

# Adventure!

THREE GOALS  
OF THE HERO

BY DARIO D.-K.











## **Adventure! Three Goals of the Hero**

**[www.three-goals.com](http://www.three-goals.com)**

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## Adventure!

Wherever they live and however old they are, most people spend at least some of their free time reading or watching stories. Whether the story is in a book, comic book, a tv show, a movie, or even in a videogame, people love stories. Why is that?

First, they're simply fun. Most everyone can tell us about a time their favorite movie or book really grabbed them. Read interviews with famous writers or filmmakers, they can all tell you about a moment when they lost track of time, when they became so **engrossed** in a book they were reading or a show they were watching that when they finally finished it was waaay past their bedtime.

**engrossed:** adjective

having all one's attention or interest absorbed by someone or something

*They seemed to be **engrossed** in conversation.*

This is why we love stories. They take us to wonderful lands far away from our everyday lives and allow us to participate in adventures that we couldn't possibly have time for in between classes and homework.

The stories of today grew out of the folktales and fairy tales people told around a fire long ago. It's true; Ultraman, Harry Potter, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are the descendants of the myths and legends involving characters with names like Achilles, Zambe, and Thor (an ancient legend who's been revived in Marvel comics and movies).



**Fun Fact:** the day Thursday is named after Thor.



All cultures and countries around the world have their own stories; many of us know of the tales of Robin Hood and King Arthur from old (olde) England or Beowulf from even further back. Separate

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regions of Western Africa had tales of heroes like Uncama and Kwasi Benefo. Ancient Greek mythological figures Achilles and Odysseus are well known.

Japan is full of ghosts and spirits, both good and evil, such as Nomori the Wilderness Guardian, or the goddess Amaterasu, whose presence can bring light to the world or take it away.

The point is that the old myths were the blockbuster movies or bestselling books of their day. These stories provided entertainment long before the first movie camera was invented. But they also had a different purpose: to teach.

Folk tales were created to teach values, ideas of good and bad, right and wrong. Think of the stories you learned when you were little, what did they say? The old western folk tale of the Tortoise and the Hare is meant to stress the importance of not resting until a task is finished. The Three Little Pigs encourages kids to do something well, whatever it is they're doing.

## **principle:** noun

a rule or belief governing one's personal behavior: *struggling to be true to their own principles* | *she resigned over a matter of principle.*

• morally correct behavior and attitudes: *a man of **principle**.*

## **Sacrifice:** verb

to give up (something that you want to keep) especially in order to get or do something else or to help someone

*Nick's parents made sacrifices so they could pay for his college education.*

Modern stories are no different. We'll cover this in more depth later, but most of our heroes fight for **principle**. Today's stories promote the values that we believe in, and our heroes represent those values.

## **What is a Hero?**

To experience the adventure we need someone whose eyes to see it through. This is the main character, called the **hero**. Everything that happens in the story, we live it through him (or her - girls can be heroes too. Normally, the term for a female hero is *heroine*, but to keep things simple, we'll use *hero* for both genders).

The purpose of the hero is to go on a journey. Not just any journey, but one of great danger, with a lot at stake. We accompany him on his



travels as he encounters enemies, overcomes obstacles, and most importantly, **sacrifices** for the principles he believes in. The hero will give up his own personal comfort and safety in order to help others or save the world.

**This journey will be the single most important event in the hero's life. What happens during the course of the story will change who he is forever.**

Everything that happens in a story is because of **conflict**. A journey wouldn't be any fun if a hero didn't have to do anything brave or exciting along the way. A story where the hero meets no resistance is about as thrilling as a visit to the dentist. Instead, a great story puts the hero and her friends in constant peril, having to do extraordinary things in order to survive and succeed in her mission. Being a hero is a difficult and dangerous thing. Conflict makes the story exciting.

Conflict also reveals **character**.

Some words have more than one meaning. The word **character** is one of those, and this book uses two different meanings of it. When you read a word that can have two different meanings, you can usually figure out what the writer means to say if you know both definitions.

**Character:** noun

Strong moral qualities, such as courage or honesty.

*We expect our leaders to have strong character.*

**Character:** noun

A person in a book, tv show, or movie.

*Many actors have played the character of Spider-Man in the movies.*

Can you guess which meaning of character we're using in this instance?

When someone is safe at home, it's easy for him to be a good person. But when faced with danger, and doing the right thing could require him to sacrifice something, then we see who he really is. If he's truly a good person, then he'll do the right thing no matter the cost. This is what we mean when we say that conflict reveals character.

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## The Hero's Journey

Let's talk about what we mean by journey. Early in a story, our hero is made aware of a great danger to his world, and he must do something or risk certain destruction. This usually involves leaving his safe, comfortable life and traveling forth into unknown lands, on a journey to defend his home and the principles he believes in.

But sometimes the journey isn't to a faraway land, but to a scary place right where he is. The heroes in *Spider-Man*, *Stranger Things*, and the new *Ultraman* never even leave their hometowns. Theirs is a journey into another kind of unknown. They stay where they are, but the place they live changes when they change. These heroes take a journey while staying at home.

In short, the journey can be an actual trip or not. The important thing is that the hero takes action and goes into the unknown, in some form. This book was written to help you understand *why* he takes the journey, and what happens along the way.

## The History of Heroes

A university professor named Joseph Campbell spent his entire career studying the myths and stories of ancient cultures. He wrote many books and essays explaining his ideas, but one book in particular expressed the idea he's known for to this day. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he explained that stories from all

over the world have many things in common. Myths from **cultures** that were very far away had the same elements, such as events of the story and similar characters.

But most importantly, they all had one thing: a hero that went on a journey. It was Campbell who named the The Hero's Journey. He said that the heroes of all **cultures** are really the same character

adapted to different places. He called this idea the monomyth (mono is a prefix meaning 'one').

The folktales of long ago grew up and became the hit movies of today. In many ways, the blockbusters that dazzle us with the

**culture:** noun

the language, customs, ideas, and art of a particular group of people.

*Respect for Mother Earth is an important part of Iroquois culture.*



latest computer graphics are just the great-grandchildren of thrilling stories that people recited around the fire long ago, as Campbell showed.

You could be assigned to read Campbell's books one day in school, especially if you go to college for Creative Writing, Anthropology, Cinema Studies, or History. His ideas are relevant to many different majors. The book you're reading now uses his ideas to explain today's most popular stories, maybe some of your favorites.



We'll examine these stories and divide them into three elements:

- The *events* of the story, which Campbell called stages of the journey. Simply, these are the things that happen in the story.
- The *characters*, or people we'll meet along the way (or talking animals, in the case of movies like Kung Fu Panda).
- The *principles* at stake. What do the heroes believe, and what are they fighting for?

As we experience new stories, we'll look closely and try to identify similarities and differences between elements in different books, movies, and tv shows. Commonly, as a hero moves through his journey, it happens in three parts:

- Part 1: the hero in his ordinary world, and his decision on whether or not to go on the journey,
- Part 2: the main part of his adventure, all of the obstacles he has to overcome,
- Part 3: the darkest part of his journey. Consequences of the decisions he's made throughout the story, both good and bad, and a final showdown with evil.

This is a *model* of how popular stories work, not a formula. Recent Hollywood movies treat the Hero's Journey as a **formula**, and they never change anything about it. The adjective that describes something like this approach is *formulaic*. As you read more books and watch more movies, you'll end up getting bored by stories that do exactly what the formula says to do.

**formula:** noun

a conventional model for doing something.

*The author used an old formula in his latest mystery.*

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You'll notice that we'll use the words 'often' and 'sometimes' a lot in the book. We need those qualifiers because good movies shouldn't always follow the exact plan of the Hero's Journey. Good writers listen to the characters, they consider the central conflict and think of how they would react when faced with certain obstacles. They make their characters do what they really would do in those situations, regardless of what the model says. Remember, the Hero's Journey is really just a roadmap, but storytellers can take detours to follow their characters where they would go.

When you learn it, you'll read books and watch shows that stray from the model in big ways. They may not have certain elements in the model, such as events or characters. Don't let the model prevent you from enjoying the story you're reading.

One more thing: in his books, Joseph Campbell was able to build the Hero's Journey model by identifying things that were similar between myths and stories of different cultures. This is fine, and the similarities are strong enough that the model works.

However, thinking well also means seeing differences too. You may notice things that Harry Potter and Anna of Frozen have in common, but you should also notice things that they *don't* have in common. It's just as important to see the differences. As you grow, you'll learn that looking only for similarities will cause you to blur your eyes so that things look the same, even if they're not. Doing this is the opposite of seeing clearly, and seeing clearly is the first step to understanding. You need to see both when you try to understand - similarities *and* differences.





# How to Read This Book

The **events** of stories are the skeleton of this book. The main text is about what happens. We'll interrupt with a few special sections:

**Characters:** as we explore the different events in the journey, our hero will encounter other people. As we defined it earlier, the people in a book, movie, or tv show are called *characters*. We'll put the discussion of characters, as well as examples of types of characters, in these green boxes.

- Characters in a story are really just parts of us. Each of us have the feelings and thoughts of the greatest heroes and the worst villains; who we become as we grow depends on the choices we make, and the inner voices that we listen to.
- Characters have **functions** in a story, and this book will try and help you to understand what they are. If you think of a story as a big machine, characters and other elements are the parts of the machine that make it go.
- Characters should be unique and realistic as people. Too often, bad movies and books make the characters flat, having no personality aside from their function in the story. Real people are more than the tasks we assign to them; they have thoughts and emotions. Recognizing those in a character also can help us to understand why they do what they do, and why they made certain choices in their life. To put it simply, realistic characters make stories better.

**function:** noun

the purpose or role that an object or a person fulfills or is suited for.

*The function of a fire fighter is to put out fires.*

Occasionally, we'll need to use some special words or terminology in order to provide better explanations. When we use a word you might never have heard or read before, we'll **define** it in the blue boxes, which you've already seen.

**define:** verb

to explain or state the meaning of.

*The teacher asked me to define the word "demolish."*



**Ideas:** any interesting discussion will usually raise some ideas that might be good for us to think about, or be good for their own conversation, separate from the topic at hand.

We'll share these ideas with you in these orange boxes. Consider chatting about them with your friends, classmates, or teachers.

# How to Read This Book

Each section ends with a few questions that you may want to consider or discuss with your friends. Books like this can help, but you won't really understand these ideas until you determine how

**debate:** noun, verb

a discussion between two people or groups who disagree on an important subject.

*The debate in Congress lasted two days.*

**evidence:** noun

something that gives proof or a reason to believe.

*Scientists have not yet found evidence of life on Mars.*

*you* think and feel about them yourself. When you bring your own thoughts to the discussion is when you truly take ownership of what you learn, and it becomes part of you.

Discussions in classrooms and among friends sometimes involve different opinions and ideas. A discussion like this is called a **debate**. A debate is a great activity for expressing what you think and discovering the best available answer. When debating about stories, if you want to support an idea, you must refer to **evidence**, either in the form of the written words of a book, spoken words in a movie or tv show, or the actions of a character.

For instance, let's take a trip back to America's Old West for a moment.

Cal was looking forward to supper at Abbie's place. It was a scorcher today, and the new bronco was proving hard to tame. Considering the day he had, the old cowboy was really looking forward to some fine lemonade.

The rusty door creaked as he entered, and Cal noticed that the room was empty, except for one other customer - Charlie Nightwell.

He hadn't expected to ever see him again; last he heard, Charlie had left with a wagon train. His reputation as a crack shot would always guarantee him a job; his personality would guarantee that he'd never get re-hired.

"Howdy, Cal. Fancy seeing you here."

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"Nice to see you, Captain."

"No need for formalities, I didn't re-enlist. Call me Charlie."

"Where's Abigail?"

"She went out back to fetch the chicken I ordered. Come on, have a seat."

*Darn*, thought Cal. Not wanting to be rude, he pulled up a chair.

"I thought you were going west with the settlers."

"I took them as far as I could."

"How far was that?"

"Not far enough."

He waited for him to say more, but Charlie didn't.

"Captain, I thought they'd have made you a General by now, especially after Jackson's Bluff."

"You were there too, Cal. What did you think?"

"You were brave. It said so in all the papers."

Charlie shifted in his seat, yawning as he did, though Cal's old fighting instincts noticed that he had freed up his pistol hand.

"Well, my promotion got blocked. Apparently, someone talked to the Governor. They gave him what you could call an 'alternate account' of what happened."

*That's it. That's why he's here*, Cal thought, and he realized that it was only a matter of moments now.





# How to Read This Book

**infer:** verb

to make a guess based on facts and observations; conclude.

*I inferred from the books on his shelf that he enjoyed reading adventure stories.*

As a reader, we try to **infer** the meaning of things when they aren't spelled out in detail, but anything we conclude should come from the words of the story, which we call **textual evidence**.

Returning to this passage, there are two characters, Cal and Charlie. They know each other; apparently, they were in the army together.

## Do they like each other?

They could be old friends, having fought aside one another in the army. One says "Howdy", an old west way of saying 'hello', and the other says "Nice to see you, Captain". These seem like affectionate greetings among old friends.

However, there's evidence that they might dislike each other. When Charlie invites Cal to sit, Cal thinks *Darn*, a negative exclamation that means he's not happy, and sits because he didn't want to be rude. If you see someone you actually like, you sit with them because you *want* to sit with them, not to avoid being rude. Based on that, we can conclude that Cal, at least, dislikes Charlie.

## Was it really a coincidence that they met?

Cal was surprised to see his old Captain at Abbie's, we know that it's so because we're reading the account from his perspective; we hear his thoughts. Was Charlie surprised to see Cal? He said so - "Fancy seeing you here" is another way of expressing surprise at seeing his old acquaintance. We're not hearing Charlie's thoughts, though; he could be lying.

