

Ink:Well – Writing for Wellbeing on the ‘Hero’s Journey’

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Abstract

Ink:Well is a co-investigation between a Creative Writer and a Psychologist into the importance of storytelling for good mental health. Our ‘Hero’s Journey’ pilot study used screenwriting techniques commonly taught in university seminars to develop therapeutic workshops for participants in different social settings. We trialled the relative benefits of a mythic narrative structure and archetypal characterisation in life-writing activities, testing their impact on volunteers’ wellbeing against more standard forms of memoir or autobiography, to discover whether the ‘quest’ mode could impart greater resolution and better self-reflection.

This article lists the resources selected from creative writing pedagogy and narrative therapy in the design and delivery of our survey, logging the sources we chose to describe the twelve legendary steps of the Hero’s Journey, and evaluating the quantitative and qualitative material produced by 350 participants in our live and on-line workshops, to show how this format could offer effective ‘arts on prescription’ intervention in palliative care.

Keywords

Creative Writing, Psychology, The Hero’s Journey, Life-Writing, Narrative Therapy

Article

“Have you ever thought about your life as a great adventure? Was there a year when everything seemed to happen, or is each week like the temple of doom for you? Does every day feel like you’ve had to slay a dragon? Or fallen down a rabbit hole? Or does your life seem dull compared to the experiences of Indiana Jones, Alice in Wonderland, Harry Potter or any other hero you can name?”

This little adventure, now, will introduce, outline and explain the work of ‘Ink:Well’; a co-investigation by Creative Writing and Psychology researchers at the University of Portsmouth into the importance of storytelling and the impact of life-writing on good mental health.

It is not a new thing. We're drawing on 'the oldest stories in the book', and a substantial body of academic research dating back to the 1980s. Evidence that writing can enhance mental and physical wellbeing, to the point of lowering participants' blood pressure and increasing their immunity to illness, has been widely published by psychologists and practitioners from Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) to G.G. Chavis (2011) in America. A link between narrative identity and “eudaimonic wellbeing” (from the Aristotelean sense of life feeling pleasurable and meaningful) has been shown by USA-based Bauer et al (2008), where stories that frame personal experiences as transforming, and show a move from suffering to surviving, can increase happiness through the development of a “redemptive self”. (p.81)

Elsewhere, evidence that 're-storying' lives can resolve serious health issues has been eminently established by narrative therapists such as Epston, White (1990) and Denborough (2014) in Australia and New Zealand, and Stephen Madigan in Canada (2011). Informed by Foucault's theories of knowledge as power and the discursive construction of madness (Madigan, 2011, pp.40-41), "externalising the problem" is the first trick. Emphasising survival and finding the "sparkle" (Denborough, 2014, p.50) are other tips for empowerment, typically carried out in discussion with therapists, or in the form of letters, memos or private contracts (eg. White and Epston, 1990, pp. 84-162). These techniques underpin our series of healing prompts like the one which opens this article.

What's new is the blend of sources and resources in our inkwell; the mix of clinical, pedagogical and critical expertise behind the design of therapeutic literary encounters inspired by teaching a generation of undergraduates. Out of the creative writing classroom we had to find people who wanted to write for pleasure or a small payment by the electronic data collection platform Qualtrics.

Our 'Hero's Journey' pilot study tested the mythic plot structure, first formulated by Joseph Campbell (2004), that repeatedly turns a problematic 'once upon a time' into a reliable 'happy ever after'. Re-told in quest form, would participants' real-life stories give them more satisfaction and feeling of success than other forms of autobiography or memoir writing? Could some imaginative engagement with archetypal narratives be more effective in helping people resolve difficult memories or chart positive approaches for the future; and, if it actually made them feel better about themselves, then exactly how did it work? Our methodology included psychometric questionnaires to test whether wellbeing results increased significantly or in specific ways on completion of the heroic protocol as opposed to more usual life-writing formats; with quantitative data analysed alongside the qualitative responses to writing prompts designed to help transform anybody's happiness.

