The Plot Thickens

by

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Introduction

There are thirty-two ways to tell a story but only one plot – things are not what they seem.
- Jim Thompson

The Plot Thickens offers you, the writer, myriad methods of plotting. Whether you are a published veteran or a writing novice, we present alternate methods of finding the best path to express and deliver the stuff pinging around in your head, driving you crazy and alienating friends and family. Okay, maybe your case isn't so severe, but that great idea that made you sit up one day and say, "I'm going to write a book," can't make itself a reality without a little guided, focused help.

Do you write by the seat of your pants or outline like a crazed English teacher? We'll examine each.

To plot or not to plot – that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the minds to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous pantzing
Or to take arms against the GMC of troubles
And, by opposing, outline them.
-Billy "Rough Draft" Shakespeare

Do you write around a situation or let the characters lead? We'll look at both.

Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are. . .something is bound to happen.
-Anne Lamott

Is the three or four act structure your preferred method? How about centric plotting or using index cards?

If you have no idea of how to take the first step, if you can't decide if writing is a dream come true or a nightmare (hint: sometimes it's both), the following chapters can help you decide which method works for you.

Repeat: Which method works for *you*. There is no right, correct or perfect way to plot. Nor is there a wrong way, just what isn't aligned with your best way of thinking. Sometimes, what works for one story won't for another.

There are many roads to Oz.
-Jennifer Crusie

Pick what works. Ignore the rest. Explore, and most of all, enjoy.

Share. Evolve. Inspire. Write.
-Cheryl "Let's make up stuff" Steimel
-Mary "I've got an idea" Timmer

The Hook

The hook is overrated.

Ha! Got your attention, didn't it? Even if you're new to writing, you know the importance of the opening hook. It grabs your reader's attention and convinces him to buy. Not only the reader in the bookstore, but the literary agent or editor who will acquire your story and turn it into a book.

Take a few minutes the next time you're in a bookstore or library. Observe the patrons as they select a book. What's the average time they spend after opening the front cover to the moment they decide this is the book to take home? A few seconds? Ten? Fifteen?

A good hook raises questions, piques curiosity, and draws the reader deeper into your story. Without a compelling, question-producing opening, they aren't going to read further. You only have a few sentences to make an impression. Nowadays, no one has the luxury of time. You have to hit them fast and hard.

Your reader wants to be drawn into a believable world from word one. He expects to be entertained. Don't disappoint him. Skip the protagonist sitting with a cup of coffee, contemplating the letter she got from dear Aunt Sally, or in the car on her way to a governess post in the Scottish Highlands. Jump her right into the story – Aunt Sally died, but collecting the inheritance means quitting the job she loves and moving back to the town that gave her heartache. Or a car bomb goes off, leaving her stranded in the Scottish Highlands.

Conversely, don't plunge the reader so quickly into the story with a one line exclamation from the protagonist. The reader has no context in which to place it. It's a cheap device that's been overused.

Instead, start where the protagonist's problem begins, raise

questions that intrigues the reader, and filter in backstory later.

What is a hook? According to Dwight Swain, author of Techniques of the Selling Author, "A hook is a device for catching, holding, sustaining or pulling anything – in this case, a reader."

A hook prepares the reader for what's ahead – the immediate future of a character and introduces the conflict. It sets the mood and style and gives the setting – all the elements of who, what, why, when, where and how.

Who is the story about?

A penniless orphan? A struggling housewife? A wizard? Whomever you've chosen as the protagonist has to strike a cord with your reader. They need to quickly identify with him and his problem. While Melville's "Call me Ishmael" hints that Ishmael might be an alias, is it enough to intrigue the reader to continue? To do that, you need to provide –

What is the story about?

> *One hot, August Thursday afternoon, Maddie Faraday reached under the front seat of her husband's Cadillac and pulled out a pair of black lace underpants. They weren't hers.*
>
> *-Tell Me Lies by Jennifer Crusie*

The story now has a "what" – alleged infidelity. How will Maddie respond to her unexpected find? Will she confront her husband? Another layer of curiosity is added to the reader's expectations.

Why is the story worth reading?

What's changed or unique? What's about to change? Throw the reader a curve to intrigue them to read on.

> *The unbelievable horror began when Fred walked in on her parents making love on the living room coffee table.*
>
> *-Sleeping with the Fishes by Mary Janice Davidson*

Fred is traditionally a man's name, so Ms. Davidson has introduced the unanticipated. So is the fact of Fred walking in on her parents making love. Danger is promised with the phrase

"the unbelievable horror began. . ." The author has set up many questions the reader will pursue by reading further.

Where is the story set?

In London? The moon? A suburban living room? You are creating a world for the reader to step into. Give them a sense of where they are and let them suspend belief.

> *When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.*
> *-The Fellowship of the Ring by J.R.R. Tolkien*

The reader knows the location – Bag End in Hobbiton. Reference to an eleventy-first birthday party indicates a different culture.

When does the story take place?

The present? Near future? Alternate past? Give the reader a timeframe.

> *The year 1866 was signalized by a remarkable incident, a mysterious and inexplicable phenomenon, which doubtless no one has yet forgotten.*
> *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea (1870), Jules Verne*

Not only does the reader know the year, 1866, but Verne has intrigued the reader with "a remarkable incident, a mysterious and inexplicable phenomenon." Who wouldn't want to know about the incident and phenomenon?

How is the main character affected?

Does he panic? Turn the other cheek? Ignore the sudden change in his life?

> *The regular, early morning yell of horror was the sound of Arthur Dent waking up and suddenly remembering where he was.*
> *-Life, The Universe and Everything by Douglas Adams*

Arthur Dent definitely panics. The reader, knowing the "how" of his reaction, is intrigued enough to read on and find out why he

yelled in horror and where, exactly, he is.

If you've noticed a pattern in these examples, it is that the opening of a story begins when a change takes place. The reader doesn't care at this point about the main character's background, he wants to know what happens next.

How can you show when a change takes place?

- Start with the arrival of a stranger (usually bearing bad news)
- Start on a day that is different (Maddie didn't expect to find black lace underwear)
- Start with a crisis
- Show something unique, unanticipated (Fred walking in on her parents)
- Start with the emotional moment in the character's life that will drive the story
- Begin with dialogue
- Start with a question
- Start in media rest – in the middle of things, stuff is happening and the reader has to read more to catch up

In all these scenarios, the change sets off a chain reaction of events that continually get worse and worse for the character. Build from that moment of crisis, force the character to make a commitment and thrust him into a strange and dangerous world.

What to leave out

You won't engage your reader if you fall into the common mistakes writers make:

- Don't add backstory, background, or the past. Stick to what's happening in the story now.
- Forget character description. There's time later to have the heroine look in the mirror and admire her luxurious blonde hair, azure eyes and alabaster skin. Better yet, have another character notice her looks.

- Setting. Yes, the reader needs to know where the story takes place, but they don't need a multi-page description of Aunt Edna's antique store.

- Discussion of past events. "Shelley, dear sister, something happened today that reminded me of when we found old man Smith's body, which led to the arrest of Handyman Jones." Boring, boring, boring. People don't talk like this in real life.

- Flashbacks. It takes skill to pull one off. You probably don't have it.

- Introducing too many characters at once.

- Similar names. Matt, Mike, Mick, Mandy and Missy deserve their own stories.

To engage the reader you need an existing situation, a character in the situation, a goal, an obstacle and consequences to the decision the character is forced to make. If you add in a reaction to his decision and a problem for the next scene, you've got all the ingredients to keep your reader turning page after page.

Sagging Middles and Lackluster Endings

The novel's middle is vital in holding your reader's attention. It's where the protagonist will encounter the bulk of his trials and tribulations, where her strength will be tested and flaws exposed. It's where you torture your darlings and force them through life-changing events. It sets up the major crisis at the end of the book and paves the way for a satisfying conclusion.

The middle is also where the writer is most likely to give up. After the first few chapters, he realizes the big bite he's bitten off. How can he hold the tension? How can he up the stakes and plunge the antagonist into deeper and deeper trouble? In other words, how can he paint his hero into a corner then realistically get him out?

To avoid a sagging middle, introduce questions that make the reader hang around until he is satisfied with the answers. What is the protagonist's challenge he'll have to overcome? What does he truly, truly want? (Remember the external and internal goals.) How will the antagonist stop him from reaching his goal? How will the external plot events magnify the protagonist's internal conflicts? Will his flaws get in the way of his attempts to resolve the external plot?

If you challenge your protagonist, your reader will follow.

Don't let your reader down at the end of the book. They've hung with you through hundreds of pages and expect a payoff. Here are four common mistakes to avoid disappointing them:

- Ending too fast. Maybe the author got tired of the characters and wanted to move on. Maybe she didn't know how to end it. Whatever the reason, don't shortchange the reader. Remember, the ending is the last impression the reader has of your story. Give them satisfaction. They'll remember when your next book is published.

- Endings that drag on too long. The opposite of the abrupt ending is the one that seemingly goes on forever. Maybe the author loved the story and characters so much she didn't want to let go. Don't lose your reader's interest by going on too long. Leave them wanting more.

- The ho-hum ending. You've opened the book with an incredible hook, you've layered in plenty of conflict and tension, but the ending doesn't live up to the buildup. Reward the reader for their patience with an ending that matches their expectations.

- The predictable or cliché ending. The fat high school kid attends his ten year reunion, now trim and thin and a millionaire. He wins over the prom queen, takes to the stage as M.C. and has everyone eating out of his hand. This type of ending is too neat and unbelievable. Give the hero his just reward, but make him suffer to earn it.

The end should give resolution and catharsis to the reader. It should show how the protagonist has changed since the beginning of the story. Their world should be back to normal, but a new normal. They've gone through an incredible journey and emerged a stronger person.

The external conflict is resolved in the climax, but don't forget to give the reader resolution to the internal conflict, for it's what they will most identify with. It should emotionally satisfy them and reinforce the faith they gave you on page one.

Tie up loose ends, resolve all conflicts, reinforce the theme, show the protagonist's growth and give the reader catharsis. Make the reader's last experience with your book memorable.

Goal Motivation and Conflict

Even a perfectly wonderful plot can result in a flat story if your characters aren't well developed. If you can't give a good reason for your characters to act the way they do, the story will feel contrived. It's essential that you give your characters goals and motivations. Furthermore, if you want to make the story more interesting than the average cookbook, you're going to need conflicts for your characters to overcome.

Goals are what your character wants. Does he want a car? Is he out to make it into the major leagues of his sport? Does she need to solve a crime? A character's goals can be the focal point of the story, but it doesn't have to be. Take, for example, the character Scarlet O'Hara. Her goal was to marry Ashley Wilkes. But while her goal makes her act like an idiot at times, it really isn't the driving force behind the story. On the other hand, if you look at Rocky, his goal was to be the champ, and it's that goal the entire story is focused upon.

While goals can be tangible or external like a destination met or a mystery solved, they can also be internal. Your character may have a goal to prove something to herself or others. She may need to find peace in her soul. She may just want to make it through the day without going postal or crying in front of her co-workers. Regardless, your characters need to have goals. Goals help the reader cheer for your hero or heroine. They make the character believable, and they can very often shape the behavior of your character.

If your character's goals aren't in line with their behavior, you'd better give a good reason for them to act against their own interests or a compelling turn of events causing them to lose sight of their goal.

Don't forget that goals can change. Your character might start out the story just wanting to make it through the day, but when her child's school is locked down due to a terrorist threat, her goal might change from making it through the day to busting into that school and getting her baby out. Under the right

circumstances any goal can change.

Usually, there are two sides of a goal, one is external – something the character wants to have or achieve outside of himself. The other is internal – something the character needs for his or her emotional satisfaction. Say your character wants to own a Mercedes Maybach. That's an external, tangible goal. But why does she want to own a Mercedes? Maybe she wants to show her ex-husband that she can be successful without him. That's an internal, non-tangible goal. The car is just an external expression of the internal desire to "show him."

But wait, you say, isn't the internal goal her motivation? It could be part of it, but then you have to ask yourself why. Why does she want to show him? Did he try to convince her that she would never be able to succeed without him in her life? Then "showing him" is part motivation and part goal.

Motivation is what drives your character to hold his or her goals. What causes rational men and women to run into burning houses to help strangers? Did someone save her at one time? Did someone fail to save her? Did she lose someone in a fire? Or does he need something to make others look up to him? Why? So your character wants to super rich – why? Answer that, and you will have your character's motivation.

