

EXPLORING THE

12 STAGES

OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

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Exploring the 12 Stages of the Hero's Journey

Introduction

Welcome to **Exploring the 12 Stages of the Hero's Journey**, where we explore each of the twelve stages and how your screenplays could benefit from them. We'll trace down the origins of the Hero's Journey, tracing it back to Joseph Campbell's original 17-stage Monomyth that was inspired by his studies on how the journey of the archetypal hero is shared by mythologies found in different cultures and countries throughout the course of world history.

Hollywood development executive and screenwriter Christopher Vogler took Campbell's storytelling theories and created the 12-stages of the Hero's Journey, which he later used as a story and character development directive for story departments and screenwriters.

While all of the twelve stages **do** apply to many stories and character arcs found in iconic Hollywood screenplays and their respective movie adaptations, you can also use each **individual** stage independent of the others with equally effective results.

Therefore, as a screenwriter, you can utilize either the full 12-stages to craft and structure your cinematic stories **or** you can cherry-pick particular stages and apply them to your own hybrid structure with equally effective results.

Christopher Vogler best explained it by saying, ***“The Hero's Journey is a skeleton framework that should be fleshed out with the details of and surprises of the individual story. The structure should not call attention to itself, nor should it be followed too precisely. The order of the stages is only one of many possible variations. The stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically shuffled without losing any of their power.”***

With that in mind, we break down how each individual stage of the Hero's Journey can help enhance your story and your characters. After that, it's for you to decide how you want to use them in your screenplays.

So sit back, learn about the Hero's Journey, and have fun finding ways that these stages can make your stories and your characters even better...

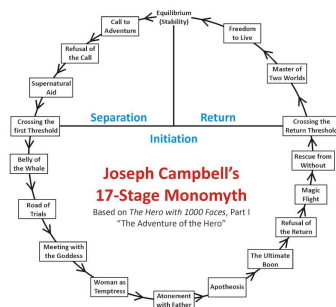
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The Hero's Journey Breakdown

Joseph Campbell's 17-stage Monomyth was conceptualized over the course of Campbell's own text, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and then later in the 1980s through two documentaries, one of which introduced the term ***The Hero's Journey***.

The first documentary, 1987's ***The Hero's Journey: The World of Joseph Campbell***, was released with an accompanying book entitled *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*.

The second documentary was released in 1988 and consisted of Bill Moyers' series of interviews with Campbell, accompanied by the companion book *The Power of Myth*.



Christopher Vogler was a Hollywood development executive and screenwriter working for Disney when he took his passion for Joseph Campbell's story monomyth and developed it into a seven-page company memo for the company's development department and incoming screenwriters.

The memo, entitled *A Practical Guide to The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, was later developed by Vogler into *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* in 1992. He then elaborated on those concepts for the book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers*.

Christopher Vogler's approach to Campbell's structure broke the mythical story structure into twelve stages. We define the stages in our own simplified interpretations:

1. **The Ordinary World:** We see the hero's normal life at the start of the story before the adventure begins.

2. **Call to Adventure:** The hero is faced with an event, conflict, problem, or challenge that makes them begin their adventure.
3. **Refusal of the Call:** The hero initially refuses the adventure because of hesitation, fears, insecurity, or any other number of issues.
4. **Meeting the Mentor:** The hero encounters a mentor that can give them advice, wisdom, information, or items that ready them for the journey ahead.
5. **Crossing the Threshold:** The hero leaves their ordinary world for the first time and crosses the threshold into adventure.
6. **Tests, Allies, and Enemies:** The hero learns the rules of the new world and endures tests, meets friends, and comes face-to-face with enemies.
7. **The Approach:** The initial plan to take on the central conflict begins, but setbacks occur that cause the hero to try a new approach or adopt new ideas.
8. **The Ordeal:** Things go wrong and added conflict is introduced. The hero experiences more difficult hurdles and obstacles, some of which may lead to a life crisis.
9. **The Reward:** After surviving The Ordeal, the hero seizes the sword — a reward that they've earned that allows them to take on the biggest conflict. It may be a physical item or piece of knowledge or wisdom that will help them persevere.
10. **The Road Back:** The hero sees the light at the end of the tunnel, but they are about to face even more tests and challenges.
11. **The Resurrection:** The climax. The hero faces a final test, using everything they have learned to take on the conflict once and for all.
12. **The Return:** The hero brings their knowledge or the “elixir” back to the ordinary world.

In the following chapters, we explore each of these stages and delve into how each of them can service the story and characters of your screenplays.

Stage 1: The Ordinary World

The first stage — **The Ordinary World** — happens to be one of the most essential elements of any story, even ones that don't follow the twelve-stage structure to a tee.

Here we offer three reasons why writers need to show protagonists in their Ordinary World.

1. To Set Up How the Conflict Disrupts the Character's Ordinary Life

When you open the story within the character's Ordinary World, you're establishing their comfort zone — a world that they're complacent with or used to living.

This doesn't mean that they're happy and comfortable in that world — sometimes they are far from that — but we're seeing them in their element at the time the story opens.

When the conflict occurs — whether it's a problem to deal with or Campbell's own **Call to Adventure** — the protagonist's world is shattered or disrupted at the very least.

And the only way we truly notice this is by witnessing them in their Ordinary World first, even if it's for just a brief window of time within the story.

Luke Skywalker living on a moisture farm.

Sarah Connor working as a waitress.

Neo living life as Thomas Anderson — a computer programmer and hacker — within the Matrix.

The Ghostbusters doing paranormal research at Columbia University.

Frodo living a quiet life in The Shire.

These are all examples of the Ordinary World. When these protagonists are forced to face conflict within — or outside of — that Ordinary World, they enter the Special World that the rest of the film takes place within. A world that is new or challenging to the protagonist.

And it even works with drama as well.

A film like *The Big Chill* offers a glimpse of the Ordinary World of each of its main characters in the form of the death of their college friend and where they are in life when

they are informed — and later asked to attend his funeral.

[CLICK HERE](#) to watch the opening of the film.

2. To Foreshadow the Story to Come

The Ordinary World at the beginning of a story offers the writer a chance to foreshadow events to come, plant plot and character devices that pay off later within the story, and even allows for the opportunity to present themes and metaphors that will be explored within the narrative.

It's the perfect setup place for writers to prepare the reader or audience for the ride to come.

Luke Skywalker is always looking to the stars, to the distant suns, and to the adventure that lies beyond his Ordinary World.

Sarah Connor is a far cry from the savior that she is later told she'll be.

Neo, as Thomas Anderson, has always felt that there's something off about the world — and he's heard online rumblings about the concept of something called The Matrix.

The Ghostbusters are living a dull and uncelebrated career life. Peter is the screwup who has no real interest in what they are studying, beyond using university funds for projects that allow him to meet cute college girls. Ray is obsessed with the paranormal. He believes in it all. And he quickly proves that he's an authority on the subject. Egon takes a purely scientific approach to everything. To him, all of life is an experiment — especially the paranormal. This all plays within the context of the story to come.

Frodo has heard his Uncle Biblo's stories. He's interested in the book his uncle is writing. Little does he know that he's the one who will finish that book for him in the end.

You use the Ordinary World portion of the opening of your story to introduce themes, metaphors, plants, and foreshadowing to engage the reader or audience once the conflict hits the protagonist hard.

3. To Create Catharsis and Empathy

Today's cinematic interpretation of catharsis can be translated as the feeling we feel after the resolution of the story and the protagonist's overall journey.

If a story opens up in the middle of a conflict, and we're introduced to the protagonist in the midst of dealing with that conflict, we have no context of who they are or where they came from. So when the conflict is resolved, the reader or audience doesn't leave the story feeling that there's been a cathartic resolution. We've only witnessed a character

dealing with a conflict. It may be entertaining to watch them do that in some genres, but the best stories are those that offer a truly cathartic experience.

And part of that is feeling empathy for the protagonist.

