

Daniel Hall Presents



Episode 120

## How to Pre-Structure Your Novel So You Finish It Fast

with Steve Alcorn

Welcome to this episode of the Real Fast Results podcast! Today's episode is going to be especially helpful for you if you are a fiction writer or aspiring to be one. Steve Alcorn is one of the contributing authors to [Write and Grow Rich](#). By the way, that book is currently being promoted, and you can get it for just \$0.99 if you move fast. There are a number of bonuses being offered with it for those who get it early as well. You can find out more about this at [RealFastResults.com/wagr](http://RealFastResults.com/wagr).

Steve is an expert author who helps other aspiring authors and independent publishers to reach their goals. In fact, he has been able to help more than 30,000 aspiring authors throughout his career. He's also the CEO of Alcorn McBride Inc., which is a company that designs products used in nearly all of the world's theme parks. In addition to that, he is the author of many books spanning many genres including historical fiction, romance, young adult novels and many non-fiction titles as well. Please welcome Steve to the show...

### Promise: How to Structure Your Book

Well, I hope that you will take away the idea that structuring and coming up with a plan before starting to write a novel or a short story, or any kind of fictional work, will save you a tremendous amount of time later on. **I'll show you the specific techniques for structuring so that before you even start writing, you will guarantee that you are going to finish.** So, no more writer's block, and no more getting stuck. You are going to learn the key to having a firm structure in place for writing fiction too.

Well, I think that any of us who have tried to write fiction have encountered a problem in which we get very excited about an idea, and the idea may be based upon a character, it might be based upon a setting, or it might be a plot idea about something that happens. We sit down and start furiously writing, and then we write the length of a chapter, maybe, and things start to get a little fuzzy. We aren't quite sure where to go, and we start to get a little bit lost.

Even if we plow on, and we call ourselves "pantsers," the term is, when we write by the seat of our pants, and even if we manage to get all of the way to the end of that novel, then we have to go back and look at what we've done. And, it's kind of a mess. We really can't figure out what we are trying to say in it. It doesn't all make sense, and we start editing, and the editing process goes through 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 drafts, and sometimes it seems like we are just not really approaching that goal. We aren't really getting closer to what that goal was, of coming up with a really cohesive novel.

**So, the techniques that I teach in my classes at Writing Academy all come down to having a structure in place before you start.** Now, back when we were in school, we probably all were in some class or another where they talked about the Greek 3-Act Structure, and it's true that most Greek plays were structured in three acts. About that point in the lesson, most of us probably found our eyes, kind of, glazing over because Greek tragedies or comedies from 2,000 or 3,000 years ago don't really rivet our imaginations anymore.

It doesn't really seem like these techniques are particularly applicable, but it turns out that there really aren't that many different types of stories that can be told, and the Greeks, kind of, did have a fundamental handle on this. **The problem is that describing how something is divided into three acts is a little bit vague.** So, we are left with the problem that, although we know that there should be a beginning, a middle, and an end... Maybe we even remember that there should be rising action throughout the first couple of acts that builds up to some sort of a climax, then there's a release of tension at the end that the Greeks called catharsis, where we feel like something has been resolved.

That's all so vague that it doesn't really help us when we are sitting down and we're trying to type that first page of our manuscript. It doesn't guarantee that we're going to get where we are going on a nice, smooth journey. So, what I've done at Writing Academy is come up with a technique where we start by defining the dramatic elements that we want to come across in our work, and then, instead of having this amorphous blob of three acts we're supposed to fill in, I've actually divided each of the acts into nine easy-to-understand checkpoints. If you write to make your story pass through each of those nine checkpoints, you'll discover that almost magically, it has, kind of, written itself.

**So, by combining these techniques of starting with dramatic elements, and then writing to these checkpoints, we pretty much guarantee success.** The amazing thing is that if you take and look at any modern media (successful movies, successful books, successful television shows) if they really affected you, if they really worked, if they clicked, you'll discover that you can find all of these elements in good fiction. So, they are there, even if the people who created these works were consciously writing to my system. To help the rest of us, who are trying to

figure out the formula, if you will, create something that is not formulaic, but is easy to write and doesn't require a lot of editing later on.

