



## The Four-Letter Word Behind All Successful Stories

Why do some stories make us dream while others make us drowsy? The secret ingredient behind all successful stories is a four-letter word - and no, it's not *plot*. While narrative structure is undoubtedly important, the true test of any story is how it makes your audience *feel*. "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel," said Maya Angelou, and truer words about storytelling were never spoken. So why are so many nonprofit storytellers ignoring this basic truth? [Full Story](#). Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.



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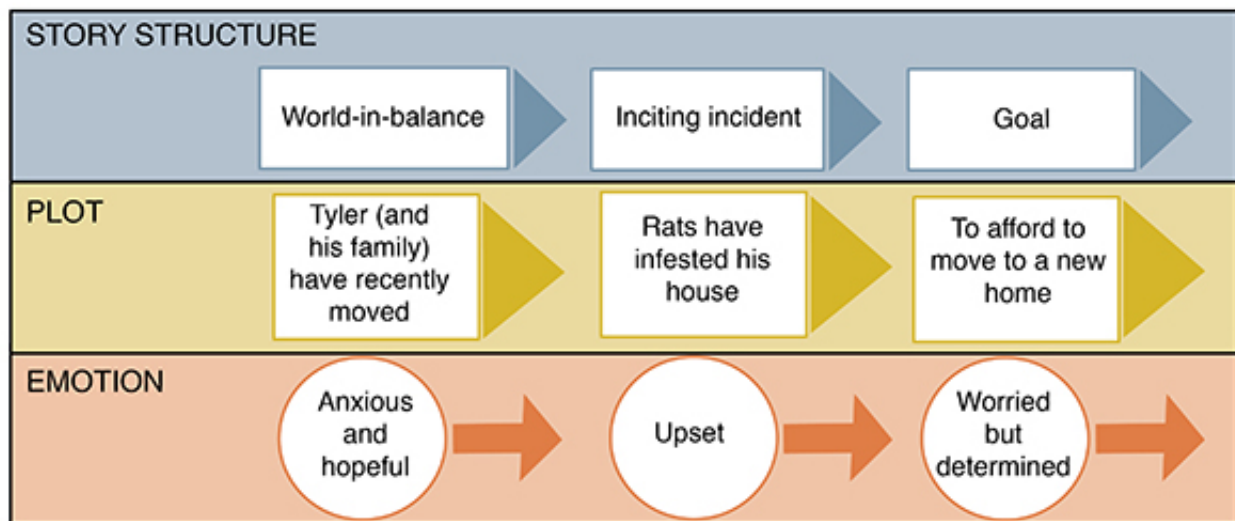
In Goodman Center workshops and online classes, we've seen many students struggle to show the emotions experienced by characters in their stories. To illustrate this problem, we've taken an actual homework assignment - a story about a nonprofit that helps low income families become homeowners. (We've changed the names and a few key elements to protect the privacy of the writer.) The following paragraphs are the opening act of this student's story - the part most responsible for drawing us in and making us care about the characters:

*In 2008, after finishing grad school in Chicago, Tyler and his wife Aimee decided it was a good time to move back to their hometown of Seattle. With their new baby in tow and only Aimee's income, the couple could only afford to rent a somewhat dilapidated house on the south end.*

*It wasn't long before they began to be awoken almost every night by the scratching of rats living above their bedroom. Aimee tells Tyler that they need to find somewhere else to live. Tyler is upset and frustrated as he reminds Aimee that they couldn't find anything better in their price range. Tyler wants to provide for his family and move them somewhere that isn't infested with rats. He knows Aimee is getting increasingly frustrated but as time passes, Tyler becomes more and more hopeless. He's not sure what he'll do but he knows he must find a way for his family to leave this apartment. And fast.*

On a purely structural level, the story is off to a promising start. We can clearly see the protagonist (Tyler), his "world in balance" (a rat-infested house and a very unhappy wife), and his goal (rat-free house, happier spouse), but we only get a surface understanding of how he feels about all this. A protagonist is more than merely our guide through the events of a story; he is also our emotional avatar. We react the way he reacts, so when a writer doesn't show how their protagonist feels, the audience may be left unsure of how to feel about the things that happen.

To avoid this problem, try mapping the structural elements of the story side-by-side with your protagonist's emotional journey. For the story above, the **emotion map** might look something like this:



With the emotion map to guide us, we've written a second draft of these opening paragraphs. (Check out the annotations to see the emotional intent of each choice we've made in the rewrite.)

*Startled, Tyler sits up straight in his bed. There's that sound again. The scratching in the middle of the*

night seems louder than before-the rats are back, possibly with reinforcements.<sup>1</sup> "We've got to find someplace else to live," Aimee says to Tyler as she wakes up.<sup>2</sup> Tyler lets out a deep sigh. As he lies there, his thoughts swirl around him: I'm pathetic. I can't take care of my family. I can't even find a job. What if I never do?<sup>3</sup> "We looked," he says quietly so as not to wake their sleeping one-year-old son. "I'm sorry. We can't afford anything better right now." The scratching continues, this time on the other side of the room.<sup>4</sup> "This is NOT okay," Aimee says, turning her body away from his, "we can't live like this."

Tyler knows she's right but since finishing grad school six months ago, he hasn't been able to land the steady work he had been hoping for. Living off of Aimee's income, they're lucky to afford even this run-down, rat-infested apartment.<sup>5</sup> The sounds of his son crying in the next room stop his mind from its downward spiral: I must get us out of here now, he thinks.<sup>6</sup>

"Stories are engines of empathy," says Ira Glass, but these engines run on emotion. While your audience will follow a story to its conclusion to find out what your characters do, they will remember the story and be moved by it because of how it makes them *feel*.

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1. Rather than starting story with the protagonist's backstory, begin inside a meaningful or dramatic moment of action. Right away, we're in the protagonist's head, wondering what has startled him, then wondering what the noise is, then finally worried that the now familiar sound is signifying something worse to come.
2. Dialogue continues the effort of drawing the audience into the story. Suddenly, events aren't being recalled, they are happening right in front of us.
3. Instead of telling us how your protagonist feels, focus on describing the actions that illustrate how the character's emotions manifest. Why is showing better than telling? First, it helps the reader visualize the story and therefore makes it more vivid to them. Second, it makes the story more interactive-by describing what things look like rather than just stating them flat out, you force the reader to deduce how Angie feels, making them a more active receiver of the story.
4. Sensory descriptions allow the audience to have a sensory experience of the story, making it feel more real to them.
5. Now that we're invested in Tyler, a little summary about his backstory only serves to make us relate to him more.
6. Keep us wondering what happens next. Do not reveal how the story ends before the story is over. Curiosity is a huge emotional driver for audiences to stick with stories. If we know what happens from the start, we're more likely to be getting up from our seats than being on the edge of them.

[^back to top](#)

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free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

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