



tenacious
WRITING

by goldenmay

The Shape of Character Arcs

JUNE 2024

golden may



- Professional book coaches
- Badass editors
- Fantasy + romance writers
- Hosts of the Tenacious Writing lifetime membership program
- Hosts of the Story Magic podcast



tenacious **WRITING**

A writing program as comfy as your favorite pair of sweats. Craft and community resources, tailored exactly to you. Forever.

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craft skills that serve **YOUR** story

In-depth craft resources that don't feel like gibberish, you'll finally learn how to make the 'rules' of writing work for YOU.

a **community** of **YOUR** people

Your people in your pocket: people who get the ups and downs of this wild rollercoaster journey and will hold you up with support, feedback, and friendship.

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We're rewriting perfectionist, self-doubt, hustle culture narratives and rediscovering the joy of making things without the weight of shame.

An entire library of over 40+ hours of masterclasses, workshops, coaching calls, and study groups

Resources for every stage of your writing journey

A Slack community of dozens of writers devoted to writing the book of their dreams on their own terms

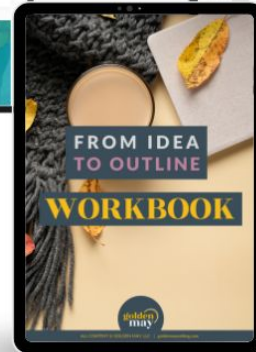
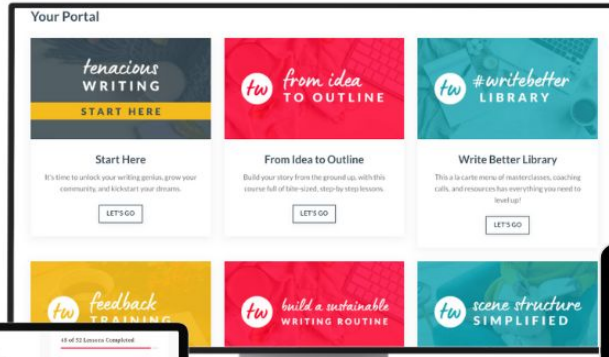
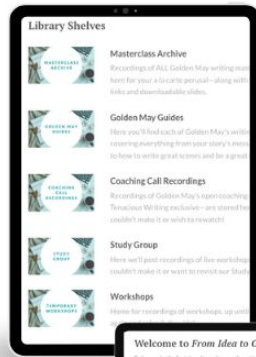
Build the writing life that works for YOUR unique life

Mindset resources to help you ditch hustle culture and find the joy of writing again

Tons of worksheets, workbooks, guides, downloadables, and checklists

Feedback Training to teach you how to give and receive feedback in effective writing partnerships

A full course on planning, plotting, and outlining your way to a story that works



A person is sitting on a beach, reading a book. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The person's hands are visible, holding the book open. The background shows the ocean and a clear sky.

Let's talk about character arcs!

class agenda

- The shape of how people change
- How plot and character arcs influence one another
- Positive arc breakdown + Examples!
- Other kinds of arcs + Examples!
- Plotter vs. Pantser tips
- QA

class expectations

- Presentation → time for questions at the end
- Follow along with class workbook
- Jump in the chat with questions and we'll answer as we can
- Recording will be sent out via email in the next 24 hours
- FOR TENACIOUS WRITING MEMBERS: It will also be archived in the *Write Better Library*

GRAB YOUR WORKBOOK

Use the link in the chat to make a copy of
The Shape of Character Arcs workbook for yourself!

A person is sitting on a beach, reading a book. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The person's hands are visible, holding the book open. The background shows the ocean and a clear sky.

First, let's define some stuff.

PLOT: The main events of a story.

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

the power of arcs

We read stories with character arcs because we learn from them.

We cognitively put ourselves in the main character's shoes, and we experience their journey as we read. We feel as they feel. We succeed as they succeed, and fail as they fail. When they experience the consequences of their decisions, we do too. When they learn, we do too.

We change as they change.

You can use character arcs to move and change your readers.

Tenacious Writing friends, check out [Your Story's Heart](#).



The question at the heart of an arc:

Will the character overcome their demons and prevail?
Or will they succumb and fail?

the essence of an arc

A character arc takes a character from *believing something flawed* to *believing something healthy*.

'Internal Obstacle' (flawed belief) → 'Story Point' (healed belief)

Regardless of whether your arcs are *positive* or *negative* (more on that later!), **the possibility of this change** is still at the heart of them.

the essence of an arc

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.’)

... But how do we get them from A to Z? How does a person change?

Tenacious Writing friends, check out [Craft Complex Characters](#).



**People don't change because they're told to,
they change because of **the consequences**
of their flawed actions.**

A person is shown from a high angle, sitting at a desk and typing on a laptop. The image is heavily blurred and has a dark, teal-blue color overlay. The person's hands are visible on the keyboard, and a pen is lying on the desk to the left. The text is centered over the image.

Your character is flawed.

They make a mistake.

They learn from it + grow.

A person is shown from a top-down perspective, writing on a laptop. A magnifying glass is held over the text, which is the central focus of the image. The background is a dark, muted blue color.

