

How to Write Character Arcs: Adding Depth to Your Story's Players

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If you want to write a story that remains memorable long after readers finish your book, you must master the skill of creating realistic characters.

Any good story uses the evolution of the main character as a crucial focus. This change might happen externally or internally.

The journey of change is what readers can relate to, because just like the characters in the story, all of us undergo changes throughout our own lives.

Since the characters are what stick with us when we read a story, it's important to learn how to plot the protagonist's journey so that readers are eager to discover what happens next, but also so that the events progress in a logical, believable way.

One way of doing this is by making character arcs that leave readers cheering, heaving a sigh of relief, or crying by the time they turn the last page.

What Is a Character Arc?

A character arc is the psychological or emotional growth, development, and eventual transformation of your main character. It's an important part of [creating a great character](#).

When the protagonist undergoes a positive transformation, it logically results in a happy ending; when he undergoes a negative transformation, the result is a tragic ending for your readers.

As a writer, your main job is to understand how these changes happen in real life and present them in your writing in a realistic way so your readers to connect with the story.

What is a Positive Character Arc?

A *positive change arc* is simply one in which the protagonist undergoes a positive transformation. This usually includes a neat resolution at the end, where, because of their internal change, the character finally achieves their goals.

Joseph Campbell's popular story structure, [the Hero's Journey](#), complements a positive character arc perfectly.

An example of a positive character arc in classic literature is that of Marilla, the woman who adopts Anne in [Anne of Green Gables](#). Marilla starts off uninterested in keeping the little girl, but as the story progresses, we see her developing a subtle but strong affection for Anne.

Negative Character Arcs

But not all stories have a happy ending: a *negative change arc* is one that still shows how your character develops, but not toward a positive transformation.

Instead, this arc illustrates a downward spiral. However, the basic “arc” pattern remains the same, as it is still about how your protagonist starts one way and ends up another.

Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is a classic example of a negative character arc. From the beginnings of her adultery, Anna Karenina continues to spiral downward, only to reach a tragic end at the end of the book.

What Is a Flat Character Arc?

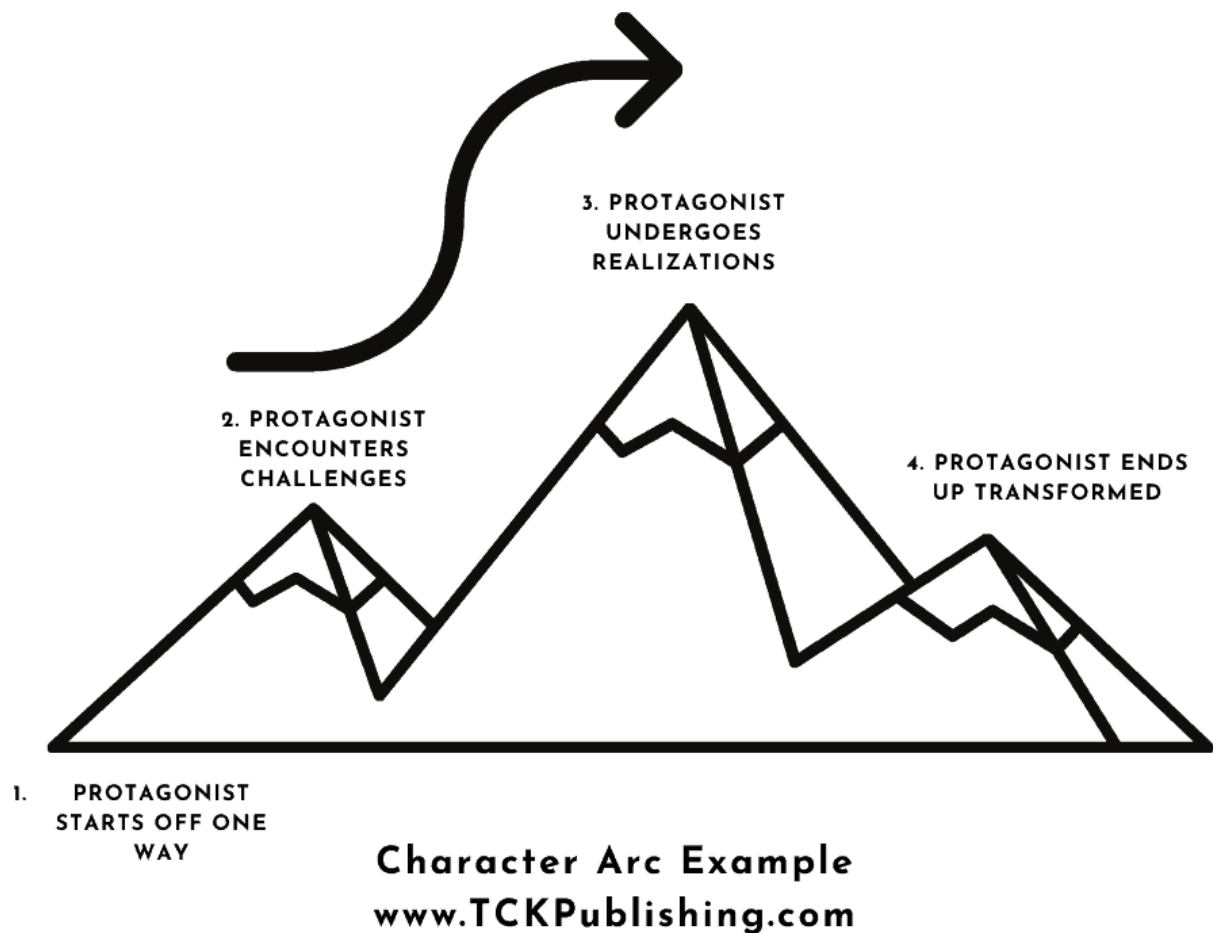
Another character arc is the *flat arc*, wherein the character already has their beliefs in place and uses them to solve problems throughout the story; but even as the story ends, the character remains mostly the same.