While motivation gives your reader a way of understanding and relating to your character, sometimes the reader doesn't have to know the whole motive. (You, the writer should know though.) Why did Scarlet O'Hara want to marry Ashley Wilkes? We, as readers, might surmise that she had an incurable crush on him or she was insanely competitive and didn't want her cousin to have a man she couldn't land herself. The fact is we never really do find out what started Ms. O'Hara's obsession. But I bet Margaret Mitchell knew.

Motivations can be slippery things. Sometimes a character may not realize what her true motivations are. I suspect that if we all understood our motivations in life, we might decide some of them are pretty silly. Our goals might change. But I wouldn't over-analyze your character's motivations. Or, at least, I might refrain from letting your character think about it too much. Your character might become too rational, and then he won't seem human, and you'll lose your story.

Conflict is what makes a story interesting. If Moses had waltzed into Egypt and marched out with his people skipping

along side of him, we wouldn't have much of a story. And, most readers wouldn't find it believable either. (Yeah, right. What sort of king is going to let half his subjects walk out on him?) But the plagues, a murderous Pharaoh, a large sea to cross, and a whole bunch of other obstacles flesh out the story, make it interesting and make it believable.

I wish I knew where the famous analogy of goals, motivation and conflict originated, but it goes like this: If you have two dogs and two bones, you don't have a story. If you have two dogs and one bone, you might have a somewhat of a story. But if you've got two starving dogs and one bone, then you've got a story. Do you see it? Do you see their goals, their motivations, and their conflict?

There is a tricky balance between conflict and motivation. If a character's goals aren't important enough to him or her, a tough conflict could easily thwart them from pursuing the goal. The motivation behind the goal has to be strong enough to withstand the challenge of the conflicts you put in the character's path.

Does your character want to save the kitten in the tree? Really? Why? If the tree is covered in poison ivy, will he still be willing to climb up and save the kitten? What if there are killer hornets nesting in the tree and the hero can't withstand a common bee sting? What would make him climb that tree then? He might do so if a large reward was being offered for the kitten's safe return. He might be even more likely if he needed the money to pay for his son's medication – especially if the son might die without the medication. But if the hero's goal is to buy a 1968 Corvette Stingray and he can get the money in other ways, he might decide death by hornet isn't worth the reward.

An easy way to add tension to your story is to throw together two or more characters with conflicting goals. This is the classic conflict ploy used in romance, but it works well in other fiction as well. Say your hero, a cop, hates religion and anyone who has one. His goal is to get through life without knowing God. Wouldn't it be interesting if he found himself babysitting for a devoted man of the cloth? And suppose that man of the cloth has known too many cops who were dirty? His job is to save the cop's soul. But he doesn't really want to. The cop's job is to save the minister, but he doesn't want to either. Think you could have fun with that? I know I could.

Give your characters goals, give him a compelling reason to want

them, and then make the character (and your reader) suffer one set back after another. It’s an easy recipe for a good story, and it will make your plotting much easier.

Scene and Sequel

Scene and sequel always sounded so esoteric to me, a lofty action practiced by those in the *literary* world. It seemed precise and calculated and very dry and boring. Not at all the way I plotted my stories, which has always been a dash of pantsing and enough planning to know the key events, but none of the details.

I was wrong. Scene and sequel is something I've done since first putting pencil to paper and fingers to keyboard. It's another way of describing pacing, cause and effect, action and reaction. Both are critical to building your story and without them it is flat, and your reader will stop turning pages.

Scenes are the moments of conflict between your characters, the "stuff" that happens to them, the establishment of the goals they want, the thing or person that gets in the way, and the failure to obtain what they set out to achieve.

Sequels are the transitions between scenes, the aftermath, when the character reacts to what has just happened, reviews it and makes a decision that leads him to a new goal and further conflict.

Scenes

The functions of a scene are varied.

- It moves the story forward by changing the character's situation.
- It keeps the reader involved by thrusting the character into opposition, creating tension as the reader wonders if the character will obtain his goal.
- It gives the character opportunity to grow.
- It shows the character's strengths and weaknesses, values

and beliefs.

Tip:
Goals should be: Specific Concrete Immediate enough for the character to take action

Scenes consists of three elements.

1. The goal. Usually short-term, but tied into the overall story goal. The character must want something. To fall in love is a weak goal, but to join an on-line dating service and ask your friends to fix you up with the objective of six blind dates in two weeks is a specific, concrete goal.

    a. What the character wants, his goal, is either:

        i. To possess something. Love, peace, the magic elixir, the return to a farmhouse in Kansas.

        ii. Relief from something. Poverty, boredom, the Ring of Sauron.

        iii. Revenge for something. A double-cross, violence, the murder the one-armed man committed.

2. Conflict. Opposition. Two starving dogs, one bone. Someone wins, someone loses. Readers love conflict. They can indentify with the fight and root for your character to overcome his obstacles, get the girl and live happily ever after. Of course, if you structure your scene correctly, the obstacles become more insurmountable, the stakes are continually raised, and the hero doesn't get the girl until he's faced his worst fears.

    a. How do you make it harder for your protagonist?

        i. Show his opposition's strength. The mortgage payment on the old homestead is due, and Johnny's unsuccessful in getting an extension from the bank's new officer.

        ii. Increase the obstacles in his way by having him

receive unexpected information. Cattle futures are in flux, and he must hustle to get his herd to market to get the best price.

iii. New complications equals renewed character effort which equals renewed reader commitment.

3. Disaster. A logical but unanticipated situation that upsets the character's progress and leads to new questions for the reader. Can the protagonist succeed in lieu of new information? What will he do now?

   a. The dastardly bank officer (Dastardly Dan) calls in the loan.

   b. Rumors swirl about the railroad cutting through land east of town, right where Johnny's farm lies.

   c. Beloved, innocent Nell spurns him in favor of Dastardly Dan, who plans on selling the foreclosed farm to the railroad for unlimited wealth.

   d. A snowstorm threatens to wipeout the herd.

Scene flaws

The reader is not engaged.

Solution: Anchor him by focusing on a character, even if it's not the story's main character. Revolve the action and drama around a specific character so the reader can gauge what happens and how he feels about it.

The goal is not clear.

Solution: Establish it early, in black and white so the reader worries about the outcome.

The goal is weak.

Solution: Make the goal short-term, something the character thinks is achievable. Keep the goal forefront throughout the action, don't let him lose sight of it.

The character is weak.

Solution: Increase the stakes again if he doesn't achieve his

scene goal. Always have your character making choices instead of passively waiting for something to happen.

There is a lack of urgency.

Solution: Add a timeline. Force your character to take immediate action. Johnny has to get his herd to the train depot before Friday when the bank note is due.

There is not enough opposition or it is weak.

Solution: Beef up the antagonist. Give him strong motives as well and a specific, concrete goal that is mutually exclusive of your hero's. A strong antagonist gives the protagonist focus and makes him stronger.

The scene feels contrived.

Solution: The "Act of God" ploy can occasionally work, but the disaster should be organic to the character and the story. Maybe Johnny knew about the approaching storm but instead of rushing his herd to market, he spent the time with Nell. This compounds his problems, as losing the farm now becomes his fault.

Writing scenes

The timeframe should be linear, with no breaks.

Establish the time, place, circumstances and point of view at the start.

Establish the character's goal at the start. It must be clear, concrete and explicit in order to intrigue the reader. Without a goal there is no conflict, no action and no reason for the reader to stick around.

If applicable, use a focused, unexpected hook to draw in the reader.

> *"I saw Dastardly Dan with your gal last night."*
>
> *"What's this I hear about old man McGee selling out to the B&O railroad?"*
>
> *"The storm's cut the telegraph lines between here and Summitville. Got your herd in yet?"*

This is no time for flashbacks. In reality, in the swirl of action and opposition, your character doesn't have time to sit back and reflect on how he got into this mess. Flashbacks interrupt the story's flow and make the reader lose interest.

Don't summarize. You want to display every facet of your character's agony. Don't gloss over what he's feeling.

Mind the old adage, "show don't tell." If Johnny's upset because Nell is seeing Dastardly Dan, have him punch a hole in the barn door or chop a cord of wood with vengeance.

Show character motivation and reaction. Why does Johnny want to save the farm? Why should I care? What happens if he doesn't? What does he feel when he learns of the call of the bank note? Nell's infidelity? The approaching storm? Don't spend a lot of time on his internalization, this is a place to show action, after all, but give me, the reader, reasons why I should stick around.

Don't skimp on the scene's length. Scenes are inherently longer than sequels. The importance of the goal needs to be established as well as the conflict and how the repercussions will affect your character. A satisfying emotional peak must be built, drawing in the reader and making life hell for the hero. Unanticipated information and problems must be introduced and the establishment of characterization explored. These all demand time. Save brevity for the sequels.

Sequels

Okay, your hero has met his Waterloo and is defeated. What is his reaction? His state of mind? What will he do next?

Sequels explore these areas. A sequel is a bridge between two scenes. It is the aftermath, the place where the previous events are mulled over and a new decision made, which will, of course, lead to deeper conflict.

The function of a scene is:

- To give introspection. What just happened? What is the character feeling? Is Johnny angry? Upset? Jealous? Scared? Probably all of the above. What is his next step?

- Slow the pace. We've climbed the emotional peak with

Johnny is his quest to save the farm. Now we need to take a breather and regroup.

- Translate the disaster into a new goal. The character will shortly enter a new scene with a new goal. How does he get there? By finding a reason in the previous disaster to turn in a new direction (and more conflict, but he doesn't know this yet. Your reader, smart person that she is, already has it figured out and can't wait to see what's in store for him.)

    - The character must act with reason and motivation. His decision – this or that – leads to a new goal. Does Johnny pack up and move to Cincinnati? If yes, he faces a new goal and new conflicts. Does he find a new buyer for his beef? How? Where? Whatever he decides brings consequences.

- Summarize. Shorten reality. We don't need to see the play-by-play of Johnny's decision. We know it might take time for him to come to a conclusion, but we can't afford to lose the reader's attention.

Sequel structure

Sequels consist of three elements.

1. Emotional reaction. This can be expressed by what the character is feeling, dialogue, and his reaction. This is a good time to add detail, to show how he feels with attention to the little things. Make the aftermath of the violent storm reflect his mood. Does the death of a calf mirror the end of his dreams? Does his reflection in a pool of melted snow show the failure he's become? In a few chosen words, you can access his feelings.

2. Dilemma. What should he do? The alternatives should be equally unappealing. Move to Cincinnati? It will prove he's a quitter, just like his old man always said. Find a new buyer for this beef? Will he have time? Good or bad, your character will have to puzzle out what action to take.

3. Decision. Ultimately, your character has to make a decision. He has a new goal that is logical and plausible. Sure, the stakes are higher, but the risk is worth it.

Writing sequel

Writing the sequel consists of three elements.

1. Compression. Time must be compressed. Johnny enters the saloon and doesn't emerge for a week. He sits in his darkened cabin, shooting holes in the walls. In effect, he's a mess, but you don't have time to go into his emotional breakdown. You want to keep the reader engaged, so his troubles have to be telescoped into one feeling, one feature that represents everything he's gone through. Maybe it's the discovery of dead calf that spurns him toward the new decision to call in a few favors, send a couple of telegraphs, and, by jingo, find a different buyer.

2. Transition. Your character has experienced a setback, but you can't afford to wallow in his misery. He must pick himself up, dust himself off and start all over again. Bridge the time or space by sandwiching it between his most dominate feeling.

    a. *"I hate the snow," Johnny mused as he pulled his collar tighter. "It will make driving the herd harder."*
    But it was still snowing when he set out for Tulsa.

3. Credibility. Your character's decision must follow a logical sequence. He's had a chance to think about things, sort out the alternatives and chose the best one. Of course, this might be the lesser of two evils, but it is a choice and it will propel him into the next scene. He has a new goal, it's specific, concrete and immediate enough to make him take action.

Integrating scene and sequel

A balance between scene and sequel should be maintained. After all, what is a roller coaster without long climbs out of the valleys and exhilarating twists, turns and descents? There are, however, a few rules to help you decide which should play a bigger part of your story.

Scenes drive action which propels the story.

Each peak (scene) should be larger than the one preceding it. Stakes are higher, choices uglier, the probability of failure more assured the closer you get to the end of your story. Start

out with small disasters and escalate them as you go along.

If the story drags, make the scenes bigger to increase the conflict and resulting tension.

If the story sounds implausible, make the sequel bigger to increase the logic of the character's choices.

Be flexible. Each story is different. Some demand more scene while others cry for a sequel's introspection. Balance them as best you can. Experience will tell you to take a break in the action or if you need to heighten the conflict.

