**Building Blocks: How To Structure Your Story**

**Episode 1: An Introduction to Structure**

Video (with closed captions): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2L88RRydvI>

Hello, how are yous?

Thanks very much for tuning into our video.

I am Michael Patrick and I am Oisín Kearney.

We’re a writing partnership, and we’ve written for stage, for TV and radio.

We are currently working with the Traverse Theatre as the IASH Playwriting Fellows of 2022.

We are absolutely thrilled that they've asked us to deliver the next in their series of playwriting workshops after - Meghan Tyler’s “Anyone Can Write a Play” and Laurie Motherwell’s “How to Build your Voice”.

Now, if you’ve not watched those, we’d really recommend it. They've got lots of, you know, rules and tools, and they’re really helpful for any writer, whether you’re a beginner or very experienced.

So, if you’d like to go and give them a watch, - if you've not done that already, pause this and come back when you’ve done so. We’ll wait.

(Humorous pause).

Thanks for coming back.

Over the next four fifteen-minute videos, we’re going to offer you a crash course in structure, talking about the building blocks of story, which will be really helpful for writing plays.

But similar rules also work if you're writing for television , screen, creative non-fiction, or just telling a story to your mates.

We’ll talk about ACTS, SCENES, the TIME, and PLACE, and the HERO’S JOURNEY.

It is not a hard and fast rulebook, but what we're going to talk about is a framework that can help you sculpt your scripts and tweak your stories.

It's basically something to hang your hat on, if you ever get stuck.

It’s good to know the theory of conventional classical story structure, so that you can decide to do whatever you want with your own story.

So, what we are going to present in these videos, is nothing that we have come up with ourselves.

It’s all things what we’ve picked up from working on the job.

We've learnt them from videos like these, from writing workshops, from reading lots and lots of books, from some very lovely feedback from incredibly patient people after we've delivered very bad first drafts and second drafts.

... And third drafts... Sometimes fourth drafts... And often fifth drafts.

But, you know, this video series is our attempt to pass on some of that knowledge to you, and hopefully that's valuable.

Everything we’re going to talk about in these videos, we use all the time in everything we write.

Hopefully, we can help you find something that's useful for you.

So...What is structure?

So Ira Glass, - of the great podcast This American Life - he talks about narrative as basically "a sequence of events:

something happens, then something else, then something else, then something else, maybe.

And then, human instinct compels us to stick around to see what happens.”

So, if narrative is a sequence of events, then structure is where those events are placed.

How many scenes, how many events and when and where do they appear in the story?

Shall we go over to the flip chart?

Yes, let's.

Thanks for joining us to the flip chart.

So, when we're talking about structure, we like to boil it down to essentials.

We think about is as

1, 2, 3.

BEGINNING, MIDDLE, END.

Now, that might sound a bit simple, but it’s really the basis of all story.

There are many different ways, different practitioners refer to this, but it’s all really different ways of saying- one, two three.

Use whatever you find helpful.

So, 1, 2, 3.

INTRODUCTION, DEVELOPMENT, CONCLUSION.

Or, you might hear it referred to as: SETUP, CONFRONTATION, RESOLUTION.

Or, for you philosophers out there: THESIS, ANTITHESIS, SYNTHESIS.

Ordinary World, Extraordinary World, Ordinary

World again, but Changed.

Water, Fire, Steam.

Blue, Yellow, Green.

Or, what we're going to refer to as:

ACT 1, ACT 2, and ACT 3.

So, what is an Act?

An Act is a unit of action, consisting of a number of scenes.

The Acts themselves, have a beginning, middle, and an end.

And at the end of the Act, it spins the narrative off, into a new direction, into a new Act.

So, we're going to be looking at stories in a 3 Act structure.

This isn’t the same as what you might read in a play script.

Yes, because a lot of plays you know might say it is a 1 Act play, or it's a, maybe it's got an interval, so it's a 2 Act play, or maybe it's 4 Act play, like a Chekhov, or a 5 Acts, like Shakespeare.

But no matter how many Acts the play claims they have, they all have a 3 Act structure.

All the others are just variations of the same thing.

So, Act 1, introduction, so, what happens in that?

We introduce the protagonist.

Act 2, what happens in Act 2?

We confront the Protagonist with their opposite, or with the Antagonist.

And in the third Act, we synthesise to achieve balance.

Okay. So, it's a wee bit heady there.

But let’s see if we can make the structure work.

Oisín, can you think of a basic story, - a fairy tale.

Goldilocks and the Three bears.

All right. Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Hopefully, you know that.

If you don't, check it out on the internet.

How would you break Goldilocks and the Three Bears into your three Act structure?

Okay, so, Act 1: Once upon a time, there are three bears; daddy bear, momma bear, and small bear. They make porridge and they go off into the forest.

All right. And how does that develop in Act 2?

Okay. So, Act 2: the antagonist, -a little girl-,

goes inside the house, tastes the porridge and sleeps in their beds.

