



Structure of a Shakespearean Drama

ALL plays have FIVE acts and a varying number of scenes. A parallel exists between the number of acts and the universal law of living things:

In a drama	In life
Act 1 (Introduction)	Birth
Act 2 (Rising Action)	Growth
Act 3 (Climax)	Maturity
Act 4 (Falling Action)	Decline
Act 5 (Conclusion)	Death

ENG 1D1
St. Edmund Campion
R. Dobson-Efpatridis

Each act has a specific function in the development of the play and every tragedy contains the following six elements:

ACT I **Includes the exposition, and the exciting force**

In this act the mood and conditions that exist at the beginning of the play are described. The time and place will be identified as well as the main characters, their positions, their circumstances and relationships to one another. The main complication or conflict of the play is also introduced. This is what gets the action going which is why it is referred to as the exciting force or trigger incident. All the information needed to understand the circumstances of the play are provided.

ACT II **Develops the rising action**

The series of events which lead up to the climax of the play comprise the rising action. These events provide a progressive intensity of interest for the audience. The rising action develops over several scenes of the play. All the action has been developed and any secondary plots (subplots) are well underway.

ACT III **Continues to develop the rising action and always contains the climax**

This act includes the turning point of the play. The most serious conflicts have been addressed. From this point on, the Shakespearean hero moves to his/her inevitable end.

ACT IV **Falling action begins**

This act covers events occurring from the time of the climax up to the hero's death. The episodes will show both advances and declines in various forces acting upon the hero. Like the rising action, the falling action will involve events across many scenes and into Act V.

ACT V **Falling action ends and the conclusion occurs**

This act focuses on developing the consequences that are a natural outcome of the hero's previous actions which must be the hero's death. The catastrophe will characteristically be simple and brief.

Structure in a Shakespearean Play

A Shakespearean tragedy can be broken down into six distinct structural elements:

- Exposition
- Exciting Force
- Rising Action
- Climax
- Falling Action
- Conclusion

Use the chart below to keep a summary of the main action of the play.

Structural Element	Main Event or Events in Plot
1. Exposition	Outline 5 essential facts from Act I i-iii that make up the exposition
2. Exciting Force	List the exciting force which occurs in Act I iii
3. Rising Action	List points from Act II and Act III that contribute to the Rising Action of the play
4. Climax	List the event(s) from Act III that you consider to be the climax of the play. Provide a reason for your choice
5. Falling Action	Outline all the events from Act III-V that are part of the Falling Action
6. Conclusion	At what final point in Act V are all plots brought to an end? List and describe the event(s) that mark the conclusion for the characters in the plot and subplots.