THE ORIGINS OF STORY OUTLINE

A HANDOUT FOR FIRST DRAFT FRIDAY

STEFAN EMUNDS

THE EIGHT CRAFTS OF WRITING

STORIES AND ADVERSITY

Likely, in the earliest days of storytelling, people took real-life adventures, like raiding a village, surviving a storm, escaping a death trap, or abducting a woman of another clan, gilded those with dramatic devices, and told the tale at the campfire.

Over time, storytelling became an art.

Joseph Campbell analyzed stories, extracted the dramatic devices, categorized them, and put them in a sequence. That became the Hero's Journey. But since the Hero's Journey outlines dramatic devices, it does not explain what a story really is, neither does it reveal story dynamics.

If we want to understand what makes stories tick, we need to take a wide step back, analyze the dynamics of real-life **adv**entures and emulate that.

Stories are dramatized virtual **adventures**.

Adventures are inspiring struggles with adversity.

THE ADVENTURE CYCLE

In real life, struggles with adversity go through the following cycle:

1. An adversity arises
2. We become aware of adversity's **symptoms**. This produces a crisis: shall we deal with the symptoms or not?
3. We are busy or lazy and ignore the symptoms.
4. When the **symptoms** become **annoying**, we apply a **workaround** to suppress the **symptoms**[1]. We do that because we lack the **ability** to deal with the **cause of adversity**.
5. When the symptoms escalate and put something at **stake**, the crisis whether to engage with adversity escalates too.
6. If we decide to engage, we shift from **subjective reaction to symptoms** to **objective analysis of the cause** of adversity.
7. We analyze what **tool or ability** we need to remove the cause.
8. We acquire the **ability or** get the **tool** and apply it.

9. We fail or succeed.

Example: Robert is a nerdy programmer who neglects apartment maintenance. One day, he notices that the kitchen sink is dripping (symptom). Robert is busy finalizing a program and ignores the dripping. The next day, the sink drips faster and louder (annoyance). Robert tapes the water pipes below the sink and slows the dripping. The next day, water leaks through the tape and floods the kitchen floor. Now, something is at stake - the kitchen floor and the ceiling of the apartment below. Robert closes the main water valve and takes the pipes apart. Turns out, the culprit is a worn-out rubber washer. Robert buys a new rubber washer and replaces the old one.

Writing Prompt

Here is a writing prompt for you. Orientation: Judy's office, late afternoon. Judy notices a slight headache (the symptom). She keeps working on her presentation (she ignores the symptom). The headache worsens and she gets dizzy (annoyance). She takes ibuprofen, leaves the office at six, and goes to sleep early. In the morning, she wakes up to a hairsplitting headache (stakes).

The Adventure Action and Reaction Cycle

The adventure cycle is an elaboration of the action-reaction cycle, through which we go three times:
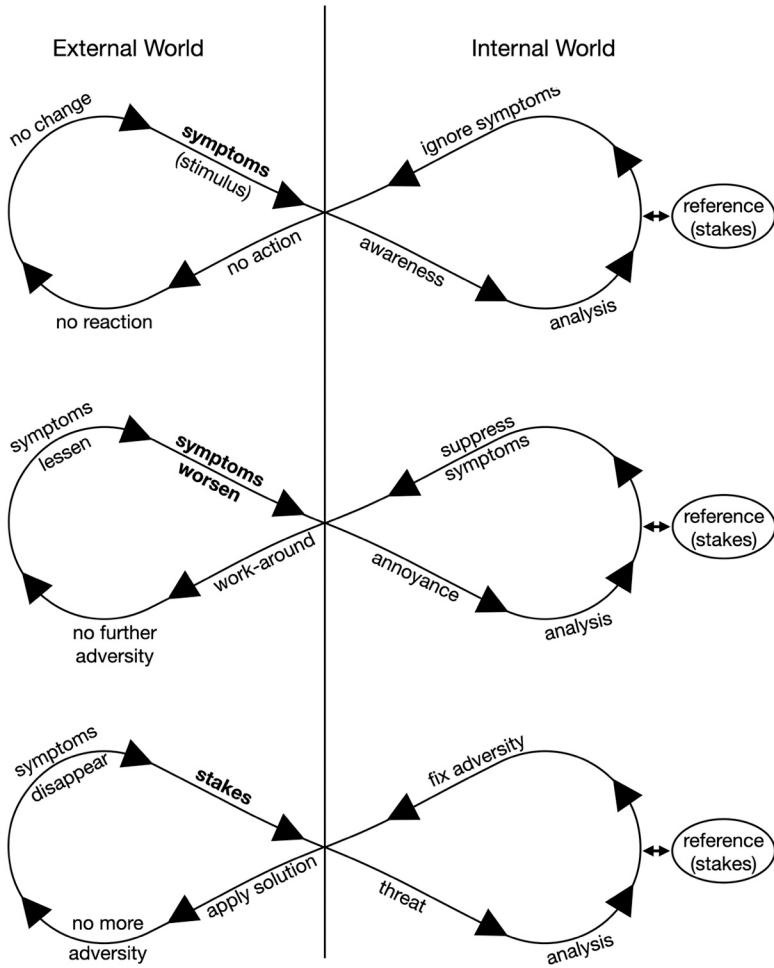
The (internal) reference is the question whether something is at stake. While the stakes appear in the external world and are to some extent objective, we may not care.[2] Here, we have a juxtaposition of an external and internal stake flip[3]. An example of an internal stake flip is an emotional reaction. This is important. External stake flips *belong* to characters and characters need to react to them. Read here how this plays a role in scene structure.

