

You Are Already a Character Arc Expert



Many, many books have been written on creating compelling character arcs. I'm not going to try to write my own. What I can give you is a way to take the pulse of the arcs in your story as you revise.

This lesson builds on the pacing lesson from a couple weeks ago, so if you haven't checked that out yet, now's a great time! (ingridpierce.com/writing-resources/)

Now that you've got your pacing sorted and your Big Three beats labeled, it's time to check the vitals on the emotional underpinning of your story.

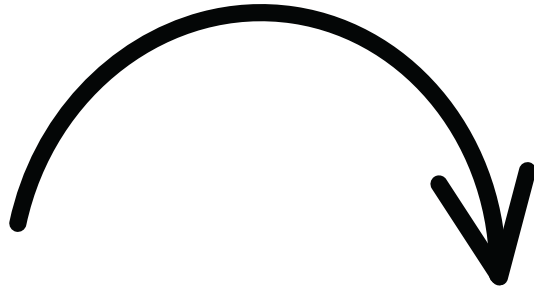
Why? Character arcs are what make your book worth reading. They show us how your character grows as they face the challenges of that genius external plot you dreamed up.

If your external plot is the skeleton, your internal plot—the emotional arc, or how your characters react to the external plot—is the heartbeat of your story.

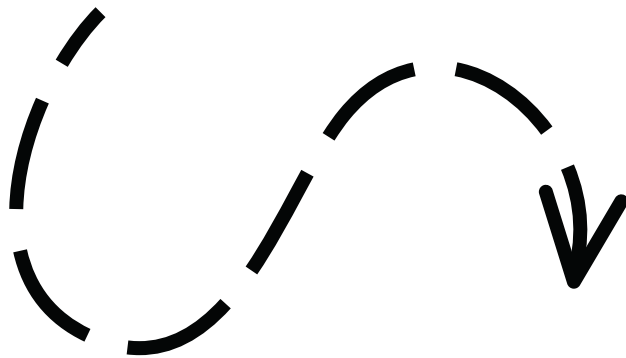
Your character's emotional arc is what gives your story life.

CRAFT CHEAT SHEET

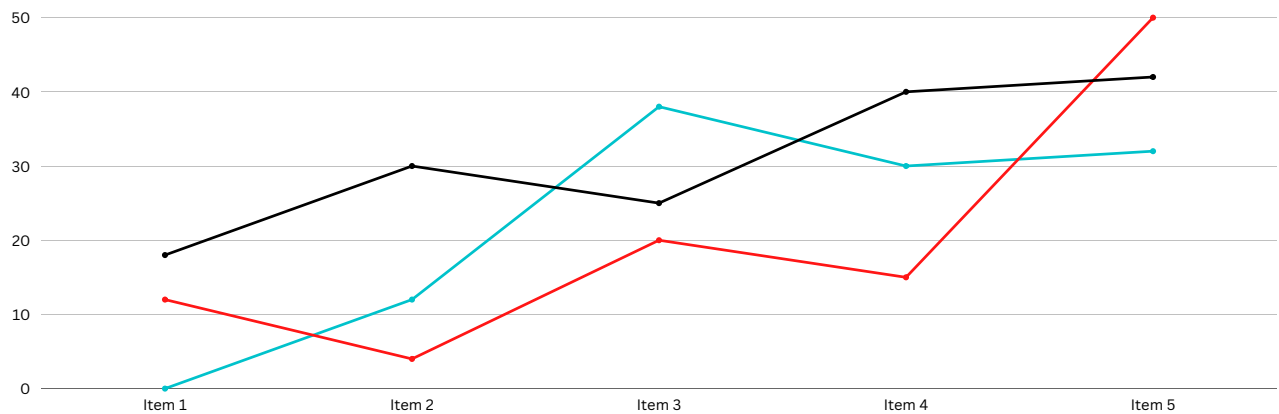
You're probably used to seeing a character arc illustrated like this



Or this



Or even this nonsense



If these kinds of drawings help you, that's great. But I've got an alternate tool for you.

