



Photo by [Riccardo Romano](#)

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Character arcs—what about ‘em?

This week, I’m looking to cover an oft-mentioned, seldom-explained part of storytelling: **character arcs**.



It’s easy to get caught up on the plotting and planning of a new story’s *events* that we don’t think as much about the characters. I’ve made a habit of getting started on a story’s events and in the middle, stopping to really think about how the characters are going to grow and change (I *do* get to know them well that way, though—fewer surprises from there on out).

I don’t think there’s a wrong way to implement a character arc, whether you plan them from the beginning, figure them out along the way, or add it all in edits. But there’s no denying that **a character must grow and change along the way** for the story to truly appeal to readers.

What do you think? How would you define a character arc? When do you think about your character arcs—or do you plan them at all?

Photo by Riccardo Romano

Starting and ending the character arc

Character arcs are an important part of making any story satisfying. As we said yesterday, it’s as simple as making sure a character grows and changes throughout the



course of the story. It’s important to remember that these changes, too, are most effective if they’re brought about by the external plot (more on that later).

Every character, and every character, has to start somewhere. We know that in the ordinary world, something is amiss—**something is missing from the protagonist’s life**. That doesn’t just mean a love interest or a murderer that needs to be brought to

justice—there’s something deeper, on an emotional level, that the character needs.

That *could* be love or justice—or it could be forgiveness, healing, resolve, courage, wisdom, etc. (Alicia Rasley has a great list in her article “[The Internal Journey](#).”) This is what they gain in the end— what the story events mean to the character.

This is another instance where knowing the end from the beginning really pays off—if **you know what the character will end up with, you know set them up in the opposite place**: if they need love, they start off lonely. If they need healing, they start off damaged; resolve, dissolute; courage, afraid; wisdom, naive.

This also works the other way around—if you have the flaw at the beginning, you can look for ways to “fix” it throughout the story events.

A major part of the “elixir” a hero returns with is this internal journey—the process of fixing what is wrong in his life. It’s what makes a book **truly compelling**, and something that we continue to contemplate beyond the basic events of the plot.

What do you think? How have you crafted your characters’ arcs? What are your favorite character arcs to read?

Photo by Richard Johnstone

Finding the character arc

Of course, the above method works great if you already know your plot and character (if you’re at the end of planning, in drafting or in revisions). But what if you don’t really *know* your characters well yet, or you’re trying to find a good internal conflict, or you still can’t figure out how the external events of the plot are going to affect them internally?

There should be one little thing you know about your character: **what motivates her**. Look at your character’s profession, hobbies, and journey in the story. What’s going to compel him to go on this journey with you? (Dragging him along when he has no reason to go on the story journey isn’t going to work well.) What are her core values—what does she prize above all else?

Let's say our heroine's core value is stability. She goes on the story journey because she is very specifically led to believe that this journey (let's say winning huge cash prize in a reality game show) will give her life financial stability. So, at the beginning, she lacks stability.



But if we dig deeper, it's not just that she likes for things to be calm and stable. If her life is unstable, and all she wants is that equilibrium, **she is afraid**. The external journey may be her quest for cash, but the internal character arc will be her quest to allay her fears.

And what do you want to bet a cash prize won't do it? You could tell a story about a woman who wants stability above all else, and then she gets it, but her internal conflict isn't going to be very deep. Instead, if we realize that the desire for stability is a manifestation of underlying fear, we can **use the events of the story to help her (or force her) to gain the courage she needs** to press forward in an uncertain world (because, seriously, even a big cash prize won't be enough to *guarantee* stability. Hello, economy. Hello, taxes. Hello, house fire.).

And we can do this starting with the external conflict. Say you have a character on a quest for a hidden treasure with, I don't know, religious ties. He's actually searching for the treasure to prove that it doesn't exist and the adherents of this hokey religion are all wasting their lives.

There could be many internal journeys here. An obvious one is that he's starting out in a position of doubt, and he could come to find faith. Or maybe he hates this hokey religion because of a bad experience with a member or the religion, so he's trying to exact revenge—and then he can journey to finding justice (though probably not in the way he thinks).

And, like yesterday, **these are only the beginning and ending of the character arc**. To make it truly believable, we have to have some pretty major internal conflict in the middle of the story—some deep challenges for the character to learn and grow from.

