Falling Action

DEFINITION

What is falling action? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> The falling action of a story is the section of the plot following the climax, in which the tension stemming from the story's central conflict decreases and the story moves toward its conclusion. For instance, the traditional "good vs. evil" story (like many superhero movies) doesn't end as soon as the force of evil has been thwarted. Rather, there tends to be a portion of the story in which the hero must restore regular order to the world, clean up the mess they made, or make a return journey home. This is all part of the "falling action."

Some additional key details about falling action:

- Falling action is just one part of the structure of a story's overall plot. The falling action follows the climax, or the moment of peak tension in the story.
- Falling action is often confused for dénouement, the final part of the story. They're similar, but not the same. We'll explain the key differences in this entry.
- The opposite of falling action is rising action, which occurs before the climax and in which the story's main conflict unfolds and tension builds.

Falling Action Explained

The falling action is an important but often overlooked part of plot structure in which the central conflict of the story is moved toward complete resolution. Generally speaking, *most* works of writing that have a plot can be said to have a section of falling action. But not *every* story has a falling action—and even for stories that do contain it, the falling action isn't always well-defined or easy to identify. Here are a few of the key defining features of falling action to help you identify it:

- **The falling action begins with the climax.** The climax often answers the story's biggest question (such as "Who did it?" or "Will they win?"), but it doesn't answer *all* the questions or resolve the story's main problem completely. Rather, the climax makes that process or resolution *possible*. In other words, the falling action can't begin until after the climax.
- **The falling action "winds down" the tension.** After so much time has been devoted, in the rising action, to building up the story's central conflict, it's important in the wake of the climax to dispel some of the built-up tension. So it's common, during the falling action, to see the characters *themselves* relax a little, with the end of their struggle now in sight.
- **The falling action sometimes introduces a new conflict.** Many people think of the falling action as the section of the story devoted exclusively to de-escalating the conflict that was built up during the rising action. And while this *is* one of the main purposes of the falling action, plot twists and new conflicts can also be introduced during the falling action.
    - For example, it's common for writers to use falling action to describe the hero's journey back home after they succeed in their quest. But just because the climax has already occurred doesn't mean the trip home has to be uneventful; often, characters face new problems (albeit smaller ones) during the falling action, which can be a good way of adding interest and suspense. The falling action can also show how the protagonist has grown (as they may now deal with obstacles differently than they did before the rising action and climax).
    - As another example, if the story's hero died saving the world during the climax, it might be revealed during the falling action that it was all part of their plan, and they actually survived.
    - Similarly, sometimes the antagonist is defeated during the story's falling action rather than its climax.
- **The falling action ends with a resolution.** The end of the falling action is marked by the resolution of the story's main conflict. What this looks like in practice depends on what the main conflict of the story was: in a mystery, the criminal might be thrown in jail, while in a romance, the lovers might get married. Resolutions aren't always happy, and sometimes they don't give the audience a feeling of complete closure, but they always makes it clear that the story is drawing to an end.

Falling Action vs. Dénouement

Falling action is often confused with dénouement, a separate part of the structure of plot. The dénouement is part of the general process of bringing the story to a point of resolution, so it's easy to see why it would be confused with falling action, but the two parts have some very specific, key differences that are important to understand.

- Dénouement is the final part of the story, in which loose ends are tied up, and the effect or "outcome" of the events of the story is hinted at, if not shown.
    - For example, the dénouement might give the audience a sense for what the future will hold for the characters, or how they were changed by the story.
    - This part of the story is usually quite brief, even compared to the falling action: the most well-known dénouement is "and they lived happily ever after."

- Dénouements, by definition, occur *after* the resolution that marks the end of the falling action. Whereas the falling action results in the resolution of the major plot point, the dénouement resolves issues or conflicts that are of a secondary nature to the main issue of the story.
- Like an epilogue, the dénouement may also show how the events of the story fit into the broader scheme of history or the lives of those involved.

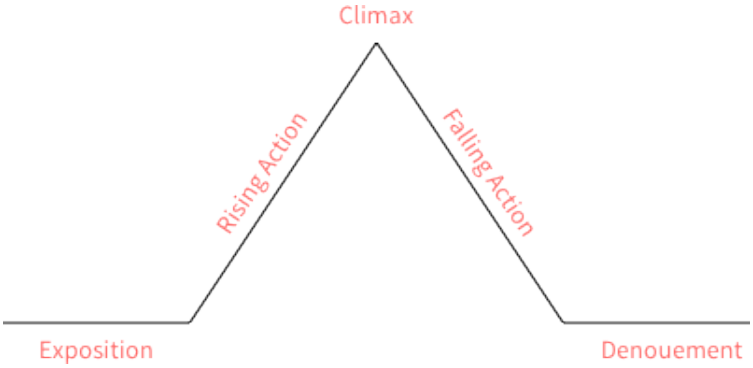
To fully understand what makes dénouements different from falling action, take a look through our entry on dénouement, where you can find some clear examples.