It's not a sure thing, but consider this:

- The two men have a history. They don't reveal enough for us to determine the nature of their friendship, but we do know that they experienced a battle together (Jackson's Bluff).
- Charlie was hailed as a hero for his actions and was considered for a promotion.
- He didn't get promoted, however, and Charlie thinks it's

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because someone gave the Governor an ‘alternate account’ of his actions in battle.

- From Cal’s perspective, Charlie shifted in his chair to ‘free up his pistol hand’, and after the Captain’s failure to receive a promotion is mentioned, Cal seems convinced that’s the reason for the visit.
- Where’s Abbie? It’s her restaurant. Did Charlie send her away because of what he intended to do?

I think it’s fair to infer that Cal thinks that Charlie is here to confront him, and that Charlie thinks that Cal is behind the ‘alternate account’ that prevented his promotion.

Here are a couple of other questions to consider regarding this story:

- **After Charlie told Cal to call him by his name, why did Cal continue to refer to him as Captain?**
- **What do you think happened next?**

When discussing this or any other story, always return to the text to make inferences and arguments. In movies and TV shows, refer to the **dialogue** (what characters say) and **action** (what characters do). As you learn more about how movies and tv shows tell stories, you can also refer to **visual evidence**; filmmakers will express ideas or hint at truths with techniques such as lighting, composition, editing, or music. Often, this is how they tell you who the bad guy is.



Even without a single action or line of dialogue, we would know that Norman Osborne, as played by Willem Dafoe, was the villain of *Spider-Man* just by his expression, the lighting, and the minor chords in the soundtrack.

# How to Read This Book

Keep in mind that this book is full of *spoilers*. A spoiler is simply information about what happens in a story. We need to refer to the events and characters in stories in order to discuss the ideas of the hero's journey. They're called spoilers because if you haven't read the story, the surprise of discovering what happens is spoiled, or ruined for you. For the purposes of the lessons contained in the book, it's not important that you've read the story or seen the show we'll be discussing, we'll

## **Summarize:** verb

to restate in a concise form.

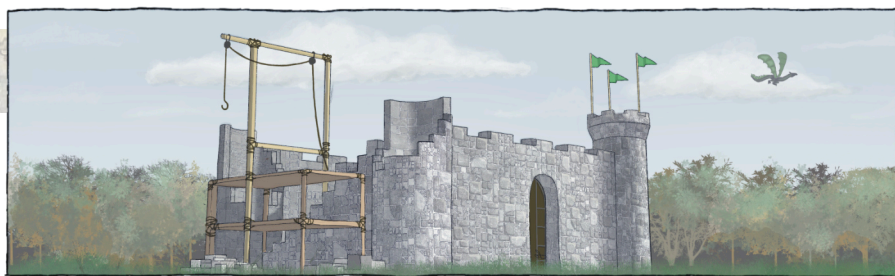
*The students had only five minutes each, so they needed to quickly summarize what they had done in their projects.*

**summarize** what happens. But if you *want* to read the story or watch the movie and discover it for yourself, these are a few of the ones we'll talk about in this book, among others:

- Harry Potter
- Frozen
- Ultraman
- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
- Raya and the Last Dragon
- Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events
- Mulan
- Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse
- Stranger Things
- Coco
- Kung Fu Panda
- Amulet
- Moana
- Inside Out
- How to Train Your Dragon

With that final warning, we take our very first steps on our own journey. But first, let's have a quick word about *where* it happens.





## About Worldbuilding

Some adventures take place in the world we live in, but stories also allow us to leave our normal life and go to an **exotic** land, one full of magic, places to explore, and things we don't see every day. Stories in books are limited only by our imagination, and thanks to new computer techniques, movies are catching up. We can go anywhere in the world, and even out of it.

**exotic:** adjective

from a foreign place, or very unusual or interesting.

*The zoo in Chicago has exotic birds from Africa.*

A term has been coined by people who make places for books, movies, and videogames: '**worldbuilding**'. It's a great word, one that does a good job of describing what writers and artists do. They do the hard (but fun) work of designing a place for their story, and then set our hero free to wander around in it.

In most adventure stories, the setting can be divided into a few kinds:

**The world we live in now.** Many stories don't build a place for their stories but set them right here. Most superhero stories take place in our existing world, the only real difference being the presence of the superheroes themselves. By setting their stories here, superhero comics make it easy to imagine ourselves in the role of the hero.

**A secret world.** Another place where stories are set is in a hidden world beneath ours. The magical world that Harry Potter inhabits is one such place (aside from dismal summers with the Dursleys), or the land of Aleddia that Emily discovers in the *Amulet* graphic novels. Stories set in places like these will usually have a chapter where our hero discovers this secret world and has to learn the rules of it. Often there will be a character, such as Hagrid, who acts as a guide for our hero in this secret world.

# About Worldbuilding

**Historical eras, real or imagined.** History is fertile ground for inspiration. Studying the past is a big creative resource for writers, one in which they can take creative liberties. Fantasy worlds such as the ones in *Lord of the Rings* or *Frozen* are set in an *imagined* history - not a real place, but one that borrows heavily from European history and culture (*Kung Fu Panda* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* did the same but borrowed from Asian history instead).



The author Arthur C. Clarke was quoted as saying "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic".

**Future worlds.** Science Fiction uses technology in the future, where machines allow us to do things akin to magic, such as travelling in space across vast distances, meeting alien life on other planets, driving flying cars or using futuristic weapons.

That's why, in many SciFi stories, technology is used like magic in fantasy stories. Instead of a magic wand that shoots beams or a winged horse, a future world would have a laser gun or a flying car. They're different, but these objects have the same *function* as their fantasy counterparts.

The most popular forms for stories among kids in Japan are **anime**, their word for animated shows and movies, and **manga**, which are comic books.

Science fiction is still trending in Japan, especially when they involve giant robots. Though the *Transformers* movies are produced in Hollywood, the original toys came from Japan, and **anime** such as *Gundam* and *Macross* are still very popular.

**Dystopia** is a word that refers to imagined places that are terrible, where the people are miserable and usually subject to an oppressive ruler or political system. The purpose of dystopian fiction is to show how our lives

could be if we, as a society, make the wrong choices or allow our worst notions to control us.

Probably the greatest dystopian novel is George Orwell's 1984, but readers of a younger age might be more familiar with the sadistic rulers of Panem in *The Hunger Games*.

# About Worldbuilding

## Exposition: Introduction to a New World

Like our own, each world has its own rules, and we have to learn them *twice*. The first time when we're introduced to it in the beginning of the story, we (the readers / viewers) need to be shown how the world works so we know how people interact and navigate in this special place. The word for explaining things to the reader in a story is called **exposition**. It's one of the hardest things for a writer to do in a way that's elegant and clear, so there are some tricks stories use to do it.

In *How to Train Your Dragon*, the hero, Hiccup, is given the narrator's voice - a narrator is someone who speaks directly to the viewer or the reader without speaking to other characters. As we look at the Viking village on the islands he calls home, Hiccup explains:

"This is Berk. It's twelve days north of hopeless and a few degrees south of freezing to death. It's located solidly on the Meridian of Misery. My village [is] in a word, sturdy. It's been here for seven generations, but every single building is new. We have fishing, hunting, and a charming view of the sunsets. The only problems are the pests. You see, most places have mice or mosquitoes; we have *dragons*."

*(Written by William Davies, Dean DeBlois, and Chris Sanders.  
Adapted from the book by Cressida Cowell)*





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In movies, exposition is handled with a combination of picture and spoken word. While Hiccup speaks about his village, the images show us an ancient settlement on an island; this is how we know

he doesn't live in a big city in the modern day.

Hiccup continues to explain how they survive and fight the dragons, and in a combination of dialogue and narration, it's explained that Hiccup himself is kind of wimpy, a disappointment as a fighter. We now know where the story is set, how it works, and our hero's place in it.



The second time the world is explained is when the hero goes on her special journey. She leaves her comfortable life to go to a strange new part of the world, one full of danger that she and her friends must avoid or overcome. Then it's her turn to learn how this place works so she can traverse it safely, and we learn about it too by tagging along. In many cases, the hero is coupled with a guide, a character whose job it is to explain this new world for her. This is especially important in 'secret world' stories, where the hero needs to quickly learn about a world she never knew existed. Some examples of heroes and their guides:

- In *Amulet*, Emily and her brother Naivin find themselves in a secret world where they have to rescue their mother. They actually have two guides: first, they find their long-lost great-grandfather, who tells them about the secret world of Alledia on his deathbed, and after he dies, they're assisted by the robots he built, especially one named Miskit.
- In the Harry Potter series, Harry is first made aware of the secret magical world when Hagrid comes for him. On the night they talk, Hagrid explains everything he, and we, need to know about

this world hidden beneath ours, including why it's a secret, the existence of the Hogwarts school for magical education, and the special relationship Harry has with Voldemort, the evil sorcerer who's a threat to everyone in the magical world.

- Later, Hagrid accompanies Harry to Diagon Alley, the first time the boy sees the magical world for

## **norm:** noun

a model or standard of behavior, esp. one that is generally accepted or followed.

*Society often dealt severely with people whose behavior was outside the norm.*



## About Worldbuilding

himself. He comes to understand the norms and cultures of this world firsthand, keeping quiet to avoid revealing his lack of understanding. In this way, Harry is really our representative, and is no different from us if we had been placed in his shoes.

Remember, the way an imaginary world is described in a book or shown on screen can be dazzling to us, but for the characters who live there, it's just their everyday life. By now, they're bored by the giant dragons, conjuring wizards, and faster-than-light spaceships. In the stories you read and watch, notice how the characters pay little or no attention to the things that would amaze us if we could visit.

- Is our world really any less amazing than the ones we read about? Or do we fail to be amazed because we live here every day?
- Remember, Mr. Weasley, the dad of Harry Potter's best friend, was enchanted by the muggle world, as he called it. So was Ariel, the main character in *The Little Mermaid*. Try to look at things anew. What would your favorite characters from other worlds be amazed by if they could visit you?
- What about you? Have you ever daydreamed about your own imaginary world (perhaps when you should have been doing homework)? Think like a storyteller:
  - What did the world look like? Was it mostly cities, countryside, or a mixture of both?
  - Who ruled this world? Did they govern fairly or were they demanding overlords?
  - Who lived there? Were they mostly farmers, merchants, soldiers, or something else?
  - What were the rules of this world? How did it work? What kinds of things did its inhabitants have to do to live?
  - Who prospered in this world? Who suffered?

These are the kinds of questions that writers and other kinds of storytellers have to ask themselves when worldbuilding. They need to know the answers to these questions so they know how their characters should behave when navigating this world.



## About Characters

Now that a world has been built for the story, it has to be inhabited by characters, the people who live there. In the original text where he introduced *The Hero's Journey*, Campbell said these myths were populated by characters he called *archetypes*, which are different kinds of people, each one representing something - feelings, thoughts, and ideas - inside of us. We all have the potential of becoming the greatest hero, the worst villain, and every type of character in every story; it all depends on the choices we make. We'll just call them characters.

Later, we'll cover the most common types of characters found in most adventure stories, including:

- **The Hero**, the character that undertakes the journey,
- **The Mentor**, the hero's guide and teacher,
- **The Shadow** and **The Villain**, the characters that represent the forces opposing the hero,
- **Enemies** and **Allies** of the hero, people he meets along the way, and
- **The Shapeshifter**, kind of a wild card in the story.

In order for a story to really work, the characters should be believable, even in the most fantastical and alien environments. They should have thoughts and feelings that we recognize as real, and are motivated by things people really want, even if they're wrong to want it.

When you meet a new character in a story, ask a few questions about them, such as:

- **What do they want, and what would they do to get it?** Is what they want something good for the world and other people, or something that will only benefit them alone?
- **What are their values and principles?** What do they think is right, or do they even believe in right and wrong?
- **Are they honest?** Do they tell others characters the truth about what they're thinking and feeling, or do they deceive other people

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to get what they want?

- **Their personality:** are they personally kind and considerate of others, or mean and nasty to those around them? Are they shy and retiring, or are they an extrovert? Are they funny or always very serious? Are they happy or sad?

The people in stories, regardless of the environment they're in, will want the same things as the rest of us: good things like their own personal well-being and that of their loved ones, safety from harm, or, for the more ambitious among us, wealth and power.

## Static and Dynamic Characters

One thing that divides the characters you'll meet is whether they're static or dynamic. This defines whether the character changes at all. A **static character** doesn't change, at least during the events we're witness to. They are who they'll be throughout the story, and their function in the story will likely stay the same as well. Most characters in serials, episodic stories like comic books or movie series such as James Bond, are static in nature.

A **dynamic character**, in contrast, will change in the story. How do they change? Usually they'll learn and grow, becoming the best version of themselves (although there are some stories where characters become worse and change by surrendering themselves to their worst instincts). The hero in a traditional non-serialized story is a dynamic character by definition, but she doesn't have to be the only dynamic character.

### Prince Zuko of Avatar: The Last Airbender

An important moment in the growth of a child into young adulthood is when they learn to see their parents clearly as human beings, rather than just as the voice of authority. With most of us, we come to understand them better and, while they'll always be our parents, our relationship transforms into a friendlier one (hopefully).

Not so with Prince Zuko, son of the Fire Lord. He spends the first half of the Avatar series looking for the approval of his abusive father, hoping to obtain it by capturing or killing Aang, the hero. Wanting the approval of a parent is a normal feeling; the parent being so horribly abusive and uncaring of his son is not.





# About Characters

Over time, with the patient guidance of his kindly mentor General Iroh, he comes to see things clearly, realizing that Ang is not his enemy, and that his father is to blame for all of the turmoil, not only in his life, but in the world as a whole. Prince Zuko's transformation makes him a **dynamic** character, and is crucial to Ang's success in defeating the Fire Lord and restoring peace.

**manifest:** verb

to show plainly; display;  
demonstrate.

