A Comparison of Seven Story Paradigms:

Dramatica®
Syd Field
Michael Hauge
Robert McKee
Linda Seger
John Truby
Christopher Vogler

How and Why Dramatica is Different from Other Story Paradigms

by Chris Huntley

I spent nearly sixteen years avoiding reading anything of substance by (Hollywood) story theorists such as Syd Field, John Truby, Christopher Vogler, Robert McKee and others. As co-creator of the Dramatica theory of story, I didn't want to influence my development of Dramatica so I avoided direct interaction with competing theories.

In 2006 I decided to lift my self-imposed ban. I figured my understanding of Dramatica was mature enough that I didn't have to worry about "contaminating" it by exposure to the competing theories. It was past time that I figured out how other story theories are similar and dissimilar to Dramatica, why they are different (assuming they are), and what those similarities and differences mean.

Originally written as a series of articles, I've reworked my findings into this single paper. I've divided the results into four major topics of comparison: Story Throughlines; Hero, Protagonist, and Main Character; Character Growth and Resolve; and Plot Structure. I've also included an overview of the source materials, some initial observations, and a summary at the end. I've tried to be as objective as I can and I'm always interested in feedback and notices of errors and omissions. Contact information is provided at the end.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

There are dozens of "how to" books on story structure, especially in the screenwriting field. I chose to compare the Dramatica theory of story with the story paradigms of six popular writing *gurus*: Syd Field, Michael Hauge, Robert McKee, Linda Seger, John Truby, and Christopher Vogler. Each has written books and lectured widely on the subject of story and story structure. The following describes my research for each author's work with a few personal comments added.

- SYD FIELD: I watched Syd Field's video, "*Screenwriting Workshop*." It's well made for a talking head instructional video though the opening music is cheesy. Syd comes across as warm and authoritative. He gives good writing advice.

- MICHAEL HAUGE: I watched the DVD, "*The Hero's 2 Journeys*," by Michael Hauge (*Writing Screenplays That Sell*) and Christopher Vogler (*The Writer's Journey*). The production values of this DVD were fair. Having these two story guys working together was very interesting. Their story paradigms appear to be very different but are surprisingly compatible. Both Hauge and Vogler are good speakers and communicators.

- ROBERT McKEE: I read Robert McKee's book, "*Story*." It's a good book with lots of great story examples. His "Chinatown" example of writing from the inside out is brilliant (pp 154-176) and shows his writing technique to its best advantage. There is no question that McKee loves story, knows film and theatre intimately, writes well, understands screenwriting as a specialized form, and has a lifetime of experience to back up his writing advice. In many ways, "*Story*" is inspirational. I recommend reading this book, especially if you are a screenwriter.

- LINDA SEGER: I read her seminal book, "Making A Good Script Great," (Seger, 1984) and read sections of two of her other popular books, "Creating Unforgettable Characters" (Seger, 1990), and "Advanced Screenwriting: Raising your Script to the Academy Award Level"

(Seger, 2003). Linda Seger's greatest strengths are in her methods of getting to the heart of an author's intent and her understanding of storytelling techniques—what a writer wants to say and how to express it effectively. She uses real world examples and has lots to say about writing, most specifically about writing screenplays. She is also one of the few well-known women in a predominantly male industry.

- JOHN TRUBY: For John Truby, I read through my business partner's class notes of Truby's basic story structure and advanced screenwriting workshops. These were compiled into fifty-one typed pages. Truby's workshops go far beyond story structure but the notes were more than sufficient for me to get the gist of Truby's story paradigm. Truby has some great descriptions of storytelling conventions in various genres.

- CHRISTOPHER VOGLER: I read Christopher Vogler's book, "*The Writer's Journey*" (2nd Edition). Chris Vogler has an engaging writing style and strong command of the English language. He goes out of his way to give credit where due and provides appropriate caveats for exceptions and rules. It seems honest, direct, and sincere. And, it goes into greater depth than the "*The Hero's 2 Journeys*" DVD. The greatest area of expansion over the DVD is discussion of his character archetypes.

- DRAMATICA: I used, "*Dramatica: A New Theory of Story*," Special Tenth Anniversary Edition, by Melanie Anne Phillips and Chris Huntley (Write Brothers, 2004) as my source for most of the Dramatica material. As co-author of the book and co-creator of the Dramatica theory of story, I was familiar with the material already.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Though the six non-Dramatica story paradigms I studied are different in their specifics, I was surprised to find that most more or less fit into one of two broad categories. The first category I call the *post-Aristotelian* story paradigm. This category finds its roots in the work of Lajos Egri (*The Art of Dramatic Writing!*) who significantly expanded the function of Character in story beyond Aristotle's *Poetics*. Its adherents include Syd Field, Michael Hauge, and Robert McKee. The second category I call *The Hero's Journey* story paradigm and finds its roots in adaptations of Joseph Campbell's work (*Hero with a Thousand Faces*). Its devotees include John Truby and Christopher Vogler. Linda Seger falls mostly into the first category, but acknowledges and incorporates the concepts of the hero's journey as one of several "myth" forms a story may use.

By contrast, Dramatica does not fall neatly into either category. It appears to be a much broader story paradigm—one that encompasses elements from both categories and then some.

Another generalization is that each of the non-Dramatica story paradigms assumes your story has a Main Character (or Hero) who Changes and is also the Protagonist in a story with a happy ending (Success/Good). With Seger the exception, lip service was given to the idea of *steadfast* main characters. These structural elements seemed somewhat rigid and overly specific. I assumed that there was more to their understanding of story, so I dug further.

While reading "The Writer's Journey," I was surprised that many of Vogler's observations about character and the hero's journey "felt" right. Specifically, Vogler discussed the "meaning" of certain archetypes or events in the story and how they correlate to "meaning" in the real world. So much of it sounded good and useful, but I also saw all the conditions where those observations didn't hold up—places where too many assumptions are made, such as the nature of a Hero. Vogler bends over backwards to illustrate exceptions to the Hero definition. So many that they seem to void any sense of "rules" to go by. But that's not what really bothered me.

What bugged me was that there seemed to be some "Truth" to his observations about character and plot. These truths didn't contradict Dramatica so much as suggest deficiencies in the Dramatica theory. It wasn't until I was talking this over with someone that I had an "aha" moment of clarity. I related how Vogler talked about what elements in a story meant.   That's when it clicked.

An early axiom determined in the development of the Dramatica theory was this: If you look for *meaning* in your story, you cannot *predict* how to put your story together. If you want to *predict* how to put your story together, you cannot know what your choices will *mean*. In other words, you can try to find meaning in a work OR you can predict how to put it together—but not at the same time from within the same context. Why? The short answer is that we use one as the given in order to evaluate the other. When looking for meaning, we assume a particular story structure. When looking for structure, we assume a particular meaning (author's intent). It's tied to the same reason we can see light as particles and waves, just not at the same time within a single context. One aspect defines the basis for the other. Story structure provides the basis for seeing meaning in the story. Meaning provides the basis for understanding and manipulating structure in a story.

In other words, meaning is tied to the audience's experience of the story while structure is tied to the author's perspective of the story. The audience perspective allows a synthesis of the underlying story elements to discover its "meaning." The author's perspective assumes a given meaning (author's intent) and allows manipulation of the arrangement of the story's structure and dynamics. Using the appropriate context is important.

