

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| Part 1: A Question of Good Plot..... | 4 |
| Part 2: The Three Elements of Good Plot..... | 6 |
| Part 3: The Importance of Conflict..... | 8 |
| Part 4: A Breakdown of Plot Structure..... | 10 |
| Part 5: How to Diagram Plot..... | 12 |
| Part 6: A Convergence of Character and Plot..... | 15 |
| Part 7: The Story Arc..... | 17 |
| Part 8: The Emerging Plot: Let it Flow..... | 20 |

The Building Blocks of Plot

Introduction

You've come up with the perfect character or idea for a story and so you begin to write in earnest, but somewhere along the line you run smack into a brick wall, which causes your magic flow to come to an abrupt halt and you seem in a permanent stall with your story. What do you do next? Why can't you go any further? Is it writer's block or something more elemental that keeps you from moving forward? Do you find this happening with just about all your writing? One thing you can try is taking a closer look at the plot.

What makes a good plot? That isn't an easy question to answer because there are many elements that go into producing a plot of worthy quality. It is a combination of good characters, plenty of conflict, the correct organization of ideas and much more. I have put together a series called the Building Blocks of Plot which contains a series of eight articles dedicated to giving a well rounded view of what makes up a good plot.

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 1: A Question of Good Plot

Part 2: The Three Elements of Plot

Part 3: A Breakdown of Plot Structure

Part 4: The Importance of Conflict

Part 5: How to Diagram Plot

Part 6: A Convergence of Character and Plot

Part 7: The Story Arc: Novels and Subplots

Part 8: The Emerging Plot: Let it Flow

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 1: A Question of Good Plot

Works of fiction, from short stories to novels, actually center on a small and focused world that usually has a single pressing question that arises above everything else, which is called the major dramatic question. This question usually has a yes/no answer and the reader knows the answer by the end of the story. *Will Maggie marry Jeff? Will Angie get the job she's always wanted? Will Mark apologize to Amy for ruining her new dress?*

If you do it right, a reader will be more than willing to wade through hundreds of pages because of the suspense that the major dramatic question creates along the way. Yes, no, or maybe are all acceptable answers, but try to make it believable. You don't want the reader to feel cheated or let down. Most importantly, make sure your answer matches the question you asked. Don't have a story about... *Angie getting a job and end it with her finding love.* Stay on target.

Once you know the major dramatic question of your story then you have to answer it, which despite the fact that there are only really a few ways that it can go; yes, no and maybe- it can take on many different forms as you make the journey to your answer. Sometimes the possibilities of a story can overwhelm, while at other times it becomes difficult to see past what has already been written.

Some questions to ask as you look at the story you have been stuck on for weeks, maybe even months: Do you know what the major dramatic question is in your story? Do you know how you will answer it? Do you know of all the possible ways to get to your answer? - If you answered no to any of these questions, then maybe it's time to take a second look at your question and the possibilities that it holds.

Here is an exercise that might help you loosen up your thinking about sticking with a particular version of a story and help you realize other possible ways to answer the same question...

How to Develop and Finish Stories

Exercise from the book *What If?* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter

Find a story that you are stuck on.

Next write in the top of a blank page What If.

Now write five ways of continuing that story, not ending the story, but continuing the story to the next event, scene, et cetera. Let your imagination go wild. Loosen up your thinking about the events in the story. Your what if's can be as diverse as your mind can make them. More than likely, one of the what if's will feel right, organic, to your story and that is the direction in which you should go. Sometimes you will have to do several groups of what if's per story, but that's okay as long as they keep you moving forward.

You can also discover more about the major dramatic question and how it is played out within a story through three vital elements of plot which are: the Protagonist, the Protagonist's goal, and the conflict blocking that goal. Let's take a closer look in Part 2 of The Building Blocks of Plot series called The Three Elements of Good Plot.

