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# DRAMATICA®

A New Theory of Story

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*The Dramatica Theory was developed by Melanie Anne Phillips and Chris Huntley and was not researched nor based on any other theories of story design or analysis.*

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# SECTION I

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## The Elements of Structure

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# Foundations

## Central Concepts

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In Dramatica, there are some central concepts that prove immediately useful. Presenting these up front reveals the practical side of the theory and provides a firm foundation for more explorations to come.

These central concepts are:

1. The Story Mind
2. The Four Throughlines
3. The Overall Story Throughline
4. The Main Character Throughline
5. The Impact Character Throughline
6. The Subjective Story Throughline
7. The Grand Argument Story

## The Story Mind

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One of the unique concepts that sets Dramatica apart from all other theories is the assertion that every complete story is a model of the mind's problem solving process. This *Story Mind* does not work like a computer, performing one operation after another until reaching the solution. Rather, it works more holistically, like our own minds, bringing many conflicting considerations to bear on the issue. It is the author's argument about the relative value of these considerations in solving a particular problem that gives a story its meaning.

To make his case, an author must examine all significant approaches to resolving the story's specific problem. Leave out parts of the argument and the story will have holes. Make the argument unevenly and the story will have inconsistencies.

Characters, Plot, Theme, and Genre are the different *families* of considerations in the Story Mind made tangible. This allows audience members to see them at work

and gain insight into their own methods of solving problems. Characters represent the motivations of the Story Mind (which often work at cross-purposes and come into conflict). Plot documents the problem-solving methods employed by the Story Mind. Theme examines the relative worth of the Story Mind's value standards. Genre shows the Story Mind's overall attitude, which casts a bias or background on all other considerations. When a story is fully developed, the model of the Story Mind is complete.

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## The Four Throughlines

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It is not enough, however, to develop a complete Story Mind. That only creates the argument the audience will consider. Equally important is how the audience is positioned relative to that argument.

Does an author want the audience to examine a problem dispassionately or to experience what it is like to have that problem? Is it more important to explore a possible solution or to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of alternative solutions? In fact, you must develop all of these points of view for a story to be complete.

An author's argument must go beyond telling audience members what to look at. It must also show them how to see it. It is the relationship between object and observer that creates perspective.

In stories, *perspective provides context, and context creates meaning.*

There are four different perspectives that must be explored as a story unfolds to present all sides of the issue at the heart of a story:

- Third person perspective ("They")
- First person perspective ("I")
- Second person perspective ("You")
- First person plural perspective ("We")

Each perspective offers a unique context in which problems can be identified and resolved. Together, these four perspectives represent all the ways in which we experience the real world

When we connect these perspectives in stories, they create four story "lines" that reach from the beginning of the story to its end. We call these story threads, Throughlines. Each throughline has a different name. They are the Overall Story Throughline, the Main Character Throughline, the Impact Character Throughline, and the Subjective Story Throughline.

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## The Overall Story Throughline

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The first perspective we'll look at is the Overall Story Throughline, so called because it is the broadest, most dispassionate, objective look at the Story Mind. This is the third person, "They" perspective.

Imagine the argument of a story as a battle between two armies. The Overall Story view is like that of a general on a hill overlooking the battle. The general focuses on unfolding strategies and, from this perspective, sees soldiers not by name but by their role on the field: foot soldier, grenadier, cavalry officer, scout. Though the general may care for the soldiers, he must concentrate on the events as they unfold. Because it highlights events, the **Overall Story Throughline** is often thought of as plot, but as we shall see later, plot is so much more.

Other names for this throughline include the Objective Story Throughline, the "head" line, the "Big Picture," and others.

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## The Main Character Throughline

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For a story to be complete, the audience needs another view of the battle as well—that of the soldier in the trenches. Instead of looking *at* the Story Mind from the *outside*, the **Main Character Throughline** is a view *from* the *inside*. What if that Story Mind were our own? That is what the audience experiences when it becomes a soldier on the field. Audience members identify with the Main Character of the story. This is the personal, first person, "I" perspective.

Through the Main Character we experience the battle as if we were directly taking part in it. From this perspective we are much more concerned with what is happening immediately around us than we are with the larger strategies that are too big to see. This most personally involved argument of the story is the **Main Character Throughline**.

