**The HOW TO WRITE Master Document Pro Forma using Classic Novel Structure**

This pro forma relates to the Classic Novel Structure system outlined in *How To Write*’s guides to plotting, writing and editing novels. It is a flexible system and the actual number of chapters you end up with can vary, depending on how much plot you have, and the length of your chapters, based on your preferences and genre. The following 20-chapter structure, if you wrote chapters averaging 15 pages, would create an extremely well-structured 300-page novel, absolutely ideal for most publishers and genres. However, chapters can be split or merged to accommodate that. The most important thing to note is the percentage through the book the relevant plot point or beat takes place. This is not absolutely fixed but you are encouraged to keep as true to this as reasonably possible.

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| **ACT ONE (OPENING SCENE TO BREAK INTO ACT TWO/JOINING THE QUEST) FIRST 25% OF THE BOOK****Chapter 1 of Act One -Opening Image/Hook (1-5% through)** - Establish who your main character is, their ordinary life in the world in which they exist before the narrative starts and hint at their general outlook and motivations in life. - Introduce that same world, and the atmosphere or setting of your story, providing detail and intrigue to immerse the reader. - Establish the Status Quo – Show the protagonist's life before the Inciting Incident disrupts it, which is how they would continue existing without the Quest appearing. This can be a new life, or how they have lived for many years. - Present an Opening Image/Create A Hook – Create a memorable first image/impression of the world or intriguing hook (character, situation, etc) to draw us in and to which we can refer later, if needed. - Optional foreshadowing of the Conflict Ahead – You will not be introducing the Quest yet, but think of ways in which you can foreshadow it. For example, let us know that there is a war going on, hint at the threat - Start preparing us subtly for the Inciting Incident and the Quest now. |  |
| **Chapter 2: Expanding the World and Deepening Character Relationships (5-10% of the way through)**This chapter is a chance to let us luxuriate in the world a bit. It can build tension and more clearly foreshadow the Inciting Incident, hinting at the impending change. In the first two chapters, you have clearly outlined much of the world, but in Chapter Two, you might want to either show some of the tensions or limitations in that world or to show us what the central character has to lose and to leave, when eventually they are debating whether to go on the Quest.Key Elements- Character Development: Show more of the protagonist’s personality, desires, and conflicts.- Supporting Characters: Introduce or deepen the roles of secondary characters.- Setting: Expand on the setting introduced in Chapter One, providing more detail and texture. Build the atmosphere. Introduce secondary characters.- Foreshadow Conflicts And Tensions *subtly*: start to investigate any tensions in the world, anything that would either encourage or discourage the protagonist from going on the Quest- This is a chapter in which to let the reader continue to understand the world and to sell the protagonist to them. |  |
| ***Checklist For Building Towards And Creating A Great Inciting Incident*** *- Establish the Status Quo and introduce the protagonist - Build characters and the world - Foreshadow the Conflict**- The Inciting Incident happens and issues the invitation to join the Quest**- Show the protagonist’s initial reactions and dilemmas, including any decision they make to act or not to act (which they can reverse)* |
| **Chapter 3 of Act One: The Inciting Incident (10-15% of the way through)** - Introduce the Inciting Incident, thus disrupting the protagonist’s Status Quo and inviting them to join the Quest, the central journey of the novel. The protagonist possibly won’t fully understand what the Quest entails at this stage or what it will require of them yet (although they absolutely could) - RememberDisruption: Present an event, information or revelation that invites the protagonist to take action/to go on the Quest.- Emotional Importance: The Inciting Incident must have a strong emotional impact on the protagonist and reader, even if it is not clear how significant it is yet. - Decision Point, Part One: The protagonist won’t make a final decision to join the Quest at this point, but it is clear that change has arrived and a decision is necessary. After this, the protagonist will debate going on the Quest, but of course, in every single novel, they will have to go. The Inciting Incident is thus a decision to make a decision about going on the Quest.**Tips For A Great Inciting Incident**- Know who your protagonist is and what they stand to lose. The Inciting Incident should challenge them.- The Inciting Incident should be a natural starting point for your journey (the invitation to the Quest).- While the incident should be relevant to the plot and may even have been foreshadowed, it should also grab the reader’s attention. Be surprising. This does not necessarily mean “bolt out of the blue” unexpectedness (although that is absolutely fine) but rather it is intriguing and inviting to the reader.- Subtly hint at and foreshadow future conflicts or obstacles. This can help cohesion as the story unfolds.- It is better if the Inciting Incident offers up immediate consequences or an imminent threat, forcing the protagonist into the story’s main action. Begin to what your protagonist has to gain/lose, although is discussed more next. |  |
