

THIS STORY'S MAJOR BEATS

Act 1: The Setup

THE HOOK/OPENING IMAGE (0–5%)

The introductory scene or scenes to your story's characters and their world; A snapshot into your character's life before the events of the story will change them forever. Should hint at and give context to the story's main conflict, your character's internal struggles, and how they got to this point (i.e. backstory).

INCITING INCIDENT (~5%)

The event or events that thrust your character into the main conflict. This is where a “Theme Stated” beat — or a moment/statement that hints at your main character's transformation — would go.

SETUP (5–10%)

A series of events that show your character facing the consequences of the inciting incident, which also consequently leads up to the first “pinch point” — a major event or discovery that further turns your character’s world on its heads. Maybe your character will resist or try to cope with the change. Either way, action and tension should mount until it reaches a peak with the next beat.

1ST PINCH POINT (10%)

A major event or discovery that further turns your character’s world on its head, hinting at the opposing/antagonistic force and raising the stakes. For a detective story, this may be when the killer strikes again; but, instead of targeting a random victim, the killer goes after someone the main character (MC) is close to, thus ensnaring the MC further into the investigation and raising his personal stakes (e.g. his loved ones won’t be safe until he catches this killer).

THE DEBATE (10–20%)

Sequence of events that come about in reaction to the first pinch point. Usually involves a lot of backtracking and reflection about your characters' fears and (mis)beliefs.

Act 2: The Complications

BREAK INTO TWO (20%)

After your character has time to reflect, they should decide on next steps. It can be as simple as deciding to stay in a strange new world or return to their old one (hint: usually a good idea to keep them in the new world for as long as you can).

B-STORY (~20-22%)


This is when a side character or a subplot is introduced that ties directly in with the main conflict and your character's transformation. Often is the beginning of a romance subplot and/or a change in relationship with another character (e.g. friends to lovers).

FUN & GAMES (20-50%)

Also known as “the promise of the premise,” this is where you get to play with your main story idea. Your character gets to explore their new world/situation and navigate their way around it. If they formulated a plan in the previous beat (like in a heist story), this would be the execution of that plan.


GAME-CHANGING MIDPOINT (50%)

As the name suggest, this should be a “game-changing” moment, a moment where your characters learn or experience something that throws their goals and plans out of alignment. Going home unchanged its not an option anymore; the only way now is forward.




BAD GUYS CLOSE IN (50–75%)

This sequence of reactionary events will plunge your character further into the main conflict. The stakes have never been highest. Tension should mount, your character’s flaws should run rampant. Whether the events are good or bad, their demons should be closing in and getting in the way (literally or figuratively), coming to a head in the next beat.




ALL IS LOST/2ND PINCH POINT (~75%)

The event or discovery that breaks your characters and shatters their world. At this point, they are defeated, all hope of getting what they want lost. They've never been lower.



DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL (75–80%)

Also known as “the darkest hour,” this is where you main character processes everything that’s happened so far. Their fears/wants/desires are reassessed; they acknowledge something in them has to change.



Act 3: The Confrontation

BREAK INTO THREE (~80%)

Once your characters have processed everything, it is time for them to come up with a solution. They'll realize what they must do to fix the problems raised in Act 2, ultimately, taking steps to crawl out of the hole they got themselves into. What is their plan?

FINALE (80–99%)

This is where your characters will put the plans they came up with in the previous beat into motion. For some, this will be a final test — a last hurdle — they have to go through to make amends and complete their transformation.

GATHERING THE TEAM

Your characters will need help executing their plans. Who do they turn to/recruit? What do they need? Do they need to do something before help can be obtained?

EXECUTING THE PLAN

The final battle is underway. Your characters are dodging blows left and right. They may face little obstacles that get in their path, but somehow they pull through, getting that much closer to the main oppositional/antagonistic force.

THE HIGH TOWER SURPRISE

Just when it looks like your characters are going to make it through, plot twist! Your antagonistic force pulls something that knocks them back down. A trap, a revelation, a special power that weakens them and renders them helpless. What will the antagonist do to knock your characters down?

DIG DEEP DOWN

What will your characters do now to get out of the antagonist's clutches? This is when they have to dig deep and face those inner demons that plagued them throughout the story. Only when they can stop telling themselves lies and realize the truth (the theme) can they find the strength to fight the antagonist. What is this truth and what leads your character to realize it?

EXECUTION OF THE NEW PLAN

Now that your character has come to realize the truth, what needs to be done to end the main problem/antagonistic force? What are the last steps your character has to do to defeat them once and for all?

RESOLUTION/FINAL IMAGE (99–100%)

A “mirror” to the Opening Image, this is a scene or series of scenes showcasing how far your character has come after their journey. Have they changed? Does the world look different? What is their life like now?

Note: Beats were taken from Blake Snyder’s book, *Save the Cat!*, and Abbie Emmon’s [Three Act Story Structure blog post](#); descriptions of beats were written and paraphrased by Caroline M. Tell.

For a deeper dive into the *Save the Cat!* beats, check out [Blake Snyder’s blog](#). For novelists, [Jessica Brody’s blog](#) and book, *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*, are must-reads.

For more on the Three Act Story Structure, I recommend Abbie Emmon’s [Youtube video](#) “How to Use the 3 Act Story Structure,” plus her “How To Structure A Novel with the 3 Act Story Structure” playlist.