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E P I S O D E 1 8

The 3 Acts v 4 Quarters Story Structure

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Welcome back everyone! This is the Author Revolution Podcast where we talk about all things authorly related as we work to demystify the writing and publishing process. I'm your host, international bestselling indie author, Carissa Andrews.

Today's podcast episode is all about the difference between the three acts and four quarters when laying out your novel. When I first started writing, I can honestly say I didn't understand either of these very well and learning the structure behind both really did help me to tighten up my writing and develop stronger plots.

I will say that I'll be trying to keep this episode short and succinct. My grandmother passed away this weekend and in all honesty, my brain's not entirely in it. So, before we get started, I will say that if you run into any questions that I didn't answer for you, please be sure to head over to the Author Revolution Facebook page and drop me a line. Or if you're a student, head into the Author Revolution Facebook group and ask there. If you have a question, it's likely others might as well, so it's nice for them to benefit based off your question.



**E P I S O D E 1 8 : T H E 3 A C T S V 4 Q U A R T E R S S T O R Y
S T R U C T U R E**

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Alright, so with all of that out of the way, let's talk about story creation in terms of using these two systems. Hopefully you've at least heard of the 3 Acts or 4 Quarters in passing, but if not, we'll be walking you through them in more detail so you can understand how to implement them into your own writing. First, let's compare and contrast what the two systems are.

For the most part, I'd like to say that there really is no difference. You're taking your larger piece of work and breaking it down into smaller chunks so you can understand its function better, stay clear on your narrative, and ensure a complete story structure, rather than an episodic narrative that goes on and on without an endgame in mind.

The point of both the 3 Acts and 4 Quarters (which I will point out can sometimes be called the 4 Acts) is to provide context for the overall arc and problems the characters are going to face in each section.

In a 3 Act structure, you're putting it into the context of beginning, middle, and end. However, not all parts are considered equal under this structure and that can be where some authors get lost. Your story isn't broken into equal 3rds because your beginning and end equates to a quarter each, where your middle encompasses a half of your book. Yes, a complete half.

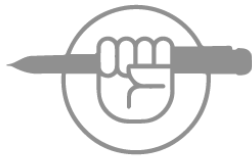
Which is where the 4 Quarter structure then comes in. It completes the structure, fleshing it out more so you understand what to do in that big lump of a middle. Often times, when we don't understand the structure of a novel, it's easy to get lost in the middle and feel like it's dragging. Readers and authors alike will call it the saggy middle because there's really no drive or point behind what's happening if it's not conforming to some sort of story parameter.



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While understanding your overall arc is important, knowing how it fits into these two story structures is your golden ticket. So, let's dive a little deeper.

With the 3 Acts, your goal as a writer is to know how to set the stage, build the action, and resolve the story. In Act 1, you're giving the reader the exposition – who, what, where, when, why, and how. You're also giving them the inciting incident that everything else will spring from. In Act 2, you're building the action, adding in roadblocks, red herrings, plot twists, and introducing the resolution idea. Remember, this is a full half of the book. You want to add as much drama and trouble as possible here. So, if your middle section is saggy, you want to think about what the worst thing that could happen is – and make that happen. Make it as uncomfortable for your characters (and your readers) as possible. If you do this, your middle section is never going to sag, I promise you. Then, in Act 3, you let the action fall, a resolution is presented, and you either end with a happily ever after, an unhappily ever after, or a cliffhanger.

With the 4 Quarters, you can view each quarter a little differently. Rather than being beginning, middle and end, it's more about what the character phases will be as they go along the story arc.

In Quarter 1 – you are still providing the exposition and setting up the story's inciting incident, but the objective is to provide understanding for both the characters and your readers. They need to know who and what they're dealing with and why they should care.

In Quarter 2, it's about insight. Your characters have to dive deeper into learning about their circumstances, get into trouble, and have things NOT go well. As you end this 2nd Quarter, you're hitting the middle of the book, so it's a great place for a plot twist or really escalating the crisis they face.