The left (external) circle produces curiosity - will the workaround or solution work? The right (internal) circle causes tension.

If we project the adventure cycle onto a time-line, we get the following graph:
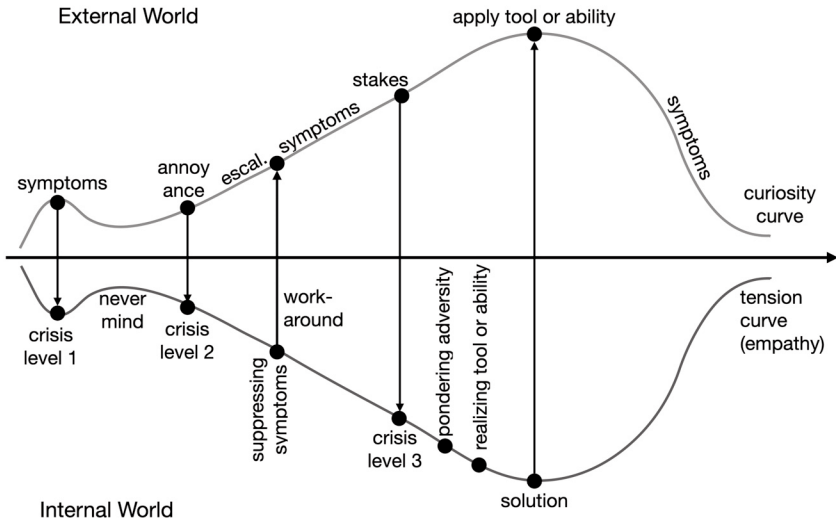
How to translate real-life adventures into stories? By turning the adventure cycle into the story arc by adding dramatic devices.

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1. Entire industries are in the business of workarounds and suppressing symptoms.
2. Your protagonist needs to care.
3. Aka external and internal turning point.

THE STORY ARC

We turn the adventure cycle into a story arc by weaving eleven major dramatic devices into the adversity cycle. This gives us the following twelve major story elements:

1. Adversity
2. Inciting incident
3. Stakes
4. Story goal
5. Stake flip
6. Midpoint
7. The key ability
8. All-is-lost moment
9. Climax
10. Conclusion
11. Antagonist
12. Protagonist

Adversity

Usually, stories don't show the rise of adversity. Kung Fu Panda 3 does: Kai rising from the spirit realm.

Story adversity need to be dynamic and forceful, meaning, if nothing or nobody opposes it, it would fully unfold and destroy all that is at stake.

The Inciting Incident

The inciting incident marks the moment when adversity affects the protagonist's life by producing symptoms[1].

In War of the Worlds, adversity arrived on Planet Earth in the form of aliens who dug war machines into the ground, but the movie begins with the war machines popping out - the inciting incident.

The inciting incident throws the protagonist's life out of balance and sets a chain of events into motion that will tempt or force her to go on an adventure.

One difference between real life and stories is that the inciting incident already puts something at stake[2]. This sudden and *unnatural stake flip* causes a story outline problem: writers need to keep raising the stakes to keep readers engaged.