*The results of the treatment  
generally manifest  
themselves after only four  
days.*

- Think of people you know; do the characters in the stories you've read have anything in common with, say, your dad or your sister's best friend? Do their personal beliefs end up manifesting themselves in their daily behavior or how they talk to others?
- The potential of every character in every story exists inside of you. Can

you see bits of yourself in the characters in the books you read or movies you watch?

- Concerning the questions we ask about a character - what they want, what they would do to get it, their values and principles - have you thought about asking those questions about yourself?
- Are you a static or dynamic character in your life? Are you changing, or do you always stay the same? Are you open to change in yourself, or do you resist? Does change frighten you?

# Prologue: Before the Beginning

In many stories (but not all), a story starts *before* the beginning. This is called a prologue (pronounced *PRO-log*). A writer will have a small scene that takes place before the story really starts, sometimes many years before. The point of this scene is to show events that will affect the story once our hero takes the first steps on his journey.

This scene, or chapter of a book, will usually be very short and not reveal too much; exposition (the art of revealing details in a story) is for the hero to discover along with you. It's there to give you some information that you'll refer to later. You probably don't know what it means yet, but it's important.

Some examples include:

- In *Frozen*, two loving sisters, one who is capable of magic, are playing in their home when an accident occurs. In order to prevent harm to others, Elsa is told to hide away in their home and conceal her magical powers.
- In the new *Ultraman* series, the entire history of Ultraman is explained.
- Four baby turtles take residence in the New York City sewer and are discovered by a rat who's a martial arts master, which is how the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were created.

Often, the prologue involves an explanation of how our hero, or the world he lives in, came to be. A prologue is a good tool for explaining something that's unusual about the hero in some way, such as how an infant got a scar on his head and came to be an **orphan**, or how four turtles living in the sewer came to grow to unusual size and become masters of the martial arts.



In the prologue of the *Amulet* series of graphic novels, our hero Emily and her mother are left alone in the snow after a car accident kills her father.

(Art and Story by Kazu Kibuishi)

**orphan:** noun

a child whose parents have died.

*When both her parents died, she was taken to live in a home for orphans.*

# Prologue: Before the Beginning



Regarding orphans, you'll notice that many, even most, of our heroes have no parents; their parents are either absent or have died. You'll understand why when we begin reading about the hero, but it's no coincidence. Just consider some of these examples:

- Superman
- Batman
- Spider-Man (the original one)
- Harry Potter
- Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars*
- Anna and Elsa of *Frozen*
- Raya of *Raya and the Last Dragon*
- The Baudelaire children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

And many more. In short, it's an easy way to make the hero stand on his own, without the support and love that a parent provides.

- Has there been a prologue in your life? Was there an event long ago that had an effect on your life today? What was it, and how do you think it could be affecting you?
- Could you be living a prologue for your future life right now? What could you be doing now to ensure your life in the future is what you want it to be?

Now that the prologue has fulfilled its purpose, let's give the story a proper start in the hero's Ordinary World.



## Part 1: The Ordinary World

Stories *really* begin in the **Ordinary World**. Everything is normal, nothing unusual for the people we meet at the beginning. Characters are engaging in their regular day, life is **static**. To understand these beginnings, and all other stages of the story, we must first meet our Hero.

**static:** adjective

Without motion or change

*The town center was static for years until new shops and restaurants opened.*

### Characters: The Hero

Heroes are the main characters in stories. They're the people who undertake the journey for us, and it's through their eyes that we experience the events of the story. Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Don't be tricked into thinking that all heroes should be the tall, muscular man common to comic books. Any kind of person can be a hero, as long as they have the qualities like courage, intelligence, and generosity that we look for in our heroes.

Like all characters, we want them to be believable as people. What they think and how they feel should be relatable, meaning that we can understand their thoughts and feelings, because we've thought and felt that way ourselves.

Not that all of their thoughts are good ones. We all have bad thoughts sometimes, and negative feelings like anger, selfishness, and a desire for revenge. Those are feelings that dominate the thoughts of the villains we'll meet. Whether we become a good person or a bad person is determined by which ones we act on. The hero may falter sometimes, but in the end, she resists bad thoughts and relies on her sense of decency to guide her.

Here are the things that make a character the hero of their story:

- First, she receives the **Call to Adventure**, the prompt that forces



# The Hero

her to leave her normal life and embark on a journey to save the world and fight for good. She may hesitate to leave her home at first, she may not even want to go. The Italian writer Umberto Eco once said that “The real hero is always a hero by mistake; he dreams of being an honest coward like everybody else.” In spite of that, she ultimately makes the decision to answer the call and take the journey.

- Once on the journey, she encounters **obstacles** blocking her path, including opposing characters who try to **impede** her progress, or even kill her. The hero fights through those obstacles until the end.
- She may have **friends or allies** helping her, but at the most important parts of the journey, she fights alone, relying only on what she’s learned and the skills she possesses. This is why heroes are often orphans, not having parents who can offer help through difficult times. In a story, we want to see the hero overcome hardships on her own.
- Though it may appear that she’s fighting only for selfish reasons, by the end it becomes apparent that she’s fighting for a **principle** she believes in. She comes to believe in this principle so much that she’ll ultimately **sacrifice** herself for it.
- This journey she takes will be the most important event of her life. It will change her forever, and her life will be different (usually better) than it would have been if she hadn’t ever left home.

**Impede:** verb

to slow or block the movement or progress of; hinder.

*The cascades of snow impeded the settlers' progress.*

These are things that heroes of most stories have in common. We’ll revisit the hero’s progress through the journey, as we discuss other events or meet other characters.

We first meet the hero in his life as he’s lived it for as long as he remembers, probably since he was born. He’s safe and secure in his everyday existence, but there’s something wrong, either in the world around him or in his feelings inside (probably both). He’s dissatisfied with life, and there’s something both in his world and inside of him he has to fix. The journey ahead may be full of travels and adventure in faraway lands, involving strange characters and creatures, but the real reason for the journey is to fix the flaw in themselves.

# The Inciting Incident

Let's meet a few heroes in their ordinary worlds:

- Harry Potter is living miserably with the Dursleys, his dreadful aunt and uncle and their monstrous brat of a son, Dudley. He's yet unaware of the challenges and dangers that await him; right now his biggest concern is surviving the minefield of a terrible home life.
- Po, the title character of Kung Fu Panda, is unhappy waiting tables at his father's noodle shop, and isn't thrilled with the prospect of inheriting the restaurant someday. He dreams of being a great warrior, but that dream seems impossible.
- In the Netflix show Stranger Things, Mike lives a generally happy life with good friends, playing adventure games like Dungeons and Dragons in his basement. His life is unremarkable, though, and like all boys, he dreams of living a life that's truly adventurous.

Though the hero's life seems stable, that's only an illusion. Whatever he thinks, his situation can't continue forever. There's something wrong in his life, and there's an event coming soon that'll blow it all to smithereens. He'll soon be forced to make a decision, one that will determine the course of the rest of his life.

## The Inciting Incident

An event occurs (as events do); it could be something big, it could be appear to be **inconsequential**, but whether he knows it or not, it's the most important occurrence of the hero's life so far.

Something happens, and to an astute observer, it's a clue that their life as they know it is about to change. Screenwriters call this event the **Inciting Incident**. It

happens, and it's a signal that something is in motion, the first in a series of events that the hero has no control of.

**inconsequential:** adjective

of little or no consequence; not important.

*Making an error in practice may be inconsequential, but making one during competition can destroy one's chances of winning.*

You should note that the importance of the inciting incident isn't always clear to the hero; sometimes it's interpreted as having no importance at all. Consider the example of Miles Morales, the new Spider-Man. While on an excursion with his uncle, he notices a spider that's bitten him on his hand. Thinking nothing of it, he

# The Call to Adventure



Comic books and superhero movies usually begin with an **Origin Story**, telling us how the superhero came to be so super.

We'll examine the special rules of superhero Origin Stories later in the book.

swats the spider and brushes it away.

Those of us familiar with the original Spider-Man **Origin Story** know better; that was no ordinary bug bite. It was from a radioactive spider, and though he doesn't know it yet, it's given Miles incredible superpowers that'll propel him headlong into a life of action and danger.

Some other Inciting Incidents:

- In *Frozen*, the parents of the two sisters die tragically in a shipwreck. Since they were royalty, this means that the older sister, Elsa, will have to emerge from confinement to be crowned Queen. She's frightened that she'll be unable to control the magical abilities she's been concealing.
- In *Mulan*, an invasion by the Huns causes the Emperor to conscript one man from each family into the army to defend China. When the Emperor's Counsel comes to town, Mulan is distraught to realize that means her father, who is far too old for war.

Whether the hero has figured it out or not, the inciting incident has changed his world forever, but it only really becomes clear to him when he gets the Call to Adventure.

## The Call to Adventure

At some point, the world sends a message to the hero. It tells him that the life as he knew it is over. It tells him that his entire world is in danger, and that he alone can save it. It tells him that he has to leave his life of comfort and go forth on a journey, into the unknown, and risk losing everything. If the Inciting Incident hadn't made it clear, it's undeniable now: mortal peril awaits. This is the **Call to Adventure**, the true beginning of his journey.

The Call isn't necessarily an actual spoken warning, it doesn't have to be someone saying something (though it could be). It's simply an event that makes it clear to the hero that he no longer has a choice - he learns of a threat that could destroy him or his

# The Three Goals of the Hero

world, and that he alone can stop it.

He may refuse at first, thinking that it might not be that serious. He might not recognize that he's being threatened with utter destruction. He may want the whole problem to just go away and leave him in peace, but he comes to understand that inaction is not an option. He must act, or face certain doom.

Regarding the Call, the hero must *decide* to go. He can't find himself in the midst of the journey because he was abducted or forced into it. He must have an understanding of the situation he's faced with and make a deliberate choice to go forth into the unknown.

## The Three Goals of the Hero

At this point, the hero is given the mission that's central to the story. This mission has three parts, which we'll refer to as the **Three Goals**:

- There's an **External Goal**, a strategic objective that he must reach in order to achieve victory over The Shadow (the evil forces that oppose him).
- There's also the **Internal Goal**, something inside of him that he needs to fix.
- Related to both is the **Principle**, the ideals and beliefs that he's really fighting for.

In many ways, **the Three Goals are at the heart of what motivates the hero**, and what keep him moving forward. The Three Goals are why the hero sets foot on the path in the first place, and the Principle, if we share the hero's values, is why we should care if he succeeds.

What is the call that forces our hero onto the road?

- In *Ultraman*, Shinjiro (son of the first Ultraman), has been skeptical about the need for a new Ultraman, and doubts the claims of Morabushi, his commanding officer. He responds to a call in downtown Tokyo and meets his first alien invader, interrupting a powerful being while it devours some unfortunate people. Only





## The Hero

now does he see that the threat is real, and he accepts the call: “I know what the world needs me to be, and that’s Ultraman.” His external goal, of course, is to protect the citizens of Tokyo from being eaten by hungry aliens. His internal goal is to overcome his continuing doubts about his purpose.

- Moana is a Polynesian princess charged with protecting the people of her island community. As a very young girl, the ocean - a magical character in the story - chooses her to restore peace and prosperity by returning a magic gem to the goddess Te Fiti from whom it was stolen. She forgets the incident, but when her island’s crops begin to fail, her Grandmother reminds her of it - “The ocean chose you.” She is tasked with being the first of her generation to resume the sailing traditions of her ancestors and find the goddess.



**Raya of *Raya and the Last Dragon***

Raya is a good example of a character who fits the model of a hero; the first clue is that the movie is named after her. It’s a historical fantasy, meaning it takes place in the past, but not a real history. Like the settings in many other stories we’ll talk about, Raya’s Kumandra is an imaginary place, but has some elements of real-world culture. She’s a hero because the story follows her journey.

A prologue reveals that long ago, the land of Kumandra had been split by into six warring factions by the Druun, an evil force that infects the land and has the power to petrify people (turn them into stone). A magic gem has the power of resisting the Druun, and could possibly revive the dragons who once protected the people of Kumandra.

The story begins as Raya's father teaches her the fighting skills she needs as part of the elite unit charged with protecting the gem. His dream is to use it to revive the dragons and reunite the six lands, restoring peace and trust among the people. This is Raya's **Ordinary World**, the place she's lived since she was born, and the situation in the world she knows.

At a summit with the leaders of the six lands, Raya is betrayed by a rival, who attempts to steal the gem. In the struggle, the gem is shattered into six pieces, each piece seized by a character from a different country. This is the **Inciting Incident**, the event that sets the story in motion.

Broken, the gem's power is diminished and the Druun advance, unopposed. Raya's father gives his daughter their piece of the gem and urges her to fix it and find Sisu, rumored to be the last surviving dragon who can save them. He's then petrified by the Druun, sacrificing himself to save Raya. She's been given a mission; this is her **Call to Adventure**.

To this point, Raya has met all the qualifications of the hero in a story:

- We meet her in the **Ordinary World**, a world that's imperfect and needs to be fixed. The Druun are running roughshod over the land, people who should be friends are fighting each other, many of their loved ones have been petrified and need to be revived, and their traditional protectors, the dragons, are absent.
- She is alone, not having the assistance of a protective and helpful parent for most of the journey.
- She receives the **Call to Adventure**, and has been given a mission with an **external goal**, restoring the magic gem and locating the Last Dragon.
- A **principle** has also been introduced: that trust between the warring factions of Kumandra can save the world if she believes in it, which she doesn't (yet). Overcoming the mistrust and reluctance inside of her is the **internal goal**.

# The Hero

We're still early in our quest to understand the Hero's Journey, but later events also confirm that Raya is an excellent hero:

- She meets the **Mentor** (spoiler: it's the dragon) who guides her, not only in achieving her goals, but also in understanding the principles they represent;
- She overcomes **obstacles** and **enemies**, and makes **friends** and **allies** along the way;
- The mentor is removed at a crucial moment, leaving Raya to face the **showdown** alone;
- Raya ultimately comes to understand what her father had been trying to teach her, and **sacrifices** herself for the principle that represents everything she believes in.

