

NOTICE

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SUPPOSE THAT THE ELEMENTAL INGREDIENTS of fiction may be grouped in one or another of four major categories: plot, character, tone, and form. To define these terms quickly and simply: plot is what happens in a narrative; character is who it happens to (or who makes it happen); and tone is what it sounds like. Form is the pattern of its assembly, its arrangement, structure, and design.

Form is the aspect of a story that can be abstracted from everything else and expressed in some other medium, for instance, a graph, or some other geometrical figure. Not that a recreational reader would be likely to need or want to undertake this procedure—no more than you'd want to get to know your pet cat by dissecting it. But for writers it is sometimes (not always) necessary to perform such a maneuver of abstraction so that form can be rendered in ways that yield to analysis.

Form is of primary importance, always. Ingredients of fiction from the other three groupings (regardless of appearances, which may often be to the contrary) are always subordinate to form, to design. Indeed, any or all of these ingredients can and do function as elements of design. We are accustomed to thinking of plot as what defines structure in a story. But elements from other categories—point of view, imagery, shifts and alterations of tone—may also be used structurally and often are.* In reading and writing, you must consider (consciously or unconsciously) all of these aspects of fiction in terms of their relationship to the overall design. Even the overall meaning or theme of the narrative cannot be separated from this relationship. In a properly realized work, form and function are one and inseparable.

For the writer, some sense of the final formal design of the work really ought to precede the first stages of composition. The level of prior refinement of this sense of design will vary wildly from one writer to another. It may be quite specific and detailed (though it is risky for it to become *too* specific and detailed in the early stages—lest you create a paint-by-the-numbers design whose execution will suck the life from your conception). Or it may be no more than a vague and cloudy sense of where the story is headed—where *you* are headed, across the terrain of the story.

The length of the narrative being contemplated has a good deal to do with how evolved the writer's idea of its form needs to become before it is written. Most writers can navigate their way through a short story on sheer intuition at

*For the structural use of imagery, see the discussions of "Depth Charge," p. 49, "Daisy's Valentine," p. 120, and "O Man Alive," p. 157. For the structural use of characterization, see the discussion of "The Sky Is Gray," p. 189. For the structural use of tone, see the discussion of "Red Hands," p. 284.

LINEAR
DESIGN

MADISON
SMARTT
BELL

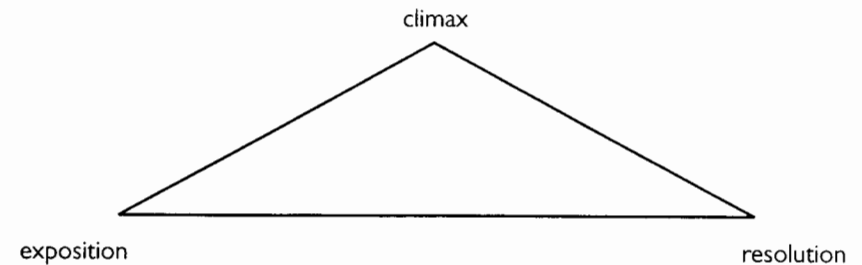
least some of the time: write a story successfully clean through without a deliberate, conscious plan—flying blind, as it were, and without frequent reference to the instruments either. In this situation, the writer discovers the form of the story in the process of writing it, just as the reader discovers the story's form in the process of reading it. This sense of discovery has much to do with the pleasure of reading, and for the writer who can work in the analogous way, it can truly be an ecstatic pleasure, akin to Hopkins's inscape or Joyce's epiphany. There's no better thrill, in this business, than to realize your intention at the very moment you write the last line. What makes it all possible, however, is the *unconscious* apprehension of an underlying structure. Without that, you'll become confused and lose your way.

Anyone who's ever grappled with a longer narrative, something approaching the length of a novel, say, will have discovered (quite painfully, perhaps) that sheer intuition won't carry the project all the way through. At least not successfully on the first attempt. To end up with a first draft of a novel that is structurally sound, you must do *some* structural planning in advance. Without it, you end up with an anarchic mass of material that must be arduously rewritten toward some sort of formal coherence. At the opposite extreme is the risk that excessive structural planning, prior to the actual writing, will overdetermine the work before it is realized and leach the life out of it.