Showing them in their Ordinary World allows the reader or audience to do one of the following:

- ◆ Sympathize with the protagonist
- ◆ Empathize with the protagonist

You can make people sympathize with your characters. People see their situation, and they feel compassion, sorrow, or pity for the protagonist without necessarily identifying with the situation they are in.

Writers can also use the Ordinary World to offer ways that the average reader or audience member can identify with their character. Maybe they hate their job. Maybe they like their job, but feel that something is missing in life. People identify with those things.

Whether it's outright sympathy for the protagonist or the preferred deeper level of empathy, those elements set up the catharsis that you want readers and audiences to feel when the story is concluded.

Read ScreenCraft's [The Single Most Important Element of a Successful Screenplay!](#)

Showing your protagonist within their Ordinary World at the beginning of your story offers you the ability to showcase how much the core conflict they face rocks their world. And it allows you to foreshadow and create the necessary elements of empathy and catharsis that your story needs.

Stage 2: The Call to Adventure

The next stage is the **Call to Adventure**. The hero is faced with an event, conflict, problem, or challenge that makes them begin their adventure.

Here we offer three reasons why that Call to Adventure means everything when you're trying to tell a great story.

1. Introduces the Core Concept of the Story

Concept is very crucial to the success of any story that you write. It will be the sole reason why anyone reads your story or watches your movie or television pilot. It represents the core of your story and affects each and every character that you create to live and breathe within that plot and narrative.

Conflict is everything to a great story. And the Call to Adventure represents that conflict and is what pushes that core conflict onto your protagonist.

Luke Skywalker is asked by Jedi Master Ben Kenobi to go with him to Alderaan to return the two droids to Princess Leia to help the Rebellion defeat the Empire.

Sarah Connor is told by soldier-from-the-future Kyle Reese, "Come with me if you want to live," as they are pursued by a cyborg assassin that wants to kill her unborn child.

Neo is asked by a computer hacker to take the blue pill or the red pill in order to either learn the truth about the world they live in or live in ignorance to the fact that the world is not what it seems.

The Ghostbusters are called to investigate a supposed haunting at the New York Public Library, which leads to a threat that puts all of New York City in danger.

Frodo is asked by the Middle-Earth wizard Gandalf to take a powerful Ring out of The Shire to save all of Middle-Earth.

These are all examples of the Call to Adventure. The protagonist is faced with a problem or conflict that rocks their Ordinary World, and they have to decide whether or not to answer that call.

And it even works with drama as well.

A film like *The Big Chill* offers a Call to Adventure to each of its main characters in the form of the death of their college friend and his eventual funeral that they all are asked to attend.

2. Defines the Genre of Your Story

The Call to Adventure can come in many forms — and it will usually define the genre that you're writing in, which is another vital aspect of your story.

Knowing your genre is important. That knowledge will allow you to use or avoid any given genre's cliches and tropes. It will help you develop the perfect context and narrative. The tone and atmosphere will be better defined when you know your genre as well. And the reader or audience will know what to expect when they know and understand what the central conflict (concept) of your story is.

And lastly, when you market your story for possible acquisition, the Call to Adventure for your protagonist will be the center of your logline that you pitch. And that pitch has to give the potential buyer a quick cue to what genre the story is.

3. Begins the Process of Character Development

Your protagonist's reaction to the Call of Adventure will offer you the chance to begin to showcase the character development within your story.

Their initial reaction will easily dictate the type of character that they are at the beginning of the story.

Luke Skywalker is longing for a little adventure when the story begins. But when he's given a chance to make a difference, he hesitates. He showcases loyalty to his Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, despite just having asked them before the Call to Adventure to leave the farm to attend the Academy.

Sarah Connor is overwhelmed by her Call to Adventure. She can't believe that she's the savior of the future. To her, she's just a waitress. A nobody. And as she faces the conflict at hand, we begin to see her character development into the strong person Kyle Reese knows she'll become.

Neo takes the leap of faith by taking the pill that will awaken him to the truth, showing that he's someone willing to take a risk.

The way each of the three Ghostbusters reacts to the initial Call to Adventure defines the role they will play throughout the course of the story. But we quickly learn that Peter

will become a believer, Ray may be scared of the mystical truth he believes in, and Egon, well, he'll handle everything he encounters with a scientific approach.

Frodo will go above and beyond to do the right thing, which is why Gandalf entrusted him with the Ring in the first place.

Read ScreenCraft's [5 Screenwriting Tricks to Conjure Better Character Depth!](#)

Giving your story's protagonist a Call to Adventure introduces the core concept of your story, dictates the genre your story is being told in, and helps to begin the process of character development that every great story needs.

Stage 3: Refusal of the Call

What stage can come next in your story? **The Refusal of the Call**. The hero initially refuses the adventure because of hesitation, fears, insecurity, or any other number of issues.

Here we offer three reasons why your protagonist should refuse the Call to Adventure — and how your script can benefit from that refusal.

1. To Create Instant Tension and Conflict Within the Story

The Refusal of the Call to Adventure can work within any type of cinematic story structure and narrative — even one that doesn't hit all of the marks of the Campbell or Vogler Hero's Journey stages.

The Call to Adventure is the Inciting Incident that pushes your protagonist into the core conflict of your story, which comprises the central concept of your script.

Imagine a screenplay with a protagonist that is a private detective. Someone comes to them with a case. They take it and begin their investigation. You show them in their Ordinary World and introduce the Call to Adventure. That's the opening of your script, and most of the first act as well.

Now imagine the same scenario, but you inject a scene, moment, or sequence where your protagonist doesn't want to take the case. Maybe they feel that it's too dangerous. Maybe they have a personal connection. Maybe they don't trust the person that is hiring them.

Doesn't that added refusal add some spice to not only the opening of your screenplay but to the whole first act as well?

When a character refuses a Call to Adventure, there have to be reasons why. And those reasons why offer you — the screenwriter — the ability to inject tension into the opening pages of your screenplay. Tension is equated to conflict. And conflict is a vital element to any screenplay — the more, the better.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Luke Skywalker's Refusal of the Call!

2. To Showcase the Risks and the Stakes Involved

The best screenplays showcase big risks and big stakes that characters must overcome. The Refusal of the Call to Adventure offers you the opportunity to introduce those risks and stakes.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's initial refusal reveals that even Gandalf — a man of great power and ultimate goodness — could become seduced by the power of the One Ring.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Frodo's Refusal of the Call!

In our private investigator example, the reason(s) that character is refusing to take on the case allows us to be able to show the reader or audience what that character could be risking if they did.

What if the case involved a missing person that was linked to some dangerous mafia gangsters? If the private investigator gets involved, they may uncover details that the mafia doesn't want to be divulged, thus making the private investigator a threat to them. Now the P.I. has enemies — and dangerous ones at that.

We've just injected high stakes for that protagonist. And if they take on that case, they're going to be at risk.

So whether you employ all twelve steps of Vogler's Hero's Journey stages or not, the Refusal of the Call to Adventure can help to amp up your tension and conflict by raising the risks and stakes involved.

3. To Create Empathy and Character Depth

Any character can take on an adventure or handle a conflict that is thrown at them. We've seen that time and time again in any action flick.

But not every action movie takes the time to create empathy for the protagonist or offers character depth that allows us to feel empathy towards that character.

When a protagonist refuses the Call to Adventure, they're revealing their own insecurities, fears, and inner conflicts. This is a bridge to allow the reader and audience to feel empathetic towards the protagonist. We're allowed to relate to that character or, at the very least, sympathize with their plight.

In *Rocky*, we only get a brief Refusal of the Call to Adventure when he's offered the chance of a lifetime. But the fact that he initially rejects the offer shows his insecurities. He may be a fighter, but he's insecure with himself and his abilities. And that introduces a lot of empathy.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Rocky's Refusal of the Call!

And it also offers some introduction to key character depth as well.

If our private investigator took the case instantly, that may show some bravado — but we're missing out on some character depth and opportunities for empathy. Most people won't relate to a character that just takes a case no matter what the risks may be. But if you show that they are hesitant, you can start to reveal any number of possible compelling characters traits.