**What do you think? How have you linked character motivations to their arcs?
Where do you start and end your character arcs?**

Shaping character arcs—the middle

So we've figured out what [drives our characters](#), and where they'll [start and end their internal character journeys](#). So **what happens in the middle?** Obviously, if our characters start at one extreme (fear, loneliness, naïvete) and go to the other (courage, love, wisdom), some pretty extreme things are going to have to happen in the middle. I mean, most of us don't just wake up one day to have our deepest problems, flaws or hangups magically healed, right?



This **reversal** can stem from some level of autonomy—the character can recognize the problem and make a conscious choice to change—or we can force them to accept the change, give them no other possibilities than to try this new belief system/opportunity/way of life. But either way, to be believable, it's got to be **prompted by external events**. As [Alicia Rasley says](#):

Character-driven fiction is about internal change. Paradoxically, external action is usually needed to bring on this change. External action is the surest catalyst for both internal growth and reader interest. Sure, your protagonist could overcome his distaste for intimacy and his dread of family by going to a psychologist twice a week for ten years.... but who wants to read about that? Even psychologists, probably, would put down a novel about therapy sessions to pick up a novel about a woman who learns to trust by being blackmailed into joining a secret team to rescue the kidnapped clone of Thomas Edison.

To make sure that the external action is prompting your internal changes, Alicia suggests linking the external events and internal arc in stimulus-response units. She also points out that the change comes later—we see the **character striving to maintain his worldview/attitude/whatever** for most of the story. Until that reversal comes, the character isn't ready for the change, and he'll do what he can to avoid it. And **those choices are going to backfire, hurt him somehow**, perhaps breaking him down gradually, until he is put into a situation where he has no other choice or where he finally sees how stupid he was.

It's also okay—advisable, even!—to *not* build the character arc every second. In fact, it's more compelling to see him take two steps forward and one step back, resisting that change until he can't anymore. And then at the end, show us how complete the change is by one last external action—have the character prove to us one last time that they really have changed.

What do you think? Where do you put the reversal in your works? How do you prompt it, and how do you prove to your readers that your character has changed?

Photo by Reuben Whitehouse

Micro character arcs in scenes

So far, we've looked at character arcs on a macro level—characters changing over the course of a story. At the beginning of the series, however, Deb [pointed out](#) that **characters can also have arcs within a single scene**, where they go from one emotion to another, possibly opposite, emotion.



Character emotions are always delicate things. It's so easy as a writer to push the emotions a little harder than we should, so that they end up unnatural—especially in a delicate transition. Now, of course it's always possible to use the events of the scene to create a very natural change in a character's emotion—but it's not the only way.

Jack Bickham delves into both kinds of changes in his book [Scene & Structure](#). **The first kind of change relies on external actions and scene structure.** The basic structure of any scene, Bickham says, is **Goal – Conflict – Disaster**.

The **Goal** is the POV character's goal at the start of the scene, for just that scene. (For a story and characters that feel purposeful and driven, have the character state the goal near the beginning of the scene.)

The **Conflict** is what happens as the character pursues the Goal and meets resistance—dialogue, movement, pursuit, etc.

The Conflict builds to the climax of the scene—the **Disaster**, when the character's goal is frustrated. Naturally, when the character is frustrated, s/he will have an emotional

reaction—for example, she might go from hopeful or determined at the beginning of the scene to discouraged at the end.

So external events can obviously help to bring about a micro character arc. But there's another way to show emotional change within a scene that we'll look at tomorrow.

What do you think? How have you handled drastic emotional changes in scenes?

Photo by [Tony Case](#)

Micro character arcs in sequels

There are two different ways to handle character arcs in scenes. The first kind uses *scene* structure to bring about the change. The second kind of change, however, doesn't rely on scene structure because it doesn't happen in a scene—**it happens in a sequel**. The Sequel is what comes after the scene—the emotional response. However, it also has a structure that can help with this kind of character arc.

Bickham's structure for the sequel is **Emotion – Thought – Decision – Action** (which leads to another scene). The **Emotion** is the initial response to the events of the scene and its Disaster. When the character moves past the initial emotion, they think through the events, their response and their options in the **Thought** phase. This ultimately leads to a **Decision**, which takes the character to another **Action**.

