

## Returning to College; or, The Hero's Journey Act I



The hero's journey serves as a useful frame for understanding the challenges and rewards of returning to school as a working adult.

By Meilee D. Bridges  
May 3, 2022

One of the most powerful myths that pervades literature, video games, film, and television is that of the hero's journey. First described by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and later simplified by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*, you may have been ~~forced to learn about~~ introduced to it in your high school or college English classes.

The TL;DR? An individual ventures out on a quest, overcomes challenges, is transformed by their struggles, and returns home with new knowledge.

You might recognize this archetype from epic poems like Homer's *The Odyssey* or books and films like *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. It's the template for a lot of Disney and Pixar films too.



But the hero's journey is also a useful frame for understanding the ups and downs of returning to school as an adult learner. Like you, millions of students have left college but are re-enrolling. They're turning the page, rewriting their academic record, and plotting out better opportunities and more fulfilling careers. Let's take a look at how you too can be the hero of your own success story.

## Act I: Departure

### The ordinary world

In the first stage of our hero's journey, our protagonist is an ordinary person living an ordinary life. Think hobbits frolicking in the Shire. Or Harry Potter being forced to live under the stairs at his abusive aunt and uncle's house. Or Stitch wreaking havoc as Experiment 626 while Nani tries her best to parent her younger sister, lonely Lilo, on Kauai here on Earth.

OK, these aren't quite *ordinary*, but stay with me.

In your case, this might mean you're a former student who's taken a break from college. You might be holding down one or more jobs, and you might be caring for children or elderly parents. Things are fairly routine, and you might be content with where you are. Or maybe you're feeling a bit harried as you're pulled in different directions.

Or maybe, just maybe, you are feeling like you want more out of life.



### The call to adventure

Sometimes known as the inciting incident in fiction, this is the moment in the story when our hero is presented with a threat or opportunity. If you're a bespectacled young boy with a lightning-bolt scar on his forehead, this is when the half-giant groundskeeper Hagrid says, "Yer a wizard, Harry." If you're Katniss Everdeen, this is when you decide to take your sister's place in the Hunger Games.

And if you're an adult learner, this is when you decide to leave your comfort zone and return to college. You click that button in an email (called a *CTA*, wink, wink!) encouraging you to re-enroll because you want to [achieve your goals](#) or improve your situation in life by earning your degree.

### Refusing the call

OK, adventure sounds all well and good, but leaving your comfort zone is actually pretty scary. Our hero doesn't necessarily want to disrupt their familiar routines. The future is uncertain down that path, after all. Picture Odysseus rejecting the Greeks' call for him to join the Trojan War. Remember that Frodo is afraid to walk that rather treacherous piece of jewelry to Mount Doom.

Your own hesitation about going back to school is normal too. It can feel like an overwhelming new commitment to add to your already-daunting mix of work and life responsibilities. College—and technology—may have changed since you were last a student. Or you might be worried that you won't fit in with other learners. It might help to know that fear of the unknown is universal. You might also benefit from . . .

### Meeting the mentor

Enter the mentor figure—your Obi-Wan Kenobi if you're Luke Skywalker, your Mr. Miyagi if you're Daniel LaRusso, or your Shifu if you're Po the Kung-Fu Panda. A mentor is the person who provides our hero with the training, tools, and wisdom they need to accept the call to adventure.

At ReUp, that figure is your [Success Coach](#). They can provide you with the guidance you need to clarify your goals, make decisions about returning to school, find your motivation to re-apply, and ultimately complete your degree. Our coaches don't technically possess supernatural powers like Yoda or Dumbledore, but we think they're pretty magical nonetheless.



### Crossing the threshold

Our hero leaves the comforts of their ordinary life and embarks on their adventure in a special world. Beowulf accepts his mission to kill Grendel and sails to Denmark. Dorothy's quest to see the Wizard of Oz begins. Harry takes a train from King's Cross in London to Scotland—I mean to Hogwarts.

And *you* are re-enrolling in college.

Adventure awaits!

Stay tuned for [act 2 of your hero's journey](#) . . .

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### **Ready to accept your call to adventure?**

If you need expert guidance to help you navigate your own heroic journey from re-enrollment to graduation, your Success Coach is a mere click away. Ready to meet your mentor?

Connect with a coach!

