

LEY TAYLOR JOHNSON

HOW TO
WRITE A
Satisfying
ACT THREE

A GUIDE FOR NOVELISTS

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How to Write a Satisfying Act Three

A Guide for Novelists

Ley Taylor Johnson

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Foreword

Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending. —

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

There's a certain mythos surrounding the way a story ends. Most of us grew up with stories that ended in some kind of happily ever after — the hero defeats the villain, marries the prince / princess of their dreams, and fades into the implications of a long and prosperous life. As we got older, we were exposed to new kinds of endings; perhaps the "dark" original endings to our favorite childhood fairy tales, or an ambiguous ending that sat with us long after the story was over. Some of us might have endings we despise, or an ending to a beloved series that we're still waiting on due to cancellations or delays. Whatever your personal experience with endings may be, you know from experience how important they are to a story's success. As a writer tackling the ending of your own story, there's no denying the pressure is on.

There are a great number of ways your story can potentially end, from the classic happy ending to the tragic twist ending to the dreaded cliffhanger. While the exact shape your ending takes depends on a number of factors (plot, themes, tropes, archetypes, etc.) there is one thing that all endings should have in common, and one thing that your ending needs

above all else. No matter what type of story you're telling, the ending should be *satisfying*. You want readers to walk away with an overall positive impression of your book and the feeling that the ending was complete, realistic, and well-deserved.

The key to a satisfying ending is making sure that all of your plot threads and questions are neatly closed, either sewn down (permanently resolved) or buttoned shut (left at a stable resting point) with no lingering frustrations left behind. Even cliffhangers — theoretically unsatisfying by nature — rely on some level of closure to ensure your ending point of choice feels intentional instead of arbitrary! This is achieved by keeping a close eye on all the information that needs to be wrapped up, from the lessons your protagonist must learn to the goals they must achieve before the story is over.

This is easier said than done, which is what this book aims to help with! Over the next twelve chapters, we'll discuss the particulars and peculiarities of Act 3 from a story and craft perspective, covering both *what* to write and *how* to write it. My hope is that you leave with all the direction and guidance you need to write an ending that you and your readers will be happy with, even if it's not a happy ending.

Let's get started!

Part 1: The Purpose of Act 3

What is Act 3?

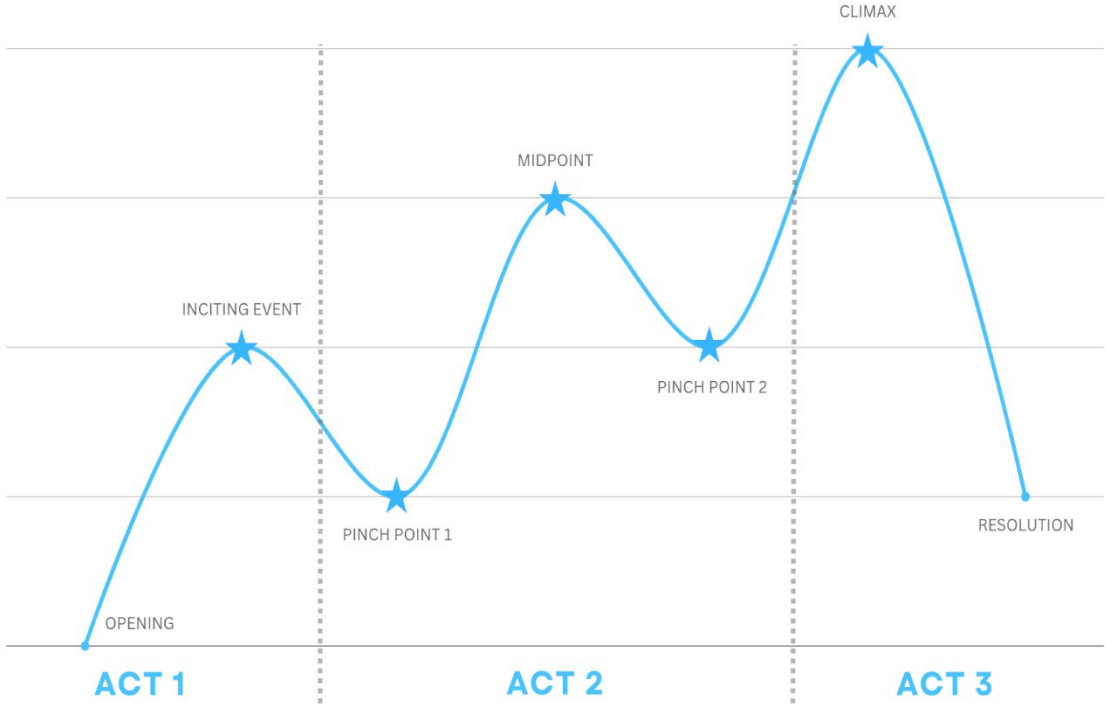
Before we get into how to write Act 3, we must first talk about what Act 3 actually is and why you need it. Simply put, it's the end of your story, where all the hard work you put into your first two acts pays off. Everything you've been building up to this moment — every twist you've introduced, every hardship you've put your characters through, every development you've agonized over foreshadowing *just right* — comes together in Act 3. It's more or less the point of your story, as it contains the resolution for every aspect of your story, from the protagonist's original call to adventure to the hook that made readers pick up your book in the first place.

Act 3 is home to your story's **climax** and **falling action** — the points where tension and stakes are at their highest and lowest, respectively. It kicks off just before the climax takes place and ends shortly after (typically once you've had a few chapters to tie off any remaining loose ends). This results in a faster pace that makes Act 3 the most high-octane part of your story, whether that looks like an edge-of-your-seat final confrontation on a collapsing space station or a heart-pounding love confession in an airport.

Let's take a look at our three act structure diagram for reference:

THREE ACT STRUCTURE

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Compared to the absolute beast that is Act 2, Act 3 is relatively short, comprising about 30% of your total word count. Using an average novel length of 90,000 words as an example, that puts us at about 27,000 words (give or take a couple thousand based on your genre of choice). That's nothing to sniff at, but you'd be surprised at how quickly the words

add up once the climax really gets going.

This is where it helps to rely on your **essential scenes**, which contain all the key beats and developments needed to make the most of your third act. These scenes will keep you focused and on track as you navigate the highs and lows of your climax and falling action while also ensuring you have everything you need to give your readers the satisfying ending they crave.

We'll go over each of these essential scenes in more detail in Part 2. For now, let's take a look at the three elements that define Act 3 and why they're must-haves for your story.

Expectations, Consequences, and Resolutions:

The Must-Haves of Act 3

Considering how much there is to accomplish in Act 3, all your scenes must pull their fair share of weight. While there's certainly a point to be made about how *every* scene in your story should have a clear purpose, it's more important than ever in Act 3 that each scene serves to either heighten the stakes, increase the tension, or bring everything to an appropriate close. This is where the three must-haves of Act 3 — expectations, consequences, and resolutions — come into play.

