

CHAPTER 9:

The Simple Story Timeline

This chapter will necessarily be a little bit different.

In fact, let's start with our ninth universal storytelling truth: You cannot build a great story by thinking in terms of *a single* Plotline. Great stories consist of *many interwoven parallel Plots*.

In the first section of the previous chapter, we touched on some of the traditional concepts of *plot theory* from authorities such as Aristotle, Freytag, Campbell, and hosts of others in the storytelling marketplace, most of whom are deriving their ideas from these seminal thinkers. We acknowledged the power and truth behind most of these systems, while also questioning if these ideas best serve creators constructing stories as well as they do academics analyzing already completed works.

It's not so much that the majority of finished stories don't end up operating as you have been taught in these schools. It's more that post-game analysis offers little explanation of *how and why* Structure functions as it does. These ideas are often mainly predicated on vague concepts like *rising action*, hitting specified *beats* at certain times, and thinking about the plot in terms of a single line—focused on the actions of the Protagonist as they would have you understand it. Oftentimes, these models are peppered with dense, arcane language that seems to make things murkier rather than easier to comprehend.

By now you understand well that these traditional concepts do not translate to the Your Storytelling Potential Method for thinking about constructing a narrative. We maintain that to the extent these models hold water (and not all do), these *truths* are the result of conscious application of Thematic Relevance.

An *inciting incident* is not something to be whipped up out of thin air in service to a story you want to tell, only to hopefully flesh out a Character interesting enough for an audience to follow while events unfold in regular beats. All of this starts with a Main Character, and the *inciting incident* is the Convergence point of a flowing B-Story life *merging with* the Momentum of an A-Story Problem or Opportunity.

Our view is that *Story Structure* is not something to be considered until *after* the internal Thematic Relevance has been established by building out the Core Elements. It should be a naturally flowing progression from the grasp on the story you gained through the work completed using the visioning tools you now have at your disposal. You know your story so well, its *Story Structure* is inevitable. It's logical. The clear next step progression.

Very likely many of you will view this chapter's discussion of Structure as practically obvious.

The major difference for this chapter compared to the previous chapters is a greater reliance on graphic imagery to convey the content. Throughout this book, we have endeavored to explain each idea as thoroughly as possible and then supplement them with key graphics that best illustrate points. This content, however, is better delivered through graphic representation than text. Expect the words to support the graphic representations.

With Structure, our primary concern is the Conceptual Timeline. *Conceptual Timeline* means *showing* the relationship of the Core Elements and Thematic Connections to one another as the story progresses.

Another critique we have of traditional Plotline Graph thinking for building a story is that Plotlines tend to conflate *what* and *when*. They ask the Author-Storyteller to think about *what* happens as a function of *when*

it happens. As you have seen, we have discussed *what* happens at length before we arrived at this exploration of *when* events should happen.

That *what/when unit* thinking holds a dangerous potential for very flat, two-dimensional storytelling. The *when* should follow the *what*. And *what* happens should follow logically based on Thematic Relevance, not timelines.

Think about it this way: *if* you were to get your first draft's Story Structure *wrong* (whatever that means), would you rather have all the right things happening in terms of Thematic richness and Relevance but somehow happening according to the *wrong* timeline, *or* would you prefer to hit all the structural timeline beats according to the formula, but have a flat, two-dimensional story filled with irrelevant material?

When should follow *what*, not the other way around.

We reiterate that this is *not* a screenwriting book. It's important to remind readers of this here because, if you have ever studied screenwriting, you are aware of how much the form demands Structure. Moreso, perhaps, than any other form of storytelling. More to the point, the movie industry demands a certain standard of structure. Executives primarily speak in terms of "three acts."

In a typical 100-page screenplay, it becomes important for the objectives described for each segment to be achieved in a roughly set number of pages. Traditionally, a screenplay is broken into three acts, with approximately 25-30 pages available for Act I, 40-60 or so devoted to Act II, and the remaining 15-25 pages for Act III.

A comic book has about 24 pages to tell its complete story, and structure must work within those boundaries. Graphic novels, on the other hand, can run 80 to 120 pages on the low end, with major works that can run several hundreds of pages.

And of course, the most widely distributed novels are at least 250-300 pages and can run over a thousand. The boundaries are less firm for the novel writer, whose material is less costly to produce and who has the most direct control over their content.

In all of these cases, the novice Author-Storyteller is well-advised to bring sparkling examples of work that is tightly written and well within

their industry’s standards for length. Those expansive epics are usually reserved for top professionals with a stellar track record. But that is as much career advice as we’re prepared to give in this book.

Our point about Structure as we present it for this method is the focus is less on set page numbers or exacting percentages of story length to hit certain story beats. Rather it’s about *accomplishing* the described *objectives*. Again, many forms will dictate how much space you have to accomplish what you need to do.

Formulaic adherence to a preset structure can feel as though it handcuffs creativity. That comes from being boxed into a rigid program *and* not having a clear understanding of *why* things must be arranged as you are told beyond the admonition that “those are the rules.”

Structure flows naturally from the internal logic stemming from a well-integrated, thematically relevant story. Things that do not contribute to this internal logic, irrelevant things, are off-topic and do not belong. Cut the fat—that which does not belong—off and what you are left with is a tight story that keeps your audience engaged. But knowing what belongs and what does not starts with understanding the deeply rooted *why* of every aspect of your story. You are either progressing the A-Story, or you’re progressing the B-Story, or you’re building and exploring the Thematic Conflict—and doing all three at the same time as much as possible. The key is understanding the Core Elements give you a clear roadmap to follow if your Main Character is going to Journey through a satisfying Character Wave.

- Structure ensures the *progression* of a story.
- Structure ensures *Convergence* of the A and B stories.
- Structure dictates *what is taking place* at intervals within a story.

Here is the master structural graph showing the **THREE-ACT STRUCTURE** of a well-told story in the Your Storytelling Potential Method, which we call the *Simple Story Timeline*:

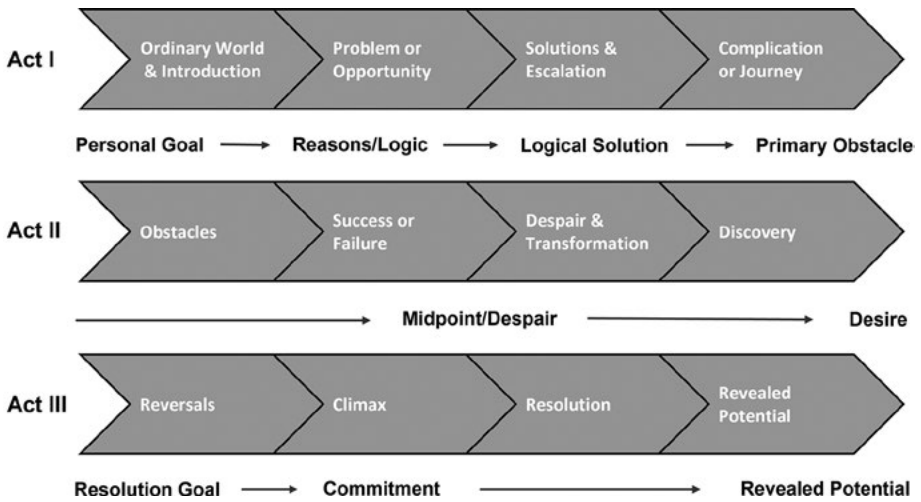


Figure 101: Simple Story Timeline

If you have read this entire book up to here, this graphic should be understandable. Every label in it references an idea we have previously explained. You should probably see that the Core Elements and the Character Wave essentially fill in the timeline naturally.

A key difference between the Your Storytelling Potential Method timeline and other plot graphs—which we will see as we examine each act separately—is that these objective-based phase Movements operate in parallel for both story tracks. Broadly speaking, whatever is going on in the A-Story is what is going on in the B-Story, even when the two stories are unfolding independently of each other.

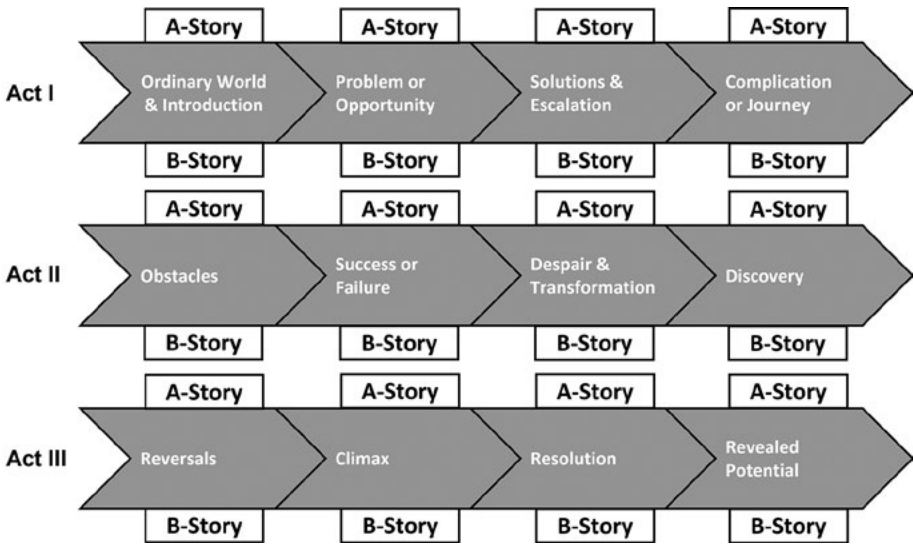


Figure 102: Relationship Between Simple Story Timeline and the A and B Stories

This will be made clearer as we go through each phase segment of the three acts and reference *Liar Liar* examples along the way. We will visit other IPs at the end of the chapter and look at those in their entirety.

Be attentive to the two-story track development. In our view, the proper understanding of a Revealed Story as two essentially separate-but-converging A and B Stories is highly problematic for the traditional notion of a *Plotline* in most any graph you have encountered. Often, these phase Movements are *not perfectly aligned* in the unfolding of the Revealed Story. The A-Story's Midpoint Failure can present the Obstacles or the Complication for the B-Story, for example. Things are not so cut and dried as a single *line* suggests. Different stories have different structural needs in varying proportions. Focus on the Core Elements and the achievement of objectives in a logical progression.