## How to Structure Your Book: Elements

There are three checkpoints in each act, and there are nine overall. Before getting into the checkpoints, let's get into the dramatic elements. Maybe we can create a story right now. **The very first element I want to cover is passion.** This can be just about anything. It's just a reason why you want to tell this particular story. It could be something as simple as, "Hey, I want to publish a book and make a lot of money." Maybe you are an environmentalist that feels very strongly about the environment, or it might be that you like adventure stories, and you want to write something that's exciting. Just come up with a passion that's within you of why you'd like to tell a particular fictional story.

Let's say that you liked to read stories about "Redemption". That's what the host of the show, Daniel Hall, told me when I posed this question to him. I told him that he had actually created the first two elements. His passion was that he loved stories about redemption, and the next element is the theme. "You've already identified that the theme of this work is going to be redemption." I said. That brought us to the third element. This one is surprising because this one is a flaw because in order to tell a story, we are going to have to talk about the journey of a particular character.

**I'm going to say two words from now on that a lot of us think are the same words. They are "plot and story".** They are actually different words, and here's how I am going to define the two of them: **The plot is going to be everything physical that happens, and the story is going to be the emotional journey that the protagonist takes to get to the end of that plot.** So, "plot" is physical, and "story" is emotional. In working out these dramatic elements, we are going to need a character, and that character is going to need a flaw.

**It's the moment that the character overcomes the flaw that is going to create that theme.** Since the theme is redemption, you'll have to come up with a flaw that the character must overcome for us to realize the value of redemption. I would suggest that, perhaps the flaw that would work best in this case, is to create a character who cannot face his past. If he has to finally face his past, that's what will allow him to find redemption.

Just to mention a few other flaws that we could have used, but would have resulted in some different themes. **The most common flaw is probably "lack of self-confidence".** If you look at movies and television shows, there's usually a character that doesn't think that they can do something, having to finally rise to the occasion. That's a common one. Lack of self-worth is similar, but related. "Inability to put the past behind," is another one. It's kind of related to the one we are going to use. Stubbornness is a common one. Prejudice is a good one. So, there are a lot of different flaws, but they all produce different themes.

For our theme, of redemption, we are going to have a flaw of "inability to face the past." **Now, the fourth dramatic element that we are going to put together is the premise.** The premise is

a very generalized statement that establishes that we have a character that has this flaw, and he has to overcome it in order to succeed. What if a character that cannot face the past encounters a problem and must face the past in order to solve it. That's going to be the premise of your story. When you get to the end of that story, you are going to reflect that theme of redemption because of what the character has done.

At this point in my explanation, I asked Daniel what he felt the character should overcome. He answered, "An abusive childhood." I wanted to be more specific with the premise, so let's say, "What if a character who could not face his abusive past encounters a problem? Let's say he has to take care of a parent who was abusive to him." In order to actually do something good for his parent, he's going to have to face the past and come to some sort of internal and external agreement with the parent, in order to resolve that.

Just from scratch, with the barest idea of redemption and using these four dramatic elements, we've kind of created this framework for our story, already. That puts us into a spot where we can now start building our nine checkpoints. It kind of gives us a skeleton.

## How to Structure Your Book: Nine Checkpoints

**Now, what we are going to do is fill in the next level of that skeleton, which will be the nine checkpoints that reflect that overall premise that we've created.**

### Act 1

Let's start with Act 1. In Act 1, we have three checkpoints. **The first one is the hook.** It's pretty obvious what this needs to do, just from the name of it. You need to hook your readers because if you can't get them past the first sentence, the first paragraph, and the first page, then they are not your readers. The job of the hook is typically just to dump us into the middle of some interesting action.

Thinking back to what our premise is about, we have to think about where the story would start. For dramatic tension to be really high, we want the story to happen over a pretty short period of time. There might be a whole bunch of backstory and things that have happened before that would need to be filled in, but we don't want to start with this character being born and describe their abused childhood. Instead, we want to start with some inciting moment that's, sort of, "in the now," and causes the sequence of events that are going to transpire over days, or weeks, or even months.

Maybe the character receives a letter, or a phone call, or some information that their parent is broke, dying, and in need of care. That would be the inciting moment. This person, who had abused the character in the past, is suddenly in need of help, and the main character doesn't even want to face the past or admit it to himself. Once you've done that... By the way, this can be pretty short. It might take a paragraph, it might take a page, it might take a chapter, but probably

no longer. **Once we've done that, the next part is going to be the section that's called "the backstory".**

A lot of the time, this is literally backstory. We could flashback and have memories of that character being abused and all of the reasons why they don't have the slightest interest in helping this person who abused them in the past. Sometimes the backstory just carries us forward in the story, and we might learn little tidbits of the actual backstory through conversations that the character has, or thoughts the character has through the first couple of acts. We could often just move forward with the story and kind of try to learn what's going on based upon their reactions.