These must-haves ensure that your climax is adequately set up, has meaning, and leaves readers without too many burning questions remaining after the story is done. In other words, they ensure your story actually has an *ending*, rather than simply cutting itself off after the most interesting action is over. Let's get into how they accomplish this, how exactly they fit into the third act, and how you can start incorporating them into your story right away.

Expectations

We'll start by tackling expectations. **Expectations** are the assumptions readers make about your story, based both on the facts and twists you've set up over the course of Acts 1 and 2, as well as the conventions of your chosen tropes and genre. They define what readers want to see from your ending and help shape their understanding of what's happening in this final stretch of your plot.

The importance of expectations stretches all the way back to why readers consume stories in the first place. Consider what compels you to pick up a book in your favorite genre — sure, maybe the hook sounds interesting or a friend recommended it to you, but chances are that you have a certain idea of how the story will turn out and are eager to see how it happens this time around. If you're a fan of contemporary romance, for instance, you feel confident that the couple will reunite after being separated by an argument or misunderstanding and end up living happily ever after (or happily for now, at least). If you're a fan of horror, you anticipate that the protagonist will finally defeat or outmaneuver a seemingly insurmountable evil just when it seems they've fallen into its clutches. It can sometimes be interesting if these things *don't* happen, but it doesn't change the fact that you still watch for them because of the expectations set by the genre. The same will be true of your readers — they'll be on the lookout for certain events and outcomes based on the expectations set by the genre, as well as the unique beats you've set up

across the course of the story. If these expectations aren't met, you risk readers leaving the story feeling unsatisfied.

The benefit to this double-edged sword is that a lot of the work of setting expectations has already been done for you simply by writing the story in the first place. Your job now is to address them by taking what readers expect to happen and either allowing it to play out or introducing a twist that cleverly subverts the trope or convention in question. We'll talk more about managing and addressing these expectations to strengthen the climax of your story later on.

Consequences

Next up are consequences. **Consequences** are the natural outcomes of the events you've set up throughout the story — in many ways, they're the answer to those aforementioned expectations. They're what gives your story meaning, both by ensuring that every decision and action taken by your protagonist has significance and by linking these decisions and actions together in service of a larger theme.

Without consequences, you risk your plot feeling to readers like a string of coincidences and your climax like arbitrary happenstance. Ideally, your plot should consist of a series of **complications**, or a chain of cause and effect that allows readers to track the path your story takes. I've previously discussed complications in *How to Write a Compelling Act*

Two, but the long and short of it is that each action should have a consequence, which in turn leads to a different action with its own consequence, and so on. These actions and consequences lead into Act 3, where all the events you've established so far culminate into a final confrontation with the source of your external conflict. This confrontation is your most vital and layered consequence — not only is it the result of whatever action drove your protagonist to engage with the plot in the first place, it's also been affected and recontextualized by every decision they've made on their way here.

One of the reasons we're focusing on consequences here in Act 3 is because it takes a lot of work to make this tangled mega-consequence feel both compelling and earned. If you've been tracking your chain of cause and effect up to this point, you can identify the specific choices that have shaped your climax over time and use them to your advantage when writing your third act — simply see these consequences through to their natural conclusions, and you'll end up with a final result that readers find engaging and realistic.

The other reason is that the increased pacing of Act 3 results in a much faster turnaround on the action-consequence cycle. Stakes are high, and every decision your characters make will receive near-immediate feedback. Knowing which consequences are the most important to your ending will help you discern which actions are most important and which ones are just filler when tightening up your climax sequence. We'll talk

more about the importance of consequences in self-editing in Part 4!

Resolution

Finally, we come to resolutions. **Resolutions** refer to the end points of all the plot lines and arcs you've crafted over the course of your story. In a way, you can think of them as a sort of final consequence — the last link in your chain of cause and effect. (Do you see how the three must-haves relate to each other?)

Resolutions ensure that your major and minor plot threads are neatly tied off and that no loose ends are left dangling after the story ends. Simply put, they allow your story to actually *end*, rather than cutting off abruptly once the interesting part is over. Without them, readers are left with unanswered questions and unaddressed points of tension, which can lead to disappointment with even what would otherwise be a compelling and masterfully crafted ending. Not everything should be left open-ended, and not everything can be a cliffhanger!

As with our two previous facets, the key to writing effective resolutions in Act 3 is to keep track of the work you've already been doing in your first two acts. Having a list of all your current plot lines and open questions will give you a tidy guide to which aspects of your story still need to be resolved at the end. It also helps you balance which things can be left open-ended, either in preparation of a sequel or to let readers

impose their own interpretations on the story. We'll discuss both options in further depth down the road.

Now, you may be thinking that these elements are somewhat self-explanatory. You're writing the ending of your book, so of course you should be resolving your plot threads! And you'd be right — as a writer, you've likely had a lifetime of reading and listening to stories, so much of how to end them will be instinctual. It's still helpful to highlight these features, however, as knowing exactly what you're setting out to accomplish will make it easier to plan your essential scenes.

With that in mind, let's get to Part 2!

Part 2: The Anatomy of Act 3

The Essential Scenes of Act 3

As you form the initial structure of Act 3, it's important to keep your essential scenes in mind. **Essential scenes** are scenes that contain key beats and/or information and support the overall shape of your story. In other words, they ensure that your story has everything it needs to actually *be a story* and accomplish whatever you've set out to accomplish — to explore a certain theme, to get a certain message across, or to follow a certain character through a gauntlet of your own devising.

The goal of planning out your essential scenes ahead of time is to make your job easier once it comes to the actual drafting process. If you were to strip Act 3 of everything but the four scenes highlighted below, you'd still have all the material you need for your story to have an ending. It may be a bit boring without the extra trimmings, but it'd be *there* — no need to worry about any crucial moments or details slipping through the cracks as you write. This leaves you free to have fun with the drama of the climax without constantly checking that you remembered to tie off this subplot or foreshadow that development for the sequel.

Below, we'll go over each of the essential scenes of Act 3, covering where exactly each fits into your story and what it's meant to achieve. We'll also discuss the characteristics and focal points of each

scene, along with some basic tips on how to tackle them as you go.

The Plan

This essential scene goes hand-in-hand with the ending of Act 2 (if you'll recall, the corresponding beat at that point is called the "Act 3 Transition"). Once the protagonist is through coming to terms with their character flaw and making any necessary amends, it's time to lace up their boots and take on their final challenge. This is where The Plan comes in — they formulate their plan of attack and set out to pull it off.

The primary purpose of this scene is to kick off your climax, but there are a couple of smaller goals that go along with this. The first is to lay out the immediate stakes as far as your protagonist is concerned, making it clear to readers exactly what challenges they're about to face and what is at risk for them if they fail. The second is to quickly ramp up the tension as they begin facing those challenges, ensuring that your climax has enough momentum to carry readers through your final plot twist, when the protagonist's carefully formulated plan begins to fall apart (more on that in a moment).