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 2: The Three Elements of Good Plot

The major dramatic question of a story is the lifeblood of your story. It is what pulls the words together to make a coherent story, so how can we discover more about what it is and what it does for your plot? Well, we need to take a look at the three elements of plot which are: the Protagonist, the Protagonist's goal, and the conflict blocking that goal.

The Protagonist is the main character of your story. He is the center of the universe that you created in your story, which will allow the reader to see his complexity and depth most fully. It's the desire, or goal of that character that drives the plot forward.

A **goal** can be a conscious effort by the protagonist, or it could be unconsciously driving his actions with the protagonist being unaware of its moving force. A goal can be concrete, like looking for a job, or abstract, like finding self-worth. Though, usually abstract goals are often manifested in concrete things like food to find comfort, money is linked to power, and a job usually brings self-worth. This desire is the key to the plot.

Conflict brings suspense and is essential to a good plot. Make your character struggle for what he wants, and keep raising the stakes as the story progresses until the circumstances seem impossible to get through. Resist the urge to be nice and give them what they want, because this leads to bad plot. Hold out until the very end then give the protagonist and reader the payoff they've worked so hard to get to, or deny them the pleasure- your choice.

It is important for a writer to know how to control a basic plot. The following is a writing exercise of a simple story that will give practice in doing just that. This story has the main Protagonist, his goal and whatever conflict that keeps him from reaching his goal.

The Skeleton

(Exercise from the book *What If?* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter)

Write a linear story, in which a strong main character is on the quest for something important and specific (e.g., a shelter for a baby, medicine for a sick mother, or the key to the storage house where a tyrant has locked away all the grain from a starving populace). The object is given- don't explain its importance. The main character starts acting immediately. She meets a (specific) obstacle; finally she triumphs over the obstacle by means of magical or supernatural elements that come from the outside (Dorothy's red shoes in *The Wizard of Oz*). You may introduce minor characters but the narrative should never abandon the main character. This story should be told through action and dialogue. Limit: 550 words.

A good story requires all three of these things: the Protagonist, the Protagonist's goal, and the conflict blocking that goal. Once you know at least the first two (the Protagonist and his goal), then it is up to you to create enough conflict to keep the story going. Part 3 of *The Building Blocks of Plot* series called *The Importance of Conflict* will focus on creating that conflict.

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 3: The Importance of Conflict

Out of the three elements of plot the Protagonist, the Protagonist's goal and conflict, conflict is what keeps the momentum going in your story. It will keep the reader's interest and make them want to keep going to find out how the Protagonist manages to get beyond the obstacles that are put in his way. Plot depends on conflict.

Conflict can be achieved many ways. Obstacles can be external: be found in the other characters (antagonist, or a character that might try to keep the Protagonist from his goal), in nature, through society, acts of God, and through countless other external possibilities that exist to keep the character from what he desires most. Maybe a homeless man is looking for a meal, or a girl wants desperately to become a ballerina.

Another way to build conflict is internally. The homeless man may feel embarrassed for asking for handouts and hesitates to do so, or the girl may not know how to become a ballerina. Internal conflict usually takes place mainly within the Protagonist's mind and the emotional battle of desire, fear, and personal shortages can even create great sympathy and deep meaning through out the story, some of the conflicts may even mirror an emotional conflict the reader has dealt with in the past or is currently going through. Stories that have the most depth usually contain internal conflict.

Still not sure how to enhance the conflict in your story? Try some of these ideas: don't have two characters in a scene agree with one another, don't be afraid to allow your character to FAIL in his journey, things should go from bad to worse, a joke is a great way to produce tension with the punch line as the release (you can even interrupt the joke with a phone call or someone

else coming into the room to get more use from the joke), the characters have a right to have real sacrifice, find drama in what you might find mundane (such as, drumming up a conversation with another person across the room while a sticky situation is being played out), don't be afraid to "go there", use foreshadowing to help build up conflict, but most important of all remind readers of the cost (don't be afraid to mention this several times).