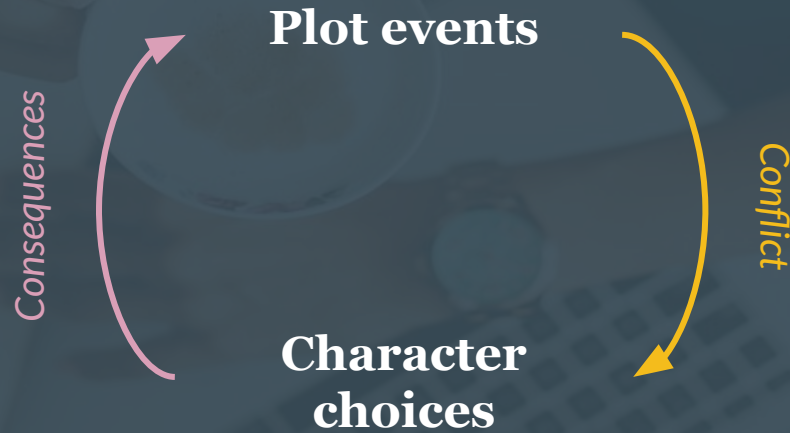
How does this work *in a story*?

How do you PLOT with it?

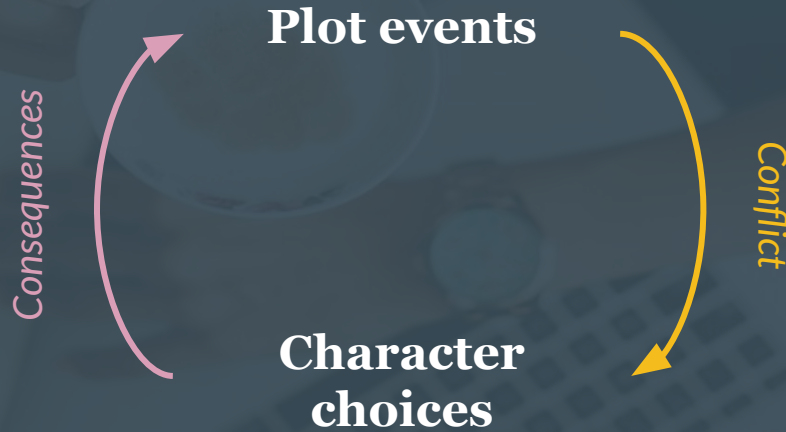


Plot + character arcs are inextricable.
They influence one another.

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.



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

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

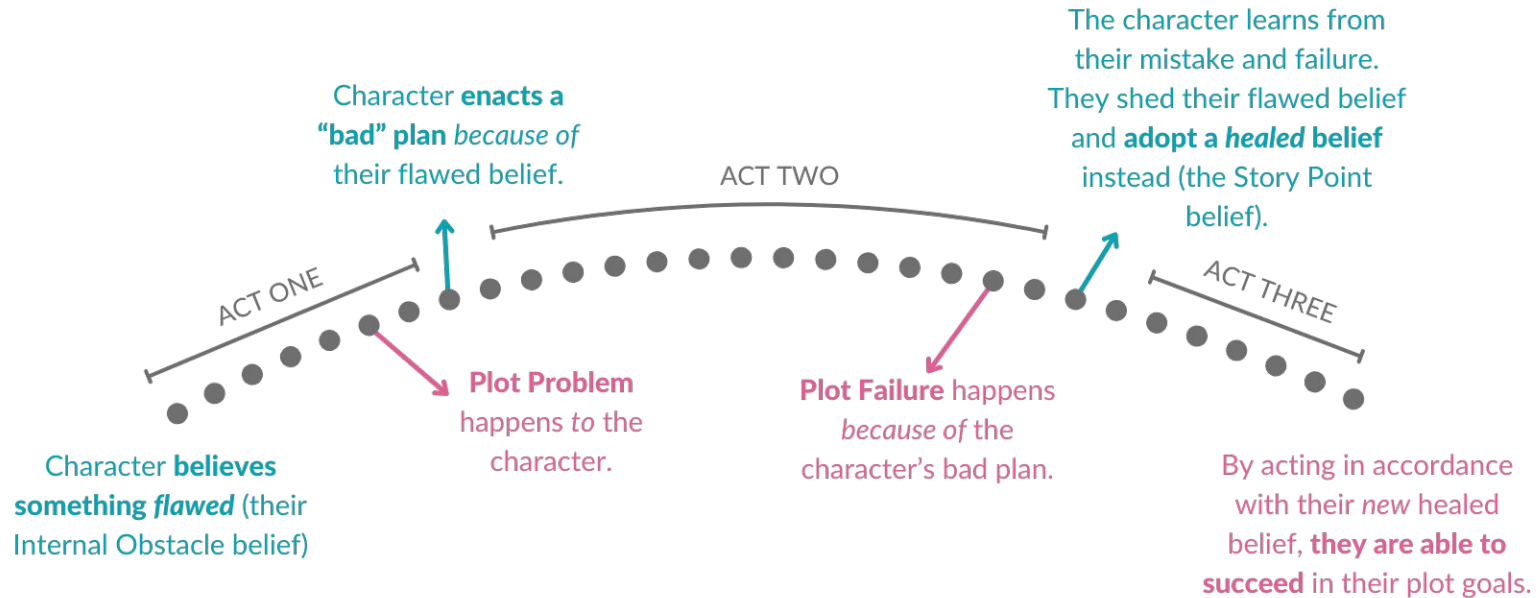
That belief makes them enact a really “bad” plan... **Big, flawed choice**

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)**

Positive Character Arc



A person is shown from a top-down perspective, wearing a light-colored shirt. They are holding a magnifying glass over a laptop keyboard. The scene is dimly lit, with the magnifying glass highlighting a specific area on the keyboard. The overall tone is serious and focused.

