



Prologue Structure for both character-driven and plot-driven stories.

Jodi Henley

Hi, my name is Jodi Henley. Welcome to Prologue Structure! One of my very favorite workshops.

The Pros and Cons of using a prologue

Many writers don't like prologues and feel agents and editors also don't like them. People might also mention that prologues aren't "needed", which is true--a prologue isn't necessary.

Unlike a beginning, middle or end, nobody really "needs" a prologue. It's not a part of your story skeleton. It's more like a set of braces; an add-on to something that already works.

Like braces, it's all about personal choice. You might feel your story is crooked and needs a little support. It might not look "right", or your gut feeling is that a prologue simply needs to be there.

Like everything else, it's optional.

Because a *good* prologue is hard to write, some people have sworn off them and encourage others to do the same. A prologue, regardless of where you stand on the prologue debate, *is a stylistic choice*.

It's not right, wrong or lazy writing; it's simply one of many choices you make during the creation process.

In *The Elements of Style*, Strunk says, "*Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.*"

Not that I'm arguing with Strunk, but good writing sings and dances, it doesn't plod along like an English textbook. How many times have you seen a book that totally blew away everything you knew was "right" and reached the top of the bestseller charts? Head-hopping, run-on sentences, goofball plot events and purple prose—you can do anything if you can connect with your reader. Good writing tells a *great* story. Whether you have a couple of unnecessary words, want to go purple, blue or Hemingway, if it works, it works, which is why "voice" is the hardest thing to teach.

Voice is how you interpret craft.

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I don't think everyone should have a prologue because prologues don't make weak writing stronger or a weak story better. If you like and want to use a prologue it should be an informed choice.

What agents and editors don't like are prologues that don't work.

What a prologue is and isn't:

A prologue is not an info-dump.

If you have a story about John and Jane, and talk about how John's grandma Suzy owned a Victorian, made friends with Jane and left the house to her which made John upset because "he" wanted the house to stay in the family. Then show John getting the news, talking to a lawyer and swearing he'd get the house back for his sweet old mom—that's an info-dump.

A prologue is not unrelated information that has nothing to do with the story you're currently writing.

If John practices kendo, or Jane once saw a ghost—maybe John is the founder of the local Veteran's Day parade or is really an alien, it should only be in your prologue if it impacts on the story, comes up again, or illustrates a point.

A prologue should not read like the Old Testament, the History of the World or say things like "Little did she know" or "As she was to find out"

Unless you're so good an unrelated sampling of beta readers agrees that it's the hottest thing to hit paper since Diana Galabon.

A prologue should provide info that would take a huge amount of time to explain or has more impact when shown.

Remember Jane's friend, Suzy, the old lady with the house? What's the important part of that whole scenario? Is it John's vow to get the house back? Or his meeting with the lawyer?

It's actually Suzy's death.

If Suzy doesn't die and leave the house to Jane, the story doesn't happen. Why did Suzy leave the house to Jane? Could it be that no one in her family cared enough to talk to her? Was Jane her only friend? Did Jane love Suzy?

Showing their connection is important, because it's one of Jane's primary motivations. When John shows up, wanting to buy the house back from her—her love for Suzy and anger at Suzy's family will provide a major source of conflict.

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Narrowing it down further, showing Jane in the Emergency Room, crying at Suzy's bedside, holding on to her hand provides an emotional hook. There is nothing stronger than the death of a loved one.

A prologue should be connected to the story you're telling.

Not "a" story, or the story of your character's lives at some earlier or later time, but this story.

If Jane's mom once took her to a Christmas pageant and Jane fell in love with Santa Claus which is why Jane collects Santa figurines, "that" has nothing to do with Jane making a stand in Suzy's house.

If Jane's mother used to beat her and forgot Jane at school the day of the Christmas pageant, and Suzy was the mean old librarian who found Jane hiding in the stacks, got her something to eat and turned Jane's life around—that makes a good prologue.

A prologue, above all—should be an emotional hook that pulls your reader into chapter one.

If you don't "feel" it, your reader won't either. The story of Suzy's death, or the beginning of Jane and Suzy's friendship might feel over the top, but there's a vast difference between a dry recitation of story events and an "in-your-face" visceral experience.

Plot-driven v. character-driven?

Before we get started working I'd like to spend a little time exploring the difference between character-driven stories and plot-driven stories because it makes a difference in what you're trying to do, and how to do it. Not that either way is wrong. Simply that each way needs to be approached differently.

