

More Storytellers Should Know About This (Free) Resource

It offers detailed narrative X-rays for books, movies, and TV



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One way to level up as a storyteller or [writer](#) is by teaching yourself to be a narrative plumber. It starts by being [more active while you read](#). Dog-ear or highlight when something you read strikes you, then try to understand why. Is it just

the language or did the pacing speed up? Maybe a punchy quote worked as a surprise kicker after a long description? Did the author play with your expectations in a skillful way? Underlying all these types of inquiries is one operative question: "What is the writer doing here?"

Storytelling is a craft, and many elements of it can be studied. With that in mind, I'm often surprised more people haven't heard of a free wiki called [TV Tropes](#). (It's not just about TV). The site collects frequent tropes used in storytelling, explains how they work, and then lists endless examples in books, movies, and other media.

"Everything is a version of something else."

— *Patrick Marber, Closer*

It's valuable to know about tropes so you can wield them more consciously in your own work. As the website mentions, [tropes are not bad](#). [Tropes are tools](#). Sometimes, a trope can help you solve a narrative puzzle. Look at the hilariously-named "[Death of the Hypotenuse](#)," for example, as a way to handle love triangles.

Other times, it could be compelling to set up what seems like a trope the reader will recognize but then subvert it. There's a great example of this in a graphic novel (I won't name it for the sake of avoiding spoilers) but suffice it to say that the reader is lured into the familiar territory of "[Bond Villain Stupidity](#)" where the [Big Bad](#) explains his whole plan to the heroes. It's a familiar trope, so I was

waiting to see how the heroes would thwart the plot, but then the Big Bad reveals that he already executed his scheme — there's nothing they can do. It's happened already and they've lost. I was reeling.

Once you start learning these little tricks of the trade, it becomes a [Baader-Meinhof](#) phenomenon. You'll begin spotting them everywhere. Perhaps it'll be a "[Hannibal Lecture](#)," a "[Batman Gambit](#)," an "[Armor-Piercing Question](#)," or a "[Cradle of Loneliness](#)." There are also meta-tropes that reveal interesting elements of craft like "[Realistic Diction Is Unrealistic](#)" or "[Word of God](#)," and so on. Yeah, the names are a lot of fun.

One way to get started is to search for a few of your favorite books or movies, and read through their list of associated tropes. Here's [The Matrix](#). [Shawshank](#). [The Sopranos](#). This type of "plumbing" is actually... pretty fun. You get to take an axe to the plaster, saw through the drywall, and follow the pipes. They almost always lead to places you wouldn't expect. Just watch out for a [Monster Clown](#). And let's hope you don't experience a version of [Chandler's Law](#) down there. I wish you at least a [Maybe Ever After](#).