

## **Section 3: Engineering a Successful Story Structure**

### **Write-by-the-Lake Writer's Workshop & Retreat**

**June 17-21, 2019**

**9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. each day**

**Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison**

**UW-Madison Continuing Studies & UW-Madison Dept. of English**

### **Syllabus**

**Instructor: Tim Storm**

It's time. Maybe you've been dreading it; maybe you're just figuring out the necessity of it. Perhaps you've been told your manuscript isn't quite working. Regardless, it's time for you to (re)assess the thing holistically, to look at your outline and find the structural weaknesses preventing your novel from being a success.

Just as an underground parking lot needs pillars to bear the weight above it, long-form stories need structure. This course will examine in depth the "engineering" concepts behind where you place the pillars in your story and what sort of weight those pillars need to bear.

There are lots of structural paradigms out there, so we'll begin with a comparative analysis of many of them, searching for some of the main common denominators and arming you with the knowledge to pick and choose the elements that ring true for your brand of storytelling.

We'll look at the external and internal dimensions of your story (the external referring to the dramatic arc that plays out in scenes that depict concrete, physical events; the internal referring to the progression of the character(s) moving toward a transformation). And we'll examine how these two dimensions of story structure overlap.

We'll look at the concept of weaving – incorporating subplots, setups and payoffs, twists and revelations – all in the service of the story's main plot and an impactful ending.

We'll spend some time workshopping your outline; by week's end, you'll come away with a comprehensive story spreadsheet and some clear direction on how to make your story a success.

Whether or not you began your writing process with an outline, you're going to want to use one to help you revise. This course offers the rare opportunity for you to work on your entire story in one week. I've run plenty of workshops in the past that focus on scene writing. Such courses are valuable, but they're necessarily limited in what they can do to help you with your story holistically. It's time to tackle the whole.

## Syllabus

Who's in need of holistic assessment of their work? Well, everyone writing a longform story at some point has to take the long view. It's tempting to see writing as strictly a matter of pinning down the minutia, perfecting each brushstroke on your canvas. And certainly, line- and scene-level craft is important. But when a story isn't quite working for an agent or publisher, the culprit is often in the story's bones or concept, not in the word smithing.

You may be just beginning to outline your story; you may have a completed draft. It's really never too early or late in the process to get a scene-by-scene or chapter-by-chapter overview of the thing and scrutinize it.

But scrutinize it for what?

That's what this course is all about.

Just as you can build a bridge in several different ways, you can structure a novel in several different ways. But there are still some underlying engineering principles that don't change. This course will help you understand those principles and apply them to your own work.

## Day 1: Structural Overview

There is no shortage of structural paradigms out there. From the hero's journey to Save-the-Cat beat sheets, from screenwriters' plot points to one-page novels; from the Snowflake Method to the Story Grid to John Truby, Syd Field, Michael Hauge, K.M. Weiland – all of these templates for story structure are just a little different from each other. Which one is right?

The problem is that any one of them could work for you, but any one of them could be the wrong fit. You're investing a lot of time and energy into writing your story, so it may behoove you to do a little comparison shopping. (If you're like me, you can't even buy a refrigerator without researching it for a month.) This first day of the course will examine almost two dozen paradigms.

But we'll be on the lookout for common denominators. Despite their differences, all the paradigms share some key elements in common. And that's when they become helpful – when we can look past their unique selling points and listen for some echoes in the comparative analysis.

Along the way, you may resonate with language particular to one paradigm. And that's great. Because what we're after today is to help you create an individualized paradigm for your story.

Some of our driving questions:

Why is structure necessary?

What is its effect on the reader?

Is a structural paradigm formulaic?

Can originality coexist with structure?

What about experimental or unorthodox structures?

Our goal will be to have you map out your story structure according to your well-informed, individually-catered paradigm.