## Returning to College; or, The Hero's Journey Act II



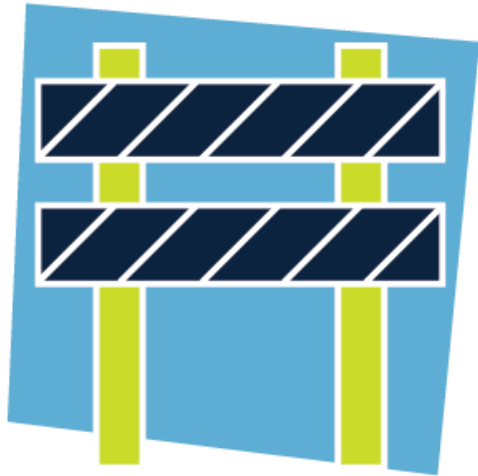
A daunting stage of the hero's journey entails enduring the obstacles of being a working adult in college—but it also has great rewards.

By Meilee D. Bridges  
May 4, 2022

*Our hero's journey so far: After leaving your comfort zone, you've accepted your call to the adventure of re-enrolling in college, met your trustworthy guide, and set out on your path to completing your college degree.*

### **Tests, allies, and enemies**

This is the stage of the journey at which our hero confronts trials and obstacles, builds relationships with trusted friends and supporters, and faces down certain foes. Clever Odysseus takes on the Cyclops Polyphemus and later Scylla and Charybdis. Katniss partners with Rue and the aptly named baker Peeta to fight off the other Hunger Games contestants. Lilo tries to teach Stitch to be a “model citizen” (like Elvis Presley!) while Stitch is pursued by mad scientist Jumba and Agent Pleakley.



You too will face trials of mental and emotional endurance. Those tests may come in the form of actual exams as well as papers and projects. You may face faceless foes, such as lack of [motivation](#) or not having enough [time to get everything done](#).

But if you [study well](#) and are willing to [ask for help](#), you will prevail! And although you may feel alone at times, you actually have many allies and tools to help you. Your [ReUp Success Coach](#) is always available to provide expert guidance and support. You can also seek out campus resources, from professors, tutors, and academic advisors to financial aid, career, and counseling staff. And don't forget your support network of classmates, friends, family, bosses, and colleagues!

Soon, you'll learn who you can trust, who supports you most, and who or what might block your way forward. And that is a valuable lesson in itself.

### The approach to the innermost cave

In any hero's journey, fear of upcoming obstacles and setbacks is inevitable. For example, Beowulf defeats Grendel—only to discover that Grendel's momster is lurking in the depths. The Fellowship of the Ring enters the desolate Mines of Moria, where they soon encounter a fearsome Balrog. And Harry, Ron, and Hermione get past three-headed Fluffy before they have to play a most dangerous game . . . of chess.

As an adult learner, you might enter your own caverns of self-doubt, uncertainty, and isolation. You might feel like an impostor or lose confidence as you complete your coursework, practice presentations, or prepare for midterms and finals. This is where [developing a growth mindset](#) is crucial for success. It's all about plucking up your courage and maintaining resilience before and after you experience challenges.



### The ordeal

We have arrived at the crisis of our hero's journey. And often, it entails sacrifice. Odysseus must endure a harrowing trip to the Underworld, where he learns his mother died while he was at war. Luke, Han, and Chewy manage to rescue Leia . . . only to lose Obi-Wan during a duel with Darth Vader. Katniss must fight off the other Tributes as she grieves the loss of little Rue.

This is the point in your journey to graduation where you might stumble. You may be frustrated by a particularly challenging course or semester. You may be feeling guilty for not spending enough time with loved ones and friends. You may start to resent having to [juggle school, work, and life](#). You may be suffering from chronic [worry and stress](#).

As you confront your own ordeal, this is the right time to commit to [self-care](#) and [ask for help](#). You may also have to tap into your reserves of strength and determination to resist the temptation to leave college again.

But why keep struggling? Why continue your hero's journey? Because you're going to reap . . .

## The reward

By facing down fear and even death, our intrepid hero receives treasure or discovers some elixir—perhaps some insight or magical power. For defeating Grendel's mother, Beowulf is awarded treasure and the throne of Geatland. The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion earn their trophies, and Dorothy is promised a hot-air balloon ride home. And every hero learns that they can survive seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

As an adult learner, slaying the dragon of even a single course in college means expanded knowledge and improved skills.

You'll also be building your network as you connect with instructors and classmates from various backgrounds. And you're growing by building resilience, responsibility, and other soft skills, like communication, teamwork, and organization.

Learning new things and learning more about yourself and what you can accomplish? Those are some pretty magical powers!

