



## Shape of Character Arcs

### *Workbook*

This workbook pairs with the masterclass *The Shape of Character Arcs*. It contains questions and writing prompts to help get your creative juices flowing, so you can develop a plot that pushes your characters along their arc of change.

Use the prompts below to help you develop each piece of your character's arc. Or, feel free to simply take notes from class!

#### **DEFINITIONS:**

To make sure we're all on the same page, these are the definitions we're using in this class.

**PLOT:** The main events of a story.

**CHARACTER ARC:** The internal change a character goes through in a story.

**INTERNAL OBSTACLE:** At the beginning of a story your character should operate with a specific, flawed belief, worldview, and/or perspective—something problematic that is harming them, their dreams, or the world around them. It needs to change. (ie. the belief that 'You're only worthy of love if you're perfect.')

**STORY POINT:** By the end of the story, if it's a positive arc of change, they will adopt a healed belief and outlook instead—this is the message that you, as the author, want to share with your readers. When the character learns it, readers will too. (ie. the belief that 'Your imperfections are worthy of love.')

## **THE BIG PICTURE:**

People don't change because they're told to, they change because of the consequences of their flawed actions. At its heart, a character arc works like this: *Your character is flawed. They make a mistake. They learn from it + grow.*

When developing a character's arc of change, we need to consider their growth trajectory *alongside* the plot.

Plot + character arcs are inextricable. They influence one another. There is a cycle between plot and character; a constant push and pull that moves a character through both arc and plot.

Plot creates problems for your character to solve. → Your character makes choices that create plot events. → Plot creates problems for your character to solve. → Your character makes choices that create plot events.

In the plot itself, the beats flow together like this...

Your character believes something flawed... **Internal Obstacle**

And when shit hits the fan... **Plot Problem (not their fault)**

That belief makes them enact a really "bad" plan... **Big, flawed choice**

Which later comes back to bite them in the ass... **Huge plot failure (their fault)**

Pushing them to unlearn that belief in exchange for a healthier one... **Story Point belief**

Allowing them to finally succeed... **Plot success (their doing)**

Use the prompts below to dive into how to link your character and plot together!

## SHAPING THE CHARACTER ARC

### The flawed beginnings (*Internal Obstacle*)

At the beginning of your story your character has **a specific, flawed belief, worldview, and/or perspective** that's holding them back from their dreams at the beginning of the story—a belief that needs to change.

**What beliefs can you think of that are in direct contrast to your story point? What is the deeply flawed belief this character holds?**

Several may come to mind. List them out and consider which one is the most succinct, holds the greatest emotional impact and stakes, and will provide your character with the most intriguing struggle.



**How has this belief influenced their status quo life? How do they look at the world around them?**

This belief has influenced their life, likely for quite some time. In what ways has this belief become pervasive in their life? How do they navigate through “work, home, and play?”



## Shit hits the fan (*Plot Problem*)

Every story needs a big bang, some initial plot problem that smacks your main character right in the face. This is a plot problem that happens TO them, it's your story's hook and the moment when the action gets going.

This plot problem can't just be 'anything,' it needs to be a shock that directly challenges your character's Internal Obstacle belief.

**Considering your character's Internal Obstacle, what plot problem can you throw at them to make them confront it?**

How does the plot problem put your character into a tough situation? How will they be forced to take (flawed) action in the face of whatever happened? How will this plot problem launch them on this story's journey?



## Really bad plan (*Big flawed choice*)

At first, your character will be shell-shocked by the big ass plot problem, but once they hem and haw for a scene or two they'll realize they must act and find themselves at a crossroads:

- 👎 They can use this opportunity to enact a flawed plan (led by their Internal Obstacle belief).
- 👍 Or, they can take this opportunity to enact a good plan (if they knew the Story Point)

These are 'good' and 'flawed' plans because of the consequences that would come out of them.

If the character enacted the good Story Point plan, they would succeed in getting what they most deeply want. BUT, because they are flawed and they need to change (but haven't yet) they will choose the flawed plan option—they have to, or you wouldn't have a story!

