



The Story Skeleton

Writers can be divided into two categories. One kind writes from inspiration, throwing everything on paper as it occurs to him. He's like a sculptor picking out a huge chunk of marble that will eventually be chipped down to the size of a man. Skillfully done, this works. But it is very time consuming and a bad way to learn story. It depends on more than latent skill; it depends on experience and story insight.

The second kind of writer is like an artist who sculpts clay. He starts with a wire frame and adds to it one piece of clay at a time until the figure of a man is completed.

This is the way we're going to approach story. We aren't looking for a huge chunk of marble prose that can be pared down. We're looking for a wire frame capable of supporting the story we want to tell. That wire frame is called a story skeleton (or spine, but skeleton sounds cooler). It consists of the four scenes that will define your story's three major acts.

For the next two weeks we'll concentrate on shaping the wire frame of your story into a strong support system for your novel.

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ACTS AND SCENES

*Acts and Scenes**Acts*

Western cultures favor stories with repetitions of three. *The Three Musketeers* is one obvious example, but the principle goes much deeper than that. Even childhood tales like *The Three Little Pigs* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* barely scratch the surface. Almost every story you can think of uses repetitions of three to some extent. Jokes, anecdotes, advertising slogans, radio dramas, movies, short stories, novels—even urban myths—all rely on the power of three.

Why? It probably has to do with the economy of language. The first two repetitions of any story element are just enough to establish some kind of pattern, which means developing an expectation in the reader's mind. The third story element either breaks the pattern, and so creates surprise or humor, or it completes the pattern and creates a sense of satisfaction.

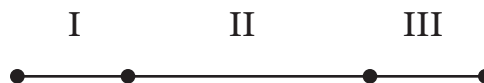
Here's an example of the first from Mark Twain: "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of congress. But I repeat myself." This is a funny line because the first two sentences make us think Twain is going to say something about congress. That expectation is fulfilled, but in an unexpected way, and we are both surprised and amused.

Goldilocks is an example of the satisfaction created by the third element fulfilling, rather than breaking, a story pattern. She first found Papa Bear's bed too hard, then found Mama Bear's bed too soft, then found Baby Bear's bed to be *just* right.

But in its most basic form, the power of three is structural. Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Your audience expects as much; they expect to be given clues about when beginning changes into middle, and middle becomes end.

Playwrights and screenwriters speak in terms of "acts," and so will we. The three acts of your novel coincide with the beginning, middle and end of your story. The middle section will be twice as long as the beginning and end, roughly half the length of the book. This means act I will consist of chapters 1–3, act II will consist of chapters 4–9, and act III will consist of chapters 10–12.

Your novel should be structured like this:



Each act must have a trajectory of its own. An act doesn't serve as a complete story, and cannot stand by itself, but it does have a beginning, middle and end. Chapter 1 is the beginning of act I, chapter 2 is the middle, and chapter 3 is the end of the first act.

This may seem incredibly obvious and simple. But it is easy to overlook the obvious and simple when creating a story. You have a lot of things to think about. That's why we're taking time to create a workable structure now, so when it comes time to do the writing of your first draft, you don't have to worry about the structure part. You can spend your brain cells on the feverish act of imagining what happens next.

Because this is an adventure novel and not a play, we can be fairly loose with the way we construct our three acts. The most important thing will be for each act to fulfill some aspect of the story goal as it pushes the hero on or culminates in a completion of the story goal.

In the next lesson we'll look at how acts are marked by major changes and **defining scenes**. But before we can do that, we need to examine what a scene is—and what it isn't.

Scenes

A **scene** is the smallest section of a story in which something of value to the story changes. Think of values as either positive or negative. Any time an important value goes from positive to negative or from negative to positive, you have the basis for a scene. Here are a few examples:

Married to single	Free to imprisoned
Wealthy to poor.	Hopeless to hopeful
Healthy to sick	Having to not having
Leaving to staying	Ignorant to informed

All these are changes in values. All might form the crucial change necessary for a scene to have meaning in a story.

