

Handout

Kickstart Your Novel 2-3: Build Your Story with the Four Story Pillars

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F 2:15-3:05

F 5:15-6:05

Amy Deardon

www.amydeardon.blog

Great stories are built on four story pillars: Plot, Character, Theme, and Story World. It's best to establish each of these pillars to construct a resonant story foundation that will make your story sing. In these two talks you'll plan out each story pillar so that they coordinate and strengthen your narrative into a unified whole. Exercises will help to sharpen your focus so you are not lost.

OUTLINE

Introduction

Story World Pillar

Theme Pillar

Plot Pillar

Character Pillar

Note: see my book *The Story Template* for more detailed information about the four story pillars.

INTRODUCTION

Four story pillars form the foundation of a story.

It is possible to write a story without all four pillars, but if you do then your story will lack richness and depth.

Even if your story has a small scope, it's helpful to take at least a little time to consider all four pillars for your story.

Mix and match the order that you work on these.

Note that, as your story comes increasingly into focus, you may need to go back and tweak your story pillars so they coordinate into a grand unified pattern.

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
CONCRETE	Plot	Character
ABSTRACT	Story World	Theme

STORY WORLD

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
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Story World is usually the easiest pillar to start with.

The story world becomes **COMPELLING** when you describe, not just the environment, but your **CHARACTERS' REACTIONS** to it.

Some stories, especially in genres like science fiction, fantasy, and adventure, emphasize technology and special environments.

If you are inventing a magical world, remember to **CREATE LIMITS** on any special abilities, talents, or phenomena so the reader or viewer perceives them as **REAL** rather than magically made-up. Think Superman with the kryptonite.

Remember that the story world is **BACKGROUND**. The focus should be on your **STORY** even if your story world is really cool. Take time for the story world but don't exhaust all your time and energy here.



STORY WORLD EXERCISES

- 😊 1. Describe the environment(s) in which your story will take place. Some characteristics that may be relevant:
- time and date
 - social customs
 - languages
 - technology
 - buildings and structures
 - transportation
 - food and clothing
 - weather
- 😊 2. What do your characters think and feel about your story world? How do they respond?

THEME

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
CONCRETE	Plot	Character
ABSTRACT	Story World	Theme

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

—Matthew 12:36

The story is a powerful thing. It opens our minds to accept concepts by using emotional tactics that bypass our rational thoughts.

When writing your story, you are RESPONSIBLE to express true and God-glorifying themes. As a Christian, it is better not to write than it is to mislead your

readers to accept a bad premise. For example, a movie like *Dirty Dancing* is compelling but ultimately pro-abortion.

Single Theme

To write a gripping story, among other things you need to articulate ONE, AND ONLY ONE, universal principle or theme. You may express different aspects and arguments about this theme through different characters and plot twists, but keep your message focused.

The theme of a story, in a deep sense, tells what your story is about. This theme emotionally resonates with your reader.

The theme is the backbone of your story. You can bend or adjust the other story elements to fit the theme more easily than you can adjust or add a theme once you've planned the other parts.

You should be able to express your story's theme in a single sentence. Here are some examples:

Romeo and Juliet: Great Love Defies Death.

Forrest Gump: Unconditional Love Redeems the Rebel.

Fellowship of the Ring: Willingness to Relinquish Absolute Power Leads to Preservation.

The Godfather: Family Ties Overcome Individual Virtue.

Rocky: Courage and Persistence Lead to Significance.

The Incredibles: Working Together Allows Each Individual to Shine.

How to Identify Your Theme

How do you write your theme? One way is to use this process:

1. Identify the primary principle driving the story.
2. Refine this principle so it's specific.
3. Determine what that principal's opposite might be.
4. Imagine what the outcome will be when these two forces go head to head.
5. Write out the heart of your story in a single sentence.



THEME EXERCISES

- 😊 1. Determine the overall theme IN ONE WORD that you want to explore in your story. Some examples might be love, hate, forgiveness, anger, generosity, greed, humility, arrogance, friendship, enmity, courage, fear, truth, doubt, etc.

The Wizard of Oz: Longing.

The Fellowship of the Ring: Power.

Romeo and Juliet: Love.

The Count of Monte Cristo: Revenge.

- 😊 2. Refine this theme to make it specific. For example, if your driving principle is love, then it could be specifically the love of a parent for a child (or vice versa), love for animals, or love that fails.

The Wizard of Oz: Longing for something outside of self.

The Fellowship of the Ring: Absolute power.