So maybe the character just carries on, ignoring the phone calls, going to work, ignoring the advice of their fiancé, or their other friends, or whatever. That would be the backstory. We start to learn who this character is. We start to suspect that the character has something in the past that they don't want to face, but we aren't sure quite yet. It's just getting us involved in the character's life and moving us forward. So far, they are just putting aside this inciting incident and avoiding it. That brings us to the third element in that first act. **The third element is the trigger.**

The trigger is the specific event that is really going to throw the character into crisis. By crisis, what I mean is that the character is going to be overcome by his flaw. It means that he's now going to be faced with the fact that the past isn't going to go away, and he's really not ready to face it yet, but it's trying to face him. So, the way that we do that is that we have to force him onto some sort of a journey that he doesn't want to go on. We need to come up with some sort of circumstance, so that something is now forcing him to go back to his hometown, back where he grew up, whether he wants to or not. But, he still not willing to take responsibility or to face the past.

Maybe he's a reporter and he gets an assignment that forces him to go to that town, but maybe that's too much of a coincidence. Maybe he finds out that something really horrible is going to happen to somebody that he does care about, if he doesn't go back to his hometown and take care of it. That's logically related to the inciting incident, but doesn't yet reflect that he's changing. Whatever that trigger is, now he's really being put in close proximity with that past that he doesn't want to face because he has to go back to where he came from.

## Act 2

**This moves us into Act 2, which begins with this moment of crisis that he is in.** This crisis is an internal moment. This is our first checkpoint in Act 2, but we are now getting into the idea that these checkpoints are not necessarily the same length. We said that the hook might be a chapter long, or something, but then the backstory could have been a lot of material where he was living his everyday life. Then, we said that the trigger was just a moment, or just a thing that happened to him that forced him to go back where he came from. And, we've said the crisis is an internal moment, where he is overcome by that flaw.

So, those two were very short, but now this puts us in the long middle section of Act 2. **In almost all books, movies, and television shows, that section, which is called, "The Struggle,"**

**is by far the longest.** Sometimes it's more than half of the entire work. It's a whole bunch of plot. It's all the things that happen, which we fortunately don't need to work out today. They are all the things that happen now that the character is back in his hometown, and he's struggling with whatever the situation is that he's there to handle while he is refusing to face the past and deal with whatever that parent did to him all that time ago. Finally, after all of that struggling has happened, the fictional tension has risen to a fever pitch.

Throughout this long struggle, there keep being more and more setbacks as a result of the fact that he refuses to face that flaw of his, and so the tension just keeps ratcheting up, and up, and up. Occasionally, it will drop down for him to react, and to give your readers and listeners a little bit of a break, but for the most part, it just keeps getting more and more tense, until we reach what's called a black moment that ends the struggle. That black moment is when it seems like things can't possibly get any worse. This is the thing that finally tips the character into having an epiphany. **The epiphany is the third checkpoint in the second act.**

**The epiphany should be a brief internal moment, and in its simplest form, it is simply the fact that the character realizes, "Wow, I have this flaw, and I need to change."** So, in this case, the character realizes, "Wow, I have been unable to face the past, and I need to change." That is actually the most important moment in the whole story. It might not be the most important plot point, but in the story, which is his internal, emotional journey, that is the moment where your theme arises. **That's the moment where readers go, "Aha! I get it! This story is about redemption. This is about this character changing, redeeming himself, and deciding that he really needs to face the past." That takes us to Act 3.**

## Act 3

Now, in Act 3, we again have three checkpoints. **The first checkpoint is called, "The Plan," and this is where the character finally becomes an active character and starts being able to try to solve his problems.** He can do that now because he has changed. The plan might not work. His first plan might not work. He might have to make multiple plans. It might be that none of the plans exactly work, but at least he's making plans. He's trying, so there's a lot of plot happening here. **So, the plan section could be long, or it could be short.** It depends.

I've even seen works where the plan is just one idea, one sentence, or one thought that he has to make, which immediately leads us to the next checkpoints. Other times, like in an adventure story, or a police procedural, the plan might be very long, or complex, or very convoluted. It depends upon how you want to write your story, because as I said before, these checkpoints are not formulaic. They don't prescribe what you have to write, they just give you some guidelines to write to.

