



Lost the Plot?

Plot Writing Workshop Notes

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What is Plot?

The plot is the series of events (action) that provide conflict within a story, which is sometimes referred to as the “spine” of a story. It is the result of what choices the characters make, the actions they take, and the events that happen because of those choices. Ideally the plot should be able to be described in one or two sentences. The plot should be simple.

“Plot isn’t an accessory that conveniently organizes your material according to some ritualistic magic. You don’t just plug in plot like a household appliance and expect it to do its job. Plot is organic. It takes hold of the writer and the work from the beginning.

As you fashion your plot, ask yourself how you want to go about it. There are two main ways that I know of. The first is to bulldoze your way through the work without ever looking back. Get to the end and then worry whether or not you got it right. Don’t let intellectual concerns about plot get in the way of the emotional thrust of writing a book. Lots of writers work that way. They put full stock in the power of rewriting.

The second way is to know what you're doing and where you're going.

Ask yourself which approach you would feel comfortable with. If you think that constantly applying the elements of plot will stunt your expression of ideas, just get it all on paper. If you know which plot you want (and that may change in the middle of writing your story as you become aware of other possibilities), read over the guidelines and see if they stick in the back of your mind while you write...”

—Ronald Tobias



How to write a plot

A good plot has a clear motivation. It has a clear structure. It has an outcome. It has subplots. A good plot looks something like the plot structure template below.

Motivation - Lizzie Bennett wants to marry for love

Plot structure - She meets Darcy & Wickham. She dislikes Darcy, and starts to fall for Wickham. Wickham turns out to be a bad guy; Darcy turns out to be a good guy. She now loves Darcy.

Outcome - She marries Darcy

Subplot 1 - Jane Bennett (Lizzie's nice sister) loves Bingley. Bingley vanishes. He reappears. They get engaged.

Subplot 2 - Lydia Bennett (Lizzie's idiot sister) elopes with Wickham. She's recovered.

Subplot 3 - An idiot, Mr Collins, proposes marriage to Lizzie. She says no. Her friend, Charlotte, says yes.

Note that there's loads of material that the above plot template *doesn't* tell you. It doesn't tell you where the novel is set. It doesn't say anything about plot mechanics - it doesn't tell you *why* Lizzie dislikes Mr Darcy, or *how* Lydia is recovered from her elopement. It has nothing to say about character (apart from maybe X is nice, or Y is an idiot).

And that's fine. Too much extraneous detail about settings, mechanics and character will cloud the overall structure. The simpler you can keep your plot template, the better. Note that everything in the structure should relate pretty directly to the protagonist's motivation.

Build your own template

If your template has about as much structural complexity as the one above, then you're doing fine. If you've got loads more complexity, then challenge yourself to pare it down. If you really can't reduce your plot to a few bold strokes, then you may well be making a mess of things - take care. If your plot is much less complex than the template above, then again take care. You may well need to complicate matters. That doesn't mean you should add padding - it means you should develop the complexity of your overall work.

How to fatten a plot

If you think your plot is a little lightweight, then you need to add substance. That doesn't mean more events, more backstory, more points of view, more people shouting or shooting at each other. It means add complexity.

For example: let's suppose your story tells a simple tale of a man watching his father die slowly of cancer while coming to terms with their troubled relationship. That sounds good, but there's not enough complexity there to carry a modern novel. So complicate it. One traditional route is mirroring. Give the man a son (or daughter, or both), with whom he also has a complex relationship. That would be a fairly straightforward kind of mirroring.

An alternative would be a sideways kind of mirroring. This bloke is upset about his dad, so he embarks on a ridiculous relationship with a 22 year old Polish nurse, thereby imperilling his marriage.



Multiple POVs

If you are telling stories about multiple protagonists, each of whom will occupy a decent chunk of the novel, then you basically need to develop a plot outline - along the lines of the template above - for each and every one of them. The only difference is that you can go in for a tad less complexity in each one. But only a tad. You still need to develop a complete story for every protagonist. Remember to think about how to avoid confusing your story, though.