Maybe the private investigator is asked to take on a missing child case — and it's revealed that they lost their own child to a sexual predator. They refuse the case because it's too close to home, but what if they end up taking the case to help them get closure and prevent another parent from losing a child?

This is how you create empathy and introduce further character depth — all because you had your protagonist Refuse the Call to Adventure.

The Refusal of the Call to Adventure allows you to create instant tension and conflict within the opening pages and first act of your story. It also gives you the chance to amp-up the risks and stakes involved, which, in turn, engages the reader or audience even more. And it also manages to help you develop a protagonist with more depth that can help to create empathy for them.

Stage 4: Meeting the Mentor

Along the way, your protagonist — and screenplay — may need a mentor. The hero encounters a mentor that can give them advice, wisdom, information, or items that ready them for the journey ahead.

Here we offer three things a mentor character can do for your protagonist and your screenplay.

1. Create an Emotional Empathetic Bond Between Characters

The best stories have heart — and that applies to any genre. And for a story to have heart, the writer needs to create empathy for the characters.

When you introduce a mentor character — even in stories that don't necessarily follow every stage of Campbell's and Vogler's Hero's Journey — you're creating a relatable bond that readers and audiences can attach to on an emotional level.

People instantly relate to the bond of a parent and child or teacher and student — and often, those two types of relationships end up being one and the same within so many stories.

In ***Star Wars***, Ben Kenobi teaches Luke in the ways of the Force. But he's also a father figure. Luke never knew his father. While he had his Uncle Owen, Ben Kenobi represents a connection to Luke's real father — which manifests as a direct father and son relationship.

In ***The Karate Kid***, Daniel is the son of a single mother. We don't know what happened to Daniel's father, but we do know that he doesn't have one. Mr. Miyagi teaches him karate, but he also offers Daniel fatherly influence, helping Daniel get through challenging situations in his life that his mother can't quite relate with.

In ***Rocky***, Rocky's parents are dead. He has no one — no family. His life as a fighter hasn't worked out. He's a club fighter by night, getting paid next to nothing. By day, he's the muscle of a loan shark. There's been no one to guide Rocky away from the bad path he has taken — except for Mickey. Mickey, like any father, calls Rocky out on his bad choices. He points out Rocky's faults. He does this as a teacher of boxing, with Rocky as his student, but there's a strong father-son bond that develops between them as well.

In ***Million Dollar Baby***, Maggie is looking for someone to train her. Frank begrudgingly takes her on as a student. Their relationship develops. Maggie doesn't have a strong fatherly figure in her life, but it's Frank that is taking on a paternal bond with Maggie,

substituting her for his estranged daughter.

A mentor character offers the reader and audience something to relate with, in terms of an emotional connection to the story and the characters.

2. Guide the Protagonist Through the Central Conflict

When the protagonist is first introduced within their Ordinary World, they are in a place of comfort or complacency. The best stories then take that character out of their comfort zone by throwing them into the metaphorical fire of an extreme conflict that rocks their world.

For some stories, this is an adventure that they are called to take on. For other genres, it's an emotional journey that they will be forced to deal with.

Mentors help them deal with their insecurities and weaknesses. They give confidence, knowledge, and direction. They build up the protagonist's hope and offer wisdom for them to reflect on as they deal with any inner and outer conflict. And sometimes they offer physical, supernatural, or metaphorical items that can help the protagonist succeed.

And sometimes the mentor isn't a character at all.

In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the mentor present within the Hero's Journey interpretation of that story is the information embedded within Roy's mind by the UFO he encountered — constantly pulling him to a location that he's never been to through the image of a simple but mysterious shape that he sees.

Whether the mentor is a real person or something else, they also offer you the ability to use story elements to enhance the second act of your story. A protagonist taking on a conflict without any outside help can be engaging, but the second act can often falter.

When you have a mentor in the mix, the second act has more meat to it with this relationship between the protagonist and mentor, whether it's the preparation that the mentor takes the protagonist through or the conflict between the two as they do — preferably both.

3. Help You Introduce Story Elements, Themes, and Exposition Within the Screenplay

In *Star Wars*, we don't learn anything about the Force until Ben Kenobi shows up. Nor do we learn about Luke's father and the history of Darth Vader.

In *The Karate Kid*, we don't learn anything about karate or the philosophical angles of it

that can help Daniel through his journey until Mr. Miyagi shows up.

In ***The Lord of the Rings***, we don't learn anything about what can be done about the One Ring until Gandalf appears and explains things.

Mentors are an easy way for you, the writer, to offer information not only to the protagonists but to the reader and audience as well.

They can be present throughout the whole story, or they can appear briefly within the first and beginning of the second act. They can be physical items like maps or diaries. Or they can be supernatural intuition or scientific evidence that helps guide the protagonist to where they need to go.

They can also come in multiple forms within the story. In ***The Wizard of Oz***, Dorothy has multiple mentors throughout her adventure — Professor Marvel, Glinda the Good Witch, Scarecrow, Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, and the Wizard. They all have a hand in helping her. And they all also have a hand in introducing the themes of the story.

Meeting the Mentor offers the protagonist someone that can guide them through their journey with wisdom, support, and even physical items. Beyond that, they help you to offer empathetic relationships within your story, as well as ways to introduce themes, story elements, and exposition to the reader and audience.

Stage 5: Crossing the Threshold

At some point at the end of the first act, your story may showcase a moment where your protagonist needs to **Cross the Threshold** between their Ordinary World and the Special World they will be experiencing as their inner or outer journey begins.

The hero leaves their ordinary world for the first time and crosses the threshold into adventure.

Here we offer three ways Crossing the Threshold affects your story.

1. Shifts Your Story Into Gear

If we've been introduced to your protagonist through their Ordinary World, and have watched them finally accept the call to adventure — whether it be an inner or outer emotional or physical journey — it's always nice to offer a moment within the story that shifts everything to the next gear.

We've gotten to know the protagonist and their world. We've maybe seen their insecurities, struggles, and fears when they initially refused the Call to Adventure. Once they've decided that they're going to take the conflict on, we're at the turning point of the story, shifting gears from the first act and into the second.

In ***Cast Away***, when Chuck goes into the cockpit of the FedEx jet, he sees the danger at hand. We've shifted gears from his regular FedEx routine to something dire. He doesn't cross the threshold when he says goodbye to Kelly or gets on the jet. Everything is still within his comfort zone. He's still in his Ordinary World.

It's when things go wrong that he steps out of his normal work routine and into the Special World he's about to experience — and it is vastly different from what he is used to.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch!

In ***The Lord of the Rings***, Frodo and Sam literally cross the threshold between the world they've known, The Shire, to a world they are unfamiliar with — beyond The Shire.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch!

In ***Stand By Me***, the boys walk onto the train tracks leading away from their hometown of Castle Rock — and it's both a literal and metaphorical threshold they are crossing. The tracks represent a physical path away from their home. And once they embark on their adventure, the boys are crossing the threshold from boyhood to a coming of age.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch!

These moments within stories allow the reader or audience to switch their own mindsets, knowing that the characters are going to be facing the central conflict, as well as many trials and tribulations throughout. It is the moment that truly captures our attention going into the second act.

2. Introduces the Differences Between the Ordinary World and the Special World to Come

The Special World is the world that the protagonist is about to come across as they deal with the conflict they've been forced to — or have chosen to — take on.

And it's vital to the story to present a world that is very different from what the protagonist is used to. Yes, some great stories simply showcase a window of time within a character's world. But if you want to truly engage a reader and audience, you need to inject as much tension and conflict that you can. And you do that by taking them out of their element.

In ***Cast Away***, Chuck is a character that is used to a routine, a schedule, and the technology that can help him maintain all of that. When he's stranded on an island, he's out of his comfort zone.

In ***Stand By Me***, when the boys embark on their adventure, there are no parents to guide them through life — and they've also escaped the constraints of the life they left behind in Castle Rock. It's just them, the tracks, a long and intimidating bridge, a murky swamp, and the coming-of-age conflicts and realizations that comprise the new world they've entered.