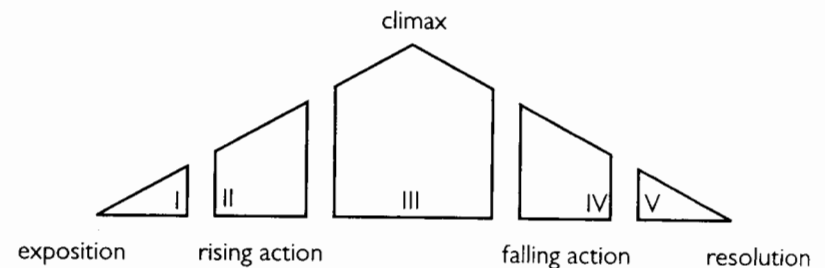
To steer a safe course between these two shoals is a demanding undertaking. In practice, most writers actually zigzag back and forth between them. Some writers can tolerate a very high level of detailed advance planning for a long work without losing their own interest and sense of discovery in actually writing it. Others are so differently constituted that they cannot tolerate any abstract advance planning at all and must proceed through novels as intuitively as they would through short stories (with the result that they suffer more and have to write a lot more drafts).

But for structural purposes, there's really no *essential* difference between a novel and a short story. The only difference is size, which means that while a short story potentially can be written in a single inspired sitting, a novel absolutely can't be. One's intuitive idea of a novel's design must be propped up with some sort of scaffolding, in order to last out a longer period of composition. But the fundamental principles of a narrative's design are apt to be much the same, regardless of scale.

THERE ARE MANY POSSIBLE STRUCTURES for a narrative, but the most common, familiar, and conventional of these is linear design. Linear stories start at the beginning, traverse some sort of middle, and stop at the end. Furthermore, all linear designs bear some relationship to what is known as the Freitag triangle.

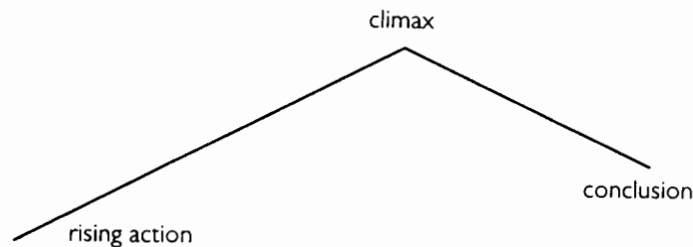


This diagram will be familiar to many students and teachers as an instrument, like a protractor, for stripping the life and interest from Shakespeare's plays. The triangle can be divided to correspond to the five acts of Elizabethan drama. According to this reading, Act I is responsible for the "exposition" (the establishment of principal characters and the situation that obtains at the opening of the narrative); Act II constitutes "rising action" (a series of complications which leads to the climax); Act III presents the "climax" itself (the moment where whatever forces have been released in the opening stages of the narrative have their definitive confrontation—i.e., the point where the conflicts of the story are ex- or imploded); Act IV contains "falling action" (a decline of the plot's movement down from the climax—thus *away* from the highest peak of interest and excitement); and Act V presents the "denouement" or "resolution," where the final outcomes are disposed of, weddings, funerals, and the like. The picture looks like this:

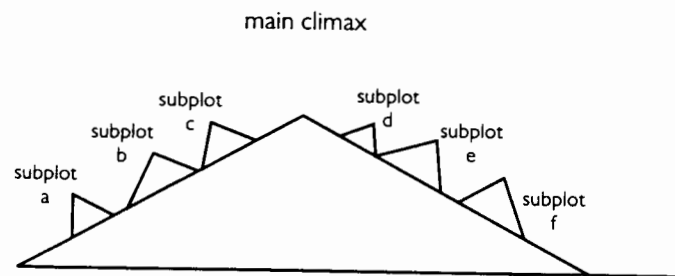


This pattern is so rigid and programmatic that even Elizabethan plays don't conform to it very strictly. Much less do fictional narratives of our own peri-

od. In modern narratives, the climax—the moment of the most important insight—will frequently be placed nearer to the end of the whole story, creating a different diagram, something like this:



As frequently, there may occur a pattern of many smaller peaks and valleys. These represent smaller subclimaxes and resolutions to subplots and subordinate conflicts over the course of a story and may be diagrammed in a figure that resembles a dragon's back:



