

SC NEW WRITERS CLASSES – Plotting: Telling the Story You Want to Tell

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How do you get started with your story?

- 1st – **Do not write about what happened . . . write about what went wrong.**
- 2nd – **Stories are transformations/alterations of either a character or a situation, or both.**
- 3rd – **Know your protagonist's unmet desire – there you find your story.**
- 4th – **Your story is: 1) what should go wrong, and 2) what does the character want**

Write down your story in one or two sentences (CORE CONFLICT). Some say a 25-word synopsis is even better. Several ways to write this short synopsis.

Lowcountry Bribe: *Threats, a missing boss, a very dead co-worker, a federal investigation and a sinister hog farmer: Carolina Slade is a bean-counting civil servant in hot water. All hell breaks loose when she notifies authorities of a bribe, and now she could lose her job and her kids unless she breaks all the rules to solve a crime that's nobody believes exists.*

Tidewater Murder: *Carolina Slade's best girlfriend is a suspected embezzler in a case wrought with drugs, stolen tomatoes and slaves. When the farmer who knows the truth dies in a shrimp boat explosion, Slade copes to save her friend's career, her life, and the lives of those around her when farming turns vicious . . . meaning people die and disappear in deep, South Carolina water.*

Murder on Edisto: *Her husband murdered by the Russian mob, Boston detective Callie Jean Morgan suffers a mental break and relinquishes her badge to relocate home to South Carolina. She hopes to reclaim her life and raise her son, but she arrives on Edisto Beach to find her neighbor murdered, her sanity challenged, and her home repeatedly violated as she fights not to get involved in crime solving, when that's exactly what she has to do.*

SHORT SYNOPSIS VERSION ONE: Keep it simple (from Rachelle Gardner)

- Mention one or two characters
- Identify the choice, conflict, or goal
- Emphasize only one plotline
- State what's at stake (can be implied)
- Refer to action needed to reach the goal
- Mention setting (if important)
- Use strongest nouns, verbs and adjectives
- Make conflict clear, but don't have to note the solution

SHORT SYNOPSIS VERSION TWO: The formula (from Nathan Bransford)

When [opening conflict] happens to [character(s)], they must [overcome conflict] to [complete their quest].

Examples:

- **Charlie & the Chocolate Factory** - Everyone wants the secrets of the reclusive Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory, but only one courageous boy will get them during a wild and hilarious adventure.

- **Lowcountry Bribe** – Sucked into a bribery investigation that goes wrong, a by-the-book federal employee fights against both bureaucracy and the criminal element for her life.
- **Murder on Edisto** – Guilt-ridden after her husband's murder, an ex-detective leaves the job and retreats to her parents' beach cottage, only to learn crime isn't done with her yet.
- **Edisto Jinx** – An alcoholic, ex-detective digs into a six-year old history of accidents in a beach community that refuses to believe in murder.
- **Echoes of Edisto** – When death and mayhem hit Edisto Beach, the newly appointed police chief discovers her mother may be the culprit.
- **Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone** - A boy wizard begins training and must battle for his life with the Dark Lord who murdered his parents.

SHORT SYNOPSIS VERSION THREE: Three key elements (from Janet Hardy of Fiction University)

- WHO is the protagonist
- WHAT is their problem (what makes the character act, what is the inciting event)
- WHAT is the gotcha (OOH or AHA factor, coolness factor, what a reader wants to read)

When trying to mold your novel, and justify if it's worthy, take it in stages:

- **Idea** – just a place, or a character, or a crime
- **Premise** – add what happens
- **Plot** – add why
- **Story** – add character depth and emotion

For example, Murder on Edisto:

- **Idea** – A murder mystery on Edisto Beach.
- **Premise** - An ex-detective secludes herself at Edisto Beach only to face solving a murder.
- **Plot** – An ex-Boston detective relocates to Edisto Beach only to have murder follow her and force her out of her self-imposed sabbatical.
- **Story** – Still reeling from her husband's murder, an ex-Boston detective retreats to her parents' vacation beach home to heal and plan her life only to face a homicide of her childhood mentor.

Define the stakes.

- What happens if this big thing isn't resolved?
- What would have happened if this big thing hadn't happened?
- Who will get hurt?
- Who will be saved?
- What's so bad about this thing?

Define the theme. The big lesson. A recurring idea or concept explored in the novel.

Clichés, universal connections, things you embroider on pillows. Once defined, keep front and center for reference as you write.

Examples of Theme:

- Jurassic Park - Should humans play God?
- Twilight – Everyone is special –OR- Love conquers all.
- Wizard of Oz – There's no place like home.
- Platoon – War is hell.

- Jaws – Good vs. evil.
- The Hunger Games – Family is everything.
- Forrest Gump – Life is a box of chocolates.

Define the protagonist.

- Must be central to the issue.
- Must have a lot to lose, if not the most.
- Why tell the story through his eyes?
- Why is he qualified to be the main voice?

Define the antagonist.

