

Editor's Advice for Writing a Novel: How to Write the Hero's "Ordeal"

Emotionally compelling protagonists are at the heart of the best advice for writing a novel.

"If you want to be a writer, you have to be a reader." So the advice for writing a novel typically goes. And this advice remains solid because there are many things writers can learn by example from exposure to other people's stories and storytelling.

If you've ever read a book, watched a movie or TV show, or played a video game, you've engaged with the story structure known as the Hero's Journey (possibly even without knowing it, although if you have a background in creative writing, this will sound familiar). The Hero's Journey is a twelve-step narrative structure from Joseph Campbell in his book of the same name, a structure that most conventional fiction follows. These steps span all three acts of the story, beginning with Ordinary World (the introduction to the setting) and ending with Return With The Elixir (the hero returning to their world, triumphant after completing their task or facing their challenge).

(*also: please note: I intend and use "hero" in a gender-neutral way and interchangeably with "protagonist" throughout this blog.)

If you're not familiar, or you want a refresher, take a look at the [Hero's Journey structure](#), and you will think of examples from the hundreds of stories you know. There's a ton of guidance out there that addresses different steps in the Journey; in this blog, I'd like to focus my advice for writing a novel on the Eighth Step, the Ordeal, which is generally considered one of the most important moments in the conclusion of your story.

Exploring the Eighth Step: The Ordeal

The eighth step, The Ordeal, is described as the lowest point of the protagonist at the end of act two. It is their dramatic downfall or defeat, but it also reveals the truth of their character. Maybe the hero lost a battle against the villain, or they failed to save another character from danger. This step sees the protagonist hitting rock bottom in order to return with greater strength and resolve to conquer the main antagonist or conflict. (Not to be confused with the eleventh step, The Resurrection, which is defined as the final confrontation or climax, in book terminology.)

Define Your Protagonist: Advice for Writing a Novel Lead

When you're outlining your story or reach The Ordeal when writing, it can be challenging to weave plot points and character arcs together to create an emotional downfall for your protagonist. However, effectively crafting your protagonist makes this step easier to define through the following traits: their goal, their room for improvement, and their inner turmoil. If you find yourself struggling to define your character or build the right emotional tension, Developmental Editing provides that kind of assistance on your book's character work and overall structure.

#1: What Are Your Protagonist's Strengths and Goals?

After The Ordeal, ask yourself and outline:

What strengths does your protagonist currently hold? And what do they still hope to accomplish?

Return to your story and make note of the knowledge your protagonist currently has after their loss in The Ordeal. Perhaps they are a skilled fighter with a relentless need to bring peace to their city, an insanely knowledgeable detective with a knack for complex cases, or a passionate businessperson at the top of their career.

A skilled fighter might strive to take down the villain or halt an evil external force to save their city. An intelligent detective might wish to catch an evasive serial killer. A passionate businessperson might dream of completing their life by finding their forever person. Once you have these two questions answered, you will know your protagonist's mindset after The Ordeal, as well as the endpoint of what they still hope to accomplish.

Using this arc, connect the necessary plot points (events that must happen) for the hero to grow from The Ordeal in order to navigate The Resurrection (or climax) in your book.

#2: How Can Your Protagonist Improve, and What Can They Learn?

Now ask yourself: where does your protagonist still have room to grow or learn?

Returning to our previous examples, a skilled fighter might be great at what they do, but perhaps they're still too hot-headed, which is what caused their problems during The Ordeal. They overestimated their abilities in a showdown with the villain and were brutally defeated.

A detective might have underestimated the killer or worked themselves to exhaustion, and after The Ordeal, it seems the killer has slipped through their fingers.

A passionate businessperson might have been shown during The Ordeal that they still have to learn a thing or two about partnership.

All of these are common (and effective!) tropes for these character archetypes, so experiment with yours to make them unique to your story using specific plot points in your book; twist them into a more refined character. If you are unsure how your protagonist can still improve, examine where you have written them as a flawed, thus more human, character in previous scenes. How have they acted or what decisions did they make that were detrimental to them during The Ordeal? What lesson does it seem they might still need to learn?

#3: What Is Your Protagonist's Inner Conflict?

Lastly, for your protagonist, you must find their inner conflict. These tend to be external to the main plot and based in a B-plot or the character's roots. A fighter might have an unrelenting drive to prove himself to his peers. A detective might be on the case after their loved one fell victim to the killer. A passionate businessperson might struggle with commitment, dedicating too much of their life to work. The inner conflict must be unique to your protagonist, as it fleshes out their personality and individual emotions. This conflict drives your protagonist's motivation in the story, and directly relates to The Ordeal and the lesson they must learn.

Final Advice for Writing a Novel: The Ordeal Sets up a Phenomenal Climax in Books of All Genres

The Ordeal can be a tricky step in your story, but if you take time to properly craft your protagonist with a goal, room to grow, and an inner conflict, you can create an engaging and compelling character-defining moment that'll resonate with your readers. My advice for writing a novel using the Hero's Journey is that it can be helpful to return to your favorite stories for inspiration, or even use a list of examples that clearly define the steps and what comes before and after The Ordeal. Most importantly, remember that this step serves as the most vulnerable point for the protagonist. Constructing an effective Ordeal is more than beating the protagonist to the ground; it's the pinnacle of their flaws and traits clashing together in chaotic disharmony, and where they must learn to accept or improve themselves to conquer their objective.