



Booker's Seven Basic Plots.

seven plots, one deep shape.

A complete working guide to Christopher Booker's framework: the seven plot types nearly every story draws on, the single five-stage arc that runs beneath them, a worked example carried from the first glimpse of the monster to the world made whole, the mistakes that flatten each stage, and a printable stage sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you plan.

The seven basic plots were set out by British author and critic **Christopher Booker** in *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004), the product of more than three decades of work. Booker gathered stories from myth and scripture to modern film and argued that they draw on a small set of archetypal shapes, seven plot types resting on one underlying five-stage arc. His book is sweeping and, in places, contested. This guide takes only its most useful craft ideas and leaves the rest to the scholars.

What follows is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of the framework, covering what each of the five stages is for, how to write it, where drafts go wrong, and a running example so you can watch the shape move. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by Christopher Booker or his publisher. One orientation note before you start. Treat the seven types as a menu and the five stages as a spine. Pick the journey that matches your story, then use the stages to keep its pulse honest from first page to last.

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Why the seven plots share one shape.

seven stories the world keeps telling, one arc beneath them all.

Christopher Booker spent more than thirty years on a single argument. Strip away setting and surface, he wrote, and the vast majority of stories fall into seven recurring types: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, the Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. Each names a different journey a protagonist can take. Your story is not built from a template. It already belongs to one of these families, and knowing which one clarifies almost every choice that follows.

Booker's deeper claim is that beneath the seven types runs one shared rhythm, a five-stage arc that most of them follow. Anticipation, Dream, Frustration, Nightmare, Resolution. The monster you fight and the fortune you chase move through the same emotional weather, from a hopeful beginning through a false triumph to a reversal, a darkest hour, and release. The plot type tells you what your story is about. The five stages tell you how it breathes.

Use both together. Name your plot type first, then lay the five stages beneath it as a pulse to check against. One caution carries through the whole guide. Tragedy runs the same five stages as its six siblings, but its final stage completes a fall rather than a rescue. Same shape, opposite verdict.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A protagonist meets the power that will define them, enjoys early success, watches it collapse as the power shows its true scale, endures a final ordeal at the darkest hour, and emerges made whole. Unless the tale is a tragedy, in which case the same arc ends in ruin.

The engine: the self and the shadow.

one figure, incomplete, meeting the power that will remake or ruin them.

Under all seven types runs one dramatic engine. A protagonist begins in an incomplete state, missing something they cannot yet name. Against that lack rises an opposing power, a shadow the story must reckon with. It can be a monster, a rival, poverty, a temptation, an unknown country, or the protagonist's own flaw. The whole story is the long confrontation between the incomplete self and the power ranged against it, and every stage that follows measures how that confrontation is going.

What the five stages track is who wins. In six of the seven types the protagonist grows equal to the power and the world is made whole. In the seventh, tragedy, the power wins and the figure is destroyed. Same weather, opposite ending. Decide which you are writing before stage one, because that single choice changes the meaning of the dream, the depth of the nightmare, and whether the last stage heals a wound or seals a doom.

BUILD THE SPINE IN FOUR LINES

- **Protagonist + lack:** one figure, and the specific incompleteness this story will cure or expose.
- **The opposing power:** the monster, rival, poverty, temptation, or flaw strong enough to plausibly win.
- **Plot type:** which of the seven journeys this is. Name it out loud before you outline.
- **Ending sign:** made whole, or destroyed. Six types heal; tragedy alone does not.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET ROAN

*Our running example is an Overcoming the Monster tale, working title **Blackwater Fen**. Roan traps eels in a drowned peat marsh, reading its channels better than anyone since their late father. Something vast now hunts the flooded quarry at its heart. Livestock vanish, then the ferryman. Roan's lack is a life lived small in a father's shadow. The opposing power is the thing the villagers call the Hollow.*

Five stages, one deep shape.

the same descent whether you fight a monster or chase a fortune.

The five stages below are Booker's underlying rhythm, the skeleton beneath whichever of the seven types you are telling. A hopeful rise, a false peak, a reversal, a final ordeal, and release. The percentages are targets, not laws. The order and the logic are what bind, because each stage exists only because the one before it made it inevitable.