Exceptions

Yes, there are always exceptions - but not many. The major genre where different rules apply is in crime novels & thrillers. The exceptions are twofold. (1) Detective stories are often driven by the drip-drip-drip of information release rather than plot in a conventional sense, and (2) thrillers (and crime tales) often use multiple POVs, few of whom are protagonists, to move the story forward.

That's OK - but do take care to keep a relentless focus on your core story and your protagonist's place in it. There are exceptions to the golden rules - but most people who break them go horribly wrong.



The 20 Master Plots

1. Quest

The hero searches for something, someone, or somewhere. In reality, they may be searching for themselves, with the outer journey mirrored internally. They may be joined by a companion, who takes care of minor detail and whose limitations contrast with the hero's greater qualities.

2. Adventure

The protagonist goes on an adventure, much like a quest, but with less of a focus on the end goal or the personal development of the hero. In the adventure, there is more action for action's sake.

3. Pursuit

In this plot, the focus is on chase, with one person chasing another (and perhaps with multiple and alternating chase). The pursued person may be often cornered and somehow escape, so that the pursuit can continue. Depending on the story, the pursued person may be caught or may escape.

4. Rescue

In the rescue, somebody is captured, who must be released by the hero or heroic party. A triangle may form between the protagonist, the antagonist and the victim. There may be a grand duel between the protagonist and antagonist, after which the victim is freed.

5. Escape

In a kind of reversal of the rescue, a person must escape, perhaps with little help from others. In this, there may well be elements of capture and unjust imprisonment. There may also be a pursuit after the escape.

6. Revenge

In the revenge plot, a wronged person seeks retribution against the person or organization which has betrayed or otherwise harmed them or loved ones, physically or emotionally. This plot depends on moral outrage for gaining sympathy from the audience.

7. The Riddle

The riddle plot entertains the audience and challenges them to find the solution before the hero, who steadily and carefully uncovers clues and hence the final solution. The story may also be spiced up with terrible consequences if the riddle is not solved in time.

8. Rivalry

In rivalry, two people or groups are set as competitors that may be good hearted or as bitter enemies. Rivals often face a zero-sum game, in which there can only be one winner, for example where they compete for a scarce resource or the heart of a single other person.

9. Underdog

The underdog plot is similar to rivalry, but where one person (usually the hero) has less advantage and might normally be expected to lose. The underdog usually wins through greater tenacity and determination (and perhaps with the help of friendly others).

10. Temptation

In the temptation plot, a person is tempted by something that, if taken, would somehow diminish them, often morally. Their battle is thus internal, fighting against their inner voices, which tell them to succumb.

11. Metamorphosis

In this fantastic plot, the protagonist is physically transformed, perhaps into beast or perhaps into some spiritual or alien form. The story may then continue with the changed person struggling to be released or to use their new form for some particular purpose. Eventually, the hero is released, perhaps through some great act of love.

12. Transformation

The transformation plot leads to change of a person in some way, often driven by unexpected circumstance or event. After setbacks, the person learns and usually becomes something better.

13. Maturation

The maturation plot is a special form of transformation, in which a person grows up. The veils of younger times are lost as they learn and grow. Thus the rudderless youth finds meaning or perhaps an older person re-finds their purpose.

14. Love

The love story is a perennial tale of lovers finding one another, perhaps through a background of danger and woe. Along the way, they become separated in some way, but eventually come together in a final joyous reunion.

15. Forbidden Love

The story of forbidden love happens when lovers are breaking some social rules, such as in an adulterous relationship or worse. The story may thus turn around their inner conflicts and the effects of others discovering their tryst.

16. Sacrifice

In sacrifice, the nobler elements of the human spirit are extolled as someone gives much more than most people would give. The person may not start with the intent of personal sacrifice and may thus be an unintentional hero, thus emphasizing the heroic nature of the choice and act.



17. Discovery

The discovery plot is strongly focused on the character of the hero who discovers something great or terrible and hence must make a difficult choice. The importance of the discovery might not be known at first and the process of revelation be important to the story.

18. Wretched Excess

In stories of wretched excess, the protagonist goes beyond normally accepted behavior as the world looks on, horrified, perhaps in realization that 'there before the grace of God go I' and that the veneer of civilization is indeed thin.