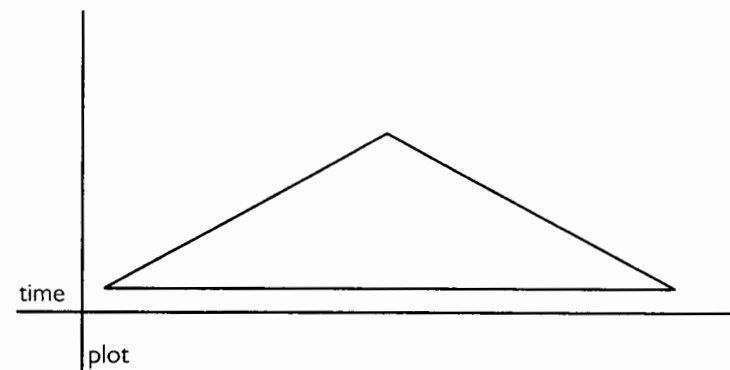
It's easy to get silly with these pictures. And indeed, most writers can get by very handily without them (or at any rate, without actually chalking them on the board) during the process of writing. The diagrams are no more than crude representations of the shape which the writer's intuition should be giving to the material as the process of composition goes forward. The Freitag triangle is a left-brain superimposition over what is for the most part a right-brain activity. But if intuition fails or goes astray, the triangle and its variants can be quite useful as diagnostic tools, perhaps even as problem-solving devices.

It is a familiar truism that all stories must always present some problem to be solved, some conflict in need of resolution—be it ever so humble, so apparently trivial. Conflict, the question which requires the story to answer it, is what generates the energy to ascend the rising slope of the triangle, toward the peak where the conflict will be, for better or worse, resolved; on the descending slope, the byproducts of the climactic fission or fusion settle back

toward a (temporarily) steady state. This, by some standards, is the very definition of what a story is; all narratives must share these qualities. There are probably just enough exceptions to this rule around to prove it.

Still, it would be difficult to think of (or write) a story in which no problem or conflict whatsoever arose at any point. At this moment, I can think of no example. The point is that all stories do bear some relationship to the structure of rising and falling action that the triangle is intended to graph. Suffice it to say that we do still expect some pattern of conflict and resolution from our narratives. To write a story with no vestige of these would be virtually impossible.

According to the Freitag triangle, the structure of a narrative is a function of plot and time.



The vertical axis represents plot; the horizontal axis represents time. The supposition here is that events will be told in chronological order, which does tend to be true in Elizabethan drama, but is not at all a fixed rule in more modern narratives. A second presumption is that plot is the primary structural element in the pattern. That presumption does not always hold for linear designs, but it is true often enough to be significant.

Because the figure represents the progress of events over time, you must consider that it is a process of motion as much as it is a fixed geometric form. That is to say, it is neither, or both. The difficulty of this distinction is reminiscent of the difficulty quantum physics encounters in distinguishing between a wave and a particle. But to the writer, this ambiguity is an advantage, because it offers two different ways of furnishing shapeliness to the work.

AS A PROCESS OF MOVEMENT, the linear narrative is timebound and sequential. The rule, proved by dazzling exceptions such as Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* and Charles Baxter's *First Light*, is that movement in time will be for-

ward. The temporal vector runs out of the past toward the future, and the linear narrative follows it in a sequence of causes and effects, like a string of dominoes falling. Suspense, which controls the reader's desire to keep reading, is generated by the manipulation of the cause-and-effect cycle as it rolls toward the future, each effect becoming the cause of the next one. What effect will this cause produce? That's only a hifalutin version of the reader's fundamental question—*what's gonna happen?* Suspense (no narrative will hold a reader's interest without offering at least some *mild* form of suspense) comes out of a dextrous withholding of the answer to this question. With skill, you can string this withholding out almost forever—but as soon as you answer one question, you immediately have to think of another. Your task is to make the movement toward outcome, from first cause to final effect, seem inexorable. (In backward-running works such as *First Light* or *Time's Arrow*, the question is reversed: what first cause produced this final effect?)

The reader is interested in the outcome of a narrative as a scientist is interested in the outcome of an experiment. The writer of course may have other fish to fry—other aspects of the narrative may be infinitely more important to the writer. But plot and suspense are the instruments with which the reader is led (by the nose, if you like) across the passage of time that the narrative requires to take place.

Plot, suspense, causality, and time are inextricably intertwined, in linear narratives especially. But *real time*, the time in which our lives are lived second by second and hour by hour, remains a problem, sometimes an intractable problem, for the linear narrative. No story is long enough to actually express real time completely, absolutely, moment by moment. (Nicolson Baker's *Mezzanine*, a shortish novel which adheres with excruciating fidelity to the real time it takes the protagonist to traverse the mezzanine level of a department store, is the exception which proves *this* rule.) All narratives end up having to compress real time in some way or other—sometimes by summary and sometimes by skipping.

