

ALEX BROUN PLAYWRIGHTING COURSE
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STORY STRUCTURE: SIX STAGES OF YOUR STORY

You may look at your play in terms of the six stages of basic story structure i.e.

BALANCE – at the start of the play a balance – uneasy or tranquil – exists between the characters or in the world of the play

DISTURBANCE – something happens, an event or a character enters, upsetting the balance and setting in motion the events of the play. This can also be called the “inciting incident” – the incident that incites the action of the play. In a ten minute play the disturbance may take place before the play begins so we jump immediately to stage three. The characters then refer back to previous balance and what disturbed it.

CONFLICT – Due to the disturbance characters are brought into conflict, which also allows the dilemmas or concerns of the play to be brought to life. This is **the primary action of the play** and should occupy most of your stage time.

OBSTACLES – These are events, or characters, or character weaknesses that stop the conflict being resolved or stop your central character achieving their goal

COMPLICATIONS – Twists in the story that may not necessarily be obstacles and may hinder or help the conflict resolution and/or the central characters journey

RESOLUTION – In some way the conflict is resolved – central character gets or doesn’t get what they want - and a new balance – uneasy or tranquil - is put in place. The way the story resolves often displays the playwright’s intentions or message.

Central Character (s)

In most plays there is usually one character, or group of characters, who want or need something which the other characters either help or hinder them to achieve. It can help to simplify your play down to the simplest terms – Who is my play about – the central character? What do they want? How do the other characters effect that (if a character has no effect then what are they doing in the play)? Does my central character get what he/she/they want?

It may also be helpful to look at the Six Stages directly how they relate to your central character – indeed this will often give you/be your play, e.g. Hamlet

BALANCE – Hamlet unhappy about death of his father and crowning of his Uncle

DISTURBANCE – Hamlet finds out his father was murdered

CONFLICT – Hamlet wrestles with himself, his Uncle, mother and members of the court to try and revenge his father’s death

OBSTACLES – Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, Hamlet’s own vacillating nature

COMPLICATIONS – Denmark is being invaded, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (can be obstacles)

RESOLUTION – Hamlet succeeds but kills everyone in the process, including himself. Message: Revenge is pointless

TO DO: Examples – examine these stories in terms of the Six stages: MacBeth, Oedipus, A Doll’s House (Ibsen). Map out your own play in terms of the six stages.