

# The Story Copywriter Podcast

Episode 34:  
The Quest!



## 34: The Quest

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One of my longtime marketing mentors is Perry Marshall. In about 2011, Perry put an email out to his list inviting people to write a video script. So it was a competition to write a video script for Perry Marshall, and the winner would have their video produced into a video on Perry's homepage.

In Perry's community, he received quite a lot of flack for this. People assumed he was after free copywriting. I didn't really see it that way. At the time I wasn't doing much copywriting work, and saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate my skills, and open a few doors.

So I submitted a script. I didn't win, but I got down to the last three. Since that time, Perry sometimes invites me to go and contribute to his courses as an expert copywriter.

In 2018, Perry got in touch and said that he was running a workshop on his 'Swiss Army Knife' ad writing method. Would I like to help with the event, and work directly with one of his high spending clients? So I said, "Yes, count me in!"

I went and spoke to my wife Linzi about it, and she said, "I don't think you should go. I think this is another Arizona. I think you're acting in desperation. Money's tight. I think you should put the family first."

We continued to argue, but I decided to go anyway - on the proviso that I would get to Chicago as cheaply as I possibly could. So, I booked the cheapest flight I could find to Chicago. My journey there involved setting off two days before. On Halloween in 2018 I got the train from Sheffield down to London.

The first leg in my train journey involved changing in Doncaster. I had a little voice in my head that said, "*You can't miss the connecting train. Get to Doncaster early.*"

So I did. I went to Doncaster an hour earlier than I needed to. Of an evening, Doncaster is like the Wild West of South Yorkshire. So on Halloween there were drunk people everywhere; some getting into altercations, people in witches outfits, people dressed as all sorts of Halloween things. I'm sitting there, clutching my stuff, trying to get to London.

It's a good thing I went an hour early. The train that I was supposed to get was hopelessly delayed, and I would've missed the connection at Doncaster.

So I caught my train to London, arriving into London at 1:00 AM in the morning. I walked out of King's Cross Station, and it may as well have been 3:00 in the afternoon. There were witches everywhere, ghouls everywhere, girls dressed as pumpkins, people reveling in the moment. And I'm there, alone, trying to get a night bus to Heathrow Airport.

I'd looked up on Google Maps where I needed to go, and I went and waited at a stop. I waited and waited. Everyone else seemed to know where they were going. Everyone else knew what bus to catch.

Eventually the night bus to Heathrow pulled up, rammed with shrieking witches. I plowed my way on, and sat down next to a guy holding a guitar who was drinking from a can of beer. He promptly told me that his name was Igor, and would I like any of his beer?

I declined sharing his beer, but we got talking. He told me he'd been playing a gig at night. He told me he just wanted to go home, and go to bed.

At half three in the morning, I arrived at Heathrow Airport. The airport security wasn't even open yet. There were a few people walking around, mostly cleaners and night workers. I could hear the distinct hum of floors being cleaned, while tinny music blared out from a nearby toilet. I sat there and I fell asleep on a bench by the toilet.

30 minutes later, a young lad appeared next to me. "All right mate!" he said loudly, in a Liverpool accent. "Where are you off to?"

"Oh, no." I thought to myself. First Igor from Latvia, and now Jimmy from Liverpool wants to make friends with me. I made my excuses, and I eventually got through airport security.

I sat in the departures lounge, perched on an uncomfortable plastic seat, feeling like death; feeling like sleep was about to overwhelm me at any second, but I had to stay awake for this flight. I couldn't fall asleep. I had to stay awake.

Finally, I got on the flight. Eight hours to Chicago. Did I fall asleep? Of course I didn't fall asleep!

I sat there, without the mental energy to do anything productive, but without the tiredness and peace to get any rest.

Everyone around me looked assured, like they knew what they were doing. Some people were tapping away on laptops. I'm sat there with the words of my wife echoing around in my head. "I think this is another Arizona. I think you're making a mistake. You should have put the family first."

I arrive at Chicago's O'Hare Airport at 10:00 AM local time: far too early to check into my hotel. I can't check into my hotel until 3:00 PM in the afternoon. As I had nothing better to do, I had planned to get public transport to my hotel.

I made my way down to the Metro at O'Hare airport, tapped the card on the gates, which beeped a dull beep. My credit card didn't work. My second credit card also didn't work. "*You're going to get stuck here forever, stuck in the terminal!*" a small voice whispered at the back of my mind.

I tapped my third and final credit card to the reader, heard a friendly 'beep', and the gates in front of me swung open.

I love traveling on public transport in new cities. I think it's one of the best ways to actually see the city. And not only see the city, but see the people who really *live* in the city.

