

LESSON 5: Story High Points and Low Points

When we talked about the inciting incident in the last lesson, we called it a shake-up, because it takes the main character's ordinary world and turns it upside down. You can also think of it as a story "low point" or an *uh-oh* moment. Something drastic just happened that presents your main character with a serious dilemma that she must work to solve.

As your main character works to solve the problem, one way to look at that is like climbing up a mountain. You're striving and toiling and feel like you're getting somewhere. In fact, you may have a brief moment of feeling that things are looking up. That would be a "high point" in the story. But if the story ended there it would be very short and probably not very interesting.

So, you need to let your character tumble off the other side of the mountain and skid down to another low point a couple times before reaching the end. Pull the rug out from under her and make her work twice as hard to get up that next mountain and closer to solving the story problem.

Think of the events in your story as peaks and valleys. Ups and downs. And in the case of a novel, you want each iteration of the low point and high point to be more intense, to really start squeezing your main character so that she learns and changes and finds what she needs inside herself to get past her flaw/misconception and obtain the story goal.

I've drawn up a little diagram of how that mountain range of ups and downs might look:



If you're writing a shorter story (a novella, for example), you may not have all those peaks, so I put the first peak in gray. I also suggest in the image that it's common for the peak before the black moment to include a love scene if you're writing a romance, because that's often when the main character is at her happiest and thinks everything is going great, just before it all falls apart in the worst way ever, but you can have love scenes in other places, too, or not right before the black moment at all. This is just a suggested guide.

The key here is to have a combination of successes and failures along the way to the goal and to increase the stakes/tension as the story progresses so that by the black moment, your main character is really feeling the heat. Then one of two things will happen. The character will die (of course not!) or he/she will finally see the light and be forced to change and grow and learn at last what she need to do to solve the problem and find the happiness that had been missing before.

The story events as you move up the mountain will ultimately come to a head at the story climax, where you have the lowest of the low points, the **Black Moment**. All seems lost, failure seems inevitable. Your character will feel like the easiest thing to do is give up...

But then, your main character has a **revelation**, finally puts the pieces together and figures out a way to get past her flaw, solve the story problem, get what she wants (or needs) and find a happily-ever-after, or happy-for-now ending (depending on your genre).

What devastates your character most is up to you and has to do with who they are, what they care about and most of all, what that flaw/fear is they're carrying around.

For NaNoWriMo, it can be **helpful to brainstorm some of those high points and low points** you see here on the diagram because they tend to be big scenes, the type that pop into your head early on. Jotting them down now will give you things to work on during NaNoWriMo.

You may not know yet what happens in Chapter 2, but if you can picture the Black Moment, then you can write about that for a few days during NaNo and leave Chapter 2 for later. **You do not need to write linearly in NaNoWriMo.** You just need to get 50,000 words of a new story completed. It's okay to still have pieces to fill in when you're done.

Homework

See if you can think of some big shakeups that might appear in your story and jot them down. Start with the **inciting incident**. Review what you wrote for the previous exercise. Think about what the next scene after that might be and how it might translate into a minor success followed by a failure.

Then think about scenes where the main character may learn a shocking piece of information or come up against something unexpected like a threat or sudden situation. Jot down a line or two about each.

Look at the diagram and see if you can put a scene with each peak and valley. Don't worry, nothing is set in stone. Use pencil. :-) You're free to change any of this later on if a better idea comes along.

Consider your **black moment**. Look at what your character wants and what she fears the most and see if you can brainstorm a scene that makes it seem like she's about to lose everything she cares about and fail big time but if she finally faces that fear, she just might get out of this alive.

Think about how you want your story to **end**. You may not have many details now, and that's perfectly fine, but based on your genre, you know a few things. For example, if it's a romance, the hero and heroine will get together finally. If it's a mystery, the crime or puzzle will be solved. Think about how that might look for your story and jot down your ideas.

Post to the loop a **brief description** (about a paragraph) **of one of your story high points or low points.**