


“A comprehensive map to writing fiction  
that only Robin Laws could deliver.”  
—Mur Lafferty, author of *Six Wakes*

# Beating the Story

## ROBIN D. LAWS

HOW TO MAP, UNDERSTAND,  
AND ELEVATE ANY NARRATIVE

FOREWORD BY JOHN ROGERS



# *Beating the Story*

*by Robin D. Laws*



GAMEPLAYWRIGHT

*This PDF edition of Beating the Story has been adapted from the print edition for best function and appearance on tablet devices. Pagination differs between editions.*

*For convenience of reference and to make it easier to see the sweep of each entire story, large-format beat maps of the narratives within are available on the Gameplaywright website at [gameplaywright.net/beatsthestory](http://gameplaywright.net/beatsthestory).*

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**[gameplaywright.net/beatsthestory](http://gameplaywright.net/beatsthestory)**

A team from the software makerspace Northland Creative Wonders has created a web application for crafting beat maps using these techniques. Try it out for free at:

**[storybeats.io](http://storybeats.io)**

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# How to Pretend You've Read This Book

*Beating the Story* provides writers of fiction, whatever your form or genre, a specific, detailed way of thinking about the inner workings of narrative: a system we call beat analysis.

As a writer, you can use beat analysis whether you outline carefully in advance or write exploratory drafts and then substantially revise them over a series of drafts. It assists you in finding the heart and meaning of your work, and in maintaining focus on them. On a moment by moment basis, beat analysis helps you hone your piece's emotional rhythm to keep your audience engaged.

As an editor, beat analysis helps you spot a draft's problem sections and point your author to solutions.

As a client dealing with writers on work you have commissioned, you can use the beat system to couch your notes in terms they turn into practical action.

As a critic or student of literature, you can use beat analysis as a window into a work you're examining, illuminating its construction, techniques, and wider significance.

The system arises from a simple premise:

*Stories emotionally compel us by constantly adjusting audience response toward the positive or negative, shifting us frequently but in an unpredictable pattern between hope and fear.*

Each shift in emotion comprises a beat, a moment in the story that moves the emotional needle up or down.

Beat analysis identifies nine types of beats, grouping them into three categories, according to their narrative function.

The two most pervasive beats, the ***foundation beats***, are:

- The **procedural**, in which characters confront an external obstacle hoping to achieve a practical objective.
- The **dramatic**, in which characters clash in pursuit of emotional rewards.

Three ***information beats*** provide the context required for the audience to follow the story and care about the outcomes of its procedural and dramatic incidents:

- The **pipe** beat, presenting information needed to understand later moments in the story, usually without signaling itself as such.
- The beat that introduces a **question** the audience wants to see answered.
- The **reveal** beat, in which that expectation is later satisfied, for good or ill.

Finally, four *flourish beats* invite emotional engagement in a tangential fashion, without themselves moving the story forward:

- The **commentary** beat, where the author pauses to directly address the work's themes or ideas.
- The **anticipation** beat, which encourages the audience to expect an upcoming story turn, awaiting it with pleasure.
- The **gratification** beat, which supplies a positive up note that does not arise from, or forward, the narrative.
- The **bringdown**, a likewise tangential or disconnected moment that introduces feelings of dismay, dread, or sadness.

To better understand stories, we map them as sequences of these beats. In addition to identifying beat types, we look at the emotional resolution of each beat, using arrows.

We mark a positive resolution with an up arrow and a negative one with a down arrow.

A neutral resolution (something to generally avoid) earns a lateral arrow.

An ambiguous resolution, provoking a confused mixture of fear and hope, we mark with a pair of crossed arrows. Moments of internal contradiction often register as the richest and most memorable moments in a layered emotional narrative—if used sparingly, to preserve their impact.

Finally, beat mapping highlights transitions between scenes. A new scene occurs when the action shifts in time, place, or protagonist. Certain transitions bring the audience along in a seamless manner that preserves or builds momentum. Others require the writer to reorient the reader before moving forward. Depending on context, these transitions may disrupt or heighten the energy of your piece.

Beat analysis tracks the following transition types:

- the **outgrowth**, whose action arises as a direct consequence of the previous scene
- the **continuation**, which shows the focus character from the previous scene still pursuing that scene's goal
- the **turn**, which sticks with the same focus character but shows that character pursuing another goal
- the **break**, shifting our identification from one character to another

- the **viewpoint** transition, bringing in a new viewpoint character for the first time
- the **rhyme**, in which two scenes that would otherwise be separated by a break achieve a sense of matching harmony through the use of a common sensory cue
- a **meanwhile** transition, in which the two scenes share the same timeline but not place or viewpoint character
- the **flashback**, which moves us back to a previous time
- its counterpart, the **return**, in which the present-day storyline resumes after a temporary shift in time
- the **flash forward**, moving us out of the main timeline of the story to a moment in its future

Any narrative can be expressed and illuminated using these basic building blocks.

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# Foreword

This book probably needs about 20% more bullshit to be successful.

