

# Writing and the Creative Life: Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling (Part 4)

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What Is / What Could Be / What Is / What Could Be / What Is...

In [Part 1](#), we considered a Harvard Business Review article about the influence of stories on the brain, how much of it apparently boils down to the reaction of a chemical called Oxytocin.

In [Part 2](#), we considered additional chemical reactions in the brain related to storytelling: Cortisol during tense moments, Oxytocin which promotes a sense of connection to what is happening in the story, and Dopamine which makes us feel more hopeful and optimistic. So a new way of thinking about Three Act Structure:

Empathy [Oxytocin]: Establish a point of emotional resonance with characters.

Tension [Cortisol]: Create a dilemma that arouses disunity.

Release [Dopamine]: Resolve the dilemma that brings about unity.

In [Part 3](#), we explored another HBR article and came away with three important questions to ask as part of the story-

crafting process:

\* *Who is my audience?*

\* *How can I make the script reader feel like the hero?*

\* *How can I imbue my story with conflict?*

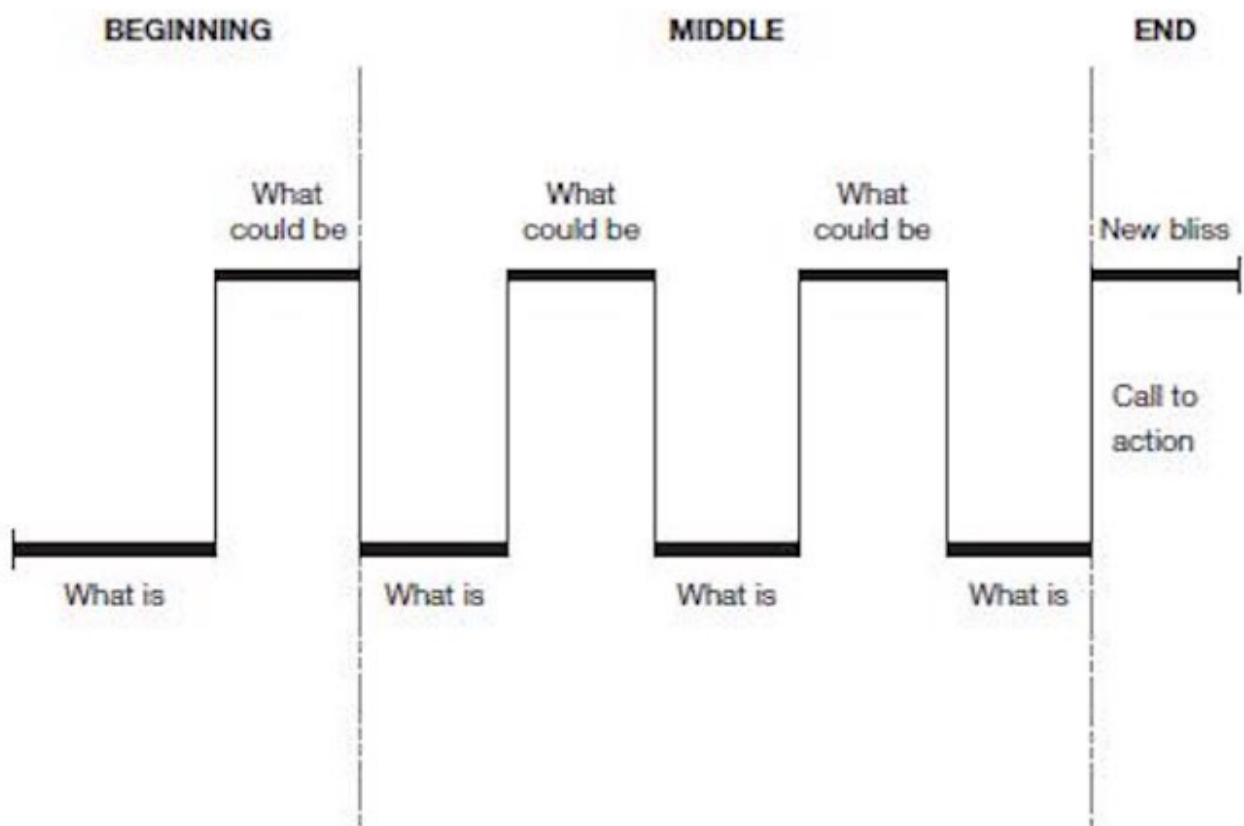
Today we look at yet another HBR article: Structure Your Presentation Like a Story.

*After studying hundreds of speeches, I've found that the [most effective presenters](#) use the same techniques as great storytellers: By reminding people of the status quo and then revealing the path to a better way, they set up a conflict that needs to be resolved.*

*That tension helps them persuade the audience to adopt a new mindset or behave differently — to move from what is to what could be. And by following Aristotle's three-part story structure (beginning, middle, end), they create a message that's easy to digest, remember, and retell.*

Here is a chart visualizing this idea:

# Persuasive story pattern



Once again, Three Act Structure. What's intriguing to me is how similar this looks to a visual tool I use in my own teaching about screenplay structure. Imagine each What Is and What Could Be section as a group of scenes. Now imagine a horizontal line connecting all of the What Is groups of scenes. Let's call that the Plotline. This is the realm of Action and Dialogue, what we see and hear in a movie. This is the domain of the *Physical Journey* of the screenplay universe.

Now imagine a horizontal line connecting all of the What Could Be groups of scenes. Let's call this the Themeline. This is the realm of Intention and Subtext, what we intuit and interpret in a movie. This is the domain of the *Psychological Journey* of the screenplay universe.

At each point of the Plotline where the line becomes vertical and heads toward the Themeline, something happens which a character has to process — emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. That process is represented by the horizontal line of What Could Be. External events effect internal change, so when the line becomes vertical and heads back toward the Plotline, the character acts differently in the Physical Journey. That in turn effects the Plot, creating a move forward in the narrative, a new What Is set of scenes.

This process, going back and forth between external events and internal actions, goes on and on and on in a story: What Is / What Could Be / What Is / What Could Be / What Is / What Could Be.

If you use sequences, in theory at least, each one posit a couplet of What Is / What Could Be with the sequence not only advancing the plot, but also creating a shift in the character's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior.

We can call this *Metamorphosis* or *Transformation*.

Now you may think this is an article about how to craft a winning presentation, basically a sales tool. But if you think about it, when we write a story, we not only tell it, we *sell* it. That is we are crafting something we hope will win over a script reader. If we can approach each sequence with this couplet in mind — What Is / What Could Be — that could be a way to lure a reader into and through the entire

narrative. As the article says:

## **Craft the Beginning**

## **Develop the Middle**

## **Make the Ending Powerful**

The more I write, the more convinced I am there is something innate to the connection between Three Act Structure and the writing of our brains. How about you?

For the rest of the article, go [here](#).

In Part 5, we will discuss *transcendent purpose* and *transactional purpose*.

*Writing and the Creative Life is a weekly series in which we explore creativity from the practical to the psychological, the latest in brain science to a spiritual take on the subject. Hopefully the more we understand about our creative self, the better we will become as writers. If you have any good reading material in this vein, please post in comments. If you have a particular observation you think readers will benefit from and you would like to explore in a guest post, email me.*

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