Rising Action

DEFINITION

What is rising action? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> The rising action of a story is the section of the plot leading up to the climax, in which the tension stemming from the story's central conflict grows through successive plot developments. For example, in the story of "Little Red Riding Hood," the rising action includes everything that takes place after Little Red sets off for Grandma's house—up to the moment she comes face to face with the Big Bad Wolf. In other words, *most* of the story is rising action, which is often case.

Some additional key details about rising action:

- The rising action follows the part of the plot known as the exposition (in which the world of the story and its characters are established), and precedes the climax.
- Every story has a section that can be described as the "rising action," even if the story has an unconventional narrative or plot structure.
- The opposite of rising action is falling action, the phase of a story following the climax in which the main conflict is de-escalated and tension is further dispelled.

Understanding Rising Action

The rising action is really the "meat" of any story, in which most of the important action occurs. Generally speaking, any work of writing that has a plot can be said to have rising action. Here are a few of the key defining features of rising action to help you identify it:

- **The rising action begins with an inciting incident or complication.** The inciting incident is an event that creates a problem or conflict for the characters and sets in motion a series of increasingly significant events that constitute the main events of the story. The inciting incident marks the end of the exposition and the beginning of the rising action. Note that the inciting doesn't have to be an actual event—it may just be a piece of information that adds tension or suspense to the actions of the characters. This information is sometimes referred to as the **complication** rather than as the inciting incident. Here are two examples, one of a complication and one of an inciting incident:
  - **The complication in "Little Red Riding Hood"** is that there is a Big Bad Wolf in the forest, making Little Red's trip all the more dangerous and suspenseful.
  - **The inciting incident of the first *Home Alone* movie** is that Kevin gets left at home when his family goes on vacation.
- **The rising action is typically the longest part of the story.** This is the simplest rule of thumb for identifying the rising action. While this rule is pretty dependable, it's important to know that it's not fool-proof, because some stories have atypical plot structures. But as in the example of Little Red Riding Hood, the rising action usually constitutes the bulk of a story.
- **The rising action builds tension or suspense.** In other words, the rising action can also be identified by paying attention to how the audience feels during the story. As long as the feeling of tension or suspense associated with the central conflict continues to increase, the action is still rising.
- **The rising action ends with the climax.** Most of the tension and suspense that get built up over the course of the rising action are dispelled during the climax. Therefore, one good way to identify a story's rising action is to identify the climax. Since the climax dispels the tension that was built up during the rising action, the climax is directly concerned with the conflict or tension that drove the rising action. For instance, if the climax of a mystery story is the unmasking of the villain, then the rising action is likely concerned with the crime committed and the discovery of different clues leading to the villain's identification.

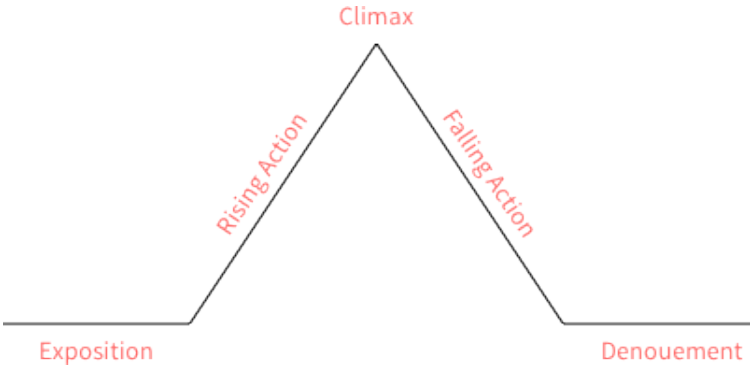
Some people would describe the rising action as the most important part of the plot because the climax and outcome of the story would not take place if the events of the rising action did not occur.

The Rising Action and Freytag's Pyramid

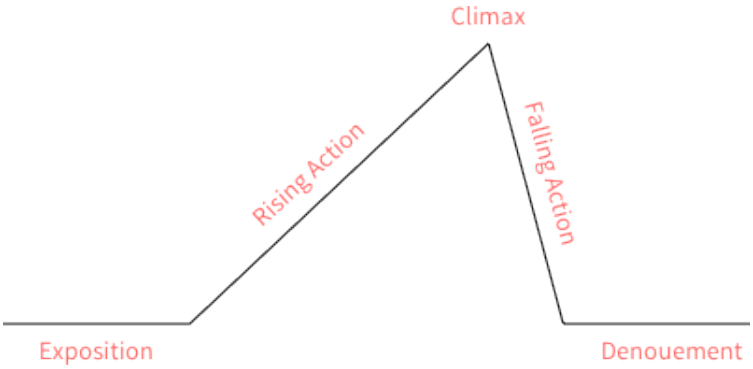
One of the first and most influential people to create a framework for analyzing plots was 19th-century German writer Gustav Freytag, who argued that all plots can be broken down into five stages:

- Exposition
- Rising action
- Climax
- Falling action
- Dénouement

Freytag originally developed this theory as a way of describing the plots of plays at a time when most plays were divided into five acts, but his five-layered "pyramid" can also be used to analyze the plots of other forms of literature, including novels, short stories, films, and television shows. Here's the pyramid as originally defined by Freytag:



One important thing to note about the shape of Freytag's pyramid is that it shows all parts of the story as having equal length, with climax at the very center of the diagram. However, this is actually a bit misleading, since the rising action is usually longer than other parts of the story, and ends closer to the story's ending than its middle. Therefore, a slightly more accurate version of Freytag's pyramid (modified to reflect a longer rising action) might look something like this:



Note: Freytag's Pyramid Doesn't Fit All Plots

While Freytag's pyramid is very handy, not *every* work of literature fits neatly into its structure. In fact, many modernist and post-modern writers intentionally subvert the standard narrative and plot structure that Freytag's pyramid represents. So while the rising action is often spoken about in relation to other parts of Freytag's pyramid, there may be times when it's easier to determine what part of a story is the rising action based on criteria *other* than its position relative to other sections of the plot, such as what part of the narrative builds tension or suspense.