Stakes and tension are the name of the game when writing this scene. The stakes will come somewhat naturally as you begin writing the climax — since the protagonist is directly facing their biggest challenge, the stakes will be more upfront than they have been previously. Tension

will start to rise as your characters carry out the Plan, but you can help it along with minor plot twists and escalations that will build momentum going into your next essential scene, which is where everything falls apart. We'll talk more about how to do this in "Making (and Breaking) Your Protagonist's Plan" in Part 3.

Contact with the Enemy

No good plan survives contact with the enemy, and that's what this essential scene is all about. You can think of this scene as the climax itself — the point where one final plot twist disrupts your protagonist's plans and escalates the scene to a make-or-break moment. The stakes are at their absolute highest, and readers understand that if the protagonist doesn't succeed here, then everything will have been for naught.

The aforementioned plot twist is the focal point of this scene, and thus carries a lot of weight. There are a number of forms this twist can take, all to varying levels of effect — the point is that it dramatically raises the stakes by introducing an element that the protagonist either did not or could not account for in their original plan. Ideally, this twist will also feel believable and earned, rather than seeming either too contrived or completely random.

This is where your chain of cause and effect comes in handy. Visualize your plot as a series of increasingly large dominoes — each

domino is a set of actions and consequences, and knocking it over sets off a series of events that eventually spirals into the biggest domino of all, this final plot twist. If you're having trouble identifying what that should be, looking back to previous dominoes in the series and seeing how they relate to each other should help you develop a natural escalation for your climax. This can work in reverse as well — if you know what you want your final plot twist to be and are having trouble making it fit into the story, you can reverse engineer which dominoes you need to get there. We'll talk more about how to do this last part in "Strengthening the Climax."

Locking In the Character Arc

This essential scene has a lot of overlap with Contact with the Enemy, as it involves your protagonist's response to whatever plot twist you've just set up. I've highlighted it here as its own scene, however, because it contains a vital element that hasn't so far featured prominently in Act 3 — your protagonist's internal conflict. While the first two essential scenes are understandably concerned with the physical stakes, this scene is a reminder of what's at risk for the protagonist personally and challenges them to do what's necessary in spite of all that. Will they finally overcome the flaw that has held them back over the course of the story, or will they succumb one final time when their decision really, truly counts?

There's no one true way to handle this scene, as there are so many

directions your protagonist's character arc could go based on your story's structure, genre, themes, and more. Whether or not your protagonist experiences growth and change is entirely up to you and the story you're trying to tell — the important thing is that the arc is resolved in some capacity. You can do this by giving your protagonist a moment to reflect; zero in on how they're feeling and show the reader the motives behind whatever decision they're about to make. This is another place where that chain of cause and effect will be important, as you want to have a good grasp on your protagonist's journey and mental state to see which directions they're being pulled in at this crucial moment.

There's a lot that goes into making this scene work, so we'll discuss it in more depth in "Concluding the Character Arc."

Closing Scenes

Finally, we have the Closing Scenes. These are (surprise, surprise) the exact opposite of the Opening Scenes from Act 1 — rather than introducing your characters, establishing your starting status quo, and setting up your major plot threads, these scenes focus on bringing all of these elements to a close. The goal is to leave readers with a clear stopping point by answering any remaining questions and tying off any loose ends. These scenes are characterized by a lessened sense of tension, a slower pace, and an overall feeling of closure.

There isn't much for you to do here aside from end the story! Since the stakes are lower here than at any other point in the story, you can take your time in making sure that all of your key concerns have been addressed. There's no need to rush, as your only goal is to orient readers with the new, post-adventure reality and drop the curtain on your protagonist and their journey. We'll talk more about how to pull this off in "Resolving the Plot Threads."

With these essential scenes in place, the structure of your third act is off to a good start. Please keep in mind, however, that this is only a loose template. Your ending is likely to have more than just the four scenes mentioned above, and there may be a bit of overlap between them! Don't worry so much about having only one single, cut-and-dry example of each of the scenes above — as long as you have *at least* one scene that fits the model of each of the essential scenes mentioned above, you're in business.

From here, let's get into the specific questions that will guide your writing of these essential scenes and make the most of your Act 3.

Questions to Answer in Act 3

As your story hurtles through its third and final act, managing both the controlled chaos of the climax and our all-important must-haves from Part 1 becomes a delicate balancing act. You want your ending to be fun, exciting, and unpredictable, but you also want it to check all the boxes needed for it to make sense and follow your trope and genre conventions — two ideas that may at first seem mutually exclusive. The questions below are designed to help you walk the line between these extremes, giving you the nudges you need to stay on course while still keeping a loose hand on the reins.

Most of these questions focus on the external plot, obstacles, and conflicts of your story, since those are the primary things Act 3 is concerned with. As you can see, however, there are moments where your protagonist's inner conflict and character arc get a chance to shine, which is where much of the emotional core of your climax will source from.

Keep in mind that these questions aren't a 1:1 template for writing your final act. While it does help to answer each of the questions within its corresponding essential scene, there's no need to answer them in any particular order or to confine your answers to only one scene. As long as you at least use these questions to guide your final act, you should be set.

Let's get into it!

The Plan

The Plan consists of the buildup and first part of your story's climax, so the questions here are extremely fact-focused. Work on moving the story forward and raising the stakes and tension as you approach your main, final conflict.

What is the major conflict awaiting your protagonist?

What remaining obstacles stand between them and this conflict?

How are they prepared to face these obstacles?

Who and what do they rely on for support?

Contact with the Enemy

Contact with the Enemy is where your climax truly begins. Stakes and tension are at an all-time high, so we're still going strong on the external conflict. Focus on challenging your protagonist with the unexpected (or at least with the unprepared-for).

What happens to disrupt the protagonist's plan?

What impact does this disruption have in the short term?

How is the protagonist at a disadvantage going into their final confrontation?

Locking In the Character Arc

Locking In the Character Arc, as you might assume, shifts briefly back to a balance between the external and internal conflicts. At this final stage of the climax, your protagonist faces an obstacle that they're only capable of overcoming if their character arc is complete. Work on illustrating their growth and its direct impact on the events of the story.

What is the final challenge standing between the protagonist and victory/defeat?

What is required of them to overcome this challenge, and how is it directly related to their character arc?

How do they use the new perspective gained from their arc to overcome their final challenge?

What is the positive outcome of their victory? What is the cost?

Closing Scenes

The Closing Scenes are all about resolution. These scenes focus heavily on tying off any remaining plot threads and establishing the final

status quo, so work on bringing the tension back down and wrapping up your plot, subplots, and character arcs as needed.

What is the status quo following the events of the climax?

What is the most notable difference from the status quo at the beginning?

What is the protagonist's ultimate perspective on themselves and their journey?

How have other aspects of their lives changed following the events of the climax?

I recommend having at least a rough answer for each of these questions in mind before starting in on Act 3. The main reason for doing so is that this will give you a road map to follow while writing your climax. Having the shape of your ending in mind ahead of time will show you the most effective places to introduce new complications and consequences to heighten your tension and make your climax more compelling without getting off the rails.

