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

**Episode 4: Act 3: Building the End**

Video (with closed captions): <https://youtu.be/tovGhkK7c_g>

Well, this is it. This is the fourth and final video in our workshop series, Building Blocks:

How To Structure Your Story. Thanks very much. If you've stuck with us so far, I'm Michael Patrick.

And I'm Oisín Kearney, good to see you. So over the course of the workshop, we've talked about Act One, the beginning, we've talked about act two, the middle. So now that brings us aptly to act three, the end.

So what makes a good ending? Is it something that wraps up everything the audience has been told and ties up all the loose ends? Or is it something surprising!

It could be something which was-, seems inevitable, but but it was in front of-, you couldn't guess it, it was in front of your face the whole time. Or maybe it's something that makes the audience feel something. We think a good ending should strive to do all of those things.

So you know, no pressure.

No pressure at all. So the ending is arguably the most important part of your story. It's the bit where you get to the heart of what the story is about. And it's the bit where everything that you set up before comes to a head. Yeah,

it's the last thing your audience will see when they leave the theatre or when they put down the book or when they finish the film. So it's the last memory you're left with. So you need to give it the attention that it deserves.

So whenever we've been writing plays, we've written many things that have a really good opening, and a really good setup, and a good middle with lots of development. But then we run out of steam, and we don't know how to end it, and it's

difficult because you're you're working towards something and it's hard to know where to go. So sometimes we think it can be better to start at the end and work backwards. If you know where you want to go. If you know what you want to say with the play, then start with that, the ending, and then try and figure out how to get there.

So before we do that, or let's look at some possible types of endings. So if we want to start with the ending, first, what type of endings are there, there's your classic "and they lived happily ever after", you know, sort of a sweet ending, lot of Shakespeare comedies and like this with a big sort of big wedding for everybody or fairytales. That's your classic happy

ending, then the opposite of that would be the tragic ending. So that's where everything ends on a negative note. So things like Romeo and Juliet would be a classic, tragic ending, and this is usually like a bitter feeling.

Then you've got your bittersweet with a sweet ending and a happy ending the bitter ending. Then there's a bittersweet ending, you know, things. Things aren't great, but there might be a possibility of joy in the future. You know, Casa Blanca, Rick gets Ilsa to safety, losing the love of his life, but he can now move on with a new, beautiful friendship.

Then I suppose you have an open ending, one where something isn't resolved. And an example of that would be American Psycho, and or Doubt by John Patrick Shanley, it's the idea that things are left unanswered, they might be implied or they might be left open ended entirely.

Yeah, you get your twist ending, obviously, which is like, "WHAT, WHOA", you know, The Sixth Sense, anything by M. Night Shyamalan.

The Mousetrap, there's a bit of a twist in that but I'll not spoil it if you haven't seen it

And then the tie back or what's called the book ending where something happens at the start, and then the play happens or the story happens and we come back to the start. So something like Enda Walsh's How These Desperate Men Talk or Waiting for Godot by Beckett or Gone Girl, the character kind of comes back to where they were at the start. And what has changed is the audience's maybe understanding of that character.

So everything in acts one and acts two leads to this act three, leads to the end. It's the climax, which is by definition, the culmination of everything that's come before it. It's the most important part of the story. So how do you structure your climax?

Good question. The climax is where your protagonist meets their biggest test. It's where they meet the bad guy and lessons are learned.

Yeah, an exciting climax usually encompasses a last minute resurrection of hope, a final showdown, a battle against the odds, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat.

So if your inciting incident sets up what will happen, and the worst point is the worst possible consequence of this, the climax is: 'this is what will happen' and it's a reversal of fortune from the worst point. It's, it's emotionally satisfying and it pays off the

thematic questions that you set up in act one.

Yeah. So we're actually gonna-, because climax is kind of the most important we're gonna go into a bit more detail about it and we're gonna draw upon Blake Snyder's "Save the Cat" story beats we're going to talk about a five point finale in screenwriting, but it's also very useful for writing plays as well, we use it when we write plays.

So, shall we look at the five point finale?

Let's do it, you know what that means?

To the flip chart!

Thanks for joining us at the flip chart for the climax.

