

How to Write Rising Action in Act II

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<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-write-rising-action-in-act-ii/>

This entry is part 2 of 5 in the series [PLOT writing](#)

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This is about how to write rising action in Act II in such a way that it keeps your readers engaged and riveted, anxious for more. Act II is always the longest part of a 3-act story.

We can break it down into average percentages. This is what readers generally expect: the beginning is 25% of your story, the middle is 50% and the ending is 25%. And yet, most of what has been written about writing a story focuses on writing the beginning or the end. Why? Well... because it's easier to explain.

For many writers, keeping the story interesting in this middle stage is very challenging. It's the largest stretch of your story and often the only thing we're told with absolute certainty is that it should have Rising Action. That means the action literally goes up: it gets up somehow, some way. But UP.

So how do you write Rising Action?

The reason it's hard to write this lengthier phase of the story has much to do with basic human desire: we want instant gratification - for everything.

As a writer, you need to allow yourself to *slow down enough* to write a compelling story that pulls the reader right up to your amazing climactic moment and then thoroughly satisfying ending ([which you should already have written, because you started at the end](#)).

What you'll get here:

- A clear definition of when and how Act II starts.
- 5 key writing tools you need to craft Act II.
- 7 types of conflict.
- 3 stages of Act II and how to make them progressive.

NOTE: It doesn't matter what kind of story you're writing or for what demographic or reading level. You'll need this for any kind of story.

When does Act II start?

Your story set-up (the beginning) has to get readers interested in more. *The beginning of Act II has to be a step up from that beginning.* So what exactly and how do you do that?

The beginning of your story officially ends with what's called the Inciting Incident. This is the point of action that thrusts your protagonist out of their status quo and spinning upwards into Act II.

You could also consider this to be The Thing that gets the story started: without the Inciting Incident, the protagonist's life would simply continue as it is and ever was. No story.

Just to back up a bit: the beginning of your story describes the protagonist in their status quo existence. You're setting up the story, establishing the main character and [doing all the important things the beginning should do](#).

The second act jump-starts with the Inciting Incident and continues through to the moment just before the climax.

What Happens After the Inciting Incident: The Rock Sock

There is an essential 3-step rhythm to most any Act II (keep reading), but there should also be a sense of "important things happening," throughout. How do we do that? There are 5 essential things you need to keep the momentum of reader's-interest going.

I call this the Rock Sock (R.O.C.S.C.) for Act II:

Relationships

In writing any kind of story, more action does not translate into better, more exciting material. You've got to have – not lulls, but moments when we get to see the protagonist being an actual character instead of a figurehead hero doing unrealistic things.

NOTE: There is nothing you can ever write that will smack as Unrealistic if you've established a solid character and also established that these Unreal Things are absolutely part of that character's reality.

One of the most effective ways to show who a character really is: show how they react to other characters. The reason we have [sidekicks and mentors and enemies](#) as characters in a story is for one sole

function (it isn't to tell jokes): it's to show us different aspects of the protagonist. That's it.

A single character could go and do absolutely anything. Their primary conflict could be Nature, it could be Technology, or it could be the Protagonist (protagonist vs. self). There is no plot-based purpose for other characters.

When we add more characters, we naturally get a more complex story with a wider variety of potential conflicts, but as a writer, you should approach those characters as new ways to explore who the protagonist is. The Story that unfolds will happen seamlessly and naturally, because how they react and interact with each other will feel quite natural.

[Know the themes for your protagonist](#), and this will give you all kinds of ideas as to the kinds of relationships and relationship conflicts you can give them.

Obstacles thrown into the mix

Obstacles are different from conflict (though for the reader these may seem like the same thing), because conflict is the Big Stuff that pushes against the protagonist's efforts. Obstacles are the smaller details that get in the way.

No matter what obstacles you create for your protagonist, they should always be used in such a way that they reveal more about the protagonist's character. If it's irrelevant in that regard, then it is fundamentally irrelevant and can be removed from the story (or changed in some way so that it does matter).

If you write up the "wrench in the motor" just because, it will smack of contrivance. It will annoy the reader and ultimately, will come across as a boring bit of the story. Your wrench needs to have clear meaning to the protagonist in some way.

For children's books, this is especially true. You don't have the space or the words to waste. You've got to have purpose. The fewer pages you have, the more intentionally details need to be chosen.

Conflict

No protagonist, none whatsoever, can exist on the pages of a story without conflict. It can be any kind of conflict that you choose. *Traditionally, there are four types of literary conflict:*

- Man vs. Man
- Man vs. Nature
- Man vs. Society
- Man vs. Self

Over time, the list has changed:

- Protagonist vs. Antagonist

- Protagonist vs. Nature
- Protagonist vs. Technology
- Protagonist vs. Society
- Protagonist vs. Self
- Protagonist vs. God(s)
- Protagonist vs. Supernatural/ Monsters

The original four points hold, though the language has changed to be more accurate. Man vs. Man is so generic it's misleading because the implication is that both characters get equal weight in the story (or that they must be male).

