

Plot

What is a plot?

Is there a difference between a story and a plot?

E.M. Forster, in his excellent book, 'Aspects of a Novel' gives these examples.

"The King died and then the Queen died" is a story.

'The King died and then the Queen died of grief' is a plot (There is cause and effect and it maintains the time sequence).

"The Queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the King' is a mystery. (There is a question and it reverses the time sequence.)

With a story, Forster says, we say, 'And then?' With a plot we ask 'Why?' The plot is the sequence of events that pulls the reader through the story by setting up suspense and curiosity. Nearly all plots are based on conflict and four basic conflicts have been identified: Person against Person, Person against Nature, Person against Society, and Person against Self.

Some people say there are only two kinds of plot – a quest narrative and a siege narrative. In the quest narrative the protagonist goes out to the action, in a siege narrative the action comes to him or her. A quest provides strong forward action and demands courage and initiative on the part of the protagonist, e.g. Tolkein's 'Lord of the Rings'; a siege narrative is more static and the drama comes from the ability of the protagonist to resist and endure (e.g. Helen Dunmore's 'The Siege').

You may base a story on your own experience, but it will still need a plot, which means you will need to be willing to chop and change your story to create a good dramatic structure: after all, the truth for the reader lies not in the literal details or sequence of events, but in the overall journey and the growth that took place.

Where do you start?

There are many ways to start a story. Standard advice for writers is to start close to or 'in the problem' or with a disturbance of the status quo, as - unless you are a very gifted or funny writer - opening with an everyday scenario may lose you your reader.

Suggested openings:

1. **Start with the theme** – Dramatise or describe the central issue, e.g. if the book is a political thriller you could start with a public event that sets up the political background.
2. **Reveal a problem** - Start with a line that shows a character in danger or in a quandary, e.g. Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' where the protagonist wakes to find he has turned into a giant beetle.
3. **Reveal character** - Give the character an arresting voice, e.g. Salinger's 'Catcher in the Rye' or DBC Pierre's 'Vernon God Little' or Dickens' 'Great Expectations'.

4. **Mystery** - Create an atmospheric opening hinting at danger past or to come. See Julie Myerson's 'Something Might Happen' or Helen Dunmore's 'Your Blue Eyed Boy' or Donna Tartt's 'The Secret History', all also examples of the total flashback time structure. (see Narrative Time for more on time structure.)
5. **Create time and place** - Dickens' 'Bleak House' opens with a stunning description of foggy London which turns into a metaphor for the slow-grinding legal system; Melville's 'Moby Dick' opens with one of a whaling port. Both are effective at setting the scene for the territory of the novel, but these days one rarely needs lengthy and detailed description of place because, thanks to TV and film, we already have a pretty good impression of what most places look like.
6. **Shock the reader** - as in Hunter S. Thompson's 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas' which starts with the writer and his attorney off their heads on drugs.

Whichever you choose, try to open with a strong sentence or paragraph. Sometimes the first few paragraphs, or pages, or even chapters, are your process of working your way into the story and the real beginning for the reader is to be found further in. You will know when you read it – it will have a ring to it. When you find it, cut out what goes before and restructure. Often you will find very little of the preceding material is needed for the reader's understanding, only for your own.

Avoid long summaries or flashbacks at the start. The story needs to pull the reader forward, not back. If it is a total or partial flashback story (see Narrative Time), treat the past like a present narrative. Dramatise, don't summarise. Show, don't tell.

Mystery and Suspense

A story does not really have a plot unless there is cause and effect. Even better is a mystery, something the reader is waiting to find out. If at any stage of the book everything is satisfactorily explained, the reader can close the book and not feel s/he has missed anything. On the other hand, you cannot spin out the same mystery indefinitely, or the reader will become impatient and feel strung along. To maintain suspense all the way through, new mysteries and difficulties have to be created and old ones resolved, preferably not too quickly or this, too, becomes predictable. There should always be something – preferably two or three things – we are waiting to discover. They do not have to be big things; small mysteries will do.

Cause and effect

As stated above, plots are driven by cause and effect: every action should have a reaction, which leads to another action. This sequence of events will pull the reader through the story. Make sure every scene moves the plot on. If there are no causes or consequences, leave out the scene. James Frey, author of 'How to Write a Damn Good Novel' says that a hero should always emerge from a scene in deeper trouble than when he began. ('A Spot of Bother' by Mark Haddon provides a good illustration of this technique.) Put your protagonist under

pressure: choices and dilemmas are painful and make good plot material. Even better, put them under time pressure to decide.

Avoid using coincidences to explain things or get yourself out of a spot. In life we know coincidences happen all the time and don't necessarily mean anything, but in fiction everything means something. The secret of good plotting is to prepare your reader for what develops while keeping them unaware of what you're doing. That way your ending will not be predictable, but inevitable, and in keeping with the character you've created. If you get it right the reader will be surprised, but when they think back they will remember the clues that have been seeded, as with a good detective novel.

See Scene and Summary for more about how to show cause and effect.

Structure

Classic dramatic structure provides a simple plot structure: an 'initiating incident', which is a dramatic occurrence that kicks off the plot, starts the quest, or draws the hero or heroine into action - a problem, or mystery. The hero or heroine has some goal in mind (desire). This is followed by a series of 'obstacles' or difficulties (these can be outer obstacles/opponents or inner fears/weaknesses, or both) which eventually reach a 'climax' or 'crisis', when the hero or heroine is tested to the limits of their strength. Once they have overcome this final test the action falls off and ends in a 'resolution' in which something has been learnt.

