Classical Plot Structure

Gustav Freytag was a Nineteenth Century German novelist who saw common patterns in the plots of stories and novels and developed a diagram to analyze them. He diagrammed a story's plot using a pyramid like the one shown here:

Freytag's Pyramid

1. Exposition: this is where the playwright introduces characters, setting and most importantly the essential background information you need on what has happened up to the point the story actually begins.
2. Inciting Incident: this is where the ‘action or event’ which takes place that catapults the beginning of the story – it’s why the story is being told in the first place. This event signals the how the main conflict began.
3. Rising Action: this is where story builds or a series of related incidents builds toward the point of the reader’s greatest interest.
4. Climax: this is when the moment of greatest tension happens. Remember it’s the build, the rising action, that gets you to the Climax.
5. Falling Action: once the Climax happens the result is a series of events that will rap up the story and bring it to an end.
6. Resolution: remember the main problem at the beginning of the play? Well, this is where the character solves this problem and/or another character does it for him/her.
7. Denouement: (a French term, pronounced: day-noo-moh) the ending. At this point, any remaining secrets, questions or mysteries which remain after the resolution are solved by the characters or explained by the author.

Freytag's Pyramid
adapted from Gustav Freytag's
Technik des Dramas (1863)

Exposition consists of early material providing the theme, establishing the setting, and introducing the major characters and sometimes early hints of the coming conflict.

Rising Action is an increase in tension or uncertainty developing out of the conflict the protagonist faces.

The moment of reversal is also called the peripeteia. In classical tragedy, the reversal is that moment in which the protagonist's fortunes change irrecoverably for the worse. Frequently, the very trait we admire in a tragic hero is the same trait that brings about the hero's downfall.

During the falling action, the earlier tragic force causes the falling fortunes of the hero. This culminates in the final catastrophe and invokes catharsis (emotional purgation) in the audience.

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