For example, Robert McKee approaches story from the audience's perspective whereas Dramatica approaches it from the author's perspective. McKee speaks of author and audience but always with an eye on the story's meaning—a view only available to someone looking at story from the inside. This view is great for understanding audience reception but limited when trying to fix story structure problems. In this regard McKee is in the same boat as Syd Field, Christopher Vogler, Michael Hauge, Lajos Egri and probably most all other story mages.

One major difference between Dramatica and more traditional story theories seems to be this:

- Dramatica works with story from the objective author's view that allows writers to clearly manipulate elements of a story's structure. From this author's perspective, it is difficult to find the meaning of specific author's choices.

- Many other story theories work with story from the subjective audience's view that allows writers to see the meaning of flow and elements of the story. From this audience's perspective, it is difficult to predict which story elements are essential and how they should go together.

In retrospect this seems obvious. I've known that many story gurus developed their ideas from examining lots and lots of stories. I know Dramatica WASN'T created that way—we developed the theory by identifying the underlying story rules and elements existing in all stories[1]. All it took was recognizing the difference in perspective (audience vs. author) and the difference in intent (meaning vs. prediction) to understand how Dramatica is fundamentally unlike the other story paradigms.

So the question was how this difference in perspective manifested itself in understanding the nature of Story.

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[1] The Dramatica theory posits that stories are models of human psychology, specifically metaphors for the mechanisms of a mind attempting to resolve an inequity.

STORY THROUGHLINES

A key concept in Dramatica is that all complete stories have four separate but interrelated storylines that are present from the beginning to the end of the story called *Throughlines*. This differs from Syd Field, Michael Hauge, Robert McKee, Linda Seger, John Truby, and Christopher Vogler who, each in his or her own way, describe at most two *essential* storylines.

In simplified terms:

- Syd Field describes a dramatic structure he calls *The Paradigm,* which is a plot structure with a Main Character woven in.

- Hauge describes two throughlines as the Outer Journey (plot) and the Inner Journey (journey to fulfillment for the Hero).

- McKee describes two throughlines blended together—collectively called *The Quest* and the *Central Plot*.

- Seger describes an "A Story" or "story spine" as the major thread of a story coupled with Main Character development.

- Truby describes two throughlines blended together in his "*22 Building Blocks*" of story (which is an expansion of his *7 Major Steps in Classic Structure*). These two throughlines are similar to Vogler's hero's inner and outer journeys.

- Vogler describes two throughlines as the Hero's Journey and the Hero's Inner Journey.

The two throughlines found in each of the other story paradigms correlate to two of Dramatica's four throughlines:

- The Overall Story Throughline (the objective, "big picture" thread) closely resembles Vogler's Hero's Journey, Hauge's Outer Journey, much of Field's plot structure, McKee's Central Plot, Seger's story spine or 'A Story,' and the Desire part of Truby's *22 Building Blocks*.

- The Main Character Throughline (the character through whose eyes the audience experiences the story) closely resembles Vogler's Hero's Inner Journey, Hauge's Inner Journey, Field's main character development, McKee's The Quest, Seger's main character development, and the Need part of Truby's *22 Building Blocks*.

The two Dramatica throughlines not clearly defined, not deemed essential, or just plain absent in the other story paradigms are:

- The Impact Character Throughline—The character whose alternative perspective forces the Main Character to address his personal issues.

- The Main Character vs. Impact Character (MC/IC) Throughline—The relationship between the main and impact characters that counters the objectivity of the Overall Story throughline by adding a passionate, subjective perspective.

It is inaccurate to say these two throughlines are altogether absent from the other story paradigms. Here's what each seems to offer:

- Field doesn't adequately describe anything identifiable as either the Impact Character throughline or the MC/IC relationship throughline.

- Hauge has bits of the Impact Character blended into his Nemesis and Reflection characters. One function of the Reflection character is to reveal the Hero's inner conflict. A function of the Nemesis character is to embody the Hero's inner conflict. His Romance character implies a relationship throughline—and by extension an Impact Character—but only appears in stories with romantic relationships.

- Seger's "B Story" subplot is similar to (but not the same as) Dramatica's Main Character vs. Impact Character (MC/IC) Throughline. Where Dramatica's MC/IC throughline describes an essential emotional component of the story specific to the relationship between the Main Character and the Impact Character, Ms. Seger's relationship subplots include *any* important relationship explored in the story (e.g. according to Seger, Tootsie has five subplots ["Making a Good Script Great, p. 38]). Seger's *catalyst* character loosely resembles Dramatica's Impact Character (IC) Throughline. The idea of the Seger's catalyst character is sound, but Seger's description of its development is limited and overly generalized.

- McKee's "*Quest*" is really a blend of what Dramatica calls the Overall Story throughline and the Main Character throughline. McKee calls the Overall Story the protagonist's Quest for his conscious desire, and the Main Character throughline as the protagonist's Quest for his unconscious desire. He sees relationship throughlines (e.g. romances) as non-essential subplots separate from the *Quest/Central Plot*. So, like the other paradigms, McKee sees two threads of a single *Central Plot*, not four. BUT—McKee is aware that there are at least three areas in which a character finds conflict. He calls them Inner Conflicts, Personal Conflicts, and Extra-personal Conflicts.

  Implied in McKee's three levels of conflict are the makings of three of the four throughlines. I say "implied" because the throughlines are neither deemed essential nor explicit. They are presented as a set of writer's tools available to create conflict for his characters. The Inner Conflicts are those associated with Dramatica's Main Character throughline. The Extra-personal Conflicts are those associate with Dramatica's Overall Story throughline. The Personal Conflicts are a strange blend of Dramatica's Impact Character throughline and Main Character vs. Impact Character relationship throughline. McKee lumps friends, family, and lovers in the Personal Conflicts level and describes them by their relationship to the Innermost Self. He obviously recognizes the importance of the MC/IC Relationship throughline but can't seem to separate it from the Main Character (I) perspective. His writer's instincts are on target, he just doesn't describe how they all fit together objectively. That's the disadvantage of analyzing and creating stories from the audience's perspective.

- Truby identifies an Impact-like character in his Opponent. However, his Opponent character is intimately tied to functions of an antagonist in the Overall Story throughline that limits its flexibility. Truby understands the importance of the special relationship between the Hero and the Opponent, but does not describe or imply the need for a special throughline for this relationship for the duration of the story.

- Vogler's character Archetypes may embody aspects of the Impact Character, but their functions in the story may or may not correspond to the functions of the Impact Character. Vogler describes many relationships between the Hero and the other characters in the story, but none is specific enough to constitute a MC/IC throughline.

Stories without an Impact Character throughline and Main Character vs. Impact Character relationship throughline feel incomplete for a number of reasons:

- It is the Impact Character that forces the Main Character to address his personal issues. The Impact Character represents an alternative way to resolve the Main Character's problems and as long as it is around the Main Character cannot ignore it. So, to get the Main Character to deal with his personal problems, the Impact Character needs to be present (in some form or another) for the entire story. No Impact Character throughline—no realistic Main Character growth.

- The Main Character vs. Impact Character (MC/IC) relationship throughline provides the "passionate" perspective in the story. Whether the relationship is romantic, professional, familial, or otherwise, the conflicts in the relationship provide an emotional connection for the audience. Without the MC/IC throughline, the story lacks heart.

As a theory of Story, Dramatica offers an explanation for why a story has four throughlines and not one, two, three, five, seven, or any other number. Here's the nutshell version:

Dramatica defines a story (grand argument story) as an analogy to a human mind trying to resolve an inequity. In other words, stories are fictional representations of problem solving.