- Why is he the best person for the opposition?
- What has he got to lose? Or gain?
- Is the antagonist a person? (i.e., weather, economic times, self/bad habits)
- Defining your protagonist often defines your antagonist because the bad guy is in the way.

Define the protagonist's goal.

- PROTAGONIST is trying to solve THE PROBLEM or STAKES will happen, and ANTAGONIST is trying to stop them because of THESE REASONS.
- How you fill in these blanks can also help define your genre. (mystery, suspense, romance, scifi, fantasy)

Define some big moments because * THIS IS YOUR PLOT ***.**

- What is the first realization of the main problem?
- When does the protagonist discover what's in his way?
- When does the protagonist attempt to solve the problem and fail?
- When does the protagonist feel like giving up?
- When does the protagonist decide they need to risk something and keep going?
- When and how does the protagonist solve the problem?

Define some coolness if you need a break (scenes, trigger points, unusual stakes, surprise conflict)

Questions to ask yourself when starting a novel, then apply to your characters which in turn creates scenes which creates plot (plot is more than just telling story):

- What makes your blood boil?
- What are you desperate to protect?
- What makes you angry, deathly afraid, impotently frustrated?
- What drives you to hostile confrontation?
- What would make you lie or as a minimum embellish the truth?
- What would make you deceive yourself?
- What would make you manipulate others?
- What could you become obsessive over?

Point of View

- 1) **First person:** intimate, dialogue in her head is natural, instant reactions, everything she sees/hears/feels/senses is flavored with her voice. But it limits you in how you have to tell the story, because your character has to always be in the room, having experienced it all.
- 2) **Third person (close):** Almost like first person, where you include the thoughts in his head and the narrative is pretty tightly affixed to the character. It's still HE and SHE instead of I and MY but you are using a heavier dose of the person's quirkiness, as if you are in his head and close by him. Use this if you want to get into his head a lot throughout the story (i.e., Edisto books).
- 3) **Third person (distant):** You're a narrator, and you do not get too deeply in anyone's head. You are less invested in any one character. Many writers use multiple POVs at this range. Every character's POV has to be compelling, though, because you risk losing intimacy between the reader and the character. Whether individual or multiple POV, the players you endow with a POV must bring a LOT to the table, and the story cannot exist without their viewpoint.
- 4) **A scene has more WOW** if the reader is in the head of the person who:
 - Is the most emotionally involved
 - Has the most at stake
 - Will engage the reader and drag them into the story best
 - But . . . it often isn't necessarily the most obvious or easiest path. Challenge yourself. It's always tempting to use multiple POV, but can dilute the story and remove the mystery.

Outliner or Pantser?

- Tony Hillerman doesn't believe in outlining if:
 - Very familiar with the setting
 - Very comfortable with the mystery that needs solving
 - Very sure of the theme
 - Very comfortable with the characters
 - Everything moves more effortlessly
 - Usually doesn't happen for a book or two
- Outlining, or predestination, can stifle characters and plot.
- But not outlining can lead to dead ends. (*but no writing is wasted as you learn what works and what doesn't – you learn more from mistakes and undoing)
- Plot linearly or out of order
- Scrivener software

Regardless, define your goals as you go:

Protagonist's overall story goal?

Antagonist's goal?

Secondary character goal?

Chapter goal?

Scene goal?

The 3 to 5 major decisions and turning points in the story.

How to open the book

- Make the protagonist likable
- Place the protagonist in her setting to show sense of place to reader
- Show protagonist driving the plot, not something just happening to him
- Show a problem (doesn't have to be THE problem)
- Start with action (something important happens, doesn't have to be murder or a bomb)
- Have obvious conflict (can be mental as well as physical)
- 99 % of the time opens with the protagonist
 - OR, shows past or current event happening outside protag's knowledge
 - OR, centers on antagonist triggering the plot
 - OR, begins to map a puzzle or mystery
 - Regardless, must have action, no info-dumps or backstory

What to Do About the Stalled Story?

- Is your protagonist still motivated – or just wandering? Is the story leading them by the nose? **They need to be driving the story.** Clearly define his motives.
- Are the stakes gone or wimped out? The protagonist has nothing to fight against or for.
- Is there no conflict anymore? Are the characters just going through the steps? (Insert tension and action on every page)
- Has subplot taken over? Has your story taken a tangent? Has a subplot become more intriguing (or more fun to write)?