THE ASCENT

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 01 | Anticipation Stage - the call, the incomplete world | ~12% |
| 02 | Dream Stage - early success, premature triumph | ~35% |

THE REVERSAL

- | | | |
|----|--|------|
| 03 | Frustration Stage - control slips away | ~58% |
| 04 | Nightmare Stage - the final ordeal, darkest hour | ~82% |

THE RELEASE

- | | | |
|----|--|------|
| 05 | Resolution - the power broken, the world whole | 100% |
|----|--|------|

One note before the stages begin. Six of the seven types climb from the nightmare into the light. Tragedy runs the identical five stages but falls through the floor instead, its dream a seductive wrong turn and its resolution a ruin. Keep the geometry, and let your plot type decide the verdict at the end.

STAGE 01

TARGET ~12%

Anticipation.

the call, and the incomplete world it interrupts.

The story opens on a protagonist whose world is quietly incomplete, and on the first sign of the power that will define them. The monster stirs, the fortune glimmers, the far country beckons. Booker's first stage is the summons. Establish the ordinary life precisely enough that its lack can be felt, then let the coming force show itself on the horizon. The reader should end this stage knowing who the protagonist is, what they are missing, and what has just appeared to change it.

Hold the two halves in balance. Too much ordinary life and the summons feels late; too much monster and the world it threatens never registers. The anticipation is a promise, not the event. The protagonist may resist the call, ignore it, or stride toward it, but by the stage's end the adventure is real and the road back to page one is closing. What follows will test whether this figure can grow equal to what they have glimpsed.

ON THE PAGE

- Draw the ordinary world through one telling lack, not a tour. The reader must feel what is missing.
- Let the opposing power arrive as a glimpse, a rumor, a wake in the water. Suggestion beats spectacle here.
- Give the protagonist a reason to answer that grows from their lack, not from an errand handed in.

WATCH OUT

The buried call. If the reader cannot say what the story is now about by the end of stage one, the anticipation has not landed. Show the power, and show the lack it will exploit.

BLACKWATER FEN • ROAN

Blackwater Fen at dawn. Roan lifts empty eel traps from channels that have fed the family for three generations, the father's coracle still tied where he left it. A neighbor's ewe is gone, then the ferryman's skiff drifts back crewless. Out past the reed line, in the drowned quarry, the water lifts in a slow black swell no tide explains. The elders come to Roan, who alone still reads these waters.

STAGE 02

TARGET ~35%

Dream.

early success, and the taste of premature triumph.

Now the protagonist engages, and for a while everything goes well. The plan works, the ground is gained, the fortune rises, the far country dazzles. Booker calls this the dream stage because its pleasures are real but its security is an illusion. The protagonist begins to feel in control, even to believe the hardest part is behind them. Let them earn genuine wins here, so the reader shares the confidence that the next stage exists to puncture.

The craft trap is a dream too safe or too long. A triumph with no shadow at its edge reads as filler, and a reader who is never uneasy will not feel the turn. Plant the flaw inside the success. The victory that overreaches, the shortcut taken, the warning brushed aside. The protagonist's winning should quietly sow the seed of the coming reversal, so that stage three feels less like bad luck than like a bill arriving.

ON THE PAGE

- Give the protagonist a real win the reader can celebrate. Hollow success cheats the fall that follows it.
- Seed the reversal inside the triumph. The overreach or the ignored warning should be visible in the same scene.
- Keep the dream shorter than it wants to be. Confidence, established once, does not need repeating.

WATCH OUT

The endless dream. If early success runs on for half the story with no darkening edge, momentum dies before the turn. Let the reader glimpse the crack while the protagonist still cannot.

BLACKWATER FEN • ROAN

Roan reads the beast's hunting runs in the drift of feathers and scum, and sets weighted weirs across the narrow cuts. By the third night the traps hold torn hide the size of a door, and a severed limb no eel ever grew. The village hangs it in the smokehouse and toasts Roan by name. Roan sleeps easy for the first time in weeks, certain the Hollow is dying in its pit.

STAGE 03

TARGET ~58%

Frustration.

the first true confrontation. control slips away.

The dream cracks. The protagonist meets the opposing power for the first time at its real strength, and discovers the early wins were partial, or bait. What looked like the whole problem was a fraction of it. Booker's frustration stage is the turn from confidence to dread. The monster is larger than the wound suggested, the fortune reveals its debts, the strange country closes behind the traveler. From here the protagonist is no longer acting freely. They are responding.

This is where the story's true scale arrives, so make the reveal specific and costly. The frustration should trace back to the dream's overreach, paying off the seed you planted, rather than dropping a fresh threat from the sky. Take something the protagonist won in stage two, the ally, the standing, the tool, and turn it against them. The reader should feel the floor tilt, the same story suddenly steeper, with the exit quietly gone.

