



STORY STRUCTURE MADE EASY

A SIMPLE TEN-STEP GUIDE TO
OUTLINING YOUR NEXT NOVEL

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STRUCTURE IS THE SKELETON THAT GIVES STORIES SHAPE.

Many writers worry that outlining, drafting, or revising with structure (i.e. a framework of key narrative moments) in mind is a surefire way to produce a predictable story—but this belief couldn't be further from the truth.

Structure is an essential story element that, like a skeleton, remains hidden from view when properly developed. In this workbook, I'll teach you how to develop your story's structure with confidence and ease.

Though many established structures exist (e.g. The Hero's Journey, Fichtean Curve, the 9-Block + 27-Chapter method), I prefer the simplicity of the Three-Act Story Structure, a classic blueprint typically employed by screenwriters and novelists. Several variations of the Three-Act Story Structure exist. But at its core, this structure consists of three acts—beginning, middle, and end—that consist of nine major plot points and sequences.

Of course, you can't develop the skeleton of your story without first understanding what lies at its heart: character. That's why I'll guide you in developing the key characterization elements that drive stories forward *before* showing you how to use these elements to develop your story's structure step by step.

Note: This workbook was devised with genre fiction story structure in mind. You may find it helpful to use this workbook in conjunction with the articles available at www.well-storied.com/plotting

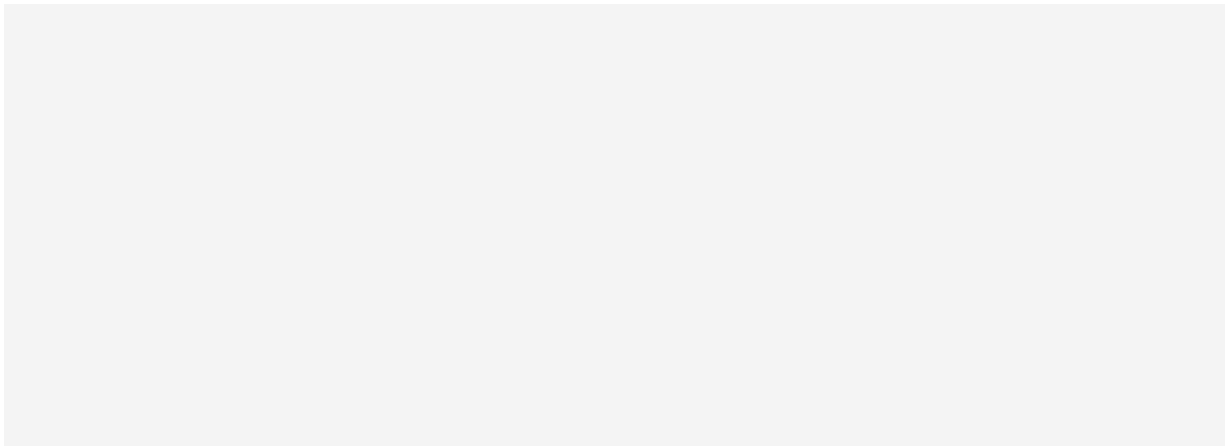


DEVELOPING THE HEART OF YOUR STORY

Behind every strong story is a character with agency—that is, a character (ideally, multiple characters) whose actions drive the story's plot. Thus, it's impossible to outline a well-structured story without first developing your characters' goals, motivations, and the stakes that push them to action despite opposition. Use the prompts on the following pages to develop these foundational story elements.