The other reason — which will only become relevant during revisions — is that having a separate list of your answers will make self-editing a lot easier. You'll be able to identify any potential weaknesses or tangents in your climax without having to sort through the writing itself,

allowing you to make more objective judgements on what needs tightening up or removing.

With all of this in mind, let's jump into drafting!

Part 3: Writing Act 3

Making (and Breaking) the Protagonist's Plan

Act 3 kicks off right away with the road to the climax. This is the most high-octane part of your book regardless of your chosen genre, with the stakes and tension rapidly amping up from moment to moment in preparation for the story's final conflict. There's something big on the horizon, and this sequence is all about your protagonist planning for and rising to meet the challenge.

Tension is the name of the game in Act 3, as it's responsible for carrying the story's momentum across the next few scenes. You want your climax to feel exciting and dangerous, but you also want it to feel *earned* — after all the hard work that's gone into writing the story up to this point, nobody wants their biggest moment to seem like a random, arbitrary obstacle! The key to making this happen lies with two of our third act must-haves: expectations and consequences. We start by setting readers' expectations by outlining the stakes and the protagonist's plan of attack, then shove the plot into motion with a chain of connected actions and consequences that will keep the story rolling forward until it's time to introduce your final challenge. Below, we'll get into how to jump start the

action and maintain an ongoing sense of tension that'll keep readers invested from start to finish.

Making the Plan

Let's start with our first essential scene of Act 3, The Plan. This scene encompasses the creation and early execution of your protagonist's battle plan in the face of the approaching confrontation. This stage is important for your readers, as it fully shifts the story's focus back to the external conflict and the stakes at hand, preparing them for the acceleration in pacing and added urgency in tone. It clearly outlines what's at risk for the protagonist and what they intend to do about it, as well as the potential consequences of their failure. This has the added benefit of providing a clear source of tension right away — when the readers and protagonist are both explicitly aware of the task at hand and what might go wrong, it creates a sense of apprehension surrounding when and how things inevitably *will* go wrong.

That part comes later, as you'll first want to show the plan in action and allow it to go off without a hitch (for a while, at least). The sooner things fall apart, the sooner your protagonist has to improvise, which can leave your scenes without a clear sense of direction and your tension feeling unfocused. This makes your job harder, which is the opposite of what we want! Better to hold off for the time being and establish a sense of rhythm as the protagonist works through their little

"How to Get What I Want and Save the Day" checklist. That way, you get a chance to show your readers what the protagonist looks like when they're fully committed and have a clear set of instructions *and* get the fun of dashing all that hope when things finally break bad and they're stuck operating on unfamiliar ground.

When developing this plan, keep in mind your ideal balance of tension and drama. The number of specifics you include controls the level of expectation and surprise readers will have as you continue through Act 3. The more readers know, the higher the tension as they wait for the plan to be disrupted; the more they're in the dark, the greater the drama when they get to see how the scenes play out and wonder how prepared the characters are for each new development. The perfect mix of the two will depend on your genre and tone, but it helps to keep in mind which direction you're pulling in from the beginning!

Breaking the Plan

From here, we move onto our next essential scene, Contact with the Enemy. In Part 2, we talked about this scene in the context of the climax, but there's actually a bit of overlap with the pre-climax, since the complications should start arising early to help build that all-important sense of apprehension. In a way, you can think of this sequence as a smaller, nearly independent string of the same complications you've been writing throughout the story — it's simply the action-consequence cycle

on high speed, with a much faster turnaround on every decision your protagonist makes. The obstacles they encounter and create for themselves along the way lead to new decisions, which in turn lead to new obstacles; this builds momentum as the scene continues and you move toward your final confrontation.

(I say this string is "nearly" independent because you still want events from earlier in the story to have an impact on the climax — it shouldn't *completely* stand on its own. This will help give the challenges and successes a bit more weight and increase the sense of payoff for readers, as they get the delayed reward of moments that were foreshadowed or set up far before the climax ever began. The **Chekhov's Gun** trope exists for a reason — readers love a callback!)

The important thing to keep in mind here is that any obstacles you introduce to break the protagonist's plan should feel realistic to their situation. The best way to achieve this is by leaving potential gaps in the plan where issues can sneak in — maybe they're lacking a crucial piece of information, or part of their plan hinges on chance. There's certainly room for unexpected or otherwise unpredictable obstacles along the way, but having most of the challenges arise either from a known point of uncertainty or from a direct link to an action taken by one of the characters will keep things flowing nicely and keep all your twists engaging and believable.

At the end of the day, you'll likely find that this part of Act 3 is relatively formulaic — you're setting up your dominoes and knocking them down. The uniqueness comes in the variability and how well you play with readers' expectations as you head into the climax. If you're still struggling, however, I strongly suggest developing your own plan of attack before you actually sit down and start writing. If you've learned anything from our breakdown of Act 3 so far, you'll know that this plan won't fully survive the drafting process as you eventually run into your own set of writing obstacles, but it still helps to have an idea of what complications you want your protagonist to encounter before they actually start showing up. I recommend taking a look at our questions for The Plan and Contact with the Enemy in Part 2 and setting up some rough answers in advance, then letting them play out and evolve as you start writing. Doing so should make these scenes flow smoothly and set you up nicely for the dramatic shift into the climax.

Strengthening the Climax

In the last section, we covered the how-tos of disrupting your protagonist's plan of attack, but all those minor complications pale in comparison to the obstacle put forth by the climax. This ultimate challenge, whatever it may be, is the most high-stakes moment in your entire story — this is the final hurdle standing in the way of your protagonist and their goal, the threat they've been preparing to face since potentially the beginning, and the moment your readers have been eagerly anticipating. It's the part of Act 3 that, more than anything else, makes or breaks your satisfying ending. Needless to say, it's important to get it just right!

I understand this seems like a lot of pressure, but I can assure you that the climax is a lot easier to write than it sounds. Chances are, you've had this moment planned in some capacity from the very beginning and are now simply at the stage of cleaning it up, sharpening its points, and fitting it neatly into the rest of your Act 3. As such, our goal today is to explore what makes an effective climax and discuss how you can build to it (or from it!) as you're drafting.

The easy and somewhat unfair answer to what makes a good climax is that the specifics of what makes a good climax varies from story

to story. What works well in one genre won't necessarily work well in another. While an epic showdown with the big bad is welcome and expected in genres like fantasy and horror, for example, it doesn't quite fit in genres that don't have a cut-and-dry antagonist to defeat, like romance and lit fic. As such, I can't give you a tidy list of the exact beats to include in your climax to make it good.

I can, however, tell you the *qualities* that every good climax has in common — every one of them is believable, well-established, and threatening. The exact meanings to these words are likewise variable, but they ultimately come down to that first pesky must-have of expectations.

Believable

A climax's believability hinges on expectations in that readers are less likely to get on board with a plot twist they didn't see coming in at least some capacity. As fun as it is to think of the evil space emperor being brought down by a surprise marriage proposal from the protagonist, it's probably not actually going to happen in any serious (or semi-serious) science fiction novel, especially if you haven't set it up beforehand — I imagine you can already hear the indignant shouts of readers who feel their highly anticipated ending was ruined by a stupid plot twist that didn't even make sense.

