

Plot Arc Cheat Sheet

Intro/Teaser/Hook

With very, very few exceptions, all works of fiction start out with a hook. Usually it's an entire scene, but sometimes it can be only one or two paragraphs. You need to do several things with a good hook:

- grab your audience's attention
- set the overall mood or tone
- introduce at least one significant concept, character, or event

You also want it to be brief. The next several scenes can provide basic exposition, more detailed explanation of settings, and introduction of the characters. The hook is to get their attention.

Beats: One-scene hook.

Exposition

Establishing all your players and settings. This is where you put your guns out. The next several scenes, paragraphs, chapters, several units of measurement of words depending on how long your work is going to be, all involve setting up where your audience will be spending their next chunk of time, who they'll be spending it with, and what sneaky bastard things might come back to haunt them later. One thing especially to consider: how you establish your main characters. What are they doing? What are they saying? How do they feel? This is a good place to set the describe-in-single-words tone for your main characters.

Beats: Minimum one establishing scene per character.

Rising Action

Raise the stakes. Take things away. Add things to complicate matters. This is the biggest portion of the work, encompassing half again to two times as many scenes, paragraphs, chapters, etc, as your exposition. This is basically where most of the plot happens.

Beats: One to two scenes (or paragraphs, in a short work) roughly one and two thirds of the way through the work where the tension is highest.

Climax

The payoff. First the showdown, then the cleanup. Wrap up all your lines. Tie them off. Leave your reader satisfied. Sexual innuendo optional, depending on your genre. This will be as long as to twice as long as the intro, depending on how many lines and subplots you've introduced. And do make sure that everything has been wrapped up, whether on or offscreen.

Beat: This is not the final scene! This is the peak and then resolution of tension.

Trailer/Stinger

Some works will have this, but not all of them. This is usually just one final scene to show that it's not quite as closed off as everyone thinks, to show the fate of a side character usually in a humorous fashion, one last little tidbit. The literary equivalent of the doorknob question, where someone has their hand on the doorknob and the other person says "Actually, I do have one question..."

Beats: One to three scenes of wrapping all main plot threads and most secondary threads up. Wrapping up can also be implied for secondary threads, but must be explicit for primary. Then the Stinger/Trailer.