You do not have to be male, or warrior-like, to go on the Hero's Journey. In this theory of storytelling, the plot of every novel or film or play can be described in twelve steps; from the 'Ordinary World' through the 'Call to Adventure' and climactic 'Supreme Ordeal' to the reflective 'Road Back' and restorative 'Return with Elixir'. The mono-myth posited by Campbell in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1954) [Figure 1] underpins all folk story and fairy tale, from horror to romance, sci-fi to crime thriller, while its rules can be bent or broken for special effect (personalising the same old stories for far more than a thousand protagonists in literary history, and still playing out today).

It's typically used to train script writers, with tips for plotting the perfect storyline and tricks for developing ideal characters, made clearer in *The Writer's Journey*, by Campbell's protegee and Hollywood screen writing guru, Christopher Vogler [Figure 2]. This popular textbook (1999) simplifies and de-sanctifies the mono-myth for modern audiences, engendering other applications such as *The Heroine's Journey* (Murdoch, 2013). We proposed that this universal narrative arc, entailing all the ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies, of the oral tradition, could be reconfigured as a series of life-writing prompts to benefit our volunteers.

Because, what if 'the dragon' were anxiety or anorexia, a bomb or a bully? What if that magic portal was to a home you had to leave, or a love you lost? What if the happy ending can't happen till you've tried, and failed, and tried again. After all,

Indiana Jones' main claim to success was that he just kept trying, even when he nearly died.

Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing Report, 2017, is an all-party parliamentary group inquiry, commissioned by the Director of Public Health, into the range of discreet and interdisciplinary arts practices offering physical and mental health interventions in the UK in the 21st Century. Its findings include "strong evidence that creative and cultural activities can have a positive impact on health and wellbeing" (p.34) and "ample evidence that the arts help to overcome mental health problems. Arts-on-prescription programmes can give rise to significant reductions in anxiety, depression and stress" (p.72). Case studies of provision in spoken word, art, music and dance participation for groups across the age and class spectrum, in settings from museums to hospices, parks to community centres, show powerful palliative impacts. Writers from Jo Brand and John Killick (working with dementia) to Fiona Sampson and Jane Moss (in End of Life writing) are highlighted as leaders in this field; and the report's conclusions urge both government and health service managers to actively engage with cultural practitioners to reduce future expenditure in social care. (pp.154-155)

In a recent literature review for an AHRC funded project into arts for wellbeing around dementia, Hannah Zeilig et al (2014) find that: "Despite the anecdotal evidence that many projects use poetry and creative writing with people living with dementia, studies evaluating the efficacy of these interventions (especially from the point of view of the PWD) are scant and work examining the applications of poetry using rigorous, robust methodologies is rather sparse". (p.24) Clearly, a network is developing in Britain, now, to research writing for wellbeing further, using "a variety of evaluative methods [as] several studies have demonstrated the efficacy of combining qualitative with quantitative measures" (p.27) as the authors of this seminal review suggest.

The Ink:Well project used psychometric questionnaires, completed before and after the writing activities, to measure shifts in peoples' psychological states, gauging the strength of that effect. We elected to test groups of UoP undergraduate and general, English-speaking, 20 - 60 year olds in this first instance. My co-investigator, Dr Clare Wilson, selected the State Functions of Nostalgia scale (Hepper et al. 2015) to show whether and how our tasks changed participants' sense of self upon reflection. In order to assess whether the Hero's Journey was more conducive to wellbeing than any other way of writing life-stories, we developed a second workshop to run as a parallel condition.

An alternative template for mapping personal memories was drawn, here; one that, though linear, is also liable to come full circle, with dramatic turning points over the course of a person's story [Figure 3]. I've used this timeline in creative writing teaching for over two decades (longer than my current undergraduates have been alive) and in adult writing retreats where mature students plot their chronologies, including the high points, low points and transformations, in preparation to write their memoir or semi-autobiographical novel.

Through its use as a pedagogic and professional tool, I became aware that it could address unresolved memories on anyone's timeline. This common method, familiar to many artists and therapists, works whether the story is fact or fiction: pinpointing the order of events, the causes and effects, the recurring themes. It makes sense of

what might otherwise be a chaotic account, helping to deal with the dramas, and presenting the whole plot on one page for a clearer perspective. Participants in the Ink:Well study were invited to reflect on their stories as a series of chronological events.

