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Plotting

By Jeff Heisler

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Plotting

How do you plot a novel? You read your favorite book and the writer put the twists and turns in just the right places. The pace was perfect. The excitement built to the end and then WHAM- What a finish! How the heck to they do that?

It's not as hard as you think- really. In fact, plotting is one of the easier and most enjoyable tasks involved in writing your novel. John Grisham agrees. He once told a reporter he loves to plot- but hates the writing. I can understand why. When you're plotting you see the story clearly in your own mind. You begin to ask yourself- what if this happened? What if that happened? It's like kindergarten playtime all over again.

So if it's so easy how do you do it? I'll tell you, but first you have to know that there is no one single method that works for all writers. You have to get an understanding of what others do and then make the process your own. Here's how it works:

Step 1- Write your book in two sentences or less. That's right- two sentences. Remember when you looked at the movie listings in the paper and they had these two sentence descriptions that told you what the movie was about. That's what you have to write first. Why? Because the golden rule of writing is to know what you're writing when you write it. Sure, you can get around this and throw out pages and ideas as you go, a lot of writers have. I think that's wasteful. I've heard several stories of great writers submitting their manuscripts in large trunks- thousands of pages. "The story's in there somewhere- they tell the editor." Look- no editor in today's publishing world is going to bother with that. You have to have the book done and edited to perfection BEFORE you send it in. That's why you need to write your story's plot in two to three sentences. Anything that you write or plot later must relate to those sentences or they need to be cut- period.

Here's an example: Moby Dick- Ahab, a whaleboat captain bent on revenge against the white whale that mauled him, spurs a tired crew across the ocean in a grand hunt. Ignoring the dangers of the sea he becomes consumed with revenge and will do anything to get it.

There it is. Hundreds of pages boiled down to two sentences. Melville should have done this exercise himself. He grew as a writer as he wrote more and more- culminating in this great literary classic, but even Moby Dick is flawed in a fundamental way. Melville includes an entire chapter that reads like an

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encyclopedia of whale biology. There is no story whatsoever in this chapter— just diagrams and descriptions of whales. It is often called the least read chapter in all great literature. Perhaps if Melville had kept the heart of his story in mind he would have left that chapter out— or at least put it in an appendix.

Boil down your story into 2 sentences and stay within those sentences.

Do this first. You will have to do it eventually when you submit to publishers and agents— so you might as well do it now and benefit from the sharp focus it provides.

Step 2— Get out your index cards. Get a bunch of 'em, whatever size you like. Now sit and think about your story. Are there scenes and events that pop to mind? Jot them down. No detail here— just enough to remind you what the card is about. Write the cards in any order. The LAST thing you want to do is to force yourself to think of these scenes in a linear way (see my column on the writer's mind for more detail.) Just jot down every scene you can think of. Some scenes will give you ideas for others. Just

keep going. When you're tired put them down and review them later. Add more (don't take any out, even if you've decided you probably won't use them.) Keep adding cards and scenes until you just can't think of any more ideas. By now you're probably excited because you're getting a great view of the story and you can't wait to start writing. Well— wait anyway. There's more to do.

Step 3— Organize your cards. Now's the time to put them in order. Keep two things in mind— first, unless you're doing weird things with the timeline— everything should be linear. Event A should be followed by event B and so on. Don't do B,T,Z,P,A, or some darned thing unless you really, really know what you're doing. If this is your first book, I wouldn't even think about it. A—B—C, 1—2—3. Keep it nice and simple. Second, think about what events you want your readers to see. Chances are you won't be showing every single action taken by every single character throughout the timeline. Decide what scenes are most exciting or important for the main storyline. Don't worry— you can easily find ways to share these events with readers without launching into the full scene. A main character could get a phone call or a note. They could hear about an event from another character— or maybe even guess that the event has occurred based on their observations. Make a little mark or symbol of the cards that you're sure you'd like your readers to see. Don't worry, nothing's set in stone yet. Just make a note and move on.