There are four perspectives available to everyone while trying to identify and resolve troubles.

In our own lives:

- We can experience firsthand what it is like to have a personal problem (the "I," Main Character perspective).

- We can experience firsthand what it is like for someone to have an alternative viewpoint on a problem (the "you," Impact Character perspective).

- We can experience firsthand what it is like to have a troubled relationship (the "we," MC/IC perspective).

- BUT, we CANNOT experience firsthand what it is like to stand outside ourselves and objectively see how we're connected to a problem (the "they," Overall Story perspective).

On the other hand, in other people's lives:

- We CAN experience firsthand what it is like to stand outside of them and objectively see how they're connected to a problem (the "they," Overall Story perspective).

- We can experience firsthand what it is like to have a troubled relationship with them (the "we," MC/IC perspective).

- We can experience firsthand what it is like to have an alternative viewpoint on a problem (the "you," Impact Character perspective).

- BUT, we CANNOT experience firsthand what it is like to be in that person's troubled shoes (the "I," Main Character perspective).

Stories have four throughlines because that's the number of unique perspectives we can experience firsthand in real life. Within the context of our own lives we can see three directly and one indirectly. Within the context of other people's lives we can see a different set of perspectives directly and a different one indirectly. In real life, we never get the whole picture.

Here's an amazing thing about grand argument stories: Complete stories provide an author and audience all four perspectives within the single context of the story. They give us something we cannot get in real life. And THAT's one of the reasons why audiences can watch or listen to a story over and over. Even after the storytelling has gone stale, stories give the audience an experience it cannot have in real life. Stories without all four throughlines lose this special quality and diminish their effectiveness in moving an audience.

HERO, PROTAGONIST, AND MAIN CHARACTER

This brings me to another way in which Dramatica is different from other story paradigms.

- Syd Field calls the principle character in a story the Main Character. The Main Character is driven by a Dramatic Need (goal) and a strong point of view.

- Robert McKee calls the principle character in a story the Protagonist. "The PROTAGONIST has the will and capacity to pursue the object of his conscious and/or unconscious desire to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre."

- Linda Seger calls the principle character in a story the Main Character: "The main character is the protagonist. This is who the story is about. This is the person who we're expected to follow, to root for, to empathize with, to care about. Almost always it's a positive figure. It's the hero of the story…" [Making a Good Script Great, p 161].

- John Truby calls his principle character the Hero. The Hero has an internal journey to satisfy an inner Need and an external journey to achieve his Desire.

- Both Vogler and Hauge call the principle character in a story the Hero. The Hero goes on two parallel journeys: The Outer Journey (plot) and the Inner Journey (a journey of fulfillment).

Dramatica separates the concept of the character that leads the efforts to achieve the Story Goal (protagonist), from that of the character through whose eyes the audience experiences the story on a personal level (Main Character).

- The Protagonist is one of many Objective Characters in the Overall Story throughline. The objective characters are defined by their function in the Overall Story throughline. For example, an archetypal protagonist represents the motivation to pursue and consider the goal and problems. Other objective characters in the Overall Story throughline include archetypes such as the antagonist, the sidekick, the skeptic, and others.

- The Main Character is a Subjective Character and gives the audience a personal view inside the story. It is through the Main Character's perspective that the audience gets the first person (I), "This is what it's like to have personal problems" experience. The other principle Subjective Character is the Impact Character who consciously or unconsciously challenges the Main Character's world view by offering an alternative way of seeing or doing things.

One advantage to separating the Main Character from the Protagonist is to be able to work with the Main Character and Overall Story throughlines separately. Here's a simple example:

Let's say the Overall Story Goal is to find the Holy Grail. Bob is the protagonist leading the efforts to find it. Fred is the antagonist and wants the Holy Grail to remain hidden at all costs. We also have Sally, Bob's assistant and sidekick, and Angela, Fred's skeptical sister.

So, who is the Main Character?

Anybody we want.

Following storytelling convention, we would make protagonist Bob the Main Character. A "hero" is typically both the Main Character and Protagonist, among other things.   Perhaps we want to get the personal view from "the other side" and make skeptical sister Angela the Main Character. We might want to go the Sherlock Holmes route and make the sidekick, Sally, the Main Character—a la Watson in the *Sherlock Holmes* books.   Or we might want to pick the antagonist as the Main Character. By separating their "objective" functions from their "subjective" functions, Dramatica lets you go beyond the confines of storytelling conventions. And that is the simplest advantage of separating the two.

Though connected, each Dramatica throughline has unique story elements and dynamics.

CHARACTER GROWTH AND RESOLVE

Character change is a major element of most story paradigms.

Syd Field says there are four major qualities that make a good character:

- Dramatica Need—What does the Main Character want to gain, get or achieve?

- Strong Point of View—The way the Main Character views the world

- Attitude—The Main Character's manner or opinion

- CHANGE—Does your Main Character change during the course of the story?

Robert McKee sees change as an essential part of a protagonist [Main Character]: "Character Arc—The finest writing not only reveals true character, but arcs or changes that inner nature, for better or worse, over the course of the telling." [*Story*, p 104]

Christopher Vogler sees change as an essential part of the hero's journey: "CHANGE—Heroes don't just visit death and come home. They return changed, transformed. No one can go through an experience at the edge of death without being changed in some way." [*The Writer's Journey*, p 160]

Michael Hauge describes the hero [Main Character] change as an inner journey of fulfillment, a character arc from fear to courage. This is a journey from the hero's identity—the character's protective mask; his sense of self—to the hero's essence; the truth of the character after all of a character's identity is removed.

Linda Seger describes character development in terms of a Character Spine and a Transformational Arc.

John Truby describes how the hero must undergo a change (self-revelation) during the Battle step in the Classic Structure. According to Truby, self-revelation strips away the hero's façade and is the most heroic thing a hero does.

Dramatica treats character change a bit differently. For one thing, Dramatica makes a distinction between a Main Character's personal growth and his resolve. Here's the distinction between growth and resolve:

- *Character Growth*: In order for a character to change or remain steadfast, a character needs to be able to distinguish between the source of conflict and its symptomatic effects. The character is "blinded" from seeing both by either being too close or too far from the problem. The character growth brings the character to the point where all options are visible to the character. Character growth is akin to a "character arc."

- *Character Resolve*: Once a character has grown, it can stay the course (remain steadfast) or radically alter its perspective (change). Character Resolve is not a value judgment, nor is it a description of what could or should have happened. Identifying a character's resolve is simply determining whether the character's perspective is fundamentally the same or different.

Syd Field's paradigm only allows for Change Main Characters and does not do much to describe different types of growth necessary to change the character, only that growth must occur for the character to change. He suggests there is an event in the main character's life that emotionally parallels and impacts the story. He calls this, "The Circle of Being." This traumatic event happens to the main character when he is twelve to eighteen years old. Change, then, is the emotional resolution of the emotional scar. His paradigm does not leave much room for steadfast main characters.

Robert McKee's paradigm equally emphasizes main character growth (i.e. Character Arc) and a main character resolve. Though McKee's descriptions of the forces that drive a character's growth seem more sophisticated than Field's, he ends up in the same place: a Change Main Character. There is either no room for steadfast main characters in his paradigm or they exist outside its boundaries. Either way, I could not find references to steadfast main characters in Robert McKee's "*Story*."