As you study these graphic structural breakdowns, notice there is often a shift in perspective that defines the action in A-Stories as opposed to B-Stories. B-Story action rarely cuts away from the Main Character. A-Story action often gets told from the Main Character's perspective but is just as likely to center around A-Story Subplot characters, such as the

Antagonist (if there is one) or what we call the Proximate Cause Character. These are not hard *rules*, but are generally true.

“Writing is rewriting,” so the old maxim goes. Nothing we present in this book will change the necessity of completing a draft, gaining distance from it, analyzing it, and then improving it on subsequent passes.

But... our sincerest belief is that *if* you have a *thorough understanding* of your story before you begin—that comes from the preparation work of identifying the Core Elements, the Thematic Connections and “What is it About?” exercises, and plotting out the Character Wave—that first draft will be *far closer* to a complete work than striking out blindly with a vague idea and a beat-sheet model of plot structure hoping to *find* the story along the way.

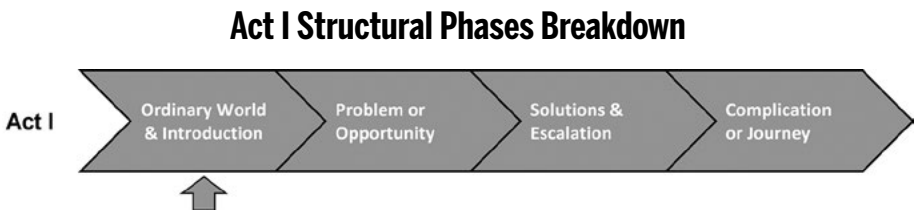


Figure 103: Act I - Ordinary World & Introduction

- Introduces the Underlying Cause and Proximate Cause
- Reveals Relevant information about the Ordinary World and Setting
- Introduces the B-Story (Underlying Cause)
- Introduces the Main Character’s Personal Goal
- Introduces the A-Story (Proximate Cause)

In the strictest *literal* sense, the Revealed Story start is the *Beginning* of the story from your audience’s point of view. But our understanding of story as a peek in on an already flowing series of life events means a better way of thinking about the start of the Revealed Story as an *Introduction* to the Main Character, their life, and the events broiling in the A-Story preparing to collide with the B-Story. Again, very few stories begin with the Main Character’s birth, and even in the ones that do, there are things

in motion that have Relevance to the tale (otherwise it's starting too early at an irrelevant point).

The Theme and Opposing Idea are introduced with the B-Story. And of course, Theme touches everything!

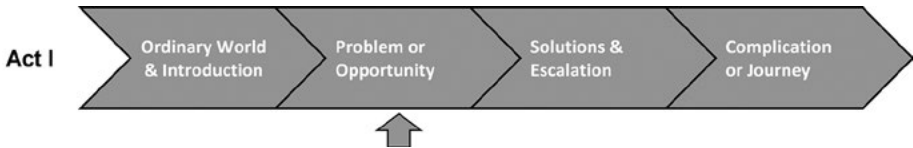


Figure 104: Act I - Problem or Opportunity

- Presents the collision point of A and B Stories
- Introduces the A-Story Problem/Opportunity
- Reveals Primary Situation to the Main Character
- Initiates the Main Character's pursuit of the Logical Solution

Many systems refer to this collision of A and B stories as the *inciting incident*. There's no problem with that term, but it's not quite as clear as recognizing that what the story *does* here is to introduce a *new* Problem or Opportunity into a Main Character's life. Other systems label this *the catalyst*. Again, though, ask yourself if it's fruitful to get bogged down in terminology or whether you would rather focus on *accomplishing goals* in your storytelling.

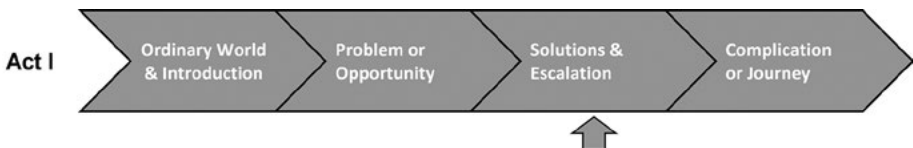


Figure 105: Act I - Solutions & Escalation

- Main Character moves toward resolution using the Logical Solution.
- Main Focus is placed on the A-Story Situation.



Figure 106: Act I - Complication or Journey

- Ends Act I
- Introduces the Primary Obstacle
- Presents a Complication or Journey to Main Character while they are trying to apply their Logical Solution
- Does not cancel the Logical Solution
- Could be the full manifestation of the B-Story Problem or Opportunity (cf. Fletcher in *Liar Liar* forced to tell the truth on the day of the trial)

Another point where we choose clearer language over tradition: the *Complication* or *Journey* says what actually happens here in a way that *Act I turning point* or *big twist* just does not convey.

The Complication or Journey that sends the action from Act I into Act II is a storytelling convention. At this point, the story follows these essential Movements:

- Main Character encounters a *Problem* or *Opportunity*.
- Main Character decides how to *respond*.
- Main Character *responds* to the Problem or Opportunity.
- The story *ends*.

This is often a problem for writers. They have a strong sense of their setup. They know how the story ends. What they lack are sufficient Complications to the Main Character's Logical Solution that create a satisfying Character Wave Journey through Act II. This leads to stuffing the Act II landscape with a lot of irrelevant filler, bloated dialogue, and tangential asides that go nowhere.

At the same time, this is *not* the Midpoint Failure. At this stage, the Main Character remains committed to their Logical Solution. It's not the

end of the road for the Logical Solution; it’s about hitting potholes and bumps in the road.

Act I in Action

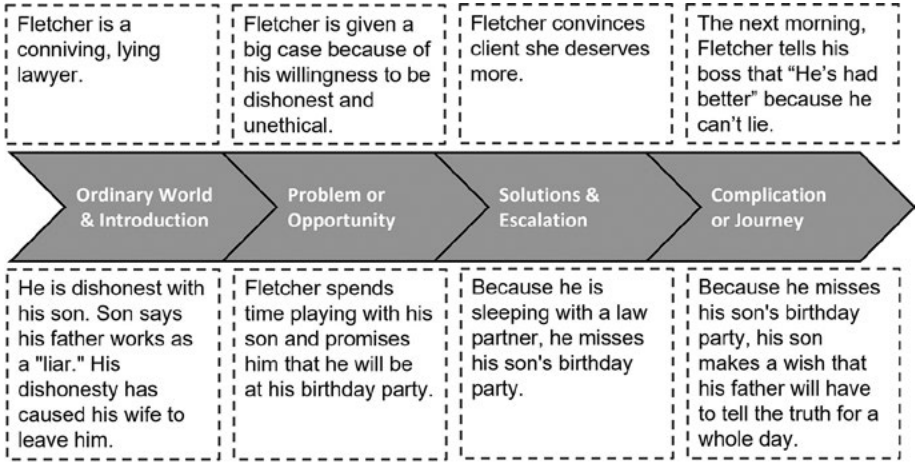


Figure 107: Act I Case Study - *Liar Liar*

Notice how the two stories impact one another! The progression of the B-Story has ramifications for what’s going on in the A-Story, and vice-versa. Sometimes one side is slightly ahead of the other, and then they switch a bit. Ebb and flow, the action is always connected even though the A and B Stories never directly interact—two story tracks impacting one Main Character.

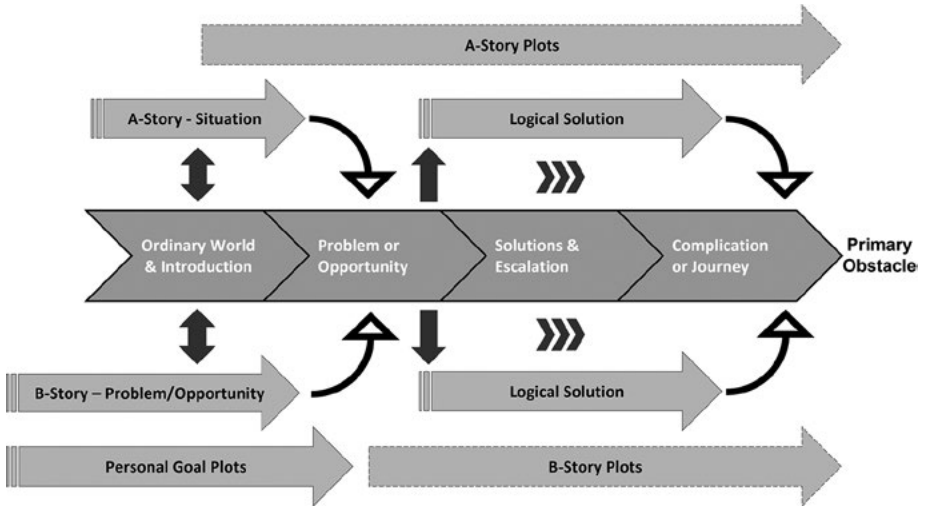


Figure 108: Act I Full Plot Dynamics Graph

While this is a *common* Act I Structure dynamic, it is not fixed in stone. These Elements can be adjusted to fit the needs of a particular story.