Other names often associated with the Main Character are the Primary Character, the Principle Character, the Hero, the Protagonist, and others.

As we shall explore shortly, the Main Character does not have to be the soldier leading the charge in the battle as a whole. Our Main Character might be *any* of the soldiers on the field: the cook, the medic, the bugler, or even the recruit cowering in the bushes.

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## The Impact Character Throughline

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To see the third perspective, keep yourself in the shoes of the Main Character for a moment. You are right in the middle of the story's battle. Smoke from dramatic explosions obscures the field. You are not sure which way leads to safety. Still,

before there was so much turmoil, the way was clear and you are confident in your sense of direction.

Then, from the smoke a shadowy figure appears, solidly blocking your way. The shadowy figure is your **Impact Character**. You can't see well enough to tell if he is friend or foe. He might be a compatriot trying to keep you from stepping into a minefield. Or, he might be the enemy luring you into a trap. What to do! Do you keep on your path and run over this person or try the other path instead? This is the dilemma that faces a Main Character.

To explore the issue at the heart of a story completely, an Impact Character must present an alternative approach to the Main Character. The **Impact Character Throughline** describes the promoter of this alternative path and the manner in which he impacts Main Character. This is the impersonal, second person, "You" perspective.

Other names for this character include the Obstacle Character, Influence Character, Mirror Character, and possibly others. Don't be distracted by the name. Though the label implies a single character, the Impact Character can be represented by one character or a group of characters. The consistency of perspective is the important quality of the throughline.

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## The Subjective Story Throughline

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As soon as the Main Character faces his Impact Character, a skirmish results at a personal level amid the battle as a whole. The two characters close in on each other in a theatrical game of "chicken," each hoping the other will give in.

The Main Character shouts at his Impact to get out of the way. The Impact Character stands fast, insisting the Main Character change course and even pointing toward the fork in the road. As they approach one another, the exchange becomes more heated until the two are engaged in heart-to-heart combat.

While the Overall Story battle rages all around, the Main and Impact Characters fight their private engagement. The **Subjective Story Throughline** describes the course this *passionate* battle takes. This is the first person, familiar, plural, "We" perspective.

Other names for this throughline include the MC/IC Throughline, the Relationship Throughline, the "heart" line, the "B" story line, and others. Though the Main Character and Impact Character take part as characters in this throughline, the subject of this throughline is *their relationship*, not them as individuals.

## The Four Throughlines Of A Story You Know

Here are some examples of how to see the four throughlines of some well-known stories. Completed stories tend to blend these throughlines together in the interest of smooth narrative style. From a structural point of view, however, it is important to see how they can be separated.

### STAR WARS

**Overall Story Throughline:** The Overall view of STAR WARS sees a civil war in the galaxy between the Rebels and the evil Empire. The Empire has built a Death Star that will destroy the Rebels if it isn't destroyed first. To even hope for a successful attack, the Rebels need the plans to the Death Star that are in the possession of a farm boy and an old Jedi master. These two face many other characters while delivering the plans, ultimately leading to a climactic space-battle on the surface of the Death Star.

**Main Character Throughline:** The Main Character of STAR WARS is Luke Skywalker. This throughline follows his personal growth over the course of this story. Luke is a farm boy who dreams of being a star pilot, but he can't allow himself to leave his foster parents to follow his dreams. He learns that he is the son of a great Jedi Knight. When his foster parents are killed, he begins studying the religion of the Jedi: The Force. Surviving many dangerous situations, Luke learns to trust himself more and more. Eventually he makes a leap of faith to trust his feelings over his computer technology while flying into battle as the Rebel's last hope of destroying the Death Star. It turns out well, and the experience changes Luke for the better.

**Impact Character Throughline:** The Impact Character of STAR WARS is Obi Wan Kenobi and this throughline describes his impact (especially on Luke Skywalker) over the course of the story. Obi Wan is a wizened old Jedi who sees everything as being under the mystic control of the Force. He amazes people with his resiliency and ability, all of which he credits to the Force and one's willingness to open oneself to the Force.

**Subjective Story Throughline:** The Subjective Story throughline of STAR WARS describes the relationship between Luke and Obi Wan. Obi Wan needs Luke to help him and he knows Luke has incredible potential as a Jedi. Luke, however, needs guidance because his desires are so strong and his abilities so new. Obi Wan sets about the manipulations that will help Luke see the true nature of the Force and learn to trust himself.

## TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

**Overall Story Throughline:** The Overall view of *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* sees the town of Maycomb with its horns locked in various attitudes over the rape trial of Tom Robinson. Due process has taken over, however many people think this case should never see trial. As the trial comes to fruition, the people of the town argue back and forth about how the defense lawyer ought to behave. They also discuss the role people should take in response to this alleged atrocity.

**Main Character Throughline:** The Main Character of *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* is Scout and her throughline describes her personal experiences in this story. Scout is a young tomboy who wants her life to remain as simple as it's always been. Going to school, however, and seeing the town's reaction to her father's work introduces her to a new world of emotional complexity. She learns there is much more to people than you can see.

**Impact Character Throughline:** Boo Radley presents the Impact Character point of view in *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*. Boo is the reclusive and much talked about boy living next door to Scout. The mystique surrounding this boy, fueled by the town's ignorance and fear, make everyone wonder what he is like and if he's as crazy as they say.

**Subjective Story Throughline:** The Subjective Story view of *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* sees the relationship between Scout and Boo Radley. This throughline explores what it's like for these two characters to live next door to each other and never get to know each other. It seems any friendship they might have is doomed from the start because Boo will always be locked away in his father's house. The real problem, however, turns out to be one of Scout's prejudice against Boo's mysterious life. Boo has been constantly active in Scout's life, protecting her from his position in the background. When Scout finally realizes this she becomes a changed person who no longer judges people without first trying to stand in their shoes.

## Summary - The Grand Argument Story

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We have described a story as a battle. The perspective that takes in the full scope of the battle is the *Overall Story Throughline*.

Within the fray is one special soldier through whom we experience the battle firsthand. How he fares is the *Main Character Throughline*

The Main Character confronts another soldier, blocking the path. Is he friend or foe? Either way, he is an obstacle, and exploring his impact on the Main Character is the *Impact Character Throughline*

The Main and Impact Characters engage in a skirmish. Main says, "Get out of my way!" and Impact says, "Change course!" In the end, the steadfast resolution of one will force the other to change. The growth of this exchange forms the *Subjective Story Throughline*.

Taken together, the four throughlines comprise the author's argument to the audience. They answer the questions: What does it feel like to have this problem? What's the other side of the issue? Which perspective is the most suitable for dealing with that problem? What do things look like in the "big picture?"

Only through developing these four simultaneous throughlines can the Story Mind truly reflect our own minds. We pit reason against emotion and immediate advantage against experience in the hope of resolving a problem in the most favorable manner.

### Why The Four Throughlines Are Important

In real life, each of us only sees three perspectives clearly within a single context.

In our own lives, we know what it's like to stand in our shoes sharing the "I" (Main Character) perspective. We know what it is like to have someone in our face with a contrary position and directly experience the "You" (Impact Character) perspective. We know what it is like to have a relationship with others and directly experience the "We" (Subjective Story) perspective. But we can never stand outside and see ourselves objectively. We cannot directly experience the "They" (Overall Story) perspective when it comes to our own lives. We can only guesstimate what it might be based on what we experience, and don't experience, in the other three perspectives.

In other people's lives, we can look at them objectively and see how they fit in. We can directly experience the "They" (Overall Story) perspective. We can have a relationship with other people and directly experience the "We" (Subjective Story) perspective. We can hold positions contrary to other people and directly experience the "You" (Impact Character) perspective. But we can never stand in other people's

shoes. We can never directly experience what it is like to *be* another person and share the “I” (Main Character) perspective with them.

Grand argument stories are special. Grand argument stories give us more than we get in real life. Grand argument stories give us all four perspectives within a single context. They provide us experiences we cannot have in real life.

This quality of grand argument stories helps explain why audiences can watch some stories over and over, long after the storytelling has gone stale. They give meaning to the ambiguous. They provide possible answers to unanswerable questions. They simply allow us the opportunity to experience more than we can in our day-to-day lives.

## **Moving On**

Now that you’ve added Story Mind, Overall Story Throughline, Main Character Throughline, Impact Character Throughline, and Subjective Story Throughline to your writer’s vocabulary, you have all the background you need to explore a whole new world of understanding: *The Dramatica Theory of Story*.