Writing is not an exact science, but two of the key elements, the amino acids of storytelling, are scene and sequel.

Plotter or Pantser?

Plotter of Pantser? The question inevitably comes up whenever two writers meet. Opinions are strong on which is the best way to plot, and arguments against the other method sometimes leads to heated debates.

For those not familiar with the terminology, here is a brief description.

- Plotters are writers who organize, plan, outline and have a full understanding of who their characters are and where the story is going before they sit down and write the first word.

- Pantsers write "by the seat of their pants." Generally, they start with a character or a situation and sit down, start writing and trust that the story will come to them in the process.

The Pros:

Plotters –

- Plotters organize. They know what happens next, and if a new idea occurs, they think out the consequences before writing it into the story.

- Plotting is an efficient use of time. Not everyone can make a living writing full time. What time we can squeeze out of a hectic schedule can be put to the best use.

- Plotters have a purpose for each scene. A well thought out plot minimizes scenes written because characters demanded it, or a sparkly new idea takes over. Not that plotters are immune to explore once the writing is started, but wasted time is less likely.

- Rearrange scenes in outline form is less time consuming. Finding the problem in advance allows the writer to find

alternate solutions without investing hours and pages of writing.

Pantsers –

- Stream-of-consciousness writing is fresh, and the magic of discovery ignites creativity.

- The plot grows from story organically. The story emerges from the creative process.

- Pantsers learn characters as they write. Who can know all the quirks, values and backgrounds of the main and secondary characters without discovering them while writing? Let them reveal themselves over the length of the book.

- No boredom. If one scene isn't working, they can switch to another, one with more gravity/fun/adventure/conflict.

- Pantsers' artistry is not compromised by rigid outlines.

The Cons:

Plotters –

- It's work. Figuring out all the intricacies of a book takes an enormous amount of time that could be spent writing. Research, character studies, character and plot arcs, calendars, spreadsheets – it can consume your time.

- The quest to nail down every specific can work against a plotter as he details the book to death. At some point, he has to draw a line and start writing.

- However meticulous the pre-writing is done, it's impossible to know everything at once. Ideas do occur later. A research detail, an overheard conversation, etc. can open the door to an otherwise unknown plot wrinkle.

Pantsers –

- Crappy 1st drafts with plot holes, sagging middles and scenes that do not add to the overall story.

- Much editing & revision. Writing without a plan incorporates going back and foreshadowing or eliminating

plot points that show up unexpectedly. Character reactions may be inconsistent and need to be brought in line. There are myriad ways a story can go off track.

- Abandoned projects as the next, great idea takes hold and demands attention.

- Characters take over and lead to dead ends.

How to write more efficiently using your style:

Plotters -

- Try something organic – paint, sew, bake, take a nature walk. The freedom of not thinking about your story may bring a great idea to the surface.

- Collage or scrapbook your story. This may already be a part of your pre-writing routine, but using the intuitive right side of your brain can feed ideas to the more analytical left side of your brain. Plus, the tactile process of creating brings your characters to life.

- Write a brief scene that does not forward the plot but may add color and depth to your character.

Pantsers -

- Break down your story into manageable, smaller issues. Write down the things you want to happen in your story and put them in some semblance of order.

- Discover the GMC of your characters. Don't know what GMC is? It's Goal, Motivation and Conflict, the teaching tool of Deb Dixon and her excellent book by the same name. It's not hardcore outlining to fill in the blanks. . .Character wants_____(goal) because _____(motivation) but_____(conflict.) If you have these three elements, your book will be more solid, and your characters might not go off on so many tangents, wasting your valuable writing time.

- Ask what the purpose of the scene is. If it's not advancing the plot, it needs to go. (read more on this in the Scene and Sequel chapter.)

- Write one story while you're plotting the next. Your taste

for spontaneity is satisfied by roughly outlining the next story while using your current outline to make daily word count on your work in progress.

Neither method is correct. Both work. I suspect most of us fall somewhere in the middle, and the extreme plotters and pantsers are on the edges of the bell curve. I fall closer to the plotter side of the equation (yes, I have used a spreadsheet or two) because I like to be organized. On the other hand, I like surprises.

My method? I write down all the things that have to happen, put them in order then fine-tune the outline as I write toward it. So, I'll know X has to happen before Y, and Z is going to be a tremendous climax, but the smaller details (how the hero survives X and how to get all the players to Y) somehow magically take care of themselves. Author Barbara Samuel O'Neal calls the process "the girls in the basement," and I'm a firm believer in the subconscious knowing exactly what's going on and how to fix any problems.

Remember, be flexible. Nothing is carved in stone, nothing is out of the realm of possibilities. Be open to changes. Not all plotters are rigidly fused to their outlines, and not pantsers are flower children, blown by the wind.

Play to your strengths and be open to improving the process. Take advantage of the other's methods once in awhile and you'll find your writing stronger and richer.

The Hero's Journey

This is nothing new. If you've read *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* or if you seen *Star Wars*, then you've experienced the familiar progression of the Hero's Journey. It's the classic set up and plot progression of story telling. I find this method of plotting makes the perfect skeleton for an outline. If I need to see where a story is going or why it's falling flat, the Hero's Journey is the perfect tool.

If you want to find the strictest, most respected version of the Hero's Journey, I recommend reading Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* or his *The Power of Myth*. Another popular source is Christopher Vogler's book, *The Writer's Journey*. There are a huge variety of articles and websites dealing with the Hero's Journey, some containing as many as seventeen steps, but the whole thing really boils down to the following:

- **The Hero in His Normal World**

This is where you introduce your reader to the protagonist and his normal life. It should give your reader the chance to relate to the character, and find something likeable about him or her.

This is a good place to introduce some of your character's inner or external problems. Think of Luke Skywalker at the beginning of *Star Wars*. Luke had two problems: a deep desire to go to school and get out into the world, and the desire to be trusted as something more than a witless boy.

Notice that Luke's ordinary world is not like our ordinary world. It doesn't have to be. But audience gets to see him before he goes off to save the cosmos, and so we have a chance to relate to him and his problems.

Please, do not linger in the normal world too long. Your reader probably doesn't want to slog through four paragraphs about the

room in which we find the hero (think Dickens.) Give a picture of the normal world as fast as you can, or sprinkle parts of it into the rest of the story.

- **The Hero Receives a Call to Adventure**

The call isn't always polite.

Sometimes your hero gets dumped into the adventure. However, if your hero has the choice to take the adventure or leave it to someone else, there has to be a compelling reason for the protagonist to interrupt his or her normal life and have the adventure in your story. Dorothy got dumped into her adventure by a tornado. James Bond chooses to live his adventures because it's part of his devil-may-care nature and because he has a duty to Her Majesty. There's a difference, but one way or the other, the hero needs a good reason to leave the comforts of his or her normal life.

- **The Hero Refuses the Call**

Okay, maybe she doesn't refuse, but she feels great reluctance.

This isn't always true, but if you can work it into your story, it serves to heighten the tension. Some adventures have scary results, and your protagonist can't be stupid (because, unless he's Forrest Gump, your readers won't root for him,) so he or she is probably going to turn down the opportunity the call presents.

Another possibility is that adventure has called, but your hero has obligations and duties in his normal world. It might sound good to run off to the Amazon with the fetching Ms. Jane, but he can't because his father's business is on the verge of collapse and he must stay home and work long hours to save it.

And don't forget that someone else might turn down the call on behalf of the hero. In *The Lion The Witch And The Wardrobe*, Lucy turned down her call to adventure because her siblings told her the call didn't exist.

One call characters find difficult to resist is death. If dying or a near-death experience lands your character into the world of adventure, he can't really refuse. But she might deny it's happening to her. Or she may refuse to cooperate for a length of time.

- **When the Hero Refuses the Call, a Mentor Steps in to Encourage Him**

The rule when it comes to this part is that a good Mentor never, ever forces the hero into following the call to adventure. However, the Mentor will make the hero see that terrible things will happen if he doesn't take the call. A really good mentor helps the hero get ready for things to come by giving the hero a talisman, a book of codes, the answers to riddles, or the perfect gadget that will later save the hero by the skin of his or her teeth.

If your hero is facing more conflict than he has the motivation to overcome, killing off the mentor boosts motivation. It also gives your protagonist greater hero status if he accomplishes the goal without handholding from the mentor.

- **Crossing the First Threshold**

This is where the protagonist decides to go for it. He or she might get pushed into the adventure by an external force, or they might decide to go for their own reasons like the realization that Mr. Right is a cheating, lying two-timer. But whatever the reason is, this is where the decision has been made and the adventure will begin in earnest.

This doesn't always mean the hero has a straight and easy path. There can be obstacles for him to make it across the threshold. His wife may be holding him back. He may lack the training he needs. He may have a powerful enemy who has some sort of pre-knowledge of his arrival and has taken precautions to prevent his entry into the new world. An accidental hero usually doesn't face too many impediments to his or her arrival in the world of adventure, but the noble, god-like hero may have to overcome obstacles to his or her world-saving presence.

- **The New World**

The hero may still be living in the same apartment he or she has always lived in, but life is now different. Now she must see things in a different light. She may realize her friends are not who they seemed to be, or her boss is a snoop. She finds out who her allies are, who her enemies are, and if the rules have changed.

This is where your spy hero is gathering information. This is where your warrior is finding a place to rest later in the

story. Sherlock Holmes always smoked or did a little opium at this point. He had a case to solve, he had some facts in hand, and so he sent Doctor Watson out to get more information while he "contemplated" the facts.

- **Approach the Inner Cave.**

He's in it now. Your hero has arrived, and last minute preparations are made before he faces the great battle. This is where David is gathering stones to kill Goliath. He's already faced his nasty brothers, he's heard the taunting of the Philistines, and he's convinced the king to let him fight, but he still has to get his stuff together. The king is trying on armor that doesn't fit. The generals are bombarding him with strategy points. And David has to find a minute to go to the brook and find his stones.

Your hero must realize his situation. He needs to know what rides on his success or failure. He and your reader need to feel the weight of this moment. The consequences of failure must be dire, or nobody will care.

Now this doesn't mean that your hero has to be excited about his plight. He may still be reluctant to go to the "inner cave," that stronghold of the enemy or that firing line he must face. Your hero may need extra incentive to face the enemy. Extra incentive can be the death of the mentor at the hands of the enemy. It can be his memory of his dying mother's wish. But whatever it is, it has to resonate with the hero and the reader. Here lies a great opportunity to give the reader greater insight into the hero's mind – what really motivates him or her.

Do not, I repeat, DO NOT let the inner cave be exactly what the reader and the hero are expecting. It has to be worse. The diabolical maniac bent on world domination has to have some evil curve balls to throw at the hero – perhaps he gets inside the palace only to find the evil overlord has kidnapped the hero's mother and she must be rescued before he can blow the place to smithereens, or maybe he gets in the enemy's camp only to find they are slowly starving several prisoners of war originally thought to be killed in action. Whatever it is, your hero has to be taken off guard by something, and it's better if that certain something instills a greater sense of urgency.

- **The Ordeal – When the Hero Faces his Greatest Challenge**

Everything has been leading up to this moment. Here the hero

and the reader are witnesses to the sacrifice. They can taste death or defeat in the air. The hero must be in maximum danger, and can even appear to die. The experience must change or transform the hero in his own eyes. He has to come of this with a new sense of self.

In this section the villain is seen differently through the hero's eyes. She must see a dark reflection of herself when she looks at the villain. Part of her greatest fears come to life in what she sees in the villain. She might vanquish the villain here, but she cannot kill him. The villain must live on to be confronted again later.

If the villain is one of the gods, then an earthly representative might get killed off because the gods can make anyone a pawn of their plans. But if the villain is real and tangible, then he or she may need to escape death in order to be brought back at the climax of the story.

In a romance, this is the part of the story where love may be betrayed or may be consummated for the first time. This is when the hero puts his or her whole heart on the line.

- **Reward**

Now our hero gets to enjoy a little success. He has survived. She has put her heart on the line and won. And the audience gets to catch its breath. In an action adventure, this is where the hero recognizes he is special or different. He may still see where he's made mistakes, but he also sees he has a purpose in this new world.

This part has to be short lived. Celebrate the success too long, and you'll lose your audience. There has to be some conflict mixed in here so the reader wants to continue with the story. Think of Forrest Gump – he makes it out of Vietnam, and the audience is thrilled, but while we watch Forrest win ping-pong tournaments and start his shrimping business, we still want to know about Jenny. That little bit of unresolved business keeps the audience in the game.

- **The Road Back**

Now something sucks your hero right back into the adventure. The villain comes back for revenge. The hero must pull himself together after the tragedy of the last crisis. Or a sudden catastrophe tosses everything into action again.