Remember chapter six from *The Prisoner of Zenda*? The scene began with Rassendyl on his way to get the king out of hiding and restore him to the throne. It ends when Rassendyl discovers that the king has been kidnapped by Black Michael. The change of values is from freedom to imprisonment. If the chapter had ended with the king being found where they left him, it would not have been a scene at all. There would have been no change of values and no movement of the story. Such a chapter



*“People do not
deserve to have
good writing, they
are so pleased with
bad.”*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

might as well have been left out. As it is, the chapter is necessary because it reveals a vital story change: the kidnapping of the king.

Or take chapter eighteen of *The Blood Ship*, which begins with Shreve undecided, and ends with his decision to kill Captain Swope. The change in values in this chapter is from undecided to decided. Suppose Shreve made no decision in the chapter. What then? It would not be a scene. We would know nothing more at the end than we did at the beginning. Such a chapter would be better left out.

The only thing that goes into your story is the story. If a chapter or scene does not advance the story, cut it out. If it does not show a change of values important to the story, either change it or delete it. A scene isn't a scene without concrete change.

A scene is not just whatever happens at a certain place. A scene is not scenery.

Many beginning writers generate pages and pages of narrative prose in which nothing changes at all except a character's surroundings. Just because the hero moved from the castle wall to the dungeon doesn't mean we're in a different scene. It is only a meaningful change if it impacts the story. If the hero moves from the castle wall to the dungeon because he has been captured, then you probably have a scene. If he moves from the castle wall to the dungeon, and then the great hall, and then the smithy, and never finds what he's looking for, you probably have a lot of unnecessary moving around. Such a scene could be reduced to a single sentence, or even eliminated altogether.

Most scenes are limited to a single time and place, but not all. It can be confusing for a reader to follow a change in surroundings when nothing else changes. But some scenes might require a change of surroundings in order for the change in values to occur.

In *The Prisoner of Zenda*, for example, they only learn about the King's kidnapping because they go to the cottage where they left him. They change their surroundings. But that scene itself isn't about where they are, and it isn't two scenes. It's one scene about the King being taken by the villain. The two locales are necessary in showing us the meaningful change of values from free to imprisoned.

It is possible, even common, to have more than one scene in a chapter. However, I strongly recommend keeping your chapters to one scene; one change of values, one dramatic turning point.

Turning a Scene

Dramatists sometimes talk about "turning a scene." What they mean is that every scene has a climactic moment that shows the change of values we've been discussing. That moment almost always comes at the end of

the scene, or very near it. The point at which an important value changes is the point at which the scene “turns.”

Chapter six of *The Prisoner of Zenda* turns on its last sentence: “The king is not here.” Likewise, chapter eighteen of *The Blood Ship* turns on: “I’ll kill Captain Swope.” In both cases the change in values (free to imprisoned and undecided to decided) results from the action of the entire scene. What happens when they find out the king is missing depends on what happens before. The decision to risk everything and kill Captain Swope is necessitated because of what happens earlier in the chapter between Shreve and the two gun-toting sailors, Boston and Blackie.

Scenes always turn either on a **revelation** or an **action**. Either a character learns something or does something. As you begin to outline the twelve chapters of your novel, ask yourself:

1. What’s going to change in this chapter (or scene)?
2. Will it change because of revelation or action? Will the character learn something or do something?



Turn to the next page for a reading from *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

Also read: *The Prisoner of Zenda*, chapter 13



from *The Prisoner of Zenda*, by Anthony Hope

Chapter Nine

There were steps outside.

"They're coming! They're too soon! Heavens! they're too soon!" and she turned pale as death.

"They seem to me," said I, "to be in the nick of time."

"Close your lantern. See, there's a chink in the door. Can you see them?"

I put my eye to the chink. On the lowest step I saw three dim figures. I cocked my revolver. Antoinette hastily laid her hand on mine.

"You may kill one," said she. "But what then?"

A voice came from outside—a voice that spoke perfect English. "Mr. Rassendyll," it said.

I made no answer.

"We want to talk to you. Will you promise not to shoot till we've done?"

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Detchard?" I said.

"Never mind names."

"Then let mine alone."

"All right, sire. I've an offer for you."