And then, your conclusion in Act 3?

Okay, so, the conclusion is: the bears come home, they

see somebody has been there, and they scared Goldilocks away, and she runs back into the forest.

And there you go, that's your ending.

Introduction, Development, Conclusion.

Now we're going to do an exercise for you guys.

Do the same thing. Think of fairy tales; simplest story there is. Normally, they're very clear structurally.

And see if you can think of what's the introduction, what's the development, and what's the conclusion. We'll wait.

How did you get on?

So, I did, I tried the story of The Three Little Pigs.

Okay, great. (laughter)

So, tell us, what's the first Act of The Thee Little Pigs?

Act 1, Three Little Pigs - Three little pigs are sent out into the world to make their fortune, and they build three houses.

One of straw, one of sticks, and one of brick.

Okay, what's Act 2?

The development: a big, bad wolf comes upon the three houses.

He blows down the straw house, he blows down the house made of sticks, but he can't blow down the house made of bricks.

So, what happens in the third and final Act?

In the conclusion, he tries to climb down the chimney of the house made of bricks, and he falls into a pot of boiling water and the pigs eat him.

That's very cheery. It’s interesting how both those, and a lot of fairy tales have a number three in them, like three animals.

You know, there’s also Three Blind Mice.

Yes, so a lot of stories have three main characters - you've got Hansel and Gretel, and the Witch;

Little Red Riding Hood; Little Riding Hood with her Grammy and the Wolf.

Three Amigos.

Yeah, Three Musketeers.

Yeah. And that’s because of ‘1, 2, 3'.

We legitimately use this in everything we write.

We think of, -if we are writing a scene or anything.

Right, what's the introduction? What's the development? And what's the conclusion?

It’s simple, but we use it all the time.

So, we’re going to move on now, and we're going to talk, -very briefly-, about a thing called 'THE HERO'S JOURNEY', which breaks down the three Act structure into something more detailed.

So , The Hero’s Journey is a blueprint for any story about a person who wants something, and tries to get it. Or a hero, that goes on a quest, is victorious in crisis and comes home changed, - which, to be honest, is most, if not ALL, stories out there.

This will just be a quick overview, so don’t worry, if you feel like we’re going too fast.

Again, this is just a framework. And we're going to break it down in greater detail in later videos.

But maybe you’re not writing a plot-based play?

Yeah, maybe you want to focus on character, or monologue.

Maybe it’s absurdist play, Samuel Beckett or Ionesco?

And that’s great. This is just a framework, but you might find it can assist you with developing a character’s internal emotional journey, or, helping to structure language by setting up and paying off ideas and sentiments.

It's just a set of tools that you can use to frame your story, which will, hopefully, prove useful.

So, when we're going to go through The Hero's Journey here, we’re going to use Back to the Future, as our reference example as we go through it.

Now, if you haven’t seen Back to the Future, what's wrong with you?

Yeah, but pause this video, and go and watch that, because it's brilliant!

As we go through our other videos, as we said, we’re going to go into more detail on The Hero's Journey, and we'll use other things, but for now, we're just going to look at Back to the Future.

Just the first film though, we're not going into the second and third ones.

No, just Back to the Future one. Good, all right.

So...

The Hero's Journey. Let's give ourselves a wee sort of timeline here.

Uhu. Very apt for Back to the Future, timelines.

So, Act 1: the first part of The Hero's Journey is a thing called the 'Ordinary World'.

This is how your protagonist normally lives their life, before the story starts.

So, you got your: who, what, when, where?

Some exposition about the character and the world they live in.

So, in Back to the Future: Marty is a kid in 1985.

He likes to play guitar, and he's got hopes, fears, and flaws.

And then we move on to the next part, the 'Inciting Incident'.

This is something that happens, that sets our character on a different path.

It's sometimes called 'The Call to Action'. It's the thing that kicks off the events of the story.

So, in Back to the Future?

So, in Back to the Future, Doc literally gives Marty a call to adventure. He calls him on the phone and he says:

"Get down here!', and Marty sees the DeLorean, and he witnesses time travel.

He witnesses time travel and sees it is possible for the first time.

Next, we have a thing called 'Refusal of the Quest'.

Now, this is a thing when your protagonist is confronted with a new story, but maybe doesn't quite want to get on board, doesn't want to go on the path that's been set.

So, in Back to the Future, it's: Marty has just seen time travel is possible, and he has no need or want to go travelling in time.

He's like 'I don't want to get in the DeLorean'.

And then finally, your Act 1 Climax; the end of Act 1.

Sometimes called the 'Choosal'. This is where your protagonist goes on their adventure!

And in Back to the Future, that is when the Libyans come, they kill Doc Brown, and Marty has to to get in the time machine to get away from them, but he goes 88 miles an hour and travels through time.

So, there is your Act 1. That should be about a quarter, or a third of the way through the story.

Oisin, you've drawn too big.

I know, but it's hard to do the whole timeline, and you know... (talking over each other)

All right, we're going to do a new line.

