

The Stages of the Hero's Journey

All stories consist of twelve common structural stages found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and movies. These Stages compose the Hero's Journey. In this document you will find a simple overview of each Stage, illustrating basic characteristics and functions, as well as the eight character archetypes found within all stories. Use it as a quick-reference guide for textual analysis throughout ELA 11. The Journey's Stages are used universally; however, they may be avoided, repeated, or shifted about depending upon the needs of the individual story and creative abilities of the author

- 1. The Ordinary World**
- 2. Call to Action**
- 3. Refusal of the Call**
- 4. Meeting the Mentor**
- 5. Crossing the Threshold**
- 6. Tests, Enemies, Allies**
- 7. Approach the Inmost Cave**
- 8. The Ordeal**
- 9. Reward/Seizing the Sword**
- 10. The Journey Back**
- 11. Resurrection**
- 12. Return with the Elixir**

The Ordinary World

The Ordinary World allows us to get to know the Hero and identify with him before the Journey begins. Since the audience usually experiences the Journey through the Hero's eyes, we must be able to relate to them. The Ordinary World gives us the opportunity to identify with the Hero's drives, urges, and problems, while showing unique characteristics and flaws that make them three-dimensional. The Hero's inner and outer problems may be established, although these can change depending upon the demands of the Journey. Every story involves a problem or central dramatic question that disrupts the Ordinary World. The Hero must then enter the Special World to solve the problem, answer the dramatic question, and return balance. The Ordinary World allows the storyteller to contrast the Ordinary and Special worlds. The Ordinary World is the Hero's home, the safe haven upon which the Special World and the Journey's outcome must be compared to. Areas of contrast may include the Special World's physical and emotional characteristics, its rules and inhabitants, as well as the Hero's actions and growth while traveling through this Special World.

Call to Action

The Call to Action sets the story rolling by disrupting the comfort of the Hero's Ordinary World, presenting a challenge or quest that must be undertaken. The Call throws the Ordinary World off balance, and establishes the stakes involved if the challenge is rejected. Often delivered by the Herald archetype, the Call to Adventure can take a multitude of forms, including: a message or

announcement, a sudden storm, the arrival of the villain, a death, abduction, or a man's dying words. The Hero may need a succession of calls before finally realizing that a challenge must be met, or that his only means of escape is the Special World. Many times the Hero needs to choose between two conflicting calls.

Refusal of the Call

A Hero refuses the journey because of fears and insecurities that have surfaced from the Call to Adventure. The Hero is not willing to make changes, preferring the safe haven of the Ordinary World. The Refusal of the Call becomes an essential stage that communicates the risks involved in the journey that lies ahead. Without risks and danger or the likelihood of failure, the audience will not be compelled to be a part of the Hero's Journey. Although an eager or willing Hero may skip the Refusal of the Call, the Hero's Allies or Threshold Guardians may still express the fears and risks involved. In horror and thriller, the frightening and forbidding nature of the Special World can lead the Hero to be repeatedly "called" to the adventure that he continues to refuse. Each Call and Refusal must escalate the stakes, until the Hero has no choice but to accept the Call.

Meeting the Mentor

The Hero Meets a Mentor to gain confidence, insight, advice, training, or magical gifts to overcome the initial fears and face the threshold of the adventure. A Hero may not wish to rush into a Special World blindly and, therefore, seeks the experience and wisdom of someone who has been there before. This Mentor has survived the Special World, and can thus provide the essential lessons and training needed to better face the Journey's Tests and Ordeals. The Mentor may be a physical person, or an object such as a map, a logbook, or hieroglyphics. In Westerns and Detective stories, the Hero may hold an Inner Mentor, a strong code of honor or justice that guides him through the Journey.

Crossing the Threshold

Crossing the Threshold signifies that the Hero has finally committed to the Journey. He is prepared to cross the gateway that separates the Ordinary World from the Special World. The Crossing may require more than accepting one's fears, a map, or a swift kick in the rear from a Mentor. The Hero must confront an event that forces him to commit to entering the Special World, from which there is no turning back. The event will re-establish the central dramatic question that propels the story forward. The event will directly affect the Hero, raising the stakes and forcing some action. Outside forces may push the Hero ahead, such as an abduction of someone close to the Hero. A Chase may push the Hero to the brink, presenting no choice but to commit. The Hero's place in his Ordinary World may be usurped by another being, or the Hero may cross the threshold with guns blazing. Internal forces may also push the Hero to accept his Special World. The Hero finally decides to see a therapist, sacrifices themselves in exchange for another character's freedom or agrees to finally go out on their first date.