If you want readers to follow along with your ending and walk

away feeling satisfied, you need to keep the conventions and patterns of your chosen genre, tropes, archetypes, and your own story events in mind. Consider what your most realistic climaxes could be and how they're most likely to come about based on these factors, and develop your ideas accordingly.

Make It Well-Established

Now, this isn't to say that your climax has to be completely predictable. Subversions have their place and can be incredibly compelling, but they ought to be justified by the overall tone and events of the story. If our silly science fiction example above doesn't provide some sort of reasoning as to why a marriage proposal could potentially save the day, of course readers aren't going to go with it. That being said, there are quite a few setups that *could* make it believable, provided you put in the work ahead of time — maybe your protagonist has a habit of making dramatic performances as a diversion tactic, or the emperor is a parasitic alien possessing the body of the hero's beloved, or you're writing a satirical sci-fi comedy poking fun at the "power of love" trope. The point is, the proposal ending isn't inherently unbelievable as long as you give readers a reason it could work within the context of your story, thereby establishing it as a possibility.

In our breakdown of Act 3's essential scenes in Part 2, we talked about how you can think of the action-consequence cycle as a set of

dominoes, with each domino knocking down the next in line up to the climax, which is the biggest of them all. When structured this way, the events of your plot allow your climax to feel like a natural escalation of everything that's happened up to this point. Readers engage more with the story as a result, and you end up with a satisfying ending that doesn't feel abrupt or contrived. If you have an idea for your final sequence but are having trouble turning it into a compelling climax, taking a look at those dominoes is often the first step — ask yourself what outcome each of your planned events is likely to lead to, and steadily increase the size and scope as you go. This works in the opposite direction as well, allowing you to craft your pre-climax sequence by working backward from your desired outcomes and devising which actions could potentially cause them. You get the same end result, just from a different angle!

Make It Threatening

This quality uses the loosest definition of the word, as it's really just about making whatever challenge your protagonist is facing feel like it has a real chance of defeating them. An evil space emperor is pretty self-explanatory as far as this goes, but what about threats that aren't as in-your-face as galactic imperialism? Sometimes the threat is far more mundane — the loss of a beloved pet, or a missed opportunity at a career-defining promotion.

The point is that readers should see the challenge as something that

puts the protagonist and/or something they care about at some kind of risk that's bigger than any the protagonist has faced so far, amping up the stakes and pushing readers to root even harder for them to overcome it. The exact shape this takes is up to you, but be sure to take your protagonist's perspective into account when trying to decide on the scope of the threat in question. If they see it as an insurmountable challenge, the reader is more likely to see it that way as well!

The main takeaway here is that, as daunting as the climax may seem at first glance, it's just a natural escalation of the events you've already set into motion earlier in the story. Assuming you've been keeping track of your chain of cause and effect, this final obstacle will feel realistic and challenging enough to serve as your story's major turning point while still being susceptible to defeat by the burst of inspiration your protagonist still has in store.

Concluding the Character Arc

With the majority of the fast-paced ending under your belt, it's time to slow things down and turn your attention back to the protagonist and their arc. The external conflict has driven much of Act 3 so far, but the internal conflict still has one major role to play before the climax is over. This is the point in your story where the protagonist wrestles with one last spike of self-doubt, uncertainty, or lack of commitment in the face of their greatest challenge yet, and their reaction will determine whether or not they succeed in their ultimate goal. It's a critical moment that grants them agency amidst the avalanche of uncontrollable circumstances that is the climax, so it's important that it embodies the tone you're aiming for regarding their overall character arc.

There are three main elements to pulling this off — an adequate challenge, the actual moment of conflict, and the immediate outcome of the resulting decision. We'll explore each of these in more detail below, but the overall goal here is to make your stakes feel real, immediate, and compelling, and to give your protagonist a clear, unique, and measurable effect on the climax and your ending as a whole.

A New Challenge Approaches

Let's begin with the challenge itself. While the overall form it takes is determined by your climax (as we discussed in the last section), the details as they relate to your protagonist's arc are still up in the air. Our goal here is to determine what exactly makes your challenge a threat *to the protagonist specifically*. There are any number of options based on your story — the evil wizard overpowering the hero with their twisted magic, the love interest hesitating after the romantic lead's grand gesture, the murderer taking an innocent hostage when the detective exposes them, et cetera. Whatever the details might be, the idea is that, for a brief moment, it seems like things are over for the protagonist. They're cornered and seemingly powerless, and all signs are pointing to their own, personal, devastating failure.

The key to crafting a compelling and threatening challenge is to make it especially suited to your protagonist's weakness or **tragic flaw** (the negative trait that drives their choices). Perhaps our fantasy hero is weak-willed and struggles to resist magic, our hapless romantic is afraid of true vulnerability, or our detective is a brains-over-brawn type that can't hold their own in a physical fight. The challenge they're facing can't be a run-of-the-mill obstacle that they could easily overcome on a good day — they themselves need to doubt their own ability for that moment of triumph to truly pay off. Drawing on your protagonist's established shortcomings when developing your final challenge will amp up the stakes

when it's most important and leave readers on the edge of their seats.

Inner Conflict and Resolution

With the threat of being overtaken looming over them, the protagonist must reckon with themselves and determine if they have what it takes to resist. It's important to remember (if you've been following along with this series) that this moment of self-reflection comes after both the Midpoint Twist and the Mistakes & Consequences essential scenes from Act 2, which are both instances wherein the protagonist has been faced with a similar — albeit lower-stakes — challenge of this nature and has come up wanting. At this point, they know the cost of their failure and fully understand that whatever happens next rests on their shoulders alone.

This is your opportunity to slow down the pacing a bit and give your protagonist some time to really ruminate on what they're going to do next. While you obviously don't want to interrupt the flow of your climax too much, you want your protagonist to have a chance to center themselves, weigh their chances of success, and resolve to act in whatever way they think is best. This solidifies their agency during a pivotal moment and shows readers that they're fully committed to their decision and what it means for them going forward, thereby completing their arc.

Overcoming the Final Obstacle

Now for the moment of truth. The protagonist has found their resolve, which means it's time to fight for what they want and overcome their biggest challenge once and for all. The focus shifts rapidly back to the internal conflict as the results of the protagonist's decision plays out in real time. This is their **apotheosis**, the moment they transcend from a simple character to a hero. The fantasy hero, in a moment of desperate determination, resists the magic just long enough to fire a shot directly into the crystal that powers the evil wizard's magic. The romantic lead realizes that their beloved is worth the risk of being vulnerable and opens their heart. The detective resigns themselves to losing the fight and tackles the murderer, freeing the hostage as they both fall from the top of the clock tower. What happens next is up to you — perhaps unadulterated success is too much for the characters to hope for after everything that's happened, or perhaps there's still a bit of room for a miracle to happen. Whatever the case may be, the climax is now over.