ON THE PAGE

- Reveal the power's true scale in a scene, not a summary. Frustration must be dramatized to be felt.
- Trace the reversal to the dream's overreach. The bill should be for something the protagonist already spent.
- Turn a stage-two asset into a liability. The won ally, tool, or standing now works against them.

WATCH OUT

The imported threat. A frustration that arrives as fresh bad luck, unconnected to the early triumph, feels arbitrary. Grow the reversal from the seed the dream planted, so the fall reads as consequence.

BLACKWATER FEN • ROAN

Roan returns to finish the kill and finds the weirs shredded, the severed limb already regrowing pale in the deep. The Hollow was never dying. It was learning Roan's cuts, letting the small ones close so the trapper would wade deeper. The father's channels, memorized like scripture, are exactly the map the beast has been hunting by. Every advantage Roan owns now belongs to the water.

STAGE 04

TARGET ~82%

Nightmare.

the climax of opposition. the darkest hour.

The opposition reaches its peak. The protagonist faces the power at full strength, cornered, stripped of the tools and allies that carried them this far. Booker's nightmare stage is the point where all seems lost, where the reader genuinely doubts the protagonist can survive, let alone win. The dramatic pressure is at its maximum, and the outcome hangs on the smallest margin. Whatever the story has secretly been about, this is the stage that forces it into the open.

Depth here is capital the resolution will spend, so do not cushion it. The plan fails, the last shelter falls, the power stands between the protagonist and the only way out. Yet the nightmare should also hand the protagonist the one thing they need, usually buried in what they had dismissed. The knowledge earned in stage one, the flaw finally understood, the strength they refused to use. The bottom is not only despair. It is where the answer hides.

ON THE PAGE

- Strip the protagonist of every stage-two advantage before the peak. A cornered figure with reserves is only inconvenienced.
- Put the power at maximum and the exit at zero. The reader must believe defeat is truly possible.
- Hide the resolution's key in the nightmare itself, in something the protagonist earlier ignored or refused.

WATCH OUT

The cushioned bottom. If the protagonist keeps a spare plan, a safe refuge, or an untouched ally, the darkest hour is only dim. Audit the nightmare and take back whatever softens it.

BLACKWATER FEN • ROAN

Night, no moon. The coracle stoves in on a sunken weir and Roan is thrown into the deep pit, the Hollow circling between the trapper and the last open channel. Wounded, weaponless, Roan clings to the drowned sluice-post at the quarry's mouth. Then a memory surfaces, the father's voice on the gate that once drained this pit for peat-cutting, its rusted wheel still somewhere under Roan's frozen hand.

STAGE 05

TARGET 100%

Resolution.

the power broken, the incomplete world made whole.

The turn from darkness to light. The protagonist, at the last possible moment, prevails. The monster is destroyed, the escape is made, the fortune is secured, the true self is born. Booker's resolution is not merely survival but completion. The lack established in stage one is answered, and the world the anticipation disturbed is restored on new terms. The victory must be won by the protagonist's own decisive act, powered by what the nightmare taught them.

Make the resolution proportional to the descent. A short, earned deliverance after a deep nightmare lands harder than a long celebration. Answer the story's real question, the one the lack has been asking, in an action rather than a speech. And if you are writing tragedy, this is where the shape inverts. The same five stages carry the protagonist not to wholeness but to destruction, the power winning, the flaw claiming its due. Choose which ending your type demands.

ON THE PAGE

- Put the decisive act in the protagonist's own hand, using what the nightmare revealed. No rescue from outside.
- Answer stage one's lack, not just the plot. The world restored should show the protagonist made whole.
- Keep it proportional and brief. A deep descent needs only a short, decisive deliverance to satisfy.

WATCH OUT

The refunded ending. A resolution that heals the wound for free, with no cost kept and no change earned, cheapens the nightmare that bought it. Let the victory carry a scar, and let the protagonist earn it alone.

BLACKWATER FEN • ROAN

Roan wrenches the old gate wheel. The sluice groans open and the quarry begins to empty, the black water sheeting out through the peat cuts. The Hollow, vast and beaching, thrashes down into the draining mud until the reed line goes still. At dawn Roan poles the mended coracle home under the father's name, the fen quiet, the traps to be reset. The trapper who reads the water is no longer anyone's shadow.