Aren't there other arcs?

Positive Arc

a character changes for the better, with positive results

Negative Arc

a character fails to change for the better, with negative results

Static Arc

a character changes very little, but the world around them learns from and changes because of them

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, reading a book. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text is centered on the page.

Let's break it down

workshopping positive arcs step by step

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.

This a belief they've held for a *long time*. It's led them to take actions that have negatively shaped their current life when the story opens: their living situation, their relationships, their career, their path in life—everything.

Most importantly, this belief has influenced *what* they think they want when the story begins, and *how* they're going about trying to get it.

Tenacious Writing friends, check out [Backstory: The Key to Character Development](#) class.

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark hoodie, sitting and reading a book. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text is centered on the page.

WORKBOOK PROMPTS

What belief does your character hold that is in direct contrast to the story point?
How has this belief influenced their life?

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— something that gives them a choice between acting in accordance with their flawed Internal Obstacle belief, or shedding it for a healthier, “better” plan.

Tenacious Writing friends, check out [The Magic of Plot Twists](#).

EXERCISE #1 — Miranda

Character believes *Beauty makes you worthy of love (IO)*

Character needs to learn *Our actions make us worthy of love (SP)*

What PLOT PROBLEM could confront her flawed belief?

EXERCISE #2 — Violet

Character believes *You're only free if you have all the power (IO)*

Character needs to learn *True freedom is found in releasing power (SP)*

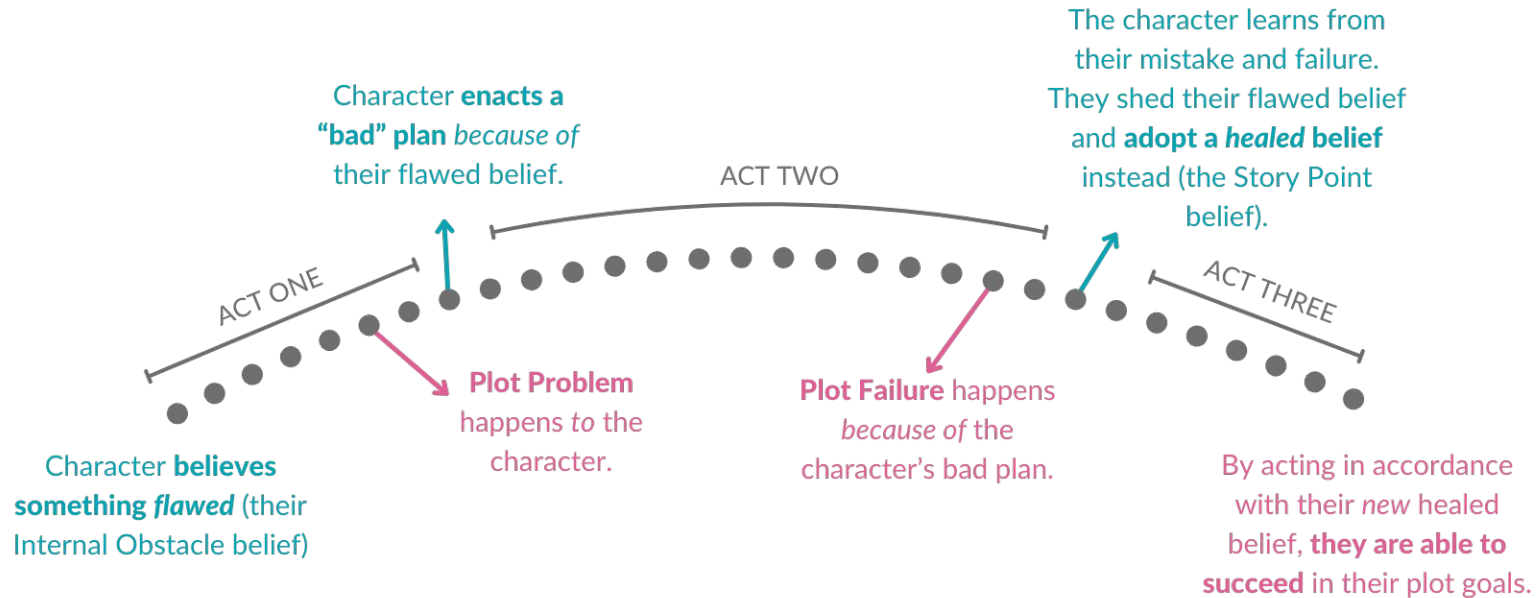
What PLOT PROBLEM could confront her flawed belief?

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark hoodie, sitting and reading a book. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text is centered on the page.