Stakes

The inciting incident reveals the story stakes. The stakes depend on the story's genre, for example, life/death or damnation/salvation.

The Story Goal

The protagonist reacts to the inciting incident by formulating the story goal. She believes that once she achieves the story goal, her life

will return to normal.

Escalation of Stakes

With the story goal in mind, the protagonist embarks on her adventure. She enters a phase of trial-and-error and workarounds to suppress adversity's symptoms.

Since she lacks the key ability to solve the adversity in question, she fails to suppress the symptoms and the stakes escalate further[3].

The Midpoint

The escalation of stakes forces the protagonist to contemplate the nature of adversity and realize the key ability she is missing.

The Key Ability

What happens if a pipe breaks in the kitchen of a plumber? He'd fix it in no time, and we wouldn't consider that an adventure. The key ability must be missing at the beginning of the story.

In the case of stories that only have external stakes, the key ability usually turns out a thing, tool, or weapon[4]. For example, Harry Potter finds the Stone of the Wise in his pocket.

If you want your story to be more true to life, the key ability should be an internal ability, like courage or love. In the case of Star Wars it's a bit of a mix: The key ability is the Force, but Luke realizes that the Force is (also) inside.

In real life, adversity has, is, and will drive progress. No sicknesses, no medicine. No hunger, no agriculture. No dangers, no society. Without adversity we would neither face our fears, nor our indolences, nor would we acquire new abilities. Over the last five millennia, society has significantly reduced our exposure to adversity, which

results in a lack of motivation to make progress. We rely on inspirations and motivations more than ever and that's where stories come in.

The All-is-lost Moment

The protagonist comes out of her introspection with an adapted story goal that takes the key ability into consideration.

She applies it and - for purely dramatic reasons - fails again. And, for purely dramatic reasons, adversity crushes her and all seems lost.

The Climax

The protagonist rebounds from the all-is-lost moment and challenges adversity with the key ability and an additional edge[5] in a final, climactic standoff.

The Conclusion

The protagonist succeeds or fails. The writers sums up success or failure in a dramatic way - the story conclusion[6].

The Protagonist

It helps thinking of the protagonist - during story outlining - as a dramatic device. The protagonist dramatizes the resistance against adversity and its transcendence during the climax. Characterization comes later.

The Antagonist

It helps thinking of the antagonist as a dramatized catalyst of story adversity. Characterization comes later.

The Difference Between Adversity and the Antagonist

In real life, adversity and antagonists are two different affairs. For example, war is a form of adversity and combatting soldiers are antagonists. On both sides, they want to stay alive, protect the lives of their comrades, and get home in one piece.

Few stories distinguish between adversity and antagonist. Mission Impossible Fallout does. In this case, adversity is overpopulation. The antagonist wants to solve overpopulation by launching a nuke. We don't know the protagonist's plans to address overpopulation, but he has set his heart on stopping the antagonist.

Antagonists are the agents or catalysts of adversity. In Lord of the Rings, adversity is Dark Lord Sauron. Sauron does not manifest as an antagonist, he is an intangible, psychic[7] force that spawns ample antagonists.

No adversity, no adventures, but the antagonist is equally important for stories because the antagonist makes things personal and that is more dramatic.

The Difference Between the Protagonist and the Antagonist

In stories, the difference between the protagonist and antagonist boils down to attitude. The attitude of the antagonist: the end justifies the means. Hence, he is tempted to take advantage of adversity. The attitude of the protagonist: *Let's help each other get through this, whatever it is*[8]. The protagonist is social, the antagonist selfish. Also, the protagonist evolves and overcomes her weakness[9], the antagonist doesn't.

The Juxtaposition of the Adversity Cycle and Story Arc

Adversity → Story adversity
Symptoms → Inciting incident
Ignoring symptoms → Refusal of the call[10]
Annoyance → Forced call to adventure[11]
Workaround → Story goal & its pursuit
Appearance of stakes → Stake flip
Analysis → Midpoint
Key ability → Key ability
NA → All-is-lost moment
Application of the key ability → Climax
NA → Conclusion
Adventurer → Protagonist
NA → Antagonist

The Story Arc Graph

If we project the story arc onto a time-line, we get the following graph[12]:

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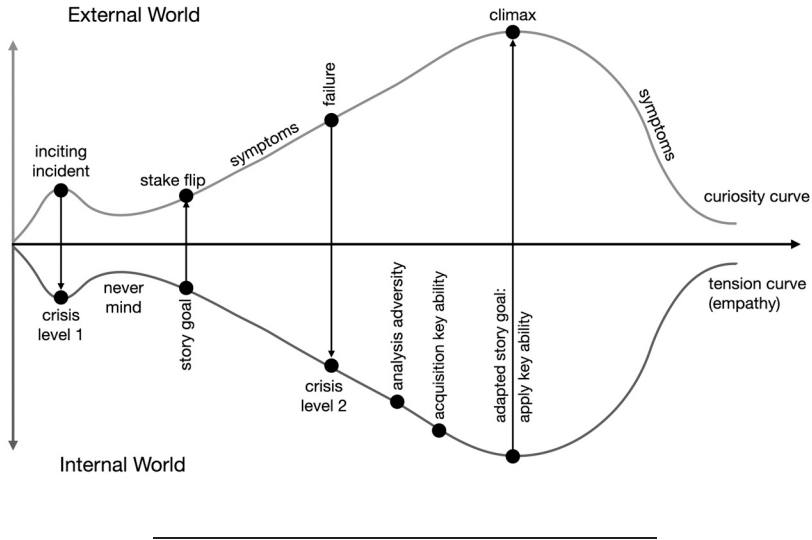
1. Often the protagonist does not yet understand the underlying adversity.
2. In real life that happens in the fifth stage of the adversity cycle.
3. Since adversity is dynamic and forceful and the protagonist did not offer enough resistance.
4. The *seizing of the sword*.
5. Could be a surprising turn of events, a tool, the protagonist's talent, or sheer luck.
6. Aka denouement, resolution, poetic justice.
7. The giant eye on the tower.
8. Kurt Vonnegut.
9. The lack of the key ability.
10. Minor dramatic device.
11. Minor dramatic device.
12. For the sake of simplicity, we assume that the curiosity and tension curve mirror each other, which is not true to life since curiosity is binary (questions and answers).

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THE BENEFITS OF THE ADVERSITY CYCLE

If you don't like to spend much time on story structure, you can use the adversity cycle to outline your story. The phases of the adversity cycle (symptoms, workaround, stakes, etc.) and the obligatory scenes of your genre will become your key scenes.

The adversity cycle helps to distinguish between what is real-to-life and what is a dramatic device. See *The Juxtaposition of the Adversity Cycle and Story Arc* in the previous chapter.

If your story's arc feels unnatural, you can use the adversity cycle to analyze what went wrong.

You can use the adversity cycle to understand and test story outline variations. For example, action stories launch right into the stake phase. Disaster stories begin slowly, showing symptoms here and there to different characters. Superhero stories reverse the adversity cycle. Usually, adversity appears first and forces the protagonist to look for the key ability. In superhero stories, the key ability falls into the lap of the protagonist at the beginning of the story. She practices it first and then looks for an antagonist to try it on.

NANOMINE - A STORY ENGINE EXPERIMENT

The Rise of Adversity

High-tech firm Nanomine's business is the production of mining nanobots that break down stones and extract metals. Nanomine produces mining stembots that replicate themselves, harvests ninety percent, *sterilizes* them so they can't reproduce, adds a self-destruction mechanism that limits their life span to one month, and sells them to mining companies. An accident at the facility allows one stembot to escape into the environment where it reproduces itself. Multiplying with exponential speed, the stembots break down stone structures in the vicinity.

Inciting Incident

In the vicinity of the Nanomine facility and the town nearby, sinkholes appear and houses and streets collect cracks. Authorities believe that (unregistered) earthquakes are the cause.

The Stakes

The planet and all life on it.

The Protagonist

Earthquake specialist Frederik Foren investigates the unusual cracks and figures that earthquakes can't be the cause. He follows the trails of cracks until he arrives at Nanomine's facility, which is surrounded by sinkholes. In those sinkholes, he finds piles of gold dust and other metals. Frederik connects the dots.

Fredrik is a neurotic person who hates taking risks and confront people. This foreshadows the key ability: courage.

The Story Goal

Frederik decides to confront the Nanomine management.

The Antagonist

The antagonist is Nanomine's CEO Dick Dullart. Dick is putting all company resources into developing a solution to the problem.

Dick's goal is to stop the nanobots and save the company and his ass. He wants to design killerbots that can terminate the stembots.

Note that the protagonist and antagonist have the same motivations, but different goals.