Yes, so I'm going to do the midpoint here, so this will be the first half of the story. It was all intended, all intentional.

And then, this will be the second half of the story.

All right, yeah, okay.

So, Act 2: moving from Act 1 into Act 2.

The start of Act 2, is what's knows as 'Fun and Games'. Things are going well for your character on their quest.

They're making new allies, they may be encountering enemies, but generally, they're just having a crack and they're having a good time.

So, in Back to the Future, Fun and Games, Marty has entered 1955.

He doesn't know what's going on. He has to go find Doc Brown in 1955, and he meets his parents, and he has a grand old time.

Yeah. It's the good crack part of the story. Which brings us now, to the 'Midpoint', which is now here.

This is the “Point of No Return”. This is where our character does something, or something happens to them, or they learn something, that means they can no longer just turn back. They have changed or their quest has changed.

So, In Back to the Future, that's when Marty realises that his presence in the past, has made his parents not come together, which means that his very existence is threatened.

And he sees it in this photograph with his brother, who is just starting to disappear.

Do you want to draw your new line?

Yes, sorry. So this is... We're still in Act 2.

Or Act 2 B, maybe?

And this is the rest of the story.

So, the second half of your story, or the second half of Act 2, kicks off with 'Things Get Serious'.

So, this is kind of the inverse of Fun and Games.

It's when the fall out from the midpoint starts to affect our protagonist.

Things are getting worse for them. Their quest is not going well.

Just progressive complications. Things are getting worse.

And in Back to the Future, that's when Marty is trying to get his parents back together, but, things keep going wrong. He just can't seem to do it.

And that brings us to the end of Act 2, which is the Worst Point & the Dark Night of the Soul.

This is the worst point for your character.

As it does what is says and intends; it's the worst point.

So, whatever it is going on, whatever the quest is, this should feel like it's a failure. They're not going to make it.

And, in Back to the Future, it's when Marty's playing guitar for his parents to bring them together, but they're not kissing, and then he starts to disappear, and he looks up, and his hand is disappearing, and he's.. he's not going to exist anymore. It's pretty bad.

So, you know, what is the worst consequence of Marty going back in time, to 1955, which was the inciting incident?

The worst possible consequence of that is that he ceases to exist.

And he has a quite, short, dark night of the soul, where he looks over, and he thinks: 'Oh, I'm not going to exist anymore', and he's kind of falling away.

And we think he's... He's done for basically.

Again, we're going into more detail on this in our later videos, just a brief overview.

So, that is our Act 2.

If you remember, back at the start of our video, we had 1,2,3,

Introduction, Development, Conclusion.

We had Act 1, this was our Introduction.

We introduced Marty and we set him on his quest.

We've now had our Development, which was, he's gone on his quest, and its gone pretty bad.

So, now we're looking forward to Act 3, the Conclusion.

Act 3.

So, Act 3 starts with the Climax.

The protagonist meets their biggest test.

Just when all had seem lost - they managed to come through and succeed, and they make a thrilling escape from death, - literal, or metaphorical.

So, the Climax of Back to the Future is Marty... There's actually quite a few climaxes... Aren't there?

Marty saves his parents, he plays Johnny B Goode, he then races to Doc Brown to travel back in time.

They just about do it in the knick of time. He goes back, he thinks he's going to try and save Doc Brown from the Lybians, and then Doc Brown is alive, because he's wearing a vest because Marty had sent him a letter through time.

Yeah, he manages to solve his dilemma, his quest. He achieve his quest.

He gets his parents together, and he gets back to 1985.

And finally, the last part of your story, the Denouement. And they all lived happily ever after.

This is where your protagonist returns to their ordinary world, having changed, because of the events of the story.

So, in Back to the Future, Marty travels back to 1985, but everything has changed, and his family are happier and richer and Biff,- the antagonist-, is now their defeated and is their servant, which is very strange.

Now, that's a good example of the world having literally changed.

But often, the world stays the same, but your protagonist has changed.

Think of, the Hobbits in Lord of the Rings; they return to the Shire, the Shire is the same, but they are different.

So, this was our quick crash course on The Hero's Journey. We hope it made sense.

Sorry about the squiggling. As I said before, we're going to go into it in greater details in the next videos.

So, before we do that, we're going to leave you with an exercise.

So , your second exercise of the video. We want you to think of a film, or a play, or a story, or an episode of a tv show, and try and map The Hero's Journey onto it.

Very clear, simple ones are things like superhero origin stories or, plucky underdog sports films, tend to follow this very closely.

So, maybe pick one of those. Why don't you pause the video now, and give that a go?

And if you haven't paused, there you have it.

Our first video on Building Blocks - How To Structure Your Story.

We really hope you found something useful in this.

And please do tune in next week for the Video 2, in which we will look at Act 1 in greater detail, the beginning.

How do you open your story, what are the elements you must include to kick your play, or story off to the best start?

See you then! Thank you!