Not all the steps of the sequel are necessary. In fact, the sequel itself might not be necessary—depends on the pacing and whether the emotional reaction constitutes a change. But **when the character is going through a major change, we can spend a little more time here**. And this is where we motivate the next action.

When an emotional change in the sequel follows the full steps of the sequence, we know that there's a logical progression of the events of the sequel. By moving through these steps, we can lead the characters and the readers through the steps of the change and create a compelling, convincing change.

For example, if we need our character to go from shocked after the last disaster to furious in the sequel,



we **start with that initial emotional response**—the shock. We don't have to spend a long time exploring the shock, especially if that's the kind of reaction you'd expect in light of the disaster. Once we create a vivid picture of the shock (and that's a toughie, since it's characterized by the absence of feeling, really), we can give the character a minute to get her bearings again.

Once she's had some time to recover, she's ready for the Thought phase. Here we can **explore exactly why she's so surprised**—because, say, this revelation is something that the hero could have told her. It's something she would understand and would have even made her happy, if he had just told her, and he knew that—but he's chosen to lie to her about it the whole time they've known one another.

And that can lead us to the Decision. The Decision can be about the coming Action and set up the next scene—or **it can be a further decision about the emotional response**. You know what? He *should* have told her. How dare he not? And if he could lie about that, what else about their relationship was a lie?

And now she's mad.

What do you think? How have you handled drastic emotional changes in sequels?

Photo by Dan Foy

Are character arcs necessary?

After all this talk about character arcs, I was browsing around on an interesting screenwriting blog, and found an article kind of [arguing against character arcs](#). So **are character arcs necessary**? The answer, of course, is *it depends*—and it depends on several factors.



In plot-driven fiction, for example, the characters' growth and change aren't what the story is about. Dirk Pitt, James Bond, and Indiana Jones see little, if any, character growth in each episode of their stories (aside from the new Bond movies, maybe). While they are memorable characters, and we root for them to win, we don't care if they have a life-altering experience to

become better people. We're cool with them staying the way they are. The story focuses on their adventures rather than their experiences.

However, in character-driven fiction, the character arc is central. Reading this kind of fiction enables us to live the character's experiences and feelings, and those are at least as important to the story as the actual actions.

It also depends on the **genre**. Mysteries tend to be more plot driven. Action stories are usually more plot driven. Romances, especially single-title length ones, are usually more character driven.

Another consideration is **whether the book will lead into a series** (and if so, how long). If this is going to be a serial character, how many different lessons can s/he learn? It's possible, of course, to do a metaarc—one that takes the character on a journey from the beginning to the end of the series (Harry Potter?)—but it will probably require considerable planning.

What do you think? Can you think of successful characters who don't arc? Do you write characters who don't arc?

Photo by craig Cloutier

Character arcs and gender

We were done with our series on character arcs, but then those pesky comments had to butt in again 😊. Murphy, an awesome commenter and thinker from the community at [Edittorrent](#), left a [very insightful comment](#) about characters who do and don't arc last week, which I think could prompt some good discussion today:

I was wondering about the difference between the male emotional arc vs the female. We think, process and communicate in a totally different ways—so shouldn't the way we plot these arcs—reflect that? And doesn't this tap into the POV issue at some point? Hmm...I'll have to think about.



I think that the exact [starting and ending points of the character arc](#) should be **suited to the character and the story—and gender, of course, will play into who the character is**, in the sense that it plays into all of our selves and self conceptions.

Generally, however, I prefer to think of my characters on a deeper level than to generalize by gender—yeah, guys communicate one way and girls another, but more important to me is who these people are as individuals, not as a man, or as a woman. (Genre and plot, of course, can also play into this—in my latest WIP the male variety of fear of failure got to play a bigger role in my POV character than normal.)

In character who do arc, **I think the basic pattern will always be the same**—start at one extreme, lacking something (internally), be forced through external events to confront that lack and try new ways to alleviate it, and finally come to the reversal (and prove the change) at the climax and/or conclusion, where they're now at the other extreme.