Remember that, no matter how epic or fantastic, the events of the adventures we read and watch are related to our own experiences, and we can use stories to help us reflect on our own lives. Think of yourself as the hero in your own story.

- Where are you in your story? Are you still in your Ordinary World, or have you set foot on the path already?
- Have you received your Call to Adventure yet? It could be a real opportunity for you - how did you respond?
- What are your Three Goals? Really ask yourself these questions.
  - What is your external goal? What is it you want to achieve in life?
  - How will your journey change you into a better person? That would be your internal goal.
  - What principles are important to you? How will your journey strengthen those principles in your life?

These questions aren't just for heroes in a fantasy world, they're for you too.



# Meeting with the Mentor

Usually by the time the hero receives the Call to Adventure, we've met all the important characters; they've either appeared in person, or they've at least been mentioned. One of the most important is **The Mentor**. We meet the mentor fairly early in the story, and he undertakes the role of teacher or guide for the hero.

**The Mentor** is someone wise, who tells the hero what he needs to know in order to survive the hardships he's about to experience. Given what the mentor knows, it's possible that he was once the hero of his own journey when he was younger.

But in this story, the mentor's function is to use the knowledge he's gained to teach the hero, and sometimes to urge him to undertake the journey in the first place. The mentor is key; it's unlikely the hero would succeed in their quest without the teachings or tools the mentor provides.

Some of the advice the mentor might provide include:

- Illustrating the danger the hero is facing,
- Encouraging the hero to take the journey, telling him how to proceed, and providing other advice along the way,
- Reminders of the principles at stake, and what they're truly fighting for.

It's crucial that the mentor not be *too* active in the story. His job is to teach the hero, and it's the hero who must ultimately take the journey and overcome all of the obstacles on the road.

Critically, as we'll learn later, the mentor must be absent when the hero takes the final steps of the journey. The mentor must be far away, imprisoned, or he might even have died. The important thing is that the hero stands alone in the end, using what he's learned from the mentor to achieve victory himself.

Some examples of the mentor include:

- **Gandalf** in *Lord of the Rings*, **Obi-Wan** in *Star Wars*, and **Dumbledore** in the Harry Potter books are the characters we usually think of when it comes to mentors: old, wise, and full of experience.



## Meeting with the Mentor

- In the cartoon series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the writers did something interesting with the mentor. **General Iroh** starts out the story as the mentor of Prince Zuko, a sworn *enemy* of the hero, Ang. But because of the General's patient and wise guidance, Zuko grows and changes, ultimately becoming an ally to Ang. The General assumes the role of mentor to the entire group of heroes who fight to save the land from the evil rulers of the Fire Nation.

### Albus Dumbledore of the Harry Potter Books and Movies

In some ways, Dumbledore is a perfect example of the traditional mentor. He is old and exudes wisdom. He is the headmaster and professor at a school, and a teacher's entire purpose is to mentor the young students in his care.

Though Harry has many adults who help to guide him on his journey, when considering his role in the entire book and movie series, Dumbledore is the true mentor. Consider:



- First and most importantly, Dumbledore is the one who tells Harry that it's his purpose to rid the world of the evil Lord Voldemort, and that only Harry can do it.
- To help him along the way, Dumbledore ensures that Harry has all of the knowledge he needs to achieve his goal, either by appointing teachers to hone his magical skills, or by exploring 'he-who-shall-not-be-named's' life story in order to show the boy where Voldemort might be vulnerable.
- Dumbledore gives Harry some tools to help him as well, most notably the invisibility cloak that once belonged to his father.
- Like all mentors, he teaches the hero everything he needs to know, and then *he leaves* to allow Harry to use what he's learned to defeat Voldemort by himself. This is crucial - the mentor's job, as we learned, is to teach the hero what he needs for the journey, not to take the journey himself.

Sometimes popular culture will promote a certain type of person in a certain role. Just as the hero doesn't have to look like Superman or Neo of *The Matrix* to be a hero, the mentor doesn't have to look like the old man with the long, flowing white beard to be the mentor; he (or she) just has to be wise, patient, and unselfish. They can look like anyone, they can be men or women, and in stories like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, the mentor isn't even a human being.

## Gramma Tala in *Moana*



Moana is a young girl; the magic of the ocean has chosen her for a great mission: sail the sea to find Maui, a demigod who stole the Heart of Te Fiti, the goddess who made the islands of Polynesia. Doing this will save her island community,

Unfortunately, her dad won't let her go. It is Moana's grandmother, Gramma Tala, who encourages the girl to realize her destiny. She shows her granddaughter the great sailing history of her people, the history that her father has forgotten. When the island begins to die, Gramma Tala gives the girl the Heart of Te Fiti, the gem that gives life to the goddess, and tells her to "Go. The ocean chose you." This is Moana's **Call to Adventure**.

- Who are the most active mentors in your life? What advice or guidance have you received from them? Have they encouraged you to start your own hero's journey?
- Most mentors were heroes of their own adventures when they were younger. Ask your mentors about their hero's journey, and how they came to learn what they're teaching you.

## Thresholds

The hero will meet resistance throughout the story, but there are key points along the way where he's required to re-commit to his decision to move forward. These points are called **Thresholds**. Each threshold increases the danger for the hero.

Having seen the danger, weighed the costs of inaction, learned

# Thresholds

what he could from the mentor, and conducted his preparations (or not), the hero sets forth on his journey, leaving his Ordinary World, and there's no turning back.

**threshold:** noun

an architectural term that means the piece underneath a door at the bottom of the doorway. You cross a threshold when you pass from one room into another, for example.

But in the context of a story, rather than passing from room to room, it means passing either into new lands, or from one part of a story into another.

*In choosing to enter the enemy kingdom, the knight crossed a threshold that would lead to war and change his life forever.*

He meets resistance right away.

This is the **First Threshold**, when the hero takes his first steps into the unknown, and it's usually the first action scene in an action-adventure movie. What stands in his way? Whatever or whomever it is, we call this first obstacle the **Threshold Guardian**.

Threshold Guardians are characters or things that try to prevent the hero from advancing; we meet them or their kind several times in each story. They could be characters, sometimes the allies of the main villain (we'll meet him later), but not always. They could be bad guys who attack the hero for their own

interests; maybe they're robbers.

The hero must defeat them, or devise a way past them if he's to advance. If these are characters that are allied with the main villain, often the hero will find a way past them without yet defeating or killing them. Usually, this particular guardian will return throughout the story.

Sometimes the first threshold isn't even a character at all, but an obstacle of another kind, perhaps an imposing mountain or a desert that is thought to be impassable. The point of the first threshold is to give the hero an obstacle to overcome, illustrating that:

- He is fully committed to the journey, and
- The incident displays the skills and **acumen** (or lack thereof) that the hero currently possesses. Now we know who he is relative to the task he faces.

# Threshold Guardians

When we mention that **Threshold Guardians** are characters or elements that stand in the way of our heroes, the first thing that comes to mind is that they are enemies. Sometimes that's true; consider Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter's nemesis at school. Having established himself on day one as a rival, and a hostile one at that, Malfoy does everything he can to make Harry's life difficult, and to foil any plans he and his friends Ron and Hermione may have. At every step, Potter has to consider Malfoy and what he might do to interfere.

However, you mustn't think that *all* Threshold Guardians are enemies; in most animated films where the hero is a child or an adolescent (and not an orphan), the parents are almost always attempting to stop their children from embarking on the adventure. Consider:

- In *Moana*, her father the chief had a traumatic experience as a youth that caused him to forbid any travel off the island. Moana knows this to be a strategy for failure, so she has to defy him in order to take to the sea and save the island.
- In *How to Train Your Dragon*, our hero Hiccup is the wimpy kid who first dreams of pleasing his father by becoming a great warrior. But when he befriends a dragon, his father, the great dragon-slayer, becomes an obstacle. Hiccup's friendship with the dragon has to be concealed from his father and the rest of the village, for fear that they won't understand and will attack his new friend.

A parent's job is to keep their children safe, and here in the real world, the smart thing is to listen to them. But in the special circumstances of the movies, the hero is constantly having to sidestep their parents in order to save the world.

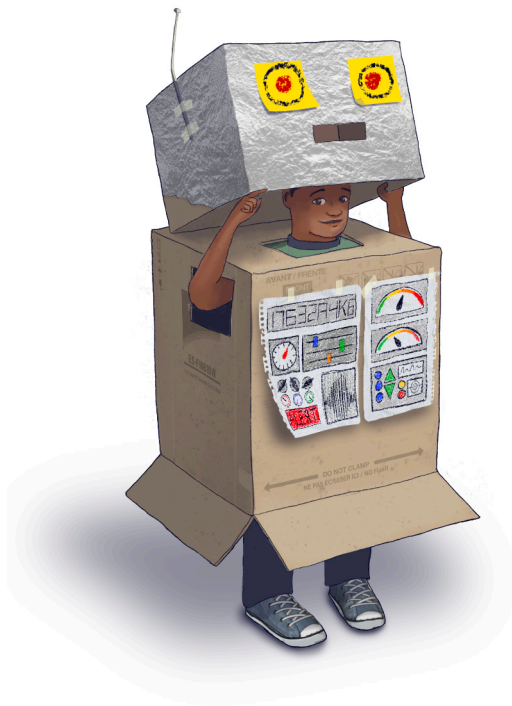
Examples:

- In the first *Lord of the Rings* movie, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, as the hero Frodo sets out on his Journey, his best friend Sam hesitates and says "This is it. If I take one more step, it'll be the farthest away from home I've ever been." This spells it out clearly - they're leaving their Ordinary World. Soon after, they encounter the terrifying Black Riders (called the Nazgul) that are hunting them. This is their First Threshold, the first time it becomes clear that Frodo is in a new world of danger, and the Black Riders are their first encounter with Threshold Guardians.



# Threshold Guardians

- In *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse*, young Miles Morales returns to the place where the spider bit him to investigate why he has all of these new abilities. This is an instance where he crosses a threshold, but he doesn't go anywhere; rather, the threshold is really about the changes inside his body, and the danger he finds himself in as a result. He's attacked by the villain's masked henchman known as the Prowler (the first Threshold Guardian - more on him later), and Miles barely escapes. This is where he crossed the First Threshold, and he can't ever return to his old life.
- Looking back at your life, can you remember when you crossed a threshold of some kind? What was it, and how did it change things in your life?
- Are there people in your life who act as Threshold Guardians and prevent you from advancing on your journey?
- Are YOU a Threshold Guardian for someone else, getting in the way of someone on their journey? Can you think of a way to be a better friend to them?





## Part 2: Into the Unknown

Now the hero is on his journey, the Ordinary World is a memory. He has no choice but to move forward. He has entered **Unknown Lands**, completely unaware of the terrain and the rules it operates by. Part 2 of the story is largely about how he learns to navigate this new world.

Along the way, he encounters **Tests** of his abilities. He meets other characters. Friendly ones can become **Allies**, and unfriendly ones are **Enemies** that function as **Threshold Guardians**. The combined forces that oppose the hero are collectively known as **The Shadow**.

**‘The Shadow’** is the blanket term that represents all of the bad forces that try to prevent the hero from reaching his goal. It’s the mirror image of everything that the hero fights for. Like the hero, the shadow has an external goal, an internal goal, and principles it represents, and all three are in direct opposition to the hero’s stated goals and principles. Harry Potter is obviously opposed to Voldemort’s external goal of killing him. In *Kung Fu Panda*, the villain Tai Lung’s principles are a stark contrast to Po’s essential goodness, and why he wasn’t named the Dragon Warrior.

Just as the hero represents the best in ourselves, the shadow is a collection of all our worst thoughts and impulses. We all have bad thoughts; we become good people by noticing these things in ourselves and not allowing those urges to dominate. **The Villain**, and other **Agents** of the shadow, never did that, and they are subject to their worst feelings. They represent who we could become if we allow the worst feelings to determine what we do and how we live.



Neil Patrick Harris plays the greedy Count Olaf in Netflix’s adaptation of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

# The Shadow

So that's the secret: it's called The Shadow because it's like the dark side of the hero himself - all the negative emotions that he rejects in himself are made real by agents of the shadow. In most stories, **The Villain** is usually the hero's main opponent, and the main expression of The Shadow. He is all of the **malevolence** in the story represented by a character.

**Malevolence:** noun

the state or quality of being malevolent; wishing or doing evil to others; ill-willed; malicious.

*The family could feel the malevolence from the evil spirits haunting the house.*

While a hero is on a journey with an internal goal - a quest to change themselves for the better - the villain generally doesn't question himself or his motives. He knows what he wants and is immune to criticism, unwilling to change.

But while most stories will have characters that oppose the hero, whom we refer to as **Agents of the Shadow**, not all stories have one single villain.

In many stories, especially in more recent Disney movies, the stories have no true villain. Instead, many heroes fight against an **evil force**, not a character. Moana takes the journey to cure the environmental collapse her island is suffering; even in the final showdown, we discover that the monster trying to destroy Moana isn't really what we think it is. *Raya and the Last Dragon* has many agents of the shadow, especially Virana, but the true evil is the Druun, mindless puffs of smoke that plague the land, destroying lives with no thought or agenda. Keep this in mind throughout the book, as we refer to villains; sometimes the hero instead has to overcome another kind of obstacle instead.

In stories that do have a villain, it's possible that the villain personally opposes the hero at each threshold, but it's more likely he has henchmen - **Enemies** of the hero - to do his bidding. Often, the hero and the villain don't even meet until their final showdown, but the villain's presence must be made known through dialogue or the obstacles his underlings place in the hero's way.

# The Shadow



When watching a movie or reading a story, think about *why* characters act the way they do. Regarding the villain, is he the way he is because of something he *has*, such as unconstrained ambition and greed, or something he *lacks*, like empathy for others or an understanding of the common good?



