

Strategic Plotting

Fiction is about character growth that comes as a result of people in trouble. When the trouble is resolved, when the character has learned something about himself, or changed something about himself, the story is over.

Writing fiction is a balancing act of character and plot. Too much character can corrupt the pace of the story; too much plot and the reader loses anyone to care about.

Remember this: the reader must have a rooting interest in the central character (the protagonist). We must care about this person, even if it's to dislike or despise him. Without an emotional connection between the reader and the protagonist there is no story.

Whether you're plotting a short story or a novel, both need all the requisite elements of fiction: a protagonist, an antagonist, and a major point of conflict. The bigger, more complex the conflict, the stronger the characters. The stronger the characters, the better the story.

Your protagonist is always a reluctant hero. He is flawed, which is to say he is human. He is dragged out of his comfortable world into uncertainty. He changes internally because he is forced to look at his flaws as a result of the conflict presented by the antagonist. This conflict is the stimulation to his character growth. There should be internal conflict and external conflict *in every scene*.

Fiction is comprised of three acts: Act One: the Setup, Act Two: the Complication, and Act Three: the Resolution.

Act One shows the protagonist before the trouble starts, in his comfortable world, but with myriad problems. Act One ends when the protagonist is so tired of avoiding the impending problem that he believes it is easier to fix the problem than to continue to avoid it. This is when he embarks upon his Quest. By the end of Act One, all the major players have been introduced, as well as the major point of conflict.

Act One places the conflict into the world of the protagonist. It is here the reader sees the impossibility of the situation, how high a mountain must be climbed. As we meet the players he is to interact with, we make judgments about these people—are they useful to the protagonist, or do they add to his many conflicts? The central conflict materializes before us (and the protagonist) and may increase in complexity because of who the protagonist is, and the people around him, and what's being asked of him. Act One is the building block upon which this story is going to stand. It's the first date. You want to get it right.

Act Two complicates every tiny point of conflict introduced in Act One. At the end of Act Two, the protagonist and reader alike are certain he will never be able to fix the problem. This is the Darkest Moment.

In Act Two think: development. This is where the conflict lives and breathes, and by doing so, takes air out of the room the protagonist desperately needs. This is where we, the reader, learn more about the individual relationships with the characters introduced in Act One. These complicate matters for the protagonist, but aren't necessarily bad. A love may deepen. A personal history may be revealed.

The Darkest Moment is where all the strings become so entangled we fear they are knotted beyond repair. How can the protagonist possibly get past this emotional or physical obstacle, this impediment? The protagonist is crushed. We are desperate to find a solution, only to realize one doesn't exist. Houdini is in the chains and under water, and the key he is supposed to have hidden down his throat has been swallowed.

Immediately after the Darkest Moment, the character has an epiphany, an inspiration, or draws upon something he remembers or has experienced in his past. A Discovery. This kicks off Act Three, when the conflicts begin to resolve. The resolution of these secondary conflicts is critical here, to make way for the operatic aria—the Climax. This needs to fly solo. In the climax, he deals, once and for all, with the central external conflict, and he takes a good look at his internal flaws. This is when he either succumbs to his failings or overcomes them. The reader is cheering for him to overcome his flaws, but characters do whatever they do. The point is that he must look at himself and be changed by what he sees. This will allow him to resolve the conflict (or not).

In the final analysis, readers will remember what happens to the protagonist internally, which is ultimately more important than what happens to the external conflict. The Discovery has led to resolution of the Conflict, has led to wisdom. Flawed wisdom, perhaps, but a wisdom we can understand makes sense as a logical outcome of the quest.

A story can be told from any point of view, can include any number of characters, can span any length of time, can host a number of subplots. Stick to one good guy, one bad guy, and one main point of conflict. Give your characters passion, memorable names, quirks, angers, frustrations and depth. Include lots of sensory imagery, so the reader can be in the scene with the character, and reveal your character's nature through the use of facial expressions and gestures. Differentiate the characters from each other, and from you. Give them a serious problem, throw them off the deep end, and watch them work their way out of it, given whom they are and what they do.

Strongly suggested reading: *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler

Spain Assignment Number One – The Opening

Begin in the conflict.

All the background information you need to present to the reader can be presented as the character continues his journey. Don't show him waking up in the morning, don't show him as he's on his way to the trouble.

Remember, the story starts when the trouble starts. Begin right in the middle of the conflict when the reader is thrown into turmoil along with the character. How he got there is something else for the reader to worry about. Readers love to worry about the protagonist.

Make certain your protagonist is sympathetic right from the start. Give us richness in setting, character and conflict.

Spain Assignment Number Two – The First Turning Point

Flash forward one hundred or so pages from the beginning.

Your character has been resisting the trouble that has been visited upon him (generally something from his past that has come back to haunt him) and in this scene there is a final straw. One last thing that makes him grit his teeth and say to himself, “All right! All right! Fixing this problem will be a lot easier than continuing to avoid it. I will fix it and be back to my Ordinary World quicker than if I continue to do battle with it.”

In this scene, show his supreme frustration with the situation and the final straw that makes him decide to jump into the conflict with both feet.

Spain Assignment Number Three – The Darkest Moment

Flash forward another hundred or two hundred pages from the First Turning Point, or the Acceptance of the Quest scene.

Things are bad for your protagonist. Not only does he think he'll never fix the external conflict, but he may not even survive the attempt.

This situation is so horrible, so terrible that he is at a loss as to how to make it better. It is made worse by his propensity for creating and perpetuating such situations (this is called his “fatal flaw”)

He keeps tripping on his same old flaw, the one that got him into this problem to begin with. All this conflict—initially of his own making—is causing him to take a look at himself, and he is distressed at what he sees.

This is a dark place for him. Make the reader sweat it out.

Spain Assignment Number Four – The Ending

Sometimes this scene comes shortly after the Darkest Moment.

In the ending scene, there must be conflict resolution, both internal and external.

Your protagonist must finish the situation with the external conflict. Maybe he'll fix the situation, maybe he won't. The external conflict resolution is not as important to the reader as what the protagonist does with his internal conflict.

Does he fix himself? Does he triumph over his shortcomings so this type of thing will never happen to him again? Or does he succumb to his shortcomings, which does not bode well for his future and those who love him?

Either way works, but in this scene, we must have resolution to both conflicts.