

The 3 Things You Must Learn to Write Killer Stories

John D. Brown

What's the Secret?

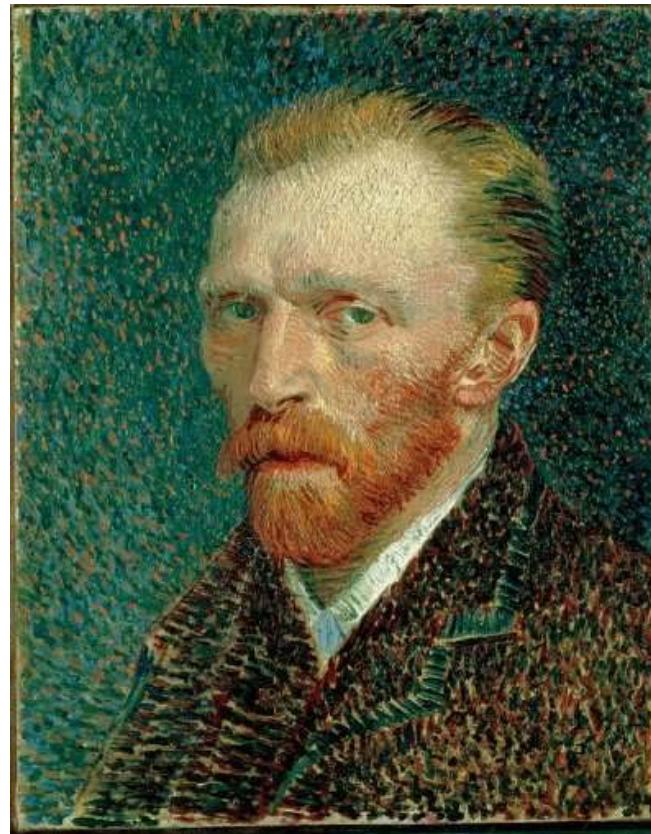


Malcolm Gladwell



Big
Bouncy
Brains!

Van Gogh



Lee Child



Patrick Rothfuss



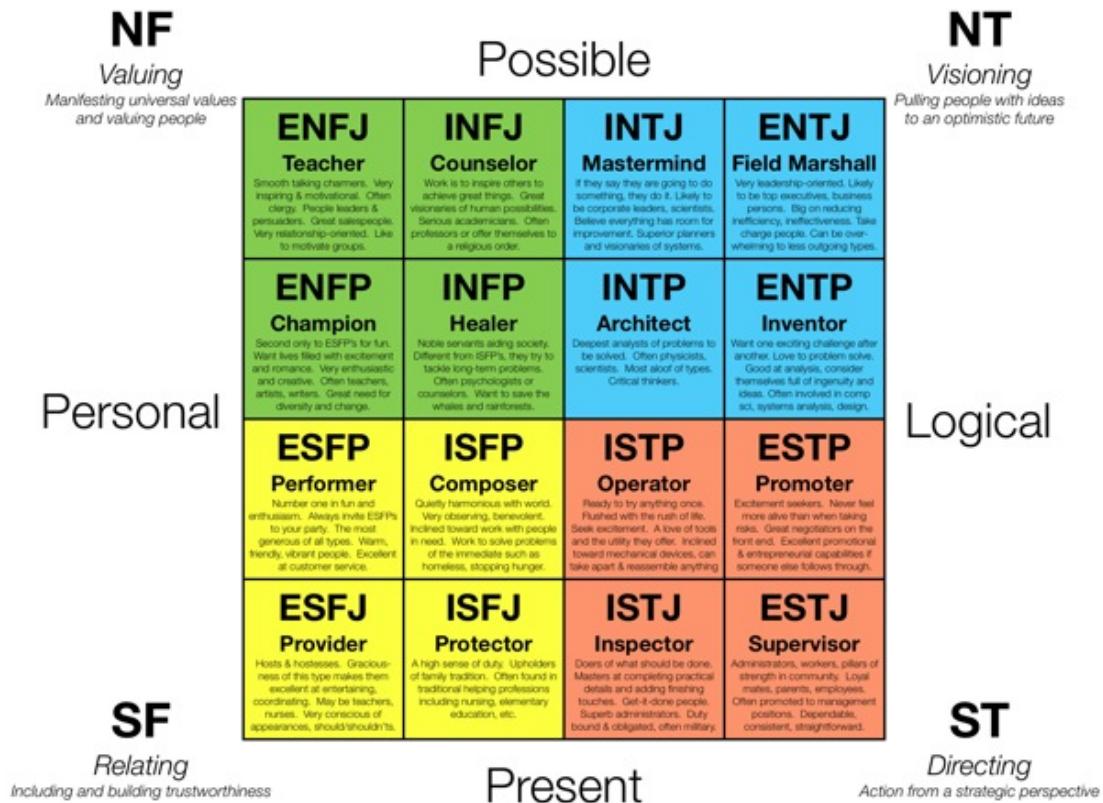
Larry Correia



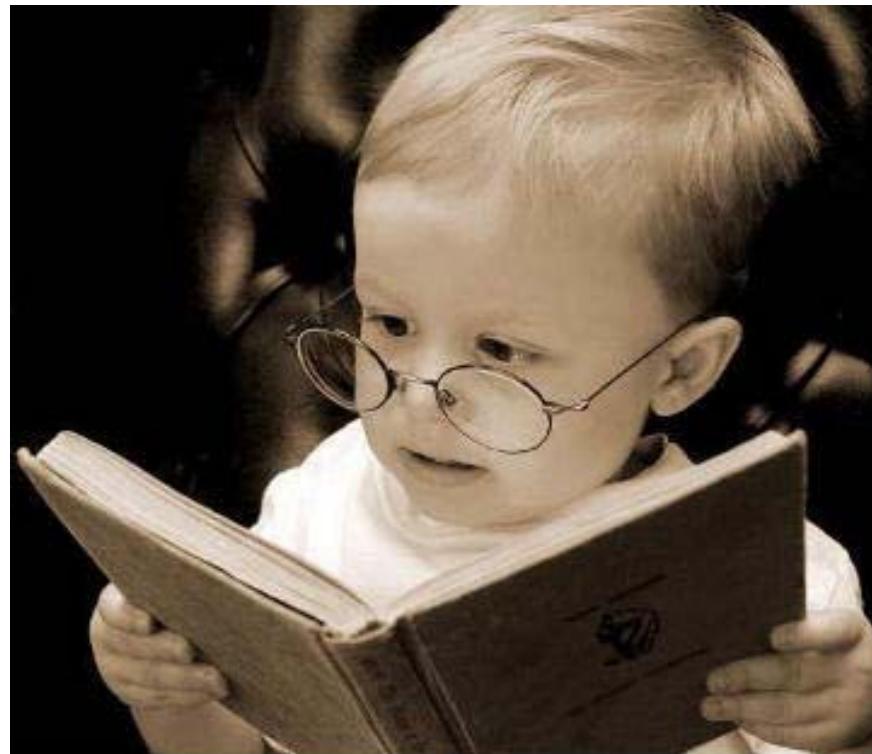
Larry Correia



Personality Type



Born to It



No

Passion, O Passion!



Chemicals



Mental Illness



Personality Type

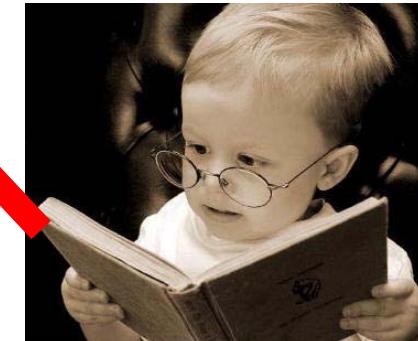
Personal		Logical			
NF	Valuing	Possible		Visioning	
Manifesting universal values and valuing people		ENFJ Teacher Smooth talking charmers. Very magnetic, outgoing, and full of energy. Like to take charge. People leaders & connectors. Very relationship-oriented. Like to meet new people.	INFJ Counselor Work to inspire others to change their ways. Very idealistic. Visionaries of human possibilities. Like to be mentors, teachers, or professors of others. Like to help people improve. Superior caregivers & connectors.	INTJ Mastermind Very independent thinkers. Like to be corporate leaders, scientists, inventors, and engineers. Like to plan, organize, and control. Like to be logical, critical.	ENTJ Field Marshall Very leadership-oriented. Used to be called "the general." Big reducers of complexity. Like to change people. Like to be overachievers, connectors, and controllers.
		ENFP Champion Second to none for fun. Likes work best with excitement and variety. Very creative and creative. Often teach themselves new skills. Like to diversify and change.	INFP Healer Niche learners and acting. Different from ENFJs, they're less outgoing. Like to be idealists. Other psychologists or counselors. Like to be with families and families.	INTP Architect Desire analysis of problems to solve them. Like to be solo, often philosophical, and detached. Like to be with people who are like them.	ENTP Inventor Want more exciting challenges after another. Like to problem-solve. Like to be entrepreneurs. Like to be inventors. Like to be connectors, inventors, and analysts.
		ESFP Performer Lively, outgoing, and enthusiastic. Always ready for fun. Very generous at all types. Wants, needs, and likes to be noticed at customer service.	ISFP Composer Gentle, kind, and considerate. Very caring, benevolent, and compassionate. Like to be with people they care about. Like to be in need. Wants to solve problems for others. Likes to be with families, stopping hungry.	ISTP Operator Practical, down-to-earth. Plastered with the truth of life. Like to be with people who are like them. And the city they live in. Interested in how things work. Likes to take apart & reassemble anything.	ESTP Promoter Entertainer. Likes to have fun more than when taking care of business. Likes to be the center of attention. Encourages personal growth. Likes to be around people. Encourages others to follow through.
		ESFJ Provider Honest & forthright. Capable, hard-working, and reliable. Interested in interacting with people. Likes to be with families, nurses. Very conscious of appearance, smooth-shouldered.	ISFJ Protector A high sense of duty. Upholders of tradition. Like to be with traditional helping professions. Like to be with parents, teachers, and students. Like to be with education, etc.	ISTJ Inspector Duties of what should be done. Like to be with people who are like them. Like to be with details and adding finishing touches. Like to be with parents, teachers, and students. Super-administrators. Duty-bound. Dutiful, often nitpicky.	ESTJ Supervisor Administrators, workers, roles of authority. Like to be with adults, mothers, fathers, parents, employees. Like to be with managers, executives, and professionals. Dutiful, diligent, responsible, dependable.
SF Relating including and building trustworthiness		Present		ST Directing Action from a strategic perspective	

Logical

Hair



Born to It



The Real Secret



Warren Ellis

The Real Secret



Ed Smylie

Apollo 13



**“When we verified they had duct tape on board,
I knew we were home free.”**

These folks have the secret too



And these . . .