Plot-driven stories are not necessarily bad, and character-driven stories are not necessarily good. Like anything else, what sells comes and goes in cycles. Sometimes one does better, sometimes the other does.

When you call a story plot or character-driven, you're simply describing a construction style.

Some people are pulled a little more strongly in one direction but both are equally valid.

In a plot-driven story events are the driving force. A good example of this would be when Joan's sister is kidnapped in *Romancing the Stone* and she has to deliver the package her brother-in-law mailed to her before he died, or Luke Skywalker's decision to leave Tatooine when his aunt and uncle are killed.

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By themselves, Joan wouldn't decide to leave for Cartagena and Luke wouldn't make the decision to leave Tatooine, but since plot events—the kidnapping and murders—happened, the characters have no choice except to react.

Characters are secondary to the plot, and are moved “by” the needs of the plot. Joan needs to get to Cartagena, and Luke needs to destroy the Death Star. It's fast-paced and high concept. If it were a book, it'd be called a page turner, because each page flips in a chain reaction.

The reader needs to know what happens next. Does Luke save the Princess? Does Joan trade El Corazon for her sister? Joan doesn't spend a lot of time in internal monologue, which doesn't mean she “can't” spend time in internal monologue. It's just that the story isn't about Joan's feelings about the bus breaking down—it's her *action* in walking away from the break down that's important.

Good examples of plot driven movies would be

Die Hard

The DaVinci Code

The Indiana Jones movies

Plot driven stories can be described in a quick elevator pitch.

A good plot-driven story, like *Die Hard*, can also have many character-driven elements, because the best plot-driven stories grow out of character in the same way a good character-driven story has an integrated plot.

Character-driven stories are a little more difficult to describe because they're driven by character and sometimes characters do things that don't make sense or come out of nowhere unless you think about their actions as part of the greater whole.

In the *Indiana Jones* movies, Indy rushes around, fighting bad guys and avoiding snakes. It's a great adventure.

In *Witness*, another Harrison Ford movie, he also fights bad guys. The difference is that it's character-driven movie, so when you remember it, you don't remember the chases or shootings, you remember him waking up in Rachel's bed, freaking out over his gun and the way he changes over the course of the movie.

While plot-driven stories can contain a character arc, in a character-driven movie or story the transformational arc is very pronounced. John Book isn't the same man at the end of *Witness*, while Indy is the same at both the beginning *and* the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Character-driven stories run on emotion.

A good example of character-driven movies would be

Witness

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Casablanca

Sideways

Gran Torino

A character-driven movie is more complex emotionally, but might also contain less plot because people are the plot drivers and plot flows out of them, instead of being imposed *on* them.

When is a prologue chapter one?

A prologue is simply your first chapter if you take away the label calling it a prologue; re-label it chapter one and the story flows on without skipping a beat.

There needs to be some kind of disconnect between the prologue and the first chapter, although that disconnect can't be totally random. The prologue and first chapter must make sense together, even if the prologue is simply a bookend device.

To-do and to think about

Create a post, copy paste your prologue “and” the first three pages of your first chapter.

If you don't have a prologue yet, build a word picture. Tell me how you'd write it and what would be in it. Then tell me how your story starts. Be detailed.

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Re-read it, and tell me if you feel its plot or character-driven. What do you feel it does for the rest of the story, and how do you want your reader to feel about it?

If it relates to a greater series arc, or something in an epilogue, also write that down.

Tomorrow:

Exploring techniques

Creating bridges

What to do if you have an overall series arc and this is book one

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My prologue doesn't work—help!

Prologue Structure: Day Two

Exploring techniques

When prologues work, they work well. When they're done badly, it's usually because the writer is on deadline, doesn't want to put effort into layering the story, or wants to “get the set up out of the way.”

An example would be a story where the author depends on the prologue to explain **who** the characters are, **what** they're doing and **why**, without ever mentioning it again. So we get stories where the hero does things that doesn't make sense, and has powers or some kind of motivation that we don't “see”. **But**...was mentioned in the prologue.

Maybe the prologue explains the war in Heaven, the fall of Lucifer, and ends with the formation of Hell. Then the first page opens on some guy walking down the street looking for a cup of coffee. Five pages later we find out the guy's name is Starr, he lives in Boston, and someone is killing prostitutes. It doesn't connect.

