

A NOVEL APPROACH

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You are a writer — perceptive, empathetic, analytical, observant, spontaneous, and creative (right?) — so the similarities between a novel and the Super Bowl game are probably obvious to you. It's easy for you to think of the scenes in a novel as the downs in the Super Bowl game and the chapters as TDs or punts, to visualize the story complications as turnovers, injuries, and penalties, and the conflict as the back-and-forth struggle for possession of the football.

In fact, the vast number of similarities between a novel and a football game might lead us to deduce that whoever came up with the idea of writing a novel by formula probably watched a lot of football, and that the content of this article, although not intentionally plagiarized, is probably not original. Whether or not you advocate formula writing, the Super Bowl metaphor can be useful in structuring your novel if you focus on the fine points.

The Super Bowl is the Big Game of the season, and yet the game is the same one that's been played all season, the teams are restricted to the rules of the game and the rulings of referees, and the playing field is limited to one hundred yards. The Super Bowl will never be played on a baseball diamond. The players will never jump off diving boards, rev their engines, or run onto the field in basketball uniforms. When you structure your novel using the Super Bowl paradigm, the win-driven plot and the task-specific characters in your story will exist within the limited parameters of the setting.

To put it another way, the plot, characters, and setting of your story will form a triple helix that relies on cohesion and unity to accomplish its goal — a specific group of people playing by a fixed set of rules within time/space limitations to win the game. Is your story plot-driven or character-driven? It is neither, and both, because the plot cannot be executed without the characters, the characters have no role without the plot, and a plot and characters cannot exist without a setting, even if that setting is limited to the recesses of the psyche. In every story, the plot, characters, and setting depend on each other for their existence.

First, imagine that you are seated in the press box, waiting for the Super Bowl kickoff. You have a perfect view of the players and the field, and everyone watching and playing knows what is at stake — winning the game. In the same way, the premise of your novel (theme, focus, moral) defines what is narratively at stake in your story.

For example, if you read *Romeo and Juliet* as a Super Bowl game being played in 16th century Verona, The Montagues vs. The Capulets, you'll find that the rules of the ongoing feud include hatred, vengeance, and murder. As the story opens, the score is even and the game shows no sign of ending. As with the Super Bowl, winning the game is narratively at stake. (Staying alive would also be good.) The feud is the big picture, the backdrop for the story.

Another example is *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The game is The Unhappy, Displaced Child vs. The Reality of a Harsh and Unfamiliar Environment set in Kansas in the 1930s. As the story opens, Dorothy is already losing, and then things get worse. Once again, winning the game is narratively at stake. The gray Kansas farm is the big picture, the backdrop for the story.

Next, imagine that you are watching the game through a mini-cam on the quarterback's forehead. Pick the character best suited to tell your story, typically the protagonist, and focus on his/her personal stake in the outcome of the game, i.e., his/her clear and compelling reason to be in your story. What if the star quarterback breaks his leg during the final minutes of the game, and the second stringer has to take over for him? Move the mini-cam and look inside the head and heart of the new QB. He's not mentally prepared for the challenge (opportunity) but he doesn't have a

choice. He has to play, and it better be the best game he has ever played. As you watch game through the mini-cam, you'll see, hear, smell, taste, and feel everything the QB experiences.

To clarify the personal stakes, answer the following questions about your protagonist:

- What does the protagonist want? What is his/her motivation? The new QB wants to win, but his personal stakes in the game are much higher than if he were sitting on the bench. Romeo and Juliet want to ignore the feud and be together. Dorothy wants to belong.
- Why can't (s)he have it? In addition to the opposing team of really big, really mean guys, the new QB is struggling with personal doubts and insecurities. Romeo and Juliet must contend with insurmountable family feud problems. And Dorothy's inner demons (witches, flying monkeys, and magical powers) keep her from accepting the farm as her real home.
- Why can't (s)he walk away from the problem or let someone else handle it? What are the consequences for failure? The QB has one chance to prove himself and no one else can do it for him. Romeo and Juliet are driven by true love—walking away would be the same as betraying themselves and each other. Dorothy has no escape. She must defeat her inner demons or she will never be at peace with herself.

Next, answer the same questions about the antagonist—the equal and opposite force that wants to win the game as much as the protagonist does. The Super Bowl would be a bore if the opposing side had no interest in winning. The game has to be equally important to both sides.

Finally, please don't delude yourself into imagining that this article is the complete guide to writing a novel. There are dozens of books on the market, addressing a wide range of issues that every writer should consider. This is a just small first step toward a novel that might have a shelf life of centuries (*Romeo and Juliet*) or decades and still counting (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*). Establish a triple helix of plot, characters, and setting that will dictate the parameters of your story. Know what is narratively at stake in your story. (What game is being played and why should your reader care about it?) You might write the narrative stakes in a single sentence and tape it to your computer monitor as a reminder to stay focused on your "Super Bowl" triple helix. And write your protagonist's personal stakes in a second sentence and tape it to your keyboard as a reminder to keep your protagonist focused. Read. Read. Read. And write on!