

ALSO BY CATHERINE ANN JONES

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The Way of Story

THE CRAFT & SOUL
OF WRITING



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The whole of life can be a meditation ... even writing.

— Sri Adwayananda

THE SEVEN STEPS TO STORY STRUCTURE

1. **Problem/Need of main character:** He will be very aware of the problem but not how to solve it. Need is inside, often hidden. Something is missing in the main character or protagonist which is usually based on a character flaw.

2. **Desire: A particular goal.** Here it is important to distinguish between Need and Desire. A lion is hungry; this is his need. Then he sees a gazelle running; the gazelle is the specific desire. To fulfill his need, he must obtain his desire. Though need and desire are linked, they are not the same thing.

3. **Opponent:** Competing for the same or opposite goal and/or same territory. There may be both external and internal opponents.

4. **The Plan:** A set of guidelines the hero/heroine or protagonist uses to overcome the opponent or antagonist and reach his goal, obtaining his specific desire. Things inevitably go wrong, and the hero has to re-group, finding new solutions. There will be many milestones before the final battle.

5. **Final Battle:** The conflicts get more and more intense. The Final Battle is the last conflict.

6. **Self-Revelation:** The lies are stripped away. The hero undergoes a profound change where he learns something fundamental about who he is, and his place in the world. The best stories will also have a moral revelation. That is, not just who he is but how he should act with others.

7. **A New Life begins:** The hero is either at a higher or lower level than at the beginning of the story. This may be either positive or negative. A test question might be: how has my main character changed in some fundamental way?

(Please note that Steps 5-7 most often take place in the last ten minutes of a film story.)

Now, let us examine each step using David Mamet's 1982 Oscar-winning screenplay adaptation of *The Verdict*, a novel by Barry Reed, to illustrate. *The Verdict* is an excellent example of a well-structured story.

1. **Problem/Need of main character:** *The Verdict* opens with Frank Galvin (Paul Newman), an alcoholic lawyer in Boston,

who is dropping by funeral homes to get work from bereaved widows. Here is a man obviously at the bottom of the barrel. At first glance, you might say that Frank's need is to stop drinking, but the need is usually deeper than the surface or first look. Later on it is revealed that Frank Galvin was once an idealistic lawyer who believed in justice and was at the top of his profession. He lost his faith in justice during a corrupt case where bribes won the day. When he confronted his boss and tried to do the right thing, he was stripped of everything: job and marriage. So his *need* is to believe in justice again. Alcoholism is merely the symptom of the underlying problem or need.

2. **Desire** is always a particular goal, never general. Remember the hungry lion and the running gazelle. Frank Galvin is given the case of a young girl who due to medical negligence in a Catholic hospital is now a vegetable for life. Frank Galvin wants to win this case, that's his specific desire. His need is to believe in justice again. This is why he surprises himself by turning down the generous settlement offer from the Catholic Church and insists on going to trial. Sometimes the need is unconscious, unknown even to the hero. The desire, on the other hand, will always be conscious and specific.

3. **Opponent** will be competing for the same goal or territory. In *The Verdict*, Frank is fighting the institution of the Catholic Church that owns the hospital where medical negligence has been done to his client. Specifically, the opponent is a villainous attorney, portrayed by James Mason, who combats Frank both in and out of the courtroom. It is a David and Goliath story, long popular in Hollywood films, and a familiar American myth where the little guy takes on the mighty corporation or power and wins the day. (*Erin Brockovich* with Julia Roberts, Elijah Wood as Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, or Gary Cooper in *High Noon* are three examples.)

4. **The Plan:** A set of guidelines the hero uses to overcome the opponent and reach the goal. Things inevitably go wrong, and new solutions must be found. Frank has Dr. Gruber, an expert witness, to testify, but the powerful defense attorney (James Mason) representing the Catholic Church gets to him first. Dr. Gruber has now left the country, and the Judge, also bought by the Church, refuses

to grant an extension. Even Frank's mistress (Charlotte Rampling) is discovered to be on the payroll of the opposing side, as an informer. One by one, Frank's case is crucified. It appears all is lost, with no where to turn, and then...

5. The Final Battle provides the final conflict: It's never over until it's over. The day before the end of the trial, Frank discovers a missing witness and flies to New York to convince her to testify. She does and wins the day. David has killed Goliath.

6. Self-Revelation. Here, as in the best of stories, there is a moral revelation: Justice for the poor and downtrodden against the mighty power machines. Doing the right thing.

7. A New Life Begins. Frank Galvin wins the case against insurmountable odds, and with it, re-discovers his belief in justice, and is thereby transformed. Though his specific desire is to win the case, his real need is to believe in justice again, and, consequently, in himself. Now a new life begins, full of hope and promise.

Also here, as in the best of stories, there is a moral revelation: justice for the poor and downtrodden against the mighty power machines. Doing the right thing.

It was said earlier that Step 7: A New Life, might be either positive or negative. A negative example would be the Billy Wilder classic, *Sunset Boulevard*, when fading screen star Norma Desmond discovers she's been living a lie and goes mad, killing the messenger played by William Holden.

Let's take another example, the 1999 Oscar-nominated screenplay and film by M. Night Shyamalan, *The Sixth Sense*.

1. Problem/Need: Bruce Willis, a noted child psychologist, once failed with a young boy who grows up to be a psychotic killer, seen in the bathroom scene at the beginning of the movie. So his need is to redeem himself from this failure and not fail again.

2. Desire: To succeed with his current patient, the young boy played by Haley Joel Osment (nominated for an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor).

3. Opponent: Here the opponent is really fear, both inner and outer: the boy's fear to reveal himself as one who sees dead people, and the psychologist's acceptance that he is one as well.

4. The Plan: To overcome the fear by confronting the ghosts the boy sees.

5. The Final Battle: The B-story of the young girl who has been killed.

6. Self-Revelation: The lies have been stripped away. Willis realizes that he himself is dead, and a ghost himself.

7. A New Life: Willis must let go of his earthly life, releasing his wife, and move on.

Incidentally, one can draw on some of the structure points above as a guide to making each separate scene in your story work. Simply use the seven steps as a check list for each scene.

Another tool focuses on structuring each scene by adapting the following five points:

FIVE POINTS IN MAKING A GOOD SCENE

1. Character's intention: What does he want and why? In *Witness*, Harrison Ford's specific desire is to protect the witness and find the killer. His need, however is to love and to expand his world view via the Amish widow played by Kelly McGillis.

2. Desire is what drives scene and story, but it is the need that gives your story its depth.

3. Opponent: Who wants to stop this character getting what he wants and why.

4. The Plan: Determine the plan of each scene from your main character's viewpoint. For instance, the hero says, "I want" and the opponent says, "No".

An indirect plan might be where your text becomes subtext. That is, the main character of a scene says one thing while really meaning something else.

5. Overall pacing: Conflict of action (what the main character is doing) and conflict of being (who the character is). For instance, in *Witness*, the soft love scenes are contrasted with the fast action crime scenes.

"I try to be conscious about the rhythms of storytelling."

— Michael Mann (director of *Traffic*)