WORKBOOK PROMPTS

Considering your character's Internal Obstacle, what plot problem can you throw at them that confronts their beliefs?

Positive Character Arc



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!

Tenacious Writing friends, check out [How to Craft a Page Turner](#).

WORKBOOK PROMPTS

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

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.

WORKBOOK PROMPTS

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

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.



WORKBOOK PROMPTS

What's the healed belief (Story Point) they adopt?

What lesson have they learned?

How did their plot failure *teach them* this lesson?

happy ending! (*plot success*)

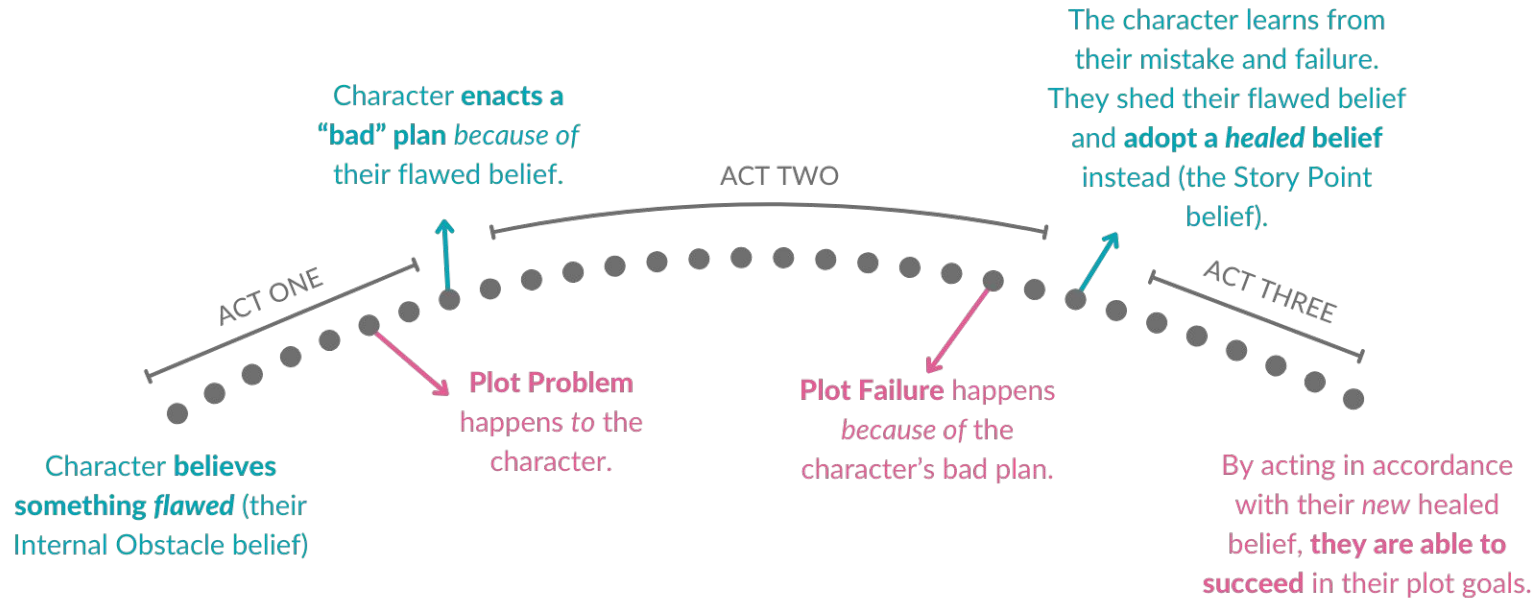
The best way to ***show a character's change is via their actions***, so once they've let go of their Internal Obstacle belief you can finally let them devise a "good" plot plan that is led by their *healed* Story Point belief instead.

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.

WORKBOOK PROMPTS

What new course of action can they take now that they've learned the Story Point?
How do they finally succeed?