Again, this section is rather short. Don't linger too long.

- **The Resurrection. The Climax. The Last Big Hoopla. The Big Black Moment.**

Now the hero faces a greater challenge than he'd ever dreamed of. He cannot be saved by anyone but himself in this section. It's the big showdown, and he or she must be fighting for their life. Here we see where their growth as a person through the rest of the story comes into play so they can overcome the last big obstacle. Attitude is everything here, and the hero might be tempted to give up, but he perseveres.

Remember when the Pevensie children fought in the big battle towards the end of *The Lion The Witch And The Wardrobe*? Everything the children suffered through, witnessed, and trained for up to that point prepared them to fight in that battle. They are still kids, and they are scared, but they do their part because they've been conditioned by everything else that has happened. Furthermore, everything prior to that point in the book builds up their motivation to take such a big risk.

This is the part of the book where you may kill off your hero if you must – but only if it's for a noble cause, and only if the story is over. If you're Tom Cruise and you die in *Valkyrie*, it might be okay. But if you're Willy Wonka, you cannot. I keep waiting for James Bond to die. He can't live forever, and I'll be really sickened if he goes for no reason. He needs to die for his cause. He needs a noble death. Or, if he gets to die in his own bed as an old man full of years and heroic deeds, he must do so holding a major secret everyone wanted to know.

The hero's triumph in this stage is most complete when the original problem in the story has come back to haunt her (perhaps her mother's condescending voice comes back to tell her she can't handle things, she isn't capable, she's in trouble and she deserves it) – only now she can do things or make decisions she couldn't make before. She's stronger now, and she can handle it. This makes the hero look bigger and better and stronger than ever before.

- **The Return**

This is where the hero gets back to his or her normal life – only it needs to be the "new normal." She must be changed somehow, and even if her life looks like it did before, she has

to be better prepared to live it and have something new to offer those around her.

Some people like to talk about the hero returning to the ordinary world with a boon or treasure to make that world better. If you're in a sci-fi/magical place, that might be okay, but for a "normal" setting, I don't think it has to be anything tangible. The hero's shift in attitude may be all that's needed. When Stella got her groove back, she didn't have something physical in evidence. It was attitude - all attitude. When Bruce Almighty became simply human again, he came back with prayer beads and a whole lot of humility and appreciation.

An attitude shift is one of the most satisfying boons a hero can return with. Peace can turn to war in an instant. Magic potions and powers can be lost or stolen. Treasures are really nice, but they can be lost. Make sure your hero returns with more than something external, and you'll make your story more satisfying.

So there you have it – The Hero's Journey in a nutshell. Look for it in movies you watch and books you read. Study how other writers manipulate it. (Remember the steps don't always come in the order given.) And try it for youself.

Five Plot Elements

Another type of plot structure is the theory that there are five important elements necessary to build a story. Each must happen for the story to succeed, and they must happen in the order given.

1. Exposition. This is the beginning of the story, often the first chapter, when the main character is introduced. The reader relates to him through small details – his quest to find the perfect birthday gift for his daughter, the way he watches another family at the mall and wishes his own family was complete. Whatever tool you use to establish the reader's connection, his sympathy with the character, it must be done quickly, before he loses interest. Setting is also introduced at this point, anchoring the reader in the location, time period, flavor and mood of the story. Is it a western? Set in the American nineteenth century or modern times? Is it a comedy? A murder mystery? Clue in your reader so he can quickly establish himself in the story. The initial conflict is also introduced at the beginning. The storm is headed toward the small boat with no land in sight. The patriarch of the family has died, pitting son against son. Show the stakes involved in your character's life. This is where he moves from the ordinary world and receives the call to action.

2. Rising action. This is the bulk of the story. Your character is forced to take action. His decisions, influenced by narrower and narrower events, lead him deeper along the path he doesn't want to take. Tensions increase, and conflict and disaster wait at every turn he takes.

3. Climax. This is it. The big, black moment, the event he's been pushed toward since the beginning. This is the high point of the story, the main danger. Your antagonist must face his worst fears, both internal and external, and your reader is anticipating disaster and wondering how the hero will survive.

4. Falling action. This is a relatively short sequence in the story. Here, the reader finds out the results of the antagonist's decisions. We discover if he won or lost and

the repercussions of his actions.

5. Resolution. All the conflicts are resolved, loose ends tied up and the correct ending revealed. There's nothing more to do but write "the end."

The five elements condense the plot into your elevator pitch. Your character, his conflict, danger, results and resolution is the basis of all you need for your query letter, twenty-five words or less pitch and synopsis to those in your life who want to know what you're working on.

Expand on these elements, adding characteristics, details, decisions and consequences to give you a healthy outline to write against.

Index Card Plotting

Another way to jumpstart your creative side is with the tactile system of index card plotting.

There are two types of plotting using this method:

General - As ideas occur to you, jot them down on the appropriately colored card. Read about something interesting? Cut out the article or write it down on a card. Hear about an unusual character quirk? Write it down. When you're stuck for an idea, pull out a card and use the idea. This is great for breaking through writer's block.

Specific – Write down the elements you want for one specific project. Think of it as hands-on brainstorming. Consider all ideas, no matter how far-fetched. Discard them as you refine your plot structure.

Start with 3" x 5" colored index cards. The full card can be a different color or differentiated by a broad stripe across the top. They're available either way, or you can adhere colored dots to plain or lined white cards. Whatever method you use, start with five colors. Each color represents a different element of plotting.

Green is for setting.

Think green for trees and grass. Is your story set in a castle? A spaceship? In a log home in central Indiana? Or are multiple settings used? Use a different card for each setting and write down everything you know about the climate, geography, culture, natural resources, etc. What bedding does your character own? What view do they have outside the kitchen window? Detail every point that will flavor his life and influence his decisions.

Blue is for character.

Think blue eyes, feeling blue, blue blood. Use a separate card for each major character and attribute. Write down physical

characteristics, career, family history, religion, and education. Spend some time on this step, and add new cards as you become familiar with your characters during the writing process. Refer to it often so you'll know if Becky's eyes are green or hazel, or if Jake's scar is on his left or right cheek.

Red is for emotion.

Think red in the face, red with embarrassment, red with anger. Write down your character's likes, dislikes and flaws. What gestures do he use? What values does he have? What will he never do? What are his regrets, hopes and dreams? What calms him? What angers him?

Orange is for conflict/tension.

Orange you done picking on me? Lame, I know.

There are two kinds of conflict, inner and outer, and both must be present to round your character and make his journey through the story torturous.

Outward conflict is physical – the villain who wants world domination and sees the hero as an obstacle. The storm of the century. A trip to Middle Earth.

Internal conflict is the character's hidden fears, something so deep he might not be aware of it, but it influences his decisions. It can be rooted in childhood, a bad relationship, social stresses, or any other obstacle that prevents him from obtaining his goal.

Your character's motivation will drive him to overcome the conflicts he encounters, but you should never make it easy for him.

Yellow is for plot.

Think yellow journalism. Sensationalism. What plot points do you want in your story? A tender father-son reunion? A search for a missing brother, mystery talisman, magic elixir? Has something happened in the news lately you could borrow and twist to add to your plot? Keep cards on hand to write down ideas as they strike.

Build your plot.

Lay out your cards by color and chose one from each stack. Discard and reselect as you brainstorm your plot. Borrow elements from other cards to define a character, set the stage, create tension, evoke emotion and tighten your plot.

Use the index card method to solve your plotting problems.

Plotting Backward

Plotting backward is a great tool for jumpstarting writer's block. If you're stuck and can't push through the wall holding you back, jump to the next scene you know you can write. Work backward from that spot. What's the next thing that has to happen before that scene? Start a list and write it down. Now, what has to happen before that scene? Add it to the list. Continue working backward until you reach the spot where you were stuck. Reorder the list. You now have a mini outline on how to write forward.

Plotting backward can work on an entire novel, as well. It is a logical step for structuring a mystery novel. After all, you know who the killer is, his motive for the crime and the clue he left behind that the detective uses to catch him. Back to front, it's an obvious method for plotting this genre.

If you know the ending of your story – in a romance, it's boy gets girl – begin with the end and list what happens before the final scene. Using the plotting backward steps, continue building the list until you've plotted your way to the beginning.

19-1/2 Step Plotting Worksheet

1.Pick a genre (more than two can be combined.)

- Romance
- Suspense
- Mystery
- SciFi/Paranormal
- Historical
- Action/Adventure
- Any other genre

2. Choose a main character, your protagonist.

- Lawyer/cop/detective
- Artist
- Homemaker
- Sheikh/Tycoon/Billionaire/International Man of Mystery
- Orphan/Virgin/Bride/Mistress
- Any other character

3. Create a setting.

- A metropolitan city
- Dude ranch/Yacht/Castle
- Space, the final frontier
- Other

4. Pick a time period.

- Present
- Past
- Future
- Alternate reality

5. Define the main character's goal.

- To achieve a specific task
- To find something

To find someone
Save the ranch
Conquer the barbarians
Other

6. Create a plan the character can use to get his goal.

   What specific details will accomplish his need?

7. Define the main character's motivation.

   This doesn't have to be an external motivation – save the planet or conquer Mt. Everest. It's a more effective motive, and will resonate deeper with the reader if it's tied to an internal motivation, even if the character isn't aware of why he needs to succeed. Maybe he had an awful childhood and wants to prove himself worthy by saving the planet. Maybe he has to climb Mt. Everest because he was responsible for the accident that crippled his mountain climbing brother. Dig deep into your character's psyche.

8. Create conflict, the obstacle standing in his way.

   This is usually another character, the antagonist, who has an equally important (to him) but opposing goal. Is it another mountain climber who doesn't want his record broken? Al Gore saving the environment?

9. Create a goal and motive for the antagonist.

   Does he want to conquer the world? Why? Were his parents worthless bums and he has to prove he's better? Or were they successful and he has lived in their shadow all his life and now it's time to show he's his own man? Remember, the antagonist's reason for acting the way he does (specifically, against the protagonist) must be real and logical, at least to him.

10. Give the protagonist an ally, friend or mentor.

    An ally or friend:

      Acts as a conscience
      Defines the protagonist's character and values
      Acts as a sounding board

    A mentor gives the protagonist valuable wisdom he will use

throughout the trials of his journey

11. Give the antagonist an ally or helper.

    Evil henchman
    Minion
    Do not make him stronger than the antagonist

12. Create an inciting incident.

    This is the catalyst that propels the protagonist into the thick of things. This should be an event that is so overpowering he makes decisions (usually for the bad) he normally wouldn't

13. Create a deadline. This creates urgency and tension.

    The train is due at 3:10 to Yuma, and the fair maiden is tied to the tracks
    The bomb is set to go off in the fourth quarter of the Super Bowl
    Little Johnny will die if he doesn't have his medicine in 24 hours
    Other

14. Character Arc.

    The protagonist changes over the course of his journey. He'll make decisions at the end that he didn't have the skills for at the beginning.
    Write down how you think he'll change.
    What abilities does he need to gain?
    How will he acquire them?

15. Brainstorm key scenes you'd like to include. They might not be in the final version, but could act as a springboard for plot points:

    Chase scene
    Love scene
    Red herrings
    Climatic fights
    Interesting plot twist

16. Conflict and escalating action. The antagonist's choices should throw him into deeper and deeper water. Find the one thing he'd never dream of doing, and force him to do it:

Climb a mountain to save his child when he's afraid of heights.
Walk away from the company he build up over ten years to go to the woman he loves.
Speak before a Congressional committee, when he's self-conscious about his stutter.

17. Tie up all the loose ends and subplots, in reverse order they were introduced.

18. The climax.

The protagonist and antagonist have been going at it for hundred of pages, and it's come down to the final, big, black moment. It's do or die, and only one will survive.
How are they going to duke this out? Describe the scene.
What's really, really at stake for your hero?
What is his blackest moment, the darkest hour before the dawn?
What makes him survive?

19. Resolution. The reader needs a brief resolution, the catharsis to return to the normal world. What will you write to show this?

A happily ever after
The Hero dies
A bittersweet ending
An open end, hoping they'll buy the sequel

19.5 Decide on a title (the publisher will change it) and start working on your novel. Good luck!

Centric Plotting

There are several plotting methods based on a structure that takes one concept and builds on it, expanding and splitting until a workable outline is achieved. By breaking the plot into small steps, the overwhelming process of plotting an entire novel is avoided.

These methods are based on a central theme or premise, which describes your novel in a sentence or less. "Love conquers all." "Good over evil." "Courage leads to victory."