Tests, Allies, Enemies

Having crossed the Threshold, the Hero faces Tests, encounters Allies, confronts Enemies, and learns the rules of the Special World. This Stage is important for both Hero and Audience alike. Whether entering the imaginary world of a future society or the emotional realm of romantic love, the Test Stage is our first look at the Special World and how its conditions and inhabitants contrast with the Hero's Ordinary World. The Hero needs to find out who can be trusted. Allies are earned, a Sidekick may join up, or an entire Hero team forged. Enemies and villains are encountered. A rival to the Hero's goal may reveal himself. The Hero must prepare themselves for the greater Ordeals yet to come and needs this stage to Test skills and powers, or perhaps seek further training from the Mentor. This Initiation into the Special World also Tests the Hero's commitment to the Journey, and questions whether they can succeed.

Approach to the Inmost Cave

The Hero must make the preparations needed to Approach the Inmost Cave that leads to the Journey's heart, or central Ordeal. Maps may be reviewed, attacks planned, an investigation launched and possibly the Enemy's forces whittled down, before the Hero can face their greatest fear or the supreme danger lurking in the Special World. The confident Hero may bypass these preparations and make a bold Approach to the Inmost Cave. The Hero has survived the descent into the Special World, but now must demonstrate that they have earned their place. Sometimes, the Hero may need to take a break for a meal, a joke, or a romance, before facing the Ordeal. A Hero's team may have hit setbacks during the Tests, and the Approach is necessary to reorganize the depleted ranks, remember the dead and wounded, and rekindle morale with a Hero's or Mentor's rally cry. The Approach may signal a ticking clock or a heightening of the stakes.

The Ordeal

The Hero engages in the Ordeal, the central life-or-death crisis, during which he faces his greatest fear, confronts this most difficult challenge, and experiences "death". His Journey teeters on the brink of failure, and the audience watches in suspense wondering whether the Hero will survive. The Ordeal is the central, essential, and magical stage of any journey. Only through "death" can the Hero be reborn, experiencing a resurrection that grants greater powers or insight to see the journey to the end. The Hero may directly taste death, or witness the death of an Ally or Mentor or, even worse, directly cause that death. The Ordeal may pit Hero against Shadow or Villain, and the Hero's failure heightens the stakes and questions the journey's success. The Hero may have the power to defeat a Villain in the Ordeal, only to have to face greater forces in the journey's second half. In Romantic Comedies, death can mean the break-up of the relationship. The Ordeal is sometimes not the climax of the story. There's more to come. However, it is the main event of the second act — the one in which the Hero actually earns the title of "Hero."

Reward/Seizing the Sword

The Hero has survived death, overcome his greatest fear, slain the dragon, or weathered the Crisis of the Heart, and now earns the Reward that he sought. The Hero's Reward comes in many forms: a magical sword, an elixir, greater knowledge or insight, reconciliation with a lover. Whatever the treasure, the Hero has earned the right to celebrate. Celebration not only allows the Hero to replenish their energy, but also gives the audience a moment to catch their breath before the journey resumes to its climax and resolution. The Hero may have earned the Reward outright, or the Hero may have seen no option but to steal it. The Hero may rationalize the Elixir theft, having paid for it with the Tests and Ordeals thus far. The consequences of the Hero's actions; however, must be confronted as the Shadow forces race to reclaim the Elixir that must not see the light of the Ordinary World.

The Journey Back

The Hero must finally recommit to completing the Journey and accept the Road Back to the Ordinary World. A Hero's success in the Special World may make it difficult to return. Like Crossing the Threshold, The Road Back, needs an event that will push the Hero through the Threshold, back into the Ordinary World. The Event should re-establish the Central Dramatic Question, pushing the Hero to action and heightening the stakes. Like any strong turning point, the action initiating the Road Back could change the direction of the story. The Hero may need a force to chase them out of the Special World, a ticking clock threatening destruction or death in the Ordinary World may be set in motion, the Villain may have recovered the Elixir and must be stopped, or the event may be an internal decision that must be made by the Hero. In Comedies, a Hero may be trying to juggle conflicting journeys, and one must finally be sacrificed. In Romance and Action adventure, the Road Back may be a moment when the Hero must choose between the journey of a higher cause versus the personal journey of the heart.