Positive Character Arc

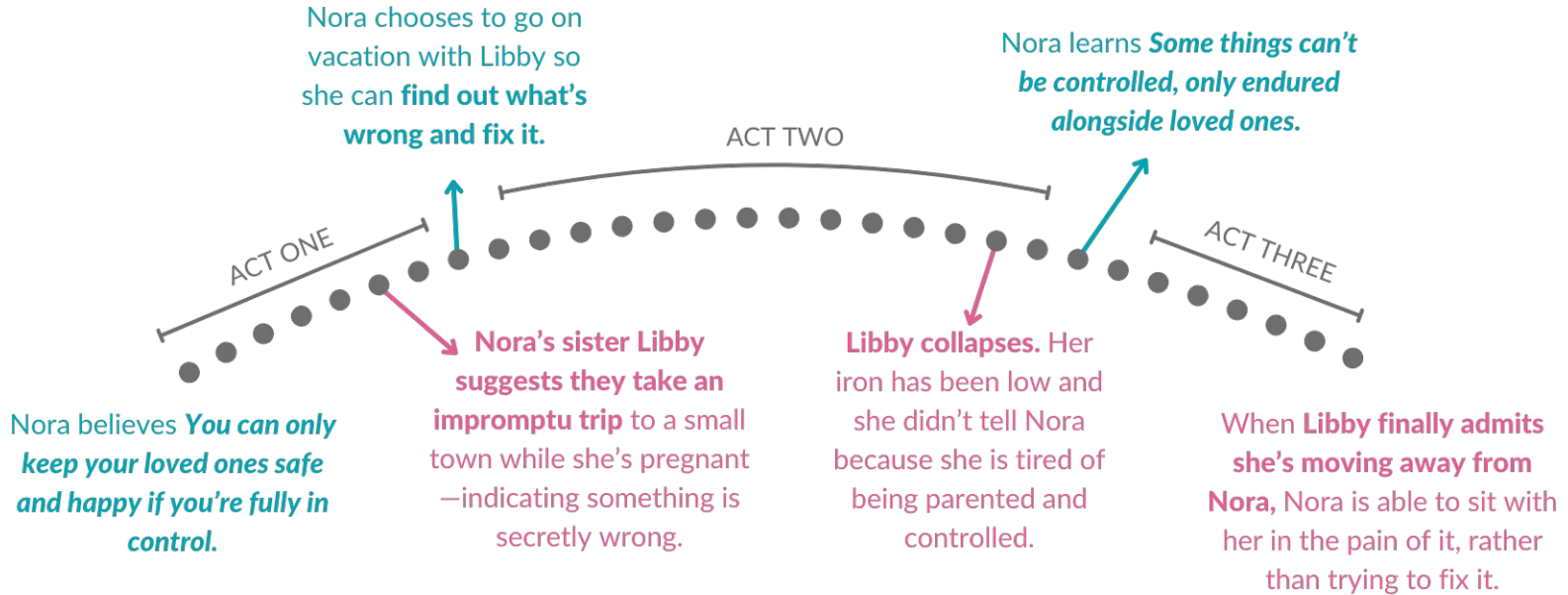




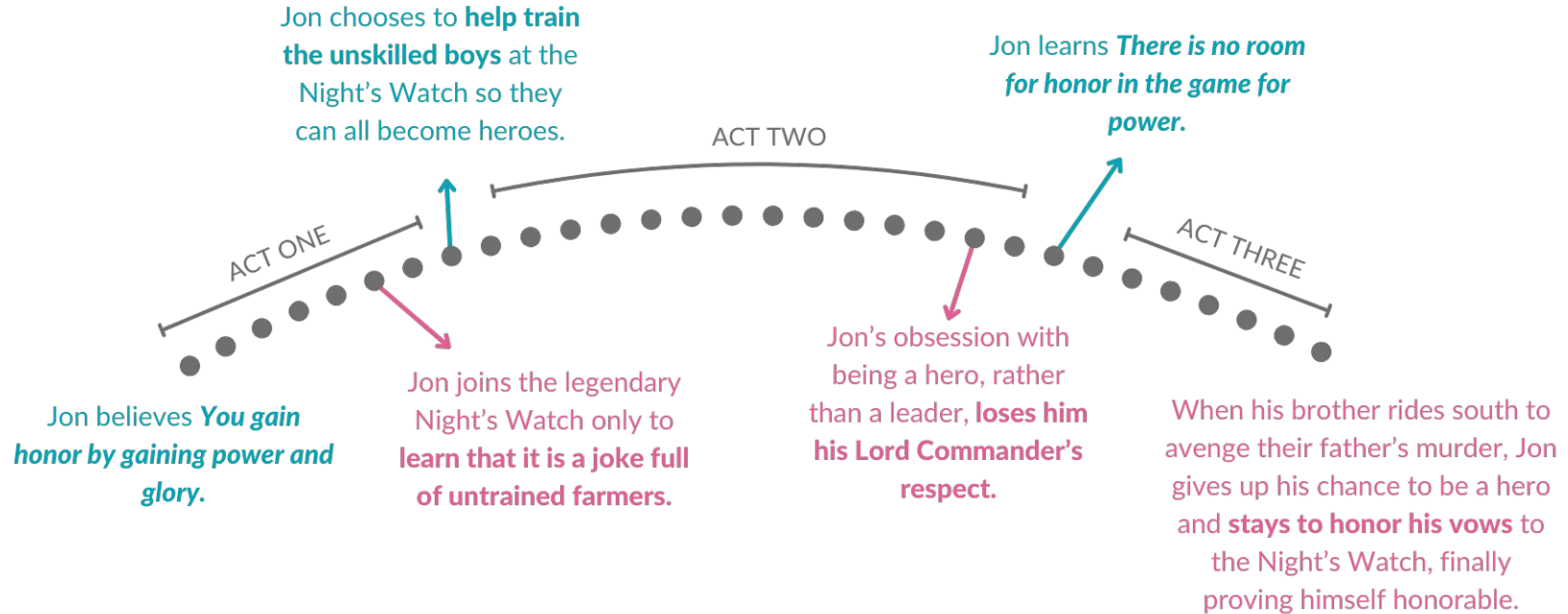
Positive Arc

examples out in the wild

Nora Stephens, *Book Lovers*



Jon Snow, *A Game of Thrones*



Positive Arc

a character changes for the better, with positive results

Negative Arc

a character fails to change for the better, with negative results

Static Arc

a character changes very little, but the world around them learns from and changes because of them

negative arcs

Your character experiences a negative internal transformation; they reject the opportunity to change and *fail* to unlearn their flaws.