James N. Frey, in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel, II* describes a premise as "a statement of what happens to the characters as a result of the core conflict of the story." The premise should be the touchstone of the story. The characters' actions should be rooted in it. Complications should arise from it. If an action or scene can't trace back to the premise, it should be cut.

A man joins the Army because his country's enemy killed his brother. He's separated from his company on the battlefield. Trying to find his way back, he helps save a village and realizes the fragility of life and the uselessness of hate.

The premise? Vengeance leads to redemption. Or, hate leads to victory.

A scene showing him relating to a young boy is a touchstone to the premise if the child reminds him of his brother or influences his decision to help the villagers. If he's buying popcorn from him or helping him find his dog, and it isn't tied to the developing situation, it's not part of the story. If, however, the boy is held captive by an enemy soldier, and the man vows to free him, no matter what, it's a complication that pushes the man further toward the climax.

Frey categorizes premises into three types:

- Opposing forces. Two forces fight and one wins. "Star

Wars" is a classic example. Jedi Knights vs. the Empire. Luke vs. Vader.

- The chain reaction. Something happens (the inciting incident) that sets off a series of events that eventually leads to the climax and resolution.

- Situational. A situation affects all the characters. While Scarlett O'Hara is the main character in "Gone With the Wind", all the characters are affected and make decisions because of the Civil War.

Let's take a look at the different types of centric, or premise, based plotting structures.

The Snowflake Method

Novelist and physicist Randy Ingermanson created the Snowflake Method of plotting. He breaks it into ten steps, which are summarized as follows:

- Write a one sentence summary of your novel. This might by the premise described above, or your elevator pitch, or a Goal, Motivation and Conflict statement. (_____wants_____but can't because of _____)

- Expand the sentence into a paragraph describing the story setup, the conflicts and the ending. This is basically a mini version of the three-act structure.

- Describe each main character in one page. Include their name, what he wants (goal), why he wants it (motivation) and why he can't have it (conflict) as well as how he will change (character arc.)

- Expand each sentence from step two into a paragraph until you have a one-page summary.

- Write a one-page story summary for each main character and a half-page summary for each minor character. Write them from the point of view from each character.

- Expand the one-page summary from step four into a four-page synopsis. Basically, each paragraph is expanded into a page.

- Expand the character summaries from step three into

detailed descriptions, writing down everything you know about the character. Don't worry if you have to go back and revise your plot summary. It's part of the plot process.

- Using the synopsis from step six, make a list of each scene that needs to be written. List the point of view character, the setting, what happens, etc. Use a spreadsheet, storyboard or index cards, whichever works for you.

- Take each line of the spreadsheet and expand it into a miniature rough draft. One or two pages should be adequate to summarize one chapter.

- Expand this rough draft into a complete first draft.

Freemind software

Download the freemind program (free!) from www.freemind.com. It's easy to use and you can layer your plot as deeply as you need to.

Subplots

Not all stories require the addition of one or more subplots. Some main plots are so rich, so layered and textured that to add more to it would detract your reader.

On the other hand, subplots can:

- Deepen characterization by revealing flaws, strengths and growth.
- Deepen theme.
- Add complexity and momentum by diverting the reader's attention from the main story, forcing tension until they can return to the main plot.
- Introduce backstory, which in turn layers inner conflict, motive and invokes sympathy with the reader.
- Introduce new characters.
- Develop relationships.
- Break up long scenes.
- Control story tension.
- Deepen conflict, making it more credible and complex.

Subplots can involve the main or secondary characters or both.

Like the main plot, subplots must follow the same rules. They should have a beginning, middle and end. At the end of the story, tie them up in the reverse order in which they were introduced. If "A" is the main plot, "B" is secondary and "C" is tertiary, they should be introduced as A, B, C, and closed out as C, B, A.

The subplot should not overshadow the main plot. Whatever happens in the subplot, never lose sight of the main line of action.

The number of subplot scenes should not outnumber main plot scenes.

Do not introduce so many subplots that the reader is distracted from the main story. One to three is the rule of thumb. It's hard to make characters and their problems distinct after that.

Subplots come in two varieties:

1. Parallel. The characters know each other through a common link – the workplace, a vacation resort, a wedding, but their stories are independent of each other. This can be difficult to pull off, but the characters can learn from each other and influence each other's storylines.

2. Interwoven. This is the most common type of subplot. The subplot is tied to the main plot and any other subplots. The complexity of the story is increased. The subplots should affect the main plot. If the subplot can be omitted from the story without affecting the main plot, does it belong to begin with?

Subplots should cover three areas:

1. There should be connections between the sub and main plots. The relationships should be interwoven, the outcome of one decision affecting something else.

2. They should add complications to the main plot. If the hero is fighting for a promotion, his alcoholic background should be revealed, his sponsor should fall off the wagon, or he should.

3. It should contrast the main plot. You don't want to repeat what's been established, but explore different tones, purposes and ranges. Portray a variety of experiences to add depth and complexity to the overall story.

Adroit handling of subplots will enrich your story.

Quick Plotting Exercise

Okay, maybe you don't have time for centric plotting or the nineteen-and-a-half step worksheet. Here's an exercise that shouldn't take long and will give you a barebones idea of what you want your book to be. Think of it as a map early explorers made of a new territory. There's vast areas of the unknown, all the peaks and valleys aren't named, but you can still identify major places.

Take a piece of paper and draw a vertical line down the middle. Label one side protagonist and the other antagonist, or hero and heroine. List the following questions and fill in brief answers. Turn off your internal editor, and don't worry about punctuation, spelling or the "right" answer.

- What is he in the process of doing (his ordinary world)?
- What is his greatest strength?
- What is his character flaw?
- What event happens to upset his world? (call to action)
- What goal is created by this new complication?
- Is the external goal tied to an internal goal?
- List two to three obstacles that prevent him from obtaining his goal. One of these should be an internal obstacle that is tied to his flaw.
- What lessons will the character learn that will lead to the growth necessary to obtain his goal?
- How will the book end?
- Try to distill the theme of the book into one word. Love? Betrayal? Loyalty? Control?

This is by no means a detailed, page after page outline, but it

is a beginning. Writing quickly, with your internal editor turned off, frees the creative half of your brain and allows ideas to bubble up.

Once you have answers to these questions, expand on each until you're comfortable with the progress you've made and you're ready to start the book.

The Five Whys

A long time ago, when I started writing, a friend (hey, Lisa!) would grill me on my character's motivation. One answer was never enough for her, she had to ask and ask and ask until the character was stripped bare. Only then would she relent and let me continue telling the rest of the story.

I named her method "The Five Whys" because that was the average number of times she asked me "Why?" about the character.

Let me give you an example.

Say you have a character named Sue. Sue's a perfectionist, a control freak. She hates to lose, and is less than scrupulous to anyone who stands in her way of success. (Any fans of "Glee" reading?)

- Why is Sue such a bitch?
    - She has to have things her way
- Why?
    - It's important for her to be in control
- Why?
    - She can control things as an adult that she couldn't as a child
- Why?
    - Her family life was unpredictable, with no set schedule or routine
- Why?
    - Her younger sister was mentally challenged and disrupted daily life

After asking "Why?" five times, you know the root cause of almost every decision Sue makes. By doing the same to your protagonist, you'll know her better and she won't act out of character when making decisions. Her flaw is exposed, and

she'll need to change her behavior by the end of the book in order to defeat the antagonist.

Remember, how your characters act and react can often be traced back one generation. How their parents were treated may dictate how they treated their child, your character. If Mom was a clean freak (for reasons of her childhood?) then her daughter could either be a second generation clean freak or a complete slob. If Dad gambled away the family fortune, his son might still have the first dollar he ever made.

Your character isn't static. He existed before page one. He has a complex history that affects him, whether he's aware of it or not. By asking "Why?" enough times, you'll have a better understanding of his motivation and why he wants the goal so much and why he'll face adversity again and again to obtain it.

The Three Act Structure

The three act structure is one of the most popular ways to plot a novel or screenplay. It's the backbone of countless novels, TV shows and movies. It keeps the story moving, the reader turning pages and box offices busy. In its simplest form it consists of three parts:

The beginning
The middle
The end

Of course, much more is involved. Your daily trip to work has a beginning, middle and end. Hopefully, it's uneventful, but boring isn't what you want for your novel. Let's re-label the three parts into:

The Setup
The Conflict
The Climax

Much more riveting, isn't it?

Let's look at each of these in depth.

Act I, The Setup

Act One establishes the mood, voice and setting of the story through the hook. It's where the protagonist is introduced in his ordinary world, and then BAM! something happens, an event (and it must be an event) forces the hero into making a commitment that thrusts him into a new situation, usually for the worse.

In Act One, all subplots, major and minor characters, goals and motivations are introduced. The stakes are set, and the reader is clued into the fact that we aren't in Kansas anymore, Toto.

Act One points toward the climax, foreshadows the climax and, if it makes sense, mirrors the climax in a neat bookend.

It ends with the Inciting Incident, the Event that changes everything.

Act One, simply, is where the action starts and when the antagonist commits to the goal.

Act II, The Conflict

The journey begins. Emotionally or physically, the protagonist will not be the same as he was when the story started. After being propelled into making a decision, usually after a period of refusal or hesitation, the protagonist reacts to the new situation. New knowledge is gained through the achievement of small goals, constant setbacks and deepening conflicts. The protagonist must overcome greater and greater obstacles, and complications arise one on top of another.

The pace quickens, tension increases and suspense rises, all of which involves the reader deeper into the story.

In Act Two, the stakes are higher, not only for the protagonist, but also the antagonist. The protagonist's pursuit of his goal should cause conflict to the antagonist, and vice versa. They need to constantly push each other, forcing retaliations that culminates in the climax.

Before the climax, all subplots should be closed out and all questions answered.

By the time the protagonist reaches the climax, he should feel lost, stripped down of all defenses, emotional and physical, and spiraling out of control.

Act III, The Climax

Act Three is the focus of your whole book. Everything from page one has led up to this scene. This is your big finish when good triumphs over evil, the guy get the girl and the sun starts to set. But first. . .

The protagonist and antagonist need to be on center stage. The promise you've given your reader for hundreds of pages needs to be delivered. The cavalry isn't going to ride in and save the day. It's the good guy vs. the bad guy. Odds are the good guy will win, but nothing is guaranteed, and the reader should be biting their nails in anticipation.

The changes the protagonist has undergone from the beginning gives him the necessary skills to defeat the antagonist. Armed with new knowledge, he fights and wins. The antagonist, however, hasn't changed, and continues with old paradigms, ending in defeat.

Lastly, give the reader Resolution, the emotional payoff, the catharsis promised. Don't give into temptation and keep writing. When the story is done, it's done. The reader doesn't care anymore. Their questions are answered, and you'll only cheapen the story by dragging it on.

Your antagonist has gone from the stability of an ordinary world to the new stability of a different world. All is well. Write "the end" and congratulate yourself on a job well done.

The Four Act Structure

The four act plotting structure is very similar to that of the three act. There is a beginning, a middle and an end, with the protagonist pursuing a goal and an antagonist in search of his own goal that may be the same, but certainly blocks the protagonist.

The story is a series of events, battles between the protagonist and antagonist with stakes raised with each choice, until they duke it out in the final battle.

The problem with a thre act structure is the middle is more than half of the book. It's hard for a writer to keep the tension tight, to surprise the reader and keep their expectation high. The solution to the "sagging middle" is to add a "point of no return." This is a crisis turning point that strips another layer of defense from the protagonist and sends him in a new direction with yet higher stakes. The reader is newly engaged and willing to continue to follow the antagonist.

In a four-act structure, there are three major turning points, each an event that makes the protagonist's struggle more hopeless.

Act one introduces the hero and his normal world. All the characters and subplots are introduced, and the mood and setting are established. The final climax is hinted at, and the hero's goal and motivation are explained.

Turning point one is the inciting incident, the "what" that will get the hero off his duff and into action. He's set aside everyday life and questioned then forced to accept the challenge.

Act two is full of complications. He's struggling with the antagonist, the stakes are raised, things don't go the way the hero had planned, and there are setbacks and small victories. The pace quickens, and the motivation becomes more pressing.

Turning point two (the point of no return) turns the story again. The hero has changed so much by the challenges he's faced, he can't go back to the beginning, his normal world. Too many obstacles stand in the way of retreat. The only course of action is to continue his journey forward, no matter what the outcome.

In **the third act**, the hero sets out again, but new and uglier complications seem to make success an impossibility. Events are spiraling out of control, his motivation becomes a case of life or death, and the hero and reader wonder how he'll get out alive.