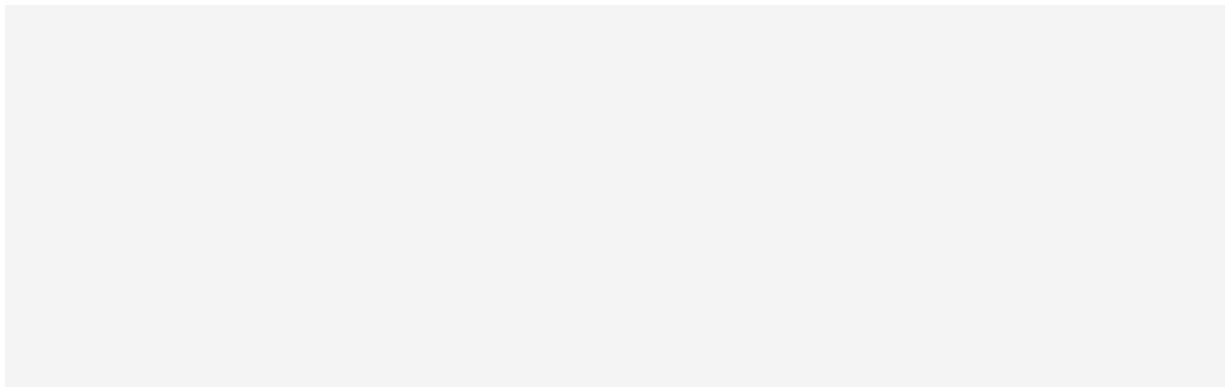
Q1: What is your protagonist's story goal? Your antagonist's story goal?

In other words, what are the main objectives that drive your characters to action? The more specific you can make these goals, the easier it will be to develop your story. For example, if your protagonist wants to become a rockstar, then their goal might be to win the local battle-of-the-bands competition.



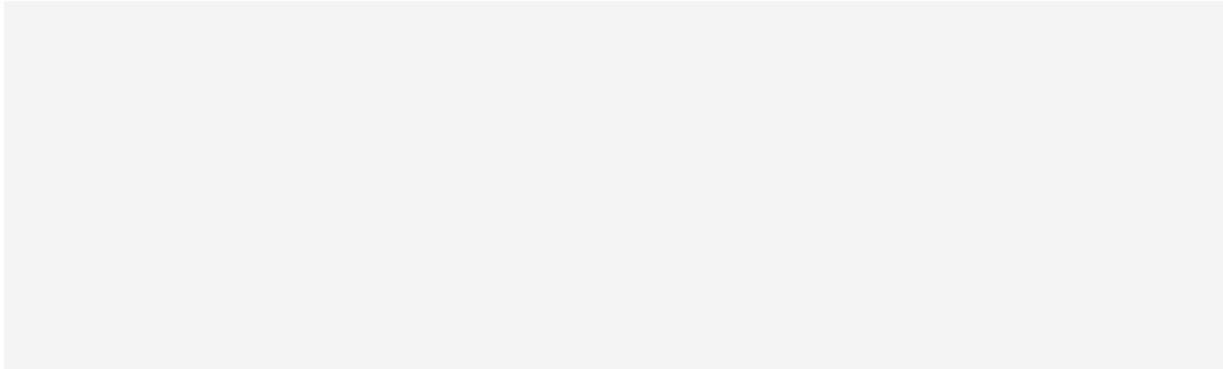
Q2: What is your story's central conflict?

Consider your main characters' story goals. How do these goals conflict? What is the major push-and-pull that lives at the heart of your story? Try to distill this conflict into just one or two sentences. For example, "Kara and Sam both want to win the local battle-of-the-bands competition. But only one can rock their way to success and earn the precious opportunity to pitch their EP to a major record producer."



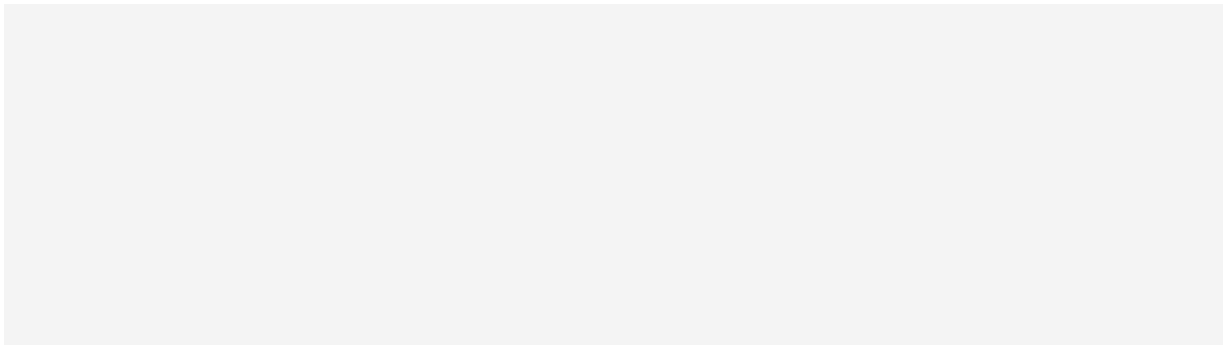
Q3: Ideally, what steps would your main characters take to achieve their goals?