After the plan, this finally will get him to, "The Climax". **The Climax is the second checkpoint in Act 3.** It's the most exciting plot point, and it's typically the point where the main character, your protagonist, defeats the main character who is opposing him, or the antagonist. We haven't talked about the antagonist in this because we don't have time to fully develop all of the range of characters and other details in your particular story, but in general, the antagonist has been an opposing force who has been responsible for a lot of the conflict that has occurred throughout the

story up to this point. So, it's easy to imagine in this idea that we have just come up with that the antagonist would be the parent who was abusive.

Typically, in the crisis, there would be a confrontation between the two of them, and the antagonist would be defeated, in some fashion. Now, that defeat could be major, depending on the dramatic weight of your story, or it could be minor, or we could even rehabilitate them. For example, in your story, there parent could now confess to those wrong actions, break down, or even reconcile. There are all sorts of things that could happen in that climax, depending upon what other themes you want to express from your storytelling. So, that's open. It's all up to you what happens.

Then, finally, that brings us to the third element in our Act 3. **That third element is simply, "The Ending"**. This is typically a relatively short part of your work because all of the dramatic tension has just, kind of, evaporated now, as a result of everything that has gone on before. Now we just wrap up some loose ends. **We don't even tie up every single loose, necessarily, but we give listeners, or readers, or viewers an idea of how things are going to go forward from this point on.** It should be enough to at least satisfy them. The conclusion is satisfying, and they've reached that cathartic moment, as the Greeks called it, and it has been a satisfying story.

That's storytelling for dramatic elements and nine checkpoints, for an idea that we just summoned up from outer space. **It's exciting because, when you look at the works that are out there, they almost all fit into that pattern.** Because of the freedom, you can create all kinds of subplots, and it can be about almost anything. If you look at something simple, like Star Wars, and Luke's problem is... Well, let's work backwards? What's the moment of epiphany in Star Wars? It's when Luke pushes the visor aside because he has decided to use the Force. So, it's when he had that self-confidence in his ability to use the Force and to use his own skills in order to do something that the computer tracking hasn't been able to do.

When you work backward from that moment of epiphany to build the rest of the story, you realize, "Okay, Luke's flaw must be lack of self-confidence." The hook is when the aunt and uncle's village was destroyed. The trigger is when he is pursued by storm troopers and so on, which causes him to be overcome by his lack of self-confidence. The struggle is this long, drawn-out battle and all of the things that happen in-between, with Obi-Wan Kenobi being killed and so on.

Then, his plan is simply that one sentence, I mentioned, to push the visor aside, and then the climax is that he is able to drop the bomb into The Death Star, and it blows up. Then the ending is the victory march at the end. It just fits right into the template, as does just about everything else that you can name.

## **Will This Apply to All Fiction-Based Works?**

Yes, it applies mostly to things that work really well, ironically. There are different styles of storytelling that have existed in the past. Now it's kind of rough reading 19<sup>th</sup> Century novels, which don't necessarily follow this. If you have something that has zillions of characters in it,

like *Game of Thrones*, for example, it's very difficult to figure out what the story is. That's if you use my definition of "story," which is a character's emotional journey.

Who is *Game of Thrones* about? We don't really know. So, there's a lot of plot there, but it's very hard to identify a person who changes and makes that journey, that emotional journey, through very much of *Game of Thrones*, for example. **So, it doesn't always work, but typically, if you go and see a 2-hour movie, you are going to find this structure. It's particularly true in animated films because they are very well-structured.** Hundreds of people work on animated films, and they spend years putting them together, so they want to make sure that they have something that really works, both emotionally and plot-wise. I would dare you to find an animated film that doesn't fit perfectly into this structure.

Certainly, you can't say that all animated films are alike. They are very, very different from one another, and yet, there's that core of having a main character who needs to change in order to accomplish something. That's what makes most animated films just so darn satisfying. You can take anything from *The Wizard of Oz* to even a lot of action movies, as long as the character, who is the main character, is not perfect. As soon as you get to an action movie where the main character is perfect from the start, then there's no story because they didn't have to change. All they had to do was a bunch of plot things in order to succeed.