Romeo and Juliet: Great love between lovers.

The Count of Monte Cristo: Righteous revenge against a great wrong.

- 😊 3. Find the opposite of your principle. This opposite, or a powerful oppositional force, allows you to showcase the theme.

The Wizard of Oz: Longing for something outside of the self is opposed by something within the self.

The Fellowship of the Ring: Absolute power is opposed by willingness to relinquish absolute power.

Romeo and Juliet: Great love between lovers is opposed by death.

The Count of Monte Cristo: Righteous revenge against a great wrong is opposed by being consumed by anger.

- 😊 4. Put your two forces head to head. What will happen? Keep in mind that for most stories, the positive will win over the negative.

The Wizard of Oz. When you are uncertain, remember that you have the answer within yourself.

The Fellowship of the Ring. Convictions and the help of friends give you just enough strength to destroy evil.

Romeo and Juliet. Love is so strong that you can die for the one you love.

The Count of Monte Cristo. Pursuing revenge, even righteous revenge, can destroy your soul.

- 😊 5. Finally it's time to STATE YOUR STORY THEME.

The Wizard of Oz. Longing for something outside of the self leads to the realization that the answer has been within the self all along.

The Fellowship of the Ring. Willingness to relinquish absolute power leads to preservation.

Romeo and Juliet. Great love defies death.

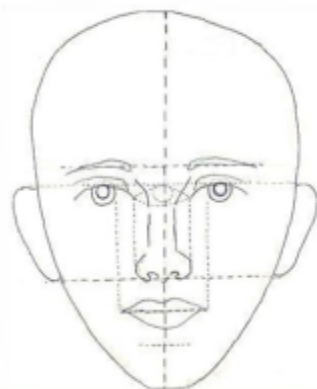
The Count of Monte Cristo. Righteous revenge against great wrong drives enacting suitable punishment—but ultimately forgiveness is the only way that leads to peace.

PLOT

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
CONCRETE	Plot	Character
ABSTRACT	Story World	Theme

The plot pillar describes the outward shape of your story. This is what people usually think of for a story, and what they will describe to you when you ask what a book or film is about.

The shape of a story is specific. Think of it as the proportions of a face—if you do not place the elements correctly, the face will be unrecognizable.



Like it or not, aware of it or not, any plot that diverges too far from the natural structure of story will not seem avant-garde, but **WRONG**. By being aware of plot elements and proportions, you can make sure that your story is consistent, complete, and satisfying.

Some writers worry that there isn't room for creativity if they must follow a pattern. However, the story structure is scaffolding, not paint-by-numbers. Even with fixed story proportions you have no limits to what you can create—just as there are an infinite variety of human faces.



Story Foundational Elements

Before you write anything else, figure out these primary building blocks of your story. Yes, even if you're a pantster ("seat of the pants" writer).

Story Goal and Story Question

The story goal is the task that your hero wants to accomplish during the course of your story. At the end of the story it will be very clear, yes or no, whether the goal has been accomplished.

Stakes

Stakes describe **WHY** this goal is so important to your hero so that he will fight through 300 pages of misery to accomplish it. Often stakes grow more personal and more intense as the story unfolds. Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dangers will affect others as well as the hero.

Obstacles

If your hero can simply go and achieve the story goal, there is no story. All stories need multiple obstacles, both internal and external, holding the hero back from getting what he wants. An important rule for writing is to never make it easy on your hero.

Often the story has a villain who spearheads the campaign of preventing the hero from reaching his story goal. The villain is better than the hero—richer, more accomplished, more powerful, whatever—and beating him seems impossible. It is only through the hero's clever thinking that he is able to win.

Simple Story

A story can be divided into three parts: beginning, middle, and end.

The beginning sets up the story, depicting the hero in his ordinary world and how and why he makes the decision to pursue the story goal.

The middle, the longest section, consists of a series of actions and reactions that show the progress and problems of the hero pursuing the story goal.

The end describes how the story is resolved.

Preliminary Structure

The preliminary structure describes several structural points that build a story: Beginning, Bridging Story Goal, Door, Story Goal, Journey, Slide, Resolution.

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PLOT EXERCISES

😊 1. Story Goal and Story Question

Free-write about possibilities for your story goal and story question. Make the goal specific and unequivocal. At the end, summarize the story goal and story question in one sentence each.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the story goal is that Dorothy longs to return home. Failure occurs if she is unable to return home. The story question is: Will Dorothy be able to return home?