I caught the Metro from O'Hare Airport into downtown Chicago, and barely awake, stumbled over to a train station. When I get very tired, my stammer comes out a lot more.

I went into a place to grab a bite to eat, and realized that I had no idea what I was doing. Was I supposed to pay a tip? Where was I supposed to queue? All things that should be straightforward. The guy at the till couldn't understand my accent. It could have been my accents; maybe I was just mumbling.

I had a bite to eat, and then caught a train to the *middle of nowhere*. I remember sitting on the upper story of this train; people around me on the commute home now, talking about work, talking about their day. I remember one guy on the phone talking loudly about *assets*. I wondered what he did for a living. I wondered what his passions were.

I got off the train at this stop in the middle of nowhere. I remember a freight train rumbling past with three engines at the front; possibly the biggest train I've ever seen.

The last leg of my journey was to catch a bus. I stood outside the train station, and waited. Eventually the bus showed up. Once again, the driver had no idea what I was saying, or even where I wanted to go.

So I tapped my card on the reader, stumbled aboard, and sat there, hoping - *praying* - that I was going in the right direction.

Eventually having memorized the map, I spotted where I needed to get off, and stumbled into the hotel. I checked in, and stumbled into my bed.

The next morning, I walked into the event room where Perry was busy setting up. Many names from Perry's forum came to life in that event. People I had communicated with in the forum were suddenly there in real life 3D. I was paired up with one of Perry's clients who was spending a lot of money on ads, and also with Perry's right hand copywriter, John Fancher. It was our job, rapid fire, to come up with new copywriting insights for the client. I sat there thinking, "*Am I a fraud? Should I be here?*"

On the second day of the event, I was sitting there in the morning when legendary copywriter Jay Abraham walks into the room right by where I am. "Good morning," he says to me. Slightly starstruck, I mumble "good morning" back. He looks around the room, and then walks out. No mention was made by anyone else that Jay Abraham was at that event, or even that I'd seen him or spoken to him.

Maybe I'd spent too long on the bus with Igor the Latvian and Jimmy the Scouser. I don't know, but I tell you he was there, and I spoke to him!

Perry's workshop really drilled home to me that marketing follow up is multidimensional. People interact with you and your brand in multiple ways, and Perry demonstrated that at that event. The workshop also pulled together the very best in marketing and copywriting firepower that Perry was able to assemble under one roof.

In Perry's opinion, AI can never write your copy, not a copy that really matters. AI can never tell your story. It can never position you uniquely. It can never understand your uniqueness. It can't churn out the ideas that you are able to do, either by yourself or as part of a group of people. I wouldn't have had that insight had I not gone against my wife's wishes and gone on my 'quest' to Chicago.

Today's podcast is all about the quest plot archetype, which is the third of Christopher Booker's Seven Basic Plots. As always, we're going to cover three ideas. The first idea is companions. The second idea is helper characters, and the third idea is the final reckoning. So let's have a look at the first idea.

# 1. Companions

In every quest plot in literature, you'll find helper characters that assist the hero on his journey. It's tempting to think of the quest as a physical journey, and there is always a journey element. I think this is why the quest is so appealing and so timeless, because perhaps it harks back to a time where we didn't live in fixed communities, where we had to move around in order to survive.

I'm going to explore two quest plots in this episode. I'm going to use *The Lord of the Rings* as a modern example. I'm going to talk briefly about *The Odyssey* by Homer, which is an epic ancient Greek poem.

*The Lord of the Rings* is essentially a quest plot, with the other plots subset into it at different points. At different points Frodo and his companions do have to overcome the monster. There is an element of rags to riches about the story. But really the main overarching plot is a quest plot.

As a quest plot, it involves a physical journey. The journey starts in the Shire, where the Hobbits live, and ends in Mordor where Sauron is, who is the antagonist of the story.

It's tempting to think of the quest as just about a journey, but actually the journey is only a fragment of the action. (We'll cover this more in point 3 about the 'final ordeal'). On the journey, the hero is always encountering unfriendly or unfamiliar terrain. So in my story about getting to Chicago, I described how it was Halloween and that I had to change trains in Doncaster. I described Doncaster as being the 'Wild West of South Yorkshire'. (I once heard a policeman call it that!)

In *The Lord of the Rings*, not only is the terrain unfriendly, but there are also companions on the trip. So if I was to retell a cinematic version my quest to Chicago, I would add in one or more companions. I would add in my equivalent of Samwise Gamgee.

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus has the support of his crew, who are slowly picked off one by one by monsters and until he is left all by himself. But he DOES have companions, and actually he can't achieve the goal of the story by himself. One of the lessons of the quest plot is that we can't achieve great things working by working alone. The quest illustrates the importance of collaboration.