**How do they react to the “plot problem”? What flawed plan do they put in place as a response?**

The plot problem has created an *issue* which must be solved. The problem is your character tries to solve it the wrong way. So how do they think they can do this?



## Bites em' in the ass (*Plot failure*)

As your character moves through the chunky middle of your story, implementing their flawed and misguided plans, you should ensure that the plan continually fails in big and small ways.

Sometimes the negative consequences won't be apparent immediately (your character might even think they're succeeding!), but they should always be snowballing quietly in the background.

Then, ~75% through your novel, everything should come crashing down. The consequences of your character's "bad" plan at the beginning of the story should come back to bite them in a HUGE way, causing the character to fail so dismally at their plans, and push them so far from their true desires, that they cannot see a way forward... Not unless they change.

**What's the big failure that finally opens their eyes? How do they lose (almost) everything, because of their flawed actions so far?**

This massive failure should open their eyes to the truth: they've been wrong. How can the consequences of their actions come back to bite them and prove they should change?



### **Changing their ways (*Story Point belief*)**

Because your character's previous plot failure was their own fault, and more specifically, their Internal Obstacle belief's fault—they have the opportunity to learn from their mistake, shed their Internal Obstacle belief, and adopt the healed Story Point belief instead. This belief is what, if they'd learned it earlier, would have prevented them from failing.

**What's the healed belief they adopt? What lesson have they learned?**

How *could* they have acted differently, had they already known this lesson? How will their actions prove they've learned the new belief?



## Happy ending! (*Plot success*)

The best way to show a character's change is via their actions, so once they've let go of their Internal Obstacle belief you can finally let them devise a "good" plot plan that is led by their *healed* Story Point belief instead.

This plan launches them into Act 3, or the end of your story. And now, because they've learned the right thing and are led by the right belief, you can finally give their plan and actions positive consequences. By allowing them to succeed in getting what they most deeply desire, you'll prove that they learned the right thing.

**What new course of action can they take now that they've learned the story point? How do they finally succeed?**

How does their success prove that 1) they've truly changed and 2) the story point belief is true?



## Plotter vs Pantser

### If you are a pantser, consider...

- Prioritize knowledge of character flaws and backstory prior to writing
- Let your character's choices and consequences influence the plot events you create
- Lean heavily into how characters react on the page (the events themselves matter less than a character's flawed reactions to them)
- Keep the cause-and-effect trajectory top of mind as you write

### If you are a plotter, consider...

- Consider how your plot events can test your character's Internal Obstacle (IO)
- Brainstorm plot events that can be your character's fault because of their IO
- Focus on big picture arc trajectory—and making sure the cause-and-effect chain is set up at a high level—before narrowing down into specifics
  - (ie. fill out The Shape of Character Arcs graph before outlining pivot plans, and then Save the Cat beats)

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### For Everyone

- [Craft Complex Characters](#) guide
- [The Keys to Scenes That Work](#) guide
- [Morally Grey Characters](#) masterclass
- Podcast: [Internal goals give characters dimension](#)
- Podcast: [The versatility of the writing process](#)
- Podcast: [Where to start your story](#)
- Podcast: [Our favorite plotting tool: Pivot Point Plans](#)
- Podcast: [Flawed people are more interesting](#)



- Podcast: [Static / flat arcs with Lewis Jorstad](#)
- Blog: [How Plot and Character Intersect](#)

## For Tenacious Writing members

- *From Idea to Outline* course - [Link Here](#)
- *Scene Structure Simplified* course - [Link Here](#)
- *Craft Complex Characters* masterclass - [Link Here](#)
- *Your Story's Heart* masterclass - [Link Here](#)
- *The Magic of Plot Twists* masterclass - [Link Here](#)
- *How to Craft a Page Turner* masterclass - [Link Here](#)
- *Static Character Arcs* masterclass with Lewis Jorstad - [Link Here](#)
- *Backstory: The Key to Character Development* masterclass - [Link Here](#)

## Join Tenacious Writing!

A writing program that's as comfy as your favorite pair of sweats. Inside you'll find craft and community resources, tailored exactly to you. Forever.

[Come join us](#), and keep the learning going.

We'll see you inside!

Xo, Emily & Rachel