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the story goal is that Frodo must destroy the One Ring. Failure occurs if the ring is not destroyed. The story question is: Will Frodo be able to destroy the One Ring?

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the story goal is that Romeo and Juliet want to run away, be married, and live peacefully together in love. Failure occurs if they are not able to escape. The story question is: Will Romeo and Juliet be able to escape?

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Edmond is falsely imprisoned, then escapes and gains an enormous fortune. The story goal is that he wishes to take revenge on those who stole his youth, his career, and his fiancée from him. Failure occurs if the wrong doers get away with a great evil. The story question is: Will Edmond be able to suitably punish the guilty (without losing his integrity)?

😊 2. Stakes

You need to decide why this story goal is so important to your hero. If it isn't important, he won't be motivated to achieve it. What horrible things might happen to the hero, to those he loves, and to the world if the story goal isn't achieved?

Free-write some possibilities. Once you have ideas, list the stakes you will use in your story.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, if Dorothy fails to return home, she will be stuck forever in the strange landscape of Oz, never again seeing her family.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, if Frodo fails to destroy the One Ring, Middle Earth will fall into chaos and horror under Sauron's dominion.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, if Romeo and Juliet fail to escape, Juliet will be forced to marry against her will. She and Romeo will never see each other again.

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, if Edmond cannot wreak an appropriate revenge, great evil will go unpunished.

😊 3. Obstacles

Obstacles can be both external (people, terrain) and internal (emotions, lack of knowledge). Come up with some internal and external obstacles that could occur somewhere in your story.

In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy is a farm girl whose dog is stolen, then within a tornado she is transported to a strange and magical land. She doesn't know how she's going to find the wizard of Oz and must battle various creatures and situations, including multiple run-ins

with the wicked witch of the West. She also has to figure out how to get the wizard of Oz to help her. Internally she's plagued by uncertainty and insecurity.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring* Frodo must make his way past the Nazgûl to fight Orcs, rough terrain, Gollum, and other varied creatures and problems. Internally he finds carrying the Ring of Power an almost unbearable emotional burden.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Montagues and Capulets are at war. Friar John marries Romeo and Juliet, a deep secret that must be covered. Juliet's cousin Tybalt kills Romeo's best friend Mercutio, so Romeo kills Tybalt for revenge and must go into hiding. Friar John gives Juliet the potion so that she appears dead, thereby initiating the whole sequence of both Romeo and Juliet individually killing themselves for the other. Additionally, there are a number of internal obstacles, including Romeo's impetuous nature, Juliet's reluctance to marry Paris, and Juliet's nurse who gives her advice she doesn't want to hear.

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Edmond must learn to live alone in prison, then to escape, then to find the men responsible to wreak his revenge. His revenges are elaborate and full of twists. Internally Edmond copes with rage, power, and losing and gaining love.

😊 4. Simple Story

Obviously you'll need to do more work, but for now, paint the bare outline of what may happen in your story. Determine where your protagonist starts, and where he will finish. Then identify in a few sentences what happens to your protagonist in the beginning, middle, and end of your story.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is a Kansas farm girl who feels trapped by her life. A tornado lifts her into Oz where she finds ruby slippers. Since the Wicked Witch of the West wants those slippers, Dorothy makes an enemy. Dorothy decides to find the Wizard of Oz to learn how to get home. She learns the answer is within the ruby slippers, not the Wizard of Oz, and returns home. She wakes to discover Oz is a dream, and has a new appreciation for her boring life.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo lives in the Shire and inherits the One Ring of Power from his uncle Bilbo. He learns that the One Ring must be destroyed in the volcano of Mount Doom far away. He gathers traveling companions and has many adventures carrying the One Ring to Mount Doom. Finally he destroys it and returns to the Shire, but he is changed.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, their families are at war. Romeo decides to sneak into a party that Juliet's family is giving and sees Juliet. They fall in love

and secretly visit each other. When Romeo kills Juliet's cousin, pressure increases for Juliet to marry Paris, so Romeo and Juliet secretly marry instead. The friar creates a plan for them to escape but sadly Romeo doesn't learn Juliet will only have the appearance of death and so kills himself. When she sees he is dead she kills herself too.

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Edmond is a young sailor about to be promoted to captain. He is also engaged to a beautiful girl. His rivals are jealous and manage to get him imprisoned for decades in the Chateau d'If. Edmond meets a mysterious friar who tells him where to find a fabulous treasure. Edmond eventually escapes, finds the treasure, and plans complex revenges for all his enemies. He is successful, but finds the anger and hate he must maintain are hurting him. At the end he forgives his last enemy and sails away with the woman he is in love with.