Both Christopher Vogler and Michael Hauge describe the main character's growth as the Hero's Inner Journey. Like the others, they inexorably tie the main character's resolve (Change) to the journey (growth). In their DVD, "*The Hero's 2 Journeys*," Vogler acknowledges that some heroes remain steadfast but does not describe how this might fit or alter the hero's journey.

Not surprisingly, John Truby's paradigm follows Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" and sees change as a component of a "good hero." Accordingly, Truby says true character change involves the challenging and changing of the hero's basic beliefs, which lead to new moral actions. Character's growth is made part of the story structure, but leaves no room for deviation from an ultimate, self-revelatory change. Steadfast heroes are not an option.

Seger's character spine "is determined by the relationship of motivation and action to the goal" [Making a Good Script Great, p110]. This may describe character growth depending on other factors. My interpretation of Seger's intent is that the character spine is part character growth and partially a description of the efforts of a protagonist trying to achieve the Story Goal. Seger's transformational arc describes when a character "comes to the story with certain attitudes, actions, and emotions, and leaves the story having made changes on each of these levels. These changes create the beats which make up the transformational arc" [Making a Good Script Great, p 147]. This probably describes more of the character growth, but definitely describes a change character. I was happy to see that Seger acknowledged steadfast main characters.

Many great stories involve characters that remain steadfast against all efforts to change them. Moreover, the fact that they "stay the course" is an essential component of each story's message.

Imagine Job in the Old Testament of the *Bible* telling God he's had too much and is throwing in the towel, or Dr. Richard Kimble in "*The Fugitive*" giving up his search for the one-armed man and heading off to Bermuda. Both might work as stories but their meaning would be changed considerably. To tell the stories successfully, each would be constructed differently from the originals so that the character growth naturally led to the new character resolve.

How is a main character's growth affected by the character's resolve?

The answer is simple and significant:

- ***Change Main Character Growth***: A change main character comes to the story with pre-existing "baggage" in the form of justifications (inner walls) that blind the character to his personal problem. Whether you call the baggage the character's *problem* (Dramatica), *wound* (Hauge), *inner problem* (Vogler), *unconscious desire* (McKee), *Circle of Being* (Field), *motivation* (Seger), or *Need* (Truby), the main character comes to the story "fully loaded" and ripe for change. Each act describes the tearing down of the justifications that hide the main character's personal problem from his direct awareness. Once the character has grown enough to see beyond the justifications and recognize the true nature of his personal problems can he then fundamentally alter his worldview (change).

- ***Steadfast Main Character Growth***: A steadfast main character generally starts off at the beginning of the story with everything in balance. An external force disrupts this balance and the main character responds by committing to a method of restoring balance. Each act describes the main character's efforts to reinforce his commitment as external forces grow and change. Once the character has reached the edge of his breaking point—when the limit of his efforts to reinforce his motivations match that of the maximum external pressure to alter course—he makes one last commitment and forms a justification that blinds him from his initial choice of action. In this way he remains steadfast in his resolve.

By allowing for Main Characters who change and Main Characters who remain steadfast, Dramatica opens up the story world to the other half not adequately explained by other paradigms. These include steadfast main characters such as Romeo in "*Romeo and Juliet*," Jim Starke in "*Rebel Without A Cause*," Jake Barnes in "*The Sun Also Rises*," Clarice Starling in "*Silence of the Lambs*," and Jake Gittes in "*Chinatown*."

By separating character growth from character resolve, Dramatica lets you determine both where your character goes and how he gets there. This gives authors flexibility in forming their stories. It also better represents the choices we have in real life and therefore brings greater verisimilitude to an audience's story experience.

Unlike the other non-Dramatica paradigms, Seger allows for character growth and character resolve. Her film examples are excellent and varied. However, their value in story construction is limited because her descriptions of how to implement them are too generalized. This is further complicated by Seger's interlocking of the functions of the protagonist with the perspective of the main character.

PLOT STRUCTURE

Plot structure is the temporal backbone of a story. Stories need plot structure to hold them together. Story paradigms need plot structure to explain how to create plots for stories and how to recognize and fix plot problems. A simple plot structure supports a simple plot. A complex plot structure supports complex plots. An ideal plot structure supports both simple and complex plot structures.

Comparing different plot structure paradigms is both easier and more difficult than I expected. There are a lot of similarities between the various plotting systems, as well as areas of difference. I chose not to do an exhaustive comparison. Instead, I chose to focus on the one area each story paradigm manages to integrate (one way or another)—Act Structure.

Here's my plan of attack:

- Begin with a word about author and audience.

- Give a general overview of my findings about Plot.

- Show each system with some brief descriptions.

- Share some initial observations and comparisons.

- Evaluate Dramatica's comparative strengths and weaknesses.

A WORD ABOUT AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE

Human minds are natural problem-solvers and pattern matchers. When something is missing, we natur lly fill in the bl nks. (See what I mean? You filled in the blanks with letters, didn't you? But, you didn't fill in the spaces *between* the words.) We feel compelled to complete patterns when we notice they're incomplete. If we cannot adequately fill in the missing pieces, we hide the incomplete pattern from our considerations. Literally, out of sight, out of mind. Hiding things from us blinds us to them. These blind spots, however, can show up in our work and create difficulties for us in our writing. That's where external story paradigms can help our writing. They remind us of how stories work—how they are put together.

Every writer wears several hats. Two important hats are that of author and audience. These are very different roles and every writer plays both of them over the development life of a story. The author is the story's "creator." He has god-like knowledge and power to shape the story. The audience is the story's interpreter. It experiences the story as it is delivered even though the story is colored by the audience's biases and interpretive abilities.

The tools, skills, and motivations of an author are different than those of an audience. As "god" in the story universe, an author creates and arranges the various story elements including characters, theme, genre, and plot. How the story is put together communicates the author's intent. Rarely a passive receiver, the audience decodes the bits of story in an effort to uncover the author's intent. The audience also searches for meaning in the patterns found in and created by the story.

Sometimes a complete and sensible plot from the author's perspective is incomplete and confusing from the audience's perspective. When the audience finds holes in the story, it fills them from its own experience. When the holes are too big to fill or the story pieces don't fit together, the bond between author and audience is broken. That's when the writer, as author, needs help fixing the story problems.

Which brings us to the plot paradigms under consideration.

OVERVIEW

The seven plot paradigms explored are Syd Field's *Paradigm*, Robert McKee's *Central Plot* and *The Quest*, John Truby's *Twenty-Two Building Blocks*, Christopher Vogler's *Hero's Journey*,

Michael Hauge's *Six Stage Plot Structure*, Linda Seger's *Story Spine*, & and Dramatica's *Act Structure*.

I'd like to acknowledge that the plot paradigm examples I use here are simplifications of the originals. The illustrations I use are designed to emphasize the similarities, not the differences. I've chosen to give each paradigm the maximum comprehensiveness while remaining true to the creator's intent and maintaining simplicity.

After building illustrations for each of the plot paradigms I was surprised to see how structurally similar they are to each other. While each is unique, it is quite easy to make broad comparisons and point out Dramatica's obvious differences.

