



## **Module 7 : How to Plan a Perfect Plot**

- A definition of plot and why it is important
- How to come up with plot ideas
- The traditional plot structure
- How to develop your plot ideas

**In this module about how to plan the perfect plot, we will cover these points in more detail:**

- A definition of plot and why it is important
- How to come up with plot ideas
- The traditional plot structure
- How to develop your plot ideas
- How to structure your plan

### **7.1 What is Plot?**



**The plot in literature is the series of events that occur in the course of the book.**

Old school thinkers (in this case really old school - Aristotle) would say that there has to be causal links between these events in order for them to qualify as a plot.

**For example:**

'I went to school yesterday. The sky is blue. My nose is red' does not really qualify as a story. 'I went to school yesterday and my nose got burnt because it was so hot' isn't much of a story either but there is a progression of events here.

It is nigh on impossible to write a book-length work of fiction without a plot. Some authors in the last 100 years, like the post-modern bunch, have tried to disprove this, and like everything to do with literature, no one can really tell whether they are right or wrong because there is no right or wrong when it comes to creativity. Their books are pretty heavy going though. There is also a difference between plot and narrative.

Plot is what actually happens in your fictional world. Narrative is what the reader sees and hears of what happens. So while plot must always be sequential, and all-encompassing, narrative is limited by the point of view that you are telling the story from. In some novels, plot and narrative are almost the same, and often in books with simple plots, very limited settings and characters, or books written in the third person omniscient narrative. The contrast to this, where narrative and plot can be quite different, would be a book written in a first person perspective, which would be accentuated if this character had a very limited understanding of the events.

## **7.2 How to Come Up With Plot Ideas**



**It can be frustrating when you have a character or two, or a scene or setting in mind, and cannot seem to get ideas for a plot to fit them into.**

It might be that you want to write a book but have no ideas at all. Do not despair, the ideas will come and here are some ways to start the ball rolling. All you are looking for here are the seeds of an idea, be it just a word, sentence, or setting. You can develop them later.

### **Start with you**

First and foremost, your plot must revolve around something that interests you. It is no good having a technically robust idea if you simply do not have the motivation to write about it because it bores you to tears.

To start narrowing down your field of possible material, make a list of the things you find interesting. Add to this your favourite adult books, the books you most enjoyed from the age bracket that you are considering writing in (if you do not know this yet, pick your favourite children's books, and the two ideas can evolve together), and finally your favourite books when you were a child. Then write down the things you daydream about, the things you aspire to now and the things that you aspired to when you were a child.

Do not worry about making this coherent, it is for your eyes only.

If this list inspires you to start writing, go for it, regardless of direction. Through free-writing about the things that excite you, you might find an idea.

### **People watch**

This one will come up in several chapters but there is a reason for that; everything we can write about has some basis in the real world and most of it will be based on human interaction. So watching how people behave, how they communicate and the things they do, is an incredibly fertile place to find ideas. Maybe there is a balloon seller with a painted face walking down the street, with a big bunch of balloons.

Could he be a magician whose magic balloons take you to strange and distant lands in a first chapter book? Or a sinister character who uses his balloons as hi-tech cameras to spy on children who might threaten the government with subversive ideas in a young adult novel?

### **Word storm**

As a writer, you notice words. Some jump out at you, others comfort or excite you. Make a list of evocative and interesting words, shaped in a circle. Join two or three of them together and make a plot synopsis that revolves around these ideas. Do not worry if it is not good enough to go with; you just need to open the floodgates of your imagination by getting the ball rolling; then the ideas will develop a life of their own. If have trouble coming up with interesting words, take a flick through a dictionary.

### **Read**

You've heard it before and I'm afraid you're going to hear it again: read.

Don't reproduce - be inspired.

## Dreams

Some people find that bizarre and interesting dreams can be a source of original and off-the-wall plot ideas. If this is you, keep a notepad by your bed so you can jot down the pertinent points before you forget them.

When you are finished with this process, see if there is anything that has jumped out at you or given you a tingle of excitement. Write it down in a separate list and use the 'how to develop your plot ideas' guidelines below to see if you can make anything of it.

## 7.3 Traditional Plot Structure

**This outline is the basis for the vast majority of plots due to its proven efficacy.**

**There are no hard and fast rules dictating that you have to follow it, but it is a good guide to use as a foundation.**

1. Introduction of the protagonist
2. Introduction of internal or external conflict
3. Rising action
4. Climax
5. Resolution

Keep this structure in mind as you develop your plot ideas, as it will help you create a plot that feels satisfying and logical to the reader.

Remember to have a progression of character development as well as action.

## 7.4 How to Develop Your Plot Ideas

**Once you have a list of words, phrases or settings that you think might be the beginnings of an interesting plot, you need to develop them into a more fully realised storyline**

How complex you make your plot depends on the genre, the age of children that you are targeting with your writing and also your personal preference. In your reading you probably will have noticed

that some books have quite a simple plot and that these are not only books for the youngest reader. A plot does not have to be complex to be interesting or engaging, it just needs to have a coherent flow that draws the reader along with the narrative.

