

Eschler Editing's Story Structure Handout

"Story"

- **Defined/purpose:** The exploration of how a character transforms due to levels of conflict—and why that transformation matters. Provides a vicarious transformational experience (survival clues) for the reader.
- **Effective Usage:** Must have some sort of movement or progress (Bickham 23); like nonfiction idea exploration.
- **Common Mistakes:** Dragging the reader through episodic events that don't create and build on each other (cause and effect—and logic—should escalate the stakes, tension, and character development).

Prologue

- **Defined/purpose:** To hook the reader with info that is or will be vital to understanding the plot/character and/or wouldn't have enough weight if crammed into backstory flashbacks (also economical way to skip excessive backstory for setup). Can intro future protag (near end of story), or past protag (above), or a different pov (Lital Talmor blog at writing-world.com). In a series, it can bring readers up to speed on current book (Edgerton 22).
- **Effective Usage:** Generally not longer than 4–5 pages/single scene/scene fragments (Bickham 123). Must keep up the momentum with the next chapter, even if it's a big jump back or forward in time.
- **Common Mistakes:** Non-critical section of backstory/setup and/or no-momentum first chapter. Often too long.

Scene

- **Defined/purpose:** Basic building block of the structure of any long story (Bickham 23). To tell a segment of story action which is written moment-by-moment, without summary, and presented onstage in the story "now"; it could be put on the theater stage and acted out (Bickham 23).
- **Effective Usage:** States a goal, develops conflict, and the character fails to reach his goal or finds worse consequences from achieving goal. The interior structure of a scene is devoted to conflict (Bickham 23, 52).
- **Common Mistakes:** Dragging out a single, unchanging conflict over many pages (Bickham 23).

Sequel

- **Defined/purpose:** Flexible structural component; provides all the tools for in-depth characterization, analysis of motivation, and explanation of character planning (Bickham 51). Holds scenes together and helps the reader get from one to the next with deep view into a character's emotional state (Bickham 51).
- **Effective Usage:** Reveals emotion, thought, decision, and action. It is internal and cannot be told moment by moment or acted out on-stage (Bickham 52).
- **Common Mistakes:** Not revealed in the order which human behavior dictates (Bickham 53)/pacing fail.

Chapter

- **Defined/purpose:** Two to four scenes from a character's viewpoint. To keep the reader hooked (Bickham 122).
- **Effective Usage:** Scene-sequel format (Podcast 8.27); used for pacing to slow or speed reader's emotional ride.
- **Common Mistakes:** Chapters not having a purpose in relation to the "story" (Podcast 8.27).