Resurrection

The Hero faces the Resurrection, his most dangerous meeting with death. This final life-and-death Ordeal shows that the Hero has maintained and can apply all that they have brought back to the Ordinary World. This Ordeal and Resurrection can represent a "cleansing" or purification that must occur now that the Hero has emerged from the land of the dead. The Hero is reborn or transformed with the attributes of their ordinary self in addition to the lessons and insights from the characters that they have met along the road. The Resurrection may be a physical Ordeal, or final showdown between Hero and Shadow; however, the ticking clock of the Road Back has been set. This battle is for much more than the Hero's life, because other lives, or an entire world may be at stake and the Hero must now prove their heroic status and willingly accept their sacrifice for the benefit of the Ordinary World. Other Allies may come to the last-minute rescue to lend assistance, but in the end the Hero must rise to the sacrifice at hand. They must deliver the blow that destroys the Enemy, or offer their hand and accept the "magic" Elixir.

Return with the Elixir

The Return with the Elixir is the final Reward earned on the Hero's Journey. This is the most reflective stage of the journey. The Hero has been resurrected, purified and has earned the right to be accepted back into the Ordinary World and share the Elixir of the journey. The true Hero returns with an Elixir to share with others or heal a wounded land. The Elixir can be a great treasure, magic potion, love, wisdom, or simply the experience of surviving the Special World. Even the tragic end of a Hero's journey can yield the best Elixir of all, granting the audience greater awareness of us and our world. The Hero may show the benefit of the Elixir, using it to heal a physical or emotional wound, or accomplish tasks that had been feared in the Ordinary World. The Return signals a time when we distribute rewards and punishments, or celebrate the journey's end with revelry or marriage. The Elixir may bring closure to the journey and restore balance to the Ordinary World. Possibly it poses questions and ambiguities that continue the journey beyond the final "fade out". In most tales, the Return with the Elixir completes the cycle of this particular journey. Story lines have been resolved, balance has been restored to the Ordinary World, and the Hero may now embark on a new life, forever influenced by the journey traveled.

The End

The Archetypes of the Hero's Journey

Archetypes describe the function or role a character plays in a story. Think of the Archetype as a mask a character wears in a particular scene. One character may serve primarily as the Mentor of a tale, wearing that single mask for the majority of the journey. Others; however, may play many roles in the story's lifetime, or even change masks in a given part, a story's characters have the potential to wear any of the Archetypal masks depending upon the demands of the story. Obi Wan Kenobi is the Mentor throughout Star Wars, and yet he must wear the Hero's mask and sacrifice himself to Darth Vader in order to allow Luke to escape with the princess. In some stories, a single Archetypal mask may be handed from one character to the next, who wears it to the journey's end.

1. **The Hero** "to serve and sacrifice"
2. **The Mentor** "to guide"
3. **The Ally** "to support"
4. **The Herald** (Need for change in the hero's life) "to warn and challenge"
5. **The Trickster** "to disrupt"
6. **The Shapeshifter** "to question and deceive"
7. **The Threshold Guardian** "to test"
8. **The Shadow** (villain opposite hero) "to destroy"

When placing these masks on your characters, ask yourself the following:

- What is the character's function on the Journey?
- What is the character's goal?
- What action should the character take to achieve that goal?

Hero "to serve and sacrifice"

The Hero is the protagonist, or central character, whose primary purpose is to separate from the ordinary World and sacrifice themselves for the service of the journey at hand—to answer the challenge, complete the quest and restore the Ordinary World's balance. The Hero's Journey may be a challenge of personal growth: to win a competition, to heal a wound, or to find love. Heroes may also need to answer Calls to Adventure where physical lives and even the fate of the world are at stake. These Heroes must learn to accept the sacrifice of life and limb for the service of others. Since we experience the journey through the eyes of the Hero, we must be able to relate to them on some level. The Hero must be driven by universal needs: to find love, to succeed, to right a wrong, or to seek justice. These drives are connected to the Hero's inner and outer problems that need to be solved. The audience can relate to a Hero's beliefs, quirks, vices and deepest fears, while wanting to emulate the hero's admirable qualities. The Hero doesn't have to be all good. Some of our most endearing Heroes are actually antiheroes, outlaws and loner Heroes who live by their own rules and consistently "buck the system." The Hero usually grows and learns the most during the journey, and although they may be reluctant and make excuses,, by the journey's end they have become active, driven by their undying conviction to succeed.