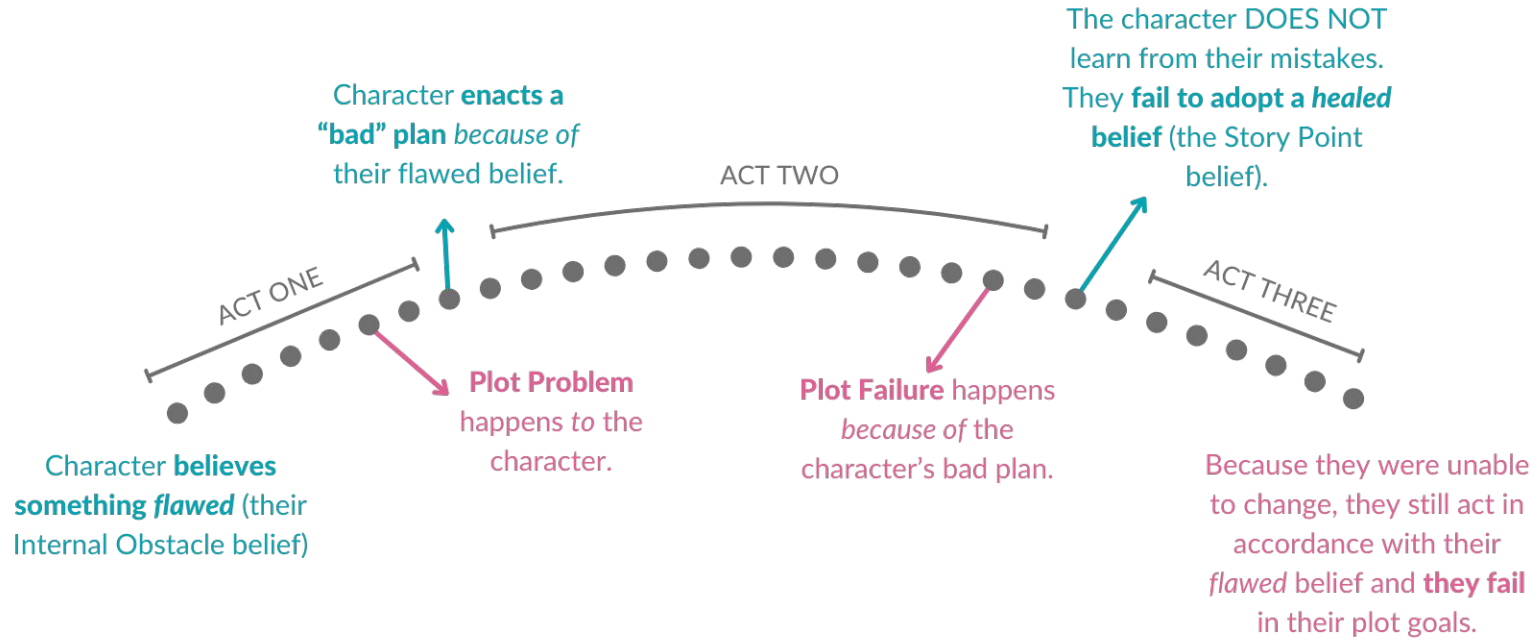
They fail to learn their lesson* and leave behind their flawed Internal Obstacle belief. The “negative consequences” of that failure to change plays out in the plot on the page—resulting in their ultimate failure to achieve their goals.

** In some negative arcs, the character indicates a temporary positive change, but ultimately is not able to act accordingly, sliding back into their Internal Obstacle belief.*