While it's not strictly necessary, you can make this moment even more personal to your protagonist and their journey by making their success hinge on a special skill or talent that is unique or otherwise important to them. Much like the challenge is more compelling when it's connected to the protagonist's flaw, the solution is more gratifying when it's connected to a prominent positive trait. It helps if this quality was established earlier on in the story so it feels familiar — perhaps readers

learn in the first act that the fantasy hero has excellent aim with their slingshot, which they always keep in their pocket and practice with whenever they're feeling frustrated or ineffectual. What would otherwise be a cute if pointless character trait instead becomes the trick up their sleeve when the chips are down and they need a miracle. If your protagonist has something like this already in place, consider returning to it for your climax!

With the conclusion of this essential scene, your protagonist's character arc is complete. They've faced their final challenge and have proven that they've learned the lesson that has so far evaded them. It's worth noting that this doesn't necessarily equate to them overcoming their tragic flaw — many characters don't, as their flaws are intrinsically connected to other aspects of their personality. Instead, they might find a way to circumvent it or use their flaw to their advantage, thereby illustrating that they've developed a healthier sense of self and self-awareness for the future. Doing so brings both the external and internal conflicts to a close, meaning that all you have left to do is wrap up your loose ends and finish the story.

Resolving the Plot Threads

This brings us to the last of our essential scenes, and the end of Act 3 as a whole — the Closing Scenes. This is where readers bid farewell to your story and characters, and as such is your last chance to tie up any remaining loose ends, highlight your core themes one final time, and leave readers with the impression you most want to make.

To ensure that impression is a good one, you'll want to check that all the different elements of your story are adequately resolved by the end. There shouldn't be any unfinished business or lingering questions left to distract readers from your ending. A little ambiguity is fine and can even be intriguing, but this is a careful line to walk — you don't want to risk your ending feeling incomplete by leaving too much up for interpretation. Even endings that don't tie everything off neatly still have at least some sense of resolution! Below, we'll get into the main points you want to cover in your closing scenes to make sure readers walk away feeling satisfied.

Main Plot and Character Arc

We'll start with the main plot and character arc, since the majority

of your work is already done here. Both of these storylines have been mostly resolved by the climax, so all that's really left here is giving your characters the opportunity for reward and reflection. With their main challenge overcome and their goal achieved, the protagonist can now enjoy the fruits of their success and take note of the ways their life has changed since they started their journey.

The main question on readers' minds at this stage will be "What comes next?" so your goal here is to simply answer that question! Explore what the world looks like with the main adversary defeated, what the protagonist feels when they return to their normal life (if they even have a normal life anymore), and what their goals for the future are. Showing the readers how things have been altered by the events of the story and what the protagonist does with their newfound freedom and perspective are what the closing scenes are all about.

Subplots

Your next priority is your subplots. In our breakdown of Act 2, we discussed the **Rule of Three**, in this case referring to each subplot needing three beats to have a complete arc and satisfying conclusion. The majority of these beats will take place in Act 2 and may even resolve there, but each major subplot should at least have one final check-in during the closing scenes to fully see it through to the end. This can be as simple as a quick acknowledgement of any relevant characters or other elements that

happen to be present, but can also be a fully fleshed-out scene in its own right.

Tracking your subplots will be important long before you start writing Act 3, but it helps to go into your closing scenes with a clear idea of what's happening in each of your secondary storylines. If you have any significant beats left to complete their arcs, be sure to carve out time in your final scenes to address them. If all three of your major beats have already taken place, check that the subplot as a whole has reached a resolution that won't leave readers with too many pressing questions about how their favorite B plot turned out.

Story Questions

This segues nicely into our last point of business, which pertains to your remaining story questions. I've saved them for last because, in this case, they *are* the least important. Any story questions readers may have that aren't directly answered by your main plot, subplots, or the protagonist's character arc are most likely not worth answering — at best, you'll provide a minor resolution to a plot point that may come up later; at worst, you'll clog up your closing scenes with details and tidbits that could just as easily be left out. The reason I've included this point here at all is that you do want to make sure that any questions related to your major storylines are addressed and that, if you are planning to write a series, you've provided a stable checkpoint for questions that will be answered

later on.

Much like with your subplots, the best way to ensure all your story questions are answered at the end is by tracking them throughout the book. Anytime you think readers will have questions about your plot, world, or characters, write it down and make note of when (if at all) it gets answered. If there are any remaining questions open by the time you reach your closing scenes, you'll have a tidy list of what still needs resolving.

Resolution is the name of the game in your closing scenes, but a satisfying ending isn't all about tying off loose ends. Knowing which details to resolve and which ones to let fade into the background takes practice, as you don't want to leave anything important behind. If you can stay organized and make sure all your key information is brought to a close, however, creating a satisfying ending will be a breeze.

Writing a Great Closing Line

Now that you've reached the end of Act 3, it's time for the part that many authors dread — the closing lines. These lines mirror your opening lines from Act 1, but rather than setting up the story that's yet to come, they have the equally important but opposite role of bringing it all to a close. Whatever you write here will be the final impression readers are left with as they finish your story, so it's important to make a lasting statement that will sit with them long after the book is closed.

There's a wide variety as to what constitutes good closing lines. Some feel like a peaceful farewell, while others hit like a punch to the gut; crafting your perfect ending is all about identifying and invoking the feeling you want readers to walk away with. One thing all the best final lines have in common, though, is that they link back to some substantial element of the story — be that a moral, arc, mood, theme, or any other fundamental aspect that defines what your story is *about* — to tie your core message back into your final scene and bring both to a simultaneous resolution.

Deciding which of the many elements of your story to connect to is certainly easier said than done, however. To that end, we'll be looking at three reliable sources for closing lines — theme, character arc, and

opening lines — and some corresponding examples, exploring what makes them work and how you can implement similar strategies in your own story.

Theme

"The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which." — George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

The closing lines of *Animal Farm* don't come as much of a surprise to attentive readers, but they're impactful nonetheless. Over the course of the book, readers have watched as the pigs, who originally allied with the other farm animals in ousting their abusive human owners, steadily adopt more and more of the humans' mannerisms and change the tenets which the animals collectively agreed to live by in order to benefit themselves as a ruling class. At the end of the book, the other (non-pig) animals spy on a dinner party held between the pigs that now run Animal Farm and some human neighbors they've allied with and find that the two are indistinguishable.

The lines hearken back to the book's **themes** of totalitarianism, corruption, and class. The pigs' gradual transformation into humans is central to the allegory of *Animal Farm*, and by marking this transformation as complete in his closing lines, Orwell drives his satire

home and eliminates any lingering doubt or ambiguity about his intended message. This is the power of referencing your themes in your final lines — you can take one last opportunity to underline your message and ensure readers walk away with the exact understanding you want to impress upon them.