Falling Action and Freytag's Pyramid

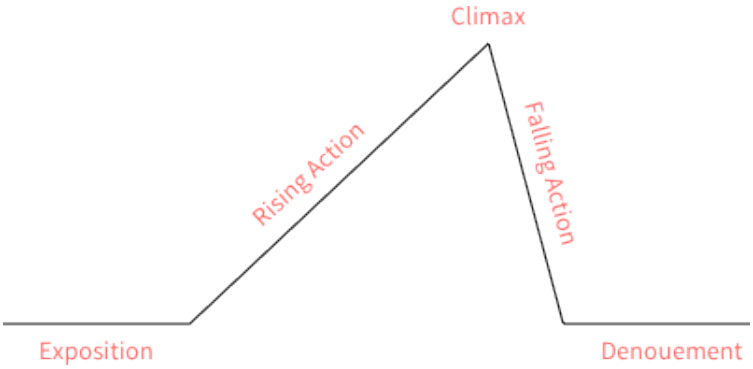
One of the first and most influential people to create a framework for analyzing plots was 19th-century German writer Gustav Freytag, who argued that all plots can be broken down into five stages:

- Exposition
- Rising action
- Climax
- Falling action
- Dénouement

Freytag originally developed this theory as a way of describing the plots of plays at a time when most plays were divided into five acts, but his five-layered "pyramid" can also be used to analyze the plots of other kinds of stories, including novels, short stories, films, and television shows. Here's the pyramid as originally defined by Freytag:



One important thing to note about the shape of Freytag's pyramid is that it shows all parts of the story as having equal length, with climax at the very center of the diagram. However, this is actually a bit misleading, since the falling action is usually much shorter than the rising action, and begins close to the story's end rather than in the middle. Therefore, a slightly more accurate version of Freytag's pyramid (modified to show a shorter, later falling action) might look something like this:



Freytag's Pyramid Doesn't Fit All Plots

While Freytag's pyramid is very handy, not every work of literature fits neatly into its structure. In fact, many modernist and post-modern writers intentionally subvert the standard narrative and plot structure that Freytag's pyramid represents. We mention this here because falling action is often spoken about in relation to other parts of Freytag's pyramid, and because understanding *where* the falling action typically occurs within a narrative may help you identify it. So while the falling action is often spoken about in relation to other parts of Freytag's pyramid, there may be times when it's easier to determine what part of a story is the falling action based on criteria *other* than its position relative to other sections of the plot, such as what part of the narrative winds down tension or suspense.

EXAMPLES

In the examples that follow, we'll explain each story's falling action in relation to its overall plot so you have a full understanding of how falling action operates within the story.

Falling Action in "Little Red Riding Hood"

Here's a simple example from a story that almost everyone is familiar with. In "Little Red Riding Hood," the climax occurs when the wolf, disguised as the grandmother, eats Little Red Riding Hood. During the falling action, a nearby woodsman (having heard Little Red Riding Hood's cries of distress) comes to her rescue, cutting open the wolf and saving both Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. This is a story in which the antagonist (the wolf) is defeated during the falling action rather than the climax—a reminder that the falling action isn't always devoid of significant plot developments.

Falling Action in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

In Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the rising action begins when Blanche Dubois arrives at the home of her sister, Stella, and reveals that she has, under mysterious circumstances, lost possession of their childhood home. Stanley, Stella's husband, is immediately suspicious of Blanche, who in turn is very critical of Stanley and derides him constantly for his low class and "primitive"

ways. The tension between these three characters grows over the course of the months that Blanche stays with the couple in their tiny apartment, and the mystery around the circumstances prompting Blanche's visit also continues to grow, until one day Stanley tells Stella everything he has heard about Blanche's sordid past from others: that she was fired from her teaching job for having an affair with a seventeen-year-old boy, and began working as a prostitute at a local hotel. Tension reaches a new height after this revelation, as it's unclear how all the various characters will respond to the new information. The play reaches a climax when Stanley finally confronts Blanche and, it's strongly suggested, rapes her.

In the following scene, weeks have passed, and Blanche's mental state has deteriorated completely. It seems that she has told Stella about her rape, but that Stella doesn't believe her. It's revealed that Stella and Stanley have made arrangements to have Blanche committed to a mental asylum. A doctor and nurse arrive to take Blanche away. Seeming to have only the vaguest understanding of what's happening, Blanche reluctantly agrees to go with the doctor. The scene constitutes the entirety of the play's falling action, ending with the resolution (a direct consequence of the climax): Blanche has lost her mind.

Falling Action in *The Lord of the Rings*

J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy tells the story of Frodo, a hobbit who must journey to a dangerous and faraway land in order to throw a magical ring into a volcano and, in doing so, destroy Sauron, a major force of evil that threatens the entire world, including everyone he loves. People often say that the final book (or film) of the trilogy ends with one climax after another, in a seemingly endless succession. But this is actually a mistake. While it's true that the plot of the film continues for quite some time after the climax (in which the ring and Sauron are destroyed), it is *not* the case that each new plot development that occurs after the film's climax is a climax in its own right. Rather, many of the seemingly "climactic" plot developments that follow the actual climax are part of the falling action, in which the heroes must make the long journey home.

For instance, the scene immediately following the climax—in which the volcano erupts and the heroes must escape—is part of the falling action sequence. The tension stemming from the central conflict has already been dispelled, but some tension remains surrounding the question of how and whether the heroes will get home.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Not all pieces of writing that have plots also make use of falling action—some plots end very suddenly after the climax, for example—but most plots *do* have a section in which the action "unwinds." That's because the falling action serves many different purposes in a story. Here are some of the main reasons a writer might build their plot with a section of falling action:

- To carry the plot from its climax to a resolution.
- To allow time for "unwinding" or de-escalating some of the tension that was built up during the rising action by showing the characters going through the process of re-ordering their lives or restoring the natural balance.
- To keep the audience engaged after the climax by introducing one or more smaller conflicts during the falling action.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Entry on Dramatic Structure:** This page covers basic plot structure, including a section on falling action.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Falling Action:** A basic definition.
- **One of the final scenes from the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy:** This scene might seem "climactic," but it's actually just one part of the film's falling action sequence.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Falling Action." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 14 Sep 2017.

Chicago Manual

Bergman, Bennet. "Falling Action." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved September 14, 2017. http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/falling-action.