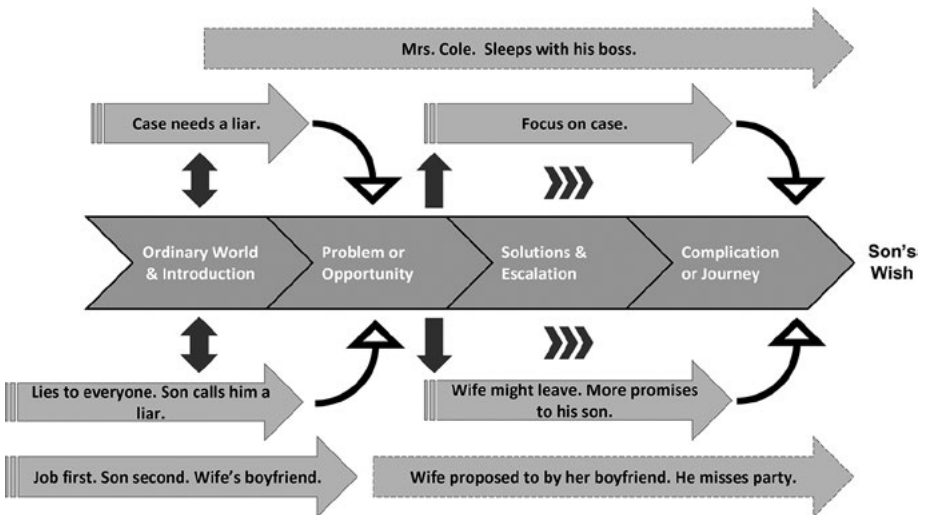


Figure 109: Full Act I Plot Dynamics Graph for Liar Liar

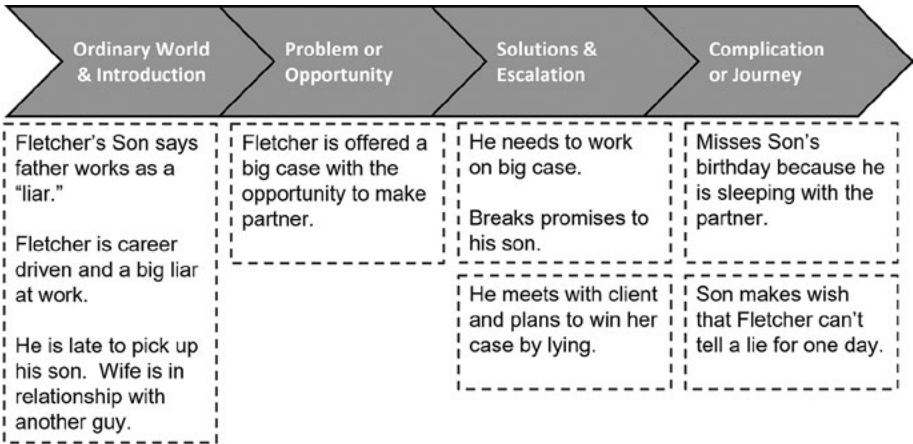


Figure 110: Act I Integrated Timeline for *Liar Liar*

This represents the process of fashioning the totality of what you have built from the Core Elements to the Simple Story Timeline to, now, a fully-integrated Outline. Once the Simple Story Timeline is built for all three Acts, we merge the A and B Stories into a single *Plotline* progression.

The strength of this approach (and using the worksheets provided in Chapter 11) is providing all of the conceptual and developmental organization tools to arrive at an outline like this which can then sit alongside an editing program as you write your draft.

ACT II Structural Phases Breakdown

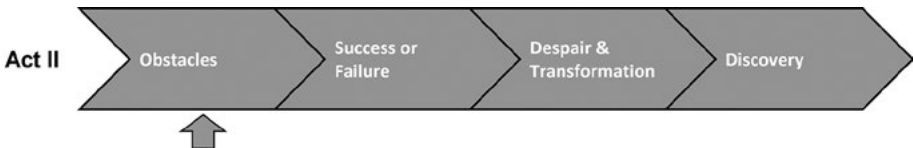


Figure 111: Act II - Obstacles

- Focus of story shifts to the Primary Obstacle.
- Main Character encounters the Primary Obstacle, which will prevent an easy application of the Logical Solution.

Act I ends with the introduction of the Primary Obstacle. The first *half* of Act II is the Main Character's attempts to execute their Logical Solution to the Primary Situation, and that effort is now hampered by the Primary Obstacle.

As Primary Obstacles come in many forms, so do the challenges they represent. Might be a direct conflict with an Antagonist or one of their agents (an Enforcer-type for the Boss Bad Guy who does the dirty work of pulling the triggers and throwing punches). If the Primary Obstacle is a Journey, it can be the sheer physical distance involved, it can be the logistics of obtaining transportation, running out of fuel, getting a ticket or plane fare stolen, the car breaking down, getting arrested while speeding, etc. With an Opportunity for the Primary Situation, maybe the Main Character's struggle is internal—such as overcoming insecurity about trying to ask the person out, so instead of being direct, they invent some convoluted scenarios where they would run into one another and have to interact, and those attempts repeatedly backfire. Always serve the story and the Theme!

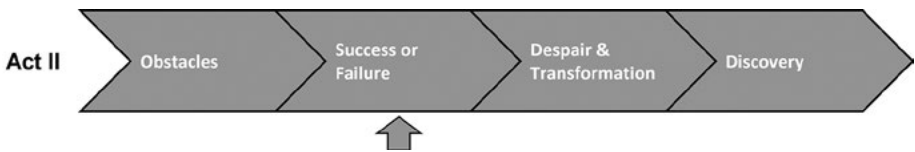


Figure 112: Act II - Success or Failure

- Midpoint of a story
- Midpoint either a Success or a Failure
- Midpoint Success does not resolve the ongoing Problem or Opportunity
- Midpoint ends the Logical Solution
- Structure hinges on midpoint

Remember: whether the Midpoint is a *success* or a *Failure*, ultimately the outcome is always *inadequate*. Even when the Main Character succeeds with their Logical Solution, the *solution* fails to resolve the Primary Situation. As with *Die Hard*, McClane successfully alerts the authorities,

but ultimately they do no good, and he ends up having to save the day by himself from inside the building.

The other thing to note here is this Midpoint success or Failure moment is not a *twist*. It's not about some major reveal, although a major reveal could be presented in the Midpoint. Fundamentally, the Midpoint is the moment where the Main Character is forced to accept that their Logical Solution has not worked. Oftentimes, the audience can see that this solution was going to fail all along.



Figure 113: Act II - Despair & Transformation

- Low point for the Main Character
- Focus moves to the Thematic Elements
- Focus on the Personal Goal

Stories tend to shift *emphasis* toward the B-Story in this phase. Despair and Transformation naturally tend to cause the Main Character to look inward. To some degree, this usually holds for all major Subplot Characters in both the A and B Stories. In this phase, most Main Characters are questioning their personal beliefs (Personal Goal), assumptions (Logical Solution), what it is they thought they knew, and what options there are for moving forward.

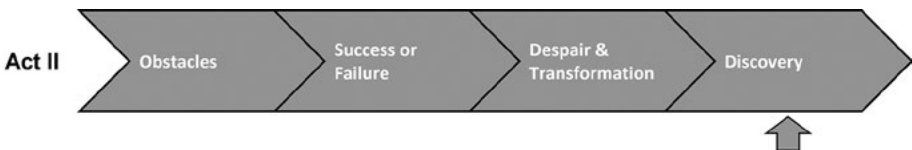


Figure 114: Act II - Discovery

- Discoveries change the direction of the outcome of *all* the storylines.
- Discovery(s) occur at the A-Story level.
- Discovery(s) occur at the B-Story level.

There can be and usually are multiple discoveries. These set up the Resolutions for both A and B Stories.

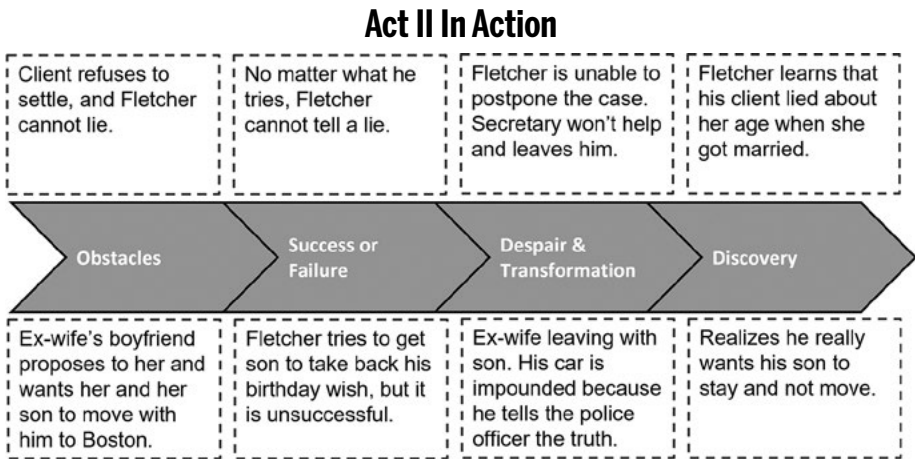


Figure 115: Act II Case Study - *Liar Liar*

If you have never seen *Liar Liar*, we hope that the process of reading this material inspires you to seek it out so you can witness these principles playing out for yourself. Assuming you are familiar with the movie, think about how Fletcher's A-Story and B-Story impact the entire narrative while never actually intermingling. Fletcher's ex-wife and son never once set foot in the courtroom or his law offices. His secretary never has a conversation with anyone in his private life. But *all* of these events have a bearing on Fletcher's Character Wave and push on one after another through him.

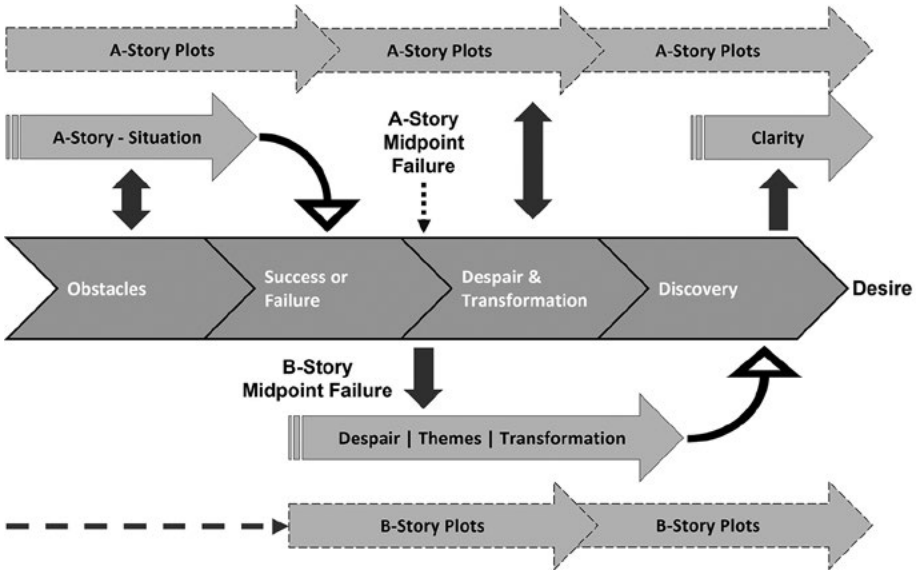


Figure 116: Act II Full Plot Dynamics Graph

Notice the dashed throughline of the B-Story at the beginning of Act II suggest a first-part/second-part shift in emphasis between A-Story and B-Story. **ACT II-PART 1** tends to be a bit more A-Story focused, while the second half tends toward the B-Story. And when you think about it, this makes perfect sense. The first half naturally deals with the practical matters of handling the Primary Situation. **ACT II-PART 2**, the post-Midpoint Despair-into-Transformation phase, naturally requires inward reflection.