In ***The Lord of the Rings***, the Hobbits are in a dark, strange, and dangerous world. Everyone is bigger than they are. They don't know who to trust. And they certainly don't have enough food. They're out of their element.

The threshold represents the difference between the known and the unknown. And there's a thrill — not just for the protagonist, but for the reader and audience as well — to the unknown.

So presenting a moment or scene where we see the protagonist crossing that threshold is so impactful. It's subtle but powerful.

3. Begins Your Protagonist's Character Arc

Character arcs are a must. Most people want to see a character change throughout a story — a transformation that they undergo as they take on the conflict at hand.

When your protagonist physically or emotionally crosses a threshold, you're letting the reader or audience know that they're character arc has begun.

We've hopefully learned a little about them within their Ordinary World. We've maybe learned a little more as they refused the Call to Adventure, divulging their fears, insecurities, and reservations. Now we know that despite all of that, they're willing to take on whatever challenge they have been presented with — their arc has begun.

This shift allows the reader and audience a brief moment to feel the empathetic impact of the protagonist crossing the threshold. And the power of that moment pulls them into the story. They're ready to go on the ride. They're invested. They're curious and want to know how this character is going to survive the conflict. They know the baggage that the protagonist is carrying. They empathize with them. And they are ready to go on this character's journey.

Crossing the Threshold is about shifting from the first act to the second, and allowing the reader and audience to feel that shift so they can prepare for the journey to come. It showcases the difference between the protagonist's Ordinary World and the Special World to come. And, even more important, we're introduced to the first shift in the character arc of the protagonist as they decide to venture out into the unknown.

Stage 6: Tests, Allies, and Enemies

And it's within this unknown that the protagonist faces many tests and meets their allies and enemies.

1. Tests

Within the Hero's Journey structure, this stage is a vital part of your protagonist's journey.

Conflict is everything. Without conflict, there's no story, no story arc, and no character exploration. So while this is a stage represented in every Hero's Journey structure application, it's also a necessary component to any story that you tell — using the Hero's Journey structure or not.

Your story doesn't merely entail a character dealing with a single conflict.

In **Jaws**, we learn that the core concept of the film centers around a killer shark that unleashes chaos on a beach community as a local Chief of Police, marine biologist, and old seafarer hunt the beast down before it kills again.

But the movie is so much more than that. Brody, the Chief of Police, has to deal with multiple conflicts within that story.

He has to ascertain what exactly is threatening the island community.

He's forced to go up against the local mayor and town board, all of whom don't want their precious tourism profits to be affected.

When the shark kills a young boy after Brody is pressured to tone down the response to the possible threat, he faces the scorn of the boy's mother and the guilt of not doing as much as he could have to prevent the tragedy.

When he's on the boat, ready to hunt down the shark, he's put through multiple tests to achieve his ultimate goal and face the core conflict of the story.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Your protagonist must face multiple and evolving conflicts (tests) throughout the second act to engage the reader and audience — to keep them invested in the journey. And

these tests are what define your protagonist's character arc as they deal with everything that is thrown at them within the narrative.

The characterization within your story relies on these tests because the actions, reactions, and inactions of your protagonist will show us what kind of character you want to portray. And this stage also sets the rules of this Special World that they're forced to exist within as they take on the conflict.

So within your stories, whether you follow all twelve stages that we've defined as The Hero's Journey above or not, the tests that you make your protagonist face need to be aplenty and present on multiple narrative levels — big and small. That's the core of any great story. And it's what keeps people invested, engaged, and compelled.

2. Allies

Along with the tests that your protagonist faces, they're going to need some help along the way. That's where introducing allies comes into play.

In **Jaws**, as Brody struggles to deal with all of these conflicts that he must face, he has to reach out for help from allies.

This introduces two key allies in Hooper and Quint — the two men with varying degrees of experience, wisdom, and knowledge that will help Brody take on the core threat of the story.

This stage of The Hero's Journey expands the cast of characters. While some novels or films focus solely on a single character, most great stories build an exciting cast of characters around the central protagonist.

Imagine **Jaws** without Hooper and Quint. Having Brody jump on a boat to hunt for a shark on his own doesn't pack the narrative punch that we get with him having to learn from and deal with these two pivotal characters. The characterization would be drastically reduced without them.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

We also see him interact with secondary characters like Brody's wife and his two sons. They are established as allies as well within his journey.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Pairing your protagonist with allies expands your cast of characters and offers you an opportunity to explore characterization on multiple levels.

3. Enemies

With the mention of enemies, we come full circle within this Hero's Journey stage. Enemies are there to test the protagonist. They offer the necessary conflict that should be present within all stories.

While allies give us — and the protagonist — hope, enemies challenge that hope and create a more enthralling plot.

Brody isn't just dealing with a killer shark. He's dealing with a money-hungry mayor.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

And standing behind that mayor is the town board. Without them challenging Brody, the story wouldn't really go anywhere. Brody would shut down the beach, and no one would be in danger. But because they pressure him into keeping it open, more conflict and characterization ensues.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Having additional "enemies" within your story isn't just about more bad guys trying to thwart the hero. It's about creating more and more conflict throughout the story.

It doesn't matter what genre you're writing in. Horror stories need enemies. Dramas need enemies. Comedies need enemies. We need to see your protagonist go up against others.

And enemies don't always have to be human characters, either. They can be represented as forces of nature, reversals of fortune, and unfortunate events.

Conflict is everything. It starts with the tests your protagonist must face and comes full circle with the enemies putting them through those tests.

The tests, allies, and enemies that your protagonist comes across defines the meat of your story. Without them, there is no story. They introduce the conflict, expand the cast of characters, and offer a more engaging and compelling narrative. If there's a single stage of The Hero's Journey that writers should utilize, the Tests, Allies, and Enemies stage is the most vital to any great story.

Stage 7: The Approach

Once you've put your protagonist through those tests and once they've met their allies and enemies, they're going to need to **Approach the Inmost Cave** of the story — preparing to face their greatest fears and conflicts.

Here we feature three ways how the Approach the Inmost Cave stage can better any story, even those that don't follow each and every stage of the Hero's Journey.

1. Allows the Audience and Protagonist to Catch Their Breath

The “cave” represents the core element of your story's conflict.

It can be a physical place like a tower holding the princess, a dungeon holding a captive, a vault containing the Ark of the Covenant, or a weak point in a world-destroying Death Star.

It can also be an emotional or physical challenge that the protagonist has been preparing themselves to take on — a killer shark in **Jaws**, a World Championship fight in **Rocky**, or finding the dead body of a missing boy in **Stand By Me**.

But this isn't the stage where your protagonist actually enters that cave to face the central conflict that you've been building up to. We're talking about the approach to that cave.

They've gone through many tests after Crossing the Threshold from their Ordinary World to the Special World where the major conflict lays in wait. They've met the allies that will help them and the enemies that are trying to hinder their progress.

Now the “cave” is within reach. And at this point in the story, just before the midpoint, you can take this opportunity to allow the reader, audience, and protagonist to catch their breath and regroup.

Action thrillers can't be a non-stop chase sequence. Even **Mad Max: Fury Road** had to have moments where the characters — and the audience — stopped to catch their breath.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Horror movies can't be a non-stop scream fest. Even those naive teenagers in **Scream** need a moment to stop running and screaming.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Whether it's a brief moment, brief scene, or an extended sequence of moments or scenes, most stories can benefit from taking that bit of time after the exciting, horrifying, thrilling, hilarious, or dramatic opening of the second act as you build to an even more intense midpoint.

Consider it that moment just before you shift into that high gear, ready to let your engine go into overdrive as you head towards the core conflict of your story.

2. Offers Time to Reflect, Review, and Plan Ahead

By this point, a lot has happened since your story first started.

You've introduced your protagonist in their Ordinary World. That world has been rocked by a conflict that they are forced to face. They may have had reservations about facing the conflict, but they've decided to take the necessary path to cross that threshold away from the comforts of their world, and into the world of the conflict they're destined to face.