19. Ascension

In the ascension plot, the protagonist starts in the virtual gutter, as a sinner of some kind. The plot then shows their ascension to becoming a better person, often in response to stress that would defeat a normal person. Thus they achieve deserved heroic status.

20. Descension

In the opposite to ascension, a person of initially high standing descends to the gutter and moral turpitude, perhaps sympathetically as they are unable to handle stress and perhaps just giving in to baser vices.

8 Tips for better Plots

1. Make Tension Fuel Your Plot--tension, conflict, frustrated intention, blocked movement...make your plot sizzle on the griddle, not limp on the blimp!
2. Create Tension through Opposition--the antagonist thwarts the protagonist. Whether external person, place, or thing; or internal doubts, fears, or flaws--make the opposition real. Even paranoids may have someone after them!
3. Make Tension Grow as Opposition Increases--start small. Then crank the opposition up, tighten the tension. And then up the ante again, make the problem a life-or-death struggle, and test your character against serious conflicts.
4. Make Change the Point of Your Story--your main character should be a different person at the end. Meaningful events change people in meaningful ways--make sure your characters change.
5. When Something Happens, Make Sure It's Important--if it doesn't contribute in a concrete way to your plot, cut it.
6. Make the causal look casual--cause and effect, yes, but if you aren't careful, the reader will know you are leading them by the nose to look at the footsteps in the garden and might suspect they will be an important clue. Instead, let them sniff the flowers, pet the dog, and notice that the dog's tracks were mashing down the dirt like the other footsteps there.
7. Make Sure You Leave Lady Luck and Chance to the Lottery—avoid the happy coincidence; eschew the miraculous.
8. Make Sure Your Central Character Performs the Central Action of the Climax--whoever wins, whoever makes the last throw, the great heave that overturns everything--make sure that is your central character!

How about we turn these into questions?

1. What is the tension in your plot?
2. Who or What is the opposition in your plot?
3. What are the "steps" in increasing opposition/tension you will use?

4. What is the change in your main character?
5. What are the important steps in your plot?
6. How are you going to "casually" bring in the important information?
7. Is there something in your plot that depends on coincidence?
8. What is the main action of the climax? Who does it?

Now, let's suppose you have a story around. It can be one you have already written (and want to tighten up) or one that you are thinking about writing.

Take that story. Answer each of the eight questions. Take your time, and think about your answers.

Then rewrite the story to stress these lowest common denominators.

Plot Hospital



We've all been there: basking in the glow of a finished manuscript, only to read it over and realize something is wrong with the plot. Finding ourselves unable to identify the problem only makes matters worse. But take heart! Here are some common plot gaffes and sensible ways to revise without starting over.

1. THE PLOT ISN'T ORIGINAL ENOUGH. Go through your pages and highlight anything that you've read in another book or seen in a movie. In the margin, write where you've seen it. Then list these sections and make a note for each one about how it could differ from its lookalike. Quick notes like these can help you detach from unintentional imitation.

2. READERS ALWAYS KNOW EXACTLY WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN. This may be because you've chosen a plot point that's overused, or because you keep giving away the answer in advance. Readers know the villain is going to whip out a picture of the hero's son and blackmail her by pretending to have kidnapped the little boy because you showed the villain taking pictures of the child and driving away from the schoolyard. You could be less obvious by only showing the antagonist sitting in the car watching the boy on the playground, and no more.

3. THE PLOT IS BORING. Take each page and imagine what different writers might do with the same plot. Choose extreme examples. Would a comedy writer have the cab driver and the villain coincidentally be childhood friends with unfinished business? Would the mystery writer have the taxi pass a clue on a street corner that makes a new connection for the hero? Would the horror writer have the cab driver channel a ghost?

Or, imagine the most surprising thing that could happen in a given scene. It doesn't matter if these ideas don't fit your story. You're not going to use them. But often, after thinking of wild ideas to make the story more interesting, you begin to come up with workable ones that are just as stimulating, but better suited to your book.