So the five point finale of a climax consists of, you guessed it, five points. And so here we have point one, first point in the five part climax, gathering the team.

So gathering team is the preparation part of the climax. It's where your protagonist might get some tools together, get a team together, maybe they have to make amends with allies they've fallen out with. The hero has committed to their plan and is gearing up for the action.

So in Macbeth, Macbeth fortifies Dunsinane Castle and he awaits the final battle.

In Back to the Future, Marty plays Johnny B. Goode at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance, and then rushes off to find Doc Brown so he can travel back to 1985.

In a big sports film, it's before the final match and maybe the sports team had fallen out at the worst point, and they come back together, they hug each other and they say, let's go and take on sports team B.

So that's the first point which brings us to

point two, executing the plan.

So executing the plan. This is when the hero puts the plan into action.

So in Macbeth, he sees Macduff's soldiers marching on Dunsinane Castle dressed as trees, but he fights anyway, because no man born of woman can harm Macbeth, and he slays Lord Siward’s son.

In fact, in the future, executing the plan is Marty meeting Doc Brown, and he's going to go travelling in time, but he realises that Doc Brown's life is in trouble. So he tries to warn Doc Brown of the future death that he's going to-, that awaits him.

In any sports teams film. It's the team starts to win their big match

they're winning. And that brings us on to

point 3. Point 3, the high tower surprise.

Yeah, so the high tower surprise is named after the idea of a knight rescuing a damsel in distress. And he gets into the castle, and he climbs the high tower but oh no, there's a dragon there. You know, this is when the antagonist in the story has their last hurrah. Something goes wrong for your protagonist that jeopardises the story up to now. Their plan has been stopped in its tracks. They need to find a new plan.

So Macbeth, this would be when he fights McDuff and

McDuff says, "Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped", in Joel Cohen’s film

this moment actually happens in a high tower

very genre savvy. In Back to the Future, a branch snaps and disconnects the cable from the clock tower. This was supposed to power Marty's journey home. Oh no, not only has Marty not warned Doc about the Libyans, he also won't be able to make it back to 1985.

In the big sports film, it's when the key player gets sent off or gets injured, or the antagonist team scores a goal.

Which brings us to point four, dig deep down.

So dig deep down, this is when the hero really has to dig deep down inside of themselves to find the answer buried within themselves. The first plan failed at the high tower surprise, so it's not going to work out the way they planned. The only way they can go forward is to overcome their inner obstacles, their fatal flaw. They need to find something within themselves in order to change and win.

Again, it's like the refusal and

the choosal of the quest in act one, this is a big moment of decision for your protagonist. The reaction to the high tower

surprise reveals what your protagonist is actually made of once and for all. Your hero must choose to change or die for the final time.

In Macbeth, this is when he's fighting Macduff, and for the first time really fears for his life. He thinks to himself “to kiss

the ground before young Malcolm’s feet,”

will be the worst thing so he doesn't surrender and he goes off stage fighting Macduff.

In Back to the Future Doc Brown manages to fix the lightning cable. Marty gets into the DeLorean and sets the time in his clock 10 minutes earlier than planned, just enough time to meet Doc in 1985 and save him

from the Libyans. But I always thought that the 10 minutes thing-, why, he has a time machine, he should have gone an hour, he should have gone a day! 10 minutes is not enough time Marty

But you know, it's a climax he was under pressure.

In big sport films, the nervous protagonist, this is the moment where there's a close up of their face

and they they just go right I have to do this. I have to do this if we're going to win. Yeah.

Which brings us to point five. The execution of the new

plan. So this is when the hero makes their last attempt to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. They might win or they might lose but if they fail It's usually a purposeful failure, which says something about your story. They may not have gotten what they wanted, an ego driven goal, but they maybe get what they need, something, a more essential goal,

[singing] "you can't always get what you want."

Whatever happens in this point needs to have been seeded before, you don't want to have what's called a 'deus ex machina' which is an act of God God in the machine. This is like a cheat ending where someone comes in to save the day. Actually happens in the film, Dodgeball, where they lose the big game, but they bet on themselves, which you didn't know about, and they come home with a big load of money. It's actually kind of

a joke because the big load of money comes in treasure chest with "deus ex machina" written out.