Before the twentieth century, the method for compressing real time in fiction was summary. Certain events and scenes of the plot would be given full dramatic rendering, as in theater, while the passages in between them would be summarized—most typically by the voice of an omniscient author. This voice would simply tell the reader—winningly, persuasively, and beautifully one might hope, but, failing that, at least economically—what happened between one fully dramatized scene and the next one. Exposition, the recounting of what led up to the scenes to be dramatically rendered, was the provenance of summary. In those days, successful and/or popular writers became very skilled in the writing of appealing and engaging summary, because they had to be.

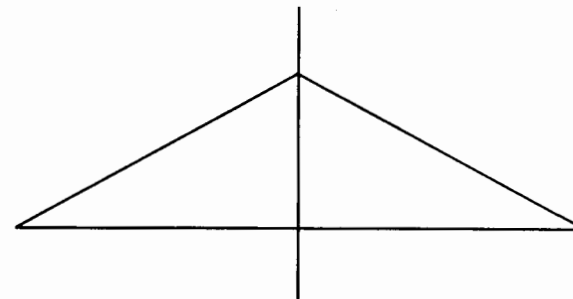
All that was changed for our times by two new features of twentieth-century life: the movies and Ernest Hemingway. Perhaps Hemingway's most influen-

tial demonstration was that expository recitations of the past experiences of the characters could be eliminated entirely from stories, and that these leaner, meaner stories (his own if not those of his hosts of imitators) could be as interesting and even more energetic than their meatier, wordier predecessors. During approximately the same period, the movies were gradually teaching the audience to unconsciously accept transitions from one scene to another, across widely varying lengths of real time, with no explanation whatsoever. Look at an old silent movie, and you'll often see long title screens that summarize what happened between one scene and the next. Watch *Ordinary People* or *Jaws III* and you won't even get a voice-over to explain how one scene relates to another—and yet, somehow, you'll know.

For film editors, the term for these forward leaps across time is *jump cut*. This device—the unstated, unsummarized, unmentioned forward transition—has become increasingly popular for fiction writers also. In fiction, the jump cut is usually signaled, typographically, by the space break.

Time, however it is managed, determines the movement of the linear narrative. Plot, the all-important structural element according to the Freitag triangle, can only exist as a function of time. But other elements of fiction may at least aspire to a condition of timelessness, and these elements may also be used structurally, thus becoming design elements. Their structural use affects the triangle in its aspect not as a process of movement but as a stable geometric figure.

The classic Freitag triangle is an isosceles triangle, meaning that two of its three sides are of equal length. It is a bisymmetrical figure:



in which a line dropped to bisect the figure produces two equal halves which are mirror images of each other. The two halves are symmetrically in balance across that dividing line, as two weights might hang in balance across the vertex of a scale.

So far as the movement of a narrative goes, this symmetrical quality isn't so important. But if you think of a story more holistically, less as a temporal process and more as an integrated, unified artifact, then the issue of symmetry becomes much more significant. In linear design, this final symmetry need not be exact—no more than the two halves of your face are precisely symmet-

rical with each other, perhaps not even so much. But most narrative designs will bear some relationship to this principle of symmetry, in the same way that most plot structures will bear some relationship to the movement aspect of the Freitag triangle.

For this reason, the placement and timing of other elements of fiction— patterns of imagery, shifts of point of view or back and forth between first- and third-person narration, arrivals and departures of characters (the possibilities are very broad)— become, in fact, elements of design and are just as important to the overall design as is the plot, and sometimes more so. All these elements are to be arranged, to be used to create a sense of shapeliness, orderliness, balance, and integrity. Each must contribute to the reader's sense of the narrative as an integrated whole, for the moment when the narrative is apprehended as a whole is the moment when it is fully understood.

Narratives based on linear design do operate, on at least one level, like vectors; they are arrows fired into the future. In the final analysis, they should also be intelligible sculpturally, architecturally, as expressions of a static form. Abstracted, the triangular shape of a linear design is quite nondescript. But it is only an armature, a substructure around which you, the writer, deploy all your ingenuity, all your improvisational ability, to make the work your own. There are as many different *variations* on linear design as there are stories to be told.