Setting up these kinds of closing lines requires laying a bit of groundwork. The final scene itself must be related to the theme in some way, otherwise the reference will seem a bit random. For example, if your story's core themes are about grief and healing, a final scene in which the protagonist takes stock of the results of their healing journey — friends who came to support them, an closer relationship with one parent after the death of another, or even just their ability to think of what they lost without spiraling — will provide the setup needed for a closing line where the protagonist realizes that their grief never went away, their life simply grew around it. This will give your theme a lot more weight than if they'd had this realization out of the blue in the middle of a workday! Consider the kind of situations that would prompt your protagonist to directly confront the story's themes, and build your final scene around it as you lead up to your closing lines.

Character

"Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." — J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Now, these lines may not seem all that impressive at first glance, but they come as a somewhat relieving end to what has so far been a rather turbulent journey for the main character. Holden Caulfield spends the entirety of *The Catcher in the Rye* in a state of depression and arrested development following the traumatic premature death of his younger brother three years prior. The events of the story detail Holden's mental breakdown following his expulsion from boarding school — the results of years of unaddressed depression and increasingly antisocial behavior, though Holden himself lacks the self-awareness to identify this breakdown and its sources for what they are. Unable to recognize his behavior as a symptom of his mental illness, Holden justifies his aggressive attitude as a refusal to engage with "phonies" who he perceives to be shallow or disingenuous, and it's not until the end of the story that he fully acknowledges that he's "missing everybody" and at least somewhat regrets pushing them away.

This is an important development (and relevant to our point about closing lines) because readers learn from various hints throughout the story that Holden is currently in a sanatorium and is recounting the events of his weekend-long breakdown as part of a therapy writing exercise. Holden Caulfield is one of the most famous unreliable narrators in fiction, and although his perspective and judgement are biased at best, there are increasingly frequent moments wherein readers can see his loneliness and vulnerability through the cynicism. His acknowledgement of this

vulnerability in the final lines of the book, the fact that he misses all the "phonies" and even the people he got into physical fights with, is an end cap on an arc that's driven both the physical and emotional plot since the beginning.

Illustrating your protagonist's growth in your closing lines is a great way to sum up the whole of their arc and bring that key element of your story to a close. You can do this either directly or indirectly to similar effect, depending both on your preference and how much of the story revolved around the character arc and internal conflict. Whether it's the protagonist themselves acknowledging a major change in their life and outlook (as in Holden's case) or merely a description of a dramatic change in their circumstances, readers will be able to see the direct contrast to how things were at the beginning of the book and get a satisfying sense of closure to their journey.

Opening Lines

"But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union." — Jane Austen, *Emma*

Like all of Jane Austen's novels, *Emma* ends with a wedding. The whole book is about weddings, really — the eponymous Emma fancies

herself a matchmaker, a good judge of others' dispositions and compatibility — and spends the entirety of the book attempting to secure an appropriate marriage for her friend Harriet, whom she believes to be the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman. Despite the many warnings Emma receives about the dangers of meddling in other people's lives (not the least of which coming from her own love interest, Mr. Knightley), her perceived success and privilege have made her self-assured, and it's not until she puts her foot in her mouth in a moment of pointless cruelty that she realizes how much she's been taking that privilege for granted. The embarrassing humility she suffers, however, eventually leads her to realizing her feelings for Mr. Knightley, and the two are married in the union described in the closing lines above.

What makes these closing lines so special in comparison to all of Austen's other wedding-related endings is how well they reflect the book's opening lines, neatly bookending the entire story. *Emma* also begins with a wedding — that of Emma's former governess Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, whose match Emma credits herself with arranging — one that Mr. Woodhouse laments as a result of Miss Taylor leaving Hartfield. Ending the book with another wedding concerning the Woodhouse family, this time one that brings a new member into the household, provides a beautiful symmetrical resolution to the story. Perhaps even more satisfying, however, is how well the final sentence concludes the idea presented in the first, to the point that they can almost

be read as a single statement:

"Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her... But, in spite of these deficiencies..."

The deficiencies referred to in the last line are actually about Mrs. Elton's complaints that the wedding lacked the flair and finery of her own off-page wedding, but considering that Emma's privileged upbringing is responsible for the vanity and naivety that causes her to briefly lose esteem in Mr. Knightley's eyes, the idea that their marriage is a happy one despite her "deficiencies" makes sense.

As you can see, bookending your opening and closing lines in this way can be a fun and thematically relevant way to end your story. When writing your final scene, take a look at your opening scenes and consider how you might mirror them in your ending. This can give you the same impact as restating your theme or drawing attention to your character arc, but with the added bonus of making the story feel neatly enclosed.

Crafting your closing lines should be easier with these strategies in mind. If you're still struggling, I suggest trying a mix of the three and

writing a list of potential final lines (I recommend at least ten). Consider what you like about each line and how well it fits into your final scene, as well as how your final scene might change to better suit each line. Having a few options to work with will make the process a bit less daunting, as you'll be able to narrow things down and mix-and-match elements from each to find the perfect ending note for your story.

Part 4: Self-Editing Act 3

Back to the Drawing Board: Returning to Your Outline

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of self-editing Act 3, I'd like to take a moment to talk about the importance of having an outline. If you've been following this ebook series from the beginning, you'll know that I swear by outlines and recommend them at every stage in the writing process. Although their usefulness in planning and drafting depends largely on your own preferences, I maintain that when it comes to self-editing, outlines are one of the best tools that you can have at your disposal.

The reason outlines are so helpful in the self-editing phase is that they give you a bird's eye view of your story from start to finish. They summarize the key events and details of each scene, allowing you to assess their strengths without the added noise of dialogue, description, and everything else getting in your way. The primary benefit here is that self-editing becomes that much more streamlined and objective as a result, and your proverbial red pen that much more effective and efficient. The other upside, however, is that you can more easily compare the overall structure of your story to any guides or templates you may be using to help shape

your story (and there are a lot out there!) and double-check that you're hitting your marks and including all your desired genre conventions.

The specifics of how you use your outline during self-editing will vary based on your system, but the broad strokes remain the same. Using the pared-down version of your scenes, you can determine at a glance if they contain all the necessary beats and/or sufficient answers to our list of essential questions in Part 2, as well as how they measure up to your other self-assessment parameters (which we'll talk about in the next section). If needed, you can then change up the sequence of events by reorganizing, adding, or removing parts of your outline without needing to copy-paste or rewrite large chunks of text. This also ensures that any major structural changes are completely contained to your outline, leaving your draft fully intact until you're ready to take on revision.

Needless to say, all of this becomes a lot harder if you don't have an outline going into the self-editing stage. Either you risk leaving some information out by trying to create a revision checklist from memory, or you're forced to comb through your scenes line-by-line for information that would otherwise be neatly summed up in an outline. This makes the whole process more time-consuming and makes it more difficult to track your changes over time, but it also takes away some of the objectivity that's needed to accurately evaluate your scenes and kill your darlings as needed.