Ally* “to support”

In our world, we oftentimes credit a singular hero with extraordinary feats; however, the truth is, none of them-and none of us-do it alone. Even in the cases where one individual performs one individual act, that person has allies, mentors, and supporters that they rely on. The intentional and purposeful recruitment of Allies, who will directly participate in the struggle with the Hero, provide valuable advice and counsel as the Hero navigates the difficult terrain of addressing the Call to Action. The Ally or Allies provide influence or resources to smooth the struggle and prepare the Hero to face and overcome the great challenge that awaits them, transforms them and changes the Ordinary World.

**Adapted from Chad Ellsworth’s “The Hero’s Journey: Tests, Allies, & Enemies”*

Mentor “to guide”

An essential Archetype, the Mentor, provides motivation, insights and training to help the Hero overcome their doubts and fears and prepare for the journey. Often the Mentor has traveled the road before and can provide needed guidance to a Hero who is reluctant to face the unknown. If the Hero proves their commitment, the Mentor may reward them with magical gifts (a weapon, clothing, piece of advice, or a key) that will help them on the journey ahead. The Mentor might present a powerful magical gift to lure the Hero to accept the challenge. Sometimes Heroes may not have a physical Mentor, but instead may be guided by an Inner Mentor, a code of honor or justice that must be served.

Threshold Guardian “to test”

Threshold Guardians protect the Special World and its secrets from the Hero, and provide essential tests to prove a Hero’s commitment and worth. The Hero must bypass these obstacles, and use any method available: ignoring, outwitting, overcoming, appeasing, or befriending. Threshold Guardians may be characters, a locked door or secret vault, an animal, or a force of nature such as a tornado.

Herald “to warn and challenge”

Herald characters issue challenges and announce the coming of significant change. They can make their appearance anytime during a journey, but often appear at the beginning of the journey to announce the Call to Adventure. A character may wear the Herald’s mask to make an announcement or judgment, report a new challenge, or simply deliver a letter. The Herald can reside within the Hero in the form of dreams and visions that push the Hero to change their life. An external event, such as a declaration of war or a storm, can serve the Herald’s agenda. Whatever the form, the Herald is needed to present the challenge, and get the story rolling.

Shapeshifter “to question and deceive”

The Shapeshifter mask misleads the hero by hiding a character’s intentions and loyalties. The Shapeshifter’s presence surfaces doubts and questions in the Hero’s mind, and can effectively infuse suspense. In Romance and Romantic Comedy, the Shapeshifter mask is often worn by the opposite gender.

The Shadow “to destroy”

The Shadow can represent our darkest desires, our untapped resources, or even rejected qualities. It can also symbolize our greatest fears and phobias. To use Star Wars as an example, the Shadow is the Dark Side, personified by Darth Vader. Since the Shadow is a reflection of the Hero’s qualities, it may represent positive qualities that the tragic or loner Hero may have suppressed or rejected. Shadows may not be all bad, and may reveal admirable, even redeeming qualities. The Hero’s enemies and villains often wear the Shadow mask. This physical force is determined to destroy the Hero and their cause, or the Shadow may be an inner demon lurking within the Hero, that must be accepted or purged.

Trickster “to disrupt”

The Trickster relishes the disruption of the balance, turning the Ordinary World into chaos with quick turns of phrase and physical antics. Although they may not change during the course of their journeys, the world and its inhabitants are transformed by the Trickster’s antics. The Trickster uses laughter to make characters see the absurdity of the situation, and perhaps force a change. Sometimes the Trickster’s voice can be the most sane and reliable in the confusion of the journey. The Trickster mask is often worn by the Sidekick in Westerns and the Mentor in Romantic Comedies (the best friend always offering comic advice to the Hero). In Action Adventure, the Hero may briefly wear the Trickster mask to outwit or disarm a villain or enemy; while in Comedy, the Hero may rely on this mask throughout the journey.