Step 4— Now that you have all of your events it's time to get picky. Lay your cards out on a large flat surface, or put them up on a bulletin board. When I first started I bought two sheets of corkboard and put them on the wall in my office. I pinned all the cards on the board the way I liked them. When you're done you should be able to see your whole novel and enjoy following the plot. Keep rearranging if you want to— go nuts. Don't stop until you like what you see. This is a concept called storyboarding, and it's used by creative people in a variety of mediums. Watch one of those how—they—made—the—movie documentaries. They always storyboard. It's a great tool.

Step 5— Details. Now take your cards down one at a time. You're going to make some notes on the back before you put it back up. You can make a new card if you need to. Here's what you're going to put on the back:

- Location: Where is the scene happening? Watch for problems with logic here. A character in New York can't be in London 5 minutes later. Think of ways to have the setting enhance your plot. Be creative. I once put a car chase scene in the hallway of the Smithsonian. Just made things more interesting.

- Time: What is the day and time this is happening? Also— watch for logical flaws.

- Characters: List all characters who will appear in this scene.

- Main POV: Every scene should be written through the eyes of just one character— your point of view

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character. Who is the POV character in this scene?

- Main POV's goal: What is the POV character trying to accomplish here?

- Problems that stop the main POV character from reaching their goal (Try to list 3–4 at minimum.):
What's in the way? What's stopping the character from getting what they want? By the way– if there's nothing in this scene that's in the way this better be the last chapter of the book or you're in trouble. All drama is based on conflict. Make sure there's plenty of it in every scene.

- Scene ending hook: In most of the book things should be getting worse, or if things are looking better– make sure your reader knows that relief will be short lived. End the scene with some hint of more conflict to come. Don't let the reader have an excuse to put the book down because they might not pick it up again.

Step 6: Put the project down and come back to it a few days later with a fresh view. Read– revise– and wait again. Do this until you're happy with the product.

Step 7: Start writing from the cards one scene at a time. I like to take what I've put on the cards and put them into a single document in Word. That way I can keep adding notes and rearranging without a lot of trouble.

When it's time for me to write I pick any scene– not necessarily in order, review the information and write the scene based on the information on the card. You always start writing knowing what your goal

is and what needs to be included. No writer's block to deal with here.

That's it. Just keep writing those scenes till you're done and you've got a well plotted book.

Jeff Heisler is a freelance writer and novelist. You can visit his site at www.heislerink.com/writeaway.htm to read more of his articles on writing.

Have You Plotted Your Story Before Writing It?

By Nick Vernon

Creative Writing Tips -

The writer, who doesn't have the time to plot, always finds the time to rewrite.

Sound familiar?

I've been guilty of this too, back in the early days of my writing apprenticeship. I was so eager to get stuck into writing my story that I wouldn't bother with plotting.

Plotting gives you a sense of direction. It's your map, which will lead you to write your story. Leaping into the unknown rarely works. Without a plot several things can happen.... Our stories aren't focused

We lose our way Our characters don't come to life because we don't take the time to develop them

We get stuck The story strays from us

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And all this happens when we haven't figured everything out first.

Your plot is the foundation of your story. It's the skeleton, which will hold your story together. Your plot is there to work everything out first - to see if it can be worked out, and then flesh out that skeleton with other elements that make a story.

Plotting is the difference between writing a story for yourself and writing one for an audience. Writing for ourselves doesn't require too much strain because we only have ourselves to please. It's when we have to please our readers that the hard work begins.

If you are aiming to sell your stories, plotting is a must.

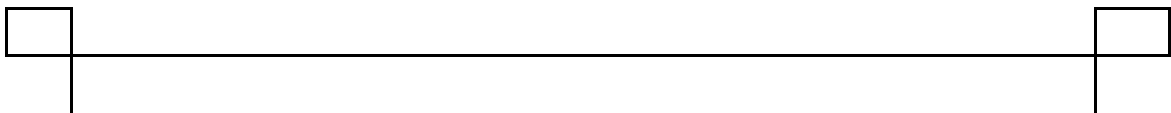
Have you plotted your story before writing it?

Besides his passion for writing, Nick Vernon runs an online gift site where you will find gift information, articles and readers' funny stories. Visit

<http://www.we-recommend.com>



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