

**“The Play’s The Thing.....”**



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**Participant Notes**

**Podcast Three:**

**The Seven Key Elements of Narrative**

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## Welcome

This podcast is the third in a series on the key elements of playwriting.

## The Learning Aids

Each podcast has a brief handout that goes with it which will make it easier for you to follow along with the content. This is that handout.

There is a series of handouts, one for each learning topic. These handouts list key points on the topic and might make it easier to follow along with the podcast, particularly for the visual learner. You may wish to download and print out the handout, particularly if you are going to be listening to the podcast in a location which allows you to follow along with some simple notes. The podcast will still be useful without the handout, so if you can't print it out, don't worry about it. Occasional references to specific page numbers will be made in the podcast for clarity. The handouts include some follow-up assignments which are designed to deepen your understanding of the topic. Those assignments will also be discussed in the podcast.

## Who Am I? (Andrew Black, Playwright and Learning Host)

Andrew Black wrote his first play, a romantic comedy, with a collaborator, Patricia Milton, in 2001. That play (a romantic comedy called *Porn Yesterday*) was a finalist in a national playwriting contest in 2002 and was produced for the first time in 2003. *Porn* has now been produced across the country. Andrew and Patricia collaborated on three more plays, and then Andrew began to write on his own. Eventually, he received an MFA in playwriting in 2012, from Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. Now a resident of Indianapolis, he teaches at the Indiana Writers Center there. His plays are produced throughout the United States. Andrew also has a degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. He feels that his background in instructional design and his artistic talent qualify him in a unique way to teach playwriting. For more info, visit [www.andrewblackplaywright.com](http://www.andrewblackplaywright.com)

## Play Submissions Helper (Series Sponsor)



PSH is a community of more than 1700 playwrights. The goal is to help playwrights realize their dream of getting a play produced by saving them hours of time searching for theaters to submit their work to. For just \$6.99/month, PSH provides a compendium of hundreds of theaters that are accepting play submissions. It's the perfect system for a busy playwright who wants to focus on the craft of writing. Sign up now by going to [playsubmissionshelper.com](http://playsubmissionshelper.com)!

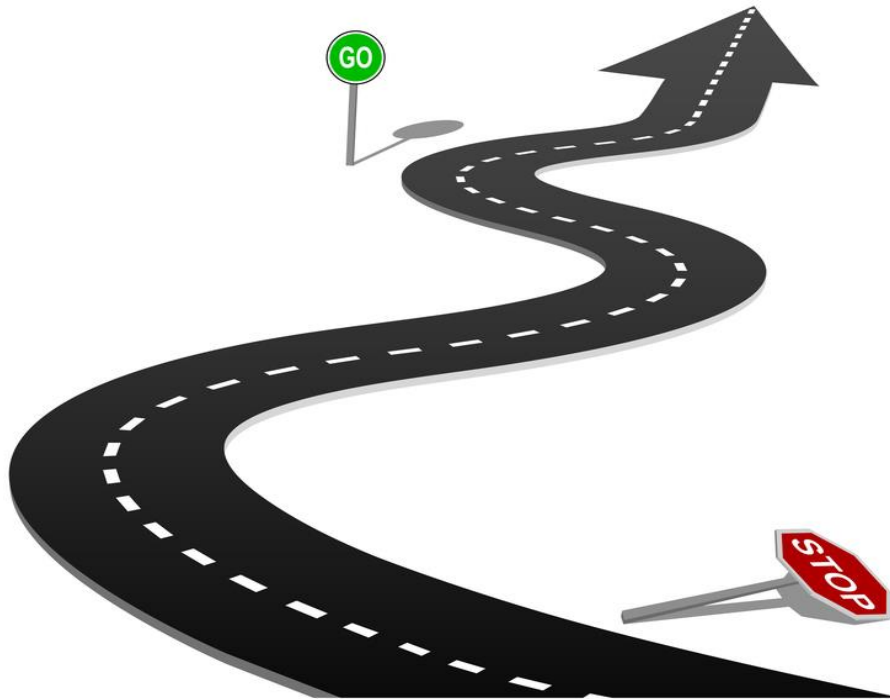
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## Podcast Three Agenda

- Welcome/Start-Up's
- The handout
- Who am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)
- Seven Key Elements of Narrative
  - How Do I Use These Seven Key Elements?
  - One, The Protagonist
  - Two, The Major Dramatic Question / The Goal
  - Three/Four, Old World Order / New World Order
  - Five, Inciting Incident
  - Six, Rising Action / Complications / Plot
  - Seven, Crisis / Perception Shift / Climax
- Your assignments

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## Seven Key Elements of Narrative

### How Do I Use these Seven Key Elements?

People have been telling stories for some time now. If story telling is considered an “art form”, it is probably one of the oldest. Since the story telling form has been around for a while, there have developed certain key “best practices” for the form. Story tellers who want to tell an effective story don’t have to “re-invent the wheel”. Seven key elements of effective story telling structure (best practices) are listed here.