The third turning point is the crisis, the Big, Black Moment, the event the whole journey has been aiming toward. All the marbles are on the table, only one person will come out alive. The climax should be an emotional battle for the hero, as well. He's been stripped bare of his emotional barriers and must face his greatest fears.

The fourth act is relatively short. The hero has survived the ordeal, and is in a new, but different, ordinary world. This is your reader's catharsis, the decompression necessary to prepare him for the words "The End."

In each act, the character is tested and forced to take greater risks in pursuit of the goal. Character growth is exhibited, culminating in the climax, where lessons learned throughout the journey are applied. Subplots should be closed out in reverse order of their introduction, and before the resolution of the story's main plot.

If you've written well, the reader is satisfied. He's aware you know your craft and will wait impatiently for your next book.

Theme

Theme n. – 1. A topic of discussion or discourse. The subject. 2. An artistic representation of a subject. 3. A recurring idea or value. 4. A short writing assignment given to terribly bored students who couldn't care less.

In high school, it was my enemy. Theme. I hated it with all my being. It took great concentration to refrain from rolling my eyes heavenward whenever I was asked to pinpoint an author's theme. My senior composition teacher would say, "What did the author mean –" and my stomach would do the roll my eyes could not.

It wasn't that I couldn't come up with a line of bologna six yards long or long enough to fill a five page paper; it was because I thought it was all exactly that – bologna. Who could know the mind of the author? Who cared if his mother potty trained him too young and sent him into the world as a mere infant? His work didn't have to reflect the trauma of his life. Not every piece of work was written with a deeper, hidden message to the world.

Looking back, I realize it wasn't the subject of theme was bad; it was the question, "What did the author mean?"

A better question would have been, "Do you see a reoccurring idea in the story?" Or, "Did you learn anything from the characters in the story?" Or, "If you could nutshell the story into one or two words, what would they be?" Hawthorne? Judgment and self-isolation. E.B. White? Nature, the circle of life. Dickens? Poverty vs. noble actions, hypocrisy. If only I'd known one didn't need a crystal ball of malarkey to discuss theme!

As a writer, theme becomes something bigger and more complicated than it was in a literature class, because there is a great debate among writers about how themes come into being. Some writers insist theme is a premeditated effort. Others claim theme isn't something a writer decides upon, but rather

something that shines through the story by some process of magical story mojo. I would argue either can be true.

If you are of the mind the Theme Fairy takes care of theme (and I wouldn't argue with that,) then there really isn't any reason to continue reading this chapter. However, if you are of the opinion that it can or should be done on purpose, we have a lot of options to discuss.

Deciding on theme

Classic themes include forgiveness, love conquers all, love takes time, hate is destructive, greed is destructive, lies always catch up, persistence pays, kindness grows the soul, faith saves, love never dies, friendship, faithfulness, death, and sacrifice. The list goes on.

But there are other, lighter, themes that can be incorporated into a story to add depth and interest. Food, cooking, sports, music and all its variations, education, humor, shoes and clothes, colors, pride, humility, children, nature, cars, pack rats. . .You name it; it can be turned into a theme. I would say the hit show *Lost* used eyes as a theme. What did the eyes mean? Perhaps my high school English teacher would like to write a paper on that.

I once read a story where the woman was obsessed with adding butter to her recipes. The whole plot of the book revolved around her baking and obsessive butter use. I've written a story where the heroine cooks massive amounts of food for her friends in order to comfort herself, and the hero listens to Glenn Miller and the blues when the chips are down. It works to have these underlying themes in a story because we have underlying themes in real life. Take a look at your life and habits; you're bound to have something you keep coming back to. It's your theme, or one of them.

Incorporating your theme

If you want to purposefully write about a particular theme – say, Love, for instance – then you need to decide how to portray the idea in your story. Are the characters going to demonstrate an undying love despite hardship and isolation? Are they going to show love by what it entails – forgiveness, patience, kindness, generosity, and hopefulness? Or is someone in the story going to die for the sake of another? (Think *A Tale of Two Cities*.) How, exactly, do you want your theme portrayed?

Once you've decided how you want to portray the theme, your outline is your friend. Your outline and your highlighter, that is. As you outline your story, highlight the areas that demonstrate your theme. If you don't have consistent highlighting through your outline, you may need to add pieces, or you may want to re-evaluate your intent.

Say your theme is forgiveness. Does your story build enough of a case against someone for your protagonist to need to forgive them? It needs to be a big deal. Think about Hester and the Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*. That guy let her suffer on her own for years, even participating in the town's condemnation. She had every right to hate him. She had every motivation to expose his duplicity. But she didn't, and she forgave him everything in the end. On the other hand, after her silence in the matter of his mental tortures, he still forgave her. What a tragic, beautiful ending to their story. If Hawthorne hadn't given one of them something "unforgivable" to account for, their forgiveness would have fallen flat. But by assigning both of them these massive crimes of the heart, he created an unforgettable climax to the story.

Check your outline. Does the action demonstrate your theme? Does the conflict highlight it?

Words of caution

With theme, it is highly important that your characters "show and don't tell." Do not write scenes where your heroine pontificates about her need for patience with the hero. Instead, show her giving that patience despite the urgings of others to cut the bastard out of her life. Nothing kills the mood faster than non-realistic dialogue or preachy thoughts given by your characters. It's one thing if the heroine objects to doing the right thing and her mentor, in a fit of impatience, gives a tiny lecture. But it's a whole other thing if your characters preach to the choir. Books get thrown across rooms for that sort of thing.

Expand your idea of theme

Stories have themes, characters have themes, and even settings can have themes. Cheryl wrote a book that had a ton of water in it. Every time the characters started feeling romantic, there was a body of water nearby. Fountains, lakes, waterfalls. Why? I don't know. But it was there. (Like I said before, I'm not

one to analyze everything to death.)

The hit television series *Sex and the City* blended the ongoing themes of shoes, friendship, and sex. Most of it was pretty shallow, but the friendship theme and relationships of the women in the story endeared it to women everywhere because they could relate to it. Which brings me to my next point –

Your theme needs to be suited to your audience. I'm afraid most high school English departments are missing the mark when they force feed Hawthorne to their students. Yes, it's a classic, great story, but seriously, do they really expect a bunch of kids to relate to Hester and Dimmesdale? Do the ideas of sin, judgment, punishment, isolation, and guilt really resonate with fourteen and fifteen year old people? I'm afraid not. It's not just the time and setting are uninteresting to them (put *Pirates of the Caribbean* in that time and setting and see them take interest,) it's they haven't dealt with the themes illustrated in the story in their own lives.

So, if you're writing a love story aimed at the young adult market, you may want to stick to themes a teenager might be able to relate to in their own life. Guilt? Maybe a little. Punishment and isolation? You better do a really good job of helping your reader suffer along with your character if you want him or her to care.

If your mystery (which always deal with good vs. evil) is going to have a theme of family and food running underneath the surface, you may have to work hard not to make it feel like the Cleavers have adopted Nancy Drew.

You can choose any theme or combination of themes as long as you remember it has to be appropriate for your audience, the characters and story have to demonstrate the theme rather than preach about it, and someone is going to come along and find a theme that you never intended to include in the story in the first place. The Theme Fairy will always put her magic into a story whether or not you want her to.

Character Arc

A writer can pour plot twists, solid conflict, steamy sex, non-stop action, and even a fluffy kitty or two into a story and still miss the heart of the reader if the main characters in the story fail to demonstrate some sort of character arc. Readers relate to characters through their goals, motivations, and conflict, but also through their flaws, disappointments, and their triumphs. But characters who fight a flaw or inner demon and conquer it (or in a tragedy, fail to conquer it) will touch the reader on a deeper level.

Character flaws or emotional baggage give the reader something to relate to, and character arc, or growth, gives the reader something to feel good about. Remember *The Little Engine That Could*? It's a simple story, but a good example of character arc. The Little Engine couldn't pull the big load up the hill; he was too weak. But after he learns to believe in himself, the reader gets to cheer him all the way to the top of the hill while he chants, "I think I can. I think I can." He learned to believe in his ability (growth of character,) and so he triumphs over the difficulty he faces.

In more sophisticated stories, the character arc is still the same principle: the protagonist must overcome inner beliefs and limitations to overcome the major obstacle blocking the successful conclusion of the story. In a love story, the hero must often accept that love is real, or that he is worthy of love. The heroine often learns to accept her feelings for a man she pre-judged or hated. Heroines we love find out their inner strengths. Heroes we love accept their emotional need. If neither of them learn anything, give anything, or grow, the story feels less satisfying than a flavor free rice cake.

So how does one demonstrate character arc? Certainly not by preaching.

> *"Brandon looked deep within himself, realized that he'd never done anything for anyone other than himself, and despised his selfishness. Vowing to become more giving of*

himself, he threw himself over the ever- weak Heather to shield her from the shrapnel."

Makes you wonder if you've contracted food poisoning, doesn't it? To avoid nasty information dumps and unconvincing melodrama, you must begin your character arc on the very first page in which you introduce the character. We need a glimpse of his flaw(s) in the very beginning, and a little pruning of his character in each plot point of the story. You may have a great Ah-ha moment somewhere in the story where the protagonist sees herself in a new light and turns over a new leaf, but there needs to be a lot of steps leading up to that sudden flash of light – a slow chipping away that exposes the problem more and more.

How your character changes can happen in a number of ways, and may depend on his or her personality. Here are a few shift types to consider:

1. Core Believer to Backslider

You aren't likely to have a person who is passionately communistic suddenly become an entrepreneur. Change like this does not happen in a flash. It would have to be forced by a need to survive or help someone he loves survive in a world where his system has let him down. By the time this guy's communist beliefs have succumbed to his need to survive, it will be hard for him or the reader to know what he really believes, and no matter where your reader stands on the issue, the character's loss of grounding will speak to the reader's heart. Left in a state of betrayal of belief, the story is a tragedy. If you bring the character to embrace his new belief, you can attain a tender triumph.

2.Mistaken Identity

In this shift of paradigm, the protagonist holds one belief, and through a course of eye opening experiences (and possibly a big upset to make them see it), decides that they were in error. In this shift, the protagonist jumps ship from one belief to a new one. There is no doubt left in the protagonist's or the reader's mind where the character is in their belief. Most love story hero's fall into this category; they start out believing love is not real and end up believing they can't live without it. You'll also find this type of shift in a story of religious conversion like that of Saul on the road to Damascus.

A twist on this character arc is when the change comes in the beginning of the story, surprising the character. The reader then gets to witness the cementing of the new belief and the character's adjustment to it.

3. Growing a Spine

Here we have the protagonist who knows who he or she is, but never had the opportunity or reason to do something about it. Like the difference between dough and bread, this character still has the same basics inside of her, but the story brings her true potential to light for her and the reader. It's a feel good character arc, and one that lets the reader appreciate the quiet guy types – think Indiana Jones.

4. The Crushed Grape

This one takes a while to develop, but it can result in a subtle yet glorious character arc.

Like a crushed grape can become a stunningly wonderful wine, some of us rise from tragedy as far better people than we were before.

Remember your ten year class reunion? If it was typical, it was one major session of "measuring up." Where are you living? What do you do? Did you hear about so-in-so's big break? I've heard of people who rent cars to impress former classmates. But something changes by the twenty year reunion. People want to know about your life, your kids, and they even share some of the disappointments and losses they've suffered. Life's spanking. People tend to become less superficial and more open to others after they've lived in the real world long enough.

If you want to demonstrate a character who has become a fine vintage of humanity, it's going to take time. Crushed grapes take time to ferment. They may go through some stages that are decidedly nasty, and they need time and care to make it to their best potential. So, unless your story is good enough to warrant the length of *War and Peace*, you're going to need to introduce the tragedy that crushes your protagonist early in the story, possibly even before the story begins.

Be careful how you portray your character's recovery. For instance, don't give your reader a heroine who has suffered rape in the first chapter and suddenly make her fearless and

indomitable two days later. By the end of the book she might overcome a lot of fears, but this isn't going to happen right away.

Another mistake writers make is to change the character's personality in their effort to show their growth. Don't do it. If your heroine is a complete bitch in the beginning, remember one little tragedy is not going to change this. Along life's path, big and little things can temper her bitchiness, but she won't be a believable character if there isn't a shred of the shrew left at the very end. In *Driving Miss Daisy*, we see Miss Daisy slowly but surely change from an arrogant, bitchy, elitist with a spine of steel to a semi-bitchy woman of privilege with a spine of steel who loves the man she never wanted to have in her life. See? She didn't change completely, but she softened, ripened, and become something quite glorious in the end.