What I mean is an inordinate number of books about writing prose (or screenplays, etc.) have some sort of central unifying metaphor about journeys, or dreams, or emotional adventures into the winding gyre of the mythic unconscious of the shared fiction spiritual human story spaaaaaaghhhh bloody hell, stop it.

Most writers do not face the problem of finding inspiration. They have journals and story notes and notebooks of fevered scrawls of half-formed characters and half-finished stories.

What most writers need are some tools to help them tell those stories effectively. Michaelangelo looked at that giant block of marble and saw David within it, true. That was his personal genius. But he carved away everything that wasn't David with an ordinary hammer and chisel, the same hammer and chisel every other sculptor used and could buy from Guiseppe's Hammer & Chiselorium & Sundries shop a block down from Michaelangelo's studio, you know the one, just past the food court.

Every professional writer accumulates tools. You cannot perform your intangible art—transmitting emotion from person to person—without them. What Robin does here is offer another valuable tool in that pursuit. He does it at the scene arc level, which is one of those particular lenses to which screenwriters are particularly sensitive but many writers in other mediums are not. He offers valuable insight about how to take your story and tune it, finesse it, and move the emotional register through different keys until you find the exact combination to match the feelings you are trying to evoke in your reader, through pace and tone. He reminds you to maintain intention. A series of flawlessly executed scenes and intricately wrought characters strung together like so many pearls do not tell a satisfying story. Understanding the different kinds of story beats, how they interact with the audience and each other, that's one of the most valuable tools you can have to guide your audience through the story's emotional journey.

For years I've executed a personal, messy version of the technique in this book when reviewing screenplays on shows I've run. Any writer who's worked with me has seen my notebooks, filled with arrows and circles and colored inks. An episode of television, by the time it's at shooting script, has gone through a logline pitch, a two-page pitch document, a full-room story



break, an outline of between ten and twenty pages, at least two rough drafts, and various sets of notes. But for some reason it's only when I have the finished script on my desk can I "hear" the pace of the script. The writers then sit down and do one final pass. We tune, we look at how the scenes play emotionally, whether they tell satisfying stories within the acts and in the script as a whole. There have been more times than I can count where it wasn't until the shooting script did we realize "Oh, damn, this scene doesn't work."

The scene of course works as a scene, as a transaction between two characters, of course—we're professional writers. Any professional writer can write a perfectly good scene. But it doesn't work in relation to the emotional journey of the other scenes in the show. It doesn't do its job in the overall arc. It drags the show down too much, as a repeated beat. It's weirdly too upbeat. It stalls. Whatever the problem, it's just wrong. (*Note:* It is invariably the writer's favorite scene.)

The scene needs to be rewritten. How it needs to be rewritten, in what direction it needs to be rewritten, well, that's what this book is about. Hell, you may even be able to figure out the right way to execute the scene way back in the outline phase with this book, saving yourself and your precious ego valuable writing time. Robin offers guidance I frankly wish I'd had over the course of my career and will now steal from ruthlessly. You might say, "hey, it's not stealing, it's in this book," but the secret is, I'm not going to credit Robin. I'm totally going to claim these concepts as my own insights. That's how good this book is.

Please, don't tell him. It's our secret.

Enjoy the book. And remember: page count equals happiness.

—John Rogers

# **Prologue: Six Essential Tips Established Writers Already Know and Aspiring Ones Hate to Hear**

This book exists to present you, the writer, with a novel set of tools for honing your work. It addresses itself to both emerging and established writers.

However, for those of you who are just starting out, or thinking about starting out, a few basic facts about writing as a craft and a career will do more for you than anything else in this book.

If they discourage you, that means you were never cut out for this often frustrating, always effortful vocation in the first place. In that case, this revelation alone is worth the cost of this book times at least a thousand.

(Established writers, you can skip this bit. It's the same stuff you say on panels in response to questions from aspiring writers.)

## **Sit Your Ass in the Chair and Write**

The only way to become a writer is to write. Not to think about writing. Not to imagine yourself writing. But by taking many hours of your precious life you could be spending with friends and family to sit by yourself and create something. Something that will suck. And then keep writing more. Which will also suck. And keep at it and at it until one day the effort starts to pay off, and you can maybe, on a good day, when you got enough sleep the night before and succeed in shutting out the ever-multiplying distractions of contemporary life, produce something that no longer entirely sucks.

This is true of any creative pursuit, of course, but this book is not about playing the violin or painting, it's about writing.

If you haven't put in the time, all of the beat mapping in the world won't make your work worth reading.

Go write.

## **Ideas are Worthless**

You may want to write in order to realize a particular story idea, one you find not only entrancing but unprecedentedly original.

As such, you may fear that editors, commenters, studios, or publishers want to steal your idea and use it themselves without compensating you.

No one wants your ideas.

A strong idea does not make a good work.

And your idea is almost certainly not so different from any other.

No great work stands and falls on the brilliant originality of its premise.

Those few that do something that has never before been done also display matchless execution.