If you aren't typically a plotter or haven't created an outline up to this point, don't fret — it's never too late to start! The goal is just to summarize the events of Act 3, so feel free to keep it small and simple. Using your format of choice — your word processor, note cards or sticky notes, a loose piece of paper — make a list of all the scenes in your third act. For each scene, add a bullet point or one-sentence summary of each of the following:

The purpose of the scene

The events of the scene (in order)

Any information revealed in this scene that will be important later

As an example, let's put together an outline for the scene in Chapter 52 of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Lizzie finds out that Darcy is responsible for saving Lydia's future and reputation:

Purpose: To show the extent of Darcy's love for Lizzie; to reveal the circumstances of Lydia's marriage to Wickham.

Event 1: Lizzie receives a letter from Mrs. Gardiner in response to her inquiry about Mr. Gardiner's involvement in Lydia's marriage.

Event 2: In the letter, Mrs. Gardiner confirms that it was actually Darcy who secured the marriage.

Event 3: Lizzie feels conflicted between gratitude toward Darcy

for his intervention, sorrow at the pain he went through in the process, and regret that the Bennet family can never properly thank him for it.

Event 4: Wickham catches up with Lizzie and tests the waters of their new relationship; Lizzie is chilly toward him but does not reveal that she knows the truth about him.

Important Detail 1: Mrs. Gardiner implies that Darcy may have had other motives in securing Lydia's marriage beyond feeling responsible for Wickham; Lizzie wonders briefly if he did it out of affection for her, but dismisses the idea as self-centered.

Important Detail 2: Lizzie feels guilty for her poor attitude toward Darcy in the past.

Once you've outlined each of your Act 3 scenes as shown above, you'll be better poised to assess the role each plays in your final act and their respective strengths and weaknesses.

With that in mind, let's get into how to conduct this assessment and actually put our outline to good use!

Writing a "Better" Ending

Now that you have your outline in hand, it's time to put it to work. When it comes to Act 3 in particular, your outline is great for taking a step back from your ending, finding what does and doesn't work for you from a story perspective, and putting those insights toward writing a better ending.

Now, in encouraging you to improve your ending, I'm not saying that your current ending is bad. There can be any number of reasons why you might be dissatisfied with how things play out in your third act. Maybe the tone is off, or it just doesn't have the impact you were aiming for. Maybe the ending you had planned doesn't really fit with the way the characters have evolved over the course of the story, or maybe the opposite is true and the new ending you devised just doesn't feel as true to your vision as the original. Whatever the case may be, the goal of this article is not to convince you to scrap your hard work just for the sake of writing something different, but to assist you in looking critically at your draft and determining what can be reworked and tightened up (and yes, maybe changed) to create a smoother, more natural ending for your story.

We can accomplish this by using the questions below in tandem with your outline to assess the strength of your scenes and make sure that

each one is serving your story to the greatest possible extent. These questions evaluate your scenes based on how much weight they carry plot-wise, how much emotional impact they have, and how they *feel* in relation to your overall story. No one question is any more important than another, but they do all contribute to the efficacy of your scenes, so try to be thorough and honest with your answers!

Is this an essential scene, and/or does it contain any essential beats?

Which events drive the story (either main or subplot) forward?
Which ones don't?

Do the events of the scene flow naturally into one another? Are the actions and consequences clearly linked?

Which new questions are introduced, if any? Which existing questions are closed?

Using your answers to the above questions, you can determine what may be lacking in your scenes and what needs to be done to improve them. The answer may be immediately obvious, or it may require looking back at other aspects of your story to see if you have any lingering elements that can be added or tied in. This is where having an outline for your previous acts helps, too!

In some cases, the issue with a given scene may seem unfixable.

This could be a sign that it's just not working for your story, and that some aspect of your ending (maybe even the whole thing!) needs to be rewritten. If so, don't fret — while it may seem like a setback now, this kind of large-scale change is a good thing in the long run. Ultimately, you're gaining a better understanding of your story and using that knowledge to create an ending more suited to what it's become over the course of your writing.

With that being said, I strongly encourage you to *delete nothing permanently!* There's always a chance you'll want to reincorporate some aspect of your original ending, ranging anywhere from a small but apt description to a deleted scene that actually works better alongside your new ending, and you'll be glad to have that old work on hand when you need it. There's nothing worse than realizing that the perfect missing piece of your draft has been lost forever to a physical or digital trash bin!

I leave you with one final piece of advice — be critical, but not self-deprecating, in your assessment of your scenes, and don't create more work for yourself than the story actually needs. You'll find things to nitpick about your ending long past the point of the story being well and truly done, so learn to trust yourself about when your ending *works* and when you simply have more ideas to put to paper.

Conclusion

And there you have it! With these tools and strategies in mind, you're well on your way to crafting the perfect ending for your story. If you've been drafting chronologically or have otherwise saved writing your final act for last, take heart — you're in the home stretch now. When all is said and done, you'll have successfully written a book!

Below, I've included a list of all the terms we've referenced and defined throughout this book, along with a list of further resources and reading that you can check out for more trips and tricks on writing Act 3.

Good luck, and happy writing!

Terms

apotheosis: the pinnacle of the protagonist's character arc; the point in the climax where they turn the tide and overcome the final obstacle

Chekhov's Gun: the writing principle that every element of a story should be necessary; named after playwright Anton Chekhov's assertion that if a rifle is shown onstage in Act 1, it must be fired in Act 3

climax: the point in a story where the stakes and tension are highest; the "turning point" where the protagonist faces their greatest challenge

complication: a minor conflict that carries the plot from one beat to the next

consequence: an outcome of a given action that takes place during the story

essential scene: a scene that contains key beats and/or information and supports the overall shape of the story

expectation: an assumption readers make about a story based on various elements

falling action: the point in the story following the climax when tension lessens and plot lines resolve

resolution: the end point of a given arc or plot line

Rule of Three: the idea that three is the most effective number in storytelling, used in this book to describe the number of beats that constitute a satisfying subplot arc

theme: an idea or message that is central to a story

tragic flaw: a negative trait that influences a character's choices and impacts their arc

Resources

How to Write a Dynamic Act One — Ley Taylor Johnson

How to Write a Compelling Act Two — Ley Taylor Johnson

Plot Perfect: Build Unforgettable Stories — Paula Munier

Plot versus Character — Jeff Gerke

Save the Cat! Writes a Novel — Jessica Brody

The Secrets of Character — Matt Bird

Story Genius — Lisa Cron

Story Physics: Harnessing the Underlying Forces of Storytelling — Larry Brooks

Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft — Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, Ned Stuckey-French

90 Days to Your Novel — Sarah Domet

About the Author

[Ley Taylor Johnson](#) (she/they) is a fiction editor and writing coach based in the Pacific Northwest. Driven by a lifelong passion for storytelling, she began her freelance career in the hopes of connecting with indie authors looking to improve their stories and their craft. She now works with new and practiced authors alike, and specializes in developmental editing for science fiction, fantasy, romance, and horror. She currently serves as the secretary for the Editors Tea Club and is the founder/coordinator of the Editorial Freelancers Association's LGBTQ+ chapter. When she's not editing, Ley can be found reading, playing D&D, and obsessing over her hobby of the month. Her own stories (both short and long form) feature queer, disgruntled protagonists who think too much.