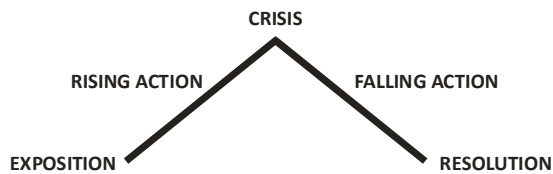


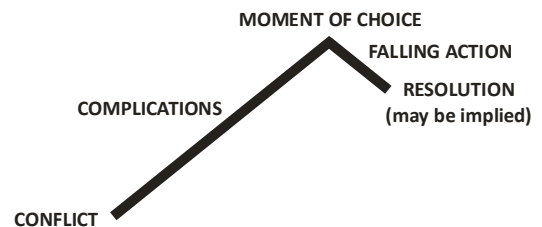
Good stories don't just happen, they're built, and as architects use blueprints, writers need sound structures to create effective emotional journeys for their readers. In this session we'll explore the structural elements shared by all stories (from linear to unconventional), uncover the differences between plot and structure, and give you the tools to build emotionally satisfying stories again and again.

People have always needed stories—it's how we understand our world. Over 2,000 years ago Aristotle identified the basic elements common to every story: a **beginning**, a **middle**, and an **end**. 150 years ago, Gustav Freytag re-envisioned dramatic structure as a pyramid of five actions: an **exposition** followed by **rising action** leading to a **crisis** after which **falling action** ends in a **resolution**.



Today, Freytag's use of the word *exposition* can be problematic—it's reminiscent of expository information dumps which can grind a story to a halt (and as most writers want people to read their stories, anything that makes readers stop reading is to be avoided). It's better for current storytellers to envision this *exposition* as **conflict** generated through the directly opposing wants of a protagonist and an antagonist (which causes **complications** rather than unspecified *rising action*). As Janet Burroway points out, conflict carries negative connotations in life, but in fiction (whether comic or tragic), dramatic conflict is key to story because only trouble is interesting.

Today's storytellers also tend to keep their *falling action* brief and at times their *crises* may only imply their *resolutions* as tolerance for long, drawn-out endings has declined since Freytag's day with increased literacy rates and an almost universal exposure to an exponentially greater number of stories. Therefore, it's probably more useful for today's writers to think of story shape not as a pyramid with sides of equal length, but rather as an inverted check mark.



And finally one last refinement: John L'Heureux argues that *crisis* is the key action of any story:

A story is about a single moment in a character's life when a definitive choice is made, after which nothing is the same.

Without this **moment of choice**, a narrative will ultimately be unsatisfying to most readers; it may be fiction, but it will not be a story (and may not help readers make sense of anything).



John Mavin has taught creative writing at Capilano University, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, with New Shoots, and at the Learning Exchange in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He's been nominated for both the Aurora Award and the Journey Prize, and his short fiction has been translated, studied, and published internationally. *Rage*, his first book-length collection of dark literary fiction, was published in the fall of 2017. Visit him online at www.johnmavin.com.