The development of Miss Maudie, the children’s aunt in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is an example of a flat character arc. She remains steadfast in her beliefs from her first scene until the end of the book.

How Do You Write a Character Arc?

In theory, the character arc sounds like this:

1. Your protagonist starts off one way.
2. They encounter obstacles and challenges.
3. They undergo self-realization.
4. They become transformed as a result of what they went through in the story.



But in practice, it may not be as simple as that. Why? Because every person, real or fictional, has several facets to their personality, and many factors play into why and how they became that person in the first place.

In fact, this means that it is virtually impossible to separate the character arc from the plot of your story.

The following steps will help you write a detailed character arc outline:

1. Decide on the theme of your story.

Every story needs to have a theme, or the point you want to drive home in your story. That will determine the character arc that you need to set in place.

For example, you may want to drive home the point that, *Love is the most important thing to have in deciding whom to marry*.

From this main point, you then think about what your character is initially like, and then what needs to happen for him to change into believing our main theme.

When you decide on this, you will then be able to think about your character.

2. Determine your character's motivation.

When you start to structure your characters, you should first define their goals. Every realistic fictional character has a goal, and the reader needs to understand why achieving that goal is important to them.

For example, your character may be a young man from a very small town who is on the lookout for a wife. That in itself seems to be a simple goal that anyone might have.

But what if he needs to find a wife not because he wants to get married for love, but because a deceased uncle's will stipulates that he can only claim his inheritance once he's married?

Because every story needs some kind of conflict to be interesting, you will need to think about what might hinder them from achieving their goals. This will usually lead you to step 3.

3. Define your character's invalid beliefs.

Now that your character has a goal, what is one wrong or limiting belief that's keeping them from reaching these goals? Think through a possibly debilitating belief that's hindering their progress.

Often, just as in real life, these beliefs are solidified early in childhood. So one way of doing this is to imagine a turning point in your character's past that led them to believe this way about things.

Returning to the same example from step 2, what if that character is actually the most eligible bachelor in that small tightly-knit community, with numerous chances of finding a perfect match? It doesn't make sense why he's not married yet.

But what if his back story is that, as a child, he witnessed his dad physically abusing his mom, and he has this wrong belief that the longer you stay with someone, the more cruelly you treat them? So every time he has a relationship with a woman that lasts longer than a year, he suddenly withdraws.

For your chosen character, write out a detailed scene of the first time that wrong belief took root. This forms a solid foundation for the way your character behaves throughout the story, giving you and your readers a predictable cause-and-effect pattern to follow.

Think through how his wrong belief is affecting his thoughts and decisions. You can jot down scenes that show how this wrong belief is further cemented.

4. Choose an opening point, nearest where something challenges this wrong belief

Now that you know what wrong belief keeps your protagonist “bound,” your story might start by challenging that wrong belief. This will give you a good opening point that will capture your readers’ attention quickly.

In our example above, perhaps we can open the story with the deceased uncle’s will being read, and our protagonist has just broken up with his 15th girlfriend, so he’s dumbfounded at the stipulation—because, at this point, he feels like he might never marry!

Remember, the character arc is not separate from your story’s plot. They go hand in hand: the plot contains the events that force your character to change.

Your protagonist started off believing and behaving one way, but the obstacles he meets will force him to make decisions.

Start to plot the specific points that will continuously challenge his wrong belief, leading to the climax where he has a self-realization and discovers the truth to replace his wrong belief.

In our example, this might include a series of challenges in our protagonist’s future relationships that cause him to rethink his life. Eventually, he finds the truth: that not all relationships go downhill, so he lets go of the belief that’s keeping him from marrying.

Now that you have an outline for your character arc, you can start writing your story in detail.

Does Every Character Need an Arc?

Generally, only the main characters need to have an arc in the story. If you put every single character on a journey of transformation, it might end up confusing your readers.

But keep in mind that the main characters may include more than just your protagonist. Showing how other important characters progress (or regress) throughout your story will help your readers stay connected to your story at the heart level—and that’s why they will remember your book long after they put it down.

Make Your Characters Unforgettable

Learning [how to write a dynamic protagonist](#) will help your story unfold in a more realistic and relatable way for your readers.

When developing your characters, think about some of your own favorites from film or literature, or even real people you know. You can find inspiration just about everywhere!