The seven plot types.

seven journeys the world keeps retelling. find yours here.

The five stages are the how. The seven types are the what. Below is each plot, its core movement, and the genres where it lives most naturally. Most stories are one type run cleanly, and many braid a second underneath.

THE SEVEN

- **Overcoming the Monster.** A hero confronts and defeats a great threat to the community. Fits horror, thrillers, action, war, and epic fantasy.
- **Rags to Riches.** An overlooked figure rises, falls, and rises again into their true worth. Fits coming-of-age, drama, and fairy tale.
- **The Quest.** A hero and companions journey toward a distant, vital goal against mounting trials. Fits adventure, fantasy, heist, and road stories.
- **Voyage and Return.** A protagonist falls into a strange world, is tested, and returns changed. Fits fantasy, sci-fi, satire, and portal tales.
- **Comedy.** Confusion and misunderstanding tangle lives, then unravel into union and reconciliation. Fits romance, farce, and ensemble comedy.
- **Tragedy.** A flaw or temptation drives the protagonist down to ruin. Fits drama, noir, literary fiction, and crime.
- **Rebirth.** A figure falls under a dark shadow, then is redeemed and renewed. Fits redemption drama, romance, and ghost tales.

Our running example, Blackwater Fen, is a clean Overcoming the Monster. Notice how neatly its five stages map, and how a hint of Rebirth runs under Roan stepping out of a father's shadow.

Adapting the frame.

choosing your plot, and braiding more than one.

CHOOSING YOUR PLOT TYPE

To find your type, ask what the opposing power actually is. A threat to be destroyed points to Overcoming the Monster; a distant goal to be reached, to the Quest; a rise from lowliness, to Rags to Riches; a strange world entered and left, to Voyage and Return; a tangle resolved into union, to Comedy; a flaw that ruins, to Tragedy; a soul in shadow redeemed, to Rebirth. The type you are already writing is usually visible in your ending. Name it, then hold the five stages beneath it.

COMBINING TYPES

Few rich stories are one pure type. A Quest can carry a Rebirth for its broken companion; a Rags to Riches often hides an Overcoming the Monster in its final act. The safe method is to choose one governing type, the shape of the whole, and let the others run as subplots or as a character's inner arc. Trouble comes when two types fight for the main spine, because their endings pull opposite ways, and the reader cannot tell whether the last stage should heal or destroy.

THE TRAGIC INVERSION

Tragedy is the shadow twin of the other six. It runs the identical five stages, but the dream is a seductive wrong turn, the frustration a warning ignored, and the nightmare a doom the protagonist has earned rather than survived. Its resolution completes the fall instead of the rescue. If your story darkens where the others brighten, you are not writing a broken plot. You are writing the seventh one, and it keeps the same clock.

Seven ways plots go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The buried call.** Stage one ends and the reader still cannot name the story or the threat. Fix: show the opposing power and the lack it will exploit in one early scene.
- **2. The endless dream.** Early success runs half the book with no darkening edge. Fix: shorten it, and plant the reversal's seed inside the triumph.
- **3. The imported frustration.** The turn arrives as fresh bad luck. Fix: grow the reversal from the dream's overreach, so the fall reads as a bill, not a coincidence.
- **4. The cushioned nightmare.** A darkest hour with reserves in the drawer. Fix: strip every stage-two asset and close the exit before the peak.
- **5. The rescued resolution.** Someone or something else defeats the power. Fix: put the decisive act in the protagonist's hand, using what the nightmare taught.
- **6. The refunded ending.** The wound heals for free, the cost quietly waived. Fix: keep a scar, and let the victory be paid for.
- **7. The two-spine tangle.** Two plot types fight for the main arc and the ending cannot choose. Fix: pick one governing type and demote the other to subplot.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any stage that feels wrong, ask two questions. Which of the five stages is this, and which of the seven types am I serving? A scene that cannot answer both is drifting off the shape, whatever else it accomplishes.

Your stage sheet.

print this page. one line per stage is enough to start.

PROTAGONIST + LACK

02 DREAM

35%

THE OPPOSING POWER

03 FRUSTRATION

58%

PLOT TYPE (ONE OF SEVEN)

04 NIGHTMARE

82%

01 ANTICIPATION

12%

05 RESOLUTION

100%

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

This entire stage sheet exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same five stages, a place to name your plot type, and a text box under each stage that saves as you type.

Read the stage, draft your story's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a complete arc in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/bookers-seven-plots

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