

Tips and Tricks: Plotting

by Joyce Faulkner

For a novelist, whether you start with a story idea or with a character, plotting is fundamental. Over the many years that I studied the art of writing, I searched for the perfect technique. I finally concluded that no one approach worked for every project or for where I found myself mentally at a given time. Also, as I began working with coauthors or ghosting someone else's story, I discovered that what worked inside my own head wasn't useful for teams. Now I use a variety of tools to stimulate ideas, explore options, add complexity—or simplify.

BRAINSTORMING

I use a white board or flip chart when I'm brainstorming a story. Even in solo projects, I sometimes include friends and/or a bottle of wine in the exercise. The goal is to relax and approach a project in the most enjoyable and creative mode possible. I use this technique either during the book definition phase or in the middle of a piece when I've encountered a structural problem.



I go from person to person and record as many ideas as possible until the group no longer has anything new to offer. During this exercise, I write each suggestion on the white board without comment or judgment. Then I evaluate what we've listed. Are there duplicates? Combine them. Suggestions that don't apply? Get rid of them. Finally, I determine which ideas are *not* workable. What's left gives me either a starting point or a turning point. If I'm just starting the book, I move to another plotting tool—like creating a short synopsis. If I'm midway through a troubled book, I rework existing copy with the new ideas in mind.

REFINING THE IDEA

In the earliest phase of planning a novel, I write three paragraphs describing the beginning, middle, and the end of the story. It's a habit I picked up my freshman year of college. The result is often a good test of the concept. I look at what I've written and ask myself some pertinent questions. Is the notion enough to carry a novel? A novella? A short story? Does it move me enough to spend many months (or years) developing it? Is the theme compelling enough to grab a new reader? Will this tale satisfy my existing audience?

If I do pursue the idea, these three paragraphs morph over time as I describe what I'm doing to others. If I change direction, I refine the passage to reflect it. Over time, it gets shorter and more to the point. Eventually, it becomes the "elevator pitch" that I use when I'm promoting my book. For example, when I tell a stranger about my novel, *USERNAME*, I say: "There is an aging serial killer who lures his victims through the Internet and an identity thief who finds her victims on-line and they target the same woman." This one sentence blurb evolved from my first three paragraph

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musing that I created in 1999. So did the whole book.

DOCUMENTING THE STORY LINE

Even if I haven't worked out the characters in detail, I sit down and write the story. Some people call this the "zero draft." It usually takes me a couple of months. Other authors tell me they can do it much faster—or slower. It depends on how committed you are to the idea and how quickly the story forms in your imagination. Inexperienced novelists sometimes consider this a completed book, however, it's important to think of it as a working document—a lump of clay. I view this first manuscript as a way to record my idea in depth. As I develop my characters, I might change my mind about the way the plot evolves. I might add scenes for one purpose or another—and what I wrote as exposition in the zero draft might be reworked as action or dialogue.

NOTE: For authors who write series or who work on many projects at the same time, the zero draft might be stored for future development.

CARVING A STORY OUT OF THE LUMP OF CLAY

Once you have the zero draft, it's time to develop the plot. There are many techniques and tools available to facilitate this job. Authors use the ones that work best for the way they work. Some of us use different techniques for different books. Some use various tools for different parts of the same novel. Others maintain they don't use any of these options. We are all different.

Outline/Reverse Outline - We all learned how to do outlines in school so the technique is familiar and easy. I use it on my zero draft when I'm figuring out "pace" and "reveal." It helps me identify inconsistencies in the plot or problems with sequencing. Have I provided the reader enough information to appreciate the "twist?" Does a heroine's behavior reflect things that have happened to her earlier in the book? I use a reverse outline to evaluate scenes that create suspense and to make sure that everything in the novel should be there. Example, if a clue is hidden behind a picture hanging over the fireplace, have I included at least two "meaningful" mentions of that picture

in scenes before the reveal?

Many authors have used this technique. William Faulkner supposedly scrawled the outline of his Pulitzer-Prize winning story, *A Fable*, on his office walls. Here are some examples of outlines created by famous writers.



Sylvia Plath's outline of "The Bell Jar."

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2326630/Notes-diagrams-famous-authors-including-J-K-Rowling-Sylvia-Plath-planned-novels.html>



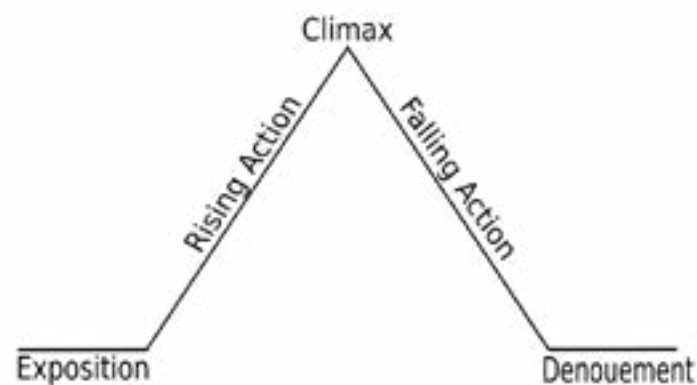
Jack Kerouac's approach was creative even in the planning stages.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2326630/Notes-diagrams-famous-authors-including-J-K-Rowling-Sylvia-Plath-planned-novels.html>

Turning Points - Anyone who has studied the art of writing will recognize Gustav Fretag's Pyramid. He separates a plot into six parts—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement.

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While I don't always map these parts of my plots anymore, I keep them in mind when I'm writing. After all of these years, even in a short story, I find myself working the pyramid almost instinctively. I rearrange the traditional structure occasionally though.