Thus we gave parallel writing activities to two, randomly-selected, groups of volunteers to generate scientific data about the relative benefits of the Hero's Journey against a standard life-writing format, which we called the Story of your Life. The two different protocols, best described to writers in education as lesson plans, were designed to be as similar as possible, drafted to match in synopsis and scenario, to minimise the psychological and semantic 'noise' which could interfere with our reading of the results. Both versions were simply structured into a beginning, middle and end; and all participants wrote for three short periods, following on-screen or spoken instructions. Both conditions included images: stills from familiar films, to signpost key plot points in favourite stories. As in a screenwriting lecturer's PowerPoint presentation, we used iconic shots to easily convey the creative tasks; like the contrasting scenes of Dorothy's 'ordinary world', bleak Kansas in black and white, transformed when she 'crosses the first threshold' into the technicolour land of Oz.

Though the images used were identical, the wording was subtly different. In composing the writing prompts, which were viewed on screen for on-line participants, and also heard aloud by those in live workshops, the Hero's Journey version used terms like adventure, mentor and dragon; while the Life Story version avoided phrases such as 'the call' and 'the cave'. In the following examples from the two scripts, the inciting vocabulary of the quest and the evocative imagery of myth is used in the former sample but not the latter:

"Begin by picking an 'adventure' you've had in real life. This might be an accident, an illness, an on-going struggle with a physical or mental issue. Or it might be the adventure of leaving home and going to university in a different city or country. It might be a personal relationship or your professional role that you could look at now as a quest you've been on..."

"Now, focus on a time when your life changed. A new school, university, job or marriage? A move from one place to another, out of your comfort zone? You may have had control over this change, your own decision; or it might have happened against your will. Please be ready to write in more detail about this scene from your life:"

While Ink:Well believed that the mythological energy of the first prompt would increase the personal benefit for participants, the difficulty was to measure results. Anecdotally, I had seen much evidence that the use of this approach gave added pleasure in writing. Academically, I had seen that to play with the power of Jungian archetypes in literary exercises might induce the 'jouissance' described by Roland Barthes and other poststructuralist theorists who found bliss beyond the pleasure of reading¹. And, as the author of six novels, I had seen that all narrative fits this healing form inherently: but the challenge now was to prove it.

It is easy to describe the design and delivery of the project, and discuss our research findings, in the twelve steps of Vogler's writer's journey [Figure 2b]. Even academic articles can fit this ubiquitous structure. My 'Ordinary World' was at the University of

Portsmouth where the story starts in a seminar room, teaching screenwriting theory to undergraduates. The illustration I picked to show this *status quo* is Alice in Wonderland nodding off on a river bank as her big sister reads from a boring book with no pictures.

Then, in every good tale, the heroine gets her 'Call to Adventure'. For Alice, this is a white rabbit with waistcoat and pocket watch; someone out of the ordinary, inviting her to follow him. He heralds the beginning but the heroine often refuses the call when it first comes. She's too scared, or sleepy, or stony-broke to go gallivanting off into the unknown. Great plotting sometimes goes against the grain of this; for example, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry is keen to receive the call but invitations are prevented from reaching him by evil uncle Vernon. (Rowling, 1997, pp. 29-38.)

Such 'mythemes' were chosen to quickly take participants to a point on their own storylines, ready to receive such instructions as: "Recall how you knew the world was about to change. Was there a warning, or an announcement; was it expected or a sudden shock?" No trumpet or telegram, in my case, the 'Call to Adventure' was simply an increasing awareness of the scope for knowledge exchange and public engagement beyond the creative writing classroom; and the 'Refusal of the Call' was merely not having psychological expertise or the scientific means to measure any possible therapeutic effects, until:

'Meeting the Mentor'. Traditionally it's an old man with a white beard (Ink:Well examples are from *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, using images in the public domain) but the original Mentor, Telemachus' teacher from the *Odyssey*, was the goddess of wisdom, Athena, in disguise. My mentor came in the shape of an ex-forensic psychologist as fascinated by storytelling as I was, but who also knew the science of it, and the language and literature of Wellbeing.