So every great quest has companions. Often the companions will have skills or attributes which make up for one of the hero's flaws. In moments of tremendous peril, where it looks like the dark monsters and the dark forces in the story will win, it's the helper characters who dig the hero out of a hole.

We see this as multiple times in *The Lord of the Rings*, where Frodo's companions will help him out at different points. So the first ingredient of a quest is that it contains a physical journey, and there are companions on the journey. So if you can include companions in your quest story, DO include them.. It isn't ideal really that I went to Chicago by myself, either perhaps in hindsight, or

from a storytelling perspective. It would be an easier story to tell as a quest if I went with someone else. That someone else would be able to help me when I got stuck: when I started stammering, when I almost fell asleep in airport security. It would've been the helper character that saved the day. So I was missing that from the plot.

## 2. Helper Characters

On the quest, there will often be light figures along the journey that as a minimum provide respite to our hero.

We've talked about the idea of 'constriction' in previous episodes, where the pressure on the hero is slowly escalated and released. So this idea of constriction happens in the quest as well. The pressure on the hero will be raised, and then there will be a period of respite or recovery. At these points of recovery we often see helper characters. We see the elves helping Frodo.

In my quest to Chicago, at the train station in Chicago, I almost got on the wrong train. It was only a very nice lady in the ticket office who said, "No, you don't want to go on *that train*. Catch the train *down there* that leaves in 10 minutes." Thinking about it now, that would've been a very good addition to the story. Even though she didn't provide me with respite, she was someone who helped me on the journey towards achieving my goal.

When I stopped for some food, I could've slightly elaborated that the server behind the till heard me stammer, and just made a recommendation. He saw how tired I was and said, "Are you from England? You should try this. It's really nice." That again, would've been an example of someone helping me out in my predicaments in that particular situation.

The helper characters are different from companions in that they are static; they don't join the hero on his or her journey. The combination of the companions and the helper characters are what helps the hero to overcome the dark powers in the story.

So as you're thinking about the quest, as you're thinking about journeys that you've been on, keep an eye out for helper characters. People who don't necessarily travel with you, but are there providing respite, guidance or support.

In literature, these 'helper characters' are often portrayed as 'wise old man' figures that actually provide mentorship. This helps to deliver a positive character arc and help the hero to grow and become a fuller version of themselves. It's by becoming a fuller version of themselves that the hero of the story can complete the quest.

## 3. The Final Ordeal

The third idea I want to talk to you about is the final reckoning. In most quest plots, the journey itself actually only takes up about half the story. If you're crafting a quest plot, the journey should take up about half of the story. No more than halfway through *The Lord of the Rings*, the Hobbits are fairly close to the Mordor. They've got most of the way there, but they haven't gone through

the final reckoning. It's the final reckoning where most of the character change happens; where the key battles happen. Potentially there's up to three battles with the dark force of the story; three obstacles that must be overcome.

In my final reckoning in Chicago, it wasn't the journey to get there. It was sitting with Perry's client and John Fancher, feeling very tired, very jet lagged, and feeling compelled to come up with quickfire copy ideas for the client, because that was the whole reason I was there. That was the final reckoning.

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus actually makes it back to his hometown of Ithaca fairly early on in the story, maybe just after halfway through. But then he finds that his wife Penelope is being chased by suitors. He has to find a way to get into Ithaca undetected, win back the heart of Penelope, prove that he IS Odysseus, slay the suitors and claim back his wife, kingdom; what is rightfully his. So the point of the quest story isn't so much about the quest. The quest is really the buildup to the final reckoning, and it's the final reckoning that matters the most.

As you're planning the structure of your quest, don't just make it about the journey. Yes, the journey matters. Yes, there should be helper characters. Yes, there should be companions. But it's the final reckoning that delivers the point of the story. The final reckoning may have three separate challenges; three ordeals that you might have to get through.

If you're writing an email sequence, each of the three challenges that you faced can be written as separate emails. You can then leave an open loop or 'cliff hanger' in between each email, so the reader wants to read the next email to know what happens next.

So, I think the quest is a very engaging plot. It's engaging firstly because it's a journey, which automatically brings adventure and challenge. Secondly, because we have internal character growth on the part of the hero to complete the quest. And thirdly, because it's relatable...

At different points in our lives, we've all experienced some version of the quest. Maybe you haven't replicated my exploits and done a crazy trip to Chicago to work directly with Perry Marshall. The specifics don't actually matter.

