

The Seven Essential Story Types

Story Type guides you as you write. It provides a map of your path to a professional draft. Story Type helps you:

- Meet the expectations of your intended audience.
- Write a consistent story with a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- Finish. After all, you can't sell an unfinished story.

There are seven distinctive plot forms, each with its own character arc, premise, and audience expectations. Let's explore them.

Action



Action stories are *plot-driven* and teach us the importance of individual heroism in the face of danger.

What's at Stake: The lives and safety of others, survival, safety, danger, the defeat of the villain.

Character Wants & Needs: The protagonist *wants* to defeat the antagonist and save the victims. They *need* to unleash their inner gift. That unleashing will require an internal change based on a Worldview, Validation, or Redemption arc.

Essential Premise: Heroic action leads to saving lives, whereas a failure to take heroic action leads to loss of life (or danger) and moral failure.

Audience Emotion: The Action reader wants to feel excitement and a sense of bravery in the face of danger.

Variations: Action stories may center on escape, chase, adventure, rescue, rebellion, revenge, or rivalry.

As a Supporting Story Type: Character-driven stories of the Worldview, Validation, or Redemption Story Type still need external-world events to create the necessary visible, external stakes that will drive the character forward. A modified Action plot, with stakes involving some degree of physical danger, (but not necessarily life and death) is one way to provide needed external focus. Many children's stories use this combination.

Notable examples: *Charlotte's Web*, *Coco* (Worldview with supporting Action); *Gladiator*, *Rocky* (Validation with supporting Action); *The Hurt Locker* (Redemption [failed] with supporting Action).

Crime



Crime stories are *plot-driven* and teach us that social order & justice depend on clever people who outsmart chaotic wrongdoers.

What's at Stake: Social order and justice.

Character Wants & Needs: The protagonist *wants* to see justice done, and *needs* to learn something previously unknown in order for that to happen. Usually that learning will require an internal change based on a Worldview, Validation, or Redemption arc.

Essential Premise: Criminal activity results in chaos, whereas the pursuit of justice restores social order.

Audience Emotion: The Crime reader wants to feel the intrigue of solving a puzzle or the safety of seeing order and justice prevail.

Variations: Crime stories may center on solving a puzzle, investigating a crime, or planning a caper or heist.

As a Supporting Story Type: Typically, where a story contains a crime element, Crime will be the primary plot. However, in a character-driven story, a crime that incites the protagonist to seek justice could be the driver of their important inner growth.

Notable examples: *Amélie* (Validation with supporting Crime); *Despicable Me* (Redemption with supporting Crime); *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Worldview with supporting Crime).

Horror



Horror stories are *plot-driven* and remind us of the persistence of evil and that only courage and eternal vigilance keep it at bay.

What's at Stake: eternal torture. life, survival, escape.

Character Wants & Needs: The protagonist is a victim who *wants* to escape a fate worse than death at the hands of the monster. Sometimes they *need* to become cleverer than the monster in order to do so, and that shift will require an internal change based on a Worldview, Validation or Redemption arc.

Essential Premise: Ordinary people can keep evil at bay with courage and vigilance, whereas cowardice allows the monster to win and for evil to thrive.

Audience Emotion: The Horror reader wants to experience terror, and feel courageous in the face of it.

Variations: The monster may be natural, supernatural, or a force of society.

As a Supporting Story Type: Typically, where a story contains some form of monster, Horror will be the primary Story Type. However, in a character-driven story, horror elements can force a protagonist to grow inwardly or change profoundly in order to escape the fate worse than death. Two examples are *A Christmas Carol* (Redemption with supporting Horror) and the film *Get Out* (Validation with co-equal Horror).

Love



Love stories are both *plot- and character-driven*, and show us how to earn the intimacy, love, & togetherness that help the human community thrive.

What's at Stake: Comfortable status quo, safety from rejection. Love, togetherness, the benefits of marriage/partnership.

Character Wants & Needs: The protagonist *wants* to attain (or avoid) romantic love, and *needs* to mature or become willing to sacrifice for the beloved. Maturing will require an

internal change based on a Worldview arc. Sacrifice will likely involve an internal Redemption arc.

Essential Premise: Overcoming internal flaws makes committed human connection possible, whereas an unwillingness to be vulnerable results in loss of love..

Audience Emotion: The Love story reader wants to feel romantic excitement, compassion, or relief.

Variations: Love stories may center on courtship, a forbidden union, partnership, intimate friendship, or familial love.

As a Supporting Story Type: Love can form a subplot in stories of any other Story Type, because the desire for love and togetherness can motivate the protagonist either to act heroically or justly, or to change internally.