| **Chapter 4 of Act One: Growing Tension And Consideration Of What Next/Debate (15-20% of the way through)** - This chapter should show the protagonist dealing with the immediate aftermath of the Inciting Incident, considering what to do next. - Rising Stakes: Show how the stakes have increased for the protagonist. Show how the situation is now more dangerous or more emotionally high-stakes.- Character Dilemmas: Debate of what to do and how to act commences. Highlight key decisions that push the protagonist further into the main conflict but first they will usually go through some kind of denial or resistance. They might feel compulsion to go forwards but use this time to reflect on their motivations and desires. You could also have the protagonist want to join the Quest but someone close to them is pressuring them not to.- Other Responses: This might be a time when the protagonist, in response to the Inciting Incident, might seek out to acquire new skills or gain advice. Or it might show them nervous and uncertain in the changed situation. |  |
| **Chapter 5: The First Plot Point/The Decision To Act And Join the Quest (20-25% of the way through)**- The “First Plot Point” is a crucial plot point that commits the protagonist to the journey and premise of the novel. Remember the clear relationship between the Inciting Incident and this plot point. This is the acceptance of the invitation to join the Quest issued at the Inciting Incident.- This chapter can initially appear to continue to explore the protagonist’s motivations and introduce subplots or counter-pressures that begin to tilt the protagonist towards action. It may be useful to see it as a continuation of the previous chapter *at first*. But here protagonist *must* make a clear act of commitment to their journey.- It can be brought on by a major event, a reveal or just a powerful discussion with a close ally, which propels the protagonist towards the Quest. It *can* come out of interior, internal reflection on the part of the protagonist, but the emotional and narrative propulsion is the same: the protagonist feels they have no choice but to go on the journey. Choose something appropriate to your story and your genre.- Their world will be changed, even if the protagonist only vaguely knows how much. They are forced to confront a new reality. The Status Quo has not only been disrupted but rejected (even if temporarily and reluctantly). The protagonist feels compelled to react – and act. - This commitment is not just about recognizing the risks (of war, of solving a crime, of seeking out love) but actively choosing to engage with them. The initial world-building/Status Quo of Act One must give way to the adventure, uncertainty and conflict of Act Two. Allow these emotions to play out. Do not be afraid of your characters’ emotions (but beware making them whiny or self-pitying, unless that is a core part of their characterisation). |  |
| ***What You Should Have Achieved By This Point*** *- Introduced The Main Characters**- Established The Setting**- Presented The Ordinary World/Status Quo**- Delivered The Inciting Incident That Disrupts The World/Status Quo**- Built Rising Action And Conflict**- Developed Character Motivations After The Inciting Incident And Let The Protagonist Debate/Experience Doubt Over What To Do**- Begin To Introduce Secondary Characters Or Subplots (Optional)**- Delivered The First Plot Point That Propels The Protagonist Into The Main Action Of Act Two* |
| **FIRST HALF OF ACT TWO (JOINING THE QUEST TO MIDPOINT) SECOND 25% OF THE BOOK****Chapter 1 of Act Two (25-30% through the book)** - Introduce the protagonist to their new environment, situation or set of risks after committing to the Quest. This could be a new physical location, a new role or job, a new relationship, the intensification of an investigation, etc. No matter whether the location or situation is different or not, the mood should certainly be because the Quest is now underway. Something happened at the end of Act One that changed things.- Show how the protagonist reacts to this new reality. Let the dust settle a little, after the decision to join the Quest. Alternatively, as in a fantasy quest, this is where the adventurers set out, leaving home. - Introduce and develop relationships with secondary characters, showing how they support or hinder the protagonist and showing their motivations. - Enter the period of adventure called Fun And Games.- Be clear that we have moved on from Act One, and the Set-Up. |  |
