

# The Act I Choice Themes Worksheet

Shortly after a story's inciting incident, the protagonist must make an important decision: either keep living as she always has, or become involved in the story's main conflict. This choice, in terms of the three-act story structure, marks the transition between Act I and Act II. Some writers also call it the "point of no return" – because after the protagonist makes this choice, her life won't be the same. And like the inciting incident, it has the ability to reflect a story's themes.

How can we determine those themes? With the **Act I Choice Themes Worksheet!** Based on my DIY MFA article "Developing Themes In Your Stories: Part 8 – The Act I Choice," the following brainstorming activities will allow you to dig into this crucial decision and uncover the protagonist's safe and story options, the consequences of each, and the reason(s) for the protagonist's eventual choice. This prep work will then help you determine any literary themes emerging from the event.

[Click here to read the DIY MFA article first.](#) You may also want to complete the [Inciting Incident Themes Worksheet](#) before trying these activities if you haven't yet.

## Instructions:

Print out a copy of this worksheet, and (if possible) have a print or electronic version of the inciting incident and Act I choice scenes from your WIP available.

Please note that each exercise is featured on a separate page to allow space for your answers and other notes.

# The Act I Choice Themes Worksheet

## 1. Identify Your Inciting Incident First

Before determining how Act I ends, it's essential to figure out which scene represents the inciting incident. This is where the plot begins by opening the protagonist's eyes to the main conflict. It shakes up her world by triggering her fears or desires, often by threatening something or someone she cares about. This event will lead the protagonist to make the choice that later establishes her story goal.

It's also possible that the protagonist might cause her own inciting incident. This can happen in more character-driven stories, where the protagonist grows as a result of an earlier mistake. In such cases, the inciting incident is that mistake, because it jump-starts the rest of the story.

**Activity #1:** Review the first few chapters of your WIP. Which external event serves as the story's inciting incident? How does it draw the protagonist into the main conflict?

Feel free to use a blank page or Word document to complete this activity.

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## 2. Give the Protagonist a “Point of No Return” Choice

The Act I choice presents the protagonist with two options. One is her **safe option**, which would allow her to remain in her physical and emotional comfort zone. The other is her **story option**, one that thrusts her into an unfamiliar situation but is the only path to her goal. No compromise exists here; the protagonist won't get what she wants by staying put. Thus, she'll have to decide whether she wants her goal badly enough to take that step.

With any decision, it's important to weigh the pros and cons. In the protagonist's case, consider the consequences of her Act I choice. What might happen if she picks her safe option? What might not happen? How do these answers change for her story goal? It's OK if the latter scenario frightens the protagonist more than the former. In fact, it's supposed to scare her, or make her feel a twinge of dread or reluctance.

**Activity #2:** Using your answers from Activity #1, develop an Act I choice that occurs as a result of the inciting incident. What two options (safe and story) does this choice offer? How would the safe option allow the protagonist to stay in her comfort zone? How would the story option give her what she wants but force her into the unknown? Finally, what are the consequences (positive and negative) of each option?

Use the blank space below or the back of this page for your answers.

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### 3. What Does the Protagonist Decide – and Why?

The funny thing is, you already know *what* the protagonist will choose. So the real question is, *why* does she choose her story option?

Sometimes it depends on the story's context. The protagonist might want the story option because it's more desirable, such as an opportunity to change her life or protect an object or person she loves. Or, she might view her story option as the lesser of two evils and be more reluctant to choose.

So, why not ask the protagonist for yourself? Pose the question “**Why do you want the story option more than the safe option?**”, and see what her response is. Chances are it will relate to her story goal, and to the fears or desires elicited by the inciting incident. New ideas or emotions might sneak in as well. All of these factors will be crucial to remember as the protagonist transitions into Act II.

**Activity #3:** Write down the reasons why your WIP's protagonist chooses her story option. Why does she want it more than the safe option? How does it draw from the same fears, goals, and/or desires that were triggered by the inciting incident? Does it introduce anything new to her dilemma? Consider all thoughts or emotions the protagonist may have at this time.

Use the blank space below or the back of this page for your answers.

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## 4. Determine Any Emerging Literary Themes

Fears, desires, goals, reasons for one's decisions – everything about the Act I choice draws on the ingredients of [DIY MFA's working definition of "theme"](#). Knowing these pieces up front will be immensely helpful as you dig for themes arising from this plot point.

Reflect on the activities you've completed so far. What high-level concepts does your Act I choice illustrate? Do the safe and story options highlight opposing ideas? What other themes might enter the picture now that the protagonist has left her comfort zone? Be open to other questions that might help you explore every angle of this event.

**Activity #4:** Revisit your answers for Activities #2 and #3, and list any themes you identify from the Act I choice. How do the choice's options show conflicting themes that the protagonist might continue to grapple with as her story continues?

**BONUS:** Compare your answers here to the answers in Activity #3 of the Inciting Incident Themes Worksheet. Do any of the themes match?

Use the blank space below or the back of this page for your answers.