Lesson 14 – Act One: Ignition

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Good morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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"Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened."

That's how John York summarizes the basic, universal form of storytelling in his amazing book, *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story*. I know I'm repeating myself from last week, but that quote is so helpful in defining what story is and what it isn't, especially when writing building the foundation for the rest of your narrative – your first act. John Yorke's fairytale approach to the form of storytelling encapsulates the basic appeal of all stories. You need a time and place for something to happen in – your ordinary world. You need a specific set of circumstances that draw your reader in. "Once upon a time" is probably the most common hook in all of fiction. And most importantly, you need a "something" to happen.

Your ordinary world, hook, and opening are all vital elements of storytelling – you can't begin a narrative without some level of context and (for lack of a better word) *pizzazz* to draw the reader in. Whether it's general or hyper specific, that necessary groundwork sets the stage for the moment when the story really kicks off. We all know the feeling of sitting through the first 15 minutes of a movie or the first few chapters of a novel, waiting with horrid anticipation for everything to go terribly, terribly wrong. We know, instinctively, that whatever balance these characters have found in their lives, fragile as it might be, it about to be chucked out the window by a powerful and inescapable *something*. It's a fundamental step in story structure, and your audience knows and expects it from page one.

I think it's also fair to say that we know the feeling of frustration that comes when it doesn't arrive quickly enough: when the writer becomes self-indulgent in creating their ordinary world and forgets what their audience is waiting for. The most obvious example is in horror movies: the longer we spend learning the backstories of the characters, the surer we are they'll all end up as so much grease for the grinder. But all genres fall prey to this problem when their writers forget that the audience is waiting for one very specific moment: the thing that makes the story go and gives it a sense of momentum, stakes, and purpose: **The Inciting Incident**.

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If you've been writing for any length of time, I'm sure you've heard this term tossed around a lot, and for good reason: besides the resolution, it's the most essential part of any story. **This is because the basic appeal of storytelling depends on *something happening*.** If there is no beginning, there can be no middle or end. The inciting incident probably won't be what people remember most about your story – that should be the climax or resolution. But it should be just as strong dramatically as either of those moments. It is the first moment in the story that fundamentally shifts the narrative in a new direction. This shift must be serious enough to force character to adapt and change, while also being disruptive enough that the characters want to return to their previous norm or construct a new one, but can't.

Let's take a look at the inciting incident of one of my favorite TV shows, *Breaking Bad*. In the pilot episode (which, by the way, has one of the most effective cold opens I've ever seen), we meet Walter White, a middle aged, unhappily married High School chemistry teacher forced to work at a car wash to supplement his family's income. At every turn, we see him stepped on and humiliated by his wife, brother in law, students, and boss. Then, at the end of the first act, he collapses soon after his 50th Birthday. In one of the most effective inciting incidents in TV history (largely because we know where it's leading, but not how the story will get there), we learn that he has inoperable lung cancer that will almost certainly kill him in two years.

Now stop. We've been introduced to Walt's ordinary world. He sees himself as a victim. Given everything we've seen so far, we probably agree with him. He's a figure of pity, and we can all empathize to one degree or another with his plight of waking up halfway through life with nothing to show for it. Unless something changes, he's never going to leave his comfortable, if miserable, place in the universe. Cue the inciting incident. We all know what a sudden reminder of our own mortality does to us: it either moves us further back into our numbness and apathy, or forces us forward towards drastic change. Again, with the help of the cold open, we know which path Walt is going to take… just not how.

The *how* comprises the rest of your first act – the section between the inciting incident and your first plot point. But just from this example, you can see what a good inciting incident can and should do for your narrative: **It disrupts an established sense of personal, interpersonal, or social balance in a way that is fundamental and irreversible**.