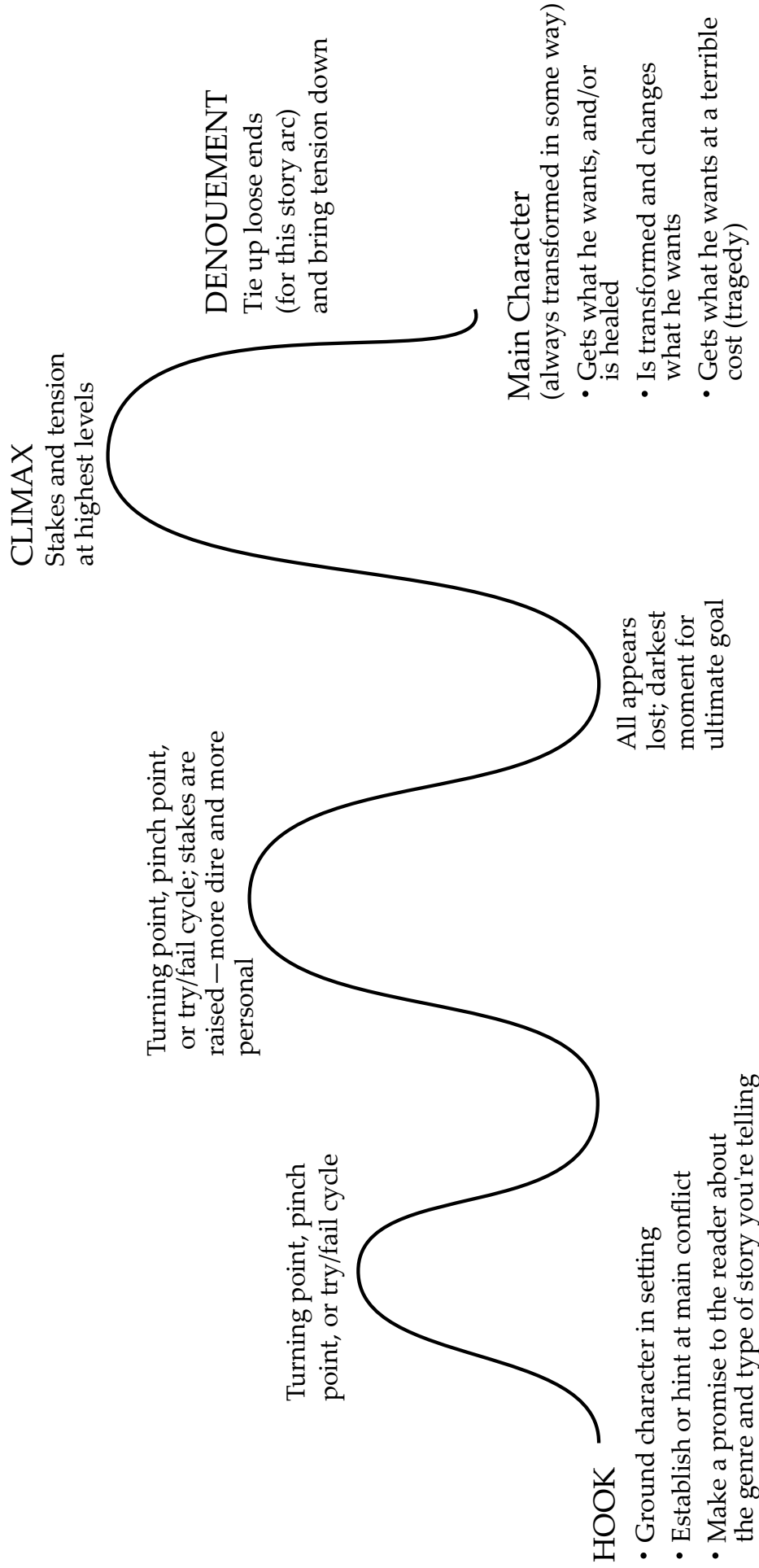
Chapter breaks

- **Defined/purpose:** New chapter to change the feel/purpose/direction of the scene, control pacing, and prompt a reader's emotional response; allows a moment for the reader to have a reaction or keeps them staying tense and wanting to move forward (Podcast 10.32). (Can apply to when you use hard returns/dingbats too.)
- **Effective Usage:** See purpose above; also "White space is mimicking a breathing pattern that happens when someone is excited/the way people speak"; ensure content/break timing deserves emphasis (Podcast 10.32).
- **Common Mistakes:** "Doing it too much . . . [you get] the text version of William Shatner . . ." (Podcast 10.32).

Resources for *your* genre's most effective story structure "recipe" and conventions

- Check out the genre map at Book Country (online). Details on what defines each genre (what conventions readers are generally expecting), what some of the foundational books of the genre are (so you're versed in what to build on and what not to copycat), and you'll get info on most subgenres within each major genre.
- The Writing Excuses podcast; especially Season 11: "elemental" genres. (In notes as "podcast.")
- Bickham's book and others on our suggested-reading list blog: "Recipes for Success." (EschlerEditing.com)

Story themes (what the character learns and why it matters) parallel the physical/external plot and build with it. What the character learns is often the “tool” he/she must employ to get through or conquer at the climax.



These cycles are based on the three-act play; a book's overall momentum will grow as noted, while there may be more cycles than shown.