These key elements apply to all kinds of narrative (movies, novels, short stories, narrative poems, etc.) They have particular power when applied to playwriting.

There are no requirements or rules for art (or playwriting), so writers are free to pick and choose from among these elements as they see fit. A writer may choose not to apply these elements for the purposes of writing a specific play. The writer may decide not to use them as an experiment to see what happens. However, if a writer doesn’t use them because he/she doesn’t know they exist or because he/she doesn’t know how to apply them, then that writer still has a few things to learn.

Charles Smith, Professor of Playwriting at Ohio University, says that talent in playwriting is a combination of structure and voice. Voice is the unique way the writer thinks about and expresses opinions about the world. Some voices are more compelling than

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others; each has its own set of characteristics. Effective voice is hard (if not impossible) to teach. Structure, on the other, hand can be learned.

## **Element One: Protagonist**

A protagonist is the main character (the central or primary personal figure) of a literary, theatrical, cinematic, or musical narrative. This character is the one around whom the events of the narrative's plot revolve and with whom the audience is intended to share the most empathy.

An effective play lulls the audience member into a kind of dream state. When done well, the audience will literally forget that it is in a theater and have an out-of-body experience of being anywhere: From the Salem Witch Trials to the country of Denmark in the late middle ages to small town River City, Iowa, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The protagonist is the character through whose consciousness the audience member enters the dream world of the play. If the play has a strong protagonist whose point of view is built and maintained over the course of the narrative, the play can have this hypnotic effect on the audience.

Typical characteristics of the protagonist:

- The character who drives the action of the play.
- The character who has the strongest want or need; the character who has a goal.
- The character who makes the final key decision of the play or narrative.
- The character is often a fish out of water.
- The ending of the play is driven by something we learn from this character and involves a conclusion the audience can come to about this character and the character's path.
- The character the play begins and ends with.
- The character who must deal with conflicts in the pursuit of his/her goal.

## **Element Two: The Major Dramatic Question / The Goal**

The audience is typically engaged in the play when the playwright creates dramatic questions that the audience must struggle to answer. People are drawn to questions. Questions engage the human mind.

The overarching question of any effective narrative is almost always: How will (the protagonist) find peace of mind? Something (usually the inciting incident) has disarranged the peace of mind of the hero, and he/she/it is on a quest to restore balance and / or peace of mind. Will he or she be successful in finding that balance?

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A strong protagonist needs something to achieve peace of mind. That thing becomes the protagonist’s goal. And thus, the dramatic question of the narrative becomes: Will the protagonist achieve that goal (which is intended to restore balance and provide peace of mind)?

In theatrical narrative, the goal usually has two elements. There is a tactical question (i.e., will Dorothy ever get back to Kansas?) and a thematic question (i.e., will Dorothy ever find a place where she feels loved and cared for?).

Assuming that the protagonist, has a goal which is the focus of the major dramatic question, there are some typical characteristics of strong major dramatic questions:

- The major dramatic question will usually be associated with the protagonist. (Will Dorothy ever get back to Kansas?)
- MDQ’s usually have one of three answers: Yes, no, we will never know.
- Most (if not all) of the images in the play should contribute to the major dramatic question. The MDQ has a unifying effect.
- The dramatic question could usually be expressed along the lines of: will the protagonist achieve his or her goal? This statement assumes that the protagonist has some goal which can serve as the MDQ.
- Effective theatrical goals are positive. The protagonist is trying to make something happen, or to get something, or to do something. Keeping something from happening or keeping things the way they are, are not powerful goals. They are passive, not active.

To a certain extent, the MDQ provides a roadmap for the audience, letting them know what they are waiting for, when the play will be over, and when they get to get up and go home. As a result, the MDQ has to be answered at the right time. Sometimes the MDQ is answered too early, and the rest of the play seems anticlimactic.

Sometimes the MDQ will be answered earlier in the play, but it will introduce another, more compelling MDQ to take its place. In this case, there may be sequential MDQ’s. And usually the multiple MDQ’s are tied together by a common thematic idea.