Most of the paradigms conform to the four-act structure—four more-or-less equal segments. Some systems define "acts" differently, but the pattern appears in most, even if the segments are subdivided or labeled differently (e.g. Act I; Act II-Part 1; Act II-Part 2; Act III). The exceptions to the four-act structure are McKee, Seger, and Truby. McKee and Seger use the more traditional three-act structure, while Truby a heavily modified three-act form.
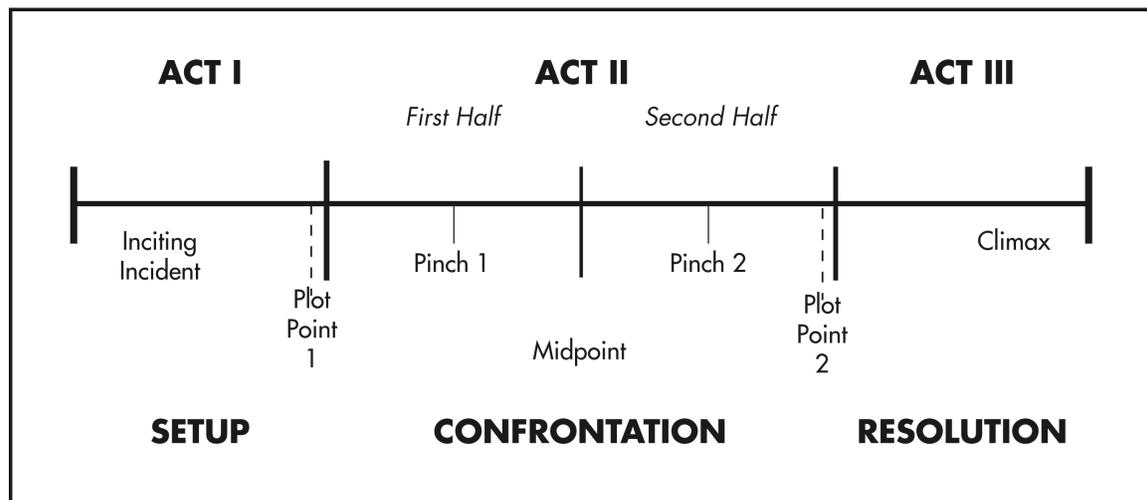
Looking at the various plot paradigms, it's easy to see how most of the paradigms only explore two throughlines: an inner journey and an outer journey.

So, without further ado, let's look at the plot paradigms.

PLOT PARADIGM ILLUSTRATIONS

Example 1: The Syd Field *Paradigm*.

The Syd Field "Paradigm"

Field's *Paradigm* is a four-act structure masquerading as a three-act structure. It starts with a setup and inciting incident, has regular turning points in the plot called "plot points" and "pinches" in the middles, and ends with a climax and resolution. Though not apparent in the illustration, the *Paradigm* describes both the external journey involving the attempt to achieve the story goal and the internal journey of the Main Character.

Example 2: Robert McKee's *Central Plot* and *The Quest*

McKee uses two different graphic examples to illustrate plot. The first is a simple linear timeline called the *Central Plot*.

Robert McKee "Central Plot"

McKee's *Central Plot* is a modified three-act structure. It begins with an inciting incident, proceeds with progressive complications, and ends with a crisis, climax, and resolution. What is not shown is McKee's system of using beats to build scenes, scenes to build sequences, and sequences to build acts. His third act is slightly shorter than the last act in the four-act structure examples. The McKee second act picks up the extra time and is slightly longer than the combined middle acts of a four-act structure.

The second graphic McKee uses is called *The Quest*.

Robert McKee "THE QUEST"
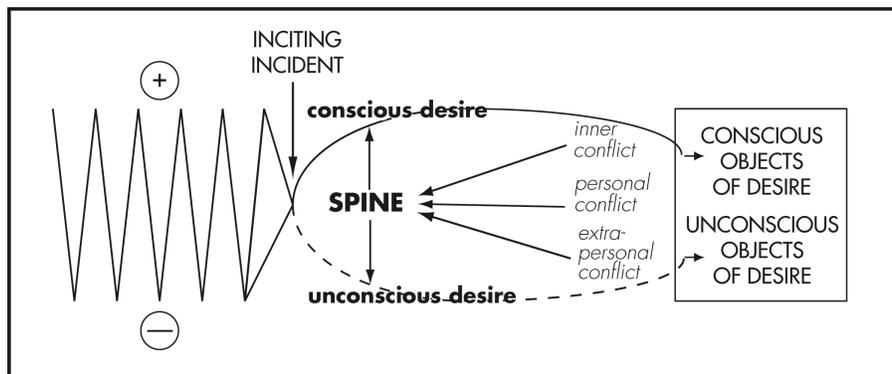
The Quest describes the flow of conflict in a story. The + and - represent the positive and negative tug-of-war of conflict in the backstory before the inciting incident. The "spine" represents the "through-line" / timeline in the story. The conscious and unconscious desires describe the drive behind the external and internal journeys. The inner, personal, and extra-personal conflicts represent the types of pressure put to bear on the protagonist/main character as the story progresses. The conscious and unconscious objects of desire represent the journeys' goals.

Example 3: The Linda Seger Paradigm.
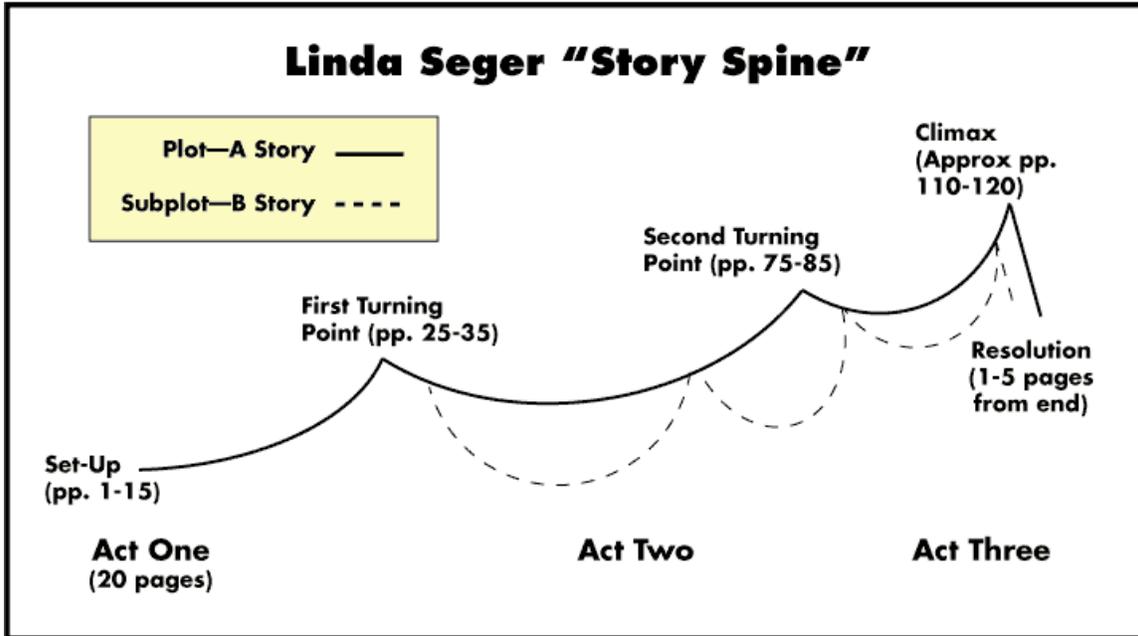
Seger's *Story Spine* (or "A Story") is a straightforward three-act structure. It has a setup, which starts with an image, establishes the story catalyst (inciting incident), and raises the central question (goal). It has two major turning points in the plot that separate Act One from Act Two and Act Two from Act Three, and ends with a climax and resolution. Seger's story spine allows for subplots that can accommodate a relationship "B Story" and more.