So a good example of the execution of the new plan if we stick with our examples, Macbeth has been killed by McDuff, McDuff takes on his head, and he says, Look, I've slayed him. And he proclaims Malcolm, the new King. Obviously, that's not good for Macbeth, but it is a tragedy. So our tragic hero has not had a good outcome in the execution of the

new plan. Whereas if that was not a non tragedy, Macbeth would be triumphant in that moment. In Back to the Future, Marty's sent back to the future, he's executing his new plan to save Doc from the Libyans. But when he arrives, because he only set his clock 10 minutes early instead of an hour. He's still too late and Doc Brown is actually gone down with the Libyans. But last minute, Doc

reveals he was wearing a bulletproof vest, and he is saved because he did actually read Marty's letter.

Yeah, Marty had sent him a letter to tell him that the terrorists were coming. So he actually read the letter and then learned that, you know what, what the heck, you know, you can sometimes create your own rules. In the big sport film, the nervous protagonist really digs down deep as before, and then they score the goal just in the nick of time at the end there, you know, and then is lifted up and everyone's all happy,

or they might miss but they might gain their inner confidence, you know. And if all that sounds a wee bit complicated here with the five point plan, all it really boils down to is during your climax, you don't want your characters fortunes to move upwards. You don't want things to always get better. You want a bit of change, a bit of variety, a bit of danger. So it's it's going well. Oh no, it's not going well anymore. But oh, yes, now it's going well, that's all it is.

So that's the five point finale. And then there's one more point, which isn't part of the finale, but it's the last moment in your act three and of your story. And that is the denouement, denouement. This is a French word. So this is the end of your story. It's where you tie up all the loose ends. And I think this actually means 'to untie the knot'. So it's whenever in Act One, you tie knots of story and Act Two you tie knots of story. And then this is where they are untied or the loose ends are tied up. So it's kind of the same. The denouement

is when your protagonist returns to their ordinary world, which has changed forever, or they have changed forever as they have gained new knowledge.

Yeah, they've been changed by the story, they went on the journey to overcome their flaw. But in pursuit of it, something unexpected was learned.

As John Yorke says, “All tales are at some level a journey into the woods to

find the missing

part of ourselves, to retrieve it and make ourselves whole”.

So examples of a denouement, if we look at Macbeth, its Macbeth's head has been raised by Macduff Malcolm is declared the king and he declares all thanes will be made earls and invites them to see him crowned at Scone.

In Back to the Future, Marty meets his new family in 1985. Everything is better. His father is confident his mother is not an alcoholic. And generally speaking, everyone is richer. He returns to his ordinary world, which has changed as he returns to 1985.

In The Lonesome West, by Martin McDonagh

it's after Valene and Coleman have tried to kill each other. They apologise sincerely and consider Father Welsh, Welsh, [stumbling over words]

Welsh Walsh's suicide, and they go off to the pub together, the relationship is slightly better than before, but they're probably just going to keep fighting and fighting.

Many plays and stories don't actually have a denouement but instead decide to end on a moment of action at the climax. An example of a recent play that did that, we think, is David Ireland's Ulster American which was on at the Traverse, which ended clearly at a moment of action.

A well crafted closing scene is pivotal for creating an engaging and transporting piece of theatre. You want it to stay in the minds and hearts of your audience. So avoid too many endings. Pick one, and wrap everything up as efficiently as you can. And remember, the ending is the last thing your audience sees. So make it memorable.

So we've reached the end of our series, we've talked about three act structure and the hero's journey, and we have one final exercise for you to do.

So let's flip the chart!

So smooth. This is a recap exercise to look over the entire Hero's Journey structure.

So the hero's journey is clearest when we look at traditional hero stories, you know, superhero stories, fairy tales, films about scrappy, underdog sports teams, but we use it in every piece of writing we do.

Yeah, it's a tool that you can use to frame your writing, which will hopefully give it more shape and give you something to work off, if you ever get stuck. It's like

a blueprint or a framework basically, to just give you the tools to go what should go where or how should I move things around. And so, our final exercise for you is this. Take everything we've talked about over these videos and apply it to a theatre piece, which you think might be furthest from a plot driven story as you can get.