Sometimes villains act the way they do not because of an evil motive, but because of normal feelings of fear. Think of Harry Potter's archenemy Lord Voldemort. By the end of the series, we've become aware that he does everything he does with a goal of living forever.

It's normal to be afraid of death, and dying is Voldemort's biggest fear. That's a feeling a lot of people have in common, but would we go to the extreme lengths he would - killing people, terrorizing both his enemies and allies - to ensure everlasting life?

## Agents of the Shadow - Virana in *Raya and the Last Dragon*



Since we examined the hero of Raya, looking at one of the movie's Agents of the Shadow allows us to contrast the two. Some may think of Raya's main rival Namaari as the villain. But Namaari has reservations about many of the actions that she's ordered to take.

In truth, Namaari's mother Virana, while not the villain, is the true expression of The Shadow. She is untrusting of others and limits her ambitions to protecting her own people, even at the expense of all others. Early in the movie, she attempts to steal the one magic gem that protects people from the evil of the Druun, shattering it in the process.

Years later, she's unchanged, and she wants to pass her selfishness and suspicion onto her daughter Namaari. They no longer have any hope for the wellbeing of the land due to the absence of their dragon protectors. Virana sends Namaari on a mission to steal the remaining pieces of a protective gem for their homeland of Fang, and only Fang.





# The Shadow

However, while on the mission, Namaari actually encounters Sisu, the dragon of the title, in person. She returns to her mother to report.

Namaari: Mother, you won't believe what I saw!

Virana: You saw a dragon. The general informed me that you would be returning home without the gem pieces.

Namaari: It was Sisu! She can fix what we broke. She can bring everyone back!

Virana. And that's what scares me. When everyone comes back, who do you think they'll come for? You forget, the other lands blame us for what's happened.

Namaari: But we never meant for anyone to get hurt.

Virana: Yes, but if we had the dragon and the gem pieces, we would be forgiven. We would save the world, but more importantly, our people would remain safe.

Namaari: But Raya isn't just going to give Sisu to us.

Virana: We're not going to give her a choice.

Namaari: What are you going to do?

Virana: That's no longer your concern my love. You've done enough.

*(Written by Qui Nguyen and Adele Lim)*

Virana should be overjoyed about the existence of a living dragon, one that could save everyone from the destructive Druun and revive their loved ones who were lost. Rather, she can't see past her own selfish motives. Even the possibility of salvation isn't enough to get her to consider the greater good.

Regarding goals and principles, she opposes Raya directly:

- Her external goal to obtain the gem pieces to protect Fang puts her at odds with Raya, who wants to collect the gem pieces to save the entire world of Kumandra.
- Raya's internal goal is to overcome her own suspicion and lack of faith, and those qualities are exactly what drives Virana.

- Virana no longer believes in the ideals of **unity** and universal friendship that Raya fights for, and her mistrust of others is why she keeps fighting for **disunity**.

Virana is an agent of the shadow because she fights for *herself*, not for principle.

**unity:** noun

the condition of many acting as one.

*The unity of the team is what won the game.*

**disunity:** noun

lack of unity; dissension.

- Since the villain is someone who can't change and doesn't even consider it, what does that tell you about the value of self-reflection and consideration?
- Try to look at the events of stories from the villain's perspective sometimes. Remember, each character is the hero in their own story. They see our hero as their villain. When you see things through their eyes, ask yourself:
  - How did they come to see things the way they do? Does their experience excuse their behavior? In the X-Men movie series, the main villain, Magneto, has been scarred by his experiences as a young boy in Nazi Concentration Camps, and has lost faith in all of humanity as a result.
  - Could a villain actually be right about some things? From a reader's perspective, a villain becomes more believable if they have some ideas that we can understand, even if we don't agree.
  - Writers and filmmakers do a lot to ensure that you feel about characters the way they want you to feel about them, but don't surrender your thoughts and feelings. Determine for yourself how you feel about characters - it's your choice. I have seen poorly written movies where, halfway through the movie, I realized that the bad guy was right. In spite of the minor chords and sinister framing the filmmakers used to make me hate him, I refused to feel about the so-called villain what they wanted me to. Use your own ideals and principles to guide you.

## Tests

For the rest of the story, the hero encounters **Tests**. Are they tests like the ones you take at school? Well, they're usually more active than sitting at a desk and writing, but they *are* similar in that they're both difficult tasks that our hero must complete before being allowed to move on in the story (or to the next grade).

We've already discussed her first test - the First Threshold. That was a clue as to the kinds of hardships that await her later in the story. At this point, the tests are not as deadly serious as the ones she'll face later, but they can't be ignored either. All of the tests culminate in one big conflict at the end, called **The Showdown**.

Not all tests are the same; there are many different kinds, though a clever writer can always invent new ones.

- **Direct Confrontation:** agents of the shadow, whether the villain or his henchmen, appear and attack the hero and her friends directly. This is the most common test, and one that most heroes will encounter at some point. Each episode of Ultraman forces him to fight yet another monster or alien bent on Earth's destruction, to cite one example.
- **Traps and Deception:** sometimes the shadow will set traps for the hero, or deceive her in some way. In Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Lord Voldemort fools Harry into thinking that his godfather Sirius is in danger, luring him into a trap.
- **The Race:** the hero could be running to get ahold of some object or achieve some goal before the villain does. In Avengers: Endgame, the team of heroes are in a race against the evil Thanos to get all of the Infinity Stones, which he needs to further his plan of killing half of everything that lives.
- **A Test of Worthiness:** the hero might be forced to prove herself in some way. In the traditional King Arthur legend, the young Arthur, yet to be king, proves to be worthy of the crown by removing a sword from the stone it's been lodged in for years. A more recent example can be found in the graphic novel Amulet, where Emily and her 'frenemy' Prince Trellis are forced to solve a puzzle to grant them access to the flying city of Cielis.
- **The Ticking Clock:** there could be a time limit for the hero to achieve some goal, or a specified period for which he has to survive. In the Pixar movie Coco, the young hero Miguel must

## Allies and Enemies

get his family's blessing before sunrise to avoid being stuck in the Land of the Dead forever.

- **Environmental Obstacles:** the hero might be forced to traverse dangerous ground, such as mountains, deserts, or bodies of water that could slow or halt her progress. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, the inability of Frodo and his friends to successfully cross a treacherous mountain range forces them to pass through the monster-infested Mines of Moria. (Note that when discussing environmental obstacles, in most cases, dangerous wild animals also fall into this category, such as in *Frozen*, when Anna is attacked by wolves on the mountain.)

Storytellers are limited only by their imaginations. Really, a writer's first job is make life hellishly difficult for the hero, and the more ways he can do that, the better the story.

- Outside of school, have you had tests or ordeals in your life? What kind of test was it? Was it like one of the ones we discussed? How did you overcome it?
- How did it change you? How did it change your life?
- What tests or ordeals do you think you'll need to endure to get where you want to be in life? It could be like a test in school or university, such as medical school or a professional certification, or something more physically rigorous, like basic training in the army. Think about it now, and you can start preparing for it.

## Allies and Enemies

On the journey, the hero can expect to meet other people. Some of them may be neutral, but the most active characters will be on one side or the other - for or against the hero. These characters are **Allies** and **Enemies**.

### Allies

**Allies** (singular: ally) have goals or beliefs that are aligned with the hero's. They usually have the same external goal as the hero, or they believe in the same principles, though they might also help solely out of self-interest.

When do we meet them? Often allies are present early in the story,



# Allies and Enemies

before the hero's call to adventure, but on a real journey, it's not unusual to meet them at different points along the way. They could either help the hero at one threshold and then bid him farewell when the hero moves on, or, more commonly, they could join the hero on his quest and stick with him until the end.

We've already discussed the first and most important ally in the person of the Mentor. Just like the mentor, allies can provide the hero with a great deal of help, but it must be the hero alone who achieves victory in the end (I sense you're seeing a pattern here).

Allies are great for *exposition*, the way a writer or filmmaker explains things in the story. Thoughts and ideas that a character might not usually say aloud could be expressed in dialogue, when explaining things to other characters. If the hero is alone, we might not ever hear what he's thinking, especially in movies and tv shows.

I expect that by now you've already thought of a few allies to the hero in some of your favorite stories. Some examples:

- Ron and Hermione are, obviously, Harry Potter's closest allies, and we meet them early in the first book. They quickly become friends, and once Harry receives the call, there was no question that they would join him on his adventure. These two accompany Harry on his entire journey, but other characters who help him along the way include an assorted collection of teachers, fellow students, and old friends of his father.
- Raya meets her allies having already answered the call in *Raya and the Last Dragon*. It's common for allies to possess particular skills the hero doesn't in order to make a team with a variety of talents. Among Raya's allies, Tong is the giant strongman, the baby Little Noi is a master thief, and Boun has the boat that's their primary home and mode of transportation.



## Allies and Enemies

### The Other Spider-beings in *Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse*



After Miles Morales discovers his powers, he's visited from Spider-beings from other dimensions (Spider-beings? I can't call them Spider-Men; not all of them are men, and they include a robot and a pig).

The original Spider-Man, Peter Parker, is the Mentor, giving Miles advice on how to proceed and master his skills. The others leave the teaching to Peter, but they join Miles on his journey to repair the cracks in the walls separating their dimensions so they can all return to their worlds. They fight together for the same goal and protect one another, making them the **allies**.

*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse*, like most superhero stories, follows the rules of the **Origin Story**, in that the first movie or book is really just a setup for his future adventures, which are **episodic** in nature. We'll cover Origin Stories later in the book.

#### **episodic:** adjective

An *episode* is one event in a series of stories; *episodic* is the adjective to express that the story you're experiencing is just one among many.

*The movie is filled with episodic adventures in which the hero faces deadly perils at every turn.*

# Allies and Enemies

## Enemies

**Enemies** are the dark counterparts to the allies. Their function is as Threshold Guardians, to stop the hero from advancing on the journey.

### Enemies

Anyone who gets in the hero's way is classified as an enemy. Even if they're unaligned with the villain, as long as they try to prevent the hero from doing something good, they are **Agents of the Shadow**.

Almost everything we say about the hero's relationship with his allies is also true of the villain's relationship with his underlings, but in reverse:

- They can help the villain to defeat our hero, but it must ultimately be the villain who will oppose our hero in the final conflict.
- The enemies are useful to the writer to allow the villain to verbalize his thoughts and feelings, but there really isn't any discussion of ethics or conscience; the villain has no interest in being good.
- While the hero and his allies rely on the bonds of friendship and shared purpose to keep them together, oftentimes the villain relies on intimidation and a desire for domination to unite them.

While the hero is in Unknown Lands, the villain and his crew are right at home here. This gives them an advantage over the hero - they are born fighters on their home turf.

In movies and stories about wars or some other big fight, the opponent's soldiers are enemies, such as the stormtroopers in the *Star Wars* movies or the orcs in *Lord of the Rings*. If the villain is a kind of gangster, the members of his gang are the enemies.

- In Ultraman, the various monsters and aliens who invade Earth are the enemies, with Ultraman being a kind of supernatural cop to protect the citizens of Tokyo.
- In the Lord of the Rings books and movies, the great villain is Sauron, and he's aided by the rotten wizard Saruman, the nine evil riders referred to as the Nazgûl, and legions of monsters called orcs.

### The Elves of Amulet

In the graphic novel series *Amulet*, Emily Hayes and her brother Naivin are trapped in a secret world called Alledia, and find themselves in a **dystopia** ruled by an evil Elf King. The story keeps you guessing as to who the true villain is, and whether the King is actually in control.

Nonetheless, the being that inhabits the Elf throne is a cruel oppressor, obsessed with finding Emily and eliminating all threats to his reign. He uses his armies further his goals, and Emily has to learn how to use her newfound magical abilities to fight her **Enemies**, the Elves of Alledia.

- For most of us, the idea of an enemy is really nonexistent. Living your life in a way that's productive and not in search of conflict should eliminate the idea of a true enemy. You may have rivals in some things, though - in sports, for instance, or in a debate club.
- If you do have a so-called enemy, why are the two of you opposed?
  - What is the nature of your conflict, and can it be resolved? Is it because you both want the same thing, or could it be a conflict of opposing ideals and principle? Could it be a simple misunderstanding? Think of ways to reduce the amount of conflict in your life, and you'll be a lot happier.

## The Midpoint

The hero is now far from home, and crossed the First Threshold, the one that resulted in him taking the journey. He's encountered enemies and passed obstacles that were threats to him and his allies. Now it's time for the next big test: the **Second Threshold**.

The Second Threshold happens around the middle of a movie or book, which is why screenwriters call it the **midpoint**. A story can't take too much time between exciting events or we, the readers or viewers, will get bored. That's why this particular moment happens halfway between the First Threshold and the next one.



# The Midpoint

Most of these events have specific purposes. The First Threshold is the hero's first experience leaving his Ordinary World, and convinces him of both the necessity and danger of the mission he's undertaking. Later, we'll learn about **The Entrance to the Villain's Lair**, which is the hero's final push before the final confrontation with the villain or the ultimate evil force.