Example 4: John Truby's *Twenty-Two Building Blocks*

John Truby's "Twenty-two Building Blocks"
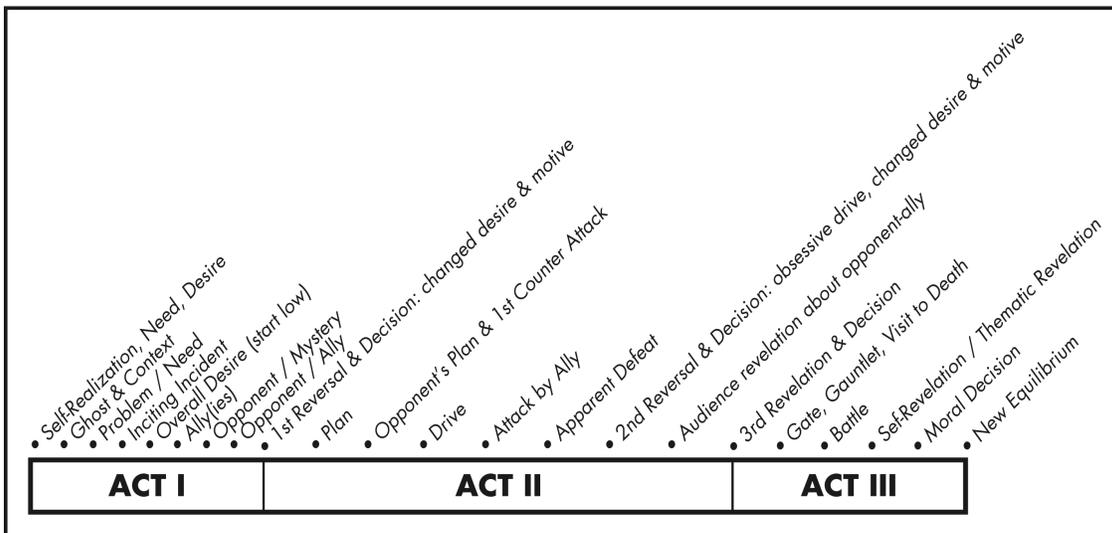
A combination of Joseph Campbell's mythic structure and original work, Truby's *Twenty-Two Building Blocks* plot structure loosely conforms to a three-act structure. Truby is a proponent of

the idea that Plot is what Character does, and Character is defined by actions. As such, his plotline is a combination of a Hero's actions motivated by his internal Need and an external Desire (goal). The actions of various Opponents and Allies counterpoint the Hero's efforts. The plot has an inciting incident, ends with a new equilibrium, and has several revelations and reversals along the way.
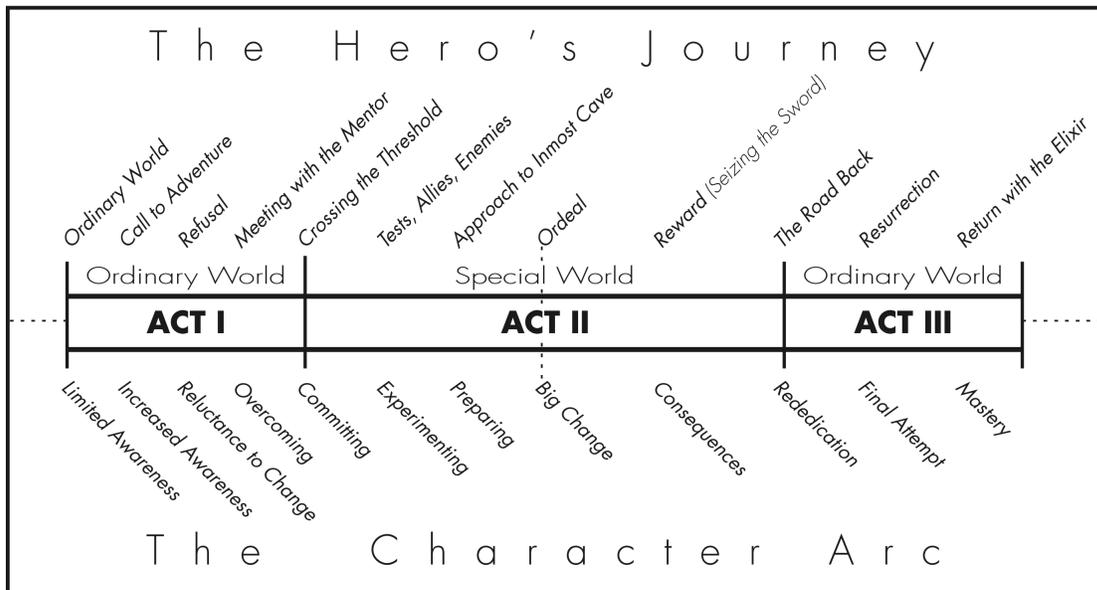
Example 5: Christopher Vogler's *Hero's Journey*

Christopher Vogler "The Hero's Journey"

Christopher Vogler's description of the *Hero's Journey* plot is usually presented as a circle. I have taken the liberty of converting his timeline to a horizontal plot line—an alternate form he uses to describe the progression of the Character Arc (*The Writer's Journey*, 2nd Edition, p 213). I've also combined his *Hero's Journey* timeline with his Character Arc timeline to get the full effect of his plot paradigm.

Like Syd Field's *Paradigm*, Vogler's *Hero's Journey* is a four-act structure camouflaged as a three-act structure. That's where the similarity ends. Based on Joseph Campbell's work on mythic story structure, Vogler has relabeled the plot points to describe the external journey of the Hero, and the internal journey of the main character (The Character Arc). Vogler's setup and inciting event take the form of Ordinary World and Call to Adventure. Like Field and other paradigms to come, major events function as turning points for the acts, such as Crossing the Threshold into the Special World, Ordeal, and The Road Back to the Ordinary World. Crisis and climax show up as Resurrection and Final Attempt. Return with the Elixir and Mastery approximate the story's resolution.

Example 6: Michael Hauge's *Six Stage Plot Structure*

Michael Hauge's "Six Stage Plot Structure"