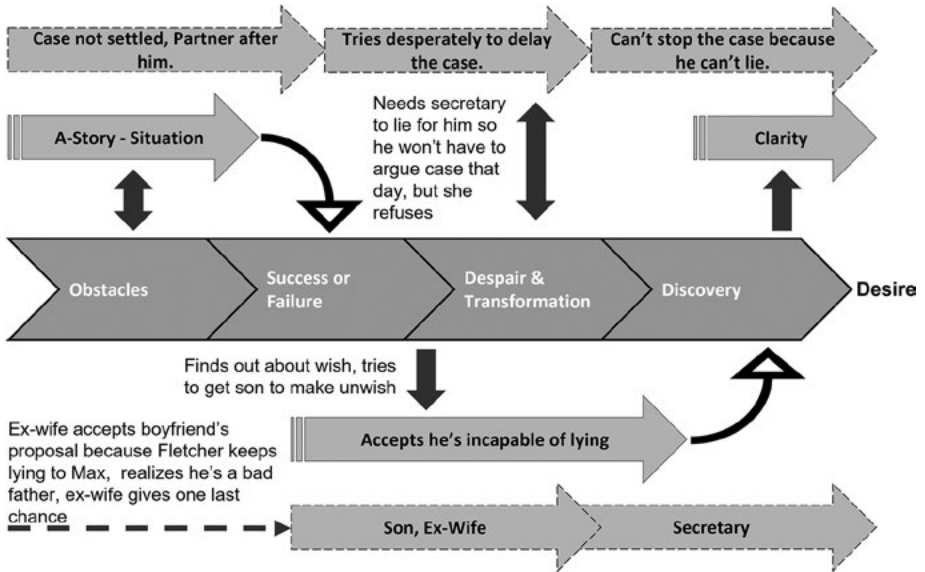


Figure 117: Act II Full Plot Dynamics Graph for *Liar Liar*

Notice here that the *Clarity* relates to the central Theme: *Win with the Truth*. And this applies to both stories. He can win the case with the truth in the A-Story, and he repairs his relationships with truth in the B-Story. Look for this in other examples, and strive for it in your own work!

Putting Act II Together: *Liar Liar*

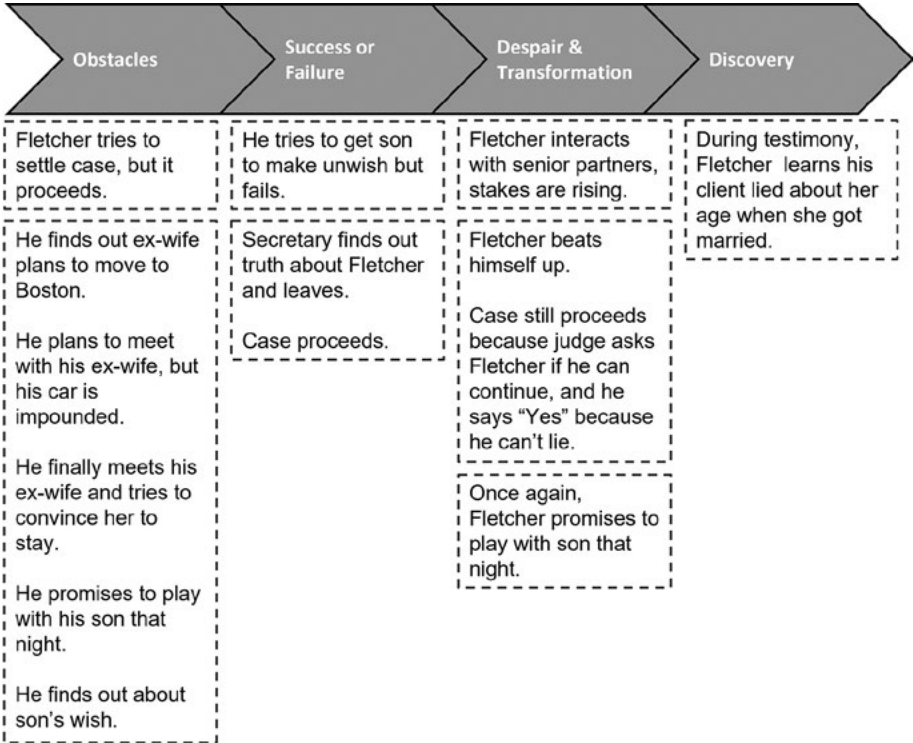


Figure 118: Act II Integrated Timeline for *Liar Liar*

Another seamless merge of Plot Elements organized into scene progression through time.

ACT III Structural Phases Breakdown

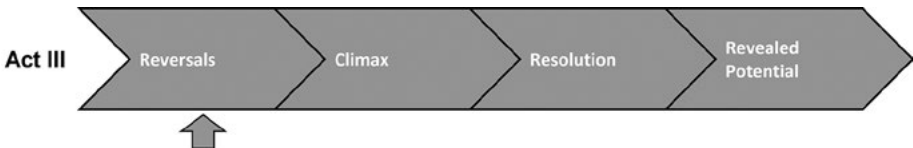


Figure 119: Act III - Reversals

- The Discovery(s) lead to a Reversal in the story's outcome.
- Reversals occur in *every* storyline.

- Resolution Goal is introduced.

Resolution Goal is a Core Element. We have worked hard to sort out these concepts to present them in an order where everything builds through the principle of *Relevance*. If you let Theme be your guide in building out your Core Elements to understand your story, then you should now see how you are working toward a *target*: a Resolution Goal that stems right from the Clarity gained through Discovery and Transformation. Transformation is the end product of the Character Wave. **REVERSALS** take place at all levels of the story. Every Reversal is fed by *Theme*.

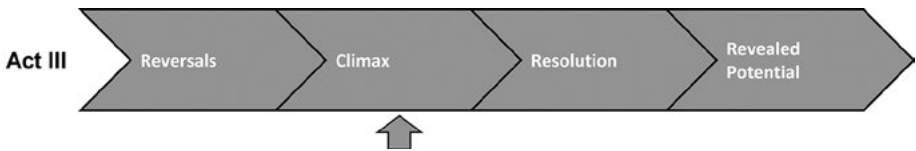


Figure 120: Act III - Climax

- The outcome of the A-Story
- The outcomes of most of the A-Story plots

The Climax marks the end of the A-Story.

The second bullet point here acknowledges this is the end of *most* A-Story Subplots because it's very likely that one or more A-Story relationships the Main Character establishes along the way continues on into their greater B-Story life. Review Chapter Eight for more on A and B Story Subplots.



Figure 121: Act III - Resolution

- The outcomes of the B-Story plots
- The outcome(s) of any carryover A-Story plots

- Completion of Main Character’s Transformation

Another way of thinking about this is to say the Resolution is the *Climax* of the B-Story. And for these ongoing Plotlines, the *outcomes* are a bit less final. Those relationships will go on after the end of the Revealed Story.

The Transformation was crucial to resolving the Primary Situation. Now the story demonstrates that the Main Character is not just going to discard Clarity and return to their old way of thinking (unless the story concludes as a tragic tale, like Stephen King’s *Pet Semetary*).



Figure 122: Act III - Revealed Potential

- A short look into the future life of the Main Character after their Transformation

And they lived happily(?) ever after. Life goes on.

ACT III In Action

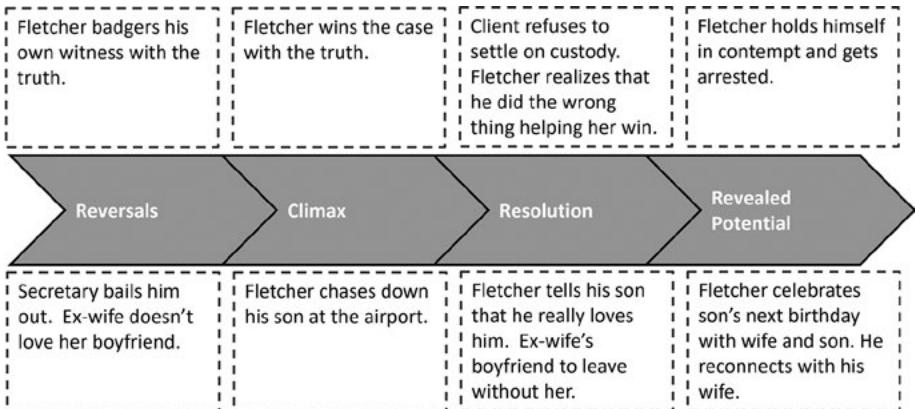


Figure 123: Act III Case Study - *Liar Liar*

Here again, the A-B Story phases are not 100% in-sync in the real-time of the movie. “Holds himself in contempt and gets arrested” happens

before “Secretary bails him out,” of course. But the speed of Act III means these events all happen in rapid short order.

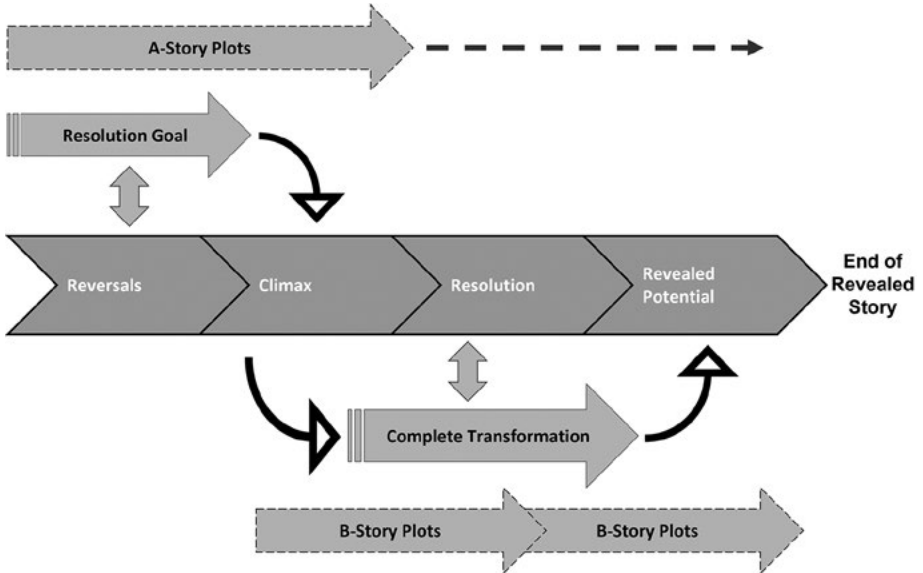


Figure 124: Act III Full Plot Dynamics Graph

Act III tends to be fast and furious by comparison to the first two acts. It’s too late to introduce new Characters, new information, and new thematic ideas. It’s a race to the finish line and this graph captures the more streamlined, straightforward energy of Act III.