Practice taking things to the next level in the story. Ask what is the worst possible outcome the story could have? Remember the battle of the Alamo? Remember the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet? Sometimes the story isn't about "winning" the day, but the immortal drama that is played out within the story.

Magnifying Conflict

(Exercise from the book *What If?* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter)

Take a story you have already completed and go through and intensify conflict, magnifying the tension and shrillness at every turn, even to the point of absurdity and hyperbole. Add stress wherever possible, between characters and within them as individuals. Exaggerate the obstacles they face. Be extreme.

Now you have some great ideas for adding conflict to your story. What next? Check out Part 4 of The Building Blocks of Plot series called A Breakdown of Plot Structure to understand more about the different working parts of plot.

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 4: A Breakdown of Plot Structure

Once you have the basic story formed you need to decide what will happen and *where* in the story, this is called plot structure. The structure of the plot can't be separated from actual plot, because it sets up the sequence of events that move the plot forward. There are three major parts to a plot; the beginning, the middle and the end.

The beginning of a story needs to do three important things: it needs to plunge the reader into the middle of action, it needs to provide *essential* background to get the reader caught up, it also has to set up the major dramatic question, which should be done right away, if possible.

The middle is the largest part of the story and has the most work to do. It is where the core action happens and where conflict is built up so that the protagonist's goal is blocked again and again. The middle should be a listing of events that happen with causes and effects, which should be built as a chain of events that are tightly linked to the event before.

The ending is usually the smallest part of a story, but it is also where everything comes together and you get the biggest payoff. It usually has the following: crisis, climax, and consequences, the 3 C's.

“It is said that an ending should feel inevitable but unexpected- that, looking back, it is the only ending that really would have made sense, but that it still felt striking and surprising when it happened.” – David Harris Ebenbach *Gotham Writers' Workshop Writing Fiction*

Want to see if your story has the beginning, middle and end then try this exercise. It will give a skeleton of what your story is all about.

Simple Plot

(Exercise Idea {Three By Three} from *What If* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter)

Break your story down into three sentences of three words each that will give you a beginning, middle, and end this will help you discover the skeleton of your story. Choose three verbs to focus on considering the three parts of action that will move your story forward.

Example: Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl.

The beginning, middle and end makes up the meat of you story, but it can be broken down further to have a better understanding of the parts. Does your story have a beginning, middle and end? If so, then you are ready to break it down even further by diagramming the different events that unfold. Part 5 of The Building Blocks of Plot series called How to Diagram Plot will help you organize all those thoughts!

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 5: How to Diagram Plot

Plot diagram is the skeleton of a story. It is the main outline of what is going on and everything else exists solely to support that structure. It lists out the individual events that takes place throughout the story and is a great way to organize your thoughts so you know what happens next. It is also helpful in showing the cause and effect of each event as they each build onto on another.

There are a couple of different ways of plot structure but the basic diagram usually consists of Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution.

Exposition sets up the story and lets the stakes become known.

Little Red Riding Hood lives in a village near the forest. One day she decides to visit her grandmother. Before she goes, her mother makes her a basket to take along and then asks her not to talk to strangers.

Rising Action is the problem and/or conflict the character attempts to resolve.

Little Red Riding Hood dawdles in the forest and meets a wolf. She tells the wolf where she is going and soon as they part company the wolf races to the grandmother's house. Once there, he eats the grandmother and takes her place in the bed. Riding Hood arrives at the cottage.

Climax is where the story is at its worst.

The girl enters the cottage and sees her grandmother in the bed, but she is suspicious.