😊 5. Preliminary Structure

Now you can start a preliminary structure of your story. A rough structure can be described using the story goal and six general points of the story flow.

Write a one-sentence phrase for each of these plot points.

Then focus on the journey—come up with at least 4 obstacles (internal and external) to your story goal.

Finally review your logline in light of your plot points. Tweak it if you need to.

Beginning: Describes protagonist's ordinary world plus a change.

Bridging Story Goal: A goal that moves the protagonist to take action.

Door: The protagonist embarks on a journey to achieve the story goal.

Story Goal: Overall goal that the protagonist wants to achieve by the end of the story.

Journey: Long middle section of the story.

Slide: The action changes again, and the story moves onto a course of resolution.

Resolution: The end of the story.

Here are some examples:

The Wizard of Oz.

Beginning: Dorothy is a farm girl in Kansas when her dog Toto is taken from her by Miss Gulch.

Bridging Story Goal: She decides to get Toto back.

Door: A tornado lifts Dorothy and Toto into the Land of Oz.

Story Goal: Dorothy wants to convince the wizard of Oz in the Emerald City to bring her home.

Journey: Dorothy meets friends, and they have many adventures and trials traveling toward the Emerald City.

Slide: Dorothy kills the witch so that she can bring the witch's broomstick to the wizard, then he will help her go home.

Resolution: Dorothy learns the wizard is a fraud, but she uses the ruby slippers she's already wearing to get home.

The Fellowship of the Ring.

Beginning: Frodo lives in the Shire when he is given the One Ring by his Uncle Bilbo. Frodo wants to hide the Ring.

Story Goal: Gandalf tells Frodo the Ring must be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom.

Door: Frodo leaves the Shire with Sam.

Journey: Frodo and Sam meet friends and form the Fellowship of the Ring. They have many adventures and trials traveling toward Mount Doom.

Slide: Orcs fall upon the group, and Frodo and Sam are separated from the others.

Resolution: The story is continued in the next two books/films, but in this one Frodo and Sam continue alone. Frodo realizes that only he is able to bear the Ring long enough to destroy it.

Romeo and Juliet.

Beginning: The Montagues and Capulets are at war. Romeo is in love with Rosaline. Although they are Montagues, Romeo and Benvolio decide to attend the Capulet party.

Bridging Story Goal: Romeo wishes to catch a glimpse of Rosaline at the Capulet party.

Door: Romeo and Juliet see each other at the party and fall in love, then learn their families are mortal enemies.

Story Goal: Romeo and Juliet want to live together in love.

Journey: Romeo and Juliet meet friends, and they have many adventures and trials traveling toward a life together.

Slide: Juliet drinks the potion that makes her appear dead.

Resolution: Romeo misses Father John's letter. He thinks Juliet is dead and kills himself, then she kills herself.

The Count of Monte Cristo:

Beginning: Edmond Dantès is a young sailor who has just accepted a captaincy, and is about to be married. He is thrown into jail under false charges as a political prisoner.

Bridging Story Goal: Edmond wants to escape prison.

Door: Edmond escapes and gains an enormous fortune.

Story Goal: Edmond wants to punish the great evil that caused him to lose his youth, his fiancée, and his life.

Journey: Edmond becomes many different persons, and has many adventures and trials as he enacts his revenge.

Slide: Edmond realizes that revenge must be tempered by mercy.

Resolution: Edmond forgives the last of his enemies, saves his friend's son,

CHARACTER

	OUTER STORY	INNER STORY
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The quirky, unique people of a story are what touch the emotions and make the story gripping for the reader or viewer. Who can forget Scarlett O'Hara, Sherlock Holmes, or Indiana Jones?

Writers use many techniques to develop their characters, and you've probably heard of at least a few of these such as deep interviews, describing physical characteristics, and using Myers-Briggs personality analysis. These are all fine, and you should feel free to use any techniques that help you to envision your story people.

My favorite method is to combine character types with the story I want to tell. I think about what sorts of characters "fit" the theme and story so they will be motivated and bring unique insights. Think of Plot-Character as a tag team for your story.

PROTAGONIST

Developing the Protagonist

While you may have complex story ideas, it's important to identify one, and only one, protagonist for your story. (NOTE: Romance is a specialized genre with two protagonists that I'll address in a moment). The technical definition of the protagonist is that he is the character who most emotionally changes in the story: he learns how to repair an emotional void or need in his life so that he can live more freely. This character change, or arc, describes a journey of fulfillment. For example, with this definition the protagonist in the movie *Mary Poppins* is surprisingly the father.