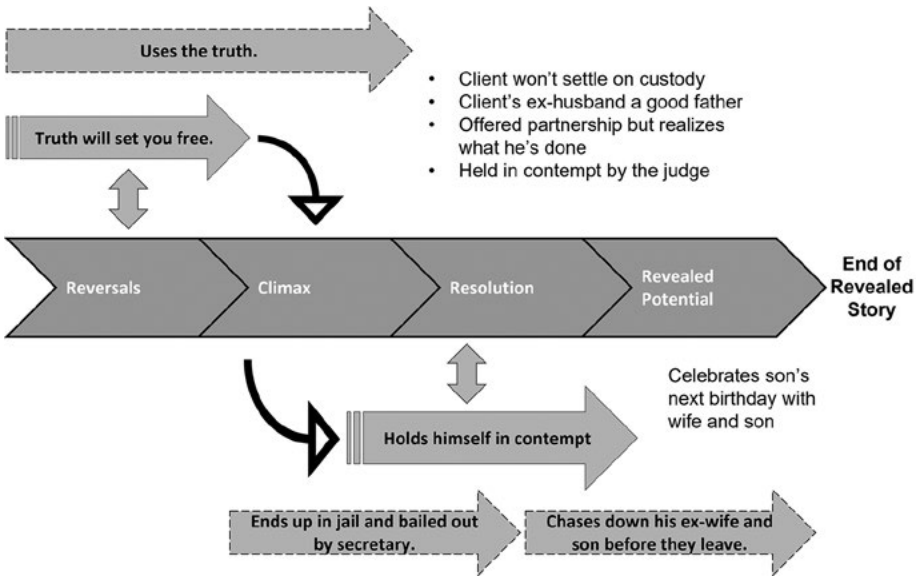


Figure 125: Act III Full Plot Dynamics Graph for *Liar Liar*

When you go back and look at the Full Plot Dynamics Graphs for all three acts, pay attention to the final piece of text for the *Revealed Potential*. The pattern emerges, and you see that each act builds toward a single moment of *significance*.

- Everything in Act I builds toward making an already difficult Situation *much more difficult* in the form of a *Primary Obstacle*.
- Everything in Act II builds toward making a profoundly unclear Situation *suddenly clear through Discovery* leading to *Clarity*, which produces a Desire that shapes the Resolution Goal.
- Everything in Act III builds toward understanding how things are going to be by way of the *Revealed Potential*.

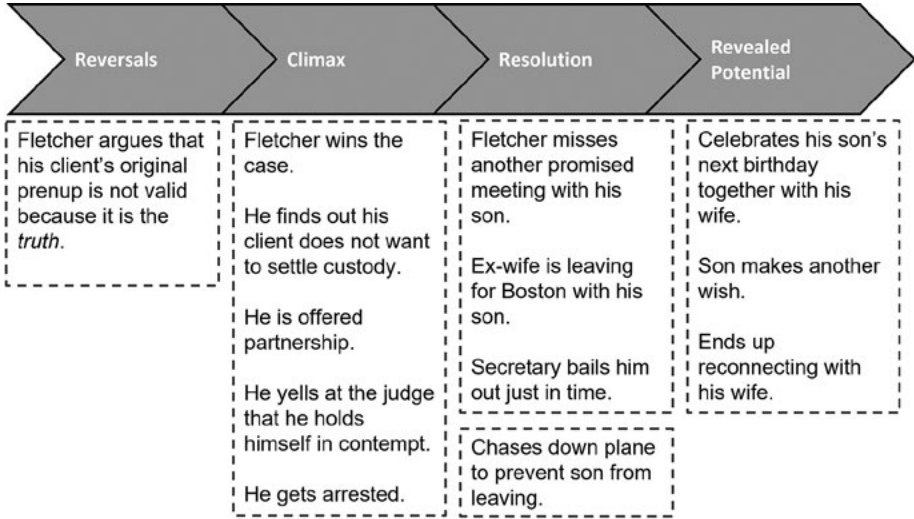


Figure 126: Act III Integrated Timeline for *Liar Liar*

This completes the structural breakdown example for all three acts of *Liar Liar*. To round out this discussion of Story Structure, we finish with breakdowns of our other IPs.

Structural Phases of the Simple Story Timeline And Full Plot Dynamics Graphs

Case Study II: *Star Wars*

Let's take a look at the Simple Story Timeline (A and B Stories) and Plot Dynamics Graphs for all three acts of *Star Wars, Episode IV*.