Note that in the *Breaking Bad* example, it's not Walt getting cancer that is the inciting incident: it is Walt's diagnosis. It is him *learning* the truth about something that's already wrong and has been since before the series began. Once the protagonist realizes there's something wrong with their world, they begin to adapt to the disruption. An inciting incident cannot be an event that happens without anyone noticing. **No matter where or how it happens in your story, it has to be something the protagonist first becomes aware of within the confines of the**

narrative. If the inciting incident is a collision in space that sends a chunk of satellite debris hurling towards the International Space Station, the astronauts there have to know. If we, the audience or reader, see the collision, we'll initially be in suspense about how the astronauts will figure it out. Again, this is a scene that the audience knows has to happen to begin the real story. But if it doesn't, the suspense will run out at about a quarter of the way through the plot. If the astronauts never find out, we'll watch the space station be torn to shreds and feel annoyed at the writers for wasting our time.

If, on the other hand, we don't see the initial collision but learn about it as the astronauts do, the revelation then becomes the inciting incident, which forces them to adapt their mission plan and try to get back on the ground ASAP (*Gravity*. I'm talking about the film *Gravity*).

In more general terms, *something* needs to happen to your characters, and they cannot remain ignorant of it forever**. The inciting incident is the moment when the balance of the protagonist or protagonists' lives become fundamentally upset. This occurs when and only when they are made aware of the change.** The reason this is so confusing is that the inciting incident typically comes from some external, unbalanced force in the story world, and thus it's easy to leave the main characters unaware of it for too long.

This has also led to no small amount of confusion regarding what should and should not be called the inciting incident. In Robert McKee's *Story*, he says, quote: "Occasionally an inciting incident needs two parts – a setup and a payoff." End quote. While this demonstrates the problem, I don't think it's very helpful to look at the Inciting Incident as having two parts. It's *the* inciting incident, after all, and there's only one thing – what McKee calls "the payoff" – that unbalances the protagonist's ordinary world.

Because of this, I view "the setup" of the inciting incident as part of the opening, where the "thesis" and ordinary world are also set up. It the inciting incident is directly caused by the forces of antagonism, then it's because those forces are already present in your ordinary world – they just haven't disrupted the protagonist's sense of balance yet. This is why so many cold opens heavily feature the antagonists: *Jaws, Infinity War, Mulan,* etc. They establish the threat as a fundamental part of the story world – one that the protagonist is blissfully unaware of or unbothered by. It's simply another element that needs to be established in the first part of the narrative and paid off later – in this case, at the inciting incident.

The Inciting Incident, on the other hand, is the moment when the protagonist's sense of internal equilibrium is fundamentally disrupted. In almost every case, **the inciting incident occurs when the protagonist loses something which they used to define themselves.** Whether that be a job, belief, relationship, plan for the future, ability, material possession, or anything else, it is taken away from them either by an

external force or by their own mistaken actions. For example, Walter White loses any plans he might have had for a future, as well as one of the most fundamental (but fundamentally untrue) human beliefs: that horrible things only happen to other people. All that is clearly communicated by his numb reaction to the news… We all know what a terminal cancer diagnosis means. In *Jaws*, it's chief Brody's sense of security and control that are challenged when he sees the remains of a half-eaten swimmer wash up on shore. In *Les Misérables,* it is Valjean's dog-eat-dog worldview and victim mentality that are destroyed by a single illogical act of mercy and kindness. In *The Silver Age*, it is Lera Lynn's belief in justice and goodness that are destroyed when her wife dies in an earthquake.