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As you enter the 3rd quarter, you're continuing on the line of throwing as many roadblocks as possible at your characters, but by the end of this act, the resolution idea should be presented so the readers will feel like it doesn't come out of left field. As much as I love to be surprised by things, I also love to be surprised by realizing a story was setting up the surprise before I ever caught on. You do that by presenting the idea earlier in the book. Namely, this 3rd quarter. Sometimes it can be added in sooner, but it should be in a very small, minute way and then get more obvious by the end of the 3rd quarter. The context for this quarter is really the doing or action part. They've learned what they need to know and now they're acting on the information.

Then, in the 4th and final quarter, you're wrapping it all up. The characters have faced their challenges and they are now working toward obtaining their goal. So the context for this quarter is about obtaining resolution. Now, not all resolutions are equal, so like I said with the 3 Acts, it can end in a Happily Ever After, Unhappily Ever After, or a Cliff Hanger. The choice is yours.

Now, when you overlay both of these structures, so you are able to use both simultaneously, I think that's where things make the most sense. They literally are the same thing – just broken out in differently.

Let me give you an example so you can see what I mean.

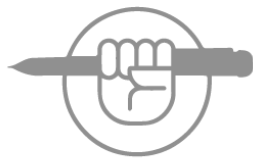
Take the 1st Avengers movie as an example.

In the 1st Act, we're being set up with who the different superheroes are, how SHIELD is trying to pull them together, and then the inciting incident of Loki as he tries to control the population with the tesseract and his scepter.



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In the middle, or 2nd Act, we're seeing SHEILD's idea break apart, they're not overly successful at what they're trying to do, and they don't like each other very much at all.

But by the 3rd Act, Earth is being attacked by aliens unleashed by Loki and his baddies – and now the Avengers have a common cause to fight against. They do their thing and, of course, save the day for now.

In the 4 Quarter structure, all of that still happens, but now we're adding in the plot twist midway where we see what Loki was planning on doing with the Tesseract (it wasn't just about enslaving humanity, it was about opening the portal and unleashing the aliens... which is technically a bigger part tied to Thanos, but let's not get carried away.)

We, the viewers first had to understand who everyone was and why it was important to join together. (Q 1) Then, they had to see them trying to gain the insights on how to make it happen. Namely, through SHEILD's Avengers Initiative. (Q 2) They tried to work as a team, but everything had to fall apart, and they all went their separate ways. (Q 3) But as that portal was opened up, the team knew they had to come together to save the world. (Q 4)

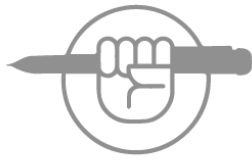
In each of these quarters, it's providing a different context to view the central problem of whether or not a team of vastly different superheroes can come together to defend the world. If you skip any of the contexts of understanding, insights, action, and resolution, you're not giving your reader the comprehensive understanding they need to fully engage with your story.



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For those of you who have taken my Indie Publishing Fundamentals course, this concept might be familiar to you because of the sample outline breakout you can download in there. I'm also working on another digital version that will be included in the Author Revolution Story Cure, which will be coming out in the next couple of weeks. So, if this is a concept you're hoping to get better at, hang tight and I'll let you know when the Story Cure drops. I am super excited to get it up and running. I think you're really going to like it.

Now, just a reminder, if you have questions, drop me a comment at our Author Revolution Facebook Page or if you're a student, ask it in our Online Community. Be sure head over to authorrevolution.org/18 to visit the show notes.

Next week, we'll be talking about whether or not rapid released stories can be any good. This is a debate that's raged on for a long time and one that I think we should address. When I first learned about writing and publishing quickly, I have to admit, I was a bit dubious. But the longer I've been publishing the more insights I've gained into this area. And I look forward to sharing them with you. So, I hope you'll join me.

Don't forget, if you haven't subscribed to the podcast yet, hit the subscribe button now. It takes just a moment. If you liked this episode, or any of the previous ones, tap the star rating or leave me a review. It lets me know that I'm on the right track as I provide insights and tips for you guys.

Alright, that's a wrap, guys. See you next week, same time, same place.

Go forth and be awesome.



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