With this person's guidance, the hero can 'Cross the First Threshold', the transition between their ordinary world and the next step of the story. Here, in the survey, we offer inspiring examples that will be familiar already, such as Harry Potter passing through platform 9 ¾. Practically, I passed this portal when a bid for internal seed funding was successful, so I could pilot the research project at UoP with my cross-disciplinary mentor.

In the middle of the story, act two of the well-made play, the hero or heroine undergoes tests and trials, finding out who are their friends and who are foes. Sometimes the main character has to get fitter or prettier to continue on their quest for happiness. This is often shown as a montage sequence in Hollywood movies. My montage would be, with Dr Clare Wilson, devising and designing our pair of Ink:Well workshops and summoning the undergraduates from our schools and faculties to come and have a therapeutic adventure with us...

They didn't come. At least, not enough of them to make the running of concurrent workshops, testing the relative benefits of two different creative writing protocols, worthwhile. Our first target was 90 third years for the pilot study; and workshops were planned to test either the 'hero's Journey' or the 'life story' conditions and discover whether the mythic quest had a stronger effect for this group. However, we

couldn't recruit volunteers to reflect on their three years at university with the novel activity on offer.

Here was our own 'Approach to the Innermost Cave'. Outside of creative writing courses, the prospect for students was perilous; and scientists, linguistics, business analysts were reluctant to face their darkest hour and reflect on the 'sights, sounds and smells' associated with that difficult memory, in a public setting with strangers, in response to instructions like these:

"Now recall a time you found yourself in deepest danger. It doesn't have to be an extreme situation. It may not have been an actual 'cave' but a boardroom or a bedroom, a battlefield or classroom; wherever your hero/heroine faced their biggest challenge. This is the heart of the writing tasks and may be the hardest scene to recreate. If possible, describe the fight you had to survive. Picture, if you can, whatever 'dragon' you had to tackle. Then, tell about what you won: it may not have been treasure or a weapon you seized, but consider what you saved, or learned, or took away with you from that scene..."

Here are the key narrative therapy techniques: externalising the problem, to facilitate dialogue with that dragon in the innermost cave, emphasising the survival, and finding the "unique outcome" (Denborough, 2014, p.50). But without heroes to observe in action, Ink:Well needed to think again. We redesigned the group workshop surveys as on-line 'workbooks' for private completion. Participants would be taken through the tests at their own screen, and we could analyse their written data anonymously. So, our 'Supreme Ordeal', such as it was (see step 8 of figure 2b), meant condensing a two-hour writing seminar into a twenty-minute computer interface that 330 people would complete individually:

"In every story ever told the hero survives this ordeal and 'Seizes the Sword'. This is their reward, the prize they thought they were seeking. Glistening jewels or glinting metal; each knight has his or her own particular quest. The dragon you faced in the dungeon may have looked more like man, though, or been a personal problem you'd somehow picked up, or a fate that you'd just been handed."

With our sword came the knowledge that we could rethink and rewrite the Ink:Well material for every kind of person with every kind of therapeutic need. Warriors or carers, kids or addicts, creative writers or just literate: no need to be a hero. But did, as we instinctively suspected, this legendary discourse make a bigger impact on self-esteem, on troublesome memories, on unresolved issues, when we rolled out our Qualtrics online survey?

Sadly, not very much. Paid volunteers between the ages of 20 and 60, from anywhere in the English-speaking world, took our on-line survey; 168 randomly allocated to the Hero's Journey and 162 to the Story of your Life.

However, some participants did not complete the writing exercise and when these were removed from the data set, we were left with 109 participants in the Hero's Journey and 97 in the Story of your Life group. The stories that were reported are still in the process of being qualitatively analysed. In brief, most participants (irrespective of group) wrote about health issues (or accidents), although not all of the accidents or health issues happened to them (e.g., 'my partner was diagnosed with cancer'; 'my teenager was in a bad car accident'). The next most popular themes were: moving house, pregnancy, going to university/school, changing jobs, and death. The mentors that were reported were overwhelmingly family. Then friends and less popular were professionals (teachers, therapists and GPs); a handful also

mentioned God as their mentor. They were asked how they overcame/ survived their most difficult step. Most mentioned taking some form of action to resolve the issue in some way (e.g. 'I left my husband'), although the second most popular strategy was to report a source of inspiration that kept them motivated to keep going (e.g., 'it was my daughter, without her, I would have never made it this far. She is the only thing that keeps me going'). Currently this data is also being analysed in terms of how the story is expressed. Research suggests that how a problem or incident is framed may be a key factor in increasing wellbeing, so these stories will be categorised based on how they were composed.