Understanding how your characters would work to achieve their goals if faced with little to no opposition can help you identify their early actions and understand where their plans will bring them into conflict.



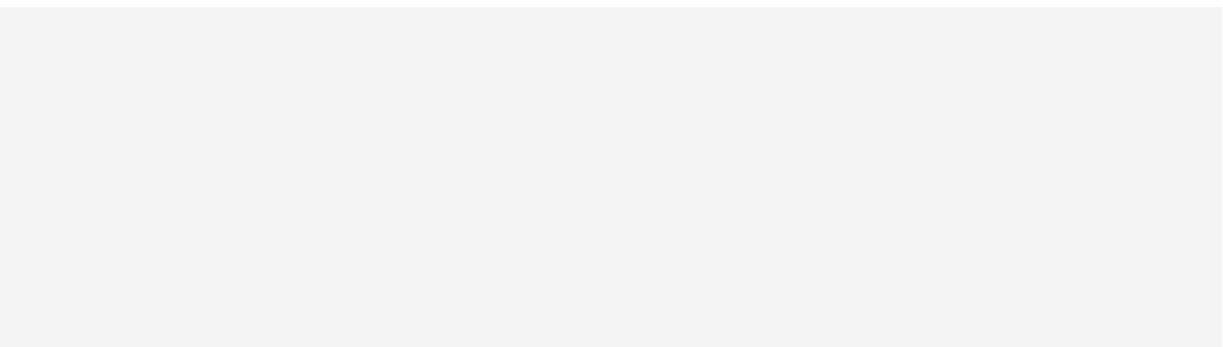
Q4: Why do your characters' want to achieve their goals?

In other words, what motivates your characters to put the time and effort into pursuing their plans?



Q5: What's at stake if your characters fail to achieve their goals?

Consider both internal and external consequences. The most effective stakes are those that push characters to pursue their goals despite the obstacles and intense opposition they encounter in their journeys.

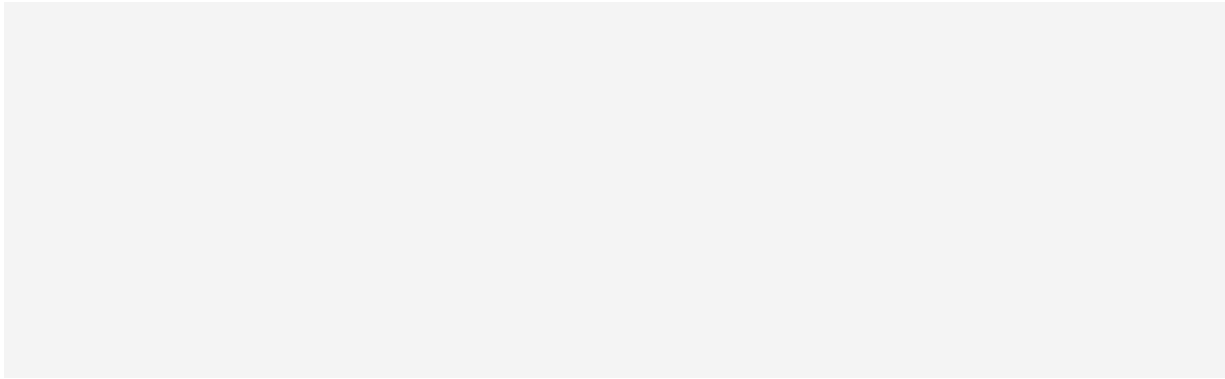


ACT ONE: THE BEGINNING

With your main characters' goals, motivations, and stakes established, it's time to begin structuring your story, beginning with Act One: The Beginning. These opening scenes comprise the first 10% - 25% of your story and contain three major beats (i.e. moments) that introduce readers to your story's characters, setting, and central conflict.