CRAFT CHEAT SHEET

We started our revision journey with pacing, where we identified our Big Three beats, right? Just as a reminder, the Big Three beats we'll be discussing are:

1. **The Point of No Return:** Where the protagonist makes the decision to engage with the plot.
2. **The Midpoint Turn:** Everything is going so super great for the protagonist; they can't possibly fail, right? (Alternatively—things can't get any worse, right? We can only go uphill from here.) However the story was going until now, it's going to take a turn.
3. **All Is Lost:** The worst thing ever has happened, there's no coming back from this, what's the protagonist gonna do??

We're going to use these scenes as guideposts to triage your characters' emotional arcs.

Remember that table we worked on for *Legally Blonde* (and maybe you even did one for your favorite movie)? We're going to revisit it and add some more information: the internal story Elle tells herself as the story progresses.

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BEAT	SCENE	TIMESTAMP	INTERNAL STORY
Point of No Return	Elle decides she's going to Harvard Law to get her boyfriend back ("Once Warner sees me as a serious law student, he'll want me back. It's a completely brilliant plan!")	15 minutes	<i>I have to change myself to get Warner to love me.</i>
Midpoint Turn	Elle decides to take law school seriously, for herself ("I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I? Screw you, Warner. I'll show you just how valuable Elle Woods can be!")	46 minutes	<i>I've tried to change, and no one takes me seriously. I'll beat them at their own game and rub it in their faces.</i>
All Is Lost	Callahan hits on Elle, and she decides she's going to quit law school ("I'm going back to L.A. No more boring suits. No more pantyhose. No more trying to be someone I'm just not.")	77 minutes	<i>I've done everything I can, and people still see me as no more than my looks. Maybe I am only my looks.</i>

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Did you catch all that?

Let's break it down.

The key to checking the pulse on your own story **is in the reversals.**

Did you notice how Elle's Midpoint Turn belief is a reversal of her Point of No Return belief?

Act 2a is all about building up to that complete reversal through the fun and games. It's all surface work: your characters will be trying on change like they try on clothes. They may look and act different, but the change is only on the outside. This is why this portion of the story is sometimes called the pulse: you can feel it, it's got vibes, and it's pointing us in the right direction. But it's not the whole story.

Now, take a look at Elle's Midpoint Turn belief next to her All Is Lost belief. That's a reversal, too, isn't it? In fact, her All Is Lost belief sounds a lot like her Point of No Return belief, doesn't it?

What makes this story so poignant is that by the time All Is Lost, we've unearthed the fear that catapulted Elle into motion at the beginning of the story. She wants to change not because she really wants Warner back, but because she's afraid that if she's not serious enough, she's not worthy of anyone's love.

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Whoa. That's a big one, right?

Go back and read that again.

Elle wants to change not because she really wants Warner back, but because she's afraid that if she's not serious enough, she's not worthy of anyone's love.

Her journey isn't about Warner—or even law school—at all!

It's about learning she's worthy of love and success just as she is. (She proves this in Act 3 by winning her court case with knowledge about hair care, all while wearing a pink dress and sparkly shoes—showing, not telling, at its finest.)

Act 2b is sometimes called the heart of the story. That's because we're diving deep into your character's wounds as they do the real work they need to change. Every scene should drive your character closer and closer to their biggest fear until they finally face it during their Dark Night of the Soul.

So what does this mean for your manuscript?

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Begin with your external turning points, then make yourself a column for your main character's beliefs at those turning points. Simplify them as much as you can—tell me in one sentence what they believe.

Does your main character face reversals in their beliefs?

Do those reversals take us deeper into their wounds in Act 2b?

Do they face their deepest fear in their Dark Night of the Soul?

By the end, do they emerge with the truth they were avoiding all the way back at the Point of No Return?

If you can answer all those questions with an honest YES, list each reversal in 1-2 sentences, and show me a line in your book for each beat to prove it...

Congratulations, you've got yourself a compelling character arc!

If you can't confidently say YES or list each reversal in 1-2 sentences because you're still not sure what your characters believe, you need to do some more work. I promise that arc will emerge and it will become your guidepost as you examine what you need to cut and what you need to add as you revise.

Want more craft tips and tricks?

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