In classical tragedies – that is, stories which focus on the negative arc of a character unable to change and adapt – the inciting incident is often an action by the tragic hero, caused by some fundamental part of their personality that prevents them from changing: their *hamartia*, to use the Greek term. This is usually defined as "tragic flaw," but that doesn't quite cover the full meaning of the concept. It's more of a "tragic quality" – a strong, defining characteristic that in a different story might have been the key to the protagonist's success. For Macbeth, it's ambition – a fine quality to have on its own, but dangerous if taken to the point of murder. This quality leads him to the Inciting Incident: his murder of King Duncan, which causes him to lose his sense of honor and eventually, his grip on reality. For Oedipus, it is his warrior cunning and single-minded determination to outsmart fate – which causes a plague in his kingdom after he unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. This plague causes the protagonist a loss of security and control that they must rectify, just like the shark attack did in *Jaws* (and I never thought I'd be drawing a comparison between *Jaws* and *Oedipus Rex* on this podcast, but here we are). For Hamlet, his *hamartia* is his unwillingness to act until he is absolutely certain. For many other protagonists, this would be a positive quality which would keep them from making fundamental mistakes. However, it drives Hamlet to seek out the ghost of his father before he even begins to act. The ghost's words are the inciting incident, causing Hamlet to completely lose his trust in his uncle, but even so he refuses to act at all until he has concrete proof. This is a case of a reluctant hero and a refusal of the call following the Inciting Incident, which we'll talk about in the next lesson episode.

I could go on, but I think you get the idea. The inciting incident is the single moment when the protagonist loses something fundamental to their sense of balance and equilibrium within the story world. **If the logic of the plot requires the inciting incident to be separated from the event that caused it, place that first cause event in the initial setup of the narrative, and make sure the two beats are quickly connected.** While dramatic irony – what happens when the audience or reader knows more than the characters – can be effective at generating suspense early on, it cannot be maintained for long without the

audience becoming annoyed with the characters for not realizing what's happened**. Generally, except for where necessitated by the laws of probability and necessity, it is best to have the inciting incident occur as soon as the story world's original equilibrium has been well established for the reader.**

This same law applies to subplots. Every subplot in your story should have its own inciting incident, though it doesn't always need to be shown as clearly or directly as the main inciting incident. As in the main plot, the inciting incident should occur as soon as the sense of equilibrium has been well established. This can either be the same equilibrium as the main plot, or a separate balance that is connected, but separate from, the A-Plot. The inciting incidents of your subplot doesn't need to occur as early as in the narrative as the A-plot Inciting Incident, and it doesn't even have to happen in act 1. In most cases, incorporating another inciting incident can help strengthen the second act and increase the overall sense of narrative momentum.

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There are many ways to create an inciting incident for your narrative, and I've already mentioned several examples that should hopefully give you an example of how to create a compelling one. Most of the time, an inciting incident is not difficult to create for your story – like I said, it's fundamental to the "something happened" macrostructure of storytelling. If you have a story, then most of the time you already have an inciting incident and what most books on writing call "the obligatory scene" – the climax or resolution of your story, depending on its structure.

The reason this scene is called "obligatory" is that it's the answer to the dramatic question raised by the Inciting Incident, delivered through plot and character action. Most audience members, especially when they have a lot of experience with stories in your selected genre or medium, have a general sense of where your story is going based on where it starts. The inciting incident of *Gravity* puts it firmly in the "survival" genre. It's a Hollywood film, and so we instinctively expect the story to wrap up with a harrowing but ultimately successful return to civilization and the ordinary world. The inciting incident of *The Name of the Wind* is the murder of the protagonist's family by a supernatural villain. The obligatory scene, which has yet to happen as of this episode, is the hero facing off against that enemy and either succeeding at a high cost or failing but surviving. Like *Breaking Bad,* the novel uses a flash forward cold open and framing story to give us a greater context on the trajectory of the protagonist's life; though it again keeps the "how" a mystery. The inciting incident of the podcast *Wolf 359* is Doctor Hilbert's betrayal of the rest of his crew, as it is the first event in the narrative that genuinely and irreversibly disrupts the balance of the story world. The obligatory scene is the crew's ultimately successful takedown of the people pulling Hilbert's strings. This case is an outlier, as the inciting incident doesn't occur until the middle of the season 1

finale. It's a testament to writer Gabriel Urbina's ability with slow burn suspense, mystery, and character development that he was able to maintain a sense of narrative momentum for so long before the main plot began in earnest.