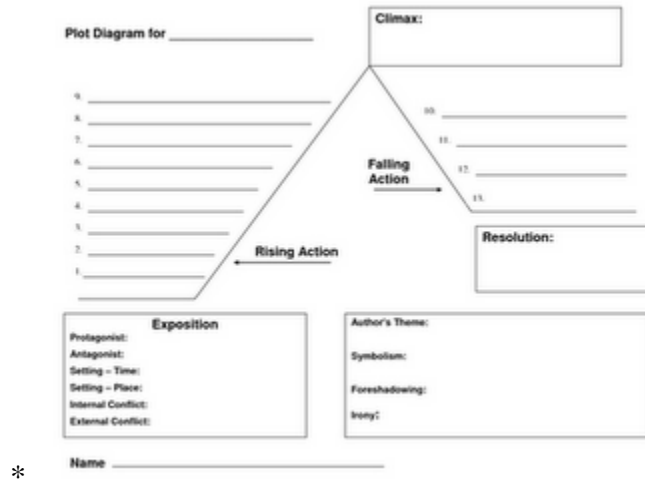
Falling Action is where the character begins to solve the problem.

The wolf tries to convince her that he is the grandmother, but fails. Riding Hood runs and screams which causes the wolf to jump from the bed to chase after her.

Resolution brings the story to a close in some manner.

A woodsman hears Little Red Riding Hood’s screams and comes to the rescue.

Exposition, Rising Action, and Climax (or beginning, middle and end) is what is called the 3 acts of a story, each playing an important part to the story.



Plot Diagram Exercise

Take a children’s story and diagram it. What is the Exposition? What are the Rising Actions? Where exactly is the Climax? What are the Falling Actions? What is the Resolution? Make sure to list ALL your actions as they progress through the story.

Don’t worry if the complete plot of your story doesn’t jump out to you the first draft or two. Some pieces may be missing, but they usually fall into place as you get to know your

characters and story better. It may take awhile for the full impact of the story to become known in its entirety and it may even surprise you.

Allow for your story to breathe and become its own life force. If some of the pieces still aren't coming to you after several drafts, then you may want to take a closer look at your characters, because they might even know the answer to the question before you do. Part 6 of The Building Blocks of Plot series called A Convergence of Character and Plot talks about the symbiotic relationship between these two important pieces of the story.

*Image taken from www.docstoc.com

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 6: A Convergence of Character and Plot

There is a very close relationship between plot and character; in fact, they are so dependant on each other that it often raises the chicken-or-the-egg question. One usually contains the other as well. In the beginning when a character is introduced to the story, the character is presented with a series of events that he is effected by and in turn leads him to other events. The story grows to become grave until finally it reaches a crisis, which will lead ultimately to a resolution. The situation evolves to the point that to separate the character or plot from one another would in effect kill the story.

Some characters are driven by the sheer force of their personalities that create lasting results that echo down time itself in such works like: Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter*, Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, and Isabella Archer in Henry James's *A Portrait of a Lady*.

In fact, instead of focusing on actual plot try focusing more on the characters in your story. This will help you from becoming too bogged down with the details and keep you moving forward. Know how they will react to any given situation. Test them and forge them in the fire of your imagination. If it helps, get them out of your head and on to the page by creating character "interviews" (this is done by you asking specific questions as the author or their "creator" and see how they respond, you might be surprised at their answers).

Discover their journey as you write and don't sweat the small stuff. It is your story after all. If there are a few "holes" that you can't quite figure out when you sit down to look at plot, your characters they will speak to you, telling you what needs to happen next. This means it's

important not to skimp on your characters. Treat them right and they will do wonders as your story unfolds.

Here is an exercise that will help you understand that the most effective plots are character driven. Watch your character's destiny become known through any given situation.

From Situation to Plot

(Exercise from the book *What If?* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter.)

In a few sentences, create a specific character in a specific situation. Complicate his life with opposing forces and alternatives within the situation. Ask, Given the Situation, what would my character want? What would my character do? How would he act or react? How will those actions propel the story toward a point of crisis and a final resolution?

Practice creating characters involved with specific situations. Then outline mini-plots for how you would complicate their situations and move them forward toward an ending. Keep this outline brief.

When creating multiple characters for one story it may be useful to plot multiple story arcs, but when you have many different arcs things get more complicated. Check out Part 7 of The Building Blocks of Plot series called Novel and Subplots to find out more about plotting multiple arcs in one story.