Act I

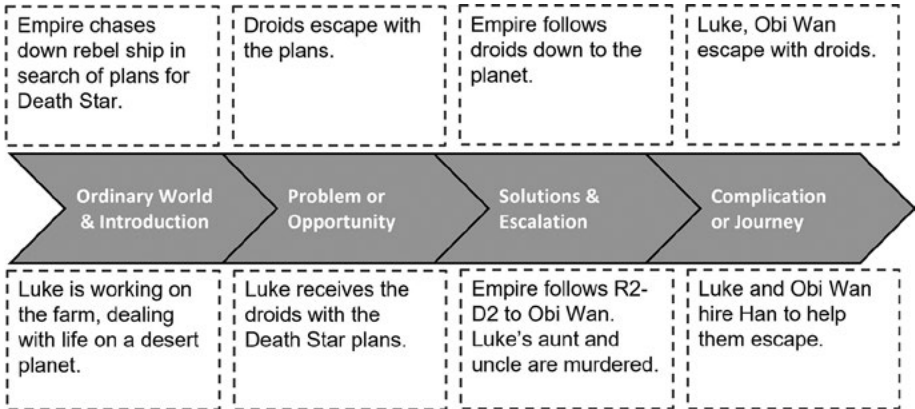


Figure 127: Act I Case Study - *Star Wars*

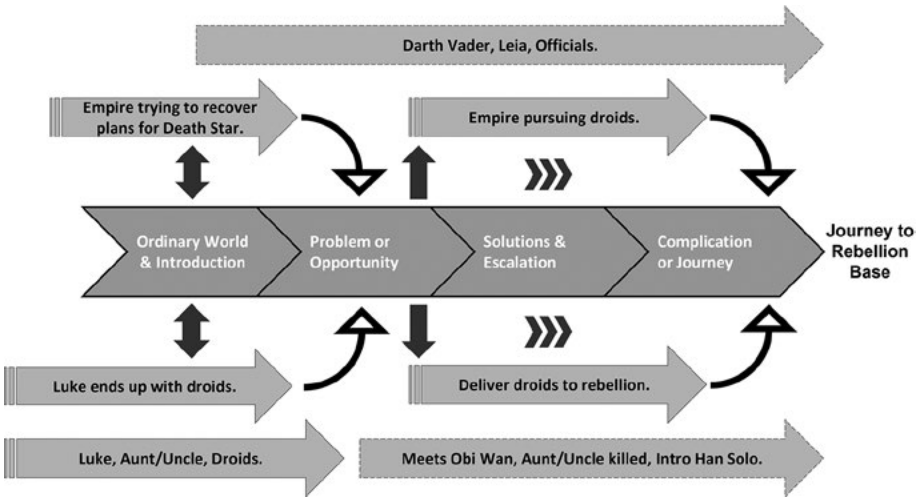


Figure 128: Act I Full Plot Graph for *Star Wars*

Act II

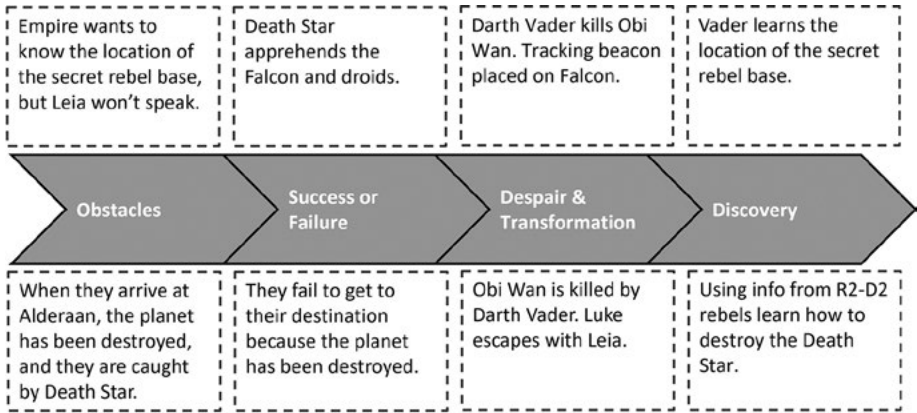


Figure 129: Act II Case Study - Star Wars

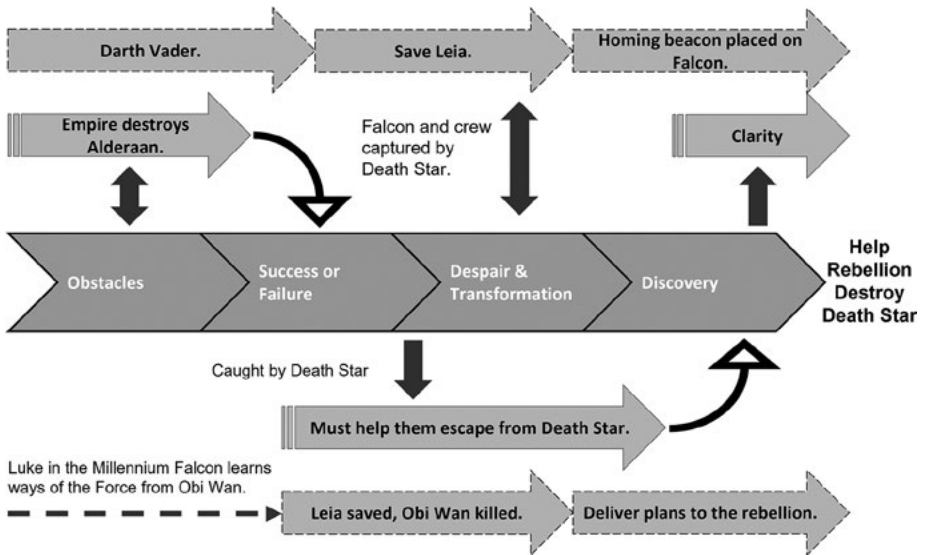


Figure 130: Act II Full Plot Graph for Star Wars

Act III

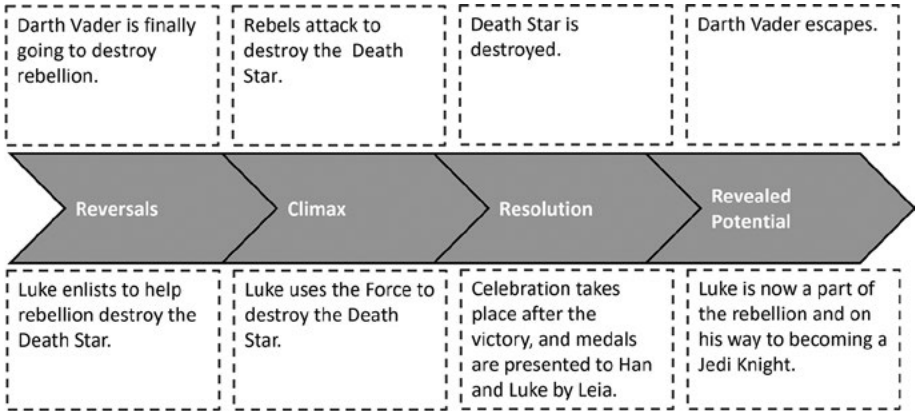


Figure 131: Act III Case Study - Star Wars

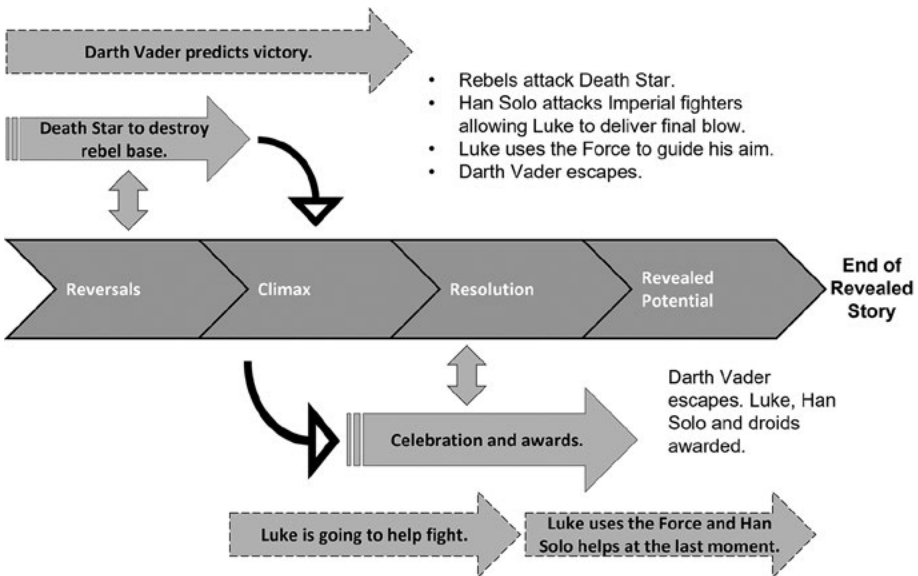


Figure 132: Full Act III Full Plot Graph for Star Wars

Case Study III: *Die Hard*

Our third Structure example covers *Die Hard*.