And when they have, they've faced many tests — emotional, physical, or both — and have met many characters that have either helped or hindered their journey to the first initial cave of their conflict.

The Approach allows them to catch their breath, and, more importantly, prepare for the conflict that they are about to face.

Mickey asks Rocky to let him train him — and Rocky's initial reaction is anger.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

This solidifies the dangers of sharks and what they may be up against. It's then that the shark returns, damaging the boat's hull and disabling the power. They work through the night to repair the engine.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Gordy, Chris, Teddy, and Vern are covered in leeches after crossing through a swamp. Gordie passes out and the others contemplate whether or not they should continue on. Gordie insists.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Luke, Han, Kenobi, Chewbacca, and the droids are pulled into the Death Star after trying to take the plans to Alderaan, which has been destroyed.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Everything we've learned about the protagonist(s) — their fears, skills, strengths, weaknesses, regrets, and lessons learned — now has to be reflected on and reviewed to prepare for the journey into the cave.

And for the reader and audience, this break in the action, horror, thrills, hilarity, or drama allows us to regroup and remember where the characters have been and how they're going to take what they've learned through their journey and apply it to take on the conflict full force.

Watch any *Mission: Impossible* movie, and you'll see the Approach the Inmost Cave stage when Ethan Hunt and his allies plan their approach to the first mission.

Watch any horror movie, and you'll likely catch the moment where the protagonist(s) prepares to take on the threat.

This is the time for the initial plan, the first training sequence, or the first inspirational pep talk. This is when the protagonist is allowed to reflect on their journey and build the courage to take on their greatest challenge yet.

3. Escalates Tension and Builds Anticipation

When we see Rocky first start to train, tension increases and anticipation builds — we not only want to see him take on his opponent, we need to.

When Ethan Hunt and his Mission: Impossible team communicate the difficulty of the plan and all of the obstacles they must overcome, we need to see how this is all going to turn out for them.

When the boys are coming of age in *Stand By Me*, we need to see how they're going to react to their first major challenge.

Tension and anticipation is the writer's ultimate tool to keep readers and audiences invested. You play with their emotions. You tease them. You offer possibilities of failure or success and try to sell the reader and audience on the notion that each of them is possible.

The Approach the Inmost Cave stage allows you to build that anticipation and tension to its highest levels before you open the floodgates and let the raging waters of their actions and reactions crash into the conflict they're facing.

What you're really doing is escalating the tension by showcasing the many conflicts they'll be facing and building anticipation by introducing their approach, forcing the

reader and audience to wonder if it's all going to work.

The Approach the Inmost Cave stage within any story — following all steps of The Hero's Journey or not — is an essential element of your narrative, allowing the reader, audience, and characters to catch their breath, reflect, review, and plan ahead for the conflict just over the horizon. And it allows you, the writer, to build the necessary tension and anticipation that you need going into the midpoint your story.

Stage 8: The Ordeal

Everything within the first act — and beginning of the second — builds up to **The Ordeal**, which is the first real conflict that the protagonist must face.

What Is *The Ordeal*?

It's the midpoint of your story where your protagonist faces their greatest conflict yet.

The protagonist has gone through the necessary trials and tribulations that prepare them for what they believe to be the ultimate test they've faced within their journey thus far — The Ordeal.

As they Approach the Inmost Cave of their story, we've learned everything we need to know about how they plan to handle the situation. But once they begin their approach, everything goes haywire. Unexpected setbacks occur. What they thought they knew was either wrong, misinterpreted, or has evolved into a far more difficult conflict than they could have ever imagined.

This is the point of the story where the protagonist and their allies (if any) face their greatest challenge thus far — usually amid great consequences. Sometimes it's life or death. Other times it's a metaphorical version of those stakes.

This is when the protagonist hits rock bottom, making them — as well as the reader and audience — feel as if they are at the dark end of their days.

Here are three ways that you can create the best Ordeal within your story.

1. Write The Ordeal as If It Was the Climax of the Story

Just because The Ordeal is the midpoint of your story doesn't mean that it can't pack a punch.

In essence, The Ordeal is a false climax.

In ***Star Wars*** — as Kenobi goes off to deactivate the tractor beam so they can escape — Luke, Han, and Chewbacca discover that Princess Leia is being held on the Death Star with them. They rescue her, survive a hopeless situation within a trash compactor, and then escape to the Millennium Falcon, hoping that Kenobi has successfully deactivated the tractor beam.

Kenobi later sacrifices himself as Luke watches Darth Vader strike him down.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

This sequence feels like the end of the great space opera, but it's really launching us towards the true climax to come — the Battle of Yavin as the Rebellion takes on the Galactic Empire in an epic space battle.

The Ordeal represents what the protagonist believes is the final confrontation between themselves and the conflict that has rocked their Ordinary World.

In *Mission: Impossible*, the plan to perform a heist within the CIA Headquarters is worthy of being one of the most thrilling heist climaxes of all time.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Part 1 of the Scene!

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Part 2 of the Scene!

But it's really just the midpoint of the story that launches us forward with even more conflict to deal with.

In *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo and the rest of the Fellowship are forced to fend off hundreds, if not thousands, of orcs within Moria. They even have to deal with a towering cave troll. When they finally defeat the cave troll, orcs are about to overrun them until their numbers are scattered as the Balrog appears.

Gandalf fights the Balrog and casts him into a chasm. However, the Balrog drags Gandalf down with him to his apparent death.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Part 1 of the Scene!

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Part 2 of the Scene!

It's hard to believe that this isn't the climax of the film.

When you develop The Ordeal within your story, write it as if it'd be the exciting climax of any other great novel or movie. When you do that, you're retaining the interest of the reader and audience through the most difficult part of your story — the second act.

And it works in any genre. The Ordeal can be a moment where the protagonist believes they are facing their greatest physical or emotional challenge. But then everything goes wrong, despite what they've learned through tests they've undergone in their journey.

2. Kill the Protagonist's Darlings

Allies and Mentors are the rock for most protagonists. They offer emotional and physical

support. Mentors offer the hero the knowledge and perspective that they need to take on whatever conflict they're forced to face.

The Ordeal is all about taking your protagonist to their lowest of lows so that they can rise up and be resurrected in such a way that they can truly handle the major conflict once and for all.

And what greater way to take them as low as they can go than killing their allies and mentors.

In **Jaws**, Brody loses both his allies and mentors in Hooper and Quint.

During The Ordeal of that story, the shark attacks the shark cage and Hooper is thought to be lost.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Soon after, as their now sinking boat takes on water, the shark attacks and kills Quint, leaving Brody all by himself.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

*Note: The Ordeal in **Jaws** comes a little later than the Midpoint of the story. There are always variances within story structures.*

Brody is now tasked with taking on the shark all by himself.

When you take away beloved characters, you create an empathetic reaction for the reader and audience. This leads to cathartic moments that make your story even more memorable and engaging.

We feel for the protagonist because we've fallen in love with these characters. We rely on them, just as the protagonist does.

Kill your darlings.

3. Give Opportunities Within The Ordeal for the Protagonist to be Resurrected

Two Hero's Journey stages away from The Ordeal is The Resurrection — The climax where the hero faces their final test, using everything they have learned to take on the conflict once and for all.

Within that Resurrection, your protagonist needs to have a moment of transformation. But before that transformation can occur, something has to push them to the brink — to

their lowest point.

While losing an ally or mentor can help set the stage for the need for them to transform so that they can handle the final test, we need more. They need to lose hope, courage, or strength to carry on. The reader and audience need to feel as if there's no returning to the Ordinary World because that is how bad things are.

In ***Jaws***, we know that Brody is afraid of the water. This character trait is showcased time and time again throughout the story. He's lost his allies and mentors, yes. But now he must face his greatest fear from his Ordinary World — the water. Not to mention the giant shark that is coming to eat him.

The Ordeal within that film sets up a necessary transformation that must occur before he can face his fear of the water and kill the shark once and for all.

Inject characterization throughout the first and second act of your script that can help you showcase a powerful transformation that will keep the reader and audience invested, engaged, and compelled.