5. Reversed Arc

Now and then we see a character gone bad. The boy who finally makes good on the bad things people always thought of him in the first place. The cop who became corrupt. The woman who leaves her children to pursue the love of a man. This change in character can come about in just about any way, but the result is a character who has succumbed to some baser emotion. Sometimes we see them as tragic, sometimes triumphant. Jack in *Lord of the Flies* becomes so cruel and evil minded he seems tragically beyond redemption. However, in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, we see a man who started out as a nice guy revel in revenge – and we can't help but cheer him on.

You can really mess with a reader's head with a reverse character arc.

In many stories we have what is called the Big Black Moment. It's the moment when the heroine thinks all is lost and there is no hope. The monster has returned from the depths and has her in his clutches, she's going to die in the way she's always feared the most – but wait! She somehow manages to free a hand and clasp onto that same knife that killed her father and plunge it into the monster's heart. She had nightmares in the beginning of this story. She could never get away from the monster. But now she has beaten him despite her fear, despite her feminine weaknesses, despite her uncontrollable urge to eat chocolate all the time. Why? Motivation, baby. Somewhere in the course of the story she has changed. It could be someone has taught her a great deal about herself and her strengths. It

could be she has fallen in love and love has given her greater motivation to live, survive, and overcome. It could be somewhere in the story she got sick of fear or weakness and she now refuses to tolerate it.

It doesn't really matter what the motivation of the hero is, it only matters that the reader can believe it. Would a tough guy killer really care about the kitten caught up in the tree? He might. Maybe he has a soft heart for animals from the very beginning of the story, or maybe that kitten happens to belong to his little girl whom he adores. It's also possible the kitten looks just like one he had as a kid. Just make sure to give your reader a really good reason to believe your hero's change of heart or shift from his or her normal behavior.

You can use your character arc as the overall theme of your story, but it isn't necessary. A story could have an overarching theme of forgiveness while your main character's greatest growth is overcoming alcohol addiction. She may experience the forgiveness of others, but her growth may have little to do with it. In my opinion, a story gathers more layers of interest when the theme and the character's growth are not the same subject.

If you want to rip out your readers heart, the character must either fail to grow – like Scarlet in *Gone With The Wind*, or the character may experience all the growth and choose to go against his or her new self in order to gain a greater good for others. Tragedy is much more overt when the good guy dies or fails, but it is equally disturbing when the character arc is missing, reversed, or when it fails to serve the character's interests.

Plot Flaws

Several things can bog down a plot and make the reader lose interest. That's not good news. You want the reader on the edge of her seat, turning page after page, staying up until stupid o'clock to read "one more chapter," letting the bathwater grow cold. You *do not* want the toilet tank syndrome, where she turns your book upside down and leaves it on the toilet tank. Forever. She won't read further, she won't tell her friends about it, and she certainly won't buy your next book.

Let's take a look at some common mistakes writers make and how to fix them. Some of these are covered in other areas in this book, but repetition is an excellent teacher.

Conflict

Tip:
If you're having difficulty deciding which "stake" is higher for your character, on where it should be placed in the timeline of your story, write them out on a list and rank them by how bad they will impact your antagonist.

Conflict is vital to a story. Without it, there is no character change. Without change, with its accompanying tension, why should your reader care?

Conflict is the fuel that feeds the plot and makes the character take action he normally wouldn't. In his everyday life, the reader avoids conflict, but she can live vicariously through your character, taking on demons, saving the world from Armageddon, or simply falling in love. She'll get caught up in the protagonist's problems, understand his motives, celebrate his successes and commiserate with his losses. She wants your character to struggle and come out victorious, a better, stronger person.

Conflict should be twofold, external and internal. The external is the easy part. Villains are fun to write, and their goals, just as important as the protagonist's, push the protagonist into making choices with uglier and uglier consequences. An antagonist will force a normal person beyond his comfort zone, stretching him beyond what he thought himself capable of doing. Even if your external conflict isn't a person, if it's the weather, an earthquake, a tsunami, it should be a major obstacle between the protagonist and his goal.

The internal conflict is harder to writer, but you shouldn't shy away from it. The protagonist needs to call on reserves he didn't know he possessed, to question his values, to face his internal demons. Would *Vertigo* have been the same movie if Jimmy Stewart, as Scottie Ferguson, hadn't climbed to the bell tower in search of the woman he'd loved and lost? Would *Rocky* be the same if Rocky Balboa had continued to not believe in himself? The literary and film worlds are filled with examples of ordinary people who have overcome their greatest fears and triumphed.

Conflicts should be logical to the characters. It should be something that matters to him and makes sense. A virus that threatens to wipe out the city's population? He can move elsewhere. But a virus that has hit the hospital where his wife is in charge of the E.R.? Now he has a reason to fight for a cure, to locate the brilliant scientist who possess the vaccine. The conflict matters. He has motivation for staying in the face of danger.

Be on the watch for serial conflict, whereby the problem in Chapter 1 is resolved in Chapter 3, to be replaced by another short-lived problem, a string of pearls, until the end of the book. You need to write an ongoing problem that grows deeper and deeper and continues to make life miserable for your protagonist.

Also stay clear of incoherent conflict, thrown into a story to spice it up, but in reality, have nothing to do with the character, his journey, and what he needs to do to get to his goal. It's distracting, the reader won't buy into it, and soon, he'll forgo your book for someone else's.

Not setting the scene

Sure, you want to plunge right into the story, dragging your reader into your character's myriad problems, but it the reader

doesn't anchor himself in the here and now, you've lost him. He'll be so busy wondering what's going on, that frustration sets in. You do not want a frustrated reader. Include a few, well chosen details that explain the space station orbits Earth in the last decade, or Mars in the next century. Is the high society party set in Regency England or aboard a yacht in today's Caribbean? Give the reader a small reference then get on with the storytelling.

If you're in the middle of the story, take the time to show where the action is occurring and how it relates to the last scene. Do your reader the commonest of courtesies.

No Hook

Your reader wants to be drawn into a believable world from word one. He expects to be entertained. Don't disappoint him. Skip the protagonist sitting with a cup of coffee, contemplating the letter she got from dear Aunt Sally, or in the car on her way to a governess post in the Scottish Highlands. Jump her right into the story – Aunt Sally died, but collecting the inheritance means quitting the job she loves and moving back to the town that gave her heartache. Or a car bomb goes off, leaving her stranded in the Scottish Highlands.

Conversely, don't plunge the reader so quickly into the story with a one line exclamation from the protagonist. The reader has no context in which to place it. It's a cheap device that's been overused.

Instead, start where the protagonist's problem begins, raise questions that intrigues the reader, and filter in backstory later.

The Sagging Middle

The middle is vital in holding your reader's attention. It's where the protagonist will encounter the bulk of his trials and tribulations, where her strength will be tested and flaws exposed. It's where you torture your darlings and force them through life-changing events. It sets up the major crisis at the end of the book and paves the way for a satisfying conclusion.

To avoid a sagging middle, introduce questions that make the reader hang around until he is satisfied with the answers. What is the protagonist's challenge he'll have to overcome? What

does he truly, truly want? (Remember the external and internal goals.) How will the antagonist stop him from reaching his goal? How will the external plot events magnify the protagonist's internal conflicts? Will his flaws get in the way of his attempts to resolve the external plot?

If you challenge your protagonist, your reader will follow.

Weak ending

Don't let your reader down at the end of the book. They've hung with you through hundreds of pages and expect a payoff. Here are four common mistakes to avoid disappointing them:

1. Ending too fast. Maybe the author got tired of the characters and wanted to move on. Maybe she didn't know how to end it. Whatever the reason, don't shortchange the reader. Remember, the ending is the last impression the reader has of your story. Give them satisfaction. They'll remember when your next book is published.

2. Endings that drag on too long. The opposite of the abrupt ending is the one that seemingly goes on forever. Maybe the author loved the story and characters so much she didn't want to let go. Don't lose your reader's interest by going on too long. Leave them wanting more.

3. The ho-hum ending. You've opened the book with an incredible hook, you've layered in plenty of conflict and tension, but the ending doesn't live up to the buildup. Reward the reader for their patience with an ending that matches their expectations.

4. The predictable or cliché ending. The fat high school kid attends his ten-year reunion, now trim and thin and a millionaire. He wins over the prom queen, takes to the stage as M.C. and has everyone eating out of his hand. This type of ending is too neat and unbelievable. Give the hero his just reward, but make him suffer to earn it.

The end should give resolution and catharsis to the reader. It should show how the protagonist has changed since the beginning of the story. Their world should be back to normal, but a new normal. They've gone through an incredible journey and emerged a stronger person.

The external conflict is resolved in the climax, but don't

forget to give the reader resolution to the internal conflict, for it's what they will most identify with. It should emotionally satisfy them and reinforce the faith they gave you on page one.

Tie up loose ends, resolve all conflicts, reinforce the theme, show the protagonist's growth and give the reader catharsis. Make the reader's last experience with your book memorable.

Too much backstory

Yes, you want the reader to know poor Matilda was jilted at the altar and will never trust another man. It's important they realize the hero's fear of horses derives from an accident that crippled his sister. But, and here's the important part, *not on the first page.* Nor the first chapter. Yes, details are important so the reader can identify with the characters, but too much detail will drive them away.

Backstory kills suspense. If the reader knows everything about the protagonist, they will have no reason to ask questions and wonder, what next? But once you've raised speculation, you have them hooked.

Backstory slows the pace. If you start out with a bang, with an explosion at the U.S. Embassy, and you segue into how the pretty receptionist shouldn't have worked that day because her mother is due in from Sydney, and she needs to clean her apartment before she arrives, you've killed any interest the reader has in why the bomb went off and who set it.

Backstory doesn't allow the reader to grow with the protagonist. If your hero has to discover secrets about himself, allow the reader to travel on the journey with him.

The best advice I've read, and I don't recall the author or I'd give her credit, was to treat the backstory as a mirror. Break it and sprinkle the shards throughout the story. Pull the reader deeper into the story by giving her one piece of the puzzle at a time.

The scene isn't working

You stare at your computer screen, you read and re-read the words over and over again, you might even avoid writing because something isn't working. The characters refuse to cooperate with you, the dialogue is flat and lifeless, or something

doesn't feel right. To clear up this dissatisfaction, backtrack to where things went wrong. Try alternative plot lines. Brainstorm different things until you hit upon the solution.

Uneven pace

By rights, your novel's pace should be uneven. One continuous car chase after another doesn't give the reader time to catch their breath. You want to build in downtime to allow the tension to rise and grow again. This rollercoaster effect assures continued interest.

You've read about the danger of dumping backstory into the beginning of your story. It kills the tension. The pace slows, and the reader is lost. Save the descriptions for someplace other than the action scenes.

To control the pace in your story, structure it into one of three types of scenes.

1. Action scenes. These don't necessarily have to be full of car chases and flying bullets. They should be centered around the protagonist acting to overcome the obstacles in her way to her goal. The action should lead to a consequence. The stakes grow higher, and the reader becomes more vested in what will happen next.

2. Descriptive scene. Setting, description, backstory and character reflection are found in the descriptive scene. It will slow the pace, but it gives your reader a chance to recover from an action scene. A descriptive scene should give the reader information that is important to the story.

3. Transition scene, also known as sequel. This could be a change in setting, time or viewpoint. It's used to stitch two scenes together.

Another way to control pace is with sentence and paragraph length. As the end of the story nears and the villain closes in on the hero, ratchet up the tension by using shorter sentences and paragraphs.

The important thing to remember is to include at least one event in each scene that affects the main plot.

Author Intrusion

> *"Little did Frank know what effect such a small decision would make on his life."*
>
> *"By Sunday, Frank would regret his decision."*
>
> *"Frank wasn't worried about losing altitude in his helium airship. The pressure inside the envelope is extremely low, about $^{1}/_{15}$ psi: equal to that of a column of water 4-5 cm ($1^{1}/_{2}$ in) high. Because the pressure is so low, a hole in the envelope results only in a very slow leak, taking hours or even days to effect the airship's performance."*

When the author steps out of the narrative to say "Hey, look at how good a story I'm writing," or "Read these facts I found," it's author intrusion. Whether he does it because he thinks he's building suspense, or from low self-esteem, or from a need to prove he knows what he's talking about, such intrusions jerk the reader out of the story. The last thing you want is for your reader's attention to wander. Bring out the research as needed and avoid facts tucked away in parenthesis (I've researched this on Yahoo, Google and Bing and find author intrusion unnecessary.)

