

Story Circle Workbook



The Story Circle by Dan Harmon is a basic narrative structure that writers can use to structure and test their story ideas. Telling stories is an inherently human thing, but how we structure the narrative separates a good story from a truly great one.

The 8 steps of the Story Circle

The way the story circle works is that your main character, much like Campbell's hero, moves from a zone of comfort towards a want, and with that, into the chaos of the second act, from where they'll return changed. The top half of the circle represents order and the bottom half is chaos. The right side of the circle represents the hero resisting their transformation, the left side represents the hero moving towards their transformation.

In this cyclical nature of storytelling, you can see the main character gain and lose: they gain their want, but lose stability; they lose in the struggle, but ultimately find what they want; they pay a heavy price for it, but can bring it back home; the old order cannot be again, but they have changed to exist in the new order.

Scene 1. "YOU" - Our Hero in their comfort zone.

This is the undisturbed status quo of the protagonist. This leads to the "Point of Attack."

The first step establishes the hero of your story in their familiar surroundings. Think of it as a 'before' picture. Note that "zone of comfort" doesn't mean things are perfect. Your main character exists in a status quo in which they have arranged for themselves to fit into their current conditions.

The 'before' picture is important for the character arc so that viewers can recognize the significance of the change later. Interesting main characters are not perfect, either, but exhibit human flaws the audience can understand and sympathize with.

Scene 2. "NEED" - Our Hero is longing for something.

This is the "Creation of the story." This leads to "Defining The Main Tension".

For the second step, you dangle something in front of your main character: desire is something they want as a thing to obtain or a problem they want to go away.

The desire becomes the main goal of the protagonist, but their next actions are decided in a "push" or "pull" fashion: if the desire is pulling them out of the status quo, then they might prepare for the journey (think: Harry Potter getting his supplies). If they're being pulled out of their comfort zone and would rather stay where it's nice and warm, then they debate how they can avoid having to go.

"Desire" can take the form of a problem or an adversary in the sense that the hero would very much like for the antagonist to disappear so they could return to the status quo right away.

Scene 3. "GO" - Our Hero sets out to find the thing entering the unfamiliar.

Elaborate on why accomplishing the goal will be difficult.

In step three, you kick off the action: green means go! Your hero is proactive: even when they've been debating and their desire is of a "pull" nature, they still make a conscious decision and take the first step themselves. This step also signifies the crossing of the threshold from order into chaos, from the first into the second act.

Their new surroundings are unknown and they find themselves in an unfamiliar situation, which can be hostile, or simply something they've never experienced before: it's the figurative (or, with *Stranger Things*, literal) upside-down of their initial surroundings.

Scene 4. "SEARCH" - Our Hero struggles to find the thing they seek.

The first attempt to resolve the main tension, is the road of trials. This leads to the midpoint, "FIND." This refines the main tension, narrows its scope, and makes it more specific.

Your hero may or may not like the chaos in their new world, but the only way out is through. As a storyteller you throw increasingly bigger obstacles in their way and put them through many trials and tribulations, forcing them to adapt as they struggle to overcome the hurdles.

What's important: the way back is barred, because the old home is so much worse (up to where return signifies death), or because there is another insurmountable concrete or abstract obstacle.

Scene 5. "FIND" - Our Hero finds the thing but it's just out of reach.

This is when your protagonist finds what they think they need, but it doesn't work out quite the way they expected. Your protagonist must pay a devastating price for attaining what they sought.⁵ Attaining the object of desire

At the halfway point, you let your hero have what they desire. Reading the Story Circle like a clock, it's now 6 PM and high time to return home. Step five, as the crucial finding step, raises the stakes of the story.

Your main character has completed the search, found what they wanted, and is holding the (metaphorical) key in their hands — but the lock which it turns is half a world away! Can they make it back, and in time? To increase tension, many stories introduce time constraints here, such as a countdown of any sort, a sick or wounded companion, or the environment turning on the main character.

Scene 6. "TAKE" - Our Hero takes the thing but suffers and sacrifices.

Full frontal assault on main tension. This leads to the main tension being resolved or maybe not...

Your hero takes what they want, but something is taken from them. Before they can go on, they must leave something behind. This loss can take many forms: a temporary, albeit despairing setback which leaves the hero stranded; the death or sacrifice of a companion character; losing "innocence"; having to give up any integral part of themselves, from limb to memories.

This step marks the absolute low point in the journey of your hero. The heavy price is so hefty that they seriously doubt if carrying on is even worth it. There are many names to describe this moment, from figurative death (of the old hero) to the "dark night of the soul" or the darkest hour.

Scene 7. "RETURN" - Our Hero is punished and must return the thing.

False resolution or exposition sequence. This leads to the twist! We've been set up to expect one thing, then it turns around.

Your hero finds it within themselves to complete the journey and return home to their familiar situation. However, within themselves is key here! Note that with step seven, your main character crosses back into the upper half of the circle, leaving the chaos of the second act behind. Yet this threshold doesn't come without a trial of its own.

In ancient myths, when the protagonist returns, they often face a gatekeeper, a riddle to solve, or proof that they are who they say they are. Although they surely have changed externally, it's their internal transformation that allows them to pass this test. Even when the magic "key" is a concrete object, such as an "elixir", only they can wield or apply it.

The familiar situation is often only seemingly familiar and externally changed as well, because the hero has been presumed dead, their old surroundings have been transformed or old friends have moved on with their lives.

Scene 8. "CHANGE" - The world is normal again, but our hero has changed.

Ultimate resolution (what happens after this character has gone through these circumstances and made these decisions.

The application of the "solution" by your hero to establish the "new order" brings with it the realization that they are not the same person anymore: they have changed from the beginning. This is where you do a second snapshot and show the 'after' picture.

Change can be for the good and your main character is now wiser, better, more mature, no longer alone, or richer in some sense; but the ending can also be tragic, and though they have brought better circumstances for someone else, they are now morally corrupt, filled with despair, utterly alone, or at the end of their life.