The Ordeal is the midpoint of your story that works as a false climax, taking your protagonist to the depths of despair. It offers you the ability to create an engaging midpoint climax that takes you into the third act. It ups the stakes within your story by taking away beloved allies and mentors. And it sets up the necessary transformation that your protagonist must go through in order to prevail.

Stage 9: The Reward

And after your hero has gone through all of that, you may want or need to reward them with something that they can use to take on the final threat they face during the climax of your story.

Here are the five types of rewards that your protagonist may need to prevail at the end of their journey.

1. Special Weapon

If you're writing in the action, science fiction, thriller, or fantasy genres, your character may need a special weapon — which Joseph Campbell referred to as "The Sword" — to defeat their greatest conflict.

This physical manifestation of The Reward can also be used in other genres, but it's far more prevalent in ones that involve action and adventure.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her friends escape the Witch's Castle with the Witch's broomstick — as well as the ruby slippers — which are essential to getting Dorothy back home.

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, The Reward is often one of the Infinite Stones. In *Doctor Strange*, Strange uses the Time Stone to reverse time and save Wong. He then enters the Dark Dimension and creates a time loop around himself and Dormammu. After repeatedly killing Strange to no avail, Dormammu finally gives in to Strange's demand that he leave Earth and take Kaecilius and his zealots with him in return for Strange breaking the loop.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In *Thor*, Thor earns the right to wield Mjölfnir, his mighty hammer, once again after proving that he's worthy. The hammer returns to him, restoring his powers and enabling him to defeat the Destroyer.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

It could be a weapon, a magical treasure, or some type of device that helps your protagonist conquer the ultimate threat in the climax of your story.

2. An Elixir

An elixir is a magical or medicinal potion that can heal a wounded ally or land. During the peak of a story, the hero and their allies usually find themselves in peril — their lowest of lows. An elixir can be something that heals them enough to prevail in the end.

In *Willow*, Willow escapes the wrath of Bavmorda's power when Raziel has him use a protective spell that keeps him safe from turning into a pig. Willow later manages to return (heal) Raziel from the curse, allowing her to use her powers to remove Bavmorda's spell from the army.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, an elixir is used in the form of The Holy Grail to heal Indy's father, saving him from death.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In *Mission: Impossible 2*, Ethan Hunt gets the Bellerophon canister to Nyah in time to cure her of the virus she's been injected with, just as he kills Ambrose.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

The elixir can work in fantasy movies, thrillers, or even medical dramas.

3. Knowledge

Knowledge is often mightier than any sword. It can be a fantastic tool to acquire to defeat a foe. It can drive a protagonist's internal need to succeed. It can inform them of the information they require to solve a final riddle or devise a certain plan of attack.

In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Han Solo escape with the plans to the Death Star, which is a key component to the Rebellion defeating Darth Vader and the Galactic Empire. Without that reward after The Ordeal of the story (the escape from the Death Star), the Rebellion would not have the knowledge or perspective to destroy the Death Star. While the plans of the Death Star were physical, it was the knowledge within R2-D2 that helped the Rebellion succeed.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In *Highlander*, Connor's reward is learning that the Kurgan raped his long-departed wife. This knowledge gives Connor the extra desire and drive to defeat the all-powerful Kurgan.

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In *Top Gun*, Maverick learns the truth about his late father's classified mission details

from Viper. He's told that his father didn't make the mistakes others had said. In fact, his father was a hero that saved many lives and showcased some of the best flying that Viper has ever seen. This knowledge gives Maverick what he needs to graduate with his Top Gun class and gets past the loss of Goose as he takes on more MiGs in the climax.

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Knowledge is power.

4. Experience

Sometimes protagonists have to experience an event or moment that opens their eyes and gives them the confidence that they need to prevail.

In *The Matrix*, Neo is ambushed and shot to death by Agent Smith. It's not until his resurrection that he can finally believe that he is The One that Morpheus prophesied. When Neo comes back to life and experiences that type of awakening, it's only then that he's able to manipulate the Matrix and defeat Agent Smith.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

This reward works very well in dramatic stories as well. Your protagonist can be awakened by a near-death experience, surviving an overdose, or coming to some sort of realization about their life and situation. In character-piece stories that can't or shouldn't incorporate weapons, potions, or plot-driven knowledge, an awakening experience can be a vital reward within a dramatic hero's journey.

5. Reconciliation

When a protagonist reconciles with a love interest — as we see so often in romantic comedies and love stories — that reward can help them to conquer any emotional conflict that they've been facing. This reward is yet another outstanding option for dramatic stories, but it can also work within genre flicks as well.

In *Return of the Jedi*, Luke Skywalker reconciles with Darth Vader, which allows Vader's true self to surface as Anakin Skywalker.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy is given a second reward that allows him to survive his biggest conflict — the reconciliation of his relationship with his father. It's evident in their conversation within the zeppelin and solidified when his father calls Indy by his preferred name — Indiana — telling him that his father's obsession with the Holy Grail isn't as important as their father/son relationship.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

The Reward offers the protagonist the added boost they need to propel themselves through the conflict they face during the climax of the story where they are facing their toughest challenge — be it physical or emotional. A special weapon, an elixir, some knowledge, an experience, or reconciliation are the five types of rewards that heroes need to prevail.

Stage 10: The Road Back

Once they've attained the Reward, it's time for the hero to get on **The Road Back** to their Ordinary World.

But what is The Road Back and how can this stage develop your third act?

More Conflict, Higher Stakes

The Road Back is the moment of your screenplay that leads your character towards the final climax. They've survived The Ordeal, which is the midpoint of your story. They've gained a special weapon, elixir, piece of knowledge, eye-opening experience, or some form of reconciliation that they know will help them face the final conflict to come before they can go back to their Ordinary World.

This is the launching point of your third act, where you transition from the second and venture into the final stretch of your protagonist's journey.

The Ordeal is the first major conflict they face, usually written as a false climax where things change and the conflict evolves. The Road Back is where the protagonist sees the light at the end of the tunnel, but faces yet another challenge — this time with higher stakes.

In *Star Wars*, after Luke, Han, Leia, Chewbacca, and the droids have escaped the ordeal within the Death Star, they're on their way back to the hidden rebel base with the plans that can lead to the destruction of the Death Star.

But it's not over yet.

They're attacked by incoming TIE-Fighters. This is Luke's first confrontation with engaging enemy fighters. This is where we learn if he's going to have what it takes to become a pilot for the Rebellion. While his piloting skills aren't directly utilized, we get to see a little foreshadowing of his targeting skills.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

The Road Back offers you the chance to keep the conflict coming. And when you do that, you continue to engage the reader and audience, compelling them to stay with the story.

You raise the stakes just a little bit more above those found within The Ordeal, but not high enough to eclipse the upcoming climax.

Showing the Light at the End of the Tunnel

There's sometimes a slight lull in the action or conflict between The Ordeal and The Road Back. A moment or sequence where the protagonist regroups with their allies or collects their thoughts leading into the continued hurdles and obstacles they face before the final climax.

This offers the reader and audience a chance to regroup and breathe after the action or drama of The Ordeal.

You want to give the characters some form of accomplishment and hope. And then, as any good writer should, you want to then throw even more conflict at them — just as they are about to believe that their journey is almost complete.

When you watch most films, you'll feel this shift within the story — to the point where it feels as if we've turned a page from the second act to the third.

It's Indiana and Marion in the boat with the Ark of the Covenant below in storage.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

They've successfully recovered the Ark and have managed to negotiate a way to transport it. They are on the metaphorical "road back" to the Ordinary World. We see the light at the end of the tunnel. Until...

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

... more obstacles and hurdles.

Setting Up the Third Act

If there's a specific purpose that writers are looking for when considering using this stage of the Hero's Journey, it's all about setting up the third act.

When the hero has faced The Ordeal, they've experienced the biggest conflict of their journey thus far. But now they've managed to survive it. We need to now flip that page to the third act by introducing more conflict and upping the stakes. And even more important, we need to understand what's at risk going into the third act and eventual climax (The Resurrection).