Coincidence

Sometimes, coincidence works.

> *"Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine." – Casablanca*

More often than not, you're asking your reader to step over the boundary of believability. What are the odds your heroine, a computer whiz, is asked to investigate a security leak that leads to the man who once crushed her heart? Or the father of an ailing boy just happens to share a cab with the brilliant scientist who's been working on the cure?

Instead, make the event happen because of the character's decision and action. The computer whiz seeks out the job of investigating her old flame's corporation. The father researches the best medical mind in the field and arranges to share a cab with the scientist. Make the event a part of the cause and effect the character creates. It's more interesting, and it provides opportunity for growth and conflict.

Clichés

Dark as night.

Gasp in surprise.

Burst out laughing.

We've all read them so many times, your eyes tend to skip over them. If you're describing an action, an emotion or a reaction, try a unique way to portray it.

The bile ground in his stomach.

The smell of winter's decay.

The wet ink of night paled into moist gray.

Also, avoid plot clichés. You know the type. The hard-boiled detective has run out of leads when he unexpectedly receives a phone call promising new information. Before he can meet with the mysterious informant, the person is killed in a freak accident or winds up in a coma.

At the climax of the book, when all is lost and your reader is wondering how the hero will ever get out of such a pickle, the villain goes on and on about what a clever fellow he is, and in his discourse, he creates an opportunity for the hero to free himself.

The beautiful heroine goes into the darkened basement, though she has no weapon, there's no electricity, no one else is in the house who can help her, and there's a serial killer on the loose. This not only qualifies as a plot cliché, but as a nomination for the Too Stupid To Live Award.

- If you've read this device elsewhere, change your version into something fresh and new.

- If common sense deserts your character, go back to where he lost reason and fix it. Don't make him do something stupid to move the plot forward. It's the sign of a lazy writer.

- Brainstorm a list of annoying plot clichés you've read or seen on the screen. If your book is headed toward any of them, back out and make it right. Learn from other's mistakes.

Dialogue

"Mattie had ill-will to see me set awa on this ride, and grat awee, the sillie tawpie; but it's nae mair ferlie to see a woman greet than to see a goose gang barefit." - Rob Roy

It's asking a lot for your reader to wade through sentences like the one above. It's easy enough to give them the *flavor* of the dialect without bogging them down in the correct mechanics of it and *making them lose interest.*

Not all of your characters have to be from Scotland, Spain or Italy. We all have accents and all have a unique way of speaking.

- Listen to how people talk. Do you have a co-worker who says "to make a long story short?" all the time? Or, "like," "you know" or some other identifiable speech quality?

- Write like people speak. We don't talk perfect. Our speech is filled with pauses, phrases, stops and starts. How often do you use the name of the person you're talking to in your speech?

- Avoid stereotypes. Unless you're deeply immersed in the culture you're writing about, forget having your character spout colloquialisms from the region. In some regions of the U.S., a Coke is a Coke. Or a soda. Or a soft drink. Or a Pop. Don't appear amateurish to the reader who knows better.

- Avoid profanity and slang. Hemingway said, "Try and write straight English; never using slang except in dialogue and then only when unavoidable . . . slang goes sour in a short time." It will also date your work. Profanity will jar your reader. Unless it's an integral part of your character, use it sparingly.

Dialogue tags is another area where you can lose your reader. Do people really, hiss, moan, laugh, sputter and screamed their words? Take a lesson from the grand master of dialogue, Elmore Leonard –

"Never use a verb other than 'said' to carry dialogue."

Misuse of pronouns

This is a common error if you have a scene with two characters of the same sex. He said, he moved, he pounded his fist – which he are you talking about? It's easy to lose track of your characters. Print the scene and read it out loud to pinpoint areas that need clarifying with the use of a proper name.

Characters: Flat, too many and unsympathetic

A story isn't layered and rich if it resolves around a protagonist and an antagonist. Secondary characters can act as sounding boards, sources of information and stars in subplots. But, every character should serve a purpose to the main plot and their own plot line. In other words, they're not just the best friend, the coworker, the TV anchor. They have their own agenda, their own goals, motivations and conflicts. You should know the secondary character's function and where if fits into the overall plan. If it doesn't *support* the main plot, think seriously about losing the character.

Is your story book three of a four part serial? Is it necessary to introduce every character from book one and two and give the reader a detailed update? Does your hero have a best friend Joe, and brother John and a coworker Jack? Can they be combined to form one person, one function? It's not by coincidence that most TV ensemble casts consist of five to eight characters. Too many, and the viewer becomes confused.

Have you written a victim character? Do bad things happen to him, through no fault of his own making, and he suffers a lot? How about a passive character, who witnesses the events in the story but isn't affected by them? Or the bumbling character, who acts but doesn't learn from his mistakes?

Is your character stereotypical or boring? Can the reader sympathize with him?

While it's good to make your character suffer, if he isn't participating in the story, why would your reader? Bad things should happen to the character because of the choices he makes. Cause and effect. Action and reaction. Force him to do something he wouldn't normally do. Find out what's the worse thing that could happen to him, *and make it happen.* You want your character awkward, squirming, unsure and vulnerable as well as growing stronger, learning and applying lessons along the story's journey. Changing, always changing.

Base your characters on real human traits, with realistic

behaviors and reactions. Your reader will identify with them and follow them.

Setting

Downtown Pittsburg is different than the Arizona desert. As is Manhattan from the Redwoods. Your setting should look, feel, sound and smell true to its counterpart. If it's an imaginary world, you have the advantage of creating a world. Don't omit its texture. If you can immerse the reader in the setting, they're going buy into it. If, however, they're in a vacuum, there is no touchstone, nothing they can identify with.
The easiest way to build setting is through details.

- The smell of horseflesh and summer dust, the sweat of the crowd in the heat.
- The hard gravel of the ground cutting her feet through her thin slippers.
- An indentation in the rough bark of the tree.
- The crackle of last year's leaves underfoot.
- Hickory smoke, with the faint addition of onion.
- The vivid color of the sassafras trees cloaking the gown she wore.

Setting is the time and location of your world. It consists of three dimensions:

1. Period, the story's place in time. Is it set in the past? What year? Is it contemporary or in the future?
2. Duration, the story's length through time. What is the timeline of the story? Does it take place over several days? Weeks? Years?
3. Location, the story's physical place. Is it set in a small town? What buildings in that town? Which rooms?

Setting is an overlooked tool in writing a story. It can evoke mood, enhance the theme, acts as a symbol, and influence the character. Don't overlook the power it can bring to your story.

Conclusion

We hope these tips will strengthen your writing and elevate it several levels. Plot is important to your story. Take the steps we've outlined to make your story everything you've envisioned.

Random Plotting Exercise

Anne Lamott Writing Exercise

We attended a speech given by Anne Lamont and have blatantly included it in this book. All credit goes to her.

According to Ms. Lamott, all writing can be broken down into short (even paragraph size) assignments.

Lamott keeps a one-inch picture frame on her desk to remind her that for each moment, she only has to write as much as she "can see through a one-inch picture frame." It's the "how do you eat an elephant - one forkful at a time" concept. When a whole project is overwhelming, you break it into little pieces.

What's your project? Are you staring down the road of a novel that you haven't yet started? Write one paragraph about the opening setting or that snippet of conflict that plays through your mind. Do you have an article about car shopping to complete? Write one paragraph describing what people are afraid of when they shop for cars.

That's all you have to do. Write something - something small that will fit into a series of one-inch chunks that will complete a larger picture.

If you're one those people who has always said, "Someday I'm going to write a book about _____," this is the perfect way to tackle the job. Take ten minutes, sit down, and write one little chunk. Tomorrow you can write the next chunk. Seriously, it's like eating the whole bowl of cookie dough one little snitch at a time. Before you know it, it's all done.

Brainstorming

Our writer's group, Grand Rapids Regional Writer's Group (http://bit.ly/grrwg) did a workshop on different brainstorming methods. Working in groups of three, we had time to try three different methods. And it was good.

My group did some traditional brainstorming, the 5 Whys method and an interview with our characters.

Of all the methods, traditional brainstorming seemed to work the best. It could be that the group was just more familiar with that method, but it could also be that they didn't get the purpose of digging deep with the 5 Whys or that they really just wanted to talk without the formalities of a set pattern - which is why interviewing the characters got side-tracked in a matter of seconds.

Anyway, we all walked away from the experience with a load of ideas for our works in progress, a renewed passion for our stories, and a couple more tools to add to our writing process.

I'm sure some people are fantastic writers without the help or input of other minds, but brainstorming with a friend or group of friends is a great way to find what interests others (always good to know if you want others to read your work), to get new ideas, and to enjoy the writing process on a more social level.

If you decide to brainstorm with a friend, remember these rules:

- There are no stupid questions and no stupid ideas during a brainstorming session.
- No negative comments such as "I tried that," or "That won't work," allowed.
- No phones.
- No walking away.
- No editing the ideas of others.
- Build on other's ideas.
- Think of every possibility you can - even if it seems ridiculous.

It can also be helpful to turn your backs to each other to avoid negative facial expressions and body language, and to have a moderator to keep the group on track.

The Three Hats Method

Every now and then I hear someone complain that they can't make their characters do what they want them to do, and I have to bite my tongue until it bleeds in order not to remind them that they own the fingers working the keyboard. Here are a few things you can do if your characters are misbehaving:

- Let them take the lead. If you are a chicken-on-Monday-pork chops-on Tuesday kind of plotter, this one will kill you because your characters won't stick to the tidy outline you've prepared for their lives. In fact, you may end up with a different story than you originally planned. However, if you're a pantser, you may find that it's a fun ride.

- Re-visit your character's goals, motivations, and conflicts. You may discover an essential ingredient is missing.

- Get heavy handed. Just write the action that you want to see take place and deal with the emotional end of it later.

And then there is the Three Hats method. It's a touchy-feely sort of way to find out what's going on with a character. In this, you take on three roles.

First, you ask "why won't my character _____?" Then answer yourself from a narrator's point of view. If you're character is the narrator, answer it from your point of view.

Next, pretend you're interviewing your character, and ask him, "Why won't you _____?" Then answer that question from the character's point of view - as if you were that character - even in his style of voice. After the initial answer is given, you ask your character "Why," and answer yourself from the character's point of view again.

The third hat you wear is that of your antagonist or another key character in the story. Ask them about the character you are having trouble with, and write out your answer from their point of view. Put yourself into the character's point of view

as much as possible, and refrain from pat answers or answers that aren't really helpful. "Because he's stupid," does not help you. You may find that thinking from your antagonist's point of view will reveal all kinds of things about your other characters.

Three Hats can help you see if you're asking your character to do something out of character for them without proper motivation. It might help you find the right motivation. It will definitely give you an interesting conversation with yourself. And, if nothing else, it will get you to write.

A Twenty-One Minute Writing Exercise

Take seven minutes and write a fast profile of three characters - two unrelated good-guy characters and an antagonistic figure. Make them as random as you can. For instance, a cowboy, an obstetrician, and a drug dealer. Include their main trait (like a musician,) their big struggle (he's going blind,) and their big goal (wants to play all nine Beethoven Symphonies with his local symphony before he has to retire), and what ever else you can fit into seven minutes.

Now, take all three of these characters and use the next seven minutes to come up with an outrageous plot for them. If you have any time left when you are done, come up with one more idea to notch up the craziness. (The obstetrician is the long lost love of the cowboy who is the hated half brother of the drug dealer, and the cowboy must save his beloved doc before the drug dealer shoots her for a blowing the whistle on his drug ring. -- Added craziness: it's all happening in a posh NYC hotel during a political convention. [Gosh, I might actually try to turn this one into a real story.])

Finally, take seven minutes to write your two opening paragraphs of the story.

If you do this right, this will be the fastest twenty-one minutes of your week. Go!

Conclusion

Note to Myself - Make time to do things I love. I'm a better person for others when I do. I fly when I'm creative.
-Jill Badonsky

Creative activity breeds more creative thought. I believe we are created beings with the need to be creative. When we create things with our hands or minds, we can't help but loosen up all kinds of creative juices. I picture little connectors in our brains lighting up and having a little party up there when we are creative, and a party in our brains makes the rest of the brain cells wake up and party, and then we get even more creative.

That's my theory, however unscientific it may be. Some day some lab nerd is going to prove it and get all kinds of recognition. And then you'll say to yourself, "Hey, I read that somewhere before." Yeah.

So, get out there and get creative with something. Write, paint, bake, refinish a piece of furniture, sew. Let your brain go where it will while you're at it, and I bet you'll have all kinds of new ideas come to you.