

Creating Plot Twists

*A plot twist is 'an unexpected development in a book, film, television programme'
(Oxford English Dictionary).*

A good plot twist adds intrigue, suspense or surprise to a novel. Plot twists are particularly popular in suspense-heavy novels such as murder mysteries, because they prolong suspense-creating questions about cause and identity.

Plot twists are particularly popular in short stories. In many stories they are the main event of the story arc. For example, in Roald Dahl's classic short story 'Lamb to the Slaughter', Mary Maloney kills her husband with a frozen leg of lamb. The dark-humoured twist is that Mary serves detectives investigating her husband's disappearance the evidence.

Authors like O. Henry and Edgar Allan Poe perfected the art of the 'twist-in-the-tale' story. In these stories, the plot twist (like in Dahl's story) is the climax. Yet plot twists are also popular in longer narratives.

1. Plumb your themes for relevant plot twist ideas

Often great plot twists illustrate or extend the themes of a story. In the Roald Dahl example above, the author shows a darker side to mundane suburbia. The dramatic irony and contrast of this is developed even further.

The detectives sit down to a cosy home-cooked meal, unaware they're about to eat the evidence.

A good example of a theme-developing plot twist comes from David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004). The first character we meet in the novel, Adam Ewing, describes a chronic ailment to a doctor aboard his ship. The doctor diagnoses a dangerous parasite and recommends a course of treatment. We only find out much later in the book that the doctor is actually poisoning Ewing deliberately, far from curing him. His motivation is theft of Ewing's fortunes.

2. Don't give your twist away too early

Too much obvious foreshadowing and a twist feels predictable. In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, a central character's pet turns out to have a surprising, disturbing double life. **Rowling's twist is effective because:**

A pet is the last thing the reader expects to be the source of a major plot twist.

The sense of false trust that results reinforces the challenges in Rowling's conflict-stricken world. We become doubly aware that this is a world where loyalty doesn't always lie where you'd expect. We're also reminded that magic means there are many additional surprises and possibilities

By centering a major plot twist on a very unlikely character, Rowling keeps us surprised. She avoids giving away plot twists early.

3. Make setting an active part of plot twists

Setting in plot can prepare the way for surprising revelations. For example, in William Faulkner's classic short story 'A Rose for Emily', Emily Grierson is the iron-willed town recluse. From the start, the narrator makes Emily's house mysterious:

'It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps – an eyesore among eyesores.'

Faulkner gives us a sense of this setting's decaying isolation. He foreshadows the surprising twist that lies inside the house.

Only towards the end do we discover the decaying body of Homer Barron, a man who goes to live with Emily. Faulkner uses the setting's mystery to build suspense until we finally enter Grierson's property and uncover the shocking twist.

Plot twists using setting may:

Reveal a surprising turn of plot within a setting (this could be a house, school or even a distant land – a common device in high fantasy)

Reveal twists about the setting *itself*.

4. Use plot twists to increase antagonists' power

If you're writing a novel or story with a central villain or antagonist, a plot twist can give them surprising, additional power. We often find this device in fantasy writing (and it's a staple of video game storytelling, too). Central characters confront a major opponent and just when they think victory is near, they hear these words: 'This isn't even my final form'.

Giving the 'bad guy' (or woman) power beyond expectations, in a surprising twist, serves multiple ends. For example, in the *Harry Potter* series, the series' main villain has taken extra (unexpected) precautions against a final defeat.

Because of this plot twist:

The series' central characters face additional complications in their path to victory

Narrative tension continues further, as the characters have new, seemingly impossible tasks to achieve

Rowling brings home just how powerful and calculating her antagonist is. The plot twist gives us a greater sense of just how determined he is to win

Plot twists that demonstrate antagonists' power include:

Measures antagonists take (unknown to protagonists) to counter and thwart their best efforts

Actions they take to punish protagonists from beyond the grave/defeat.

A non-fantasy example: A vindictive ex-spouse in a character drama might obtain a surprising divorce settlement, solely designed to make their ex's life more difficult.

5: Create plot twists to insert useful distractions

In mystery and suspense novels, a good plot twist leads characters off track. This is used quite literally in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story *The Final Problem*.

While out walking in the Swiss mountains, Holmes and Watson receive word that a woman back at their hotel needs urgent medical care. Watson rushes to the hotel, but the message turns out to be a false alarm. It's a fake created by the novel's villain, designed to separate the two and leave Holmes vulnerable and alone.

This plot revelation raises the suspense and tension. A distracting twist creates the necessary conditions for another, stake-raising plot event. **It also adds credibility:** Characters do make the wrong choice, sometimes.

6: Use plot twists to shift suspicion

In novels and stories where the main unknown is the identity of a perpetrator, plot twists help to shift suspicion. Deciphering who the guilty party is in a murder mystery (or what their motivation is) forms a large part of the story's pleasure.

Plot twists that shift suspicion onto other secondary or primary characters in your cast effectively complicate your narrative. You force your reader to let go of specific assumptions or guesses and press onward through adrenalin-pumping suspense.

The cult classic murder mystery series *Twin peaks* by David Lynch and Mark Frost contains many excellent examples of shifting suspicion. In the seemingly idyllic, picturesque small town, everyone seems implicated in the murder of student Laura Palmer. The town's seedy real estate developer, for example, runs a secret brothel. Laura's seemingly indifferent boyfriend is a drug peddler jealous of Laura's flirtations with others.

Multiple characters have motivations (from jealousy to murky underworld dealings implicating Laura). Individual arcs and possible murder motives are revealed in twist after twist. This makes it difficult to lay suspicion at any single character's feet. The town appears collectively responsible, as seedy double lives run rife in its hidden underbelly.

Plot twists that shift suspicion raise narrative tension. When multiple characters are suspects, each scene involving these characters becomes laden with potential for drama, conflict and revelation.

Suspicion-shifting plot twists don't only work in murder and mystery novels. In fantasy, for example, a secondary character such as an advisor to a monarch might turn out, in a twist, to be a spy. The whole time they've been feeding information about the kingdom's defenses to an unknown third party aligned to rival forces.

A plot twist like this creates useful narrative doubling. We see the monarch making decisions guided by the assumption their aide is trustworthy. The effect of this – the reader knowing more than a central character – is often harrowing, suspenseful.

7: Be careful with anti-climactic turns of plot

Plot twists don't always *increase* tension. Some plot twists reverse anticipation and suspense. For example, the climax of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Unconsoled* (1995). The story follows the build-up to a major concert performance in an Eastern European city by Ryder, the protagonist, a renowned musician. The twist is we never get to see the concert happen. It is constantly deferred in a dream-like narrative where Ryder struggles to keep forgotten appointments and promises.

The danger with this type of plot twist or surprise – where an expected plot point never arrives – is that the reader could be frustrated by the lack of payoff. Ultimately, successful plot twist ideas are often those that deepen the themes of a novel or defer major plot revelation, allowing readers to enjoy the guessing game longer.