

Structuring the Commercial Short Story:

Seven Elements

Beginning

1. identify the protagonist
2. clarify the setting
3. define the protagonist's problem

Middle

4. the protagonist's first attempt to solve the problem; it fails
5. the second attempt; it fails
6. the third attempt; this attempt either succeeds or results in death

End

7. verification

Commercial fiction: a story that people buy and hence makes money for author and publisher. This definition says nothing about quality. Charles Dickens, George Elliott, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Louis L'Amour, and Ian Fleming all wrote commercial fiction. Most commercial fiction is escape reading, something many readers dismiss as junk. A small percent of commercial fiction is interpretative, and some commercial fiction rises to art.

It is possible to write interpretative fiction and even literary art using the above seven-point structure for a story. Most writers who use the structure, however, write escape fiction. The structure is not a magic formula. Even for escape fiction, the structure often does not work. An experienced writer will discard the structure when it restricts and limits writing a good story.

For a piece of literary art that uses this 7-element structure, read Faulkner's "An Odor of Verbena."