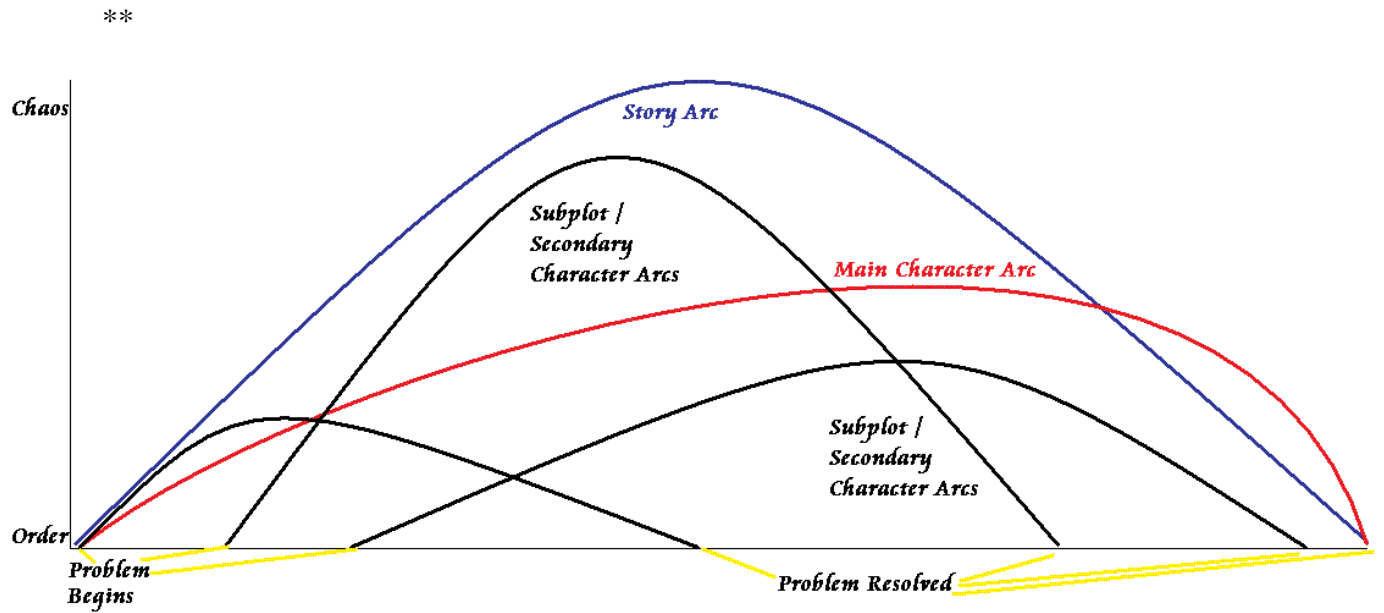
The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 7: The Story Arc

When attempting a larger piece of work such as in a novel, the series of events that take place may need a little bit more organization than in a simple diagram plot. The more characters you add the more complicated the story becomes and you may very well end up with multiple subplots within that story. This most often happens in a novel, mostly because smaller pieces of work usually don't have the room for more than one plot.

The definition of subplot is that it is *a subordinate or auxiliary plot in a novel*.* It is secondary and runs alongside the main plot of your story. The subplot(s) may focus on another character than the main character and also may focus on an issue other than the main issue. But it is important that it is somehow **relevant** to the main plot maybe exploring it in a different light or commenting on it in some way. The connection between the main and subplot(s) does not have to be obvious, but it **must** always be there lurking in the background.

Whether your story has one, two, or more plots each "arc" should have a beginning, middle, and end to it. These story arcs can overlap each other, or run simultaneously beside one another. As you can see below the timeline in the arcs of a novel can vary quite a bit, but this variation keeps the story fresh and the reader interested in what happens next. Use your subplots to give the reader a "payoff" for keeping up with the story. If you end all your arcs at the conclusion of the novel, readers may lose interest before they ever get to the last page.



