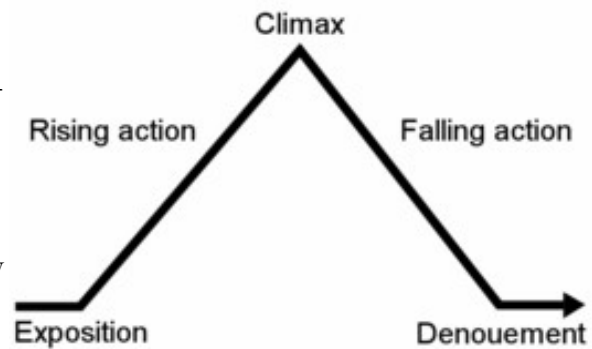


Experiments with Narrative

According to Freytag's Pyramid (right), a 19th-century German conception of narrative designed to suck all the life out of reading, a story consists of five parts: Exposition (in which the story elements are introduced), Rising Action (in which the events of the story are set in motion), Climax (in which things come to a head), Falling Action (in which the pieces are picked up), and Denouement (whereby the story is tied up with a bow). For better or worse, old Freytag was on to something—most stories can be shoehorned into this scheme without much effort, and we are programmed to feel satisfied by it. The Pyramid is basically an elaboration upon Aristotle's three-act narrative idea, which was still later depressingly re-elaborated upon by Syd Field, the self-aggrandizing screenwriting guru whom you can thank for the existence of Jerry Bruckheimer.



The semi-universality of basic narrative structure speaks to the vast importance narrative plays in our lives—story is how we make sense of things. But if you want to mess around with sense—if you want to throw a reader off-balance—then you should change the narrative structure. When you do this, you're changing the shape of life itself, and how we perceive it. David Markson's novels, for instance, dispense with this shape entirely, and replace it with a series of discrete miniaturized blobs of prose, in the form of observations or factoids. Some metafiction dispense with narrative entirely, and concentrate instead on the technical trappings of the book—auxiliary elements like the index or table of contents. Jonathan Buckley's *So He Takes The Dog* is a police procedural mystery that dispenses with denouement, leaving the crime completely unsolved, and doesn't seem to feel too bad about it.

Try to write something that corresponds, in narrative structure, not to Freytag's Pyramid, but to one of the shapes below:

