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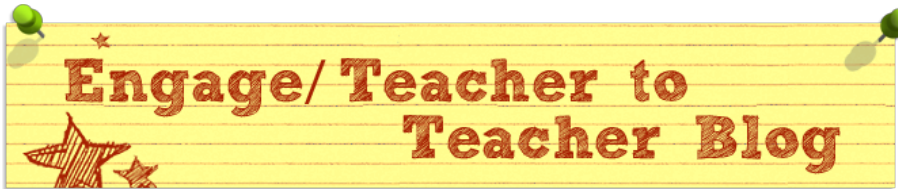
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M.T. Anderson on the Law of Three

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The Law of Three By M.T. Anderson

I have it on [good authority](#) that three is a magic number. If *Schoolhouse Rock* says it, I believe it.

So, I'd like to ask why three is a magic number in stories all across the globe. Why do things so often happen in threes?

Think about fairy tales: There are always three bears, three brothers, three mountains, three pigs, three Billy Goats Gruff. Things in picture books often happen in threes. And in jokes, too. *Three* guys walk into a bar. There are three world leaders in the sinking dinghy. A horse, a giraffe, and a bear are doing their laundry.

The use of three is a very ancient formula. In the mists of prehistoric Ireland, for example, from the age when Irishmen would paint themselves blue and play soccer with the heads of their enemies, bards began to collect a long list of all the threes in the lore of their country, [The Triads of Ireland](#). They recorded everything in threes: the



three virtues that make a good king, the three vices that make a bad enemy, and the names of three monsters that live in Glenn Dallen.

There may be some mystical reason so many people all over the world have incorporated the number three into their story-telling. But I'd like to suggest that there's a more cut and dried logical reason—and it's something that you can keep in mind for your own writing.

Three of something—anything—is the minimum number of things required to set up a pattern and then break it.

The first incident sets up the pattern.

The second incident confirms what parts of the pattern are important.

And the third incident breaks the pattern.

It's just like counting to three just before taking a picture of your friends. You have to count to three to establish the rhythm (ready—get set—go) so that they know when you're going to snap. If you only said, "Ready? Go!" you haven't defined the interval before you take the picture, and so a third of them will have their eyes closed, another third will have their mouths open, and the rest will still be making joke antennas over each other's heads.

In the same way, stories count to three so that they set up a pattern and then surprise us.

So, for example, *Goldilocks* goes into the cottage of the three bears. She goes to sit down on a chair. The first chair is too hard. The second chair is too soft. The third chair—the baby's chair—is just right. Then she tries the porridge. The first bowl is too hot. The second bowl is too cold. And the third bowl—the baby's bowl—is just right. (Which is saying something. In my opinion, no bowl of porridge is ever just right.) Then we have a third incident. She goes into the bedroom, feeling sleepy. The first bed is too big. The second bed is too small. But the third bed is just right ... and that's where she falls asleep, and is discovered when the bear family returns.

What we have here is a story built around three sets of three. The story teaches us what to expect. The first term of each triad (the father bear's chair, porridge, and bed) sets up which quality of the object is going to be examined: the

Each time (the heater, seat of chair, porridge, and bed) sets up which quality of the object is going to be examined: the softness of the chair, the heat of the porridge, and the size of the bed. The second object of each series, the mother's, is the opposite of the first one, confirming the pattern. And the third term, the baby's, breaks the pattern, offering a comfortable, happy medium.

In the same way, in the story overall, we learn from the first episode—with the chairs—how this story is going to work. Then that's confirmed with the second incident (the porridge). And then in the third incident, something changes: Goldilocks stays in the bed. That's where she's found.

So the story teaches us how to read it. We learn about the sub-structures provided by the number three. At the same time, we also learn an important lesson about breaking and entering: Get out of the house afterward as quickly as possible.

Some years ago, I heard [Marion Dane Bauer](#) talk about how she sometimes thinks of whole novels in terms of the number three. The characters are confronted by a problem. They try to solve it once, and something goes wrong. They try to solve it again—this time, trying harder—and something still goes wrong. The third time's the charm, as the saying goes ... That third try is the truly heroic one, the one where the stakes are highest—and whether it ends in disaster or success, it changes everything in the story forever. People in Hollywood often write their scripts based on a [three-act structure](#) which is similar to this.

After I heard Marion talk about this, I decided to give it a try, since it seemed so simple and natural a way to structure a story. In my novel, [Whales on Stilts](#), I have three heroes confronted by a single big problem: whales (as you might guess) on stilts. The whales are invading the land.

(You know it's going to happen sometime.)

So there are three attempts by these three kids to stop the whales on stilts, each attempt focusing on a different kid. First, the boy inventor tries to use one of his ridiculous devices to spy on the whales. Then a girl who's always being marauded by monsters confronts one of the whales in her own house. (A lot of dishes get broken.) Then Lily, a girl who thinks she's no one special, comes up with the secret plan that gets all three of them working together to stop the fearsome cetacean invasion.

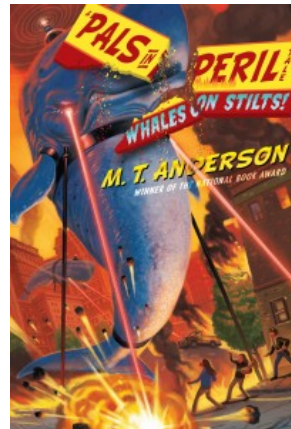
It felt very good to write that book, because we've all been trained to read our stories in threes, so the pacing always made sense to me. In fact, originally, there were three books in the series, one focusing on each of the three main characters. (There are now more, but you get the idea.)

So. There you go. The Law of Three. Set up a pattern. Confirm the pattern. Break the pattern. I even followed it instinctively as I was writing this blog post!

So one may be the loneliest number, and [seventeen may be the most random number](#), but remember: three really is a magic number.

[M.T. Anderson](#) has written stories for adults, picture books for children, adventure novels for young readers, and several books for older readers (both teens and adults). His satirical novel, *Feed*, was a finalist for the National Book Award and won the L.A. Times Book Prize. The first volume of his Octavian Nothing saga won the National Book Award and the Boston Globe/Horn Book Prize. Both the first and second volumes of that two-part series were Printz Honor Books. *Agent Q, or the Smell of Danger!* is the most recent installment of the *Pals in Peril* series.

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