Although the Hero's Journey group always had higher scores on the psychometric measures after writing, the difference between the two groups was statistically non-significant. However, both groups had statistically significant higher Life Satisfaction scores, and higher ratings of positive emotions about themselves and others after completing the writing task. Indeed, when asked how they found the writing task, the two groups did not differ in how much they enjoyed it (they both did); how well they understood it (again, this was rated highly) and whether they would recommend it to friends (most would); but the Hero's Journey group rated the statements "It helped me look at my experience from a new perspective" and "I think I learnt something helpful from doing these tasks" significantly higher than the Story of your Life group. Clearly, both sets of participants enjoyed their life-writing activities, and appreciated the clarity and care of the survey, with the heroes showing slightly more wellbeing in the end. We were also able to deliver the same surveys in live settings with small groups of university students and staff, obtaining comparable results.

It seems that our placebo was too strong, the 'life story' version as compelling in its own right. And as I run those workshops in good faith and to great effect on international adult writing retreats, I'm keen to accentuate the positive in these results, on the number-crunching trudge of 'The Road Back'. We take, from these steps, the plan for further research, to yield more dramatic statistics in the future.

I propose a close study of the relative benefits of using poetic techniques versus prose in life-writing interventions for palliative care. Is poetry-writing better for people, in a therapeutic sense, than writing similar thoughts and memories in prose: and, if so, does the rhythm, rhyme or use of metaphor have the most beneficial impact on participants?

Meanwhile, we reach step 11 on the 'Writer's Journey' diagram. This is 'Resurrection'. In classical myth, the theme is personified by Psyche, who nearly dies on the road back to Venus' temple when she peeps inside the box of beauty she's bringing from Persephone, queen of the dead. Her supernatural husband, the god of love she won over earlier in the story with her own beauty, saves her for immortality with him. Having been 'to hell and back', her name is still associated with the human soul and its pursuit of the heavenly. The trope of 'rising again' appears in Christianity and other faiths, including sci-fi. The idea of an 'eleventh hour' features in sport and business; and it figures in the (inappropriate but apt) epigram 'when the fat lady sings'.

Resurgence, for me, comes with reading what was written by the anonymous participants who completed the survey, in response to the free question they were asked at the end: 'Is there anything else you would like to add?' I've formatted some of my favourite comments as a 'found poem'.

no, thanks
none
it made me think about my life
this was pretty dope. thanks!

Everyone needs to do it

I can't believe I just shared all that!!!

Amazing, I was having a pretty cursed day and was getting down about myself but this exercise really **turned my outlook around**. Thank you!

That was really weird. It's a good thing I write short stories and novellas as a hobby or that would have been rather difficult. *And I'm still not sure what it was supposed to have accomplished.*

I wasn't too sure about this survey when I first started it - however, I want to thank the makers of this survey for allowing me to have been a part of it. **It reminded me of something that I really needed to remember and I'm very grateful.**

I might be good at creative writing:-)

Too vague. *WAY too much going on in the prompt* to come up with a focused answer.

I AM DEPRESSED

It was a very interesting and thought-provoking exercise. I enjoyed writing very much, **it eased the burden of existence somewhat**

it was really nice
no thanks
NO
It was fun

i was emo but i loved it

Totally original survey. :)

I did not realise that I could write down so much about the car accident I was involved in it was a good experience to look and write about it **as if it was a movie**

I have a hard time organizing my thoughts. *Maybe if there was a time line to complete*

Quite **amazed by how positive I feel** about writing this, despite it being poorly written and a short exercise. Very interesting

Thanks for letting me see this today, right now, i needed t

This was really cathartic

The tiny cash incentive offered for this survey is in no way sufficient compensation for being dragged through the emotional wringer like this. **Shame on you.** *There should have been a trigger warning at the start of the survey.*

The bold font shows the most powerful feedback for us; and the italicised phrases are our action points, already incorporated into new writing and research.