	The Inner Journey	

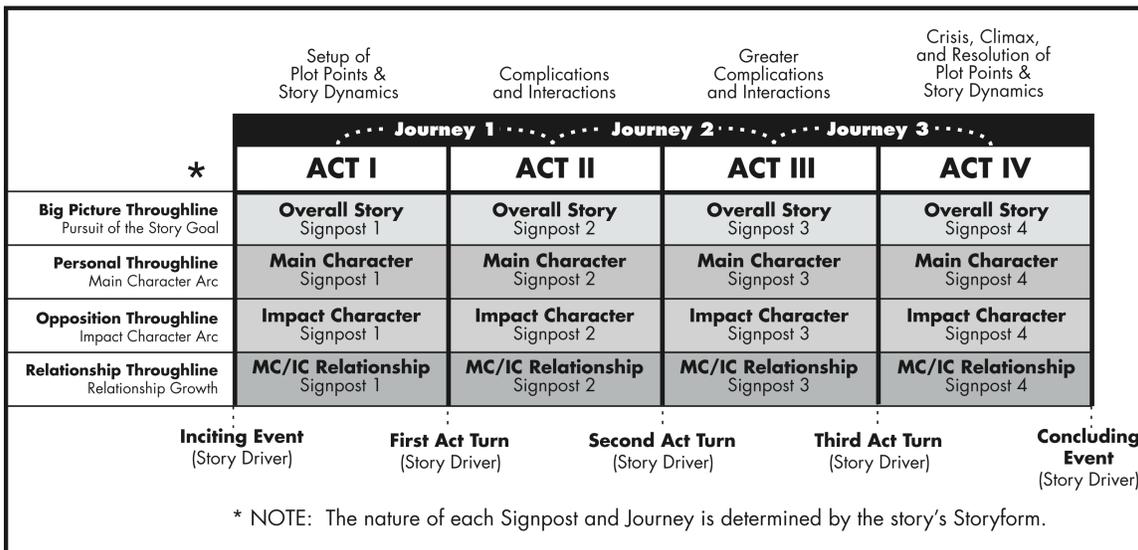| Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV	Stage V	Stage VI
Living Fully Within Identity	Glimpsing, Longing, or Destiny; glimpse of living life in Essence	Moving towards Essence without leaving Identity	Fully committed to Essence but growing Fear	Living one's Truth with everything to lose	The Journey complete, Destiny achieved

0% 10%	25%	50%	75%	90-99% 100%
ACT I	**ACT II**		**ACT III**	

Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV	Stage V	Stage VI
Setup	New Situation	Progress	Complications & Higher Stakes	Final Push	Aftermath

Turning Point #1	Turning Point #2	Turning Point #3	Turning Point #4	Turning Point #5
Opportunity	Change of Plans	Point of No Return	Major Setback	Climax

The Outer Journey

Despite its name, Hauge's *Six Stage Plot Structure* has its roots in a four-act structure as you can tell by the illustration. It starts with a setup followed by an inciting incident called Turning Point #1: Opportunity. It has regular turning points in the plot to indicate act breaks (Turning Points #2, #3, & #4), and ends with a climax (Turning Point #5) and resolution (Aftermath). As shown, Hauge's paradigm describes the Outer Journey as the attempt to achieve the story goal. The Inner Journey describes how the Hero (Main Character) goes from living fully within his Identity (a mask that hides his inner trauma and desires) to a life free of the Identity and fulfilling his Destiny.

Example 7: Dramatica's "Act Structure"

Dramatica Act Structure

	Setup of Plot Points & Story Dynamics	Complications and Interactions	Greater Complications and Interactions	Crisis, Climax, and Resolution of Plot Points & Story Dynamics
	···· Journey 1 ····	···· Journey 2 ····	···· Journey 3 ····	
*	**ACT I**	**ACT II**	**ACT III**	**ACT IV**
Big Picture Throughline Pursuit of the Story Goal	Overall Story Signpost 1	Overall Story Signpost 2	Overall Story Signpost 3	Overall Story Signpost 4
Personal Throughline Main Character Arc	Main Character Signpost 1	Main Character Signpost 2	Main Character Signpost 3	Main Character Signpost 4
Opposition Throughline Impact Character Arc	Impact Character Signpost 1	Impact Character Signpost 2	Impact Character Signpost 3	Impact Character Signpost 4
Relationship Throughline Relationship Growth	MC/IC Relationship Signpost 1	MC/IC Relationship Signpost 2	MC/IC Relationship Signpost 3	MC/IC Relationship Signpost 4

Inciting Event (Story Driver)	First Act Turn (Story Driver)	Second Act Turn (Story Driver)	Third Act Turn (Story Driver)	Concluding Event (Story Driver)

* NOTE: The nature of each Signpost and Journey is determined by the story's Storyform.

Dramatica clearly uses a four-act structure. It starts with a setup of plot points and story dynamics and an inciting incident. It has regular turning points in the plot to indicate act breaks driven by the Story Driver, and ends with a crisis, climax, and resolution of plot points and story dynamics. It also explores four throughlines; two more than the other story paradigms. The Overall Story throughline is the rough equivalent of the outer journey found in other paradigms. The Main Character throughline is the counterpart to the inner journey. Dramatica counterpoints the Main Character throughline with the Impact Character throughline. Exploring the relationship between the Main and Impact Characters is done in the MC/IC Relationship throughline.

INITIAL COMPARISONS

Wow. My initial reaction after comparing these six plot paradigms was that Dramatica looked dry and complicated while the others seemed easier to digest. Vogler's *Hero's Journey* seems the "friendliest" and most approachable of the bunch. As you might imagine, this was a little off-putting for me. I didn't expect the comparisons to show such a stark difference between Dramatica and everything else.

This got me thinking. Why do the other paradigms seem so much more "writable" than the Dramatica act structure? Why does Dramatica "feel" so different from the others? Is less plot structure better? I found some interesting answers to these questions.

Why do other paradigms seem so much more "writable" than the Dramatica act structure?

There are three obvious reasons why the other systems suggest easier writing approaches than Dramatica. The first is that they are much simpler and therefore easier to follow. Even McKee's somewhat confusing illustration of *The Quest* (Story, p 197) seems less enigmatic than the Dramatica *Act Structure* illustration.

The second reason other systems seem more "writable" is that the labels used to describe their various plot points are more story-like than Dramatica's labels. Syd Field uses straightforward terms like setup, confrontation, and resolution. Hauge uses simple phrases like Change of Plans, Point of No Return, and Major Setback. Vogler's *Hero's Journey* speaks in mythic language using words such as ordeal, reward, and resurrection. By comparison, Dramatica's Signposts, Journeys, and Story Driver sound less writer friendly.

The third reason Dramatica seems more difficult to write from is its complexity. Dramatica has four throughlines to worry about instead of one or two. It has sixteen Signposts—four for each throughline. The nature of each Signpost is determined by a "storyform." Just knowing how Dramatica's structure is put together is not enough. In fact, it's unlikely a writer could create a story just by looking at Dramatica's act structure as shown in the illustration. More information seems necessary even to begin writing.

Why does Dramatica "feel" so different from the others paradigms?

Dramatica's plot structure feels like a bunch of puzzle pieces placed in a grid. It looks more like a timetable than a description of a story's timeline. It seems purely functional. On the other hand, Vogler's *Hero's Journey* reads like a ready-made story outline and practically oozes Meaning: The Hero is in the Ordinary World and has Limited Awareness; There is a Call to Adventure which gives the Hero Increased Awareness; The Hero's Refusal of the call comes from his Reluctance to Change; The Hero's Meeting with the Mentor signals the Overcoming of his reluctance; and so on. The same can be said (to lesser degrees) of Field's *Paradigm*, McKee's *Central Plot*, Seger's *Story Spine*, Truby's *Twenty-Two Building Blocks*, and Hauge's *Six Stage Plot Structure*.

Is less plot structure better?

Not when you're trying to solve plot problems. Sure, it may be easier to use less elements of plot structure than more. It might take less time to determine if a story meets ten criteria versus twenty-five or one hundred. Easier, however, is not necessarily better.

Plot structure problems generally come in two areas: the plot pieces don't fit together properly or there are plot "holes"—pieces missing from the plot. When it comes to identifying and fixing plot problems, "less" usually is not better. In fact, persistent plot problems are often more closely tied to plot elements an author has NOT considered than plot elements the author has reworked. Having more tools with which to evaluate and construct a story is more valuable in those instances. In this regard, each plot paradigm has varying degrees of depth and breadth, but Dramatica surpasses them all.