One of the characters has to be more important to us than the other. The antagonist doesn't have to be evil. It just has to be the character that antagonizes the main character in some way(s).

NOTE: Don't confuse Theme with Conflict. These are entirely different things, but both are essential to character and plot. [For more on that, READ HERE.](#)

Suspense and Surprise

There should always be a sense of suspense, the idea of not knowing things. Mystery is essential to any kind of story. Even in a children's storybook, we should have this, even if only for the span of a couple of pages.

Suspense and Surprise are linked together very tightly, because it's a constant balancing act for the writer. What you choose to withhold from the readers for a while does require a pay-off: you can't just plop down a mystery and leave it unsolved. You've got to reveal the surprise.

Stories need the Unknown strung throughout, all the way up to the end... not all of them. There should be little mysteries here and there, but a more important one saved for a big reveal in the climax.

Peek-a-Boo! I see you! This simple child's game is the perfect example of Suspense and Surprise. Over and over. It's unending and immeasurably fun for a child - and for the adult who entertains them. It's great. Writing doesn't have to be any more difficult than this. Have fun with it.

Ask yourself: what are the little mysteries you would love to see with these characters? Notice that it isn't, "this story," but "these characters." That's a key difference.

The characters are what should drive your moments of suspense and surprise, not the story. Why? Because characters drive the story.

Character Development

I don't like to use the word development much when talking about writing, because it sounds like hard, boring work. Character *Development*. But it isn't boring at all and it doesn't have to be hard. This is the stuff I love!

Characters should always be showing us and telling us more about who they are without making us feel as though we're reading a grocery-list of things the writer wanted us to know.

Dialogue isn't enough and neither is action. Character is created when you reveal something through the HOW the character speaks and HOW the character does a certain thing. Also the WHY, but you only hint at that until a certain, later point in Act II.

For example, let's say... a character catches a ball. This is a point of action in a game, and it's important in the progression of the game. OK, fine. But that isn't really enough.

They could gloat about it. They could be surprised that they actually caught it. They could have done it just to prevent someone else from catching it. They could have done it to impress someone in particular. They could act nonchalant about it, like bringing the team that much closer to a win is no big deal.

Get the HOWs in there as much as possible, and then later, add a clear WHY (though by that point the reader should have some strong suspicions).

The 3 Stages of Act II

What are the 3 stages?

The Choice:

the protagonist decides to take the journey that will give us a story. This isn't the Inciting Incident. It happens after that.

The Reversal:

the protagonist realizes that their original plan won't work.

The Disaster:

things go from bad to worse, or from difficult to seemingly impossible. This is most often described as "the darkest hour" for the protagonist, or the "All Hope Is Lost" phase.

These 3 stages are why many fairytales and fables have a basic 3-step progression of action. Here's a great example:

- **The Beginning** = There are 3 happy little pigs. There is also a wolf in the neighborhood.
- **The Inciting Incident** = The wolf tries to hunt down the pigs.
- **The Choice (1)** = So each of the pigs builds a little house: one of straw, one of wood, and one of brick.
- **The Reversal (2)** = The big bad wolf blows down the straw house. So the first little pig runs to the wooden house.

- **The Disaster (3)** = The wolf blows down the wooden house. So the first 2 little pigs run to the brick house.
- **The Climax** = The wolf blows and blows but cannot blow down the brick house, so the pigs are safe!
- **The Happy Ending** = The 3 little pigs live safely in the brick house together. The wisest, most hard working pig is clearly the Alpha.

Don't take the 3-stages too far.

In one of the earliest versions of the Snow White story, the evil witch actually attempts to kill Snow White 3 different times: with an overly tight bodice, a poisoned comb, and then with a poisoned apple. This has been trimmed down to just the poisoned apple, as there's plenty of story happening before the witch tries to kill Snow White directly.

The lesson here is about detail, really. The pigs had built 3 different types of houses, each one requiring considerably more work than the next. So this progression is a good one because the details have purpose and they also show us something about the character of each pig.

Two of the three ways to kill Snow White aren't great. In fact, they're pretty stupid. Tightening a bodice until the girl faints? Combing her hair with a poisoned comb? These methods sound ludicrous, and because it's the same (undisguised) woman approaching Snow White each time, we just shake our heads.

By the time the witch comes with a poisoned apple, we're rooting for the witch because the girl keeps falling for the same trick. It's essentially the same – no progression. The only development is in the reader becoming annoyed with Snow White.

Write to a Point and be sharp about it.

If at any point in your writing, especially in Act II, you find yourself hitting a wall, go back to your Character Profile. When in doubt, ask the character what to do. Look at your character's Themes to get a stronger grasp of the Conflicts they should face – and also what their Obstacles should be.

What for one character is an obstacle could be an opportunity for another character. So be aware of that, and if possible, juxtapose the opposing view through a [side character](#). It will make your protagonist's actions and character that much stronger.

What are the writing hurdles you face right now? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send me an email. You know I like getting those. I'll do my best to respond as quickly as possible, but please allow for a couple of weeks.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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