The Road Back stage of story structure offers you the opportunity to reset and show us what has changed, how it affects the protagonist and their allies (if any), and what they have to overcome to prevail at the end.

In ***Raiders of the Lost Ark***, Marion is once again captured and the Nazis have retaken the Ark. To make matters even worse, Indiana no longer has any allies that he can rely on to save the day. The Road Back stage of his story ends with him climbing onto the Nazi u-boat, alone.

We've turned the page to the final conflict of the story — Indiana rescuing Marion and recovering the Ark.

It's the perfect segue. It lets the reader and audience know that things are starting to wrap up and that they should prepare for the exciting, thrilling, hilarious, scary, or dramatic finale to come.

The Road Back allows the hero — and the reader and audience — to see the light at the end of the tunnel, if not for a few brief moments. It then introduces more conflict, higher stakes, and reveals everything that is at risk going into the climax of the protagonist's journey.

Stage 11: The Resurrection

The climax of your hero's journey encompasses **The Resurrection** stage.

But what does that stage entail, and what does it have to do with your hero's resurrection?

It Begins with the Highest of Stakes

If you've employed The Road Back stage of the Hero's Journey within your story, you've done the necessary work to set up the high stakes. And make no mistake, the climax of your story has to have your protagonist dealing with the highest stakes they've ever experienced.

It's the big fight, the final showdown, the emotional confrontation — everything that your protagonist has been preparing for throughout their entire journey has led up to this final moment or sequence.

In ***Star Wars***, it's the Battle of Yavin. If the Rebels don't destroy the Death Star, their hidden base will be destroyed, and the Galactic Empire will rule the galaxy unchallenged.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In ***Raiders of the Lost Ark***, it's Indy trying to stop the Nazis, realizing he can't do so single-handedly, and then witnessing the opening of the Ark of the Covenant and the dire results. If the Nazis aren't stopped, they'll use the power of the Ark to take over the world.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In ***Rocky***, it's the final rounds of the fight. If Rocky doesn't go the distance, he'll just continue being another bum on the streets.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In ***Field of Dreams***, it's Ray meeting his father and learning that his whole journey was to reunite with him — ***"If you build it, he will come."***

Your protagonists have to face the ultimate emotional or physical (preferably both) challenge. The higher the stakes, the better the ending.

Hero Resurrected

The best type of stories showcases a character arc that culminates to a real transformation. If you follow the stages of the Hero's Journey within your story, there's a reason that we show the protagonist in their Ordinary World to start — we need to see the beginning of their arc.

If we don't see Luke Skywalker as a naive dreamer of a farm boy, we can't experience a character arc with him as he later destroys the Death Star.

In *The Karate Kid*, if we don't see the angry, resentful, and weak Daniel from New Jersey, we won't feel an empathetic connection with the young man that faces his bullies and fears.

The climax stage of Campbell and Vogler's structure is the ultimate culmination of what the hero has learned and been through. We need to see the hero resurrected in this final act. Gone is the character we met in the Ordinary World. Now we must see them apply what they've learned through their many tests and conflicts.

And this climax begins with that resurrection, whether it be physical or emotional.

When Daniel goes down during his semifinal fight, there's a moment where he and his allies (Ali, his mother, and Mr. Miyagi) believe that his journey is over — that he has done all that he can to prove himself.

When Daniel shares his feelings about balance, Mr. Miyago realizes that Daniel must be given a chance to fight in the final bout against Johnny. It's less about Daniel's revenge and more about him being able to attain the balance he seeks in life. And that is when Daniel is given the reward of resurrection.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

Luke Skywalker is resurrected as a Rebel pilot and hero.

Rocky is resurrected as a boxer who went the distance with the champ. He's no longer a bum.

Indiana Jones is a treasure hunter resurrected as an artifact attainer that respects the mysticism that he once scoffed at.

Ray is resurrected as a man who has finally seen life through his father's eyes, forgiving him.

The climax of your story is where the character arc comes to its end. They aren't the same person they were when they were in their Ordinary World, and they'll be forever

affected by the journey they've been on.

Catharsis Is Key

Cinematic catharsis is the feeling we feel after the resolution of the story and the protagonist's overall journey.

You've experienced it when you've watched a movie or read a screenplay that stayed with you afterward — when you walked out of the theater or closed that script and felt truly changed or affected somehow.

That's the magic of a fantastic story, leaving the reader and audience truly touched, affected, and sometimes changed — catharsis.

It's the final moment in *Field of Dreams* where Ray has a catch with his father.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

It's the end of *The Pursuit of Happyness*, where we witness Chris manage to see his own dream come true.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

It's the moving scene in *Dead Poets Society* where Keating's students decide to act on the inspiration that Keating once supplied for them, while also giving him the justice that he deserved.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

It's the moment when Daniel defeats Johnny and is finally embraced by everyone around him. Even Johnny hands him the trophy.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

If you can inject your climax — The Resurrection — with cathartic emotional connections, you can close your story with an emotional bang that stays with us as we close that script or walk out of that theater.

It's not just about defeating the villain, winning the big game, getting the girl or guy, or accomplishing a goal. Your hero needs to be transformed by the end of the story. They need to be resurrected as a better version of themselves after having endured this long journey full of tests, obstacles, and hurdles. And their final test in this climax needs to be the ultimate challenge with the highest of stakes.

That's how you end your script with a bang — both physically and emotionally, as far as

whatever the story and genre may be.

Stage 12: The Return

The climax of your hero's journey encompasses The Resurrection stage.

And once they accomplish that, you can have your protagonist **Return** to their Ordinary World.

Here are three reasons why your hero should make that return.

1. To Have the Story Come Full Circle

The reader and audience are on this ride with your protagonist. They empathize with them. The story creates a cathartic reaction. We want to see the story resolved. We want to witness some closure so that we know the character's journey has ended.

So what better way to accomplish that than letting them go back to their Ordinary World to either flaunt their success or show people that they've changed for the better?

In *Willow*, we see the titular protagonist return to his village a hero. When he left, he was considered a joke — a naive wannabe-sorcerer. But now, he's welcomed with open arms as he showcases the knowledge and experience that he's learned. Oh, and he's saved the world from evil as well.

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Scene!

In *A Bug's Life*, after the grasshoppers have been defeated, Flick is welcomed back into the community as a hero instead of a hindrance. The ants are even using some of his inventions that originally caused the workers grief and chaos.

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In *Back to the Future*, Marty returns to his Ordinary World, only to discover that he positively influenced his family's life as a result of his actions in the past.

Note: Scene shown in mirror image within the below video.

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A cinematic story takes a reader — and later, an audience — on a ride. It may be a physical thrill ride or emotional rollercoaster, but, in the end, that ride must always come to a close. And it helps to give people a sense of closure to see the conflict of the story resolved. And there's no better place to do that than visiting the hero's Ordinary World

once again — after all is well.

2. To Complete the Character Arc

When we follow a character for a long period of time, we want to see their character grow, change, or better themselves. It offers the reader and audience a sense of closure and catharsis.

When we put the protagonist back into their Ordinary World, it makes the reader and audience wonder how they'll react.

Have they changed?

Will they fall into the same pattern that they were in when they were introduced within their Ordinary World?

In *Back to the Future Part III*, Marty has learned to put his ego in check — a key theme throughout the second and third films.

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In *Toy Story*, Woody has learned that new isn't necessarily such a bad thing. He handles change much better.

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In *The Matrix*, Neo returns to the Matrix with his newfound powers and sense of consciousness. He's gone from an unknowing character to an all-knowing hero, ready to take on any threats.

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The Return to the Ordinary World gives your protagonist the opportunity to prove that they've changed for the better, learned something, or have attained a certain power or piece of knowledge that will help them — and maybe others within their Ordinary World — take on any and all future conflicts.