It might, *if* the author wanted to set Lucifer up as Starr. But simply focusing on events in the prologue doesn't make the story a connected whole. “You” might know where the story is going, but you need to give your reader some clues. Who is this Starr guy? Is he Lucifer? The prologue *talks* about Lucifer, but chapter one is some guy walking down the street looking for coffee.

If the story is really about an angel who got caught up in the war, decided to hang out with humans, and now he's a detective/cop/whatever and the plot involves human trafficking—the author probably figured the prologue made sense since it's what caused Starr to become a cop. He Fell.

His Fall is backstory and a trigger but until you think about the prologue as a focal piece for your story it's hard to tell if it's the “right” trigger. Besides being a hook, a prologue should be the right hook. Characters, like people, have lives that run in a continuum. Stuff happens before the story and keeps happening afterwards.

The creation of Hell isn't part of Starr's story. It's interesting and was probably fun to write, but Hell is part of Lucifer's story and even if they were friends and fought together, Lucifer and his issues have nothing to do with Starr and his coffee.

Which means in addition to being the “right” hook, a prologue needs to stay on target.

How do I find the right thing(s) to show in my prologue?

Define yourself and your story.

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Are you plot-driven or character-driven?

A plot-driven story focuses on story events, and a character-driven story focuses on people. In other words, characters react to story events in a story where the plot takes precedence, and story events develop out of *how* a character reacts or interacts in a character-driven story.

If I opened Starr's prologue with a demon in a truck of illegals—all of whom were really hot women, and ended with a shot of the doors opening, and a makeshift brothel, it would be the inciting incident for a story about dead prostitutes, demons/fallen angels and human trafficking. If I changed the focus in my prologue and opened with a shot of Starr cutting his wings off and walking out of Hell, it would be the inciting incident for a character-driven story about Starr, and the prostitutes would be my "vehicle" to show his transformational arc.

It's all part of what makes up your voice. Where and how you start your story—what it's about and where the focus is, needs to do one of two things—show the inciting incident or *why* this particular story is about to happen, or a change which then *leads* to this particular story happening.

Whether it's the story with the prostitutes or the one focused on Starr—it would still open the same, with Starr walking down the road looking for coffee.

In the first one, you already know the story is a murder-thriller-paranormal because of the prologue, so it's pretty obvious if we open with Starr he's going to play a large role in the investigation, and curiosity makes us turn the page.

In the second one, you already know who Starr is, what he's capable of, and something about his attitude. So Starr walking down the street means something is about to happen to start him on a journey driven by who and what he is. Strongly plot-driven, versus strongly character-driven.

It'd be just as easy to cut the prologue and start with the inciting incident in chapter one, or a little set-up and then the inciting incident. It's all a matter of voice. Prologues work if they're a logical part of the story, and provide either a reason for—or a jumping off point to—the rest of the story.

Creating bridges, a little more depth on plot-driven prologues

A plot driven story is very audio-visual. Think of screaming kids in a roller coaster ride. You can see by the expressions on their faces and the setting how exciting it all is. The deep rumble of the cars, the sharp wind. Kids with their mouths open, screaming and waving their hands or hanging on with white-knuckled fear.

The prologue in a plot-driven story needs to visually "show" and lay the groundwork for the story you plan to tell *and* act as a bridge to pull the reader into turning the first page of the first chapter, which means it needs to create a *gap* where the reader knows more than the characters, so he or she is willing to suspend disbelief in exchange for a payoff.

A really good example of this would be the opening sequence (prologue!) in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

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It opens with Indy in the temple, stealing the idol. He triggers the trap, the ball comes rolling after him, he barely escapes—and it cuts away to open with Indy teaching a class, very respectable in his teacher-suit.

The reader knows Indy is more than he appears, and is willing to wait for the payoff.

A little more depth on character-driven prologues

A character-driven prologue gets into the emotions of the character. It can be visual, but at the same time, it should be deeply and firmly in point of view, even if that pov is “implied” by the visuals.

Let’s go back to Starr cutting off his wings.

Unless it works for your story, “feeling” Starr’s actions don’t work as well as *seeing* them. To keep it firmly in pov, it needs to be the literary equivalent of a close-up shot.

His expression. Intent, focused and maybe chalk-white? His actions? Are his hands shaking and his shoulders hunched over? Is he sweating, or bleeding? From there, a quick visual—still in pov—of something he’d notice at a time like this. Blood running down his arms? Light disappearing. Fire in the distance? Things that work to reinforce his state of mind. What’s going on in the prologue or foreshadow coming events.