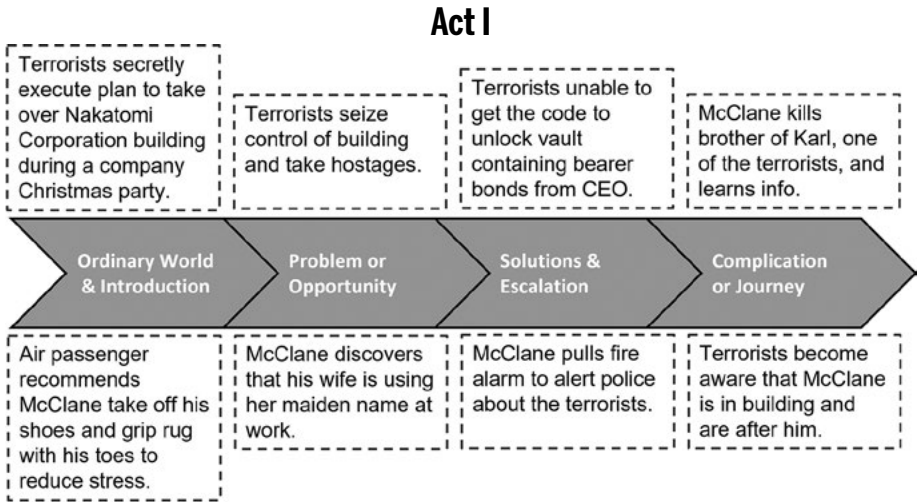


Figure 133: Act I Case Study - *Die Hard*

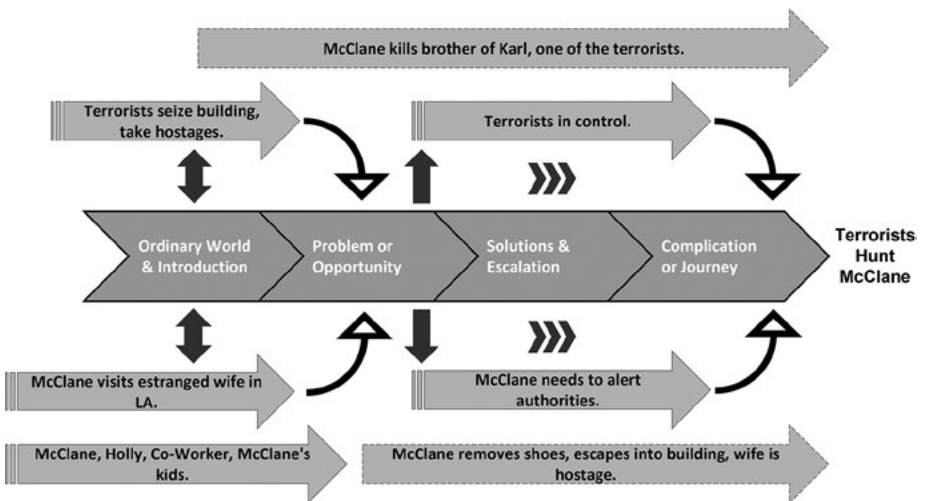


Figure 134: Act I Full Plot Graph for *Die Hard*

Act II

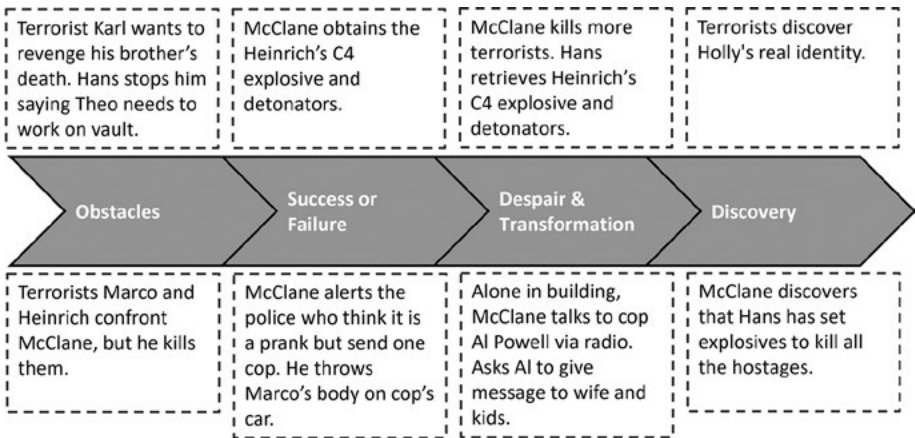


Figure 135: Act II Case Study - Die Hard

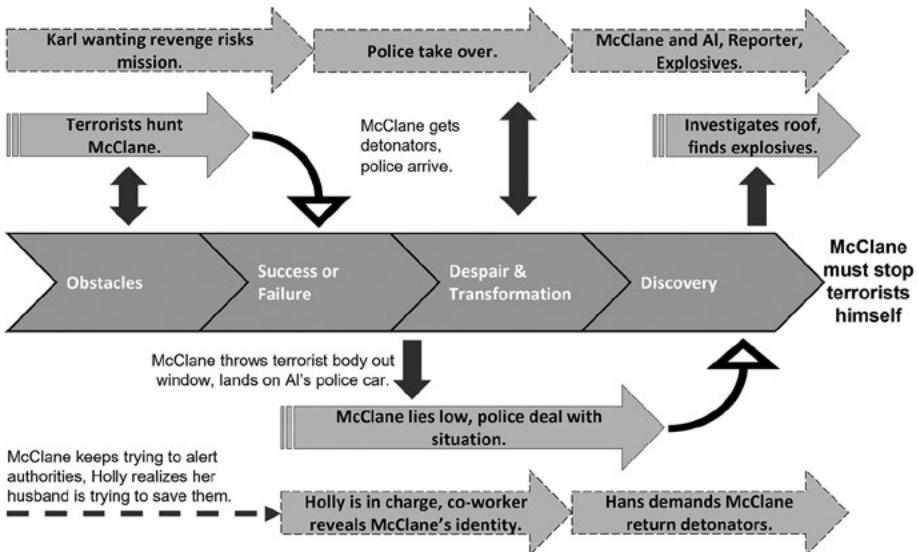


Figure 136: Act II Full Plot Graph for Die Hard

Act III

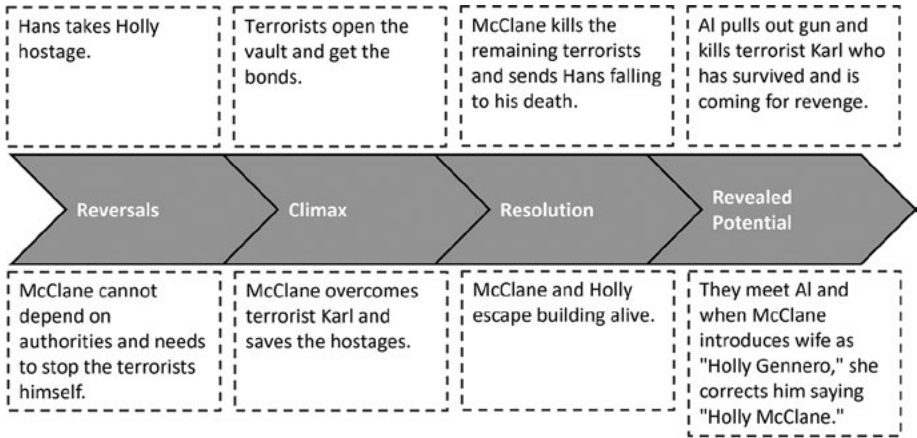


Figure 137: Act III Case Study - *Die Hard*

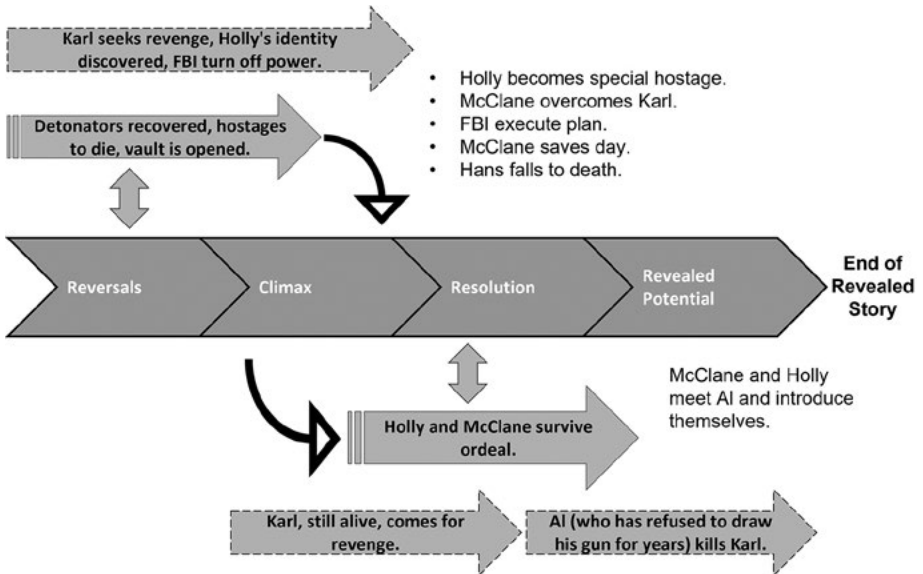


Figure 138: Act III Full Plot Graph for *Die Hard*

Case Study IV: Rocky

Our fourth IP stepping into the structural breakdown ring is *Rocky*.

Act I

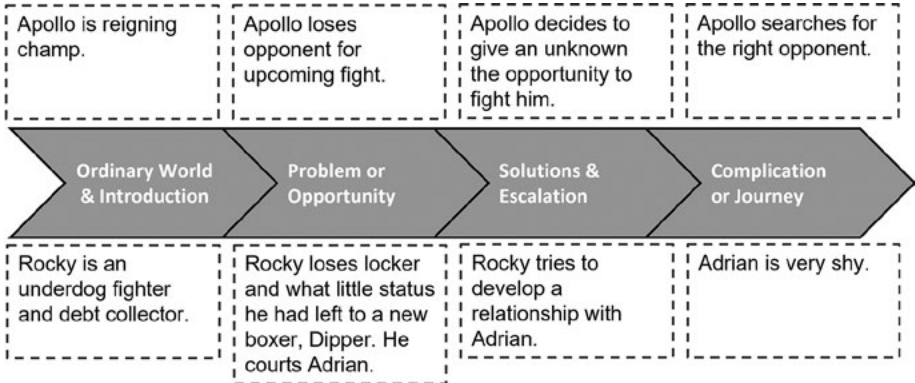


Figure 139: Act I Case Study - *Rocky*

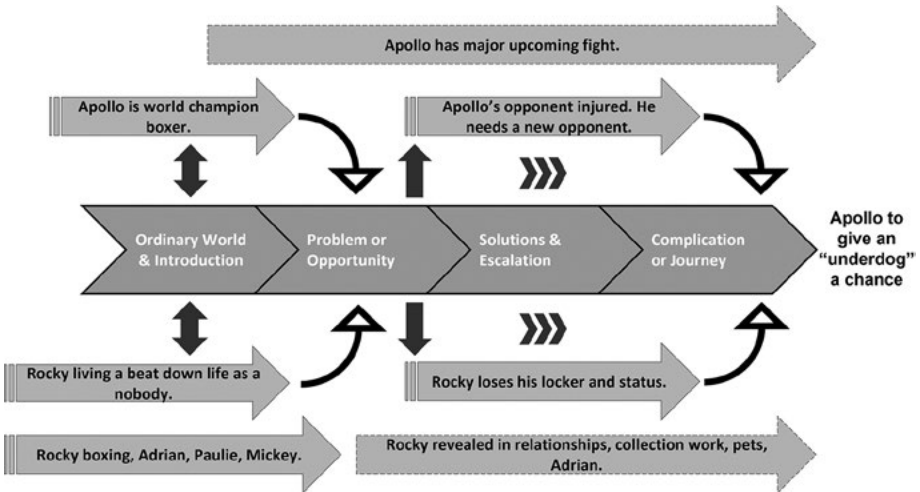


Figure 140: Act I Full Plot Graph for *Rocky*

Act II

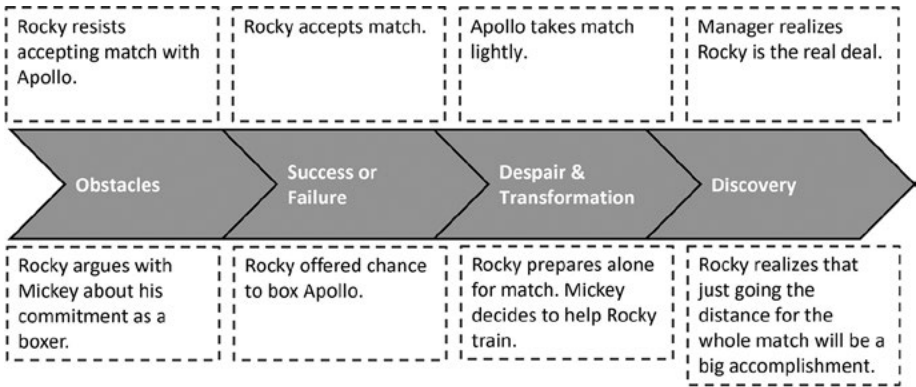


Figure 141: Act II Case Study - Rocky

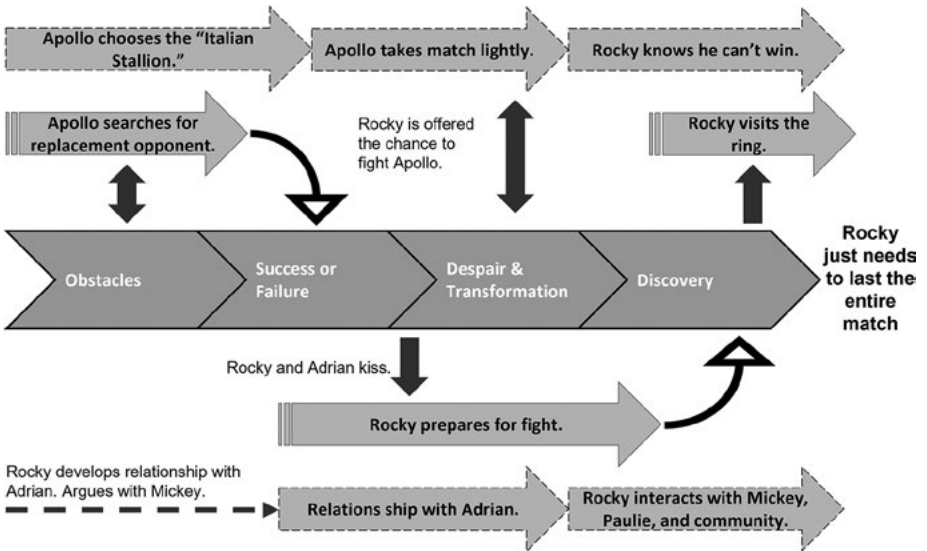


Figure 142: Full Act II Plot Graph for Rocky

Act III

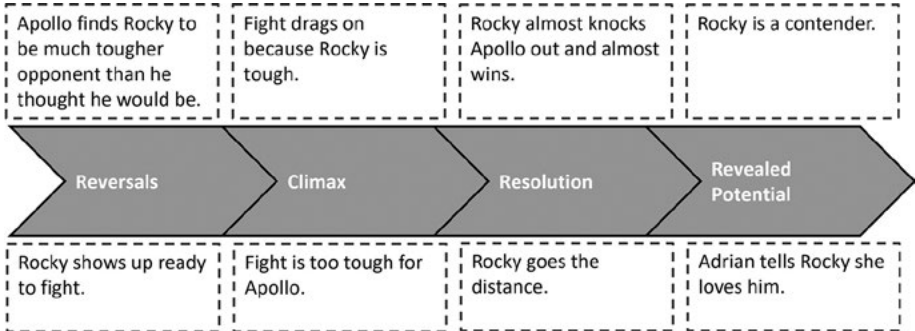


Figure 143: Act III Case Study - Rocky

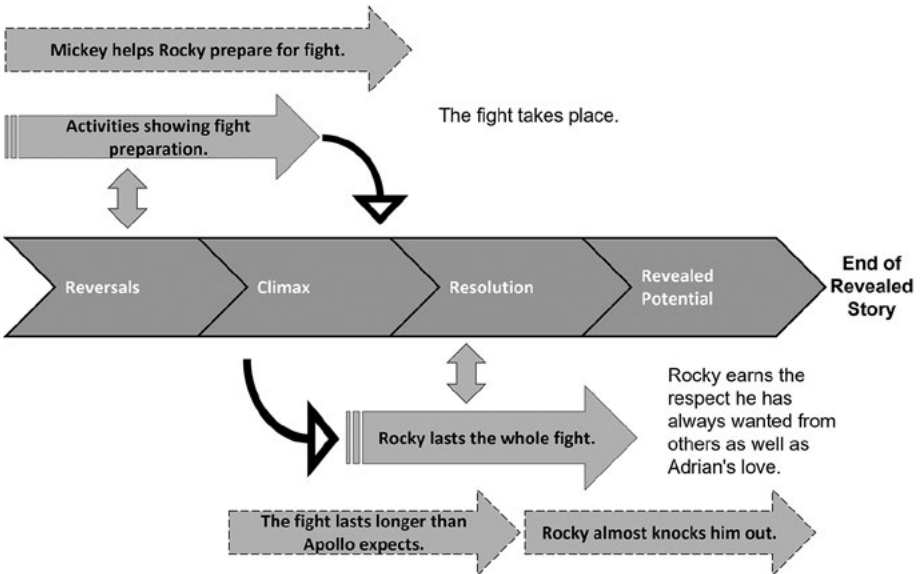


Figure 144: Act III Full Plot Graph for Rocky

Case Study V: The *Harry Potter* Series

Our final structural adventure explores the wizarding world of *Harry Potter*.

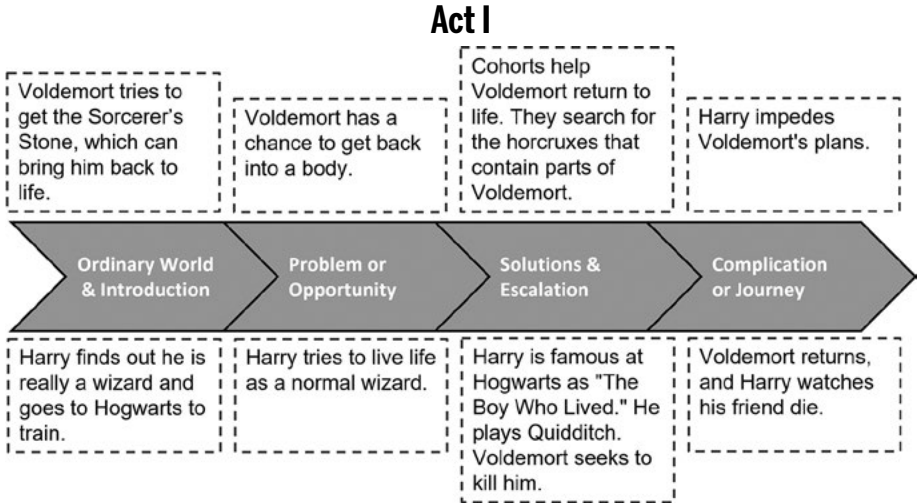


Figure 145: Act I Case Study - *Harry Potter* Series

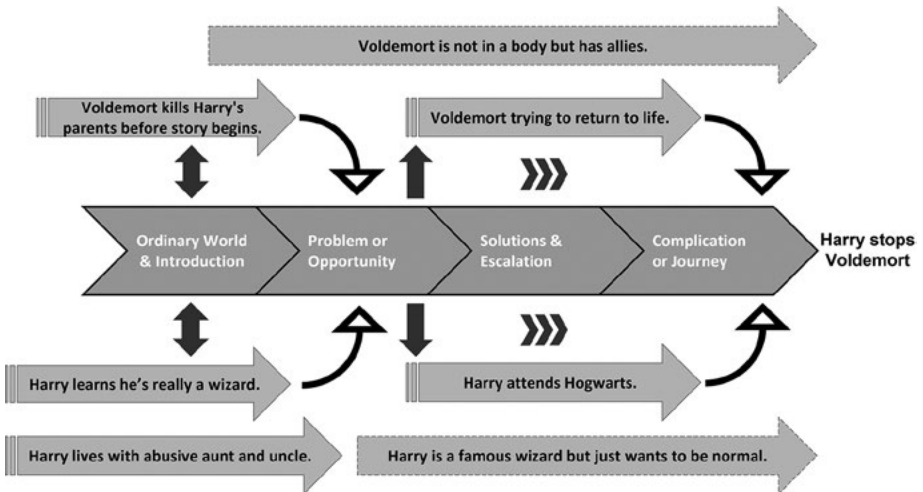


Figure 146: Act I Full Plot Graph for *Harry Potter* Series

Act II

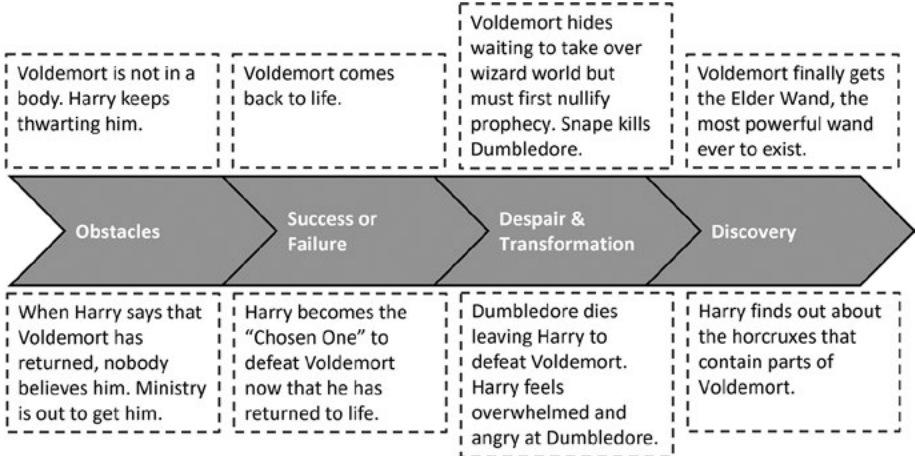


Figure 147: Act II Case Study - *Harry Potter* Series

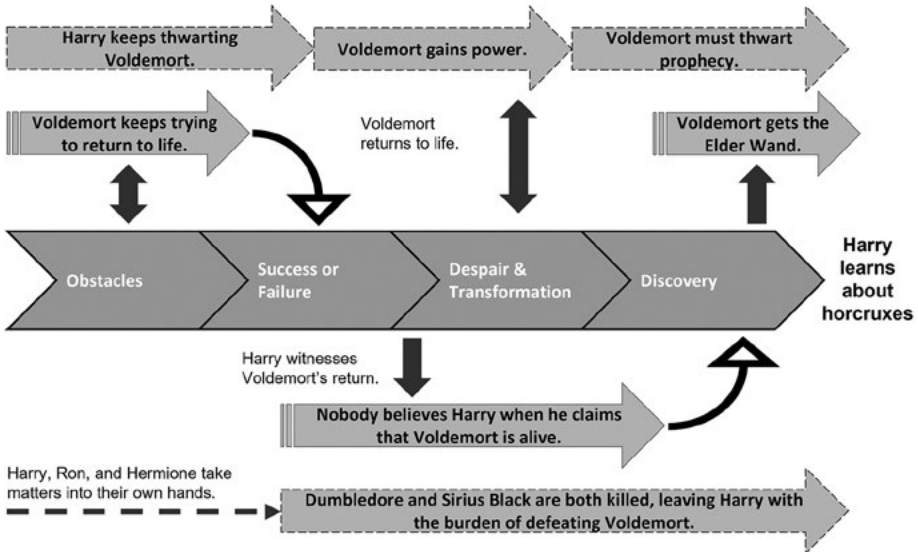


Figure 148: Act II Full Plot Graph for *Harry Potter* Series

Act III

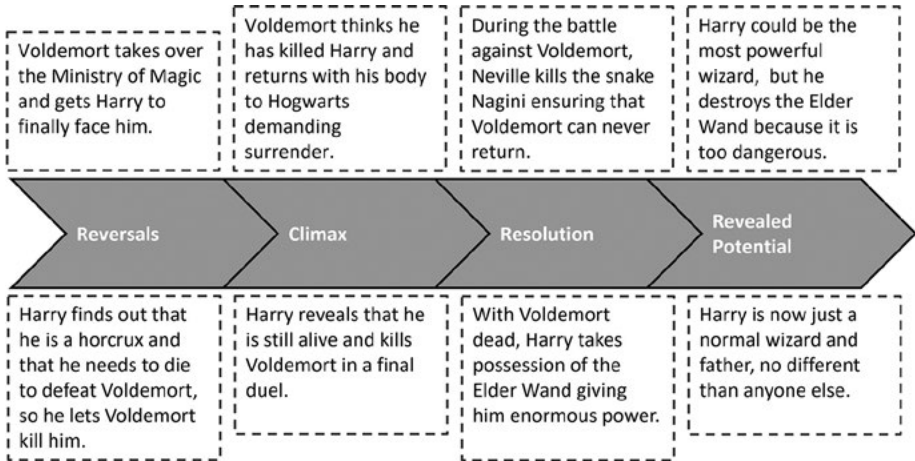


Figure 149: Act III Case Study - *Harry Potter* Series

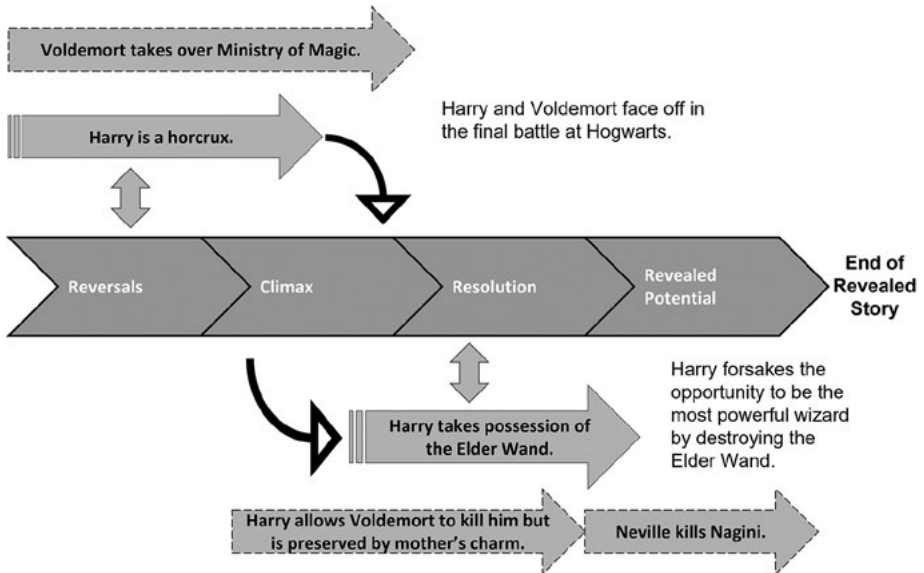


Figure 150: Act III Full Plot Graph for *Harry Potter* Series

The majority of this book laid out the conceptual construction materials for building a story. It laid out the building project proposal when we

introduced the Two-Story Model and the Character Wave. It gave you the building blocks with the Core Elements. It supplied the bonding agent in our Thematic Conflict Layer concept.

This chapter provided the architect's blueprint through our discussion of Structure.

Our tenth chapter is all about populating your construction. While you have everything necessary to build stories in the Your Storytelling Potential Method, there are some important insights yet to come about Characters, actions, and dialogue. As you can guess, we are going to continue to preach the gospel of Relevance.