And these. . .



And these . . .



Secret 1: The 3 Things You Need

1. An objective
2. Basic knowledge of how things work
3. Techniques to generate options

The 3 Things For Story

1. What you're trying to accomplish
2. How stories work
3. Proven techniques to develop and tell one

What is a story?



What is a Story?



Secret 2:

A Story is What It Does to the Reader

1. Thrill of action, adventure, romance, fright, etc.
2. Hope and fear for characters
3. Triumph
4. Mystery
5. Surprise
6. Wish-fulfillment
7. Wonder and delight
8. Humor
9. Insight

Do Not Focus on the Plastic!



Keep Your Eye on The Effect



Do these feel like story?

“The king died and then the queen died is a story. The king died, and then queen died of grief is a plot.”

- *E. M. Forster*

What about this?

The king is murdered, and three days later his scrappy queen and her guards are attacked on a lonely road, and only she and the weird one escape with their lives.

They suspect the attackers were sent by Lord Bannock, a powerful, murderous man, who has convinced most of the court that she's guilty of regicide and should be executed, and they should crown him instead.

What about this?

They then discover he's moving to kill her family to ensure there are none to contend his rule.

She must stop Bannock and identify the real killer, but how can she when she has only the one odd guard, troops are everywhere, and the realm's most bloodthirsty bounty hunter finds her trail...

Secret 3: The 3 Big Reader Responses

1. Hopes and fears
2. Anticipation
3. Puzzlement, mystery

Hopes and Fears



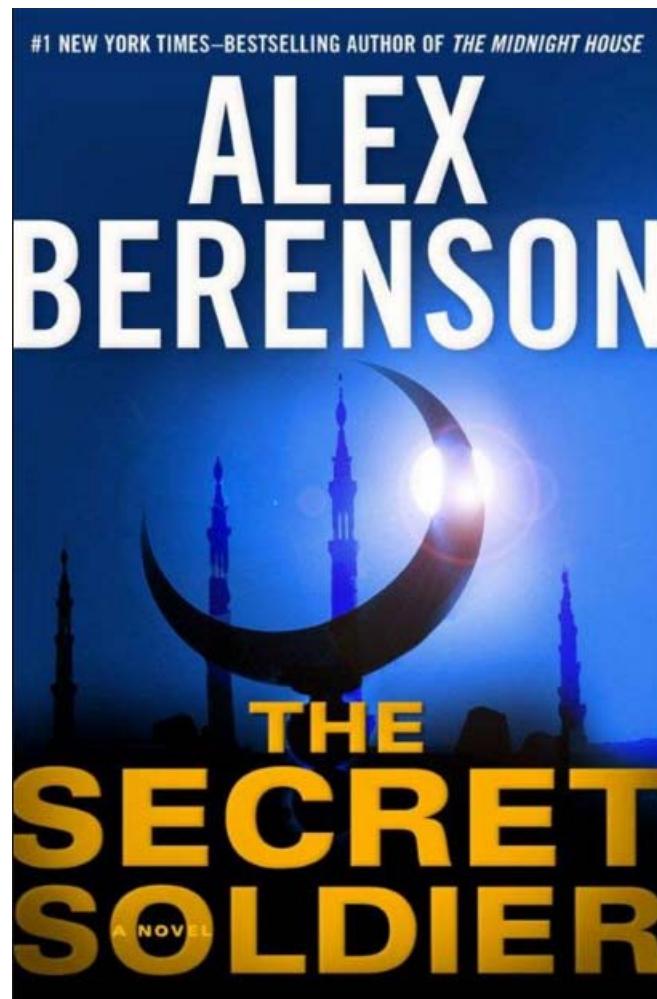
Anticipation



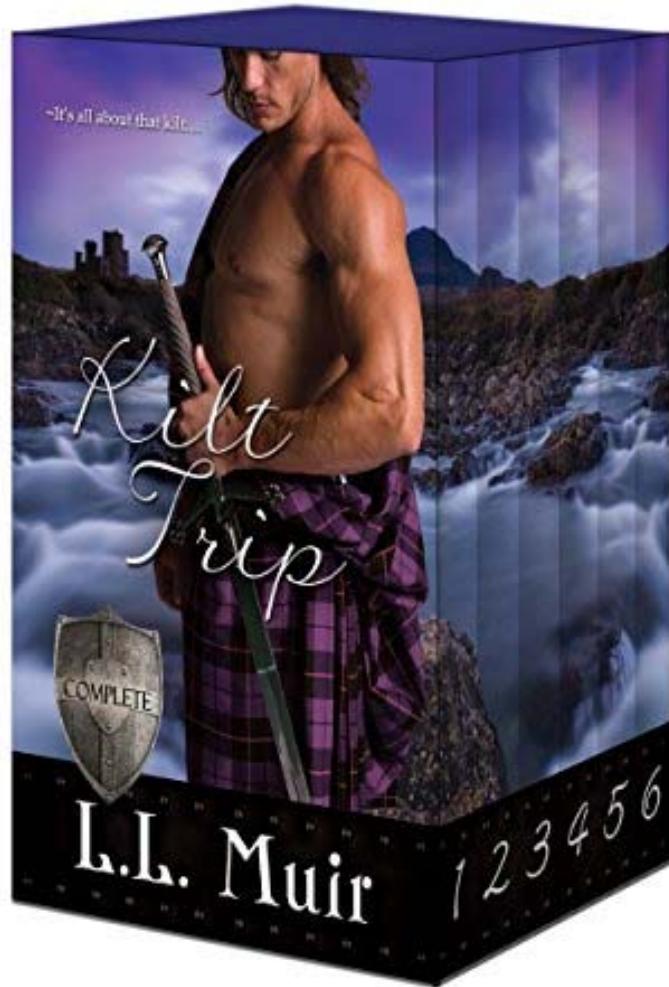
Puzzlement, Mystery



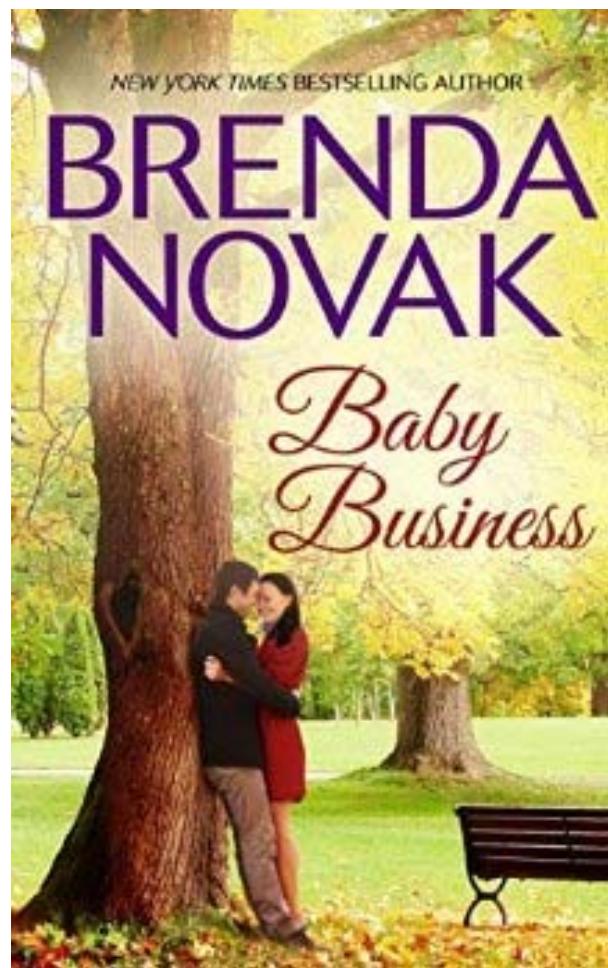
Trigger



Trigger



Trigger



Like a Rollercoaster



Requirements for the Ride

- Clarity
- Belief

Secret 4: To Start the Ride

1. An interesting character
2. Something specific to gain or retain
3. Formidable obstacle

Secret 5: An Interesting Character

- **Power**

- Sheer physical strength
- Wealth
- High social status
- Position of authority
- Influence on others
- Ability, expertise

- **Uncommon, New**

- Larger than life
- Eccentric
- Quirky

- **Wish-fulfillment**

- Doing what we'd want to do
- Has what we'd want to have
- Ability we want to have
- Beautiful, handsome

- **Other**

- Funny
- Admirable
- Has a life, something going on, hope or dream

- **In a Situation (THOMR)**

Secret 6: THOMR Triggers the Desire to Gain or Retain

THOM R

- Threat**
- Hardship**
- Opportunity**
- Mystery**
- Relationship**

Threat

An aspect of happiness in danger...

- Life
- Freedom
- Security
- Ownership
- Health
- Self-respect
- Relationship
- Control
- Meaningfulness
- Reputation

Hardship & Opportunity

Already experiencing pain or lack or
see an opportunity for happiness...

- Life
- Freedom
- Security
- Ownership
- Health
- Self-respect
- Relationship
- Control
- Meaningfulness
- Reputation

Mystery

Seeking insight for...