I still had my eye to the chink. The three had mounted two steps more; three revolvers pointed full at the door.

"Will you let us in? We pledge our honour to observe the truce."

"Don't trust them," whispered Antoinette.

"We can speak through the door," said I.

"But you might open it and fire," objected Detchard; "and though we should finish you, you might finish one of us. Will you give your honour not to fire while we talk?"

"Don't trust them," whispered Antoinette again.

A sudden idea struck me. I considered it for a moment. It seemed feasible.

"I give my honour not to fire before you do," said I; "but I won't let you in. Stand outside and talk."

"That's sensible," he said.

The three mounted the last step, and stood just outside the door. I laid my ear to the chink. I could hear no words, but Detchard's head was close to that of the taller of his companions (De Gautet, I guessed).

"H'm! Private communications," thought I. Then I said aloud:

"Well, gentlemen, what's the offer?"

"A safe-conduct to the frontier, and fifty thousand pounds English."

"No, no," whispered Antoinette in the lowest of whispers. "They are treacherous."

"That seems handsome," said I, reconnoitring through the chink. They were all close together, just outside the door now.

I had probed the hearts of the ruffians, and I did not need Antoinette's warning. They meant to "rush" me as soon as I was engaged in talk.

"Give me a minute to consider," said I; and I thought I heard a laugh outside.

I turned to Antoinette.

"Stand up close to the wall, out of the line of fire from the door," I whispered.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in fright.

“You’ll see,” said I.

I took up the little iron table. It was not very heavy for a man of my strength, and I held it by the legs. The top, protruding in front of me, made a complete screen for my head and body. I fastened my closed lantern to my belt and put my revolver in a handy pocket. Suddenly I saw the door move ever so slightly—perhaps it was the wind, perhaps it was a hand trying it outside.

I drew back as far as I could from the door, holding the table in the position that I have described. Then I called out:

“Gentlemen, I accept your offer, relying on your honour. If you will open the door—”

“Open it yourself,” said Detchard.

“It opens outwards,” said I. “Stand back a little, gentlemen, or I shall hit you when I open it.”

I went and fumbled with the latch. Then I stole back to my place on tiptoe.

“I can’t open it!” I cried. “The latch has caught.”

“Tut! I’ll open it!” cried Detchard. “Nonsense, Bersonin, why not? Are you afraid of one man?”

I smiled to myself. An instant later the door was flung back. The gleam of a lantern showed me the three close together outside, their revolvers levelled. With a shout, I charged at my utmost pace across the summer-house and through the doorway. Three shots rang out and battered into my shield. Another moment, and I leapt out and the table caught them full and square, and in a tumbling, swearing, struggling mass, they and I and that brave table, rolled down the steps of the summerhouse to the ground below. Antoinette de Mauban shrieked, but I rose to my feet, laughing aloud.

De Gautet and Bersonin lay like men stunned. Detchard was under the table, but, as I rose, he pushed it from him and fired again. I raised my revolver and took a snap shot; I heard him curse, and then I ran like a hare, laughing as I went, past the summer-house and along by the wall. I heard steps behind me, and turning round I fired again for luck. The steps ceased.

“Please God,” said I, “she told me the truth about the ladder!” for the wall was high and topped with iron spikes.

Yes, there it was. I was up and over in a minute. Doubling back, I saw the horses; then I heard a shot. It was Sapt. He had heard us, and was battling and raging with the locked gate, hammering it and firing into the keyhole like a man possessed. He had quite forgotten that he was not to take part in the fight. Whereat I laughed again, and said, as I clapped him on the shoulder:

“Come home to bed, old chap. I’ve got the finest tea-table story that ever you heard!”

He started and cried: “You’re safe!” and wrung my hand. But a moment later he added:

“And what the devil are you laughing at?”

“Four gentlemen round a tea-table,” said I, laughing still, for it had been uncommonly ludicrous to see the formidable three altogether routed and scattered with no more deadly weapon than an ordinary tea-table.

Moreover, you will observe that I had honourably kept my word, and not fired till they did.

Reading Questions

How does Hope reveal character through this scene?

What conflict makes this scene work?

What changes as a result of this scene?