So what's the purpose of this, the Second Threshold? That's a tricky question, writers use this moment for a lot of different purposes. Remember the Journey is a *guide*, not a formula; not every story has to do the same thing. But it's important to keep pressuring the hero so he continues moving forward. A hero that stops moving results in a story that stops being fun. So the midpoint has to increase the pressure on the hero; every threshold raises the stakes somehow. Here are some of the ways that storytellers have used this event:

- **Surprise and Reassessment.** New information comes to light, perhaps something shocking that changes the whole game. The hero has to reconsider the entire journey; what his goals are, how he goes about achieving them, who to trust.
- **Fake Victory.** The hero has reason to believe that he may have won already, and that the end of his journey is at hand, only to have victory snatched from him, and it seems that he's further from his goals than ever. In *Coco*, Miguel is about to receive the blessing from his great-grandmother that will send him back to his family in the living world, only to have his dreams crushed when she adds the condition that he abandon his dream of becoming a musician. Miguel can't accept her demand, and he has to figure out another way to return home.
- **Fake Defeat.** The inverse of Fake Victory, the hero thinks he's failed, only for something to emerge that gives him a ray of hope that allows him to continue. In *Mulan*, the hero character had been dressing as a man to defend her country; she's revealed as a woman at the midpoint. She's expelled from her unit, in spite of all her heroic deeds. Mulan returns to the conflict when she witnesses the enemy army approaching the capital, and feels duty-bound to warn her old commander.
- **A New Approach.** He hasn't been defeated yet, but it's clear that whatever he's doing won't work. He and his team stop to re-evaluate their approach and consider a new way forward.
- **Reconfiguration of the Team.** Sometimes a character, or characters, will reconsider their goals and how to achieve them



# Disappearance of the Mentor

and create new alliances. In *Moana*, the demigod Maui has been selfish, refusing to assist Moana in her quest to heal the world. But he finally becomes an ally when she agrees to help him recover his fish hook, the item that magically allows him to transform into different creatures.

Regardless of what happens, the Second Threshold changes the story in a fundamental way. The hero has a new outlook on his mission, and so should we.

## Disappearance of the Mentor

The journey is about testing the hero and forcing him to realize his potential. One condition of growth is that we stop relying on our teachers and parents and learn to stand on our own. In order for the hero to take the final step in his growth, the Mentor has to disappear. The hero must now rely on what he's learned, and only utilize his own skills and abilities to defeat evil.

This part is called the “Disappearance of the Mentor”, and why it happens varies from story to story. Usually the mentor dies, but he doesn't have to. Also, the mentor's disappearance can happen at many different times in the story; in *Moana*, the mentor character of Gramma Tala dies very early in the story (though she later returns as a spirit). In *Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse*, the mentor character of Peter leaves just as Miles faces his final test, The Showdown.

The important thing is that he or she is absent when the hero faces the villain in a final conflict. The Mentor's disappearance is a major wake-up call for the hero; perhaps he had been counting on the support of his teacher for the rest of the journey, but now he knows that he's on his own.

Some of the ways that the mentor leaves include:

- **Death.** The mentors die in stories like *Raya and the Last Dragon* and *Amulet*. This is the most common way of removing the mentor character, as it has the added advantage of illustrating the grave consequences of failure. Consider not just one book, but the whole Harry Potter saga: Dumbledore is killed in the second-to-last book, leaving Harry to complete his mission and face Voldemort alone, as he must.

# Disappearance of the Mentor

- **Sacrifice.** Sometimes the mentor's death is actually a sacrifice, when they purposely surrender themselves. Obi-Wan in *Star Wars*, Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*, and Bing Bong in *Inside Out* are all mentors who sacrifice themselves to save the hero or preserve the mission.
- **Abduction or Imprisonment.** The agents of the shadow might not be able to catch the hero, but they'll do whatever they can to weaken him. If they can trap his teacher, who's to say that he's learned enough already to succeed? In *The Matrix*, Morpheus is captured by the Agents when he sacrifices himself to save Neo. Neo takes it upon himself to rescue Morpheus, realizing his destiny of becoming 'The One' who can save humanity in the process.
- **Distraction.** The Mentor is fooled into abandoning the hero at a crucial time, realizing too late that it was a ploy by the shadow to remove him from the picture. Though he eventually dies, in the first book Dumbledore is called away on an urgent mission, leaving Harry and his friends to save the day by themselves.

## Bing Bong of *Inside Out*

The ingenious plot of *Inside Out* takes place inside the mind of a young girl named Riley, and makes characters out of all her emotions. The hero Joy meets Bing Bong, an imaginary friend of Riley's from her early childhood. He's been lingering in her mind, though she hasn't really thought of him in a long time.

Recruiting Bing Bong to help her on the journey, Bing Bong realizes that in order for Joy to succeed, he has to sacrifice himself not only to death, but to being forever forgotten by Riley. He does what the mentor must do, and in helping Joy to succeed, he passes from all memory.



Now that the mentor is out of the picture, the hero takes the final steps forward. Though he may still have the support of friends and allies, he's lost the guidance and strength of his mentor at a crucial moment. He has no choice but to forge ahead to the most dangerous land, the home of the shadow, alone.



# Actions and Reactions

- Can you think of a time your mom or dad helped you with something that you later could do by yourself? How did you feel before you did it by yourself the first time? How did you feel after you did it?
- Your life at school is about preparing you to stand on your own someday. That moment might be the most important one of the hero's journey, and one of yours as well. What are you doing to prepare for that moment, and to design the life that you want when that time comes for you?

## Actions and Reactions

This book centers itself around the *events* of the story. However, the main characters aren't **passive** observers to these occurrences; rather, they're **active** participants in how things unfold. Their actions affect the story directly and determine the path it takes; how their opponents react changes the situation again. In short, the story is a chain of events that the main characters make happen.

In this way, an adventure can be like a board game, and each scene in a movie, or chapter in a book, is like each player's turn. Taking into account what they know and what the possible outcomes are for each move, the players act and then wait for their opponent's reaction. The game begins with the **Inciting Incident**.

From then on, the actions of his opponent motivate the next move our hero makes, whose response then motivates the villain's next decision.

Stories are designed so that everything the main characters do, including allies and enemies, affects the path of the story, and determines who wins the prize that hangs in the balance. The hero's decisions can also be affected by environmental factors, as we've mentioned, such as a dangerous place or wild animals. These are Threshold Guardians, whether they're characters, terrain, or wild animals, and our hero has to be active in his responses to the forces that oppose him.

To help understand how it works, let's consider the first book in *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* titled *The Bad*

# Actions and Reactions

*Beginning.* The Inciting Incident is when the parents of the three Beaudelaire children are killed (more orphans). After a period of adjustment, they're placed in the care of the evil Count Olaf, who schemes to seize their inheritance. From then on, each move of the children is made to foil the plans of Count Olaf, who then responds in turn:

- Count Olaf concocts a plan to steal their money. An actor, he orders Violet, the oldest child, to act in a play with him where the two characters are to be married.
- Klaus, the middle child, figures out Olaf's plan - the marriage in the play will be officiated by an actual judge, making it an actual wedding, the ceremony an actual marriage, Count Olaf her actual husband, thus giving him control of the children's inheritance. He tells Count Olaf, hoping that it will cause him to abandon the plan.
- Instead of giving up, Count Olaf pivots: instead of trying to fool the children, he turns to coercion. He kidnaps Sunny, the youngest child, and tells Violet that she and Klaus must cooperate, or Sunny will die.
- Violet attempts to rescue her little sister, but is captured by one of Olaf's henchmen.
- The children are then locked up in a room to keep them from attempting any further rescues until the night of the play. Sunny is kept hostage in order to maintain his control over the other two children.
- During the play, it appears that Count Olaf's plan has worked - he declares victory and orders Sunny freed.
- Violet, however, had figured out a legal loophole that nullified the ceremony, and she reveals it after Sunny is freed from the clutches of Count Olaf and his henchmen.
- Before fleeing, Olaf vows to Violet that he will someday succeed in getting ahold of the children's fortune. The first book sets up the series as an origin story; we'll discuss those later.

Note how each step in the story is a reaction to the previous action by their opponents. Count Olaf schemes: Violet or Klaus attempt to foil his plot: he reacts accordingly. The children and Count Olaf are actively making things happen in the story; the events are a result of their actions.

Secondary characters like allies, enemies, and incidental

# Preparation for the Final Approach

characters can be passive, but not our hero or agents of the shadow - they're in a fight with too much at stake.

## Preparation for the Final Approach

Though she may still have friends, the hero is truly alone in a larger sense, at a time when she realizes that there's no other choice but to go forth into the home of the Shadow, the **Villain's Lair**. This is where they have to go to defeat evil.

The Disappearance of the Mentor has shown our hero that the consequences of her journey are larger than she ever guessed; nothing less than life and death, not only for her and her friends, but for the world as she knows it. If she fails, everyone she loves will suffer as a result.

Considering the stakes, our hero knows that she can't quit; there's no choice but to go to the heart of evil to defeat it. For the first time, she realizes how much she's been relying on her mentor to guide her; now her fear comes from the fact that she no longer has the support of her guide and teacher, and she is on her own.

She may or may not be completely alone; she could still be accompanied by friends and allies at this point. If she is, her friends are only the most loyal ones, the truest ones. Now is the time for a pause and reflection before they make the final push into the Villain's Lair. The writer could use this time for several practical or dramatic purposes:

- The hero and her friends could take a moment to discuss their situation and summarize everything they know, both for themselves and for the reader / viewer. They could talk about:
  - Where they have been and what they've learned,
  - What could lie on the road ahead (they don't know for sure), and a strategy for winning, though that seems unlikely now,
  - The tools they have, and what else they could rely on.
- The heroes may use this moment, the most serious and dramatic one yet on their journey, to confess their affection for one another, and their appreciation of each other's help. If some characters have been bickering up until now (common with two characters who are actually in love), now's the time for them to bury the hatchet.



# The Final Threshold

In truth, they're facing a real possibility of dying. These are the times - the anticipation of mortal danger - when people drop the masks they've been wearing and stop pretending. These are the moments when people are the most honest they can be, considering that they may not be around to say these things afterwards.

## The Final Threshold

In this, the darkest moment for our hero, her mentor is gone and defeat seems inevitable. Yet she knows she must continue and move on to the Final Threshold, the last obstacle before her final showdown with the villain himself.

This last conflict is essentially the same as her other battles, but with higher stakes. As is the case with the other thresholds, she could be having one last fight with some of the villain's minions, underlings of the Shadow, or she may have to traverse one last environmental obstacle.

If it's a fight she engages in, she could either win it to move on, or she's defeated and captured, ready to be presented to the Villain as a prize by his agents.

There's another possibility; the hero is simply allowed to pass the final threshold with no resistance for some reason. This can happen when the Villain believes that victory is assured, or when he no longer trusts his own allies to defeat the hero, deciding to handle it himself.

### **Persevere:** verb

to continue steadfastly in a task or course of action or hold steadfastly to a belief or commitment, esp. when met with opposition or difficulties; persist.

*The journalist was threatened several times, but he persevered in telling the truth.*

In the final Harry Potter book and movie, Lord Voldemort engages in a fierce battle at Hogwarts. Having inflicted great damage he believes, correctly, that Harry would surrender himself in order to spare his friends. Harry goes willingly, and none of Voldemort's supporters do anything to stop him.

At this point, the overriding feeling in most stories is one of dread, but the hero **perseveres** for honor and principle.

# The Final Threshold

- What principles must be at stake to motivate you to move forward into danger?
- What friends and allies in your life would you trust to accompany you to your final showdown with evil?
- This is the moment when friends and allies are truly honest with one another, dropping their masks, so to speak. What things are unsaid between you and the people you love? Should you tell them these things now?





## Part 3: The Villain's Lair

Now we're faced with the ultimate stakes - life and death, not only for the hero and his friends, but for the world at large, and for the principles they fight for. The hero walks into the homeland of the Shadow, where the Villain has a decided advantage. He no longer has the guidance of the mentor, so he must hope that he's learned enough to succeed on his own, though he's hardly sure of winning. In fact, he might be certain of the opposite: defeat, yet he moves forward anyway, because honor demands it. He is committed to the success of the journey, even if it means sacrificing everything, including his life.

## Separation

In the end, the hero should face the the final test alone. We need to see how he's grown, what he's learned, and how capable he's become. What's more, the hero needs to make the hardest decision, when he chooses to sacrifice himself for the principle he's fighting for. In order to do this, he often has to be separated from his friends and allies.

This can happen in a number of ways. In the first Harry Potter book (and movie), Harry and his allies Ron and Hermione need to solve a series of puzzles in order to prevent the villain from seizing the Sorcerer's Stone, an object of immense power. In the process, Ron is knocked out cold; Hermione must stay behind to care for him, and Harry continues on.

In *Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse*, many of the spider-beings are stuck in Miles' universe; someone has to stay behind to battle the big baddie so that the others can make it home. Since Miles hasn't yet proven himself, none of the others have confidence in him to win such a fight. The original Spider-man, Peter Parker, volunteers to stay behind, but Miles insists that he's ready. His friends and allies make the jump into their individual dimensions, leaving Miles behind to face the giant Kingpin by himself.



## The Shapeshifter

Now that he's alone, the hero is ready for his final **Showdown**. The bad guy may not be alone, but the hero must be.

Before we address that, let's meet one more character: the **Shapeshifter**.

### The Shapeshifter

Often at this point of the story, generally near the end, a character you thought was one thing turns out to be something different. As we head into the final showdown, we discover that some characters have either been wearing masks, or have had a change of heart. But now, as the final resolution is near, everyone must either remove those masks or finally decide where they stand.

The shapeshifter can take different forms:

- Someone you thought to be an ally who turns out to be either an agent of the shadow or the villain himself. Someone like this is good to provide one final challenge if things are going too easily. This character puts yet another obstacle in the path of our hero.
  - In *Frozen*, we believe the character of Hans to be heroic, and the true love of Anna. But when the crucial moment arrives, he betrays the sisters, and acts on his true motive when he attempts to usurp the throne of Arendelle.
- The exact opposite: an agent of the shadow who turns out to be an undercover ally who assists the hero at an opportune time. This character is a good way to give the hero a second life if all is hopeless.
  - Throughout the book series, Severus Snape has an adversarial relationship with Harry and his friends; they are certain that he's an ally of the evil Lord Voldemort. This is confirmed, they think, when Snape kills Professor Dumbledore, Harry's mentor. However, at his moment of death, Snape is revealed as Harry's greatest ally, when through a memory, he shows Harry the path to defeating Voldemort.
- A double agent, a character who has been working in his own self-interest but finally chooses a side at the end. Usually, they side with the hero. With characters like these, it's a good way to illustrate the moral center of the story. If the reader or viewer hasn't been sure about what they should feel, let the guy who discovered morality for himself show you how he came to believe in

# The Shapeshifter

goodness.