Finally, the answer to the MDQ is most powerfully represented by an on-stage manifestation: An object or an action which represents the achievement of the goal. In Hamlet, the question is: Will Hamlet avenge his father’s death by killing Claudius? The MDQ is answered when, in fact, we see Hamlet kill Claudius in front of us. If the answer to the MDQ can be represented by a tangible act (a kiss, winning an award, hanging a stethoscope on the wall of a new clinic), then that MDQ has been powerfully represented in the script. It is theatrical, visual, and it makes it really easy for the audience to know if/how the MDQ was answered.

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## **Elements Three and Four: Old World Order / New World Order**

Sometimes called “stasis,” the old world order defines the world before the occurrence of the intrusion or inciting incident (more below). Plays typically begin with exposition. Exposition is dialogue, description, information, etc., that gives the audience the background of the characters and the present situation (or old world order). This information contains clues about the old world order. It answers the questions: What is the world of the play like? What kind of play is the audience watching? The old world order often establishes the “rules” of the play.

The new world order establishes what the world of the play is like after the major dramatic question has been answered. The new world order appears after the crisis (more below) has been resolved. The difference between the old world order and the new world order offers information about the theme of the play.

The new world order is usually compared/contrasted with the old world order. The new world order may look radically different than the old world order. The old world order may look the same as the old world order, but the events of the play have caused the audience’s perception of that old world order to be different.

## **Element Five: Inciting Incident**

Also called an intrusion, the inciting (or initiating) incident usually kicks off the action of the play. It is an event which does several things:

- Disturbs the protagonist’s piece of mind
- Causes the protagonist to take action toward a goal
- Causes the audience to ask a question, tactical or thematic (or both) ...will the hero reach the goal?
- Violates the old world order.
- Answers the question: why here, why now? Why is today different than any other day that the plot should start at this point?
- In a full-length play, the inciting incident should have happened by page 10; in a ten-minute play on the first page (or close to it).

The intrusion is usually quite exciting, and if we don’t see it on stage, the playwright should have a very good reason for leaving it out of the play.

## **Element Six: Rising Action/Complications/Plot/Crisis**

Rising action is series of questions/actions that lead from the original dramatic question. All these questions are usually related to the major dramatic question. Typically, a series of events takes place during which the protagonist is getting closer or further from

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his/her goal. As the play progresses, the complications which could prevent the protagonist from achieving his/her goal become more serious, and the stakes for the protagonist get higher. One way to think about it (courtesy of *The Little Dog Laughed*): in the first act, the protagonist gets into a tree; in the second act, people begin to throw rocks at the protagonist while he is in the tree; in the third act, the protagonist gets out of the tree.

*Crisis* occurs right before the dramatic question is resolved. Before the protagonist gets to the resolution of the MDQ, the protagonist hits the biggest obstacle of all. The audience should feel that it is going to be impossible for the protagonist to achieve his/her goal. The crisis usually occurs  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through the play. When a good crisis happens, things can never go back to the way they were before. In the course of the crisis, the protagonist often faces his greatest fear.

## **Element Seven: Resolving the Dramatic Question in a Way that Satisfies/The Perception Shift/Climax**

The perception shift is the realization of the ultimate reality of the play. A perception shift creates a satisfying answer to the major dramatic question for the audience. Ideally, at the end of the play, as the result of the major dramatic question, the audience perceives a new idea, a different idea, yet somehow an idea that has always existed throughout. This new idea represents a “perception shift.” This ultimate reality is what the play is about. The ultimate reality should always be present in some way at the beginning of the story.

When the audience arrives at the apparent new place, they should say “this is the only possible answer.” It is a *perceived* change, not an actual change.

The playwright has during the course of the play created a conflict between what appears to be and what actually is. The resolution of that conflict should satisfy. Now I see. Now I see. The resolution should be both surprising and inevitable. Perception shifts can be big or small.



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## Your Assignments



*Food for thought.*

You may wish to get a “Playwright’s Journal” if you don’t already have one.

1. In your playwright’s journal, name your favorite play or musical. See if you can identify the key elements of structure. Who is the protagonist? What is the Major Dramatic Question (MDQ)? What is the protagonist’s goal? Is there an on-stage manifestation of that goal? What is it?

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2. In your favorite play or musical, how is the world (as experienced by the protagonist) different at the beginning and end of the narrative? What does that tell you about the theme?

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## Your Assignments (Continued)

3. What are the complications the protagonist experiences in pursuit of his / her goal? What is the crisis (the worst complication of all)? How does the MDQ resolve? Does the protagonist achieve his / her goal or not? What does this tell us about the theme of the play?



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4. Take a play that YOU are working on and see if you can answer the questions about structure with respect to your play.

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