| **- Chapter 2 of Act Two (30% – 35% through the book)** - Fun And Games accelerate; the adventure really starts to begin. Now the protagonist is better established in their new world, show their growing involvement in the main conflict through varied scenes. - Create a mix of action, discovery, and character interactions. This is where the protagonist begins to engage actively with the story’s central conflict. - Missions and mysteries can grow more complex, relationships (romantic or friendships) deepen. Weave subplots into the main narrative. - Remember, they should be developed to add complexity but never overshadow the main plot. |  |
| **- Chapter 3 of Act Two (35% – 40% through the book)** - This chapter will include the mid-act pinch point, which introduces a minor complication, escalation, intensification or setback that increases the stakes for the protagonist. - This pinch point should challenge the protagonist either positively or negatively, showing their vulnerabilities and wants while escalating tension and engagement for the reader. - This chapter is therefore one of the dramatic stepping stones in your story’s structure. Think of it as a little bump (positive or negative) in the road. |  |
| **Chapter 4 of Act Two (40% – 45% through the book)** - We are in the aftermath of the pinch point. This should show the protagonist understanding more and becoming more deeply involved in the Quest. They are encouraged to continue. - There are two basic ways to go here: in a negative, threatening mood, we would be feeling more tension; in a positive mood, in which things now appear to be going well, we would start to feel calm and optimistic about the Quest. This will depend very much on the tone and genre of your novel and what you plan for the Midpoint. - Even though most novels will have a formal Midpoint, usually the reader is not expecting it, at least consciously, in the way that they might expect an Inciting Incident near the start or a Climax near the end. Therefore, often the chapter that precedes or introduces it can be a moment of calm or reflection or anticipation. |  |
| **Chapter 5 of Act Two (45% – 50% through the book)** This is the Midpoint, the event after which the novel tilts into its second half and towards its novel. To repeat: even though most novels will have a formal Midpoint, usually the reader is not expecting it, at least consciously, in the way that they might expect an Inciting Incident near the start or a Climax near the end. Therefore, often the chapter that precedes or introduces it can be a moment of calm or reflection or anticipation. - In a romance or a literary novel, this might be the moments *before* the central relationship is consummated or love is declared. Feelings can be unclear or clear, but the big event has not yet happened. - - Use the Midpoint to catalyse personal changes in the protagonist. This could be a moral or romantic awakening, a shift in allegiance either because they change or are betrayed, etc.- Introduce a pivotal revelation or plot twist that reframes the protagonist’s understanding of the central conflict. They were one person before the reveal at the Midpoint and then another afterwards. They will remain “this person” until the end of Act Two.- Bring together previously disparate plot threads or characters in a way that grows narrative tension and throws light on the deeper meanings and mysteries within the narrative. Two major characters could meet at the Midpoint, in a sudden reveal or twist, although without major conflict.- Connected to these points, present fresh obstacles or challenges that force the protagonist to adapt. The Fun And Games of early Act Two now turn much more serious as a result. |  |
| ***What You Should Have Achieved By This Point*** *- Is the protagonist growing and adapting to new challenges?- Are secondary characters becoming more fleshed out and contributing to the story?- Are subplots being developed in a way that complements the main narrative?- If appropriate, is the romantic subplot progressing naturally, adding depth to character interactions?- Is there a moment of increased tension or other narrative drive around 3- 5% through the book, a pinch point?- Does this heighten the stakes and push the protagonist towards the Midpoint?- Are you exploring the core premise of your story in the spirit of Fun And Games?- Do we feel like the world is changing, and we are now very solidly in the adventure or mystery phase of the Quest?- Is there a good mix of action, dialogue, and character-driven scenes appropriate to the Fun And Games?- Are the stakes continually rising, leading to a significant turning point at the Midpoint?* |