Keep it tight and close.

Feeling the slice of the knife isn’t the same as his emotional reaction to what happens to trigger the prologue.

What did happen? You don’t need to explain it, but you do need to have Starr react. If you know Starr witnessed a massacre caused by his own side, and he can’t stomach the fighting anymore—then you’ll know blood makes him sick. When it splashes his arms, his stomach tightens. Maybe his internal dialogue mentions the fact that he wants to throw up. Or maybe he hears echoes?

Maybe he left his best friend? Maybe he killed his best friend? Maybe his best friend was killed trying to save a human, and Starr is walking away because he failed to save them. Maybe he’s carrying an enormous amount of guilt and his internal dialogue is “guilty, guilty, guilty!”

Because some stories contain elements from different sub-genres, it’s important to establish what your story is right up front. If I didn’t use a prologue where the reader could see Starr was an angel, and of his own free will decided to pass as human, it’s simply a character-driven thriller and a great opportunity to do some intensive backstory layering in chapter one.

Next up:

Prologues for continuing series

My prologue doesn’t work—help!

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Prologue Structure—Day Four Part 1

Prologues for continuing series

What exactly is a continuing series and what makes it different from a shared world?

Let's say John and Jane live in a town called Pine Needle, TX. It's a small place out in the middle of nowhere with a small manufacturing plant that makes special RV mattresses. It's big enough for a community college, but too small for a university.

If you tell Jane's story, and in the next book tell the story of Jane's friend Emma, the series would be considered a shared world because while Jane and Emma are friends and live in Pine Needle, each story stands alone. Everything in each book works the same—gravity, the monetary systems. Emmy Lou Ellen, the local librarian is the librarian at the Pine Needle Library anytime the library is mentioned, but there's nothing larger than the book going on.

We all exist in a shared world, side by side with our neighbors, the kid down the street and the dogs at the pound two counties over.

It becomes a continuing series if Emmy Lou is a doorkeeper—bound to an inter-dimensional gateway hidden behind the old-fashioned card catalog down in the library's basement. Along with her loyal gang of ninja-like were dogs she's been fighting off a rising tide of demon possessed were mice that look like human children.

In book one the Jane discovers the Librarian and every book that follows contains some new information about her or shows us what's happening in the battle for the souls of the people in Pine Needle.

A good mental-visual of how a continuing series arc and individual book arcs work is to think of them as a ball of yarn. Pretend the ball is the whole series. Emmy Lou's story is a strand long enough to travel (pretty much in a straight line) from one side of the skein to the other. That's your continuing arc. Now imagine there are maybe ten or twelve strands—the hero and heroine of each individual book—that travel from the beginning to the end with more or less focus at any particular time. Some of them get tangled and form a loop which is your individual book, while at the same time the rest of the strands keep moving toward the other side.

Once the current story in the tangled bit is over, the threads that contain it “also” keep moving toward the end of the skein. Maybe less important, maybe more important because of story events that ran in addition to the focus on the hero and heroine, which means when one story is done, the characters from that story are still there. They might not be the hero/heroine of the next story, but they show up occasionally or word of them shows up as a throwaway line or knowledge within a focal character. A good way to look at Emmy Lou's story is as a continuing subplot that has the same structure as a character arc spread out over however many books you feel it'll take to complete her story.

Because you're setting up for two things at one time, the prologue for a continuing series has to contain info about both the current book and the greater arc.

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A good way to do that would be to tie the greater arc into the current story arc. If Jane has a childhood trauma that gives her a severe fear of mice (which plays an important part in her story) then it would bring in the greater arc if you set it on the stairs leading down into the library basement. Maybe she accepted a dare to go down there at the exact instant the Librarian was fighting off an attack, and Jane witnessed something that scared her to death and at the time—didn't understand.

Because your reader doesn't know that Librarian is part of the greater arc, it simply becomes part of Jane's trauma. It's only as the story progresses that the Librarian's involvement is shown to be important to an arc that then continues "out" of the story into the next book.

Next:

Help!

My Prologue doesn't work...

Help! My prologue isn't working!

Over the course of the last week, you've had a chance (if you checked out other people's posts) to see how prologue structure encompasses many different things, depending on the story you're writing and how you approach it.