- Some factor might come into play that simply causes a character to switch sides for some reason.
  - In *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse*, the villain's main henchman is a masked baddie nicknamed The Prowler, who has orders to capture and kill the young Spider-Man. When the man who wears the mask realizes that his target is actually his nephew Miles, he declines to follow through on his orders and is killed as a result.
- A character who hasn't been certain of where they stand themselves; they may have been wavering between two separate beliefs throughout the story. Now is the time they must decide and reveal their true nature, even to themselves.
  - In the Lord of the Rings saga, the character of Gollum struggles with himself in his desire to reacquire the ring of power. While it seems that he actually succeeds in conquering his need, in the end he surrenders to it and becomes Frodo's main rival in the quest to possess the ring.
  - Or consider someone else who changes in the opposite direction: in the Amulet series of graphic novels, Prince Trellis is the son of the Elf King, the Villain. He appears at first to be Emily's enemy, attempting to kidnap the girl to force her to use the amulet's powers for his own ends. But as we proceed through the story, we see Trellis in contrast to his father and other ruthless elves, and we come to understand that Trellis is a decent person relative to the environment in which he was raised. Trellis is a good example of a character we understand is on their own journey, one towards decency and heroism.

The dramatic purpose of the shapeshifter is to either provide a shock at a desperate moment, or to introduce an air of mystery throughout the story. But by now, we know who they are and what they really want, and their presence must be accounted for by the hero.

Now the hero knows where all the pieces on the board are, and with the next step he takes, he'll be facing the villain in the final **Showdown**.

- What skills, talents, and tools have you acquired that you can use if you find yourself in a showdown with evil? Have you yet made yourself into the hero that can overcome obstacles and achieve your goals?





## Superhero Origin Stories

When following the adventures of superheroes, usually the first show / movie / comic is known as the **Origin Story**. This tells us how the superhero gained his powers and how he came to believe what he believes. The origin story usually follows the hero's journey model this book covers, but with a twist.

Superhero comics and movies are usually episodic, meaning that they're intended to just be the first of many stories. The origin story's purpose is to set up the character for further adventures. The hero is left with a **continuing mission** at the end, meaning he has just begun.

There are many variations of the origin story, but since it's an introduction to the character, there are a few things it has to address:

- **Who the character was before he obtained his powers.** This is the hero's Ordinary World; he's just like you and me, with the same goals and concerns in a normal life.
- **How he obtained his powers.** Sometimes the superhero has always been super, but often an event bestowed upon him some super-abilities, such as flight or super-strength. This is the Inciting Incident.
  - Daredevil was a normal kid but an industrial accident heightened his senses to an incredible degree.
  - Captain America was the subject of an advanced scientific experiment to create a super soldier to fight evil.
  - The Flash's powers were the result of some advanced chemistry and a stray lightning bolt.
  - Other heroes, such as Superman, were born with their powers; their Inciting Incident covers how they learned about their special birthright.
- **The struggle to master his powers.** Just as we must learn to walk, talk, and read, the hero must practice and experiment in order to learn about what he can do, and the extent of his new

# Superhero Origin Stories

abilities. In a movie, this is usually accompanied by scenes of him trying and failing, and ultimately learning how to do the new things that only he can do.

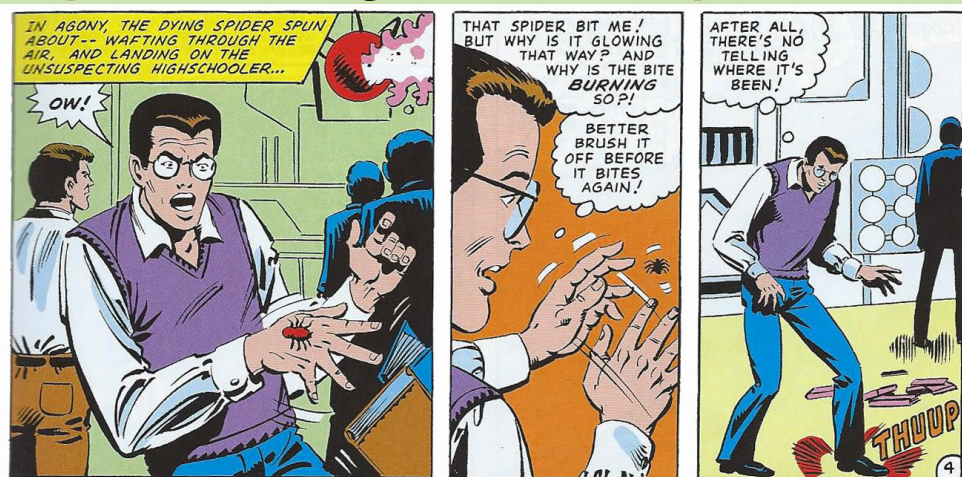
- **The Principle.** In the course of his initial adventure, the new superhero may have been faced with a choice, one that forced him to determine what he really believes and how he should proceed to use his powers. This is the Principle that all heroes fight for, but in the case of superheroes, it's usually an ideal that leads to . . .
- **The Mission.** In most hero stories, the end of the story results in victory and a new, peaceful life for our hero and his friends. Not so with the superhero. The Principle that he has come to believe in results in a lifelong mission. Usually it's something like a desire to fight crime or keep the world safe from evil. Since crime and evil will always exist, his mission is open-ended, and the superhero will spend the rest of his life fighting for this principle. This is how an origin story sets up the superhero for a lifetime of episodes, issues, and sequels.

The Origin Story is structured as a normal hero's journey. In their first adventure, the superhero is **dynamic**: they change throughout the story, learning about themselves and determining what they believe. But once the origin story has sent them on their way, they become **static**: they have arrived at who they'll be for the remainder of the series, and have come to represent the principle they fight for. In this way, the superhero has much in common with serialized characters from other types of adventure fiction, like James Bond or Indiana Jones.



# Superhero Origin Stories

## Superhero Origin Stories: Spider-Man



When examining the original Spider-Man, Peter Parker, we find that his origin story is pretty typical. In his **Ordinary World**, Peter is a normal student, gifted at science and tormented by high school bullies.

In the course of his studies, he attends a research experiment and is bitten by a radioactive spider, giving him his super abilities. This is his **Inciting Incident**.

Upon discovering his newfound abilities, he works at mastering them and initially uses them simply to make some extra cash. He enters wrestling contests and uses his super-strength and agility to defeat much larger opponents.

One night, he witnesses a robbery, and though he could have easily apprehended the robber, he declines to do so; it's none of his business. Though he doesn't know it yet, this was Peter's **Call to Adventure**.

Upon returning home, he discovers that his uncle has been killed. Peter captures the killer, only to discover that it's the same robber that he ignored before. Thus he arrives at the **Principle** that will guide him forever: "With great power comes great responsibility." He has been given his lifelong mission.

# The Showdown

Spider-Man uses his superpowers to fight crime. What talents and skills do you have, and what are the goals you'll use those talents to achieve? Just as stories use epic events as stand-ins for the obstacles we face in real life, superhero comics and movies use special powers as stand-ins for the things that we can do, and their ambitious missions represent the goals we set in our own lives.

- Take stock of the skills you have now, how can you use them to achieve your goals?
- Do you have a continuing mission, a lifelong quest to make the world a better place?
- What are your goals? What skills will you need to get there? Better get to work on developing those skills.

## The Showdown

At last it's here: the hero faces his final test against the shadow, a fight with a villain or an evil force. Perhaps it's the first time he's encountered this challenge, perhaps not, but it's definitely the last time. A lot depends on this, nothing less than the future of the world.

This is the final **Showdown**. The hero is likely (though not always) alone, having lost or been separated from his mentor and allies along the way. This is similar to fighting the "big boss" in a video game; it's the final challenge. Your character has defeated all the **incremental** challenges and now it's time to confront the being or force that represents the most potent example of everything he's been fighting in earlier levels.

**Incremental:** adjective

one of several successive increases or movements forward.

*The weight is increased in precise increments.*

**Consequence:** noun

that which follows; result.

*Her stomach pain was a consequence of eating too much.*

The hero goes willingly into battle; he's not forced to fight against his will. He knows that this is a task he has to face, whatever the **consequences**. This is the climax of the story, the most exciting part. A good climax has the potential for victory, defeat, complete destruction, or complete salvation. Any of these outcomes are possible.

The hero is now equipped with all of the tools he's acquired and everything he's learned. He's a newer, much more capable person than who he was in the Ordinary World. He has become the best version of himself, and he'll be put to the test in this last confrontation with evil.

Remember, during the fight, it's not only the hero that gets tested; his principles are also at stake. The showdown, more than a fight between characters, is really a fight between two different sets of values: those of the hero and of his adversary. Even if the hero doesn't win, his principles must. That's where the **sacrifice** comes in.

## The Sacrifice

In many stories, during the showdown, the hero sees a path to victory for his principles, but not for himself. At this moment, he decides to risk death and sacrifice himself for the greater good. This is where the hero truly separates himself from agents of the shadow; a villain would never even consider sacrificing himself for his ideals; his only goal is personal victory. The hero is simply a better person with better beliefs. He fights for principle; agents of the shadow only fight for themselves.

Remember that the conflict between the hero and the shadow happens on three levels. To recap, remember the **Three Goals**:

- There's an **External Goal**, a strategic objective that he must reach in order to achieve victory over The Shadow (the evil forces that oppose him).
- There's also the **Internal Goal**, something inside of him that he needs to fix.
- Related to both is the **Principle**, the ideals and beliefs that he's really fighting for.

In most stories, winning means achieving all three goals. Those goals are all present in the showdown. Let's consider some of the stories we've been discussing and how the final fight illustrates the hero's three goals, and how the sacrifice is what really leads to the success of the journey.

### Raya and the Last Dragon

Earlier in the chapter on the Hero, we discussed the three goals for Raya. In the final showdown, all of the world's water



# The Sacrifice

disappears, allowing the Druun (the evil force that plagues the land) to attack everywhere with nothing to stop them. Raya realizes that it's the mistrust between people that allows it to occur.

- The **external goal** is to defeat the Druun and reunite the land; they need the restored dragon gem to do this, but the individuals who hold the pieces don't trust one another, and it seems unlikely that they'll overcome it.
- Raya doesn't trust Namaari, her main rival throughout the story. Her personal cynicism about people was born in the moment Namaari and Chief Virana tried to seize the gem in the beginning of the movie, and it remains still. Like the people as a whole, Raya doesn't trust anyone. Overcoming that suspicion is her **internal goal**.
- The **principle** of trust and unity drives the whole showdown. If they learn to trust each other, victory is possible; without it, they're doomed.

Raya realizes the dream of her father and achieves all three goals with her **sacrifice**. Knowing that Namaari's distrust is too great for

The term "**to extend an olive branch**" means to make an offer of peace or reconciliation. This term has Biblical origins.

her to surrender her gem piece, Raya instead decides to be the one to **extend an olive branch**, and she gives Namaari the fragments that she has, fully knowing that she'll then be petrified by the Druun. By exhibiting trust in her main rival, Raya reestablishes trust among all the people of Kumandra, potentially uniting the land.

## Frozen

As we watch the showdown, things for the sisters are . . . not good. Elsa, convinced that she's responsible for everything bad happening in the world, is fleeing her kingdom of Arendelle, while Anna is being frozen from the inside, a condition that only an act of true love can cure.

- Anna's **external goal** is to convince her sister to return to Arendelle and free the town from the permanent winter that Elsa placed on it when she lost control of her powers.
- Her **internal goal** is to break down the barriers her sister keeps building between them and restore their relationship.
- The **principle** of sisterly love is at the heart of the story; the importance of it, and how destructive the lack of it can be.

# The Sacrifice

Hans, the opportunistic **conman**, is about to get everything he wants - if Anna dies, all he has to do is kill Elsa and the throne of Arendelle is his. Anna makes the ultimate **sacrifice** by putting herself between Hans and Elsa just at the moment when the ice consumes her, preventing him from killing her sister, an act of true love.

**Conman:** noun

a man who cheats or tricks someone by gaining their trust and persuading them to believe something that is not true.

## Harry Potter

Through seven books (and eight movies), Harry has evaded Voldemort's attempts to kill him and learned everything he could about how to defeat Voldemort.

- Simply put, Harry's **external goal** is to kill Voldemort and end the threat he poses to the freedom and well-being of everyone in the world.
- Harry has always been a good person, but his **internal goal** is to hone himself and his skills to perfection in order to complete his task; after all, Voldemort may be the most gifted sorcerer who ever lived.
- The competing **principles** are ones we regularly face on a large scale in our real world: the opposing ideals of peace and freedom versus the desire of some to dominate and control everyone and everything.

In the final showdown, Harry discovers that a piece of the Dark Lord lives inside of his body, and in order to truly defeat Voldemort, he has to **sacrifice** himself. The separation between the two enemies couldn't be clearer now: Harry gives himself willingly to death, while Voldemort's plan all along is to ensure he lives forever. Harry is courage personified, while the emotion that drives Voldemort is fear.

The sacrifice is when the main character fulfills his destiny and becomes the best version of himself; in giving himself up for principle, he has finally become truly heroic. But there's some good news: he doesn't die.

For different reasons that depend on the individual circumstances in each story, the hero survives. The important thing is that he was *willing* to die for the greater good, something the villain couldn't understand, and would never even consider.



# The Sacrifice

“I should have died — I didn’t defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!”

“And that,” said Dumbledore, “will, I think, have made all the difference.”

- From Harry Potter 7 - *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

The sacrifice has **purified** the hero: any doubts he ever had about the mission or about the principles he defends have been dispelled. He is whole, and fully committed to his rediscovered ideals. Now, he is ready to win.

As stated throughout the book, the hero needed to face the villain alone. But now that he’s made the sacrifice, it’s okay if one of his allies that he was separated from returns to assist him in the endgame. It’s still the hero who has to carry the burden of defeating evil, but he can have some help at this point.

