

How Many Narrative Threads Make A Story

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/many-narrative-threads-make-story/>

This entry is part 9 of 10 in the series [Narrative](#)

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Narrative Threads and how to use them to create a strong story is a more advanced aspect of writing that I'm going to quickly whittle down to the absolute basics. This is based on a recent writing lab I guided earlier this week.

The number of narrative threads your story needs depends greatly on the type of story you write – more specifically, the intended age group.

Narrative Threads are something we as readers take for granted in stories, and that's exactly why crafting them intentionally can be so elusive to us as writers.

What you'll get here:

- Clear definition of Narrative Thread
- How Narrative Threads are used in Fiction and Nonfiction
- Comparison of a Narrative Thread and Situation

- Example progressing a Situation to Narrative Thread
- The Number of Narrative Threads you need per story type:
 - illustrated storybook
 - chapter book
 - middle grade novel
 - young adult novel
 - screenplay

What exactly is a Narrative Thread?

Like Narrative, the term Narrative Thread is something people use rather loosely. But how we as writers use it as a tool to craft story is important to distinguish.

(To read [more about Narrative, go HERE.](#))

A **Narrative Thread** is when we have a storyline that has a beginning, middle and end. No matter the Narrative Thread, it must inspire in us a *question*. It must make us curious to find the answer – to ultimately, find out what happens.

When we tell a story, it's never about one single plot line. As in life, there are other things happening, other mini-stories or sub-plots.

The more complex your story, the more Narrative Threads it should have.

How we use a Narrative Thread is different in fiction or nonfiction, so let's distinguish those right now.

Nonfiction Narrative Threads

When you give a presentation, especially if providing a lot of technical facts and figures, it's important to establish a narrative thread or two to keep the attention of your audience.

The best way to capture people's imaginations is to weave a storyline through the facts, to make the finding of those facts engaging and human.

Fiction Narrative Threads

A Fictional Narrative Thread is essentially a mini-story within a story where those stories are linked in some way - so they belong together. It is true that the main storyline is also a narrative thread. It's just the most important one.

Narrative Thread vs. Situation

Narrative Thread = Boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back, boy marries girl. Your threads don't need to follow a trope, but this example makes it really easy to explain what a narrative thread looks like.

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Situation = Boy meets girl in a moon station. This could progress into a Narrative Thread, but it doesn't have to happen. In fact, there might not be a storyline about *this* boy and *this* girl. It could just be that they're coworkers. That's a situation.

Narrative Thread happens when we ask questions, when we need to know more.

Your situation becomes a narrative thread when it prompts a question. For example, let's take the situation above. I can turn it into the beginning of a narrative thread like this:

An intolerably haughty astronaut falls instantly for a sweet-natured astrophysicist while collaborating on a special report and living together on Jupiter's 3rd moon station. Little does he know that she is an undercover superhero. Will he be able to handle discovering her true identity? Will she accidentally squash him like a bug?

If there is a clear need to follow through with a storyline, then you have a narrative thread.

Sometimes, we sense the *lack* of a narrative thread more easily than the presence of one.

Ever read a story and feel like it left too many loose threads? Too many unanswered questions? That's when a narrative thread wasn't followed through to a satisfying end.

How Many Narrative Threads?

So how do you decide what your Narrative Threads should be and how do you decide how many there should be in your story?

Illustrated Storybook

If you're writing an illustrated storybook, you should only have 1 or 2 Narrative Threads. Not more. If you have a second thread, it should be extremely minor – perhaps only revealed by closely following the illustrations (not something in the text).

Chapter Book

If you're writing a chapter book, you should have 1 to 3 Narrative Threads. If your story has two smaller storylines, they should be extremely minor and simple, like how a character finally gets to eat their favorite ice cream after having failed (for various reasons) to do that through the whole story.

Middle Grade Novel

If you're writing a middle grade novel, your story should have about 5-6 Narrative Threads. Fewer than that, and it will feel too simple. More than that, and you stretch into the YA realm.

The smaller Narrative Threads can be more complex here, involving even serious matters. Don't be afraid to push the boundaries here. Just remember that you must have either a happy ending or at least a

bittersweet one.

Young Adult Novel

If you're writing a novel for young adults, your Narrative Threads should pretty much match that of any adult novel. Anywhere around 9-11 storyline threads should be your aim.

Don't craft more than 12 Narrative Threads. It makes the primary narrative thread too difficult to follow. No matter how many threads your story might have, the primary storyline has to be clearly identifiable.

Screenplay

If you're writing a screenplay, keep it around 3-6 Narrative Threads. You have considerably less time to express a storyline clearly, and with only (typically) 90 minutes, more than 6 storylines will confuse the point and derail your timing.

It's for this reason that so often movies don't seem to measure up to the original novel. They couldn't possibly.

The Narrative Threads absolutely have to be trimmed back, typically to about half the amount if it's an adaptation of an adult novel. With fewer threads, that usually leads to side characters getting cut as well. Don't blame the screenwriter – applaud them for knowing what to adapt.

Keeping the Narrative Threads Easy to Follow

There are two ways to be sure your narrative threads hold together to form a cohesive story – and not one that just seems to flop around.

- Have all the storylines follow a central theme.
- Have the different storylines centered around a single unifying event.

What about you? Are you reading a great story right now? How many narrative threads does it have? Write below, let me know - or as ever, send me an email. You've got to know I love getting those.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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