- Reward
- Justice
- Secrets
- Odd Events
- Understanding what's going on
- A key to gaining or retaining

Relationship

A special type of threat, hardship, or opportunity

- Friends
- Lovers
- Family

Triggering Desire to Gain or Retain

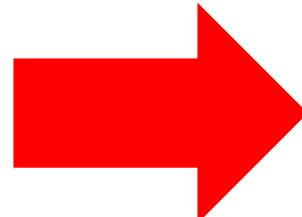
Threat

Hardship

Opportunity

Mystery

Relationship



Desire to
Gain or Retain
Something
Specific

2 Keys

Significant enough stakes

Resonates with reader

Formidable Obstacle

Synonyms

- Trouble
- Difficulty
- Problem
- Complication
- Opposition
- Dilemma

Secret 7: Why?

Uncertainty

We don't want to know
what will happen.

We want to know what might happen
and worry about the possibilities.

Making the Task Difficult

- **Conflict**

- Antagonist
- Others
- Things
- Self

- **Obstacles**

- Physical environment
- Cultural environment
- Objects
- Lack (knowledge, skills, resource, ability)

- **Pressures**

- Underdog
- Stakes
- Time

Secret 8: The Principle is NOT Just Trigger

Trigger and Delay

Delays have a shelf life

The Result of Trigger and Delay

- I picked up this book for a little light reading over Christmas break and **couldn't put it down.**” —*Live Great*
- “My gosh what a story. **I was on the edge of my seat the whole book** and exhausted by the time it was over. Absolutely loved it even though **I need a nap now.**” —*Judy Glover*
- “**Couldn't put it down** and almost read straight thru” — *Mona Talbot*
- “**I could not put it down.**” — *Alan J Anderson*
- “Very well written fast moving and **hard to put down**” — *Amazon Customer*
- “Riveting **I did not put it down** until finished” — *Amazon Customer*
- “**Couldn't put it down.** Great story!” — *Kindle Customer*
- “Very well written. Realistic **I could not put the Kindle down**” — *Shorn*

The Result of Trigger and Delay

- “It was **very difficult to put the book down.**” —*Amazon customer*
- “**You'd best find a comfortable chair** when you start because you won't get up until you're finished.” —*Seven Shinall*
- “I read in two days because **couldnt put it down**” —*Olga Platt*
- “**I could hardly wait** to go to the next page.” —*Edie English*
- “**Could not put** this book or "Bad Penny" down. Well worth the lost sleep” —*Carolyn*
- “**Damn you John Brown.** The last half of this book was so good that I stayed up until midnight last night to finish it when I had to be up at 0400 this morning” —*Ian M.*
- “I had **trouble putting it down.**”
- “This truly is **a book that I couldn't put down** (much to my wife's displeasure” —*Dwight Diedricht*

The Result of Trigger and Delay

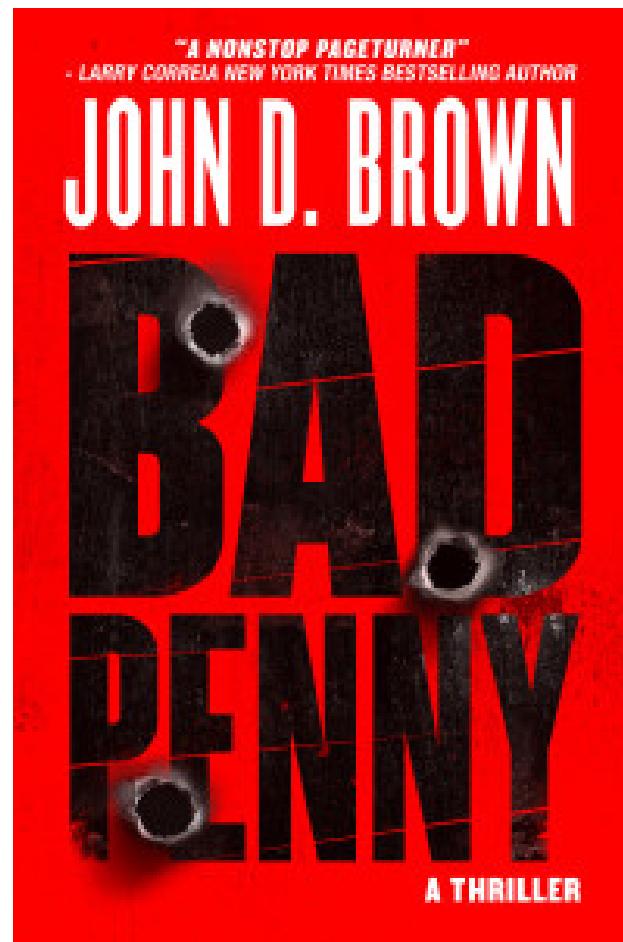


Five Stars

please lord, don't let tom cruise play this character

Published 1 day ago by ridelife

Example: Frank Shaw



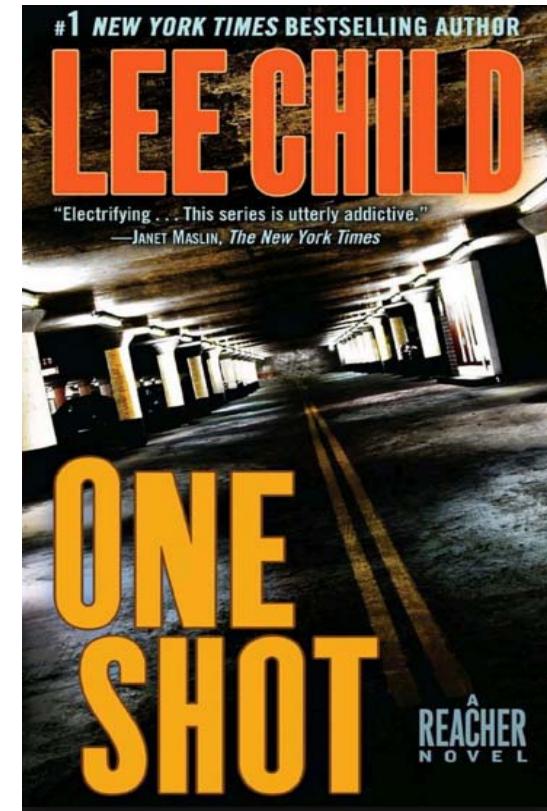
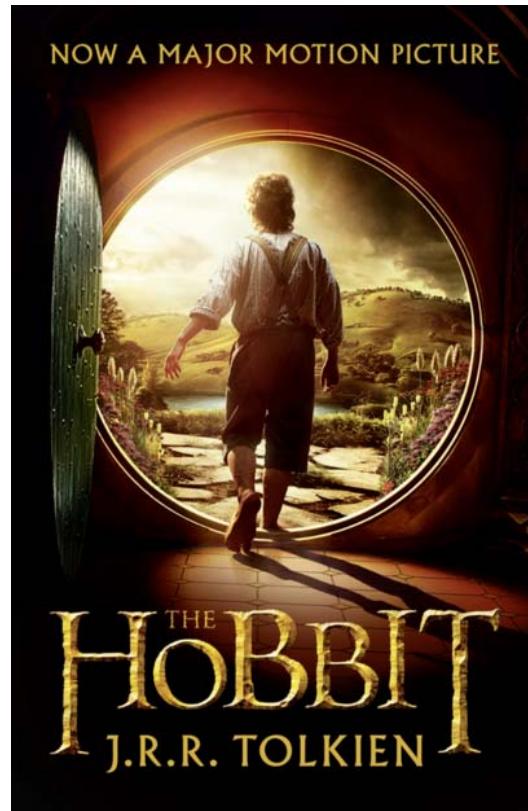
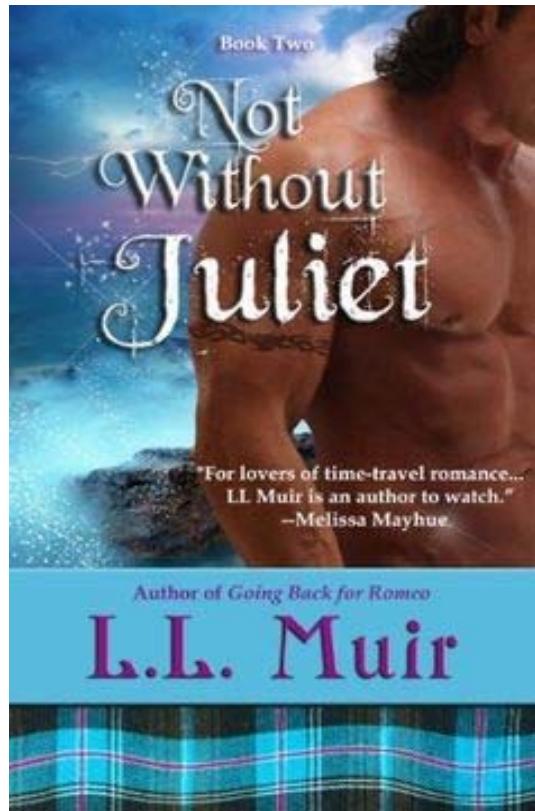
Example: Frank Shaw

- Trigger
 - Interesting Character
 - THOM R
 - Specific Thing to Gain\Retain
 - Formidable obstacle
- Effect
 - Anticipation for some good action
 - Hopes and fears for character
 - Mystery, want to know answer