But **the exact characteristics that they will change and the exact events that will make them change will vary depending on the character**. And these may be dictated by gender—most likely, you're not going to see a woman in a romance be the one to confront her own commitment issues. But at the same time, successfully bucking the conventions can be *awesome*, and in some ways, almost a requirement.

So what do you think? Are character arc patterns universal? How does your character's gender play into your choices for their character arcs?

Photo by Bianca

Everything you ever wanted to know about character arcs

Part two . . . sort of

Character arcs are vital in most fiction. We read to connect with people emotionally as they grow and change on the journey. Here, we're taking all the things we talked about so far to the next level.

Why characters should arc

In most fiction, character arcs are a vital element. A



character who doesn't arc ([with specific exceptions](#)) isn't nearly as fulfilling to read about. In [Save The Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need](#), Blake Snyder describes character arcs (italics = emphasis in original, bold mine):

Arc is a term that means “the change that occurs to any character from the beginning, through the middle, and to the end of each character’s ‘journey.’” . . . But when it’s done well, when we can chart the growth and change each character undergoes in the course of a movie, it’s a poem. What you are saying in essence is: This story, this experience, is so important, so life-changing for all involved—even you, the audience—it affects every single person that is in its orbit. From time immemorial, all good stories show growth and track change in all its [*sic*] characters.

Why is this?

I think the reason that characters must change in the course of a movie [or book] is because if your story is worth telling, it must be vitally important to everyone involved. This is why set-ups and payoffs for each character have to be crafted carefully and tracked throughout. (135)

Character arcs aren't just nice for readers—they show that the events of our story are worth reading about. The impact of the story is shown in the character arc, almost like a corollary to the “**why does this story matter?**” question that few people voice, but most people at least subconsciously wonder. Answer that question, and your fiction doesn't feel like a waste of time.



Finding your character arc

There are dozens or perhaps hundreds of character journeys for arcs. ([Alicia Rasley lists a bunch](#) with some tips on plotting out that journey.) **Think about how your character grows and changes over the course of the story.** It doesn't have to be a drastic 180-degree U-turn all the time. [For example:](#)

Romance fiction, and most of its sub-genres, the hero is also the villain to the heroine. He's a grump or a tyrant or a renegade. Maybe he's the Rochester to your Jane Eyre, a married and bitter man to a sweet and innocent, though world-

weary, ingénue. The point of the book is for him to “get” the heroine, which means the hero’s villainy must be “overcome.”

The hero has to change—not from actually evil to good, but from rude/inattentive/not interested/self-absorbed to its opposite.

But plotting this out from the beginning isn’t the only way to do this.

Developing the character arc

You can find your character’s arc at any point in the writing and editing process.

When I first began writing, I didn’t give much thought to character arcs. *If* they got in there, it was either a coincidence or something I added in revisions.

After that, about the time I wrote the first series on this topic, I *figured out the character arcs halfway through a first draft*, and I often stopped to go back and adjust what I had.

Lately I’ve thought more and more about my character’s arcs *before starting my story*, and that helps me to the **broad strokes** in there. It does make a big difference in the quality of the first draft—my most recent book was <7 weeks from idea to finished novel, but it has those broad strokes. But, as always, there’s plenty of work left to be done in the next draft.

In a guest post on *Writer Unboxed*, [A. Victoria Mixon](#) talks about rethinking your character arcs and their motivation *after* the first draft, starting with the end of the book:

Now, what deep inside this protagonist is pitted against them in that Climax? Not external forces—internal. What do they love and believe that’s irreconcilable with their first need? What’s the equal-but-opposite fire in their belly in this Climactic scene that’s fighting back?

Remember to focus only upon the climax scene of the Climax. . . .

Now we’ll ask ourselves, “Exactly how could these two needs have gotten this protagonist into this dreadful calamity?”

Yep, it’s okay to find or develop or change your character arc *after* you write the book. Sometimes it’s easiest that way: you see what your character learned and then go back to the beginning to make it match the conclusion better. (Victoria’s article talks about

circling back through your character’s internal journey to the beginning of the book. Deep stuff!)