EXAMPLES

Rising Action in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

In Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the rising action begins when Blanche Dubois arrives at the home of her sister, Stella, and reveals that she has, under mysterious circumstances, lost possession of their childhood home. This is the inciting incident. Stanley, Stella's husband, is immediately suspicious of Blanche, who in turn is very critical of Stanley and derides him constantly for his low class and "primitive" ways. The tension between these three characters grows over the course of the months that Blanche stays with the couple in their tiny apartment, and the mystery around the circumstances prompting Blanche's visit also continues to grow, until one day Stanley tells Stella everything he has heard about Blanche's sordid past from others: that she was fired from her teaching job for having an affair with a seventeen-year-old boy, and began working as a prostitute at a local hotel. Tension reaches a new height after this revelation, as it's unclear how all the various characters will respond to the new information. The play reaches a climax when Stanley finally confronts Blanche and, it's strongly suggested, rapes her.

In short:

- **Inciting incident:** Blanche arrives in New Orleans and discloses that she has lost Belle Reve, the family home.
- **Climax:** Stanley rapes Blanche.
- **Rising action:** Everything in between.

Rising Action in *Romeo and Juliet*

People have differing opinions about where the climax occurs in *Romeo and Juliet*, and there are therefore two competing views of where the rising action ends. Most can agree that the inciting incident or complication is when Romeo sees Juliet at the masquerade ball and falls in love with her, but discovers shortly after kissing her that she belongs to the Montague family, with which his own family is locked in a bitter rivalry; therefore, their love seems doomed from the outset. The action continues to rise as Romeo and Juliet meet in secret later that night, and are married the next day, also in secret.

Some would argue that the rising action comes to an end the following day, when Romeo kills a Capulet (Juliet's cousin Tybalt) and must flee the city to avoid execution. In this analysis, the remainder of the play (in which Juliet fakes her own death in order to avoid having to marry another man, and Romeo, thinking Juliet dead, actually kills himself) would be considered falling action. But others would argue that the rising action only comes to an end when Romeo kills himself after learning, incorrectly, that Juliet has died. These interpretations are quite different, but neither is wrong. As you can see, how readers define the rising action often depends entirely on where they interpret the climax to occur.

In short:

- **Inciting incident:** Romeo kisses Juliet and discovers she's a Capulet.
- **Climax:** (Option 1) Romeo kills Tybalt, or (Option 2) Romeo kills himself.
- **Rising action:** Everything in between.

Rising Action in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* tells the story of a Mariner who shoots an albatross (a large sea bird) out of the

sky after it has been following his ship for several days. Shortly after the albatross dies, the wind disappears and the mariner's ship becomes stranded in the arctic. The Mariner's shipmates hang the albatross around his neck as a punishment. Unable to move without wind, the men on the ship grow so thirsty that they cannot even speak. When the Mariner sees what he believes is a ship approaching, he must bite his arm and drink his own blood so that he is able to alert the crew, who all grin with joy. But the joy fades as the ghostly ship, which sails without wind, approaches. On its deck, Death and Life-in-Death gamble with dice for the lives of the sailors and the Mariner. After Life-in-Death wins the soul of the Mariner, the other sailors begin to die of thirst, falling to the deck one by one, each staring at the Mariner in reproach. The Mariner himself, however, doesn't die; he is cursed to live among the dead crew.

By the time the last of the crew has died, it seems as though it could not get much worse for the Mariner. The sense of tension has ballooned around the question of what his fate will be, and whether he'll ever be free of the albatross around his neck. But then comes the climax: the Mariner has an epiphany in which he realizes the value of all life, and as a consequence the albatross falls from his neck and the Mariner is, at least partially, released from his curse.

In short:

- **Inciting incident:** The Mariner shoots and kills the albatross.
- **Climax:** The Mariner realizes that life is precious and the albatross falls from his neck.
- **Rising action:** Everything in between.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Virtually every story can be said to use rising action to build the narrative. It serves the following purposes:

- It builds suspense and increases the feeling of tension surrounding the central conflict or question of the story.
- It moves the plot forward, brining it to the point of climax, which enables the story to reach a resolution.
- It reveals essential information about the characters through their responses to various plot developments, making them more complex, relatable, and lifelike.
- It "pulls the reader in." The rising action is the part of the story where writers either win their reader's attention, or fail to build a compelling narrative and lose their audience as a result.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Entry on Dramatic Structure:** This page covers basic plot structure, including a section on rising action.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Rising Action:** A basic definition.
- **15 Genius Inciting Incidents from Cinema:** This article gives a few examples of effective inciting incidents from famous films.

HOW TO CITE

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