundane world they helped create. A wall tragically appears between our main character and the new reality they helped to forge.

Everyone else is blissfully unaware of the sacrifice required to bring that peace. They are also often unaware of or do not understand the main character's continuing pain.

OPTIONAL ACT IV

OPTIONAL

Master of Two Worlds

Alienation of the veteran.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *How does the mundane world react to the presence of the main character?*
2. *How do the residents treat the story veteran? Do they know what happened?*
3. *In what ways can the hero not fully "come home"?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Will you end your story with this tension hanging as a statement, or will you try to resolve it?

NON SUPER ADHUC

ACT IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

THE RETURN

The core story focus - be it a problem or situation - is resolved, any opposing forces are vanquished or bypassed, yet something remains to imperil our main character. This circumstance could be caused by the remaining minions of the opposing force, a cataclysm caused by the destruction of the extraordinary world, or other physical threats.

Main characters often leave everything on the field of the final battle and are vulnerable as a result. Perhaps our protagonist was wounded or left helpless as a result of their efforts. Who or what will step in and ensure they survive to see the new mundane world emerge?

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Beyond surviving peril, what other final tasks might the main character need to complete?

What other characters might be imperiled that our main character might need to save?

Should our main character be saved at all? Will their death provide a more potent dramatic resolution to the story?

The Return

Post-Resolution Peril

Just because the core story focus has been resolved doesn't mean the action is done. The main character is put into danger due to successes or failures in the resolution.

Main characters often leave everything on the field of the final battle and are vulnerable as a result. Who or what will step in and ensure they survive to see the new mundane world?

OPTIONAL ACT IV

OPTIONAL

The Return

Post-resolution peril.

STORY PROMPTS

- 1. What unintended consequences might endanger the main character after the final effort?*
- 2. Is the main character in a compromised state?*
- 3. What allies are around to bring the main character out of danger?*
- 4. What remaining obstacles might still exist after the final effort?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Should the main character be saved at all? Would their death provide a more potent dramatic resolution?

TRAGOEDIA

ACT IV • STORY PATTERN
SHINE: STORYTELLING ENGINE

TO SUCCEED OR NOT TO SUCCEED

The tragedy usually has one of two paths.

1. A main character succeeds at the story's central problem, but then dies or meets a similarly horrible fate. (Hamlet kills Claudius but then dies.)
2. A main character fails at the central problem and either dies or is forced to live with the consequences of their failure. (Oedipus seeks to prevent a prophecy from coming true but finds out it came true a long time ago.)

Even in a situation paradigm story where there is no overcoming of a problem, the main character can succeed at coming to terms with the core story focus but then perish. Or they can fail to come to terms with the inevitable and be forced to live with the consequences.

UNDONE BY OUR MISTAKES

A main character's final downfall is often intentionally or unintentionally self-inflicted. It is either caused by a flaw in their character, a mistake made earlier in life, or a mistake made earlier in the story. The flaw directly leads to the tragic outcome, and the philosophical journey is thus ended.

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Can other characters besides the main character provide a tragic element to your story? What theme or philosophy are you exploring with their tragic outcome?

Can you reverse the polarity of the problem and have a main character seemingly end in tragedy but make it so that this outcome is favorable to your audience?

Tragedy

Not every story ends happily. A tragedy usually follows one of two paths:

1. **Success then doom:** The main character succeeds but then dies or meets a horrible fate.
2. **Failure and consequences:** The main character fails and is forced to live with the consequences.

Undone by Our Mistakes

A main character's final downfall is often self-inflicted — caused by a flaw in their character, a mistake made earlier in life, or a mistake made earlier in the story. The flaw directly leads to the tragic outcome.

OPTIONAL ACT IV

OPTIONAL

Tragedy

Failure, death, or mortification.

STORY PROMPTS

1. *Does your main character succeed before meeting their end?*
2. *What is the cause of their downfall? A flaw? A mistake?*
3. *If the main character is killed, how do their allies react or carry on?*
4. *Does the main character's loss state a vital theme?*

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Can you reverse the polarity and have a main character seemingly end in tragedy but make it favorable to your audience?