## Day 2: Character Arc

Built into the week's lessons is constant checking-in with your story and your evolving understanding of what structural necessities your story requires. As such, we'll open most days with a review of the previous day's homework. Day 2 thus opens with some small-group examination of your chosen structural paradigm for your story.

But we'll spend the rest of the day delving into the character dimensions of structure. The paradigms we examine on Day 1 don't necessarily ignore character arc, but as a whole, they tend to be a little more focused on plot over character. So today, we pay special attention to the "internal plot," beginning with the overarching movement of your protagonist from Point A to Point B and the essential change that occurs within the character as a result of the story's plot.

Critical to today's examination are three key concepts: progression, escalation, and revelation – with progression being about the aforementioned "essential change," escalation being about a staircase of smaller changes throughout the story's middle, and revelation referring to both the resolution's reveal of "truth," and the key points through the story in which situation-changing information is revealed to readers.

We'll look at "beats" within the character arc in order to help you think about breaking down the overall change into smaller, more workable shifts. And we'll take a moment to step outside of the holistic view to examine character movement within a scene, exploring the concept of polarity shifts within and between scenes. In fact, this concept is so important, we'll take a moment to go in close and examine how a scene moves a character.

No matter your genre of writing – even if you feel your story is more plot-driven – the character's trajectory is crucial to your overall structural plan and the story's resonance with readers. Our work for the next day will be a two-fold assignment: 1) to choose or write a 3-page scene from your story that showcases scene-level movement, and 2) to trace the scene-by-scene evolution of your main character.

### **Day 3: Story Spreadsheet**

We begin today with some workshopping of your short scenes, helping one another with character movement on the micro-level. Then we'll return to the holistic troubleshooting. Now that you've fit your story into a custom-made structural template, and now that you've traced the evolution of your protagonist, we'll take some time to examine the questions and quandaries that have arisen from our first two days. And we'll do some small-group workshopping of your character arc.

We'll examine some of the finer points that arise from a marriage of the external and the internal. And we'll pay special attention to two big issues: the role of the beginning and how to avoid the "sagging middle."

Today's mid-week session will then move toward synthesis: we'll work on bringing the internal and external together into a story "grid" or spreadsheet – again, one catered to your specific story needs. We'll examine several models for story spreadsheets and you'll work to create a solid first draft of your own story grid, a tool that may ultimately be more helpful to you than anything else in seeing your story holistically.

#### **Day 4: Weaving**

With the first draft of your story grid under your belt, you'll feel much better about understanding the forest (rather than the trees) of your work.

Ah, but there's more work to do.

Today, we talk about weaving. How do you bring other narrative threads into the main thread and weave them together seamlessly? In other words, what do you do about subplots and side journeys? How do you incorporate them with the main plot of the story?

And what comes first: the invention of a subplot or the identification of a need for subplot?

We'll also look at two challenges tied closely to subplots. The first is pacing, which is aided largely by modulation – alternating between plot lines or viewpoints or high- and low-energy scenes. And the second is setup and payoff.

The weaving challenges we look at today may benefit from some other varieties of mapping, so we'll examine a few tools that may help you visualize and/or conceptualize your weaving. But we'll also attempt to incorporate your threads into your story grid in meaningful ways. And that will be tonight's homework: a second, more complete draft of your story grid.

### **Day 5: Workshop and Problem Analysis**

You'll have a fairly thorough outline of your story by now, accompanied by a solid understanding of the role of structure. Today, we focus on a problem analysis of your grid so we can suss out its weaknesses and figure out where your story may need some re-imagining. We'll also do some more workshopping of your story spreadsheet, and in working with other writers and discovering what elements they've included in their spreadsheets, you'll likely find other pieces you want to include in yours.

We'll wrap up the week with a discussion of the challenges that remain and work toward making a to-do list for what to tackle from here on out. And as we close, we'll also look at some genre considerations, including so-called "obligatory scenes."

**Credit Option (credit fees extra):** Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others' work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.