Yeah, we're gonna have a look at Waiting for Godot. Maybe you'd like to do the same. Pause your video, give it a go and come back when you're ready.

How did you get on? Right? We're gonna give it a go. So Act One, ordinary world. Vladimir and Estragon talk about how they spent the previous night. Vladimir said he spent his night in a ditch being beaten up by people. This sets up the who, the what, the when and the where.

then move on to the inciting incident. What's the inciting incident in Waiting for Godot? Vladimir tells Estragon. They cannot leave, because they are waiting for Godot. So now we know their quest,

then you have the refusal of the quest. So maybe they don't wait. They don't want to wait for Godot and they consider whether or not they should hang themselves in a nearby tree and there's a bit of debate around that. So they're refusing to wait. Yep. Then we reach the act one climax, they choose to keep waiting. There you go. Great. So very cheery, start to Waiting for Godot. So you move into act two then right? And you've got fun and games. So this is when a man named Pozzo turns up, and his servant Lucky. Lucky is ordered to dance. He speaks aloud, they all shut him up. There's tests, there's allies, there's enemies, and everyone has a bit of fun.

Then we have the midpoint, halfway through the play, a boy arrives with a message saying Godot will not come today at all. Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, change, but then promptly stay where they are. "Well, shall we go? /

Yes, let's go." Some would argue that Godot comes during the interval actually, because there's something about the boots are bigger. And there's also more leaves on the trees. So they actually wait and then miss him at the interval.

People would argue anything... Yeah.

So next up is things get serious. This is in the the second act, obviously. And this is when Pozzo and Lucky return. But things are progressively complicated. Lucky can no longer speak, Pozzo is blind. And then they all fall down.

We get the worst point, the boy returns and says Godot is not coming today, the worst point from the inciting incident, when waiting for Godot, he's still not come!

Yeah. And then you have the dark night of the soul and in Waiting for Godot. This is when the sun falls and the moon rises, and basically they're all sort of thinking about what's going to happen next. Then we move

on to your five point climax, gathering the team. They decide to hang themselves in

desperation. But they have no rope. But wait, they can use Estragon's belt, gathering their tools.

Then executing the plan. Estragon takes off his belt and they're gonna hang themselves.

But oh no, the high tower surprise, Estragon's trousers fall down.

So they dig deep down, they realise that cannot hang themselves. So they consider what to do

and they execute their new plan. They will hang themselves tomorrow. Unless Godot comes. Estragon pulls up his trousers, "Well, shall we go? / Yes, let's go." Which brings us to the denouement, which is simply the stage direction. They do not move and the curtain falls.

So that's Waiting for Godot. If you did it, did you get something similar? Now, obviously, it doesn't actually follow the hero's journey. We've kind of forced this. But it's, it's interesting because it gives you sort of a structure to follow. If we were writing something, say for example, in the middle of the story, or the midpoint in the story is a bit too early, we would then try to move it to write more to make it come later. Or maybe the worst point is not the direct result of the inciting incident. We then try to make that work as well.

Yeah, I mean, clearly, Waiting for Godot was not written with the hero's journey in mind, but I think it's interesting, you can still kind of make something work. Yeah. So if you're writing something that isn't hero's journey, you could still find it useful to try and apply it to your character's emotional journey.

Even in a story where nothing happens and nothing changes. There's still some kind of structure to it. Yeah.

So thank you so much for watching our video, Building Blocks: How To Structure Your Story. We've come to the end of it now. That's us.

Thank you very much. We'd just like to

thank some people. We've learned some of these rules and tools from herself. There's Gavin Kostick from Fishamble,

David Horan at Bewley’s Cafe Theatre,

the Irish Theatre Institute, Prime Cut Productions and BBC Writers Room. And also

a massive thank you to the Traverse Theatre for asking us to do this and letting us be a part of this. Yep, we've used

a lot from the following books as well if you, if you'd like to get them, we definitely recommend it if you're looking for more further reading into the topic

Yeah, so books that we have stolen from for this piece, Into the Woods by John Yorke, Playwriting by Stephen Jeffreys Save the Cat by Blake Snyder, that's the five point plan comes directly from that,

The Art of Dramatic Writing by Lajos Egri and The Hero with a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell. So that's us. Thank you very much.

And happy structuring!