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The Five Essential Elements of Storytelling

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Instructional Development Travel Grant Award 2018-19



Introduction

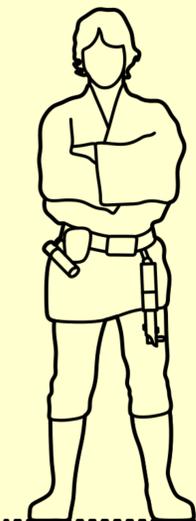
I received an Instructional Development Travel Grant to attend the 33rd Annual **Iowa Summer Writing Festival** for a weeklong workshop, June 23rd through 28th, 2019, offered by **The University of Iowa**, in Iowa City—a UNESCO City of Literature in the Creative Cities Network.

From the catalog:

Iowa City has long been a haven for writers. The rich literary legacy that belongs to this place abides today in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the Nonfiction Writing Program, the Playwrights Workshop, the International Writing Program, the Spanish Creative Writing Program, the Translation Workshop, the undergraduate Major in English and Creative Writing, The Certificate in Writing, the Iowa Young Writers' Studio, The Iowa Youth Writing Project, Between the Lines: The Writing Experience, the Irish Writing Program, the Iowa Center for the Book, The University of Iowa Press, The Iowa Review, and The Examined Life Journal.

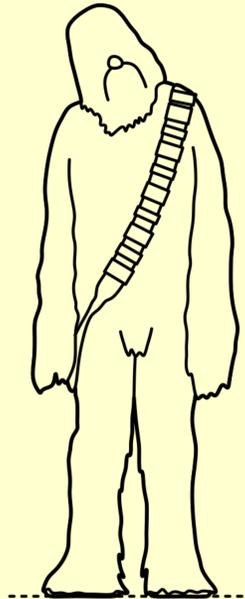
Drawn to this mecca of 125 workshops to choose from, I attended **Five Elements of the Novel**, taught by **Kelly Dwyer, M.F.A.** Each day of workshop was focused on one of the following five essential elements of storytelling — **plot, character, dialogue, point of view, and theme** — with evenings reserved for individual writing to be shared in group the next day. Also explored were practical strategies for creative inspiration and motivation toward the daily practice of writing.

Workshop Methodology



A staple in writing courses, the **writer's workshop model** supports students in taking their writing seriously and viewing themselves as writers. The purpose of the workshop is to generate new writing through exercises which are then shared with the class. Students respond to guided writing prompts, listen while others read their words out loud, and receive immediate peer feedback. Hearing dialogue read aloud by your classmates is key to crafting narrative plausibility. Students fine-tune the ability to both provide and receive constructive criticism within a supportive atmosphere of collaboration.

Five Elements

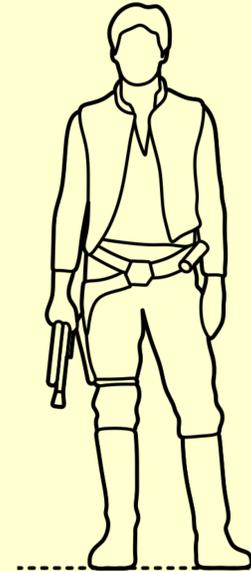


Whether it is a novel, short story, screenplay, stage play, or podcast, all stories benefit from attention to the following five essential elements:

- 1. PLOT**
(What happens?)
- 2. CHARACTER**
(Who are these people?)
- 3. DIALOGUE**
(What do these characters say [or avoid saying] to each other?)
- 4. POINT OF VIEW**
(Who is telling this story?)
- 5. THEME**
(What is the underlying concept or universal insight?)

Aristotle's Poetics

Human beings were relating stories to one another long before Aristotle identified what he believed to be the essential ingredients for a compelling tale. From the oral tradition gathered around the fire, all the way to the Hollywood Blockbuster, the best stories generate audience interest through **conflict** and **resolution**. What is the protagonist's goal? What stands in the way of that goal? What do they stand to lose? An ideal story resolution will cause audience members to experience **catharsis** through emotional identification with the character. This does not, however, automatically require a happy ending.