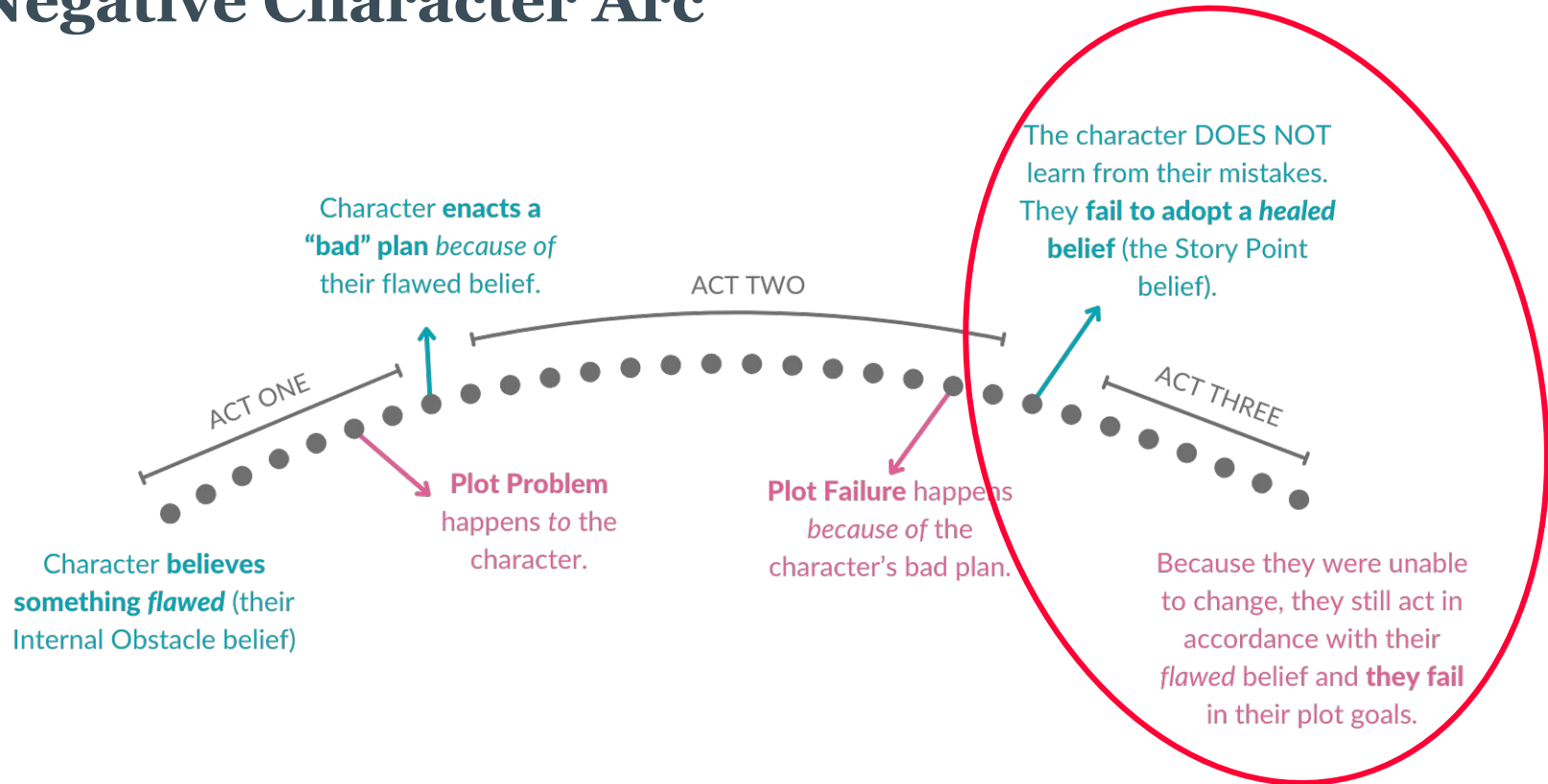
EXAMPLES:

- Anakin Skywalker, *Star Wars*
- Draco Malfoy, *Harry Potter*
- Michael Corleone, *The Godfather*