Shelter Isn't Shelter

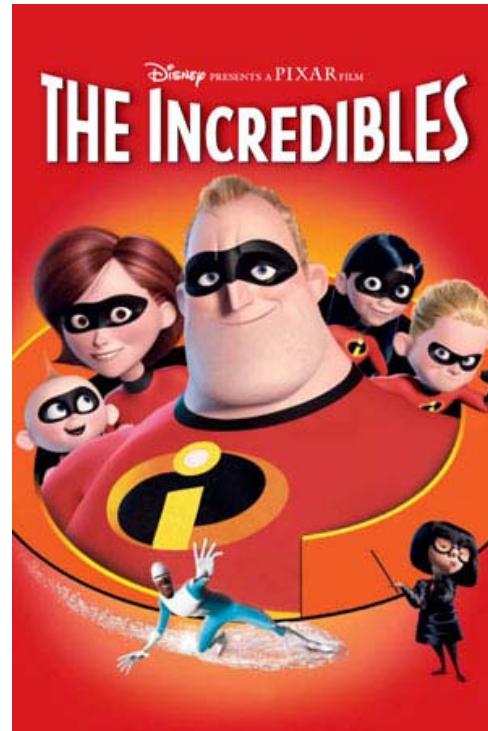
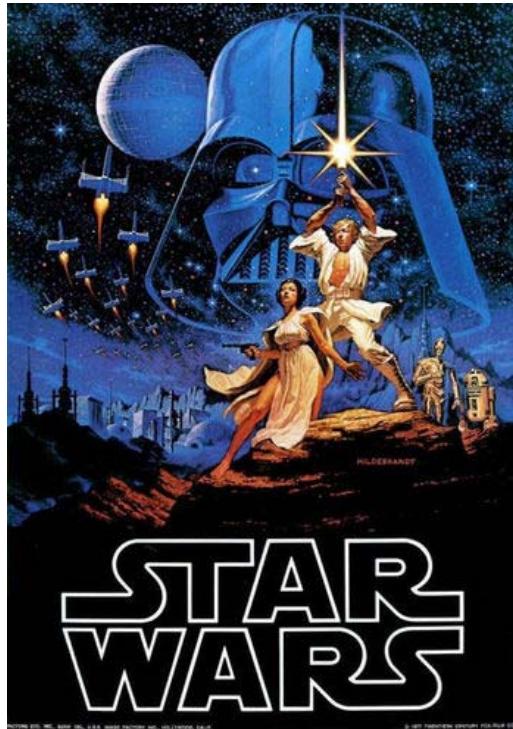


Secret 9: Story Isn't Story



Think Genre

Secret 10: The Same with Something a Little New and Cool



A story happens when you have...