Freytag's Pyramid

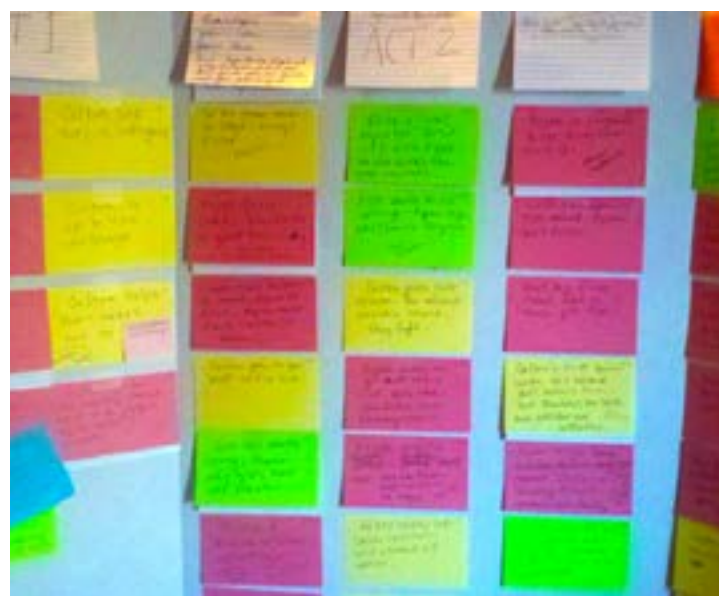
I do make a note of the turning points themselves though. These are places in a piece where the author makes decisions about what happens next—and what happens next can be many things. Although it may seem formulaic, these “causal changes” help move the story along and prevent a writer from lingering so long in one phase that audiences lose interest.

In plays and movies, turning points occur at precise places—the first at 10% into the show, the second at 25%, the third at 50%, the fourth at 75% and the fifth at 92-99%. In my younger years, I was dogmatic—and if I was writing a teleplay, I would have had to be. However, as a novelist, I found I could fiddle with the positioning of these inflections—to a point. More than once, I had a content editor point out that the story “dragged” and when I repositioned those points, that solved that negative reader “feeling.” It does depend on your genre and the specific audience. What works for a romance would not satisfy readers of action/adventure books.

Although turning points have been called many things over the years, the five turning points are: “Opportunity,” “An Imposed Change,” “The Point of No Return,” “A Setback,” and “The Climax.” (See further definitions here: www.storymastery.com/story/screenplay-structure-five-key-turning-points-successful-scripts/)

I lay these inflection points over my zero draft and adjust my story line to make things happen where they should. Depending on the planned length, I can allot the appropriate amount of time to each part of my book and create a rhythm that accommodates the attention span and expectations of audiences. Alternatively, I create a map or chart to help me visualize the rise and fall of the plot and that helps me identify the turning points.

Index Cards - Index cards are time-honored organization tools. In the olden days after I had my zero draft, I used real index cards—with a different color for the phases of Freytag's pyramid. I'd write a short description of the different scenes on each card—and mark the turning points with tape or a marker so I could see them at a glance. I'd also have different colored decks where I plotted the growth of my characters over the course of the story. Then I'd lay the decks out on the kitchen table—and rearrange and rethink. As the story developed, I'd add more scenes. I still do that today—either using iPad index card apps or in Scrivener. They are a great way to structure your options.



Example of using index cards to plot a novel.

Spreadsheets - Many authors use spreadsheets. I used Excel to outline *USERNAME*. You can see JK Rowling's handwritten spreadsheet for *Harry Potter* here:

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J.K. Rowling's Plotting Spreadsheet for Harry Potter
www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2326630/Notes-diagrams-famous-authors-including-J-K-Rowling-Sylvia-Plath-planned-novels.html



Joseph Heller's spreadsheet plot for "Catch-22"
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2326630/Notes-diagrams-famous-authors-including-J-K-Rowling-Sylvia-Plath-planned-novels.html>

Templates - As I mentioned earlier, scripts are developed from templates. All stories have been told before somewhere. For example, the story of star-crossed lovers from opposing tribes has been told many times over the centuries—from *Romeo and Juliette* to *West Side Story*. Mystery readers will tell you that they like a certain author because they fall in love with a character who isn't allowed much growth over the course of a series. Sherlock Holmes at the beginning of his career isn't all that different from Sherlock Holmes at the end. Romances follow strict plot outlines. Some authors embrace templates, others reject them as

“unimaginative.” The fact is audiences love old stories finding new life.

With the advent of the computer as a mainstream novel writing tool along with software like Scrivener, templates to help you structure your novel are appearing in the literature more often. Author Justin Swapp offers a variety of free templates on his website: justinswapp.com/free-scrivener-templates/

Visual Storyboards - Pictures have a big impact both for readers and authors. Hitchcock used detailed storyboards for each scene in his movies. I've used stick figure drawings, toy cars, model airplanes, and maps to help me visualize what I'm describing. I've also used photos to help me understand locations, people, objects, vehicles, and action. As a student, I'd tape them to a wall or pin them to a bulletin board. Now I put images into Scrivener's “Index Card” view. My new book, *Vala's Bed*, has many pictures of World War II-era Mannheim, Auschwitz, German cars, people, clothes, buildings, etc. I also have collected music and movie clips from that time.

You will find many examples of storyboarding on the Internet. Several sites offer blank forms that you can download, print, and use for sketching. There are also apps for storyboarding which allow you to create “cartoons” of a scene to help you visualize the action.

Plotting is fun. It's where we make our stories work. There are many new and traditional techniques out there—too many to list them all here. By nature, authors are creative—and often think spatially. We see our characters, feel their fear, understand their life circumstances—in context to an environment that we have created. Some people are so adept that they develop their books without external tools. Their processes are mental. Some of us grow into that state of mind with practice.

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