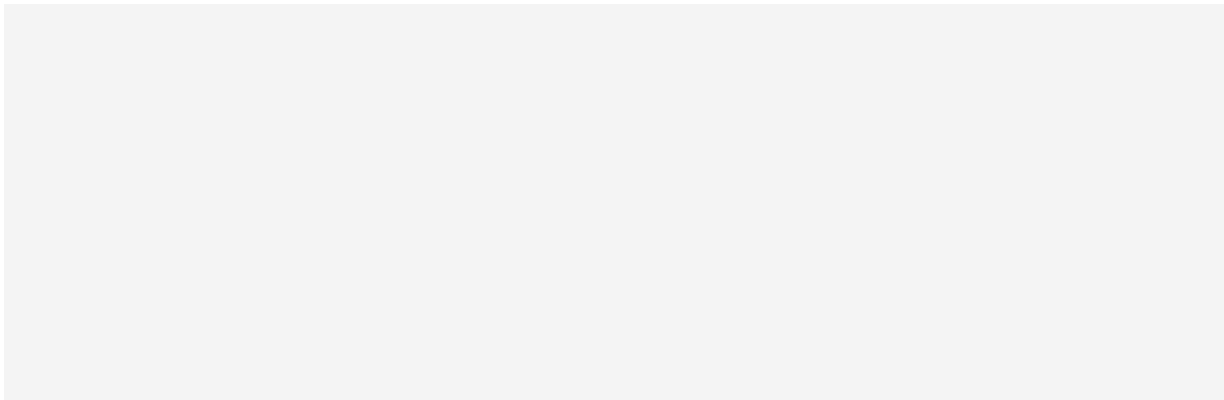
Q1: What is your story's hook?

A hook is the first scene or sequence in a story. An effective hook piques readers' interest by introducing the protagonist and showcasing a moment of conflict or tension unique to the protagonist's everyday life. In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins introduces Katniss Everdeen as a responsible, determined teenager who hunts illegally to feed her family while living in poverty under the totalitarian rule of the Capitol government.



Q2: What is your story's inciting incident?

The inciting incident is the event that sets your story in motion, offering your protagonist an opportunity to pursue their goal or presenting them with an unusual challenge they must overcome. Sometimes the hook and the inciting incident are the same event, though this isn't often the case. In *The Hunger Games*, the inciting incident occurs when Katniss' younger sister is chosen at random to participate in a televised fight to the death.



Q3: What is your story's first plot point?

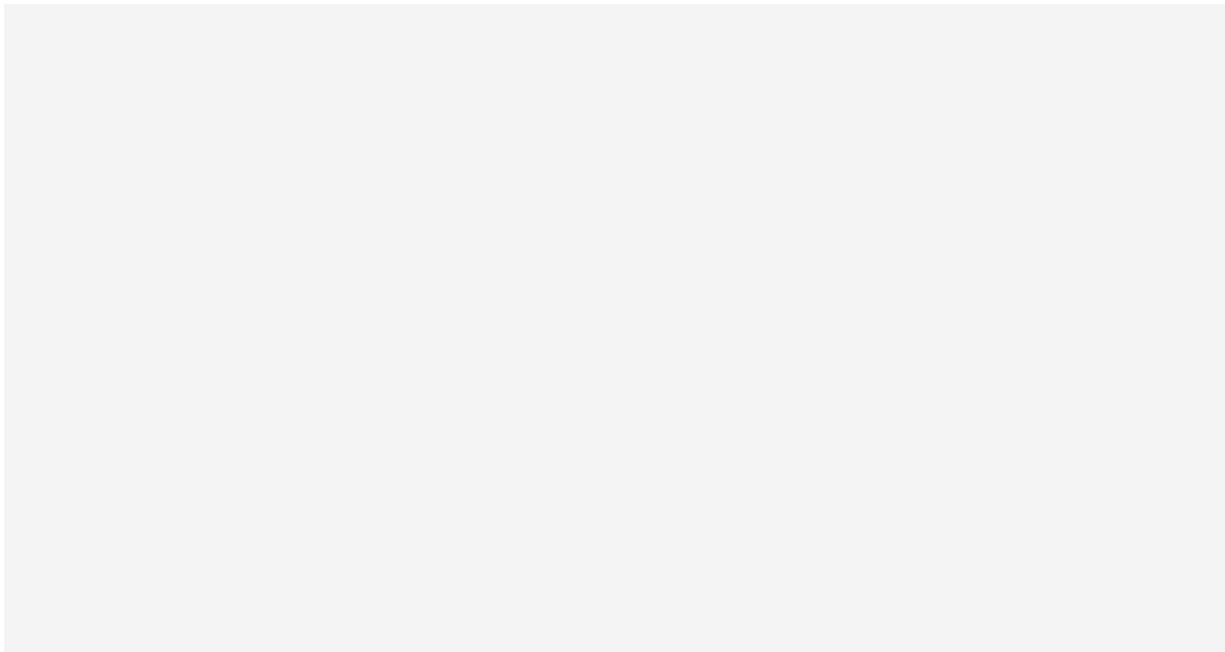
The first plot point is the final major beat in the first act of your story, in which your character fully engages with the story's central conflict (often after some initial hesitation). In some stories, the first plot point and inciting incident occur in tandem, such as in *The Hunger Games* when Prim is selected as a Games participant during the Reaping, prompting Katniss to immediately volunteer to take her place.

