When you tell someone a story, do you plan it out beforehand so that it will sound good? Do you carefully plot what you will say, in a specific order? Or does the story find a way of telling itself, the plot coming from within you from an instinctive understanding of story structure?

This is what American mythologist, anthropologist, writer and professor Joseph Campbell was interested in. Campbell was inspired as a child by Native American culture and artifacts. He spent his life comparing myths and religions from around the world in an attempt to understand humanity and its fascination with stories.

The Character Is Reborn

Campbell's writing drew from a range of influential historical figures. Among them were James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Pablo Picasso, Abraham Maslow, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. This combination of writers, artists and psychologists provided not only a rich source of inspiration for Campbell's theories, but also strong responses to his work from a number of disciplines.

The most widely known application of Campbell's work, particularly his book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," is to film.

In this book, Campbell studies hundreds of fairy tales, folktales and legends in order to unearth a common pattern in the structure of the stories. Campbell defines this as the "monomyth" — the typical path a story takes, across all cultures and religions. This monomyth is known as the "hero's journey."

The hero's journey has three stages — separation, initiation and return — which offer a narrative framework for understanding the path of the main character in a story. The journey, Campbell argues, usually includes a symbolic death and rebirth of the character. The religious idea of cleansing is also important, giving a sense of the character transforming from old to new. This transformation is also known as the character arc.

Campbell summarizes the monomythic character journey as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder, where fabulous forces are encountered and a victory is won. The hero comes back from this adventure with the power to help his fellow man.

Within this overall structure, Campbell proposes 17 story stages. They include the Call to Adventure, Crossing the First Threshold, The Road of Trials, Temptation, Magic Flight, Rescue from Without and Return.

The journey sees the hero undergo many battles that work together to bring the hero to a better understanding of his life and place in the world.

Lucas' Force Is Awakened

Hollywood filmmaker George Lucas said Campbell's theories influenced his work. Philosopher John Shelton Lawrence wrote that Lucas admired Campbell. Lucas felt "a mythic decline that left youth drifting without the moral anchor sensed in the heroic genre films of his own youth," Lawrence wrote.

Screenwriter Keith Cunningham wrote that Campbell's influence on Lucas' work caused the birth of the blockbuster mentality in Hollywood. A high-concept, high-stakes approach to story development began. The hero's journey served as a very useful model for the quest stories in blockbuster movies.
In 1983, Lucas invited Campbell to California to watch his "Star Wars" trilogy. They discussed the mythical structure used in the films, which led to the PBS television series "The Power of Myth" (1988).

In the series, Campbell tells journalist Moyers that humans look for meaning in stories that will help them move forward in life. For Campbell, the remnants of mythology "line the walls of our interior systems of belief."

This series was eventually published as a book of the same name, further connecting Campbell's work with film.

**A Model For Heroes In Film**

In the early 1990s, screenwriting author Christopher Vogler studied Campbell's work at the University of Southern California. Vogler was working in Hollywood as a story analyst, and he saw connections between the hero's journey and the scripts he was reading.

Vogler wrote a short document about how Campbell's work related to Hollywood for himself and his friends. The response was so overwhelming that he turned the summary into an official guide, "The Writer's Journey" (2007), which became one of the most successful screenwriting books of all time.

In the book, Vogler adapts Campbell's 17-stage monomyth into a 12-stage model for mapping the hero's journey in film.

**A Hero's Influence**

Campbell died more than 25 years ago, but he is still celebrated as one of the great story theorists. His work is studied and applied around the world.

The next time you tell a story and find yourself structuring it in a particular way, think about how and why you're doing it. And if you haven't read Campbell's work, try it and see whether you think his ideas were on the mark.

There's a good chance that whatever story you're telling, you're always framing it as some kind of hero's journey.
Quiz

1 Which option BEST summarizes two central ideas of the article?

(A) Joseph Campbell found that many human stories throughout history follow a specific path. Campbell’s ideas about the hero’s journey remain popular and especially influential in moviemaking.

(B) Joseph Campbell was widely admired by writers and psychologists during his life. Campbell spent his life comparing different myths and religions from around the world.

(C) Joseph Campbell believed that heroes in myths underwent battles to gain understanding of the world. George Lucas was concerned that movies of his era weren’t tackling big moral questions like they should be.

(D) Joseph Campbell's books have been studied by many people writing stories and movies. Christopher Vogler adapted his monomyth into a very successful model for a hero’s journey in film.

2 Which of these statements would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?

(A) People never tell original stories anymore because they are always framing them as a hero’s journey.

(B) Before the influence of the hero’s journey, most films left their audiences without a moral anchor.

(C) Many people who tell stories seem to have a wonderfully instinctive understanding of story structure.

(D) The monomyth of the hero’s journey outlines a common pattern in stories across cultures and religions.

3 Look at the diagram labeled "The Hero’s Journey."
Which statement BEST explains why the diagram is included with the article?

(A) It helps the reader understand the hero's journey by referencing a specific film.

(B) It proves that every story and most movies follow the steps of the hero’s journey.

(C) It illustrates the basic steps and character arc of the hero’s journey.

(D) It details all of the story stages Campbell proposed for the hero’s journey.
Look at the diagram labeled "The Hero's Journey."

Based on the article, what does the portion of the diagram labeled "Revelation" and "Transformation" represent?

(A) the portion of the journey where the hero comes back with the power to help others
(B) the portion of the journey where the hero discovers the ability to fight with magic
(C) the portion of the journey where the hero changes to become supernatural
(D) the portion of the journey where the hero is cleansed and forever changed