| **SECOND HALF OF ACT TWO (MIDPOINT – DISASTER) THIRD 25% OF THE BOOK****Chapter 1 of the Second Half of Act Two (50% – 55% through the book) -** The aftermath of the Midpoint *or* the Golden Time begins, ushering in a period of reflective calm after a negative or ambivalent change or of blissful joy after a positive one. **-** Either way, the protagonist should gain new insights and experience some internal growth. Highlight how the Midpoint affected the protagonist’s motivations and decisions, and shifted their world, even if it is not yet clear precisely what this will mean. The world should feel at least *somewhat* different*.* - If not using a Golden Time, then this will probably be a phase in reaction to a less positive Midpoint, and so this can be a time for interiority, taking stock, concern about what is ahead, but *probably* will not be highly active or dramatic.**-** If using a Golden Time, this is when the parties concerned should feel loved, contented, happy, safe, etc. Remember: the Golden Time is *always* a fake-out! But you have to make the reader believe in it for now.**Tips for The Golden Time -** Ensure there is a logical emotional build-up to the Golden Time. **-** Highlight the contrast between the Golden Time and the anticipation that went before and the struggles that will follow to manipulate the reader’s emotions. **-** Create scenes that have a blissful, joyful feel. Even if the characters’ problems are still a real, present danger, it must feel far away.**-** You can either foreshadow or seed the conflicts to come after the Golden Time or completely deny them so that when things go wrong, it blindsides the reader.  |  |
| **- Chapter 2 of the Second Half of Act Two (55% – 60% through the book)** **-** This chapter may feel like a continuation of the preceding one, but there might be subtle changes. Stakes can just start to rise here. It could be that the period of reflection or direction that follows the Midpoint clarifies in the mind of the protagonist. It could be that happiness brought by the Golden Time becomes increasingly important to the protagonist, right before you as the novelist start your manipulative games! **-** But you can also start to seed in threats from outside. Remind us the Quest still exists. Remind us of external pressures. You do not necessarily need to shatter the Golden Time here, but we need to feel two things: firstly, how much it matters to the protagonist; and secondly, that the rest of the world, with all its problems, still exists. - This chapter can be a good opportunity to create mystery or uncertainty rather than outright threat or drama, and so help pace before those accelerate in the next phase. |  |
| **Chapter 3 of the Second Half of Act Two (60% – 65% through the book)** **-** This is the late Act mid-act pinch point, another “bump in the road”. Introduce a significant complication that raises the stakes. This pinch point should challenge the protagonist further, highlighting their vulnerabilities. **-** Something must happen here that will lead to the end of the mood of reflection, ambivalence, or optimism that might have followed the Midpoint. This will probably include some kind of foreshadowing of the Disaster that awaits at the end of the act. **-** In a novel using a Golden Time, this will be the moment when the paradise must end. The lovers must realise that their problems are not resolved or are under a new and imminent threat, etc. **-** The impact of this pinch point *must be* negative, even if it is initially a subtle downturn. -The mid-act pinch point here usually either ushers in, or is itself caused, by the beginning of the phase named The Bad Guys Close In, which is explained more fully in the next chapter, but could easily begin in this. |  |
| **Chapter 4 of the Second Half of Act Two (65-70% through the book)** The **-** Whatever your novel, at this point, things are now going wrong for the protagonist. The antagonistic force gains the upper hand, and tension and stakes increase very quickly. This is therefore named The Bad Guys Close In.**-** This does not in itself need to be a major set piece. It can be an internal, emotional process (but which herald significant change) or it could be the receipt of certain information that undermines the post-Midpoint calm. However, it could absolutely just be the bad guys show up.**-**  Generally heighten emotional stakes and dramatic tension in the book, and secondly, to drive the protagonist to breaking point. It deepens the reader’s investment in the protagonist's journey by making real the imminence of its failure. This is extremely effective whether the Midpoint has been dramatic and traumatic or followed by a blissful Golden Time. By strategically maximising the emotional impact of this phase, especially after a more light-hearted or myth-making Fun And Games, writers can tighten their compelling narrative arc ever further. **-** Maintain and build momentum and set up the story’s climax, making the pace and drama tick up as we move towards Denouement, and putting the protagonist under a threat which eventually seems about to overwhelm them.**-** The protagonist’s goal must now seem more challenging and urgent. The Quest must start to look very threatened. The protagonist has to fight here, and the reader has to hope they will triumph still, but we all know what is ahead. |  |