Impact on Teaching

Students often complain to me about not having any ideas for films. Alternately, they come to class with stars in their eyes and guns blazing, gangsters, vampires, and zombies dancing in their heads. Good writing comes from personal experience, risk taking (vulnerability), and informed practice. Young students may lack experience with the world or fear being seen as different, but they can be taught a writing practice now to build good habits that will prepare them to take creative risks once they are ready.

You have to know the rules before you can break them. Structure provides a starting point, not the final word. Good writing involves allowing yourself to be vulnerable in front of others. By actively engaging in this workshop, I was able to immerse myself in the same type of emotional space that I ask my students to inhabit. I am reinvigorated with practical strategies to engage my students with new ideas for creative prompts and respect for structure.



Three-Act Structure: Beginning, Middle, and End

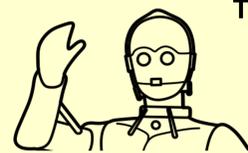
The following aspects of the **PLOT** help the audience reach **CATHARSIS** using **Three-Act Structure**:

The **INCITING INCIDENT** is the event or decision that begins the story.

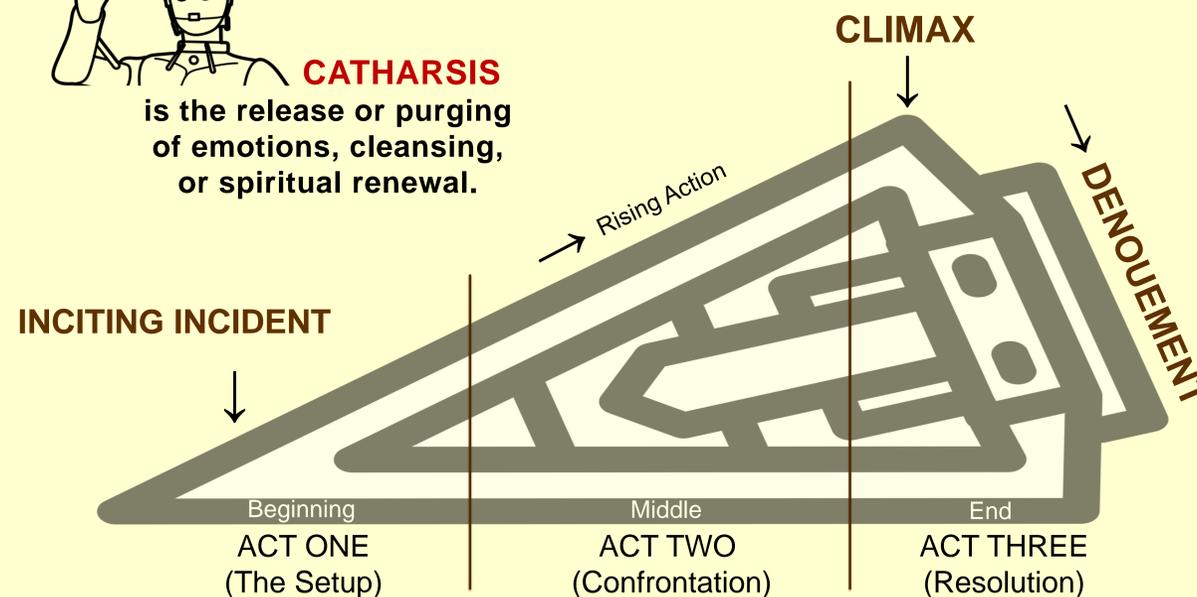
The **CONFLICT** is the struggle of the protagonist against an opposing force.

The **CLIMAX** is the point where the conflict or crisis reaches its highest peak.

The **DENOUEMENT** is the resolution of the story.



CATHARSIS is the release or purging of emotions, cleansing, or spiritual renewal.



Acknowledgements

Iowa Summer Writing Festival at The University of Iowa
<https://iowasummerwritingfestival.org/>

Summer festival faculty member **Kelly Dwyer** is a graduate of **The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop Master of Fine Arts** program, and the author of two novels, *The Tracks of Angels* and *Self-Portrait with Ghosts*, as well as two children's books. Her monologues and short plays have been produced in Madison, Boston, and New York. She is a Senior Lecturer of English at the University of Wisconsin Baraboo/Sauk County, where she teaches courses in English, Creative Writing, and Literary Magazine. <http://www.kellydwyerauthor.com/>

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