This is a common way to restore an ally after they disappointed us by abandoning the hero earlier. In *Moana*, Maui left due to a lack of confidence in his own abilities and doubt in the possibility of mission success. But he returns in the nick of time, just as Moana realizes that the lava monster Te Ka is actually the goddess Te Fiti; she only needs Moana to restore her heart to return to her natural form. Maui provides assistance, but it’s still Moana who puts herself in mortal danger by approaching Te Ka to save the goddess.

This is almost exactly what happens in the favorite movie of my childhood, *Star Wars*. On the eve of the rebellion’s attack on the massive Death Star battle station, the hero Luke Skywalker is abandoned by his ally Han Solo. Like Maui, Han returns to help Luke in a moment of certain death, clearing the way for the young hero to destroy the Death Star.

## Victory!

The hero now faces down evil at no disadvantage. She has passed all of the tests and barriers that have been placed in front of her, she has learned all that the mentor and the world has taught her, and she is in full control of all the tools she has. She goes into battle fully prepared.



## Homecoming: A Hero's Welcome

Remember, the showdown is as much a battle between two principles as it is between two characters (or a character and an evil force). For this reason, the hero cannot **violate** her principles during the showdown. For instance, in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the hero Ang finally faces the Fire Lord, the ruthless power-mad maniac. During their final showdown, Ang has an opportunity to kill his enemy, but he refuses to, even understanding that the Fire Lord has brought death and destruction to the world. Ang's principles are peaceful; he fights reluctantly, and vengeance runs counter to his ideals. His behavior during the showdown is crucial in promoting the principles he fights for.

Ultimately, the hero defeats the shadow, and the world is saved (hooray!). She is reunited with her friends and allies, and sometimes even the mentor is reincarnated and rescued from death. Our hero has obtained the wisdom that could make her a mentor to a future hero someday (perhaps in a sequel), but for now, she gets to return home.

## Homecoming: A Hero's Welcome

In traditional mythology, the journey home was considered an equal to the other parts of the story (Ordinary World, Into the Unknown, Into the Villain's Lair). In modern storytelling, the journey home is usually shortened into its most important element, be it a hearty congratulations from the people of his hometown, a reunion with a loved one, or simply quiet reflection by the hero of the adventure he had.

Once the hero completes his journey, the homecoming is simply an acknowledgement by others of his success. The hero enjoys the acclaim he has earned, and we get to enjoy it with him; his road has led him home again.

## What Did We Experience?

Think about the stories you read and watch, and why you like them (or don't). What do stories do for us?

One thing they do is allow us to have experiences in situations we're unlikely to encounter in our lives. I can't speak to what your life is like, but as for me, I seriously doubt that I'll be recruited to



## Your Journey

be the next Ultraman with the expectation of protecting Earth from hordes of evil aliens. We get to enjoy the thrills of living a certain life without the dangerous part of it.

However, if you remove the fantastical elements of many of these stories, the more personal parts of them do relate to our lives. Even if you're not tasked with trekking across orc-infested lands to destroy a magical ring, as Frodo is in *Lord of the Rings*, you can understand the feeling of working together with friends toward a common goal, such as when you're on a sports team or creating a project together. No matter how fantastical it is, the friendships in a story are things that can compare to our own experiences, even if we don't have a dark wizard attempting to kill us and take over the world at the same time.

## Your Journey

Ask yourself about where you are in *your* journey. You can think about this in relation to your whole life, or on a smaller scale, and consider the adventure as a small part of it. Have you set an ambitious goal to make the swim team? Are you taking the first steps in learning the drums with the intention of joining a band? Have you been inspired to learn to draw by that comic book you love? Think of these as your adventures, and consider the three goals; yes, those apply to you as well. Everything you try, every difficult task, has an external goal (how you measure success), an internal one (how the attempt changes you), and a principle that's connected to it.

Even if the circumstances are different, the principles are the same. The ideals of trust and honor apply to your life just as it does to Anna and Elsa's. Even if your brother or sister doesn't possess magical powers, overcoming our differences and fears for love of family is among the most important things we have to do. Courage, selflessness, compassion; these ideals are just as important to you, me, and everybody as they are to the heroes we read about. It's just as important for you to act according to principle as it is for them. Determine what is good and do what's right, and not just what's self-serving, and you'll be following in the footsteps of the greatest heroes in story.

It's also important to consider others in your life, and not only their role in your life, but also your role in theirs. Ask yourself:



- Do you have three goals? Think of long-term and short-term goals, and what they mean to you.
- What roles are other people fulfilling in your life? Is there a mentor? That would probably be a parent or a teacher. Who are your greatest allies? If you have enemies, how can you turn that around? Can they be friends instead?
- How can you be a better ally to your friends? Think of the journey others are on, and what you mean to them.
- Is there someone who is acting as a threshold guardian in your life? Are you blocking someone else on their journey?
- Do you think that you might be blocking yourself on your journey? Are there feelings and thoughts inside of you that could be getting in the way of achieving your goals?

## Problems with the Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is a model not only for understanding stories, but for understanding our own lives. We can read a book or watch a movie and think about how the conflicts on the page or on screen might relate to things we confront ourselves.

But as we discussed, noticing differences is just as important and finding similarities. Stories are a series of events engineered to create conflict for our entertainment, but they are not real life. Follow your path and address conflict in your life, but don't go looking for it.

Also, stories are often structured in such a way to ensure that the hero has no help and must act alone. This is great in a story context, where we get to see the hero look deep within himself and find the courage he needs to survive.

But in the real world, there are a number of resources so we don't have to act alone. Students can rely on their parents or teachers for help when they're faced with an emergency. We adults don't feel that we have to handle things ourselves when, say, our house is on fire; we just call 911. A society exists to ensure the well-being of everyone; you are not on your own.

# Beyond the Hero's Journey

## Beyond the Hero's Journey

Campbell's explanation of the Hero's Journey covers the myths and legends of cultures all over the world. His work analyzes old stories and uses them to explain commonalities between all people. Many writers use his ideas as inspiration for the story they want to tell, and that's fine, but a whole generation of books about writing have emerged that treat Campbell's ideas as a formula, and they imply that any **deviation** from it is sacrilege.

This is, in a word, nonsense. Campbell never said that the model is how all stories must be told in the present. The so-called experts who promote such approaches have resulted in books and movies that are predictable and stale.

The Hero's Journey is the form that connects the stories of cultures in far-flung places, separated by time and distance; it is the first tale told by everyone. It's the foundation for all the stories that followed. Musicians start by learning major and minor scales; visual artists start by learning to draw primitive forms such as cubes and spheres. Those who read and write stories start by learning the fundamentals of narrative. Writers since then have changed things, mixing things up to create new structures, but the building blocks of story are all contained in the Journey - conflict, opposition, and sacrifice. Once you understand those, you can understand stories in any form.

As you grow and discover new books and movies, you'll find yourself enjoying stories that deviate from the model, or abandon it altogether. Don't concern yourself with that; as long as we care about what happens next, it's a good story.

Some of the first variations to the form happened when writers would **subvert** some element of the Journey:

- In the stories we discussed, the Hero is expected to win in the end, emerging victorious and living happily ever after. A **tragedy** is a story designed with a different purpose: to set us up for a sad ending. Tragedies exist to express how precious life is by showing us the pain of loss. A great tragedy is as beautiful as any story can be. The GOAT (Greatest of All Time) and undisputed champion of tragedies is William Shakespeare, with masterpieces such as Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear, and Othello.



# The Storyteller's Journey

- Some stories set us up to follow a bad guy, or at least someone who's certainly no hero. These are **antiheroes** - characters who possess few or none of the admirable traits of the hero, but the writer tells us the story from his perspective. We find ourselves pulling for him in spite of our values. Rooting for the antihero can be a lot of fun; it's not real life, no one is really getting hurt. It's a thrill to put on the bad guy's clothes and enjoy the other side of the story for once. Shakespeare has his share of antiheroes in plays like Macbeth and Richard III. In modern times, The Godfather movies and the TV show Breaking Bad encourage us to follow someone in their rapid descent to evil. In video games, have you ever played the bad guy in games such as Grand Theft Auto? Then you understand the appeal of the antihero.

Use what you've learned to understand the stories you read and movies you watch; don't use the Journey to make rigid expectations of what a story should be. Let writers and artists do their job and amaze you.

## The Storyteller's Journey

Have you thought about writing your own stories? If you love stories, then read a lot; that's the first step, one that each of your favorite writers and filmmakers have taken.

There's a whole library of books written by great writers and critics about stories in all forms: novels, plays, screenplays, and comic books. I'm certain that a whole critical structure around narrative in video games will emerge at some point. But most stories can really be boiled down to a few questions, and before you immerse yourself in that library, start just by taking a few steps:

- Make a cool concept with a conflict at the center of it.
- Build your world and determine what the rules of living there are.
- Think of who lives in the world you made, and give them a problem to solve.
- Listen to the characters. Think of what they want to do, not what you need them to do.
- Remember, the journey is a guide, not a formula. Feel free to mix up all of the elements of the journey in any way you like; the

# The Storyteller's Journey

important thing is that the journey is exciting for the reader. There's much more to it, of course. Writing is a lifelong pursuit; these are just the first steps. If you decide to follow this path, you'll learn a lot more later from great writers, both by reading their stories and by listening to their advice. Look in the recommended reading for some of the better books on writing stories, but to start, you must first do this: *dream*.





## Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed learning about The Hero's Journey, here are some other books that might interest you.

### The Hero's Journey

***The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell** (New World Library, ISBN: 1577315936)

This is the mother of them all, the book that introduced the idea of The Hero's Journey. Note that he didn't *invent* these ideas; they already were part of the structure of the stories from cultures all over the world; Campbell was just among the first to engage in critical analysis of ancient mythology and make connections between those stories. He also uses his conclusions to connect mythology to theories by the psychologist Carl Jung, but you don't need to understand that to enjoy the stories. Keep in mind that this book is a collection of his academic papers, and as such, is full of writing that is very dry and dense. For something more readable, see the next entry.

***The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell in Conversation with Bill Moyers** (Anchor Books, ISBN: 0385418868)

This book is a much more accessible introduction to Campbell's ideas than *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It's an edited transcript of a six-part public television documentary (which you can also watch on YouTube). Campbell explains and expounds on his ideas using stories old and new, as well as historical events and the news of the day. Moyers is a perceptive interviewer and a great conversationalist. You could read the book or simply watch the videos on YouTube [here](#).

***The Hero with an African Face*, by Clyde W. Ford** (Bantam, ISBN: 0553378686)

This book is an enjoyable application of Campbellian ideas to stories from Africa. Ford is knowledgeable, perceptive, and a good storyteller in his own right.

### Mythology

Here are some of my favorite collections and translations of myths and legends from cultures all over the world. A good translation can really make the stories come alive (and is a necessity unless can read Ancient Greek or Yoruba).



## Recommended Reading

- ***African Myths and Legends*, J.K. Jackson, editor** (Flame Tree Collection, ISBN: 1839648880)
- ***The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights*, translated by Yasmin Seale, edited by Paulo Lemos Horta** (Liveright, ISBN: 1631493639)
- ***Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* by Seamus Heaney** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux ISBN: 9780374111199)
- ***Norse Mythology* by Neil Gaiman** (W.W. Norton & Company, ISBN: 039360909X)
- ***The Odyssey*, by Homer, translated by Robert Fitzgerald** (FSG Adult, ISBN: 0374525749)
- ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by Simon Armitage** (W.W. Norton & Company, ISBN: 0393334155)
- ***Women Who Run with the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D** (Ballantine Books, ISBN: 0345409876)

## Writing

***The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White** (ISBN: 979-8848365924)

If you want to write well, the first book you'll need is a good dictionary; this is the second. *The Elements of Style* is simply a masterpiece of clarity and concision, and as such, teaches you how to express yourself clearly with a minimum of fuss.

***The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler** (Michael Wiese Productions, ISBN: 1615933158)

Though it was written specifically for screenwriters, *The Writer's Journey* is also a very simple and clear introduction to Campbell's ideas using the movies of the time as a reference.

***Steering the Craft* by Ursula LeGuin** (Harper Perennial, ISBN: 0544611616)

Aspiring novelists would be well-served by picking up a copy of *Steering the Craft*, a great introduction to developing elegant English tailored for narrative. LeGuin is a legendary science-fiction author, so she has a perfect understanding of the obstacles you'll face if your tastes run to genre fiction. It's specifically a *workbook*, so you won't get any benefit from it unless you actually complete the exercises contained within. It's a great book to work on as part of a group; giving and receiving constructive criticism is a fundamental part of improving as a writer.



## Recommended Reading

### ***On Writing* by Stephen King** (Scribner, ISBN: 1982159375)

A combination of autobiography and writing book, King's primary instincts as a storyteller transform a book *about* writing into a book on *how* King learned to write well, and as a result, the lessons are more enjoyable and easier to digest.

### ***Into the Woods* by John Yorke** (Harry N. Abrams, ISBN: 1468310941)

Yorke dives into the different elements of story and how they fit together to make something that keeps readers turning the pages and viewers glued to their screens. While the book addresses many elements of story, you'll find that its greatest contribution to your development as a writer may be a good understanding of *plot*, which is the sequence of events within a story.

### ***Elmore Leonard's Ten Rules of Writing*** (William Morrow, ISBN: 9780061451461)

The great writer of crime and western fiction compiled a list of rules he followed to create readable prose and make himself invisible so that the reader would be able to concentrate on the story. One of the cardinal rules of great storytelling is 'show, don't tell'. Don't *tell* your reader that someone is bad, show them *doing* something bad. Though this was published as a book, Leonard initially wrote these rules for The New York Times Book Review, and you can find his initial piece online for free.

Those are a few of my suggestions; I envy those of you who get to read these wonderful books for the first time. I wish you all the best of luck on your future adventures.