Story Structure and the Narrative Arc

Linda Joy Myers

Some important things to remember when creating your narrative arc:

- Unlike journaling, a story has a structure—a beginning, middle, and an end.
- Something significant happens in each scene of the story, the reason for the scene.
- A story has a reason for being told and a takeaway—this is your theme.
- The main character, the protagonist—in a memoir it’s you!—is changed significantly by events, actions, decisions, and epiphanies. The growth and change of the main character is imperative in any story, and is the primary reason a memoir is written—to show the arc of character change from beginning to end.
- Your book needs to have a dramatic structure: Act One, Act Two, and Act Three.
- All stories have conflict, rising action, a crisis, a climax, and a resolution.
- By the end, the story world, the world where the protagonist—you—began, is transformed.

To clarify your choice of theme(s) for your narrative arc, ask the following questions:

- What is the main, overarching meaning of my story?
- What is my book about? (one sentence.)
- How does my book end? What do I want the reader to understand and learn?

Three Acts of Dramatic Structure:

**Act One (Beginning):** the set up of the story, introduction of characters and situations which show your conflicting desires and the complications that arise to make your desires difficult to attain. Writing scenes creates the pearls on the necklace of your plot ideas. During this act you present the context, the who, what, when, where, and why of the story.

**Act Two (Middle):** Drawing upon scenes and narrative summary, the story action rises through even more conflicts, complications, and challenges that you, the protagonist keep attempting to solve, but as the story progresses, even more complications develop that thwart an easy or quick resolution. In other words, life gets even more complicated. Some call this the muddy middle or dark nights of the soul.

**Act Three (End):** In the last act, the protagonist wrestles with the forces that have been working against her, shown through the crisis and the climax of the story. After that, the denouement or epiphany resolves the loose ends of the story. The crisis may be thought of as a spiritual challenge where the deepest beliefs and core truths of the character are tested. The climax is the highest level of tension and conflict the protagonist must resolve as the story comes to a close.
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Remember: each chapter has a beginning, middle, and end structure, as does each scene. The smallest parts of a story—the scene—mimic the larger chunks of the story—the chapters and the book as a whole. Each scene has a rising action, a climax, and a falling off toward the end. Keep this in mind as you arrange your “true” life events in such a way that they do have dramatic structure. This may not occur in your first draft, but keep it in mind. It becomes easier to think your story through with the dramatic arc as part of your own imagination.

It gets integrated into how you imagine scenes, and is much easier to work with because you are not imposing it onto your ideas, it’s part of how you imagine scenes from the beginning.

Working with Your Narrative Arc:

1. Plot your major turning points on the timeline. First draw the timeline on a piece of paper to be able to see it clearly and notice the clusters of things that happened in certain eras of your life.

2. Divide your turning points roughly into three sections. Be sure you have no more than 20, but ideally about 15. If you have too many turning points, you haven’t boiled down your theme and plot enough yet. You run the risk of getting lost in details in terms of this exercise.

3. Think about what might happen in act I, II and III. List the action, tension, and story questions, and resolutions as you imagine them.

4. Then list the turning point moments for each of your three acts. Remember, this is a sketch and may not be the final version for your memoir. It can give you an idea of where you might be going as you get started, which helps you keep writing!