



CREATIVE WRITING COURSE

PART 3 - THE PLOT AND SUBPLOTS

By this stage, you should have rounded characters and a believable world to put them in. Now you need to work on the action, or plot.

What is a Plot?

A plot is the story line or the way a story is written.

STRUCTURE

Every novel should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Without these the plot or story will not ring true. In plays it will be Act I, Act II and Act III.

Beginning: This is the birth of the story. The first 20 or so pages should layout the foundation for the story to unfold and introduce the main characters, especially the protagonist, as quickly as possible. We need to make a 'first impression' and win over the reader. We need to establish the status quo; who, where, when, what of the main characters, setting up the purpose of the narrative. It is never too early to introduce the theme of the book.

In movie's, where time is more pressing, much of the Beginning of the story - the establishing of character, location, style and status quo - are set up, whilst the opening credits are rolling.

EG: Using Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol as an example, the beginning (Act I) introduces the characters and their particular problems (goals and needs). The appearance of Marley's ghost is the turning point (or "big event") that moves the story into the middle portion.

Practical: Write down a brief description of the beginning of your story.

BEGINNING:.....
.....
.....
.....

Middle: This is essentially the biggest part of the book. We know we are into the Middle, as soon as the status quo set up in the beginning changes due to conflict, confrontation, life, relationships, environment, work, etc. The main plot should be revealed. This should detail the protagonist's goal in life, their objective, the mountain they must climb. The mountain you know they will climb. The mountain you want to see them climb. Why don't we give away the goal of the protagonist at the beginning of the book?

The Middle should show characters developing, being challenged, theme's need to be explored. Aspects of life we wish to expose need to be illustrated. Our beef with life needs to be set up and shown for what it is, before we can give it a panning. Problems. Obstacles. Set backs. Conflict.

QUESTION: Remember, what is conflict?

Our protagonist is on a journey. That journey will meet with options. The point of no going back will arise. The impossible will present itself. The 'iceberg' moment [where the Titanic hits the iceberg and sinks]. If the journey doesn't challenge, then it will not interest the reader. Now that the goal and the main plot are revealed, sub plots will emerge to complicate, illuminate and shade the story. We will be in a position of piecing together the puzzle.

EG: When the Ghost of Christmas Future shows Scrooge his name on a tombstone, this is the turning point (or “crisis”) that propels the story into the end segment (Act III).

MIDDLE:

.....
.....
.....
.....

END: The climax of the story, the attaining of the protagonists' main goal, against all odds, will be the point at which Act III or End begins. The denouement. As soon as the lovers have finally paired and happily wed or agreed to live with each other, or the gold medal has been attained by the guy with one leg, or the corrupt boss has been deposed in favour of our likeable protagonist at the factory, the end is upon us and all there is to do, is to revel - briefly - in the glory of the new world we have come to know. All story and plot lines, need to be tied up, those characters that had journey's need to be finished and we need to all enjoy a moment of satisfaction.

Happy ending | Sad ending | Ambiguous ending | All the threads of the story should come to a resolution. The end signifies the changes that have been shaped since the beginning

Rule - keep it brief.

The danger is that the loving couple, start to behave like a married couple and a row erupts. Or the Olympic medalist goes home, to a life of blandness. A book is a story and unlike real life, it ends on a particular dramatic or poignant moment. If you extend the book, beyond its natural conclusion, you will have begun a new journey. When one story ends, another begins..

EG: In the climax of the story (at the end of Act III), Scrooge, now filled with the Christmas Spirit, brings a Christmas goose to the Cratchit's, breaking the chain of events that would have otherwise led to the bleak future revealed by the Ghost of Christmas Future.

END

.....
.....
.....
.....



Breaking down the plot into smaller increments.

Another way to define the structure of your plot is by creating a model of your story. As a way to demonstrate how to do this we'll use John Grisham's highly successful novel 'The Firm' that was adapted into a hit film starring Tom Cruise. Bare in mind this is only an example of how you can apply a structure to your own story.

Task: Write down the model of your story. To help guide you refer to the above examples from The Firm.