Types of Plotting

- **The Three-Act Structure** - Most common - Setup, rising action with the stakes, and a resolution
- **The Hero's Journey** - By Joseph Campbell – 17-steps of a mythical creature on an adventure
- **Six-Stage Plot Structure** - By Michael Hauge – six critical elements, a variation of the three-act
- **Save the Cat Structure** - By Blake Snyder – a screenwriter format using 15 turning points
- **The Steven James Way** - Story Trumps Structure

The Basic Three-Act Structure

- **Act One (the setup)**
 - First 25 % of story
 - **Opening scene** – get to know protagonist, the world involved, something happens, you learn to like the protagonist
 - **Inciting event** – incident happens, protagonist uncertain whether to get involved, gives a window to the core conflict, may still not see the bigger problem, protagonist faces that things will be changing
 - **Inciting event has to change your character's life.**
 - **Act one problem** – protagonist has to set a goal, makes a choice, first major step
 - Protagonist has to CHOOSE to proceed and leave her comfort zone
 - The future path is unfamiliar
 - This launches the middle
 - Know your word count, your chapter count, and estimate this piece of your story

- **Act Two (the figuring things out)**
 - Middle 50 % of story
 - **The Choice** –protagonist embraces the challenge and sets a plan, but it's the wrong plan and not the whole problem and she fails, becomes more flawed and vulnerable, and doesn't see what to do
 - **Midpoint Reversal** – An unexpected incident changes the protagonist's perspective and plan. This should be around the halfway mark of the book. Stake are raised. A new secret/problem arises requiring sacrifice.
 1. **Need an all-is-lost moment**
 2. **Need a dark-self-analysis-of-the-soul moment**
 - **The Disaster** – at the 75 % mark. All goes wrong, often because of what protagonist did. Protagonist feels worse than ever. Stakes raise again. Almost too much to handle. Lies are stripped away. Reader may learn the antagonist ID, or if already known. To succeed, must face the problem head on and fight his fears.
- **Act Three (facing the antagonist)**
 - Last 25 % of story
 - **The Plan** – Digs deep, finds new plan using all he's learned. Protagonist is stronger internally and tackles the situation. This plan needs to be clever. Sometimes details of plan are secret until the climax. Sometimes the plan doesn't work, but it moves the protagonist forward to think on his feet and be proactive. Even this plan can fail.
 - **Climax** – The showdown. Protagonist realizes the answer as well as his growth from the experience to make the confrontation possible. Maybe one last stake is raised. Personal issues can complicate.
 - **Protagonist must meet antagonist**
 - **Protagonist must show he's changed to someone new**
 - **Show a twist**
 - **Sacrifice must be made**
 - **Wrap Up** – What is the protagonist going to do now? What was the point to the novel. Give a sense of closure.

Steven James Way – Story Trumps Structure – No # of acts; just feel complete

- Orientation of reader to the world of the characters
- Origination of conflict
- Escalation of tension
- Rising stakes
- A moment where all is lost
- A climactic encounter
- A satisfying conclusion
- A transformation of the character or the situation, usually both

Hooks Aren't Just at the Beginning – A hook is anything in a story to make a reader keep reading.

Types of hooks you might utilize or capitalize on:

- **Overall story hook**
 - The kind that snares an agent - Benjamin Button
 - Original, or a slant off an old idea – Wicked (Wizard of Oz), Titanic
 - Draws a reaction, raises curiosity - Signs
- **Protagonist hook**
 - Unique profession – Miss Marple
 - Unique background – The Great Gatsby
 - Possesses special power – The Avengers
 - Unusual personality - Poltergeist
 - Unexpected abilities – Sherlock Holmes
- **Core conflict hook**
 - Revolves around an unexpected event or situation – War of the Worlds
 - An impossible problem to be solved – E.T.
- **Theme or Concept hook**
 - Philosophical question – Wizard of Oz
 - Explores an idea in a compelling way – Sixth Sense
 - Often literary in nature – The Matrix
 - “What if” begs answering – Hook, Jurassic Park
- **Setting hook**
 - Sense of place triggers sense of adventure – Lord of the Rings
 - Entices reader to want to visit – Harry Potter
 - Can be historical – Casablanca

What if your story doesn't feel unique enough?

- **Add a new twist to an old idea.**
 - What if the South won the War?
 - What if Pinocchio's nose only grew when he told the truth?
 - What if super heroes were considered criminals?
 - What if apes became the ruling species?
 - What if villains have to save the day?
- **Try a new perspective.**
 - Urban Huckleberry Finn
 - Cinderella told through the frustrations of the Fairy Godmother
 - Current stories told in an historic setting, or vice versa
 - A mystery with the antagonist as the main character/POV
 - What if the protagonist lost?
 - What if Dorothy's house had landed on the wrong witch?
 - What if your worst enemy became your best friend, or vice versa?
- **Themes to consider**
 - Love conquers all
 - Never give up
 - Love is about compromise
 - Trust no one but yourself
 - Life isn't always fair
 - You can't please everyone
 - Don't take life too seriously

- Time heals all wounds
- When life hands you lemons, make lemonade
- It's better to have loved and lost than never loved at all
- Don't play with fire
- Love finds you when you're not looking
- Haters are gonna hate
- Think outside the box
- Every cloud has a silver lining
- A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush
- A leopard cannot change his spots
- Always consider the source
- You cannot save someone from himself
- It ain't over till it's over
- Get over yourself



There's something about being alone with your thoughts that makes ideas **pop**. But, alone at home it can be hard to find answers. Find the **encouragement** you need to **keep the flow going**.

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