Testing out your character arc beginning

If you don’t plot out your character arcs in advance (or even if you do), the beginning of the character arc often needs the most work. We have to match and offset the ending and make the change as dramatic as possible. Or, turning to [Save The Cat](#) by Blake Snyder again, use the “Take a Step Back” principle (emphasis mine):

Take a Step Back applies to all your characters. In order to show how everyone grows and changes in the course of your story, you must take them all back to the starting point. Don’t get caught up in the end result and deny us the fun of how they get there. We want to see it happen. To everyone.



This is just one more example of how movies [and novels] must show the audience everything: all the change, all the growth, all the action of a hero’s journey. **By taking it all back as far as possible, by drawing the bow back to its very quivering end point, the flight of the arrow is its strongest, longest and best.** The Take a Step Back rule double-checks this.

If you feel like your story or any of its characters isn’t showing us the entire flight, the entire journey... Take a Step Back and show it all to us. We want to see it.
(156)

Dig deeper in the beginning and show a big change! If your hero learns to show appreciation to his wife in the course of the story, don’t just have him be somewhat rude to her and pay more attention to the TV than her. Have him be a total jerk.

Taking it a step back also makes the middle of the character journey more challenging for the writer—but if it’s handled well, it makes the whole journey more realistic for the reader.

The middle of the character arc

I think most writers have trouble with middles, and character arcs are no exception. The basic guideline here is to **show the character making real choices between the beginning point and the ending point, and gradually moving toward the ending point—without making a full commitment to change yet.**

Or, as Alicia Rasley says in her article "[Changes and Choices: External Action and Internal Reaction](#)":

If we keep presenting him with the choice to move closer or farther away from family [the character journey she's using as an example (definitely worth reading!)], and make each choice an authentic one, then his growth will come out of his own actions and decisions. It's best to make every response somehow different, and then assemble them in the order of emotional risk (no big deal to build his own house instead of one with them... but very big emotional risk to decide he's responsible for the kid's welfare at the end). But they have to be real choices, and he has to make real decisions and take real action.

This gradual change *shows* the journey better than thinking or pontificating about it could. (Though those are both part of the process, usually.) It also is a great opportunity to **show the characters' resistance and reluctance, making the final choice even more satisfying** (and HELLO, CONFLICT!).

Ending the character arc

For me, this is the trickiest part, and the source of the biggest challenges and revelations I've had in the last couple years. There are two aspects to the end of a character arc: the climax and the rest of the dénouement.

The climax

At the climax of the story, we have to do more than just defeat the external plot forces. **We either have to show that the character has learned his/her lesson and can use it to defeat the bad guy, or force the character to make the BIG choice to change, to take a leap of faith into the U-turn, post-arc state.**

I'll give you an example: in a MS I wrote last year, the heroine's journey was one from disbelief to belief. The external plot had to do with bad guys chasing them and a physical confrontation with a psycho (obviously this is vague, but it'll take too long to explain the rest, you know?).



In the first draft, the hero and heroine work together to defeat the psycho and the bad guys. And that was it.

I knew it wasn't as good as it could have been. **I needed the external and internal plots to hit their high points at the same time.** That balance is HARD. After pondering and brainstorming, I finally found a way to bring those to stories to a head at the same time: I had the psycho challenge the heroine about what she believed, telling her she was foolish to believe in the hero (who is separated from her right then). But despite the imminent danger, she still chooses to believe and throws her lot in with him instead of compromising

The rest of the dénouement

After the climax, it's still important to **show the results of the characters' final choice**, to confirm that change is real and permanent, not just an act of momentary convenience to beat the bad guy at a critical moment.

I really like how Alicia Rasley talks about this, again from her article "[Changes and Choices: External Action and Internal Reaction](#)":

One last tip— readers will believe in the internal change only if they see it manifested on the external level. So we need some last little event that affirms the choice he made to become part of this family [the specific journey in the example]. Maybe the last sight we have of him is surrounded by the kids as they work together move his hut across the stream into the family compound— and Julie helping to set the hut on a new foundation.

We have to show that the character has changed, even if it's a one-line post script. Character arcs are challenging, and sometimes we leave them to chance. But if we execute our character arcs well, they make our fiction fulfilling to our characters—and our readers.

What do you think? How do you write character arcs? What are your favorite character journeys to read?

Photo credits: character arc logo—[Riccardo Romano](#); St. Louis Arch—[Matt](#); starting line—[Jayne and D](#); finish line—[Aaron](#)