Negative Character Arc



Negative Character Arc

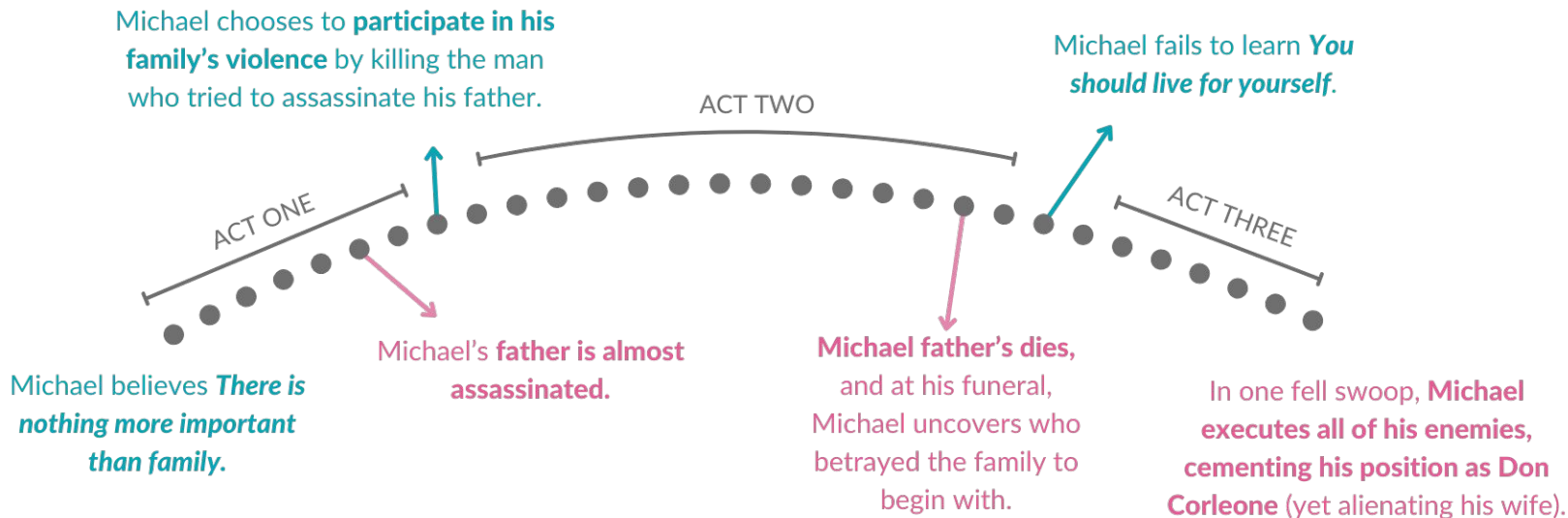




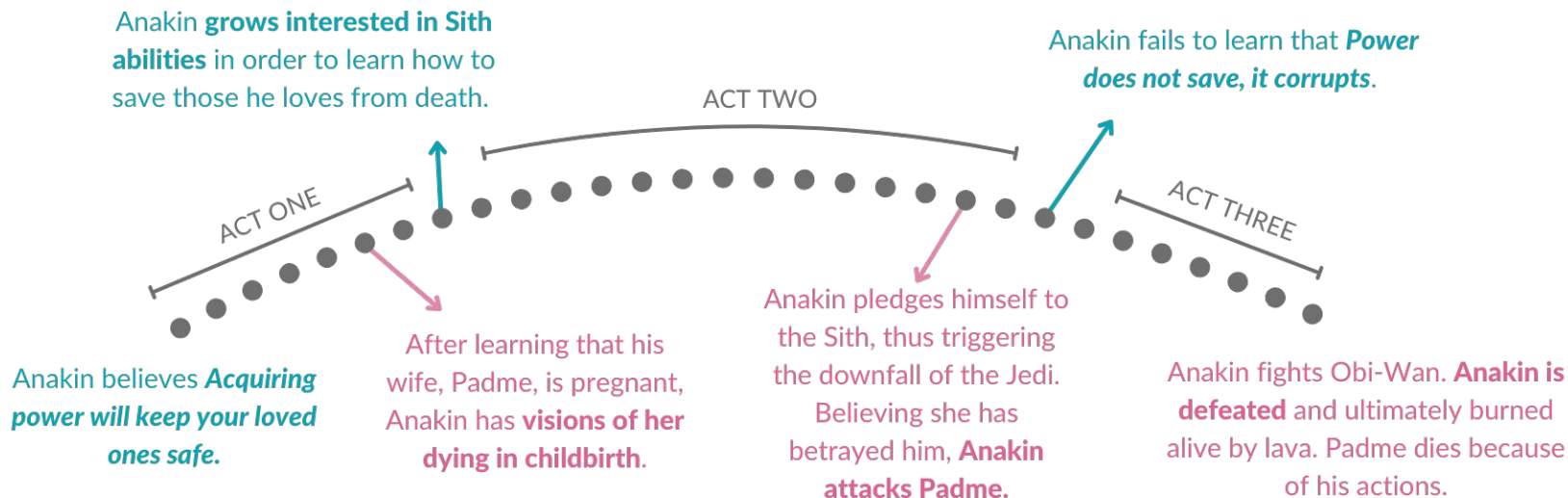
Negative Arc

example out in the wild

Michael Corleone, *The Godfather*



Anakin Skywalker, *Star Wars*



static arcs

Your character creates an *external change* in their world.


In static arcs, the character already knows a version of the Story Point or, in contrast, acts as a direct foil to it. These characters are working to create change in their environment *externally*, rather than internally. That change is usually exemplified in *another character* who has a positive or negative arc.

In a 'positive' static arc, the world / another character learns the lesson the static character is trying to teach them. In a 'negative' static arc, the world / another character does not learn the lesson the static character is trying to teach them.

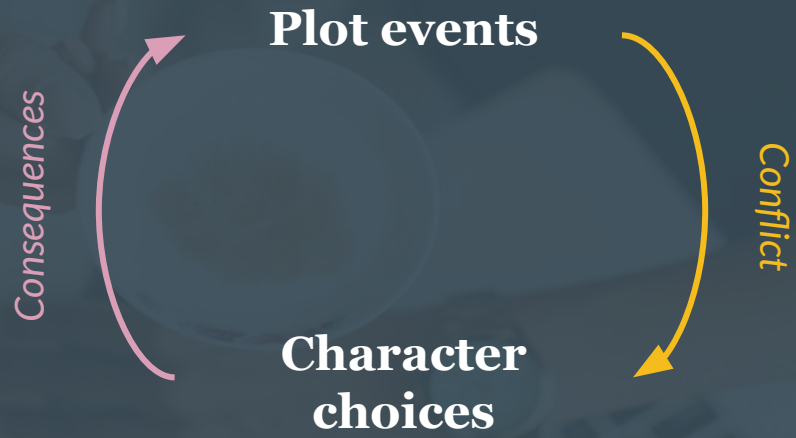
EXAMPLES:

- Evangeline, *Once Upon a Broken Heart* by Stephanie Garber (negative arc: Jacks)
- Gandalf the Gray, *Lord of the Rings* (positive arc: Frodo)

Everyone, listen to the podcast [Static / flat arcs with Lewis Jorstad](#)
Tenacious Writing friends, check out the class [Static Arcs with Lewis Jorstad](#)

A person is shown from a top-down perspective, writing on a laptop. A magnifying glass is held over the text, which is the central focus of the image. The background is a dark, muted blue color.

**Plotter? Pantser?
Here are some tips!**



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)

Everyone, check out our podcast [The versatility of the writing process](#)





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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](#)

further resources

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](#)

Psst... Not in TW? Join Tenacious at tenaciouswriting.com and get instant access to all of these resources and more!