ACT TWO: THE MIDDLE

Act Two comprises the bulk of your story, ending as late as 90% of the way through your book. This middle act consists of two series of events that bookend your story's midpoint, which serves as a major turning point in your characters' journey. Understanding how to structure this act properly will keep your story from losing momentum as it builds toward its all-important ending.

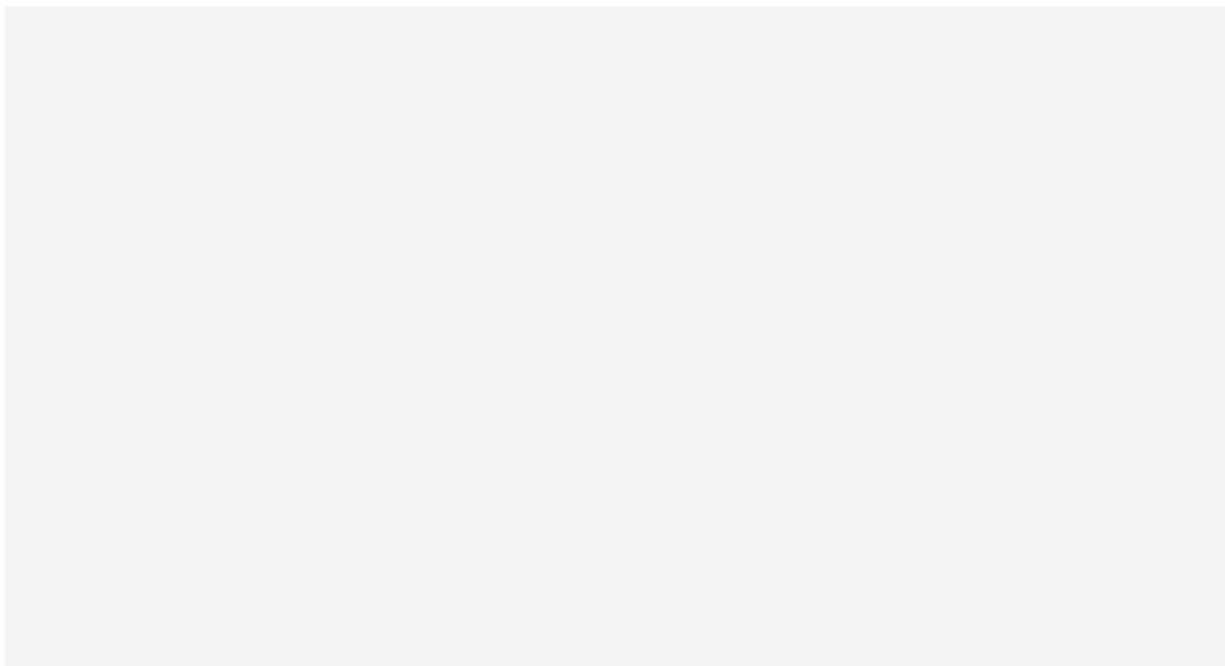
Q1: What is your story's pre-midpoint rising action?

Before the midpoint, the protagonist is largely reactionary. Despite engaging with the story's central conflict, they're overwhelmed by their new reality. They may even question their ability to achieve their goal. Hesitant, the protagonist does only what they must to survive over a series of scenes (and conflicts) leading toward the heart of the story. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss grudgingly complies with the demands made of her as the preparations for the Games begin. Upon entering the arena, she gathers what supplies she can and flees, seeking a safe place to hide from her competitors. (Additional space provided on the following page.)