| **Chapter 5 of the Second Half of Act Two (70-75% through the book)** -The Disaster! This phase is the Climax of Act Two and leads to the Denouement in Act Three. - It is usually a direct outcome of the obstacle of the mid-act pinch point/Bad Guys Close In. - Now increase the tension, and stakes go sky-high here, pretty much to breaking point, setting the stage for the story’s final grand climax. - This is a sequence of confrontations and conflicts. Remember this is not necessary a literal confrontation or a physical conflict. Usually, the Disaster will include:- Some dramatic action, whether a battle, an assassination, a shocking twist in the case, a lovers’ break-up.- Ensure that the Disaster has a profound emotional impact on the protagonist – *and the reader*. This is their lowest point. - The Disaster should *always* raise the stakes to their highest point. - Use the Disaster to highlight not only the protagonist's growth but also their vulnerability. This moment should challenge their core beliefs about the Quest and themselves. - Ensure that the Disaster is well-integrated into the overall plot and any network of subplots. Often subplots will be resolving around here. Do not carry too many subplots (with the exception of romantic subplots) into Act Three. |  |
| ***What You Should Have Achieved By This Point*** *- Does the Midpoint change the direction of the story and energise and deepen the conflict?- Do your characters – or does your novel – need a Golden Time? Or is a reflective aftermath to the Midpoint more appropriate?- Are the challenges and obstacles becoming more intense and complex?- Are the consequences of failure increasingly significant?- Are subplots continuing to develop and enhance the main narrative?- Are characters growing and evolving in response to the conflict?- Is there a moment of heightened tension/a pinch point halfway through this half of Act Two?- Does this complication force the protagonist out of their comfort zone and if appropriate, end the Golden Time?- Are the stakes continually rising after this, leading to the Disaster at the Climax of Act Two?- Are subplots resolving at the end of Act Two or by the beginning of Act Three?* |
| **ACT THREE: DISASTER TO DENOUEMENT - LAST 25% OF THE BOOK***Because of the different possible structures after the Midpoint, for example, whether or not to have a Golden Time, you can be a bit more flexible with timings in advance of the mid-act plot point.**Also note that The Dark Night Of The Soul can begin at the end of Act Two, in immediate response to the Disaster, but it should be explored more fully here.***Chapter 1 of Act Three: Dark Night Of The Soul peaks (75-80% through the book)** - The Dark Night Of The Soul is the protagonist's emotional nadir. Use this chapter to explore the protagonist's inner turmoil and psychological growth as they fear defeat. - They should consider and learn from their shortcomings and past mistakes, contemplating whether to give up. You might want to have this chapter to provide the first rays of hope. - An alternative is to have the protagonist getting beginning to understand what they assume is the new world following the apparent failure of the Quest, at the end of Act Two. - For example, if they have been imprisoned or disgraced, show them getting used to that new life. If they have been dumped by their lover, show them trying to be okay with being alone. Of course, they aren’t, and we have to realize that. The reader realizes the protagonist can’t be happy this way. |  |
| **Chapter 2 of Act Three: Building Towards the Mid-Act Pinch Point (80-85% through the book)** - Around here, the Dark Night Of the Soul starts toend. Sometimes hope is all the protagonist – and the reader – has. - Introduce the revelation or breakthrough (possibly more an internal than external process) that shifts or begins to shift the protagonist's attitude, giving them hope or insight into continuing the Quest. - Build anticipation and hope as the protagonist gains powerful insights or new or returning allies, or strategies that help them. The protagonist has to confront the reality of how much work is ahead, but they have to decide that they want to, or have to, continue the Quest, which now seems to be reviving (the course of a war or an investigation turns a little, the protagonist realizes they want the lover back). This tests the protagonist's resolve and drives them on. - They might not yet know what they are going to do, but they are now moving on from the Dark Night Of the Soul into wanting to continue the Quest. |  |