Here is a shortened version of the format your plot development might take.

This is for a first chapter book. Ideas of the (fictional) author are in italics, with a commentary in non-italics.

### **1. Write your ideas down in a list form**

- Bubbles (a word I like the sound of)
- Man selling balloons (something I have observed)
- Talking rabbit (a dream I had)
- A land where everyone speaks backwards (based on an idea I read about where everyone had to walk on their hands)
- A girl called Mary (a character that has been in my head for a while, based on my niece)

Your list will probably be longer than this; the words in brackets are examples of where the author might have got these ideas, which you do not need to include in yours.

### **2. Once you have your list, make connections between the elements, discarding those you dislike. Perhaps at this point you might start thinking of a simple character development.**

- Could Mary be a talking rabbit? No, I have an image of what Mary is like in my mind; she is an eight year old girl with dark hair, blue eyes and lots of freckles. She spends a lot of time feeling angry. I think it would be good if she could reach the end of the book and realise that she does not have to be angry any more. I do not really like the idea of a talking rabbit. Maybe the man with the balloons could be a wizard whose balloons float off like bubbles and take you to another land where everyone speaks backwards.

### **3. Fill in gaps in the plot and characterisation.**

- Why do they all speak backwards? Maybe the villain has put a curse or spell on them. It could be a witch who blows balloons at people because the balloons contain the spell, and when they burst on you, you fall under the spell. Why did she want to cast a spell on everyone in the first

place? Maybe she was in love with the wizard with the balloons, but he left her world to live on earth, and she was angry. Why did he want to leave?

- Here you see the author trying to establish motive for the villain and create a logical chain of events that has forwards movement. There are also themes emerging, in this case anger and maybe love, which is a helpful way of binding the elements of the plot together.

Continue to develop your ideas in this way until you reach the outline of a plot. If you get to a certain point and realise the idea is not working, you can backtrack, discarding elements, until you reach a point where you once again feel that the plot has the potential to be exciting. Find a balance between persevering with elements that have potential, and giving up on an idea altogether because it does not come together right away.

## 7.5 How to Structure Your Plan



**Once you have a fairly good idea of what is going to happen in your story, you can get on with writing a plan straight away.**

If your ideas are lacking a bit of coherence, write a 500 word synopsis that roughly outlines the main plot points before you begin with an actual plan.

At this point, the way you move forward will depend on your personal preferences. Some people will begin to write with a fairly rough idea of what they will include, believing that the story will evolve as you write it and that over-planning will restrict this growth. Others prefer to plan more thoroughly, some even writing a page or two for each chapter, and planning each paragraph. If you have a sense of what will work for you, then go with it. If not, then take the middle path, which consists of a step sheet, or action outline. This divides the book into chapters, and lists the plot points, character developments, the pacing of the particular section, and what major dialogue might take place.

**For the plot we saw above, chapter one might look something like this.**

### Chapter One

1. We meet Mary, who is angry because her little brother is annoying her. They are in the town,

shopping. Mary is angry about that too, she wants to be at home reading. Dialogue where she shouts at her brother for being annoying.

2. Mary's mother tells her to calm down, that she should not be so angry all the time.
3. Small amount of backstory in narrative voice about Mary not wanting to be angry but cannot help it. Maintain a steady forward pace to keep the reader interested.
4. Mary's mother buys both children a balloon from a man on the street with his face painted as a clown. Short dialogue as he sells them the balloons, where the man implies that she should take care of the balloon because it is special.
5. Mary notices he looks sad, but has a twinkle in his eye. She is curious.
6. As Mary walks away she looks into the balloon and thinks she sees another world in a shimmering image inside the balloon.

The amount of detail you put into your plan will depend on you. Do this for the whole book and then leave it for a while, maybe a few days or a week. Come back to it and read with 'fresh eyes', trying to be very objective about whether it is an effective plot. Put yourself in a child's shoes (in this case a 6 to 9 year old child as it is the plot for a first chapter book); would they find this exciting enough to want to read on? If yes, how could you improve it?

Keep adjusting until you are happy with it, making sure that the sequence of events is logical. Then maybe get some opinions from children, colleagues and trusted friends. If, however, your plot seems to be lacking in some way, try and change some elements to improve it. It should not be too long before you have a plot that excites you and makes you want to start writing.

## **In Summary**

A plot is the sequence of events that occurs during the course of your book and most books have them.

To get ideas for your plot, look at your interests and what you enjoy reading, watch people around you, word storm to find evocative prompts, use material from your dreams, and read widely.

Keep the traditional plot structure in mind when you are developing your plot. Take the elements that you have thought of and link them to form the beginnings of a plot, discarding less good ideas and building on good ones.

Once you have an outline of your plot, write a step sheet or action outline which describes, chapter by chapter, what will happen in the book. Include character development, action, the gist of dialogue, and the pacing of each section.

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