The Protagonist's Failure

Fredrik talks to Dick, who denies everything and threatens[1] Fredrik's life. Fredrik caves in.

Escalation of Stakes

Larger and deeper sinkholes and cracks.

Key Ability

Fredrik overcomes his paranoia, breaks into Nanomine's facility, steals the blueprints of the stembots, and takes them to Frida Freud, a former *college-girlfriend-now-nanobot-expert* at Stunfjord university. She analyses the stem bots and figures that they could kill the minebots with a high-voltage electric shock. For that, they need large *shock machines*, which would require government support.

Adapted Story Goal

Fredrik hopes to convince Dick Dullart to work with the government. Now, the story goal and McGuffin collide: killerbots against electric shocks.

The All-is-lost Moment

Frida convinces Fredrik to meet Dick again. Dick fears exposure and calls security, who lock Fredrik and Frida into a cell in the facility's basement.

The Rebound

Minebots have perforated the cell wall. Fredrik breaks down the wall with a chair and escapes with Frida.

Climax

None yet.

When we get an idea for a story, it's usually a what-if or a cool inciting incident. In this case, it is *what-if nanobots go rogue?* It's fairly easy to develop a story from a what-if or inciting incident all the way to the all-is-lost moment, but climaxes are evasive and notoriously difficult to come by. This is probably the reason why literary fiction stories are often anti-climactic despite their great set-ups and ample drama. Example: The Platform.

Therefore, after you gathered a few inspirations for your story, try to nail the climax and work backward from there to design your story engine. The climax is super important because it will linger in your reader's mind and induce them to recommend your book.

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1. Cliche alert.

FIRST DRAFT FRIDAY AND AUTHORS A.I.

W e authors are a famously independent bunch.

Once in a while, though, we see the value in collaborating on a big idea. And so we've joined together to create a tech startup run by and for authors. Our big idea is to put the power of A.I. into the hands of published and aspiring authors at an affordable rate.

We're passionate about great books and cool technologies. But most of all, we're excited by the prospect of helping fellow authors modernize their self-editing process so they can more easily write books that find large readerships.

We're passionate about great books and cool technologies. But most of all, we're excited by the prospect of helping fellow authors find large readerships.

Our venture began in June 2019 when two authors and tech entrepreneurs, J.D. Lasica and Matthew Jockers, began working on the idea of creating a new social hub for book lovers accompanied by a new suite of tools for fiction writers. J.D., a thriller author and Silicon Valley startup founder, was fascinated by the lessons in Matt's book

The Bestseller Code, co-authored by Jodie Archer. Matt was looking to work with a group of talented authors to field-test and enhance his A.I. algorithm.

A marriage was born.

Soon bestselling romance author Alessandra Torre joined as the third founder. Within months our team assembled a community of more than 120 bestselling authors and expert advisors. Together we've helped refine and expand Matt's original algorithm to make it suited to the popular fiction marketplace.

Now we're using Marlowe – our name for the company's fiction-savvy bot – to help fine-tune our own manuscripts while making it available to authors everywhere who want to elevate their craft and sell more books.

STEFAN EMUNDS

Stefan Emunds is the author of the Eight Crafts of Writing. Stefan was born in Germany and enjoyed two years back-packing in Australia, New Zealand, and South-East Asia in his early twenties. Prior to becoming a writer, he has worked as a business development manager in Europe, Middle East, and Asia. At the moment, he lives with his son in the Philippines.
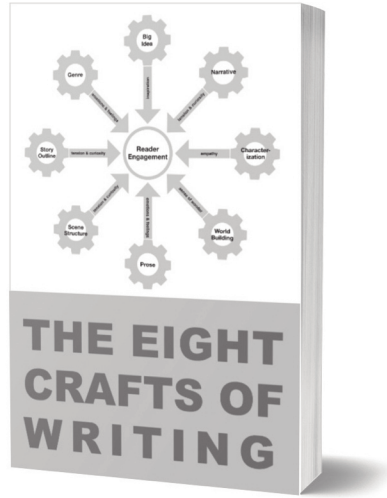
The Eight Crafts of Writing provides a structured overview of the eight writing crafts and explores new writing territories, for example:

- Reader engagement
- The psychology of storytelling
- The adversity cycle - the origin of Story Outline
- The two types of stories - protagonistic and antagonistic
- The shapeshifting writer's block

Read more here.