3. To Allow the Reader and Audience to Live Vicariously

Because catharsis is so vital to the cinematic experience — that's why people go to the movies — having the hero return to their Ordinary World triumphant offers the reader and audience a chance to feel the glory of that return. And if it's not glory, it's a sense of calm, knowing that everything is going to be okay for the character they've lived vicariously through.

In ***Good Will Hunting***, we're back to Will's Ordinary World. Yes, he's had a breakthrough with Sean. Yes, he has completed his court-ordered punishment. But Skylar is gone. Everything else in his life is better, but he lost out on the love of his life.

And now he's back in his routine — or so we think. It's another day. Will's friends arrive driveway. His best friend gets out and knocks on his door, ready to go through another day in their routine Southie lives.

But wait, Will's not home.

[**CLICK HERE**](#) to Watch the Scene!

We feel that cathartic moment of going after the love of your life through the actions of Will. And we're left energized and inspired.

In ***Titanic***, Rose has survived. She's back in a version of her Ordinary World, off of the Titanic. As she waits on the rescue ship, she sees her fiancé and her mother, two forces of negativity that represent the life she was stuck in before she met Jack. And even though Jack is gone, we soon learn that she went on to live an amazing life full of adventure and intrigue. She's taken what she learned from Jack about life, and went on to live life to its fullest.

[**CLICK HERE**](#) to Watch the Scene!

The message and center theme of the film offers the audience the cathartic feeling of the appreciation of life. We're left with a sense of wanting to be better and wanting to live life to its fullest. And we experience that vicariously through Rose.

When the reader closes your script or when the audience walks out of that theater, they go back to their Ordinary World changed — just like your protagonist has by returning to their Ordinary World and proving that they've changed themselves.

Not every story calls for the protagonist to return to their Ordinary World, but it's a wonderful tool to consider using within your cinematic tales.

Summary

The first stage — **The Ordinary World (Stage 1)** — happens to be one of the most essential elements of any story, even ones that don't follow the twelve-stage structure to a tee.

Showing your protagonist within their Ordinary World at the beginning of your story offers you the ability to showcase how much the core conflict they face rocks their world. And it allows you to foreshadow and create the necessary elements of empathy and catharsis that your story needs.

Giving your story's protagonist a **Call to Adventure (Stage 2)** introduces the core concept of your story, dictates the genre your story is being told in and helps to begin the process of character development that every great story needs.

When your character **Refuses the Call to Adventure (Stage 3)**, it allows you to create instant tension and conflict within the opening pages and first act of your story. It also gives you the chance to amp-up the risks and stakes involved, which, in turn, engages the reader or audience even more. And it also manages to help you develop a protagonist with more depth that can help to create empathy for them.

Along the way, your protagonist — and screenplay — may need a mentor. **Meeting the Mentor (Stage 4)** offers the protagonist someone that can guide them through their journey with wisdom, support, and even physical items. Beyond that, they help you to offer empathetic relationships within your story, as well as ways to introduce themes, story elements, and exposition to the reader and audience.

At some point at the end of the first act, your story may showcase a moment where your protagonist needs to **Cross the Threshold (Stage 5)** between their Ordinary World and the Special World they will be experiencing as their inner or outer journey begins. Such a moment shifts everything from the first act to the second, allowing the reader and audience to feel that shift so they can prepare for the journey to come.

It showcases the difference between the protagonist's Ordinary World and the Special World to come. And, even more important, we're introduced to the first shift in the character arc of the protagonist as they decide to venture out into the unknown.

And it's within this unknown that the protagonist faces many **tests and meets their allies and enemies (Stage 6)** — all of which define the meat of your story by introducing the conflict, expanding the cast of characters, and offering a more engaging and compelling narrative.

Once you've put your protagonist through those tests and once they've met their allies and enemies, they're going to need to **Approach the Inmost Cave (Stage 7)** of the story — preparing to face their greatest fears and conflicts. This is an essential element of your narrative, allowing the reader, audience, and characters to catch their breath, reflect, review, and plan ahead for the conflict just over the horizon. And it allows you, the writer, to build the necessary tension and anticipation that you need going into the midpoint of your story.

Everything within the first act — and beginning of the second — builds up to **The Ordeal (Stage 8)**, which is the first real conflict that the protagonist must face. The Ordeal is the midpoint of your story that works as a false climax, taking your protagonist to the depths of despair. It offers you the ability to create an engaging midpoint climax that takes you into the third act. It ups the stakes within your story by taking away beloved allies and mentors. And it sets up the necessary transformation that your protagonist must go through in order to prevail.

And after your hero has gone through all of that, you may want or need to reward them with something that they can use to take on the final threat they face during the climax of your story.

The Reward (Stage 9) offers the protagonist the added boost they need to propel themselves through the conflict they face during the climax of the story where they are facing their toughest challenge — be it physical or emotional. A special weapon, an elixir, some knowledge, an experience, or reconciliation are the five types of rewards that heroes need to prevail.

Once they've attained the Reward, it's time for the hero to get on **The Road Back (Stage 10)** to their Ordinary World. The Road Back allows the hero — and the reader and audience — to see the light at the end of the tunnel, if not for a few brief moments. It then introduces more conflict, higher stakes, and reveals everything that is at risk going into the climax of the protagonist's journey.

And the climax of your hero's journey encompasses **The Resurrection (Stage 11)** stage. It's not just about defeating the villain, winning the big game, getting the girl or guy, or accomplishing a goal. Your hero needs to be transformed by the end of the story. They need to be resurrected as a better version of themselves after having endured this long journey full of tests, obstacles, and hurdles. And their final test in this climax needs to be the ultimate challenge with the highest of stakes. That's how you end your script with a bang — both physically and emotionally, as far as whatever the story and genre may be.

Not every story calls for the protagonist to **Return to their Ordinary World (Stage 12)**, but it's a wonderful tool to consider using within your cinematic tales. It helps to bring your story full circle and complete your protagonist's character arc.

Use them all in sequence, use them in different order, or pick certain stages and apply them to your own structures.

And always remember...

"The Hero's Journey is a skeleton framework that should be fleshed out with the details of and surprises of the individual story. The structure should not call attention to itself, nor should it be followed too precisely. The order of the stages is only one of many possible variations. The stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically shuffled without losing any of their power." — Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*

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Hero's Journey Activity Worksheet

We leave you with a fun challenge that can help train your Hero's Journey eye.

Take this worksheet and watch one of your favorite movies. List a scene or moment (one sentence) that applies to each of the stages and see how many of the stages the movie uses.

You can also go more in-depth and apply it to your own screenplays.

Stage 1 — The Ordinary World

(We see the hero's normal life at the start of the story before the adventure begins)

Stage 2 — Call to Adventure

(The hero is faced with an event, conflict, problem, or challenge that makes them begin their adventure)

Stage 3 — Refusal of the Call

(The hero initially refuses the adventure because of hesitation, fears, insecurity, or any other number of issues)

Stage 4 — Meeting the Mentor

(The hero encounters a mentor that can give them advice, wisdom, information, or items that ready them for the journey ahead)

Stage 5 — Crossing the Threshold

(The hero leaves their ordinary world for the first time and crosses the threshold into adventure)

Stage 6 — Tests, Allies, and Enemies

(The hero learns the rules of the new world and endures tests, meets friends, and comes face-to-face with enemies)

Stage 7 — The Approach

(The initial plan to take on the central conflict begins, but setbacks occur that cause the hero to try a new approach or adopt new ideas)

Stage 8 — The Ordeal

(Things go wrong and added conflict is introduced. The hero experiences more difficult hurdles and obstacles, some of which may lead to a life crisis)

Stage 9 — The Reward

(After surviving The Ordeal, the hero seizes the sword — a reward that they've earned that allows them to take on the biggest conflict. It may be a physical item or piece of knowledge or wisdom that will help them persevere)

Stage 10 — The Road Back

(The hero sees the light at the end of the tunnel, but they are about to face even more tests and challenges)

Stage 11 — The Resurrection

(The climax. The hero faces a final test, using everything they have learned to take on the conflict once and for all)

Stage 12 — The Return

(The hero brings their knowledge or the “elixir” back to the ordinary world)