DRAMATICA'S COMPARATIVE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

From the comparisons so far, Dramatica's plot paradigm seems to have the following weaknesses:

- It is complicated.

- It uses non-intuitive terminology.

- It feels dry and functional instead of warm and digestible.

"Guilty" on all three counts. HOWEVER, those are mere misdemeanors and easily overshadowed by Dramatica's real benefits.

Dramatica's approach to story is from the author's perspective. That means it looks at plot in terms of how the story is really put together, not how it seems to be as seen from the audience perspective. The other paradigms developers analyzed existing stories and found common plot patterns. With Dramatica we discovered a pattern maker. That's why it is so complex. Dramatica is flexible enough to create most any story pattern there is. It's "dry and functional" because that's what plot looks like from a "god's eye" point of view. It uses non-intuitive terminology, partly because Melanie and I weren't more creative in our labeling but more so because we went for accuracy over accessibility.

The Dramatica act structure's single greatest strength is its comprehensiveness. It covers everything necessary to make your plot work well. It has over one hundred unique story points (not including recurring plot points or character interactions) with at least forty-four specifically plot-related. Dramatica's plot explores four separate but interconnected throughlines instead of the one or two described in the other story paradigms.

Just as important, Dramatica ties each plot point to the storyform. Storyforms describe the story's underlying structure and dynamics and the interconnections between Character, Theme, Genre, and Plot—in essence, the author's intent. The storyform serves to keep the plot coherent with everything else in the story.   It also indicates the general nature of each plot point. This is a tremendous advantage because it gives an author an idea of how to explore his subject matter as it progresses act to act.

The non-Dramatica plot paradigms evaluated in this article only explore one or two of the four throughlines necessary for a complete act structure. Writers recognize the patterns found in those plot structures and use them. Unfortunately, they also sense the "missing pieces." Hours of writer's block may be associated with writers struggling to figure out the structural gaps left by the other plot paradigms.

Dramatica's unique author's perspective on story gives it another advantage over the other plot paradigms. Dramatica makes a distinction between Plot, the order in which events happen, and Storyweaving, the order plot events are presented to an audience. (This partially explains the table-like format of the Dramatica Act Structure illustration.)

Storyweaving often masks problems in the plot. Separating plot from Storyweaving lets an author know what is really happening in the story as well as what seems to be happening. The other paradigms don't make this distinction and suffer for it. In *The Hero's Journey*, for example, Vogler says the plot structure should not be followed too precisely. "The order of the stages given here is only one of many possible variations. The stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically shuffled without losing any of their power" (*The Hero's Journey*, 2nd Edition, p 26). With that much latitude how can a writer possibly determine what should or should not be in the plot? A writer pretty much has to figure that out on his own if he wishes to stray from the paths specified by a particular plot paradigm. On the other hand, Dramatica shows the writer how everything fits together and lets the writer determine how he wants to assemble the plot timeline.

The examined plot paradigms have varying degrees of complexity. Some seem simple and straightforward whereas Dramatica is the most complex of the bunch. Some are more readily understandable than others. Dramatica's terminology is less descriptive than others (and has a whole lot more of it too!). Most of the plot paradigm illustrations look like story timelines. Dramatica's plot structure looks like a complicated timeline with four different throughlines going on at the same time. If ease of understanding and learning were the criteria for determining which plot paradigm is the best, then Syd Field would be the big winner and Dramatica the big loser. However, I think it best if these paradigms are evaluated based on their capabilities to help writers build strong plot structures and fix plot problems.

NOTE: In "*Advanced Screenwriting*," Linda Seger identifies what she calls storytelling structures. By storytelling structures she means the way in which a story is laid out for an audience. The idea incorporates several concepts found in Dramatica's Storytelling, Storyweaving, and Story Reception. I mention it here because the one thing Seger's storytelling structure does not contain is story structure. It describes how the storytelling is constructed, not how the story is constructed. This is an extremely useful distinction to make when you have problems with your plot. Is it a structural problem or a storytelling problem? The answer to that question tells you where you have to do your work. Seger (like McKee, and Truby, etc.) has a lot to say about storytelling structures. Dramatica has a lot to say about story structure.

The qualities that make non-Dramatica plot paradigms simple to understand make them difficult to use for writing. Dramatica is more comprehensive than the other paradigms. It is better suited to building stronger plots since it approaches story from the author's perspective. By separating plot and Storyweaving, Dramatica makes identifying plot problems easier. The Dramatica storyform connects the plot to character, theme, and genre better than any other system. Plus, the storyform indicates the nature of plot events without limiting subject matter. For these reasons I think Dramatica's Act Structure plot paradigm is the most capable system examined.

Summary And Conclusions

Exploring the story paradigms of Syd Field, Michel Hauge, Robert McKee, Linda Seger, John Truby, and Christopher Vogler has been educational and eye opening. I've only scratched the surface but I feel I've learned a lot. When looking at them in broad terms, the non-Dramatica paradigms are more similar than not even though their specifics differ. Dramatica shares some common ground with them but is different in approach and perspective.

Dramatica looks at story from an objective author's standpoint. It gives authors an objective view into the inner workings of stories but is less effective at forecasting a story's meaning for an audience. The other paradigms look at story from the audience's standpoint. They give authors insight into how audiences might interpret a story but are less effective at predicting how to manipulate the story to create specific story results.

Dramatica sees stories as grand arguments made up of four essential throughlines. The Overall Story Throughline describes the "Big Picture" perspective and shows the objective, "They" worldview. The Main Character Throughline describes the personal, "You are there," perspective and reveals the first person, "I," worldview. The Impact Character Throughline describes the influential, alternative, "You," perspective to that of the Main Character. The Main Character vs. Impact Character Throughline describes the passionate, "We," perspective of the key relationship in the story. By contrast, the other paradigms see stories made up of one or two essential throughlines that correspond to Dramatica's Overall Story and Main Character throughlines.

Dramatica separates the function of the protagonist as prime driver of the effort to achieve the story goal from the subjective, personal perspective of the Main Character. The separation allows for alternative combinations that allow the Main Character to be someone other than the protagonist in the story. The other paradigms combine functions of the protagonist and Main Character in to a single character called the Protagonist, the Main Character, or the Hero.

Dramatica allows for Main Characters to change or remain steadfast and describes how the characters grow into or out of their resolve. The other paradigms only describe how the Main Character's growth leads to change. Vogler acknowledges the existence of steadfast Main Characters but does not adequately describe how they fit into "The Hero's Inner Journey." Seger alone identifies the viability of steadfast characters though is vague on specifics.

Dramatica uses a four-act plot structure with the nature of each act tied to a "storyform." The graphic of Dramatica's plot structure is complicated and uses academic sounding terminology. The other paradigms are split between using a four-act structure and the more traditional, *post-Aristotelian* three-act structure. Their plot terminology generally is more descriptive and writer-friendly.

As tools to understand and develop stories, each of these paradigms has its own relative strengths and weaknesses. Dramatica seems to cover more story territory and provide a clearer insight into a story's inner workings; it also appears complex and filled with specialized vocabulary. The non-Dramatica paradigms range in complexity and depth. They use more conversational terminology and feel more accessible. I believe that no single story paradigm holds all the answers. Each paradigm has its story development treasures to offer. I've dug up a few and explored them to a limited degree. I look forward to continuing my search by delving deeper into these story paradigms and investigating others.

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