There are numerous ways to plot a story with multiple story arcs: outlines, index cards, different color sticky post-its on a poster board, and even websites made just for plotting stories. It really doesn't matter what system that you pick to use, but some sort of plotting during the process of writing your story is important just to keep the facts in order.

Here is a website that I've used in the past for plotting or mind mapping a novel <https://bubbl.us/>. There is also software, some of them free, available that will allow you to plot out a story in detail with character bios, storyboarding and much more. The only problem is that there is somewhat of a learning curve to use this type of software, but if you are willing to put in the time, it may very well be worth it. Here is a free online site to check out <http://www.spacejock.com/yWriter.html> .

Map It

Do you have a novel you are currently writing on or would like to write? Get those ideas out of your head and onto paper. Create a story map of your plot. Brainstorm those ideas. Use the websites provided, make an outline, or come up with your own way.

Now that you know your major dramatic question, you have a good idea of your plot structure and your characters are dictating the plot; what next? Is there anything else to know? Let's finish up with Part 8 of The Building Blocks of Plot series called The Emerging Plot: Let it Flow and discover the most important thing of all concerning plot.

*Definition from www.dictionary.com

**Image taken from www.sarawilsonetienne.com

The Building Blocks of Plot

Part 8: The Emerging Plot: Let it Flow

Don't let plotting get in the way of creativity! Whatever you decide to write whether it is a novel, short story, poetry, children's books, screen plays or flash fiction it is essential that in creating those works that you don't let the process of plotting the story bog you down to the point of extinguishing the fire that allowed you to come up with the story in the first place.

Allow yourself time to be creative. Let your first draft be a discovery of your characters and the infinite possibilities that awaits them. Don't worry about coming up with bad ideas, because if you know what doesn't work, you can then decide what *does* work. It's kind of like a scientist. He may try 1001 times to come up with a solution to an experiment to discover that none of them work, but he won't become discouraged because of the failed experiments, instead he may find ideas from those failures for new discoveries that never would have been found otherwise. A similar approach to writing could help dial down that frustration and open up doors to possibilities never imagined, because those bad ideas had their limelight now you can retire them for good and move on better ones. I'm not saying that it will take a 1001 times for you to find the "right" solution for the problem(s) that ail your story. In fact, writer's have it much easier, because it usually only takes us 2 or 3 shots before we reach that "aha" moment.

Most of all believe in your own abilities. You wouldn't be reading this if you didn't have a desire to be a better writer, wanting to be better in your craft indicates you are willing to do what it takes to get your story out there. Stop doubting your abilities and let the ideas have their voice, because if you listen hard enough those ideas will take you places that might even surprise you. This quote by Richard Rhodes the author of *How to write* says it best, "If you want to write, you can. Fear stops most people from writing, not the lack of talent, whatever that is. Who am I?"

What right do I have to speak? Who will listen to me if I do? You are a unique human being, with a unique story to tell, and you have every right. If you speak with passion, many of us will listen. We need stories to live, all of us. We live by story. Yours enlarges the circle.”

Rift Writing

Get in the habit of writing what's on your mind without letting the details getting in the way. Take 10 minutes out of **everyday** to rift write. What is rift writing? It's allowing you the freedom of getting ideas down on the paper without pesky things like proper grammar, punctuation or sentence structure to get in the way (there's time enough to deal with that later). Just write what's on your mind at that time and see where your ideas will take you. You might be surprised at what you come up with.

Note: Are you finding it hard to turn off your inner editor while writing; then check out this site <http://writeordie.com>. It keeps track of your word count and if you pause while writing it will start making awful noises and then erase your text!

Don't let the myriad of details in plot keep you treading water before you even get started writing. Just take a deep breath and dive into the bottomless fathoms of the ocean, a world of enchanting discovery awaits you there. Good Luck!