It's helpful to know that Aristotle believe that art should be an "imitation" of life. It should hold a mirror up to life. It should be "truthful," or "true to life." He went on to say this about tragedy, in the excerpt in the Bedford text.

He makes two points straight away:

• The finest tragedy is complex rather than simple
• Tragedy is a "representation of terrible and piteous events"

If a play is complex rather than simple, it will challenge its viewers in some way. Perhaps Aristotle felt that "simple" plays were a waste of time, or an insult to his intelligence. When he says that tragedy should represent terrible and piteous events, he has something specific in mind, which he explains elsewhere in the Poetics. Why is it not a waste of time to view a play? Because the play, though its arousal of pity and fear, leads its audience to and experience he called "catharsis," a healthy calling forth and then purging of emotion, that "good cry" that makes you stronger somehow.

Aristotle, next, indicates the kind of hero who should serve as the main character, but first, he tells us the kind of hero who does not qualify for service as a "main character," or "tragic hero." He tells us that, for tragedy, we can't have-

• A good man falling from happiness to misfortune (this will only
inspire revulsion, not pity or fear)

• An evil man rising from ill fortune to prosperity (that won't inspire sympathy, so it can't arouse pity or fear)

• A wicked man falling from prosperity into misfortune (that might inspire sympathy, but not pity or fear, because (1) pity can't be felt for a person whose misfortune is deserved, and (2) if we don't identify with the character's wickedness, we won't be afraid of his fate falling on us). The appropriate tragic hero, then, is the character who sits between these extremes. He's not "preeminent in virtue and justice," but on the other hand, he isn't guilty of "vice or depravity," just some "mistake." He is a person of some importance, from a "highly renowned and prosperous place," a king, like Oedipus.

The best tragic plot, he concludes, moves the hero from prosperity to misfortune, occasioned not by depravity, but by some great mistake he makes.

In an editorial aside, Aristotle puts in a good word for the poet/dramatist Euripides, who has apparently taken some heat from his critics for writing too many unhappy endings. But Aristotle insists that this is how it should be. He praises Euripides (his most famous play is Medea), calling him the "most tragic of the poets," and insists that tragedy is superior to comedy.

Aristotle spends some time elaborating what he considers the essential qualities of the tragic hero. He explains that "with regard to the characters there are four things to aim at":

• Goodness. They should reveal through speech and action what their moral choices are, and a "good character will be one whose choices are good." Any "class of person" may be portrayed as "good"-even women and slaves, though on the whole women are "inferior" and slaves are "utterly base."

• Appropriateness. Men can be domineering or "manly" (what does he really mean here, I wonder?), but for a woman to appear formidable would be inappropriate.

• Lifelike. He never explains this one. What do you think he means? How is "lifelike" slightly different from "appropriate" and "good"? I think he might mean "believable" or "true to life." Maybe he means the tragic hero should not be godlike,
not like the mythical heroes of legend, but like real human beings.

• Consistency. Once a character is established as having certain traits, these shouldn't suddenly change.

Oedipus, as a character, meets Aristotle's requirements very well:

Goodness He has compassion; he seeks the truth; he wants to be a savior to the people-BUT he's not entirely good (that would be repulsive, remember). He also is very self-interested, not entirely altruistic. He wants to find the killer, not just to fulfill the oracle (he's already shown a history of ignoring those), but because the killer may come after him next!

Appropriateness Oedipus shows the appropriate stateliness and intelligence you would expect from the ruler of a great city.

Lifelike Oedipus is obviously human. He has human strengths and weaknesses. There's nothing supernatural about him.

Consistency Oedipus' character traits, revealed throughout the play, remain consistent. He's a truth-seeker, a riddle solver; he's questing after self-knowledge; he wants to be a savior; he's also very proud, a little arrogant, and he has a real temper.

CONCERNING PLOT In constructing the plot, characters should say and do only what seems probable and reasonable given the events of the play. The outcome of the action should arise naturally from the plot itself and not be contrived by any exterior devices like "from the machine" (Aristotle is referring a plot device known as "deus ex machina"-a big contraption that many dramatists of the time resorted to. It was a big platform that held the character of a god who would come and fix everything when humans had entangled themselves so badly they couldn't extract themselves without help). The god in the machine would deliver justice and put things right.

ONE FINAL NOTE... Aristotle reminds us that tragedy is an imitation of persons who are "better than the average." Therefore, the tragic hero should appear, like he would in a
portrait by the best portrait-painter, like himself, but handsomer. In developing his character, any little flaws should be rubbed away. A little airbrushing never hurt anyone's public appeal. 

ARISTOTLE AND OEDIPUS

What a coincidence that Oedipus happens to fit each and every description that Aristotle offers. Is it a coincidence? Not at all. In fact, this play served as Aristotle's model for what constitutes great tragedy. His theory is retrofitted to incorporate every aspect of Sophocles' play. The artist went there intuitively; the critic followed.

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