Sometimes, it involves looking at the greater story arc for structure, like in Mageela's story. Sometimes it involves fine-tuning the focus like in Ushma's story, and occasionally it involves finding the right incident to show or building bridges, either for the story or the greater arc of a continued series.

Structure is the new buzz word, but it just means the workability of the whole. But...what do you do if it doesn't work and you don't know what to do?

People who are drawn to writing have a different outlook on life and ways of processing info. In other words—trust your instincts. When you *know* something is wrong with a scene, prologue, or the structure of your work—step away and do something else. Garden, talk a walk, make dinner or clean the house. Do regular everyday stuff that involves "muscle" memory. Get your body working and free your mind. Watch the clouds drift by, free associate and try to isolate the problem.

Answers are easy, the question is hard.

Jodi's Nifty Troubleshooting Guide to Common Prologue Issues:

1. Have you told your reader what just happened and told them what's "going" to happen?

That'd make anyone itchy. If you can look at your prologue and say, "Thank God, that's out of the way. Now I can get down to the good stuff," maybe your prologue isn't there for the right

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reason. In a regency historical, this would be the equivalent of the mad, bad and dangerous to know rake talking to his dad, the Duke of Something or other, about settling down, finding a bride, doing it right now this instant, explaining the consequences if he doesn't and describing the heroine's circumstances. A variant of this is the "Charles Heston as Moses" voice talking about continental drift and the next twelve thousand years as set up for an epic battle between the good guys and the forces of evil; then a kid is born and the journey through the birth canal is described.

- Set-up is important, but *don't explain the story in depth*. A prologue isn't an excuse for lazy writing. Give your reader just enough to wonder what happens next, foreshadow if you feel it'll work for your story, illuminate your characters, but...let the meaning and layers reveal themselves.

2. Have you moved the focus off the story line? A story line is what's actually happening in your story. Every story has a primary line of action, even a story that really doesn't *have* a lot of action. In other words—if someone asks you what the story is about, what would you say?

- If you tell me your story is about a wrongly convicted man who escapes slavery in the Caribbean to become a pirate and the noblewoman who falls in love with him, then a prologue that focuses on the quartermaster and pilot talking about the ship and the raid that's about to go down has focus issues.

- Usually the focus is somewhere in the prologue, usually towards the end—or it's the right focus, but the wrong people are in it. Take a look to see if what drives the plot or creates character motivation is at the end of the prologue. Or ask yourself what two guys talking about military strategy have to do with the story of a pirate falling in love with a noblewoman.

- If the raid is where the pirate meets the love of his life, the pirate needs to be in the scene. His needs and emotions drive the story. The impact is diluted if you get the information across at a one-remove. He's the one that should be checking out the maps and guns. If he needs gold to fix his damaged ship then getting the girl instead of the money is going to cause conflict when it comes to torturing the info out of her or squeezing a ransom out of her impoverished family. Love v. freedom, love v. his men. Give him a stake in the matter. What the quartermaster thinks isn't important.

3. Is it disjointed? Have you created some kind of bridge or echo? A prologue is a hook and needs to create a gap to pull the reader across "What's going to happen next?" or a bridge, "The path is here, want to learn more?"

- If it feels like the prologue comes from another story altogether, look at chapter 1 and make sure *something* in chapter 1 refers back to the prologue (even at a tangent) or continues from the prologue into the first chapter.

4. Have you overthought it? Stories are flexible as long as you remember the basic storyline. When you first started writing, remember how everything felt? The freshness and joy? Don't beat your work to death. An over fixation on grammar and sentence structure, whether or not you

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have a certain percentage of passive voice, blue markers, red markers, turning points and ordinary world suck the life right out of writing.

- There is no one way, or correct way, there's only the way that works for you. Give yourself permission to fail. Failure creates a process of elimination. What's left are the bare bones of voice (style and choice of tools) and instinct. Craft isn't a monolith. Read, study, learn—then let it go. Most of the time, craft turns into a background process. If you aren't sure—don't submit for critique, find a "reader" in your sub-genre and get an honest opinion. The editing process can fix almost anything, but it can't create a good story.

5. Have you wussed out? A story is emotion—even if it's plot-driven. Look at the implications of backstory events you give your people. Making someone a recent widow or giving them a traumatic event means you're giving them "pain." Push it as hard as you can. It's easier to trim down than to build up.

- If you want to see how gut-wrenching and emotional you can make your story, watch *Ordinary People* or *Brothers* (with Tobey Macguire).

Thanks for being here.

Jodi