An account of the effort

to gain or retain

something specific

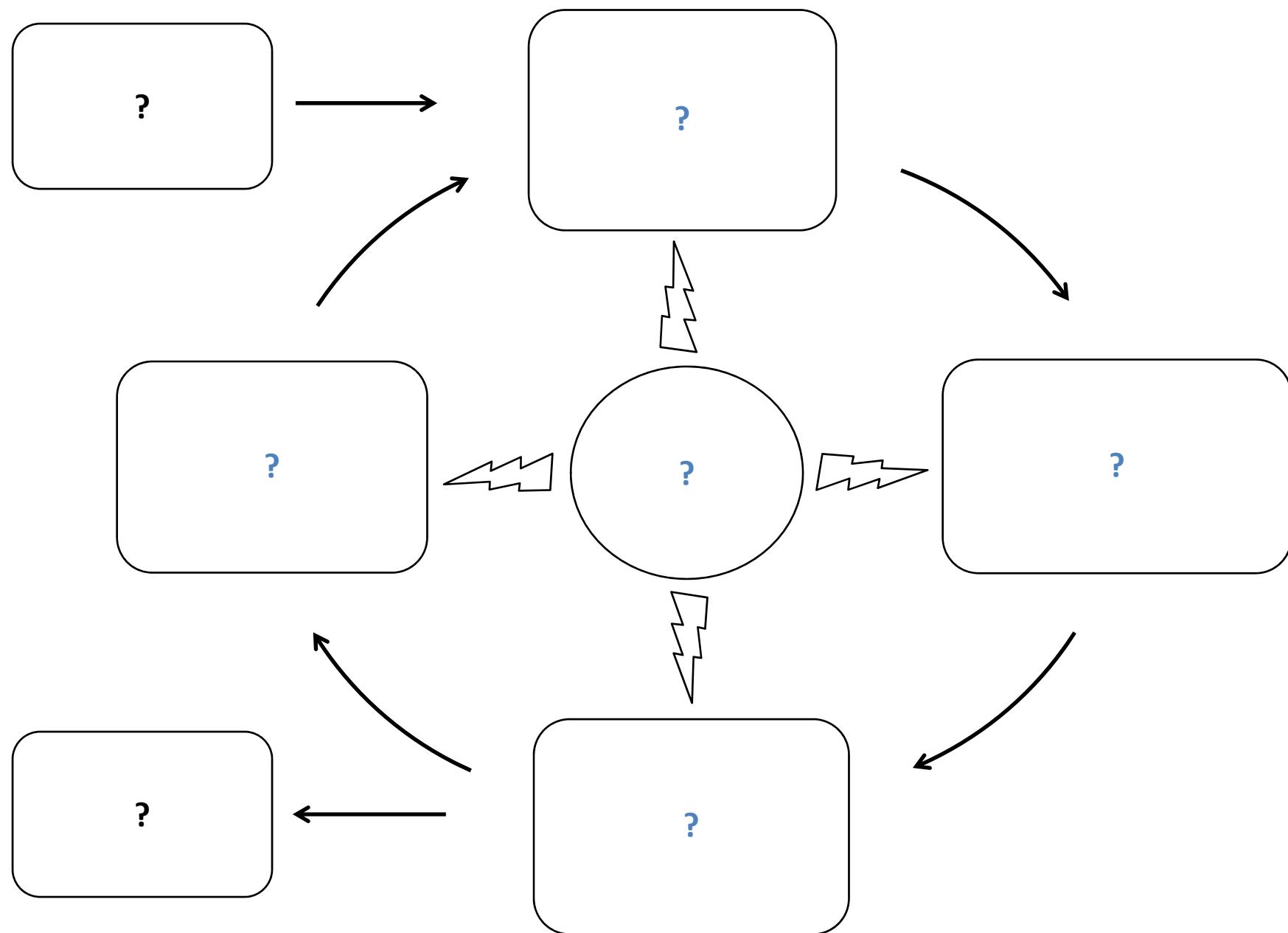
that has something new and cool

high enough stakes

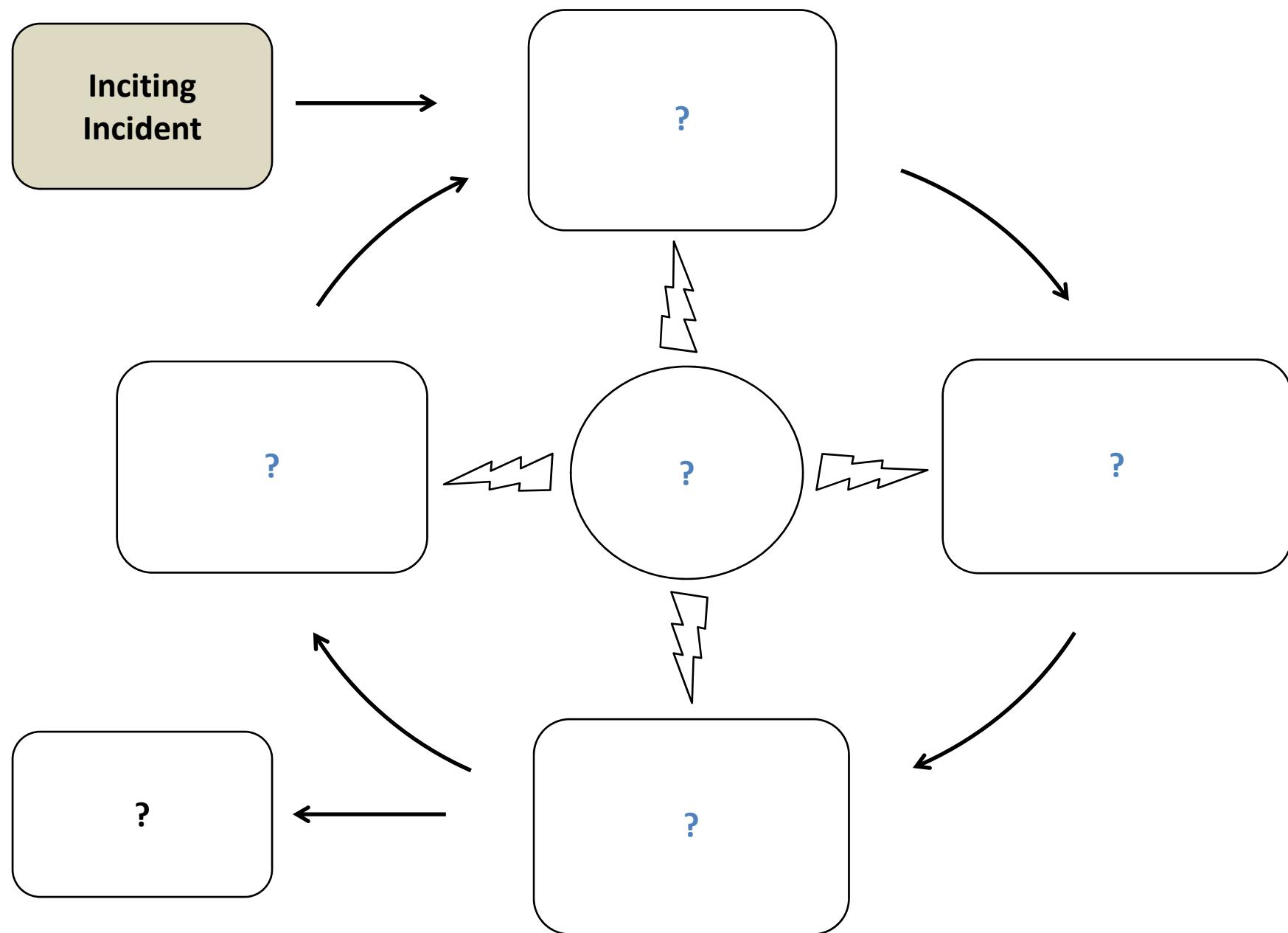
resonates with reader

and delivers its type of ride

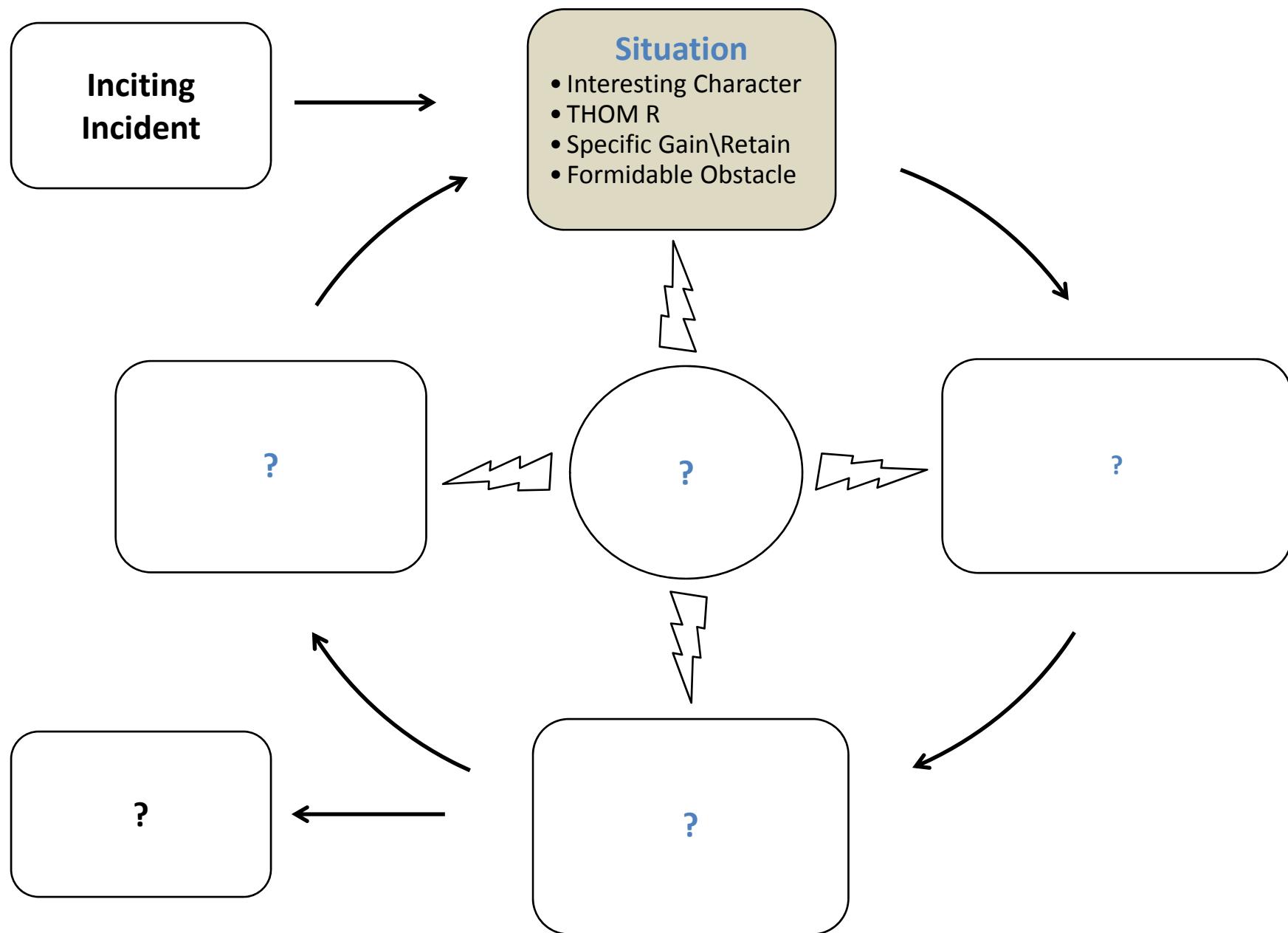
Secret 11: What Comes Next?



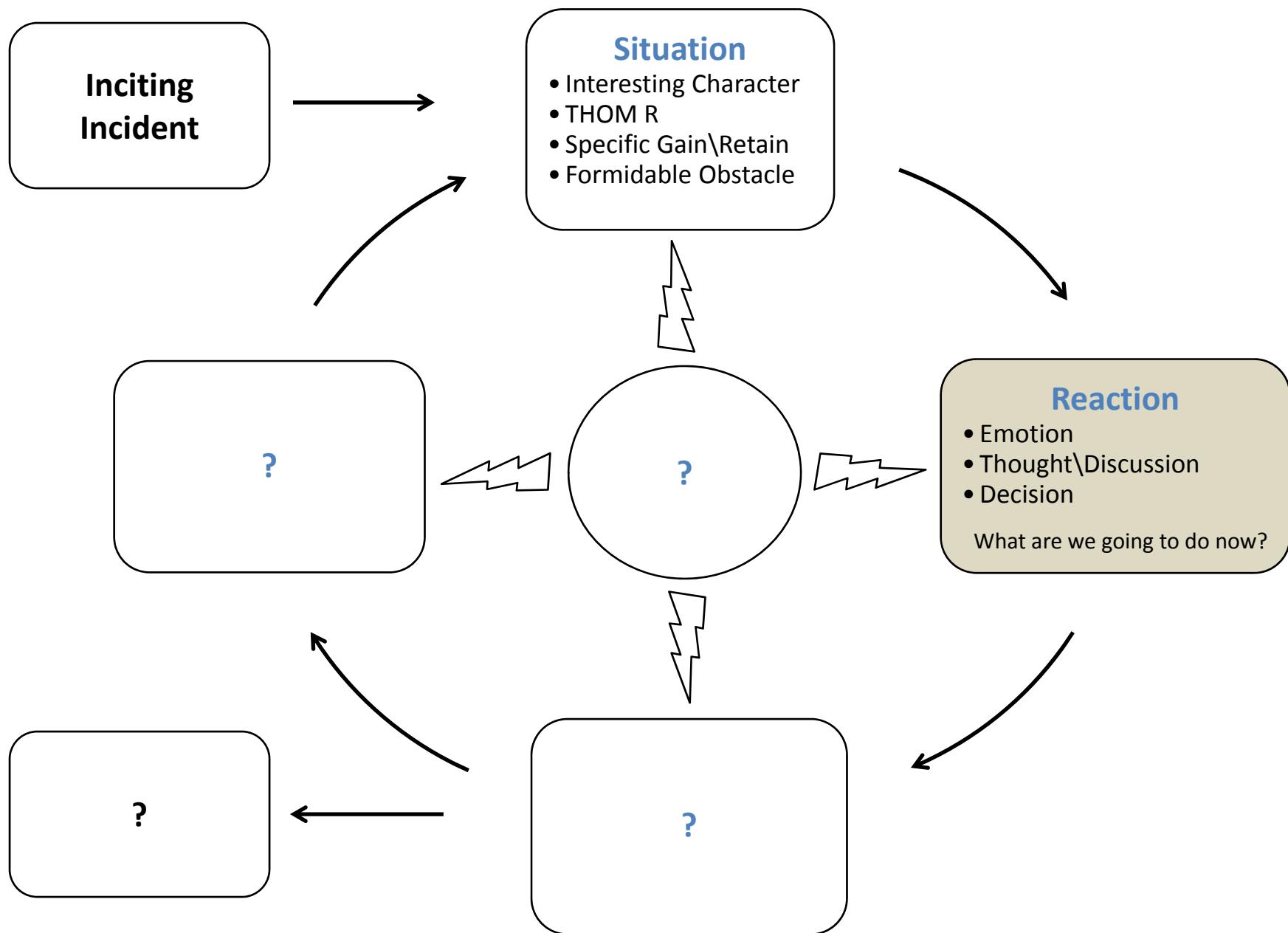
What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



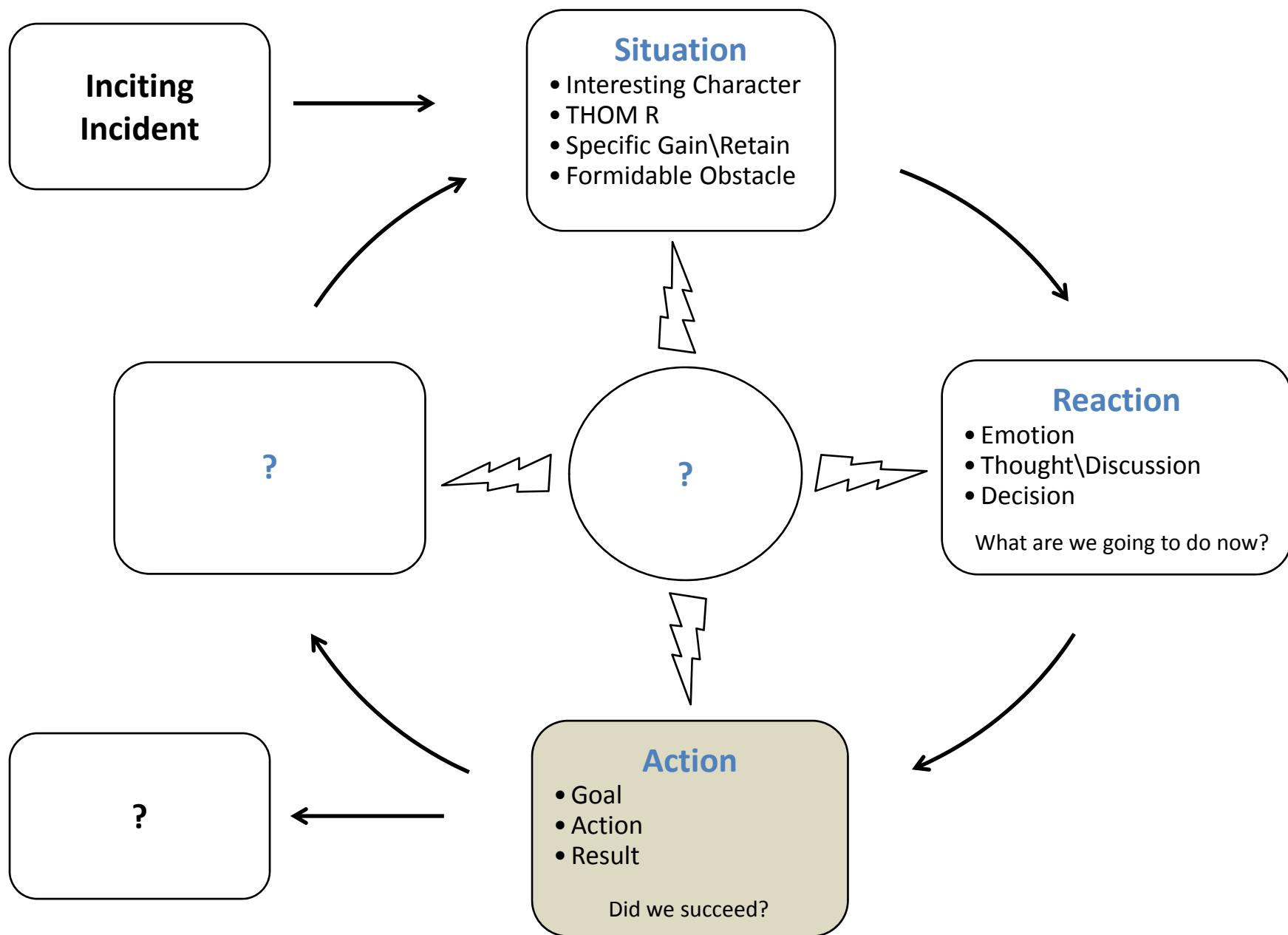
What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