In my [Simple Story Selling](#) book, one of the stories that I tell is from a client who used to train mountain guides. Their business was very well suited to the quest, because the business itself involved trips to far flung, inaccessible places. If your business involves trips, then the quest is going to be a prime plot. If you're more like me and you don't travel very often, then the quest is of more limited use case.

But having said that, we've all got these trips in the past. You can tell a personal story, rather than one that relates to your current business. We've all done silly things, gone to places and thought, "*What on earth am I doing here?*"

Sometimes it's the process of telling a story that dredges up older story ideas. Telling you that story about Chicago has prompted memories of a few older quest plots.

As a storyteller, this is why you have to keep going. You have to keep writing. You have to keep producing. You can't expect all of the stories to just float to the surface in one go. It's the act of telling a story that pulls up old memories.

## Recap

So we're at the end of today's episode, so let's do recap. Today's episode has been about the third of Christopher Booker's Seven Plots, which is the quest. And we've talked about the quest being a journey, but the journey actually not being the entire point of the story.

The first idea we talked about was the idea of companions. In a quest plot, the protagonist of the story ideally should have helper companions who help him or her along the way, and at key moments keep the hero moving forward. The companions provide skills and insight that the hero wouldn't otherwise have access to by themselves.

In a similar vein, the second idea is helper characters. At certain points throughout the quest, at certain points along the journey, the hero will encounter helper characters who help ward away the bad powers in the story; who help rejuvenate or replenish the hero. Sometimes the helper characters will provide wisdom or insights that help the hero to move forward.

The third idea was really the key point of the quest plot, and that was the final reckoning. About halfway through the story, your hero should have made most of their way towards the destination of their quest. But at the destination, their troubles are far from over. There is a big battle to be had with the dark force of the story; potentially up to three battles. A dramatic 'final reckoning' will give you a really engaging quest plot.

I'd also like to read you a short section from Christopher Booker's *Seven Basic Plots*, because I think he sums up the quest quite well. He says:

*"We see the same fundamental rhythm at work in the structure of the quest. There is the initial feeling of constriction which persuades the hero and his companions that they must leave. We have a sense of enlargement as they set out into the world on their journey: although this contains within it lesser alternations of construction and release, as each ordeal is followed by respite. We then come to the more serious constriction as the hero comes with sight of his goal, and has to face the final ordeals. Gradually the story works up to its climax, when he is pitted in a last decisive battle against the dark forces which have stood between him and his goal all along. At last we share his liberation from all opposition, as the darkness is overthrown, the goal is secured and the story ends in the image of life gloriously renewed."*

In a business story, the outcome of the story could be life renewed. It could equally be purpose renewed. All of the seven plots present the same overall plot pattern, just showcased from a different lens or perspective.

In next week's episode, we're going to talk about a plot that has similarities to the quest: the 'voyage and return' plot.



## What else is going on in Story Copywriter Land?

Well, as you might be able to tell, I still have a sore throat. I feel like I've been to some degree struggling through this podcast, but that's how it is. Once you've committed to a publishing schedule, unless something really serious happens, it maintains a degree of momentum to try and stick to the schedule

It was also my son Hugo's fourth birthday last weekend. There's something about anniversaries that throws my mind back to the day he was born.

At the time, he was born six weeks premature, and it was all a bit of a surprise. I was at work the day before, and my wife rang me. She said, "My pre-eclampsia has got a lot worse." (Pre-eclampsia is a condition that can affect pregnant ladies.) "They're going to deliver the baby tomorrow."

At that point I was very busy with work. I had a lot of plates in the air, and I just let them all fall. In hindsight I needed to do that. I needed that break. It put a forced stop on my life.

Hugo was born the next morning; a tiny little voice in an incubator, struggling for oxygen. That night before I went home, I put my hand in the incubator. He did his baby thing where the baby will grip your finger. It's a grip reflex. It was not deliberate on the part of the baby, but he gripped my finger, and I remember that. Our first hand hold.

I was walking back to the tram that evening to go home, and I thought, "He's zero days old. ZERO days old!"

So sometimes on his birthday, I think back to that experience. I think back to the immediacy of his birth, the circumstances around it, and back to that memory of walking back to the tram thinking, "We've got a human there that's NO days old." And it still blows my mind.

He's now four, and a terror. I've been calling him a 'threenager' for a long time, which pretty much sums him up. But that's what we've been up to.

So I hope you've enjoyed this episode. As always, if you've enjoyed the episode, feel free to leave the show a rating and review in your favorite podcast app. It does help to spread the word, and make sure you're subscribed to the podcast email list at [storycopywriters.com/notes](http://storycopywriters.com/notes).

All that's left for me to say is thank you as always for listening, and I will talk to you next time.

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