The audience, and the market, value execution, not ideas. The modulation of emotional beats this book presents is a key part of that execution. So is style, which this book does not have much to say about.

We refer to novels and screenplays and stories as “works” because that’s what they require: work.

Your idea is nothing until you turn it into something through work. By sitting your ass in the chair and writing.

## **Sit Your Ass in the Chair and Read**

If you don’t read obsessively, and widely, you will never write compellingly. Everything you read, but especially the material you most admire, goes into the great hopper of your consciousness, to serve as the raw ingredients of technique you draw upon when composing dialogue, description, and incident.

Read new works and old. Don’t just read the genre you love best and hope to work in. Read outside your comfort zone, assimilating as many styles and voices as you can.

If all you read is J.R.R. Tolkien and David Eddings and Guy Gavriel Kay and George R.R. Martin, your high fantasy will read as a derivative of a derivative of a copy of a facsimile.

If instead you read Tolkien and Dashiell Hammett and Jane Austen and Joan Didion and Italo Calvino and Louise Erdrich, your unique collection of influences, combined with your life experience, will fuse into a distinctive blend that is all of your influences and none of them—that is you.

## **Don’t Just Read Books, Read Life**

Most writers are introverts. Extroverts tend to drop out when they reach the “go sit in a room alone for hours and hours on end” part.

However, even the most dedicated wallflowers among us can get out there and watch how other people behave. If you only take inspiration from other writers’ fictional characters, you’ll always be writing life from a remove. Your characters will take on a cartoonish, stylized quality.

You don’t have to get out there and do as much heroin as William S. Burroughs, or ruin your body in pursuit of action like Hemingway.

Pay attention to the world around you, and to the people in it. Watch what they do and listen to what they say. Notice how these two things don’t

always match.

Observers make good supporting characters and lousy protagonists. Keep a special eye out for the sorts of folks who move their personal stories forward.

As you run into people who make a mark on the world around them, from the saints to the shit-disturbers, ask yourself what motivates them. Should they seem internally conflicted or contradictory, decide what their dramatic poles (p. 26) might be. After you witness, or take part in, an argument, sift it in your mind afterwards. Who wanted what? Did they get it? If so, how? If not, why not? Who was the petitioner and who was the granter? (See p. 46.) What emotional tactics did they use?

Two sorts of people study others like this: writers and psychopaths. Do me a favor and promise to use your powers only for good.

But seriously, no matter how distant your chosen genre might be from your daily life, the underlying verities of human behavior will make the difference between the generic and the specific, the trope and the real.

Read life.

## If You Can See Yourself Doing Anything Else, Do That Instead

Ask yourself why you want to be a writer.

*Is it for the money?*

There isn't any. Not on the scale you're thinking, anyway. Your favorite book authors may well be struggling financially. The famous writers you can think of who got rich at it are the only ones who did.

Who largely perpetuates the myth of the well-paid writer? Writers do, when writing about fictional writers. These characters are often portrayed as wealthy, because protagonists with money and no set schedule fit into any plot line super conveniently. This is funny because you'd think writers would at least be able to portray their own field accurately. The average member of the Writers' Union of Canada, an organization I happen to belong to, makes around \$13,000 per year from writing work. That's \$13,000 Canadian.

*Is it for the validation?*

If that's your primary aim, research the science of happiness and ask yourself if externally measured success in writing, whatever that is, has anything to do with that.

Also, make sure you're the extremely rare sort of person who remembers triumphant moments of genuine recognition with greater vividness and satisfaction than thoughtless put-downs from random Internet presences hovering in the electronic ether.

The writing life is kinder to thick-skinned, stubborn souls who follow their own compasses than it is for seekers of outside approval.

*Is it for the lifestyle?*

Lots of folks who haven't yet written for some reason imagine it as an easy job, when it is anything but.

“For writers, critics, and other dedicated consumers-of-narrative, *Beating the Story* is the book where Robin Laws hands you a scalpel and invites you to get up to your elbows in the bloody guts of how stories work.”

—Margaret Dunlap, *Bookburners* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

# SEE HOW STORIES WORK



The most compelling stories move us emotionally. Up and down, between hope and fear, in ways we don't always expect—but that you can harness as a writer, editor, and critic. This book shows you how to track, map, and understand the rhythm of a story. Whether you're writing or rewriting, editing a manuscript or dismantling your favorite television episode, *Beating the Story* helps you understand how stories get hammered into shape.



If it is possible for a work of deep narrative analysis to be a cult hit, then *Hamlet's Hit Points*, Robin D. Laws' previous book for Gameplaywright, fits the bill. Robin is the author of eight novels plus the short story collection *New Tales of the Yellow Sign*, and has edited five original short fiction anthologies. He designed such tabletop roleplaying games as *Hillfolk*, *Feng Shui*, *The Esoterrorists*, and *The Yellow King Roleplaying Game*. Hear him discuss writing and story, among many other subjects, on the award-winning weekly podcast *Ken and Robin Talk About Stuff*.

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