Q2: What is your story's midpoint?

Roughly halfway through Act Two, a conflict occurs that forces the protagonist to confront what's at stake if they fail to achieve their goal. This game-changing event prompts the protagonist to shed their reactionary state and take an active role in not only pursuing their goal but combatting the antagonist. For example, having been hunted and trapped by her fellow competitors, Katniss takes violent action to escape their grasp during *The Hunger Games'* midpoint. This event convinces Katniss to stop hiding and start fighting to win the Games.



Q3: What is your story's post-midpoint rising action?

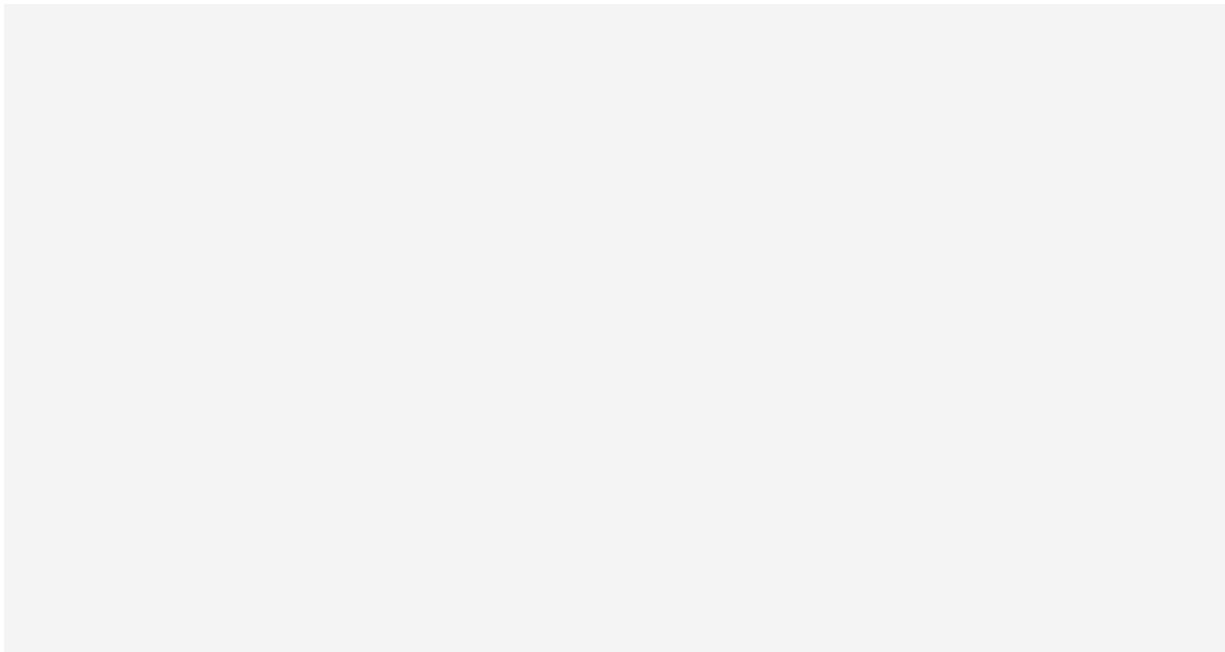
After the midpoint, the protagonist shifts from reacting to conflict to actively creating it, knowing that directly opposing the antagonist is the only way to achieve their goal and resolve the stakes at hand. During this sequence of events, the protagonist's progress serves to strengthen their confidence and resolve. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss works with an ally named Rue to destroy their competitor's supply cache, later killing a competitor in an effort to protect Rue. She then tracks down her friend Peeta, fights another competitor to procure medicine for Peeta's injured leg, and mercy-kills the final Career competitor when he's injured.

ACT THREE: THE END

If the first act is about *introduction* and the second act is about *opposition*, then Act Three of the Three-Act Story Structure is about *resolution*. Picking up where Act Two leaves off, Act Three comprises the final 10% - 25% of your story and contains three major sequences.