To come to the end of the Hero's Journey, and conclude the argument as to its relative blessing, step 12 is 'Return with Elixir.' Typically, this is associated with eternal life or endless wealth. To my students, I explain that this mysterious-sounding ingredient is whatever you want it to be: but maybe not what you thought you needed when the story began. It might also mean the chance to pass wisdom on to the next generation. Perhaps, the 'sword' is for you and the 'elixir' is for the world, or your village, society or your family, as and when you return.

Such a boon or benefit might be a CPD, or similar personal development qualification, awarded by universities like mine to the general public who practice or participate in life-writing for wellbeing; to formalise and recognise some "arts on prescription" as recommended by the recent all-party government inquiry into *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*. (2017, p.72)

For me, the elixir of this project lies in these answers to the last question 'Was there anything else you wanted to add?' by people I'll never know (one in each version of the survey) and I gratefully dedicate this paper to them.

"While I have thought many times about the incident I just wrote about, it felt good to share it with someone else! In fact, many, many, many times I have wanted to write a book about what I went through, but, for one reason or another, stopped after I began (even finishing once and then decided I didn't like what I wrote!)...maybe this is a sign to me! This survey was sent to me to get the ball rolling for me again! I NEED to write that book, and perhaps this survey is giving me the motivation to do so!! Yes, I think I will!!! THANK YOU!!!!!! God sends us what we need right when we need it, and He sent me this survey, via you! YAY! :) Thank you so, so, so much!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"I am glad I found this survey and participated in this study. The questions after the creative writing proved to me that I felt better after it. I just want to thank the people behind this experiment, for possibly helping me find a new hobby! :) I am so going to be doing more creative writing. I would also like to say the questions/activities are really well written (ironic), it manages to tap into our emotions without being too invasive. Love it. Goodbye."

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Figure 1.

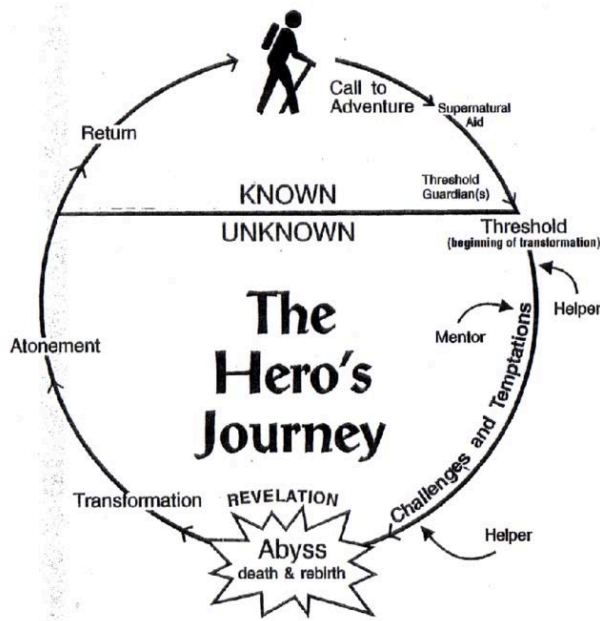
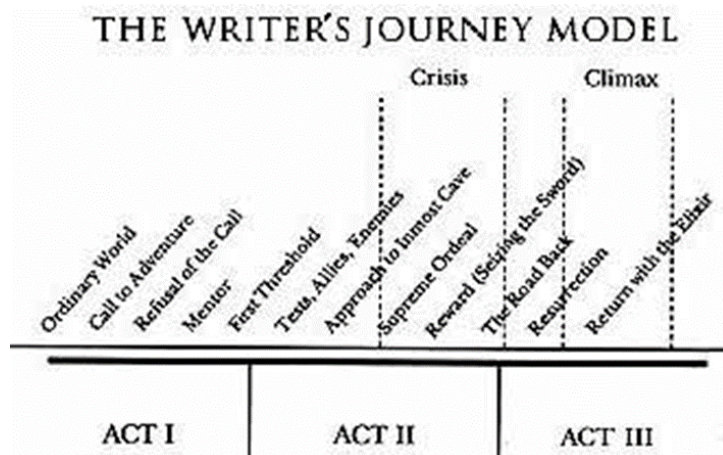


Figure 2.