If you know your obligatory scene (which is generally the one you most want to get to in your narrative), then finding the Inciting Incident is fairly easy: just run the story backwards to the first major disruption of your protagonist's world in relationship to the obligatory scene. A good place to look for inspiration is modern TV. I've already mentioned *Breaking Bad*, but almost all serialized TV dramas in the last 30 years have featured Inciting Incidents strong enough to carry a series through hundreds of episodes before it reaches its obligatory scene in the season finale. "A chemistry teacher is diagnosed with cancer and turns to cooking meth" is an incredibly rich starting point that played out across 5 seasons and a movie, not to mention a spin off with its own powerful setup. "A starship is flung millions of lightyears across the galaxy and must find its way home" provided Star Trek: Voyager with enough stories for 7 seasons before the crew finally found their way home. "The royal adviser is murdered because he learned a dangerous secret" spun out into 8 seasons of civil war, political intrigue, and almost constant reversals in *Game of Thrones,* before unfortunately coming to a disappointing end when the showrunners chose the wrong obligatory scene for the story's themes.

If you know the Inciting Incident but can't nail down your obligatory scene, just try to find the major dramatic question posed by that first cause event. For example, let's say your inciting incident was a highly coordinated and skilled robbery that left little to no evidence. Clearly, this inciting incident places your story in the crime genre, and, depending on your choice of protagonist, either in the crime thriller or detective subgenres. Examine films, books, TV shows, and other stories that have similar Inciting Incidents. You'll quickly find the general trend of these types of stories is towards an obligatory confrontation between detective and master criminal after a long game of cat and mouse. How you resolve that game largely determines what your narrative will say. *The Thomas Crowne Affair* ends with the criminal escaping and his lover, the insurance detective sent to stop him, left holding the baggage. "Love blinds us to the truth." *Point Break* and *The Fast and the Furious* both end with the detective letting the criminal go due to the bond they've formed while the detective was working undercover. While the 2003 remake of *The Italian Job* initially seems to have the same inciting incident as these other films, the robbery is merely the first cause, and the inciting incident is the murderous betrayal of the team by one of its members. Despite featuring a cast of characters who steal millions without blinking an eye, the film has a strong sense of justice, and punishes the traitor for his actions in the obligatory scene.

This is another creative choice largely determined by your premise and the values of your story. By knowing what you're arguing for and against, you can easily find both sides of the storytelling equation

between Inciting Incident and Obligatory Scene. What's more, you know how far you can push both events from one another without breaking the narrative. Getting from the inciting incident of "Walter White is diagnosed with cancer" to the obligatory scene of "Walter White dies of cancer" takes the audience and the character on a long, harrowing journey as Vince Gilligan takes him, in his own words, "from Mister Chips to Scarface." Yet the link between inciting incident and obligatory scene gave five incredible seasons of constantly shifting status quos a driving force and sense of momentum that most writers only dream of creating. And it all started with a single powerful, irreversible disruption to the balance of the protagonist's world.

Even if you aren't writing an ongoing narrative series, having a strong inciting incident is one of the main sources of momentum in your story. **Mining out how that event affects your characters will give you more than enough conflict, tension, mystery, and suspense to constantly pull your readers in and make them want more.** And if you do it right, your story will not only affect the momentum of your character's lives, but the momentum of your audience's as well.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's inciting incident illumination was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, and featured music from Lauren Baker and Jesse Haugen.

Speaking of inciting incidents and long-format series, the first episode of "The Sheridan Tapes" will go live on Friday, April 24th. Keep an eye on this feed for updates, follow us on Instagram and Twitter @trevor_VW for more info, and check out Patreon.com/homesteadcorner if you want to support our little production team.

Next episode, we'll start picking up speed on our way out of act 1, as we talk about the potential for character choices and growth between the Inciting Incident and the first plot point. New teaching episodes of this podcast are released every Wednesday at 2pm Pacific Standard Time, so be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.