4. THE PLOT IS ALL ACTION AND THE FRENZIED PACE NUMBS READERS. Let them breathe. Give the readers a little downtime now and then in your action story. Look back at your favorite action novels. Notice the conversations, summarized passages, meals, introspection and releases of emotions that are set in between the car chases, shootouts and confrontations. List them. Then give the readers a chance to breathe in your own manuscript. Find the dramatic respites that come from your characters' needs, flaws and strengths.



5. THE PLOT IS TOO COMPLEX. Often, a complex plot can be trimmed into a sleek one by cutting out some steps. Does your protagonist have to visit her father in the hospital twice—once to bring him flowers and talk about Mom, and then again to find he has taken a turn for the worse?

Couldn't he take a turn for the worse while she's still there the first time? To find the messiness in your overly complex story, summarize it out loud to yourself. When a section takes too long to explain, make a note. Making a plot less complicated doesn't have to make it less clever.

6. THE PLOT IS TOO SHALLOW. Sometimes as writers we get caught up in the action. The symbolism. The metaphors. The witty dialogue. The great character names. The slick descriptions. Sometimes we ride these skills over the surface of the story and forget what's really important.

If you or your first readers (friends, family, agent) complain that the novel feels insubstantial, step back and ask yourself these questions: Why am I bothering to write this story? Why does the outcome matter to the characters? How do the characters change? How did my favorite book affect me the first time I read it?

7. SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF IS DESTROYED. Readers need to buy into the reality put forward by what they're reading. You may go too far with a plot point or not far enough with preparing your audience for that plot point. If something that sounded right when you outlined it is coming off as farfetched even to you, look back at the stepping-stones that led to the event. If your murderer turns over a new leaf at the end of act two, make sure you've given her reason to.

8. TOO MANY SUBPLOTS MAKE THE PLOT OVERLY COMPLEX. If you start to feel weighed down by your numerous storylines, start cutting them. List the subplots (shopkeeper with a crush, neighbor's dog that tears up the garden, accountant who threatens to quit every day), and then list under each title all the ways it's necessary. Only subplots that are so vital that you could not remove them without destroying your novel get to stick around. Be bold.

9. THE SEQUENCE IS ILLOGICAL. Sometimes the sequence set down in an outline starts to show its true colours when you're writing the chapters. If you feel the order of scenes or events in your story is off, list each scene on a separate index card and, in red ink, write a question mark on every card that doesn't feel right where it is in the story. Shuffle the cards. I'm not kidding. Mix them up completely. Lay them out again in the order you think they might work best, giving special attention to those with red question marks. Something about these scenes tricked you the first time. This time, really look closely at the proper place for those tricky bits.

10. THE PREMISE ISN'T COMPELLING. If you fear that a mediocre premise is your holdup, take out a sheet of paper. Make a list on the left-hand side of everything that's dodgy in your present premise. Then write a list down the right-hand side about all the things that work great in the premise of a similar favourite book, play or movie. See where you might make the stakes higher, the characters more emotional, the setting more a part of the overall plot. Remember: The premise should make your readers curious.

11. THE CONCLUSION IS UNSATISFYING. Once again, write a list of what bothers you about your conclusion, and next to it, a list of what worked great about the end of your favourite novel. Do you have to create more suspense before you give the readers what they've been craving? Do you need to make the answer to the mystery clearer? Unsatisfying conclusions are usually lacking something. Whatever that is, make your story's ending have more of it.

A Final Checklist

1. In fifty words, what is the basic idea for your story?
2. What is the central aim of the story? State your answer as a question. For example, "Will Othello believe Iago about his wife?"
3. What is your protagonist's intent? (What does she want?)
4. What is your protagonist's motivation? (Why does she want what she is seeking?)
5. Who and/or what stands in the way of your protagonist?
6. What is your protagonist's plan of action to accomplish her intent?
7. What is the story's main conflict? Internal? External?
8. What is the nature of your protagonist's change during the course of the story?
9. Is your plot character-driven or action-driven?
10. What is the point of attack of the story? Where will you begin?
11. How do you plan to maintain tension throughout the story?
12. How does your protagonist complete the climax of the story?