

Structure for Revision

Thesis, antithesis, synthesis: Dynamics that keep a story interesting on all levels.

Another way of saying this is *opposites create conflict and drama, but neither side is right*.

Theme or Premise

Whether we like it or not, a collection of images (which is what your book is) will create meaning. Lajos Egri uses the word *premise* to describe a thematic statement. Since we are in revision, you should know (or be able to determine now) what your theme or premise is (or if you prefer — your intention).

In this model, you will take two abstractions and pit them against each other. Words like *triumphs, defeats, leads to* demonstrate the higher level arc of change.

Examples of Premise:

1. Moral virtue triumphs over ambition. (*Cinderella*)
2. Pride leads to humiliation. (*Cinderella's sisters/step-mom*)
3. Honesty leads to connection. (*Fingersmith*)
4. Deception leads to destruction. (Also *Fingersmith*, different character).
5. Love conquers fear. (*Frozen*)

My Theme or Premise is: _____.

Character Flaw:

Character flaw comes out of and informs theme and structure. When Oedipus Rex was running around, character flaw was moral. Now, it's much more psychological. In a nutshell, it's a belief that your character carries that is wrong and often represents one side of the dialectic in your theme.

For example, in *Fingersmith*, Sue believes that deception is good. And it's deception that challenges her all the way through the book. In *Frozen*, Elsa believes fear is the way to control her powers.

What is the core character flaw that you explore in your book (whether or not this flaw changes determines whether we have a happy ending or sad)?

Seven Steps

The seven steps lead you through story. They guarantees a strong beginning, middle and end. Today we're going to use this structure to make sure we are on message with our theme/intention.

Step 1: Ordinary World

The ordinary world is just what it sounds like — what is normal at the beginning of the story. This generally includes things like

- introducing the protagonist and her flaw,
- some of the current consequences of that flaw,
- the setting,
- the community this character inhabits.

What we learn here will in many ways define how we understand when the story is done, because this is what we will compare the end to (unconsciously) to see if that has been an “arc” or change.

Things to look for in revision:

1. Does my setting reflect my theme or intention?
2. Does my character's flaw push at theme or intention?
3. Is my character's flaw clear?

My ordinary world is: _____.

It reflects my theme by _____

Step 2: Inciting Incident

This is the event that changes the course of your protagonist's life, that thing that unsettles the ordinary world. In a work about love, it might be the “cute meet,” the introduction of the love interest. In an action movie, perhaps it is the kidnapping of someone important to the protagonist. Whatever it is, it shakes up the world the protagonist has been living in and rightly or wrongly wants to get back to. It doesn't have to be as grand as the two previous examples, but it does have to be big enough to add challenge and confusion to the protagonist's way of being.

In *Fingersmith*, it's when Sue is presented with the opportunity to scam someone. In *Cinderella*, it's the invitation to the ball.

My inciting Incident is _____.

It connects to my theme by:

Step 3: Act 1 Decision

Your protagonist probably tried to do as little as possible to address the inciting incident. Things escalated and now she must make a choice. In other words, start the story. Now your protagonist is making a choice to engage with the change, to come up with a plan, and to move into the new “world” of the story. Having a goal gives the story direction, focus. Good questions include what does your character want, what is the plan of action?

Things to consider:

Is the story goal big enough to carry the whole second act? It doesn't actually have to stay the same for the whole act, but it has to be big enough to carry us through it.

Is the decision a decision?

My Act 1 decision is: _____.

It relates to my theme because

Step 4: Midpoint

The game changes. At the midpoint, your protagonist is now committed to seeing the story through, but the terms of the story also change. She can be more aware now of her needs than her wants. Can be brought on by a loss of some kind, something that pushes the protagonist in a new direction neither she nor the audience expected. It can be when two lovers hook-up, a revelation about herself or someone close. Whatever it is, she is now past the point of no return.

In *Fingersmith*, it is when Sue gets to the place where she is going to finish her scam and is scammed instead. Note how it still relates to the theme of deception.

In *Frozen*, it's the point when Anna gets to Elsa and you think everything is going to be okay and then, kablam — not only is it not okay, Elsa shoots Anna in the heart and sends a monster after them. Note, for Elsa there is new information here too — the permanent winter.

My midpoint is: _____.

It relates to my theme because:

Step 5: Low Point

Sometimes called “all is lost” point, this doesn’t actually have to be a “down” point, it just has to be a counter to the ending. Often this is where the consequences of the flaw stack up, allies disappear and the protagonist moves out of her previous incarnation into something she may not recognize. The real enemy materializes. It is the price of this low that gives her the opportunity to regroup and prepare for the final battle. This is ACT 3 and things are picking up.

Example: *Fingersmith*, Sue learns that the woman who raised her and loved her was in fact the perpetrator of the scam, rather than the people she thought had done it. Worse, she believed that woman loved her — now what she previously thought of as home is destroyed, friends are now enemies to be feared... AWESOME. And connected to the theme — deception.

In *Frozen*, it’s when Anna realizes her prince is a fake. And she’s freezing from the inside out, and there’s a big storm. And they are going to kill her sister, whom she still loves. AWESOME. And connected to the theme — love.

My low point is: _____.

It relates to my theme by

Step 6: Final Challenge

The protagonist faces her greatest fear. She may be rushing to stop her love on an airplane (let's hope not since it's been done so often), she might finishing the big car race against a bigger, faster, better car and driver, she might be letting go of the thing she believed kept her going all these years. Whatever it is, the battle is the culmination of the wisdom learned and allies gained through the story journey. And, of course, the stakes are as high as they can be. It must never be clear that the protagonist will win because the antagonist is so strong.

Thematically, the final challenge is the root of the premise. It's the place to show the change of the character or the character's failure to change.

Example: *Fingersmith*, Sue makes her way 40 long miles to Maud, to be honest and accept what consequences there are from her honesty. AWESOME.

In *Frozen*, Anna can save herself or her sister. She's been going after Elsa all through the movie — but why? Because of her own needs. Now she's going after her for Elsa's. AWESOME.

Note both of these challenges are at the heart of the theme.

My final challenge is:_____.

It relates to my theme because

Step 7: Return to New Ordinary World

The protagonist has faced the battle and won — or lost, but in either case, the world will never be the same and now the protagonist goes to live in that new world. If it's an up ending, generally there are accolades and rewards for the facing of demons and winning. If it's a down ending, the loss of innocence in the face of unchecked power darkens the horizon. Whatever the end, the new world is different enough from the one we started with that the reader/viewer has an emotional sense of completion.

This is the section that informs the middle word in your premise. For example, in *Frozen*, the premise is *love conquers fear*.

The new ordinary world lets us know fear has been conquered and here are the outcomes.

In *Fingersmith*, the premise is *honesty leads to connection*. In the new ordinary world, Maud and Sue are honest with each other and get to have the benefits of that honesty—connection.

My new ordinary world is: _____.

It relates to my theme because

Structure Notes

We've been testing the story and its relationship to theme though out today's workshop. After doing this, you should have a great sense of the intention of your story or theme and how it works with character and plot to build a fantastic book. In your revision, you can make changes and adjustments so that your story fully expresses your intention.