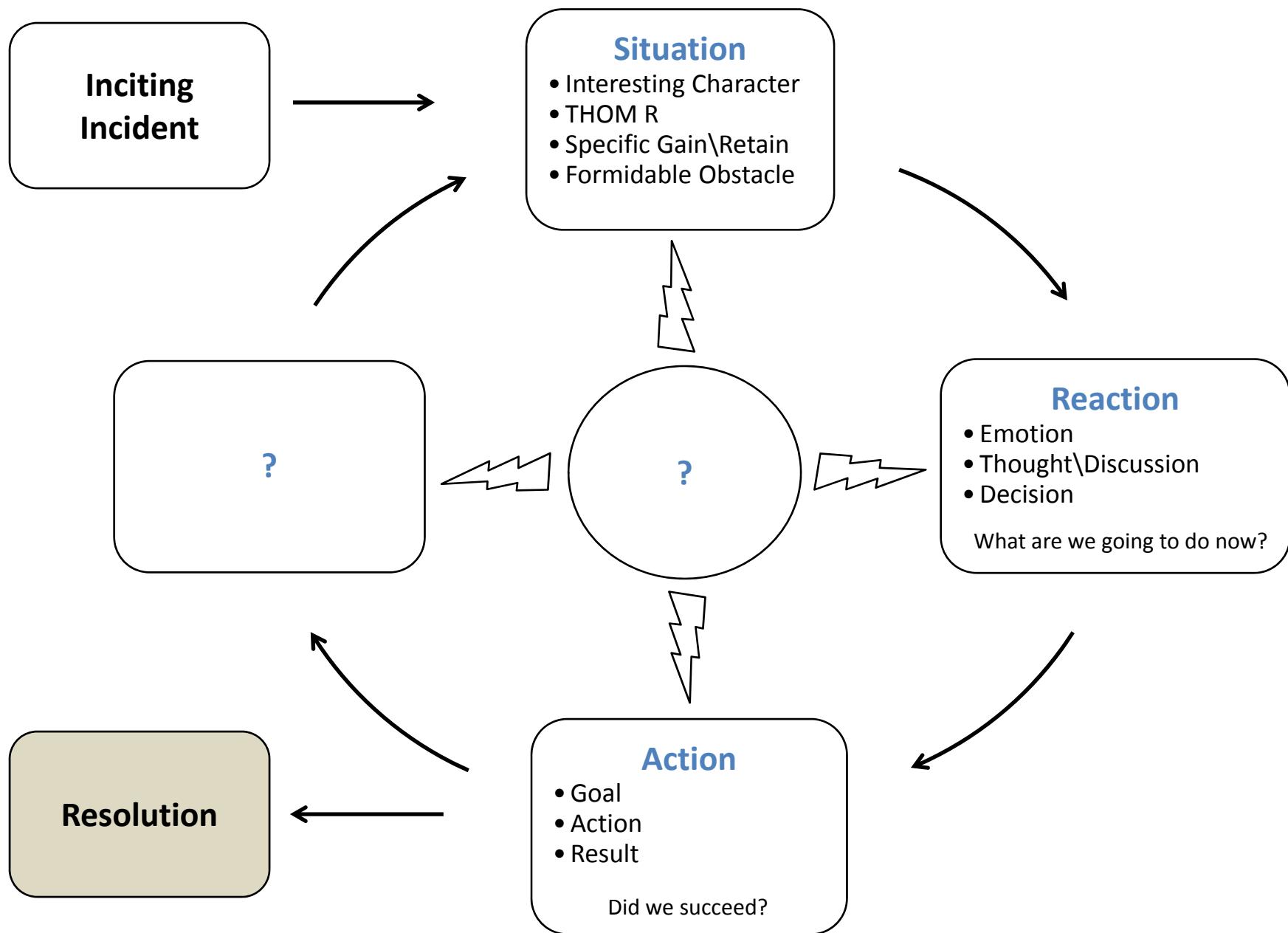
What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



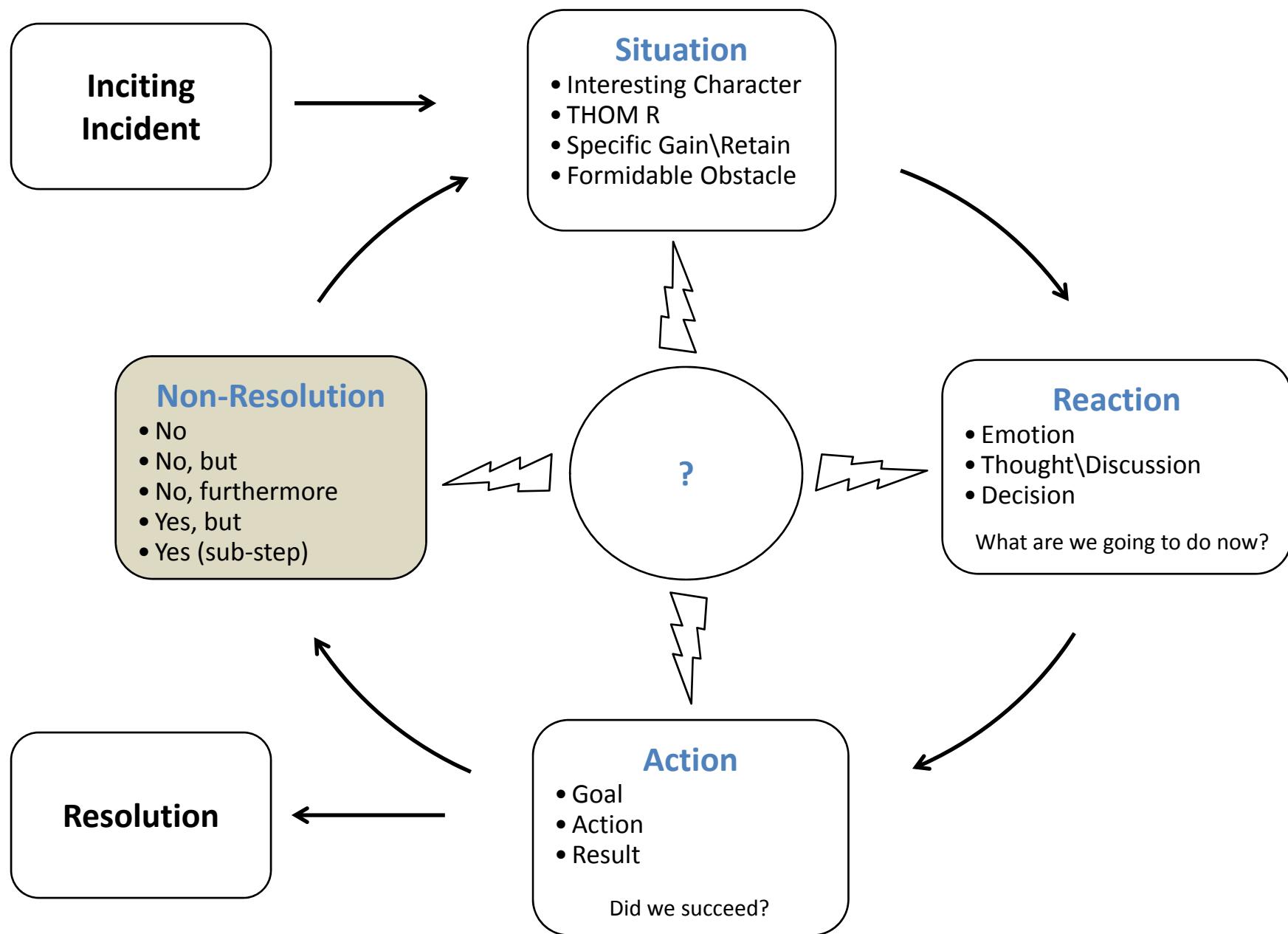
What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



