



## The Four Arc System for Organizing Your Novel

From  
How to Write KILLER Fiction  
By Carolyn Wheat

Think of your novel as having four parts, roughly 70 to 80 pages each in length (based on a total length of 300 pages; longer books have longer arcs). Each of these parts has a distinct purpose in telling your story.

### Tem-minute Hook

An opening scene or chapter that is self-contained and grabs the reader in some way, by either showing a “day in the life” of the character whose life is about to be turned upside down, or giving a preview of things to come.

### Arc 1

Set up the conflict or problem; introduce the main character and opponent or mystery  
Establish the characters inner need to, which he/she may or may not be aware of  
Start the subplot rolling now—either the main character, secondary character, or both  
No flashbacks allowed— tell the reader only what he/she must know at this moment  
Make the contact with the reader through tone and style  
Use a catalyst to get the story started and keep things moving  
End arc 1 at a crisis: the first turning point scene changes everything and sends the main character in pursuit of a new goal. A decision leads to a beginning level of commitment.

### Arc 2

Here come the flashbacks— but only to illuminate the present  
Main characters tested, trained, given tasks, tries and fails to reach goal  
One-step forward, two steps back  
Each gain leads to a (greater ) loss in the end  
Subplots deepen, also move toward their crunch points  
Discrepancy between characters wants and needs grow larger  
Establish deadline or ticking bomb beyond which all will be lost  
End arc 2 at a crisis: the midpoint scene may involve hitting bottom, being convinced there is no hope of success. Or the main character may move from reactive to proactive, from committed to fanatical, from objective to emotionally involved, from wrong goal to right goal. A line may well be crossed. Return to the status quo is now impossible. The character can only go forward, come what may.



## The Four Arc System for Organizing Your Novel

From

How to Write KILLER Fiction

By Carolyn Wheat

### Arc 3

Pace increases considerably; chapters and sentences are shorter

All threads begin coming together; all subplots will be resolved by end

Ticking bomb or other deadlines become compelling

Build toward climax with ever-increasing conflicts and consequences

Characters desire to reach goal increases exponentially

Disconnect between characters need and want becomes clear even to them

Character tested and trained for the ultimate confrontation

End with arc 3 in crisis, the second turning point, in which the character is forced to make a crucial decision. This can be a low point (if the character hasn't already hit bottom), or it can be a recognition that nothing short of a life or death confrontation will solve the problem.

### Arc 4

The showdown at last—good faces evil, and only one will survive

All the stakes are bet on a single hand; nothing is held back

Give the ending its full value—give the reader what you promised in arc 1

Use all the elements you set up in the earlier arcs for the maximum payoff now

Make sure character undergoes both external and internal transformation

Show an outer manifestation of internal change—character does something in a way he/she couldn't have done at the beginning of the story

Make sure the subplot resolution either supports or contrasts with the main plot resolution for maximum thematic impact

If possible, take the character in a full circle in some way, with a setting that repeats the beginning