*But that's not all! The [true climax of our hero's journey](#) is yet to come . . .*



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## **Ready to earn the rewards of your journey?**

*If you need expert guidance to help you navigate your own heroic journey from re-enrollment to graduation, your Success Coach is a mere click away. Ready to meet your mentor?*

[Connect with a coach!](#)

## Returning to College; or, The Hero's Journey Act III



What's the ultimate destination of the hero's journey for an adult learner? Graduation . . . and nothing less than personal transformation.

By Meilee D. Bridges  
May 5, 2022

*Our hero's journey so far: After accepting your quest to re-enroll in college and overcoming obstacles, you've reached major milestones and earned personal rewards on your path to your college degree.*

### **The road back (or forward)**

After earning their big reward, it's natural for the hero to want to rest on their laurels. They may want to return home to their ordinary world. Or they may balk at returning home to their ordinary world now that they've discovered adventure. Whichever the case, their quest is not yet done (*dun dun duuuunnn!*).

Odysseus finally arrives back in Ithaca—only to find his palace overrun by his long-suffering wife's suitors. After a period of rest, Frodo et al. leave lovely Lothlórien to continue their journey with the mood doom ring. Lilo and Stitch return to Hawaii after Stitch rescues his kidnapped BFF from Captain Gantu's spaceship.

After completing midterms or finals or giving a major presentation, you might be exhausted and require a bit of recovery. That's OK! Giving yourself time to [celebrate your recent efforts and recuperate](#) is a great strategy for [avoiding burnout](#). But R&R can easily become a series of skipped classes after a big paper or exam. Or you might start contemplating not returning to college at all after a particularly grueling semester.

Hero, stay strong! Reward yourself for overcoming your obstacles, but continue your quest. Or if family obligations, financial barriers, or mental health demand that you take another break from college, set specific goals for when you'll resume your education journey. You are almost there!

## The resurrection

We have arrived at the ultimate climax of our journey! It's our hero's final test. They must muster all that they've learned to overcome their greatest enemy, the big boss. After great struggle, our hero emerges triumphant. They may even perish, only to be reborn a changed person.

And so ghostly Obi-Wan says to Skywalker, "Use the Force, Luke," and the young Jedi promptly destroys the Death Star with his eyes closed. Katniss and Peeta begin to eat poisonous berries, forcing the Gamemakers to declare them both winners. Beowulf dies after his final battle with a hot-mouthed dragon.

In your journey, this might be a capstone project, senior thesis, or final exhibition that you have to complete as part of your degree requirements. Or it might be a final semester of coursework before you are eligible to graduate. It's a tremendous hurdle! And yeah, you might even feel like you're dying a little bit during these big final moments.

But as you come back to life, you will have your hard-won degree in hand! You'll also have garnered the pride and confidence in knowing that you've fulfilled your potential and accomplished a major goal despite significant challenges. And you'll have gained a broader range of opportunities ahead of you.



## The return with the elixir

Transformed by their journey, our hero returns home, bringing what they've learned back to the ordinary world. They may apply their new knowledge to improve that world. They may teach others. Or they may even heed the call to another adventure.

Understandably, Harry doesn't want to return to the dismal Dursleys, but he takes solace in knowing he is now a tried-and-true wizard. Dorothy and Toto land back in Kansas, happy to reunite with her unwitting family. Lilo and Stitch



teach the meaning of 'ohana to others and become the anchors of a found family. Beowulf leaves behind a legacy of greatness for his people.

Once you've completed your college degree, hero, what will you have learned about yourself and what you can accomplish? How will you have changed? You might think about what you can do now that you couldn't do before. Moreover, the future lies before you. And because learning is lifelong, you might consider whether you're ready for yet more adventure. Should you pursue a certificate, a graduate degree, an apprenticeship, or some other credential? Or do you want to learn more in your own way and in your own time?



**Whichever path you choose**, you'll have the knowledge, skills, and insights to move forward with confidence. You'll have proven that you can overcome tremendous challenges and finish the quest you started. And as the hero of your own journey, you'll be able to rewrite your success story—and author its many sequels—in the days and years to come.

### **The end . . . or rather, the beginning**

I hope that learning a little about the hero's journey helps you feel less alone as a working adult returning to college. Your challenges, need for support, and achievements are such an indelible part of the human experience that it's become a story we recognize in our entertainment and in our own lives. You can do this!

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### ***Your story is not over***

*If you think the book of your education is closed, think again! It's understandable to feel anxious about returning to school after you've taken a break—especially if it's been a long while since you stepped foot inside a classroom or attended an online seminar. Our [ReUp Success Coaches](#) are here to serve as empathetic guides and personal advocates on your journey back to school. Ready to finish the quest you started?*

Connect with a coach!