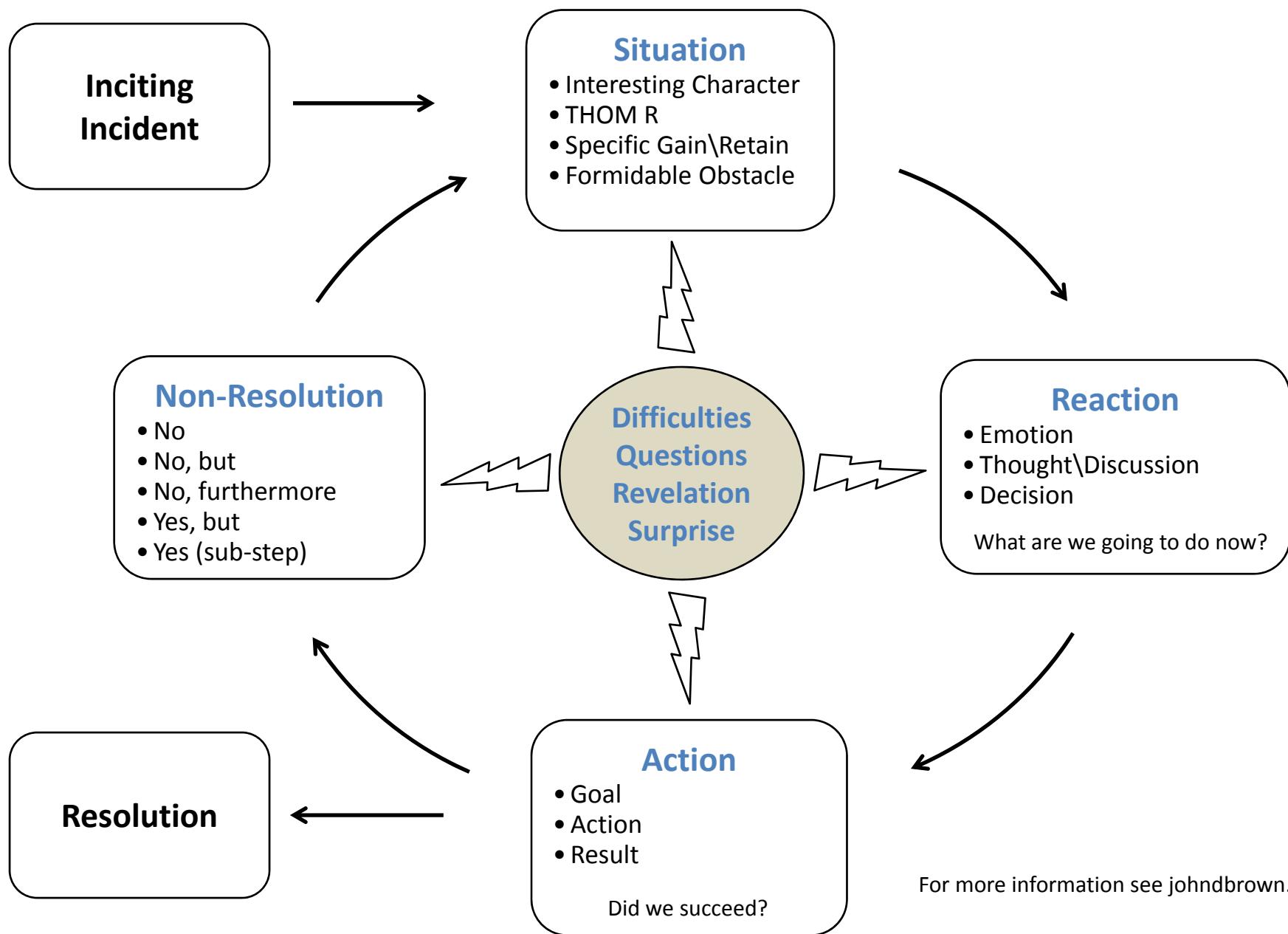
What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



Review: Things 1 and 2

The secret

- An objective
- Basic knowledge of how the thing works
- Techniques to generate options

What a story is

- What it does
- 3 big reader responses
- Think genre

How story works

- Trigger & Delay
- The Big Trigger
 - Interesting character
 - Inciting incident with THOMR
 - Desire to gain/retain something specific
 - Formidable obstacle
- The same, with something new
- What Comes Next: The Story Cycle

Developing and Telling the Story

- 1. Follow four key principles**
- 2. ID what you need**
- 3. Use various techniques to generate options**

Secret 12: Make Enough Time



Secret 13: Practice Farmer's Faith



Secret 14: Follow Your Zing



Secret 15: Goof Around, Have Fun



Some of the First Things You Need

- The genre
- A sketch of the setting
- The types of cool things you want in this ride
- The big trigger (5 parts of the story setup)
 - Interesting character
 - THOMR
 - Specific thing to gain\retain
 - Formidable obstacle
 - Inciting incident
- A twist that's new and cool

Technique 1: Question & List

Method

- State question for what you need to develop
- Generate a single list of options
- Include the obvious, weird, new, and dumb

Alternative

Generate multiple lists by generating first a list of 10 categories and then 10 items within each

Example: Question & List

Question

- Writing a thriller
- Need a threat
- What are some things that might present danger or menace?

List

- Russian mobsters (in Utah)
- Drug dealers
- Serial killer
- Some secret place way out in desert, walled off, commune
- Darknet – kill videos
- Dangerous tech facility

Technique 2: List & Twist

Method

- List what we normally expect in these types of stories
- Twist some of those things against type
- Or just add something that normally doesn't belong

Example: List & Twist

List

What's typical?

- Strong man
- Ex-military or army
- Alpha male
- Rough characters
- Crime
- Guns

Twist

- Mousy dude
- Old guy
- Very out-of-shape guy
- Flaming fashion hero
- Grandma, prim, proper, and not to be messed with
- Young girl, scrapper, brainy, LARPer, hunter?
- Pies

What Happens When You Run Out of Ideas?



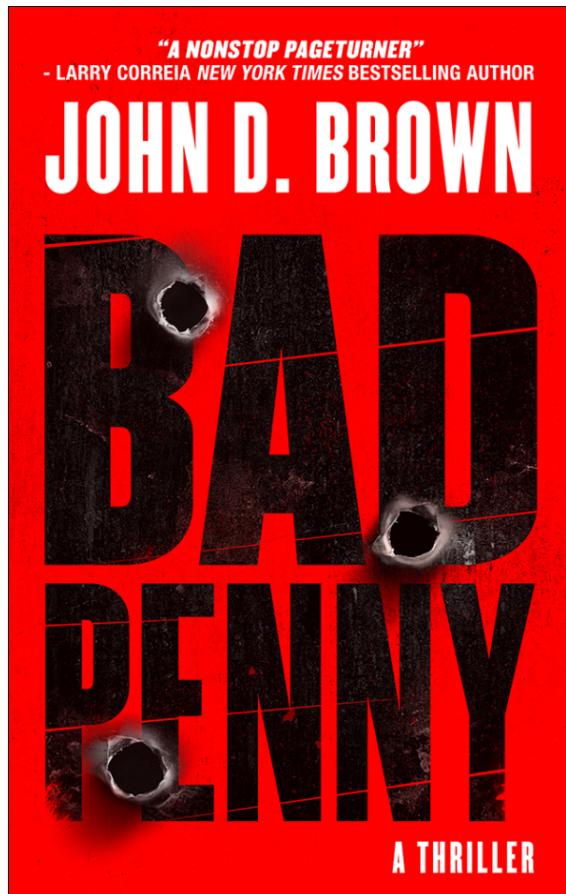
Technique 3: Gather Material

Method

Go looking, follow zing, borrow freely, alter

- News
- History
- Research (read, watch, do)
- People you know or have heard about
- Other stories (models)

Example: Gather Material



What's a new chase action gag?
Something fun

- Horses
- Tractors
- Motorcycles
- Paragliders
- Cows
- ATVs
- Pickups
- Snowmobiles...

Boom!



Lisa Koi 2012

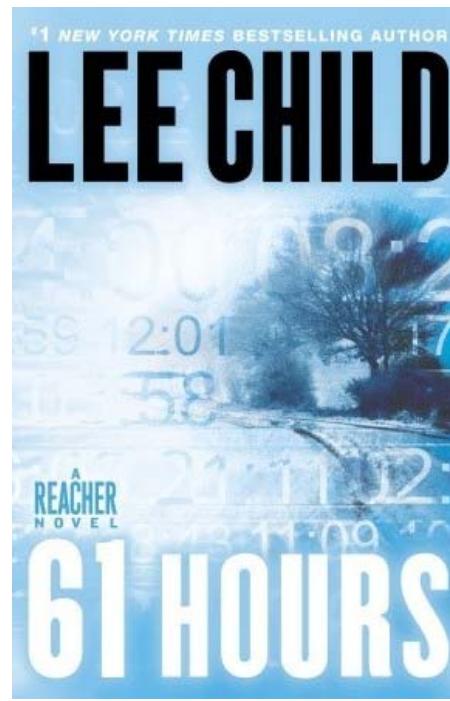
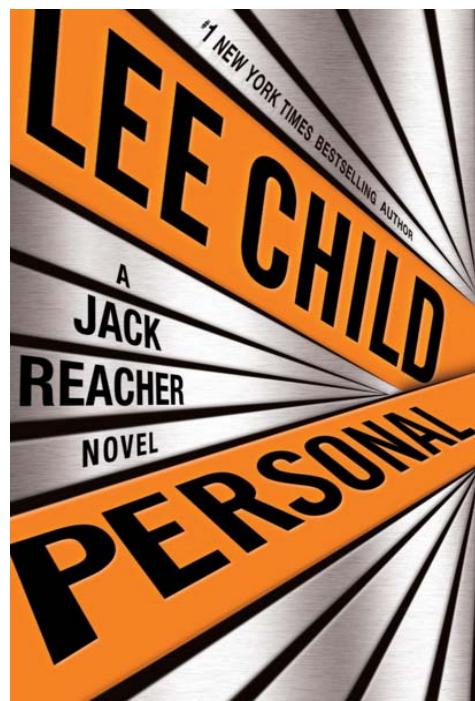
Boom!



Example: Gather Material

How did Lee Child open?

How many major twists and when?



Technique 4: Zing Party

Method

- Grab a bunch of items from your zing basket
- Juxtapose them
- Try to see if there's a way to connect
- See if the party sparks ideas for something you need to develop

Sparks?



DULUTH NEWS TRIBUNE SATURDAY, JUNE 8. 1907

TWO MEN KIDNAP NUN FROM SCHOOL AT WEST END, OUTRUN MOB AND ESCAPE

Abductors Boldly Enter Room Where
Sister Borromea Is Teaching
and Carry Her Away.

PUPILS SPELLBOUND BY TERROR

They Stand Mute While Abductors Drag Shrieking Woman to the Street and Thrust Her Into Hack, But Recover in Time to Give Chase—Are Joined by Hundreds of People in the Neighborhood, But the Team Is Fast and Outfoots Them—No Clue to Where the Outlaws Have Secreted Their Victim—Relatives of the Sister, Who Is a Daughter of Edward Digle, Formerly of Itasca, Are Suspected of Being Responsible for the Desperate Act.