| **Chapter 3 of Act Three: the Mid-Act Three Pinch Point (85-90% through the book)** - Act Three has a mid-act pinch point too, but it’s rarely talked of that way because around here, the Climax begins. But adding a clear pinch point here is helpful as a way to introduce the Climax. - It doesn’t have to be a twist or a reveal, but that would be very effective. The twist/reveal could be that the final confrontation is imminent, e.g. the enemy armies appear outside the castle walls. Or it could be the revelation of a hidden fact or secret that inspires the protagonist to take the decisive action of the Climax. Or it could be the central character finds out that their former lover has returned to town, or that the ex’s ex who told them that they were pregnant was lying. - This moment provides a final push forward into the final, decisive conflict, it upends assumptions or alliances, reveals hidden motives, overcomes fears, ups stakes, renews determination or desire, or *in some way* introduces a new layer of complexity and conflict. - It may imminently lead to the final conflict of the Climax or be the start of the Climax itself. If you want a very extended Climax, for example, a grand battle with a lot of detail and dramatic change, or a tense, exciting final court scene (which is effectively the same thing in narrative-structure terms), you might wish to start The Climax immediately at the mid-act pinch point.  |  |
| **Chapter 4 of Act Three: The Climax (90-95% through the book)**- Have the Climax as a standalone chapter (or divided between dedicated chapters), with a big set piece confrontation of some sort, either appearing as a surprise or with some build-up. - This is then the big climactic scene or sequence of scenes that brings about the final resolution of the Quest. Give it space and time. Subplots should not interfere here. - Character arcs and the main conflict are reaching a satisfying and resonant conclusion, whether characters find everlasting love, become the new Queen or die a hero in battle. - This chapter provides external closure for characters (their own arcs are completed), and shows the protagonist's final transformation. Do not be afraid to be dramatic, intense or emotional. This is where those things can go sky-high, if you wish. |  |
| **Chapter 5 of Act Three: Denouement (95-100% of the book)** This is the Denouement.- While a sudden dramatic climax in a resolution can be great, most books will want some kind of final chapter where the new world is outlined and explained, and we see the characters in their new reality, feeling resolved or hopeful or happy (or not, if appropriate). This is the Denouement- The Denouement allows the reader to relax a little, understand the impact of the Quest having been resolved, and allow some pleasurable or saddened reflection time. - The Climax ended the external journey of the Quest. At the Denouement, you can clarify and reflect on its *internal* journey, which is to say, show us how everyone, and particularly your central character, has been transformed*.* What has everyone learned? What does everyone *feel*? Repeat these questions for the reader, too. - If the previous chapter was dramatic and intense, this can be reflective and resonant. Return to the Opening Image/Hook, if possible and useful. Show the character’s happy ending or at least their moving forwards, and give the reader some time to gather themselves emotionally. It’s been their journey too.- If appropriate, this chapter can include a Microtwist (counter-twist) as described in the *How To Write* books. Please refer to the guidance to how these should be handled. |  |
| ***What You Should Have Achieved By This Point*** *- Dark Night Of The Soul:- Have you portrayed the protagonist’s turmoil following the Disaster at the end of Act Two?**- Building Towards the Mid-Act Three Pinch Point:- Is there a phase where the protagonist reignites hope or changes their approach to the conflict, ending the Dark Night Of the Soul?**- Mid-Act Pinch Point:- Have you introduced a significant event or information reveal that tests and reignites the protagonist’s resolve or shows them the way to continue to victory and thus towards transformation? Does this usher in the Climax?**- Twist/Reveal/Reversal- Is there at least one twist or reveal that jolts the narrative and adds complexity to the protagonist’s journey and challenges assumptions or alliances?- Is your novel, in its genre, okay with a single such event or would a sequence of two or three twists and counter-twists be appropriate?**- Climax and Denouement- Does your book have some kind of external and/or internal dramatic climax (either grand battle or Victorian poets!) after which the protagonist is transformed and enters their new, final “form”? - Are any loose ends, including subplots, now resolved in a way that complements the main narrative, and where necessary, completes the arcs of any secondary characters?**- Does your Denouement provide a moment for the reader to understand and reflect back on what has happened, what has been learned, and their own feelings for the Quest and its outcomes and meanings?- Does the resolution resonate with the novel’s central themes, possibly including a callback to the Opening Image/Hook, or any unused foreshadowing?* |

**ADDITIONAL NOTES**

**You can use this space to add more information about, or links, to research, character studies, images, maps, etc, which will help you to refer back to during the planning stage or after.**