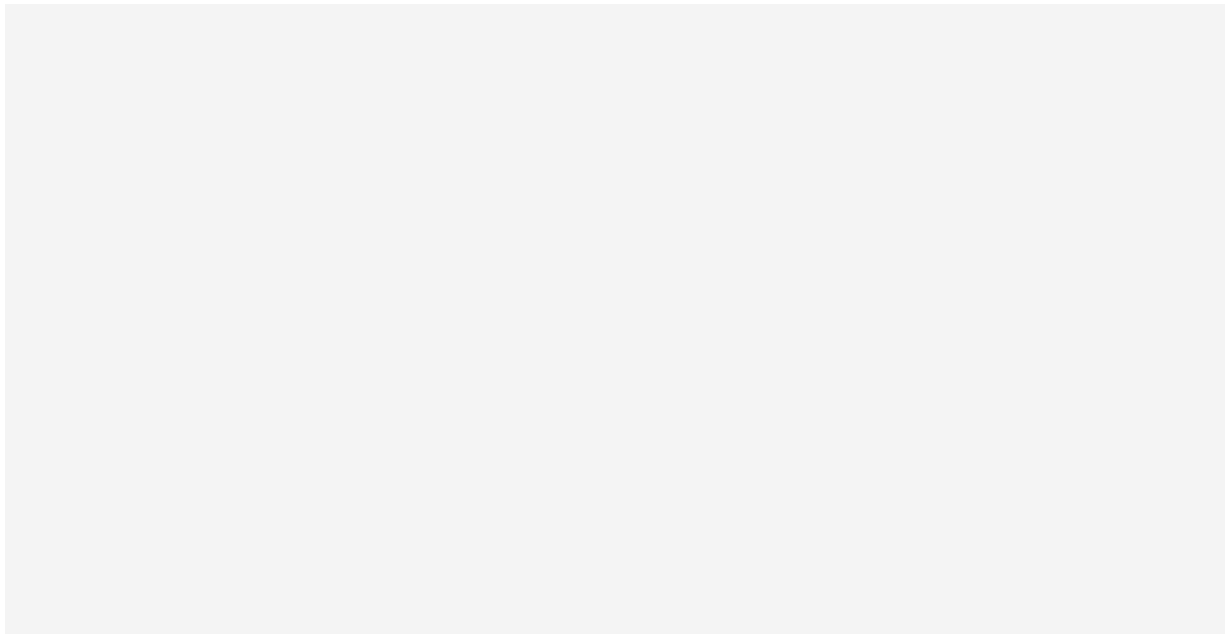
Q1: What is your story's dark night of the soul?

Just when all is going well, the antagonist rallies to deliver a blow that pushes the protagonist to their breaking point. Known as "the dark night of the soul," this moment leads the protagonist to question their ability to defeat the antagonist and achieve their goal. In *The Hunger Games*, this event occurs when it appears that Katniss and Peeta have won. Then the Gamemakers revoke the two-winner allowance and attempt to force Katniss and Peeta to fight to the death. (Additional space provided on the following page.)



Q2: What is your story's climactic sequence?

Fortunately, the protagonist doesn't stay down for long. When an event reminds the protagonist of what's at stake, they rise from the ashes in one final effort to defeat the antagonist and achieve their goal. Sometimes this fight consists of a sequence of suspenseful events. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta hesitantly draw their weapons, neither wanting to kill the other. Then Katniss proposes that she and Peeta can both eat the poisonous berries in their possession. Neither will win, but they'll maintain their integrity and "beat" the Capitol. Peeta agrees and they both put the poisonous berries in their mouths.



Q3: What is your story's resolution?

A story's resolution ties up any remaining narrative threads. Having overcome the antagonist and/or achieved their goal, the protagonist addresses the physical and emotional consequences of their experiences, often righting wrongs committed along the way. In some stories, the protagonist also achieves their goal during this time, having spent the climactic sequence working to defeat the antagonist. Finally, the resolution introduces readers to your protagonist's new normal. For example, *The Hunger Games* resolves when the Gamemakers realize the allies' intent to commit suicide and declare Katniss and Peeta duel winners. The two are then removed from the arena and taken home to District 12. Though traumatized and forced to pretend to be proud Games winners, Katniss and Peeta are ultimately safe—for now.