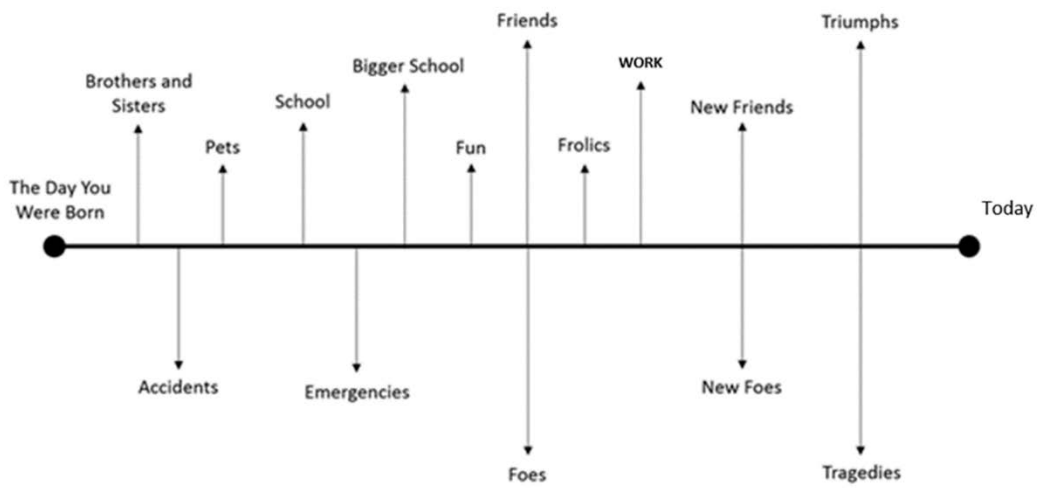


Shown as a three-act storytelling structure for trainee screenwriters (above); and laid out clearly for Ink:Well workshops below. We can also use a ten-step version in which six/seven and eleven/twelve are combined.

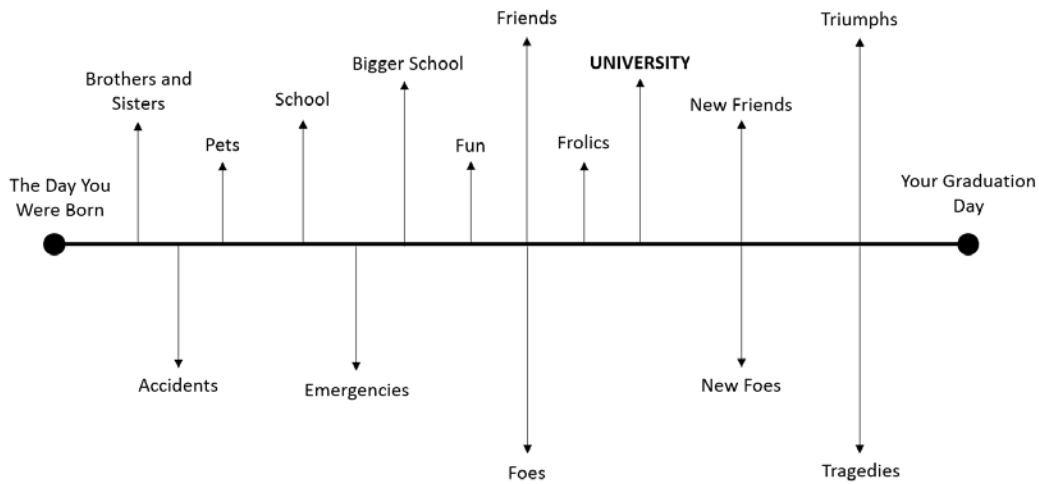
1. The Ordinary World
2. Call to Adventure
3. Refusal of the Call
4. Meeting the Mentor
5. Crossing the First Threshold
6. Tests, Allies, Enemies
7. Approach to the Inmost Cave
8. The Supreme Ordeal
9. Reward (Seizing the Sword)

- 10. The Road Back
- 11. Resurrection
- 12. Return, with Elixir

Figure 3.



The general 'Story of your Life' template is customised for final year undergraduates here:



ⁱ Le Plaisir du Texte, 1973; Lacan, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1960; Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa, 1976