Some plot-driven stories with love subplots: *Superman*, *Booksmart*, *Wonder Woman* (Action); *Omar* (Crime), *Bird Box* (Horror)

Some character-driven stories with love subplots: *Forrest Gump* (Worldview); *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Validation); *Breaking Bad* (Redemption [failed]).

Worldview



Worldview stories are *character-driven* and demonstrate that the world is not a binary place, and that we need to accept a spectrum of viewpoints.

What's at Stake: Comfortable beliefs, status quo; wisdom, deeper understanding, knowledge. The struggle is usually triggered by some variant of an Action external story.

Character Wants & Needs: The protagonist *wants* to remain safe in their status quo, but *needs* to become willing to see the world in new and more nuanced ways.

Essential Premise: Open-mindedness leads to wisdom, whereas avoiding the truth results in self-deception. Or, a binary view of the world gives way to a more nuanced understanding when new information is allowed in.

Audience Emotion: The Worldview reader wants to feel hope and satisfaction, or compassion.

Variations: Worldview stories may center on naivete, revelation, disillusionment, or meaning.

As a Supporting Story Type: Virtually no Action, Crime, or even Horror story is complete or satisfying if the protagonist facing danger or crime doesn't also learn and grow in the process. A Worldview internal arc is far and away the most common Story Type for this purpose.

Examples: *Coraline* (Horror supported by Worldview); *Harry Potter* series, *The Wizard of Oz* (Action supported by Worldview); *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Shawshank Redemption* (Crime supported by Worldview).

Validation



Validation stories are *character-driven* and remind us that the ultimate definition of success is remaining true to honorable values.

What's at Stake: Character's place in the social order, money, external esteem, honor; success, satisfaction, self-esteem.

Character Wants & Needs: The protagonist *wants* to succeed according to external measures of success, but *needs* to redefine success for themselves. They are incited to change by an external threat to their existing success, or by an external opportunity to rise in status.

Essential Premise: Ethical choices create true success, whereas unworthy goals lead to the betrayal of one's true values..

Audience Emotion: The Validation reader wants to feel admiration at the character's success, or pity at their failure.

Variations: Validation stories may center on the protagonist's successful search for success and the esteem of others, or their failure.

As a Supporting Story Type: The protagonist of a Crime story might well be motivated as much by a desire for external validation as to get justice. (as in most of the Sherlock Holmes stories).

The Validation Story Type can also work as the inner journey for an Action protagonist (*Iron Man*, *Thelma & Louise*, *Toy Story*, *The Hunger Games*.)

Even the Horror protagonist can be motivated by external validation. *Parasite* and *Get Out* are two examples.

Redemption



Redemption stories are *character-driven* and show us that forgiveness is possible, but persistent wrongdoing will end in personal moral failure.

What's at Stake: Character's comfort, livelihood, and coping mechanisms; connection, relief from guilt or shame, forgiveness.

Character Wants & Needs: The protagonist *wants* to remain selfish, but *needs* to transcend selfishness through an altruistic act. The protagonist is usually incited to embark on this internal change by an external threat to their self-satisfaction.

Essential Premise: Altruistic action results in redemption, whereas selfishness leads to moral failure. OR Redemption results when the protagonist atones for past wrongs by abandoning selfish goals and sacrificing for the greater good.

Audience Emotion: The Redemption reader wants to feel satisfaction for the redeemed character, or pity or contempt for the unredeemed.

Variations: Redemption stories may center on a protagonist seeking forgiveness or attempting to make amends for their wrongdoing, or on a protagonist who surrenders to their weakness.

As a Supporting Story Type: An Action hero or a Crime solver could easily be seeking redemption, motivated to act for the good of victims or society by a desire to make up for past sins.

Batman is an Action protagonist seeking redemption.

Gone Girl and The Netflix series *Dead To Me* are both primary Crime stories with Redemption inner arcs—failed Redemption in the case of *Gone Girl*.

A Final Word

As difficult as it might seem when you're developing a big story full of ideas that you're excited about, when it's time to produce that professional draft, one of the most important decisions you can make is Story Type.

It can be a tricky choice. But consider what your protagonist wants to achieve in the outer world, and how they need to change internally. Imagine how you want your reader to feel as they turn over that last page or watch that final scene. Think about the highest and lowest points in your story, and what your protagonist is experiencing. Ask yourself how your protagonist changes from the beginning of the story to the end.

Then choose the Story Type from one group (character-driven or plot-driven) that best suits your primary story, and one from the other group as your supporting story, and work from there.