

How to Write a Great Ending

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<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-write-a-great-ending/>

This entry is part 3 of 5 in the series [PLOT writing](#)

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Exactly how and when to end your story is arguably the most important thing a writer can decide, because the thing that sticks in our minds when we close a book is how the ending made us feel.

How to write a great ending is no small question!

This is important: it isn't the actual ending, but how the ending makes us feel. That's what either sticks with us or comes off loose to be forgotten.

The things that happen at the end of a story are rarely all that amazing or startling or new. What makes them seem amazing or startling or new is how we are made to feel about those events.

What we really need to know is this: "How do I infuse more of the right emotions at the story end?" This is how to get your readers walking around for days or months, thinking about your characters and the things they experienced.

It will haunt them in the best possible way because of feelings. So how do we make feelings for our readers? That's what I want to slug-out here.

What you'll get here:

- A clear definition of the story's end.
- Tips for plot twists in your ending.
- How the plot feels for us and how it feels to the hero.

- 5 things to never do in your ending.
- 2 things to always do in your ending.

When does the ending start?

Let's first define our terms a bit here. When does the ending really begin? Let's take a look at the traditional plot outline for a 3-act story. A 3-act story is the most common type of story structure, used across all genres and writing forms.

ACT I

- **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.

ACT II

- **The Choice** = So each of the pigs builds a little house: one of straw, one of wood, and one of brick.
- **The Reversal** = The big bad wolf blows down the straw house. So the first little pig runs to the wooden house.
- **The Disaster** = The wolf blows down the wooden house. So the first 2 little pigs run to the brick house.

ACT III

- **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.

The beginning of the end is actually your **climax**, or perhaps the few moments leading up to that climax (the preparation for it). **That means this is where you can start to reveal surprises and plot twists.**

Plot Twists!

This is where those happen. The only way to craft a plot twist is to first think of what you want to WOW everyone with, and then write the rest of the story to guide our attention away from the obvious.

WARNING! Don't just have a Big Surprise. You've got to show that it's a *genuine plot twist* by crafting a story people can read again to look for the clues – and actually find them. There is no plopping down an unrelated surprise ending. That isn't a twist. It's a cheat, and readers will spot that right away.

What it feels like to us and to the hero.

One of the reasons why plot graphs are confusing and discussing things like Rising Action doesn't seem

to help much is because of how we feel about stories. The story plot is about the tension we must create as writers. When our hero is feeling the lowest, our attention is really beginning to peak. “He can’t just give up now?!!?”

So here’s a basic plot graph that shows how the hero’s journey looks to the hero and how it looks to us readers. The yellow areas mark just how much disparity there is between our emotional experience and the hero’s experience.

What NOT to do in your ending.

It’s nearly impossible to write all the wonderful things you can do to write a terrific story, and absolutely impossible to nail that down in a single post like this! So I’m going to take the shorter, easier route here and talk about what NOT to do.

Do not get discouraged if you’ve done any of these things. I’ve done ALL of them! At least twice...

Don’t introduce a new character unless it’s the birth of a baby. But even then, we should already know that the baby is coming. *There should be surprises at the end, but not this kind of surprise.*

Imagine: you’re right at the climactic moment of a story – and then Surprise! A new club member arrives. Not good.

But writers do sometimes make this mistake because they’re trying to make the climax more surprising. It won’t work *this* way, because a character is too important a thing and it will make no sense to us if the local librarian just happens to know Wonder Woman. That won’t fly.

Likewise, any sub-plot or major detail (like having laser-vision or a toy that has laser-vision) cannot be handily pulled out to save the day. This type of writing technique (oh yes, they even name the bad ones!) is called [Deus ex Machina](#). Do not ever use this, even though it’s Latin and awkward to pronounce.

Don’t confuse being mysterious with leaving loose ends. It isn’t the same. If your story arch carries through a series and there is a mystery that runs through all of it, be sure that an important step or clue is revealed at the end of each story in that series.

Also, be sure that there is *at least one* immediate conflict resolved in each story, should you have a series in mind. If there need to be some loose ends that remain unresolved because they should carry into a future book, then address those in some way. Let readers know that more is coming and that they will get the answers.

Don’t change your tone or writing voice just because you’re excited. You’ve got to remain consistent. Many writers start to get so excited about finishing their story, they drop their narrative voice. It’s almost as if they’re on a race to the Big Finish!

Slow down when you feel this sensation creeping up on you. My best tip here is to actually start writing the end of your story first. That way, you’ll be writing with your mind at its freshest and clearest – and

right at the big climax. That way too, you'll be much better able to write a strong beginning. You'll know exactly where your story is headed.

Please. Do not end your story with a, “and then she woke up! Whew!” Those Just-a-Dream endings make everyone groan. This is a gimmick, and it upsets everyone. Really, everyone. Even toddlers.

If you want people to feel cheated, then do this. It could actually work if your protagonist is a Trickster. But seriously – don't.

Don't accidentally end. This is similar to the dream sequence ending. Everything that happens in the end should happen because of decisions made by the protagonist. If nothing goes their way, then that outcome should also come about because of their actions or inactions.

One writing trick you might try if your writing just seems to fall flat: drop part of your ending. Maybe you've written too far or included too much detail. See if cutting back helps. But again, be careful about the accidental ending. Don't let that happen, because it will feel like you just threw things on the page to make it pretty.

What to always do in Act III.

Always tie back to the beginning and middle. The best stories have a sense of craftsmanship, a sense of intention. That's because they do this; they tie it all together.

As you write, you'll do a lot of rewriting. That is when you'll be able to make sure that everything ties in together. No loose ends, nothing unaddressed.

Bringing everything together like this will prepare the reader to feel anything you want them to feel at the end of your story - because there won't be any structural problems interfering with those emotions. There is nothing like a structural flaw to throw us off an emotional path.

Fix the problems. Every story has conflict, so be sure that your conflicts are actually resolved – one way or another. Don't leave people feeling like things are hanging, because they will walk away from the story feeling unsatisfied.

If you're writing a series and there is an over-arching mystery that needs more time to be resolved, be sure that there is at least one immediate conflict resolved in each volume of the series. Whatever isn't resolved needs to be pointed to as an unanswered question that will be sought in the next story or stories.

Those conflicts should be emotional ones, and if there is more than one emotion involved, that will give greater depth to the experience. Just be age-appropriate here... meaning that younger readers will not be able to feel sad and happy at the same time. Children do not cry when they are happy. That happens after puberty.

Don't finish first. Finish right on time.

Page count is sort of important, because the quantity suggests the type of book it is. There is a clear division between a storybook and a graphic novel. Page count is one of those definers.

[If you're not sure about whether your story is too long or too short, check HERE.](#) This is a comprehensive list of both word count and page count for every type of manuscript you'd want to write. (If I'm missing something, please let me know!)

Why am I talking about page count right now? Because it's exactly the type of question you need to address after your first finished draft. If your story is overlong, you need to consider if you've actually written what you set-out to write.

It could be that your tome should be divided into 2-3 books. That means needing to write 2 to 3 endings instead of one. Just be sure that each one can be taken as its own entity, and that a larger story encompasses all of them.

See how this doesn't have an ending?

And then I woke up... and realized it was all just a dream. Oh man!

Keep creating, no matter what.

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