So, this doesn't work for some action movies, but a great action movie like *The Fifth Element*, or *Die Hard*, or something like that... I named a couple of Bruce Willis movies, but he is a character that changes in both of those movies. So, when you find a good action movie, you are typically finding a main character who has a lot of baggage, and they have to get over it in order to accomplish what they want to do. I would describe Bruce's character in both of those movies as someone who has a lot of baggage, and that baggage is reflective of the flaw that the story is built around.

**As long as you can find the flaw in the character, you can pretty much unspool and find these nine checkpoints.** Now, in the Writing Academy classes, we go into much, much more detail than we've just hit here, and those nine checkpoints get spun out into scene lists. You'll end up with, maybe, 50 scenes that you're going to hit those scene markers that you go through before you ever put a word down on paper. This also saves a lot of time. You're also going to know a lot about all of your other characters that we ignored in this. You are going to know how the setting interacts with it. You are going to work out the types of dialogue with the different characters that you use.

All of these things, you are going to have an idea of before you start writing. **What's amazing, though, is that it only takes a few days of planning like this to save yourself a few months of work, and re-writes, and dead ends, and so on.** If you've never seen anything like this before, that's because it's original to Writing Academy. Beyond the three-act structure, which everybody knows, the concept of the checkpoints, and the concept of the underlying dramatic elements, is something that we've developed over the last 20 years or so.

It started from a seed from the screenwriter, Doran William Cannon, who was my writing mentor. He wrote parts of the screenplay for *The Godfather*, among other things. **He really led**

**me into this system, and we've worked on perfecting it for all these years, to the point where it really guarantees results.** As mentioned before, I've had about 30,000 students now to go through my writing classes and get personal feedback from me on their stories.

I've got bookshelves that are lined with hundreds of books that have been published by those students. That's a measure of the success of this approach. Many of them are traditionally published, and many more are self-published. A lot of them have really sold well as a result of knowing right where they were going to go before they sat down and started writing. You can go check out Writing Academy at <http://www.RealFastResults.com/writingacademy>.

## Final Tips

Since we've focused on structure, I'd like to readdress an issue that many of my students have when they first see this technique. **I am often asked, "Isn't this going to seem too formulaic when I follow all of these checkpoints? Aren't they going to be glaringly obvious?"** The answer is simply "no." It won't be, and that's because the structure isn't glaringly obvious. Structure is something that we have to work hard to create in advance of writing, but then, when we actually do the writing, it's all the plot details, the textures, the setting, the dialogue, and all of those other little details that readers are actually going to see. Unless you stop, and sit, and analyze the structure, you don't see it.

That's why one of the things that we do in nearly all of our classes is to start by asking the students to pick a favorite movie or book, tell us about it, and frame that book with those nine checkpoints to see if we can find them. They see if they can find that character's flaw, and if they can, they will come away convinced that it's not a formula.

It's just a guideline that's going to help them to write creatively because when they read that favorite book or watched that favorite movie, they didn't think, "Oh wow, this is formulaic!" They became involved in what was really there. So, that's the single most-common question, I think that I get. By the end of the classes, I think that all of my students agree that what they've come up with is a unique and exciting plot that they are interested to work on and fill in the details.

## How Quickly Could I Produce a Good Work Using This System?

Well, there's a very good way to find out, and it's called [National Novel Writing Month \(Nanowrimo.org\)](http://NationalNovelWritingMonth.org). Every year, they challenge people to sign up on that site and write a complete novel during the month of November. I have many students who do that, and the challenge is to upload your words every day. They don't actually read the words on the site, but they count the words.

You're working towards a goal, and that is to write 50,000 words in November. Probably a third of my students have participated and "won," as they call it. This means that it's very possible to write 50,000 words in a month. The question is whether those words will be disorganized gibberish that you'll spend months re-editing, or will they be a finished novel? So, the secret is to use these checkpoints to structure, and create your scene list in advance. Then do the Nanowrimo.org challenge.

You can do it during [National Novel Writing Month](#), or you can do it on your own. But, you can easily write 50,000 words in a month, just by setting aside 1 ½ - 2 hours a day. Stick with it by having a regular writing time every day, and you can easily accomplish that goal. If you've spent a couple of weeks in advance, following the techniques taught in the Writing Academy classes, then you will be close to done when you finish with your challenge because you won't have to spend another month on Draft #2. You'll just need to polish what you have, and then you can publish it.

## Resources

[Writing Academy](#)

[Write and Grow Rich](#)

[National Novel Writing Month](#)

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