Technique 5: Sketch Then Draft



Sketch Then Draft

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John Brown

File Home Insert Design Layout References Mailings Review View Tell me what you want to do

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Navigation

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Headings Pages Results

▲ In village (changed to Meets Ferran)
 1. BORROS. Pitches to village men
 Take 1 sketch
 Take 2 Sketch his family
 ▲ Take 3 sketch family
 Okay final write up
 ▲ Take 4 chapter
 Jobs
 Take 5 chapter
 ▲ Take 6 chapter
 STOPPED
 Take 7 chapter
 Take 8
 Take 9
 Take 10
 Take 11

In village (changed to Meets Ferran)

1. BORROS. Pitches to village men

Pitches to men. So many reasons why not—don't know him, **late, dangerous road**, the one guy makes low ball offer, etc. This all ups the risk for boys. **Ferran** speaks up (we don't think of it when he does—"any crew?" Borros looks around but couldn't see who said it, yes, any crew).

Take 1 sketch

So he goes into town. What will be fun.

Some interaction. Who would he ask for? How do these places run? Well, it seems like the lord has some rule. In the past, people couldn't just up and leave. But in this one they will be able to. They owe work days to the lord of the place. And he'd want it during the harvest, wouldn't he. Rent plus the work days.

His mother can't pay the rent. She's going to have to sell something. Go into slavery or bondage of some type herself. To **lose** your freedom.

So this man comes in. A foreign look. A drover. But wearing something. A bone. Maybe has

Review: Thing 3

Principles for development

- Make enough time
- Practice farmer's faith
- Follow your zing
- Goof around, have fun

Some first objectives

- Genre
- Cool things for this type of story
- The big trigger
- A twist that's new and cool

Generation techniques

- Question & List
- List & Twist
- Gather Material
- Zing Party
- Sketch Then Draft

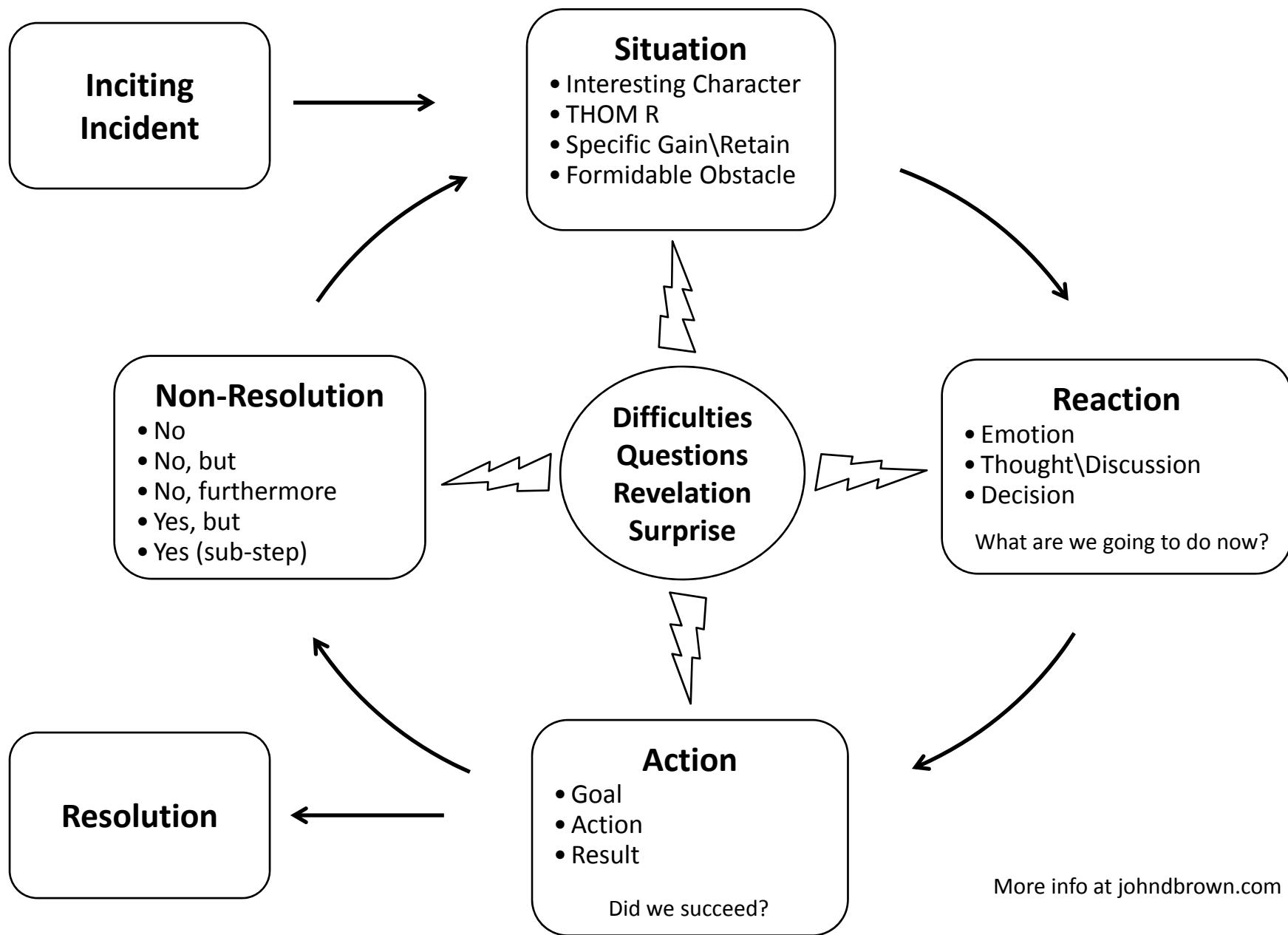
Next Step

1. Identify 10 minutes for a sprint today
2. Look at your story and ID a few things you need to develop, then select one to generate ideas for
3. Sketch some fun options using one of the techniques

5 More Questions for Later

1. What are some patterns for how people gain/retain the type of thing in my story (solve the problem) in an exciting way?
2. What's something a little new and fun?
3. What are some delights I can add (surprises, revelations, reversals, resolutions, beginnings, endings, characters, magic, etc.)?
4. What scenes do I want to tell in detail, and how can I make them interesting?
5. How can I tell the story vividly and clearly, putting the reader there and fostering belief?

What Comes Next: The Story Cycle



Chapter 1 Beginning

JESUS GOROZA, the man with tats running over his limbs like demons, thought the woman they were following on this deserted piece of interstate was FBI.

Ed Meese, the driver, the man with the scar on his neck, didn't think that was the case at all. She was in her early-twenties, a bit young for the FBI. And she was driving an old 1990s Buick without another soul in sight.

Wouldn't the Feds have sent backup at the first sign of trouble?

Of course, maybe she'd convinced her bosses she

Chapter 1 Beginning

was clear, convinced them that the big FBI agent had everything in hand, and they'd pulled back the cavalry.

Meese shook his head. Cops were idiots.

The two men had been keeping back, playing it safe, giving the woman plenty of room. It was just after four a.m., the sun still more than an hour off. Hardly a soul out here. Just them and her driving in the dark, the two men waiting for her to make her mistake.

Up ahead the woman slowed, then took the exit to

Chapter 1 Beginning

a small out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere Utah town called Coalville.

In a big city, there would have been cars. There would have been some bustle. There would have been witnesses.

There were no witnesses here. Not on these streets.

There were hardly any homes.

Meese figured there were at most a few dozen, and they were all strung out along a main road that stretched for ten miles or more. All of the houses

Chapter 1 Beginning

were dark. A bunch of hick farmers dreaming about cows.

A brightly-lit Best Western hotel and a Texaco gas station stood on one side of the interstate. A lone Sinclair gas station stood on the other. The woman came to a stop then accelerated up and across the overpass toward the Sinclair gas station on the other side, the side that you couldn't see well from the interstate. The side she obviously thought might give her cover.

“Bingo,” Jesus said.

Chapter 1 Beginning

In a big city, the Sinclair would have been ready for business. In this know-nothing town, it was dark and locked. The pumps, of course, were on. And the station's sign with a green dinosaur on a white background towered above the place and shone out into the fading night.

But there was no attendant standing guard over the cash and cigarettes to observe the woman. No one to see her stop and start the pump. No one to see her go try the bathroom door around the side. No one to see the two men pull up to the station a

Chapter 1 Beginning

few seconds later.

Meese said, “Looks like your offerings to the White Lady paid off.”

Jesus opened the glove box and pulled out the semi-automatic. “I told you she wanted mescal.”

Prayer, mescal offered up in a glass five days in a row, and cigarette smoke blown into the Lady’s skeleton face.

Meese pointed at Jesus’s gun. “You remember: this whore isn’t worth anything to us dead.”

“She’s worth less dead,” Jesus corrected.

Chapter 1 Beginning

“A lot less. Hand me some ties.”

Jesus reached into the glove box again and came up with a bundle of long white plastic zip ties and a roll of duct tape. These weren’t garden variety ties; these were nice and fat and designed for human wrists.

Chapter 1 End

...In the trunk, the woman breathed in through her nostrils and tried to calm herself. Her heart was beating like a wild bird in a cage. She fumbled around behind her with her zip-tied hands for the emergency trunk release and found nothing but the bones of the car.

It was a coffin. With the smell of motor oil, and the drone of the tires on the road, and the pinpricks of red leaking around the housing for the rear lights.

She'd known they'd find her. Eventually. Just as they found the others.

Chapter 1 End

The faces of those she'd worked with appeared before her and stabbed her with a pang of regret.

She adjusted her position, took slower breaths, tried to keep the panic away. She told herself she'd known the risks—they all had. Told herself she'd do it all over again. Told herself this wasn't over until it was over. Then she prayed to the Holy Mother. Prayed for eyes to see her chance.

Prayed the men would make a mistake.