Inciting Incident

The hero, an ambitious, poor kid from across the tracks and just out of law school, gets his dream job with a prestigious Memphis law firm. Then he realizes he's made a terrible mistake. The firm is a front for a mafia family.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Goal

The young lawyer must determine how to leave his job without getting himself and his wife killed in the process, and remain a lawyer and an individual with his honor intact.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Strategy

He sees a way out of his dilemma by collecting evidence of fraud, overcharged bills sent through the mail—a federal offense. This allows him to separate his law firm bosses from their mafia clients, handing the lawyers over to the FBI who can charge them with federal crimes, while keeping intact his lawyer/ client relationship with the Mafia bosses. Thus he retains his ability to continue practicing as a lawyer without the fear that the Mob will send someone to kill him one day.

.....
.....
.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Opposition

The firm, particularly its security chief, has killed others who tried to leave and will kill or blackmail the hero to force him to stay.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Stakes

The attorney must keep his life in a literal sense and get it back in a metaphorical one.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Bleakest Moment

His wife leaves him, and he sees no way out of a double bind: The Mafia has all but stolen his soul and enslaved him in a gilded cage, while the FBI wants him to trash his ethics and future as a brilliant young lawyer.

.....

.....

Emotional or Psychological Hole

As a kid he was poor and seemingly powerless, growing up in a trailer park with an older brother in jail for manslaughter.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Filling the hole

He learns what is important in life and what is glittering illusion, becoming a more mature and complete person.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Subplots

The subplot is a secondary, or tertiary, plot to the main thrust of the novel. If you imagine the main storyline as a tree trunk, you can have several branches of connected stories – the subplots. All these connect to the main story, the tree trunk. These connecting stories help to give texture and dimension to a novel; they give the reader something more than a one-dimensional, primary story. Your subplots must always connect and relate to the main story. They are there to lend support and substance to your main plot. They are also there to maintain the reader’s interest.

When do you use a subplot?

It all depends on your story. Most subplots appear quite early in novels, as new characters and situations unfold. A subplot can happen because you introduce a new character further along in the story, or perhaps there is a situation that conflicts with the main character’s goal which forces a different action from them. Perhaps there is a love interest, perhaps the opposite.

Perhaps there is a shadowy character waiting in the wings, someone relevant to your main character, or perhaps something in your main character's past is important, and this is told in flashback... all of these are subplots. Ideally – although not always – they should create conflict with your main character to add greater depth to the overall story. Subplots are not always apparent when you start writing your story. It maybe they start to emerge as the story matures and develops, or it maybe you have a clear indication of a subplot from the start. Each writer is different in that sense. There is no right or wrong way. They should arise naturally from the main story, so try not to force them; otherwise, you'll end up with something that is contrived and not worth reading.

To Kill a Mockingbird

The Main Plot

In this story, Scout, the main character, and her brother Jem, live with their father, Atticus Finch, in their town in Alabama. It follows a period of their lives during the Great Depression as Atticus, a lawyer, agrees to defend a local black man, Tom Robinson, for the rape of a white woman. It is set against a backdrop of prejudice and racism.

Subplot

During the summer, a boy named Dill comes to stay with his aunt and becomes friends with Scout and Jem, but Dill is also a catalyst for their interest in the spooky house down the road, which belongs to the mysterious Boo Radley. Few people have seen Boo. The children are equally fascinated and scared of him. He leaves them little gifts in the hollow of a tree. This is an indication that Boo is not the terrible person that we first imagine, and he will play a pivotal role at the end of the story.

The townsfolk turn against Atticus and his family for defending Tom Robinson, so Scout feels she must defend her father against the name-calling at school and takes to fighting with the school kids who mock her father. This is also a subplot.

Despite the truth of Tom Robinson's innocence and Atticus demonstrating that Mayella Ewell, the supposed victim, and her father Bob Ewell, the local drunk, were lying about the whole thing, the court convicts him. Robinson is driven to try to escape but is shot and killed. Ewell plagues the Robinson family. There is tension between him and Atticus. Their strained relationship is a subplot.

The Final Wash-up

The climax of the story leads Ewell to drunkenly attack Scout and Jem as they walk back from a Halloween party. Jem is beaten and his arm is broken. A mysterious shadow steps in to save the children from harm and takes Jem home. Scout follows, realising it is Boo Radley. Boo has killed Bob Ewell. The Sheriff decides that far from prosecuting Boo, Ewell drunkenly fell on his own knife. Scout walks Boo to his house. At last Scout realises the importance of 'walking in another's shoes' and seeing life from other people's perspectives, rather than judging them with prejudice, as they had done so with Boo.