The EMOTIONAL CHARACTER ARC that your protagonist experiences is usually what makes or breaks the resonance of your story. This is what I will focus on for this lecture.

Hidden Need

For a character arc, your protagonist must have a hidden need, which is AN EMOTIONAL PROBLEM THAT HE MUST FIX IN ORDER FOR HIM TO BE TRULY FREE. He discovers this fulfillment along his story's journey. The protagonist doesn't know what this lack is although he feels he is missing something.

Genesis of the Hidden Need

What caused the protagonist's hidden need? For a character arc, your protagonist may have an unhealed source of continuing pain: a wound that occurred before the story began, or perhaps in the prologue. If present, this wound is undeserved. It can be from a single event or, more commonly, an extended situation, and it often occurs during childhood.

Romance

Romance is a specialized genre in which you have not one but two protagonists. These stories are written so that both characters change and grow to see each other differently. The goal in romance stories is overcoming obstacles so they can be together — the HEA Happily Ever After.

A great book that lays out structuring a Romance book is *Romancing the Beat: Story Structure for Romance Novels (How to Write Kissing Books)* by Gwen Hayes. Be warned the example story she tells at the end does not have a traditional couple.



PROTAGONIST EXERCISES

😊1. Identify your Protagonist

You need to decide whose story this will be. List all the characters you may want to include in your story, and describe your thoughts around them. How will

each change, or will he change? Then look through your list to decide on which character you most want to focus. If there are two (or more) characters that make major changes, that's okay, but one has to be dominant unless this is a romance.

😊2. Hidden Need

Look at your theme, since this should relate in some way to your character's hidden need. You may need to go back and forth with the theme and the hidden need to fine-tune the connection. Free-write ideas for what your protagonist lacks within himself or herself: some emotional completion that he can obtain before the end of the story. Then summarize this hidden need in a few words.

In a romance, the hidden need focuses on the emotional mismatch of the characters showing why they are unsuitable together.

😊3. Genesis of the Wound

Describe relevant possible background that leads to your character's current problems. In a romance, describe the imbalance in their relationship.

OTHER CHARACTERS

There are three character roles, or types, that make storytelling much easier. These characters are not essential, but I strongly recommend you consider including them unless you already have a few successful novels under your belt.

Confidante

The confidante is someone to whom the protagonist confides, someone who shares the protagonist's journey to a greater or lesser extent. The confidante can be anyone—friend, coworker, spouse, lover, relative, employee, mentor, neighbor, whomever—who listens to the protagonist, gives him feedback, confronts or soothes him, and suggests solutions to problems. The protagonist gives this character regular updates and shares the deepest parts of his impressions and plans.

The confidante helps the protagonist achieve the story goal. Additionally, the confidante *reveals the protagonist's inner struggle to him*, and helps to point him in the direction of solving his hidden need.

Antagonist Character

In my opinion, all stories should personify the chief obstacle. Even if your protagonist's chief problem is a roaring fire, say, or a space mission gone bad, it is easiest to have a person (or sentient alien) for most of the story standing in the way. A great example of this is *Jaws*. Brody, the police chief, recognizes there is a big shark eating people. However his chief obstacle for three-quarters of the movie is actually the mayor who refuses to close the beaches. It is only in Act 3 that Brody goes to confront and destroy the fish. In *Titanic*, Rose deals with many obstacles, but it is only in Act 3 that she has to deal with a sinking boat.

According to John Truby, author of *The Anatomy of Story*, the antagonist pursues the same ultimate goal as the protagonist. For example, in *Jaws* both Brody and the mayor battle over who will control the town.

Romantic Interest

The romantic interest is a wonderful device to add tension to a story, and acts as the object of the protagonist's pursuit. On the inner level, the romantic interest is the protagonist's reward for overcoming his identity—the romantic interest will stay with him once his core is exposed.

In fact, often a romance develops when the romantic interest sees the protagonist's heart of gold under his outward actions, and this is why she sticks with him while he's ironing out his emotional wrinkles.



CHARACTER EXERCISE

😊1. Adding Other Characters

Think about the confidante, antagonist, and romantic characters. Can you add these roles to your story? Do you already have one or more characters that will fit these roles?

😊2. Function

In your story what specific things will these characters do to encourage and challenge your protagonist?

How might they be used to propel your story forward?