**Special Fiction Writing Week: Creating a Plot**

Written by [Taylor](http://menwithpens.ca/author/taylor/) - [16 Comments](http://menwithpens.ca/fiction-writing-creating-plot/#comments)

Now we’ll discuss something everyone gets fired up about: plot

Plot is the nitty-gritty that gives your characters something to do. You’d be shocked at how many people leave this step out of their story. They’ll invent a great, well-developed character with a personality anyone could sympathize with, they’ll come up with a kick-butt backstory, and they’ll place the story in a beautifully described, poignant setting.

Then nothing happens.

Well, stuff *will* happen. The character probably interacts with other characters, has conversations, and does things in this exquisitely described location.

But there won’t be any conflict. There won’t be one driving element that propels the story forward.

In essence, there won’t be a plot.

**Why a Plot is Often Absent**

Many writers mistake dramatic action for a plot. For example, if they put their character through tons of traumatic experiences in their book, they’ll point to those action-packed experiences and say, “Look! Plot!”

That’s not plot. That’s action. They are two very different things.

The plot of your story is what other people would say your story is about. No book reviewer would sum up your novel as, “This is a story about a woman who gets the crap kicked out of her. A lot.” That’s not a legitimate summary of the story because it isn’t the story.

That’s something that happens *within* the story. That’s action driving the overall plot.

**So What Is Plot, Then?**

The plot of any story can more or less be summed up thusly:

* Your protagonist wants something.
* He or she is unable to achieve it, for whatever reason.
* He or she achieves what was desired or fails to achieve it at all.

That’s it. This is the plot of almost every story. Allow me to demonstrate:

Moby Dick: Captain Ahab wants to catch the white whale. The white whale, understandably, does not want to be caught, which gets in the way of the Captain’s goal. Ahab fails; the white whale kills him. Sucks to be you, Ahab.

The Da Vinci Code: Robert wants to solve a puzzle about the origins of Christianity. Robert is impeded by a crazy albino. Robert achieves his goal anyway. Good job, dude.

Bridget Jones’ Diary: Bridget wants a nice, attentive boyfriend, specifically her shagedelic boss. Shagadelic boss is a jerk, which means he fails at being said boyfriend. Bridget fails to get shagedelic boss but succeeds at getting another nice, attentive boyfriend, mangling standard sentence structure in the bargain. Decent job, Bridget.

Lord of the Rings: Frodo wants to get the One Ring to Mordor. He can’t because of all the evil critters in his way (Orcs, Ringwraiths, etc.) He achieves his goal by chucking the Ring into the Cracks of Doom. Well bloody played, Frodo.

Take a look at your story. What do your characters want?

**The Critical Missing Element in Most Plots**

Once you’ve established what your characters want, you need to establish why they want it. These things go hand-in-hand.

Captain Ahab wants to kill the white whale because the white whale cut off his leg (he’s got a point). Da Vinci Robert wants to solve the mystery because someone was murdered (initially) but also because he is a professor of these matters and he must know. Bridget wants a boyfriend because, well, she’s a pretty shallow chick, so let’s say status. Frodo wants to destroy the One Ring because the world will be cast into chaos and ugliness if he doesn’t.

This helps readers know what’s propelling characters’ actions throughout your story. Either characters support your protagonist in their quest for whatever, or they get in the way somehow.

**Dude, My Plot Is Way More Complicated Than That**

Think your plot is more complex than that? I hate to break it to you, but it really isn’t. Even the most convoluted plot structures break down to this point.

The only exception (and it’s not really an exception) are plots where there is more than one protagonist, in which case each of the protagonists may have a separate goal.

Of course, if your protagonists’ goals do not interrelate in any way, then you have two separate stories. Usually two parallel plotlines coincide in that a single character wants a certain goal and the other character does not. Or, conversely, the characters want the same goal, but for different reasons. It’s up to us as readers to determine who has a better reason.

Either way, it’s still the same plot: Want, inability to achieve, then achievement or lack thereof.

Here’s a quick example of a plot that seems convoluted but isn’t:

In the book Pride and Prejudice, the reader has to cope with five sisters, a mother, and a friend of the family. The mother wants all her girls married because it will make her super-cool in her social circles. The eldest wants to be happily married to a specific dude. The second eldest wants to be intellectually satisfied for the rest of her life and doesn’t much care if it’s with a husband or not. The third wants to be left alone. The fourth wants to get laid. The fifth wants to be the fourth. The friend wants to be financially comfortable and doesn’t care if she even likes her husband, so long as she can achieve this goal of wealth.

That’s SEVEN different people in one story – and I haven’t even brought in the other characters yet.

Seems like a really complicated plotline, right? It’s not.

Elizabeth is our main character. Her basic goal is to be intellectually happy, and she wouldn’t mind finding a good man with whom that was possible. We’re following her in her quest for that situation.

All other characters in the book, every single one of them, are only there to contribute to Elizabeth’s quest for that situation in some way. Every single sister and friend who gets into some romantic entanglement somehow feeds Elizabeth’s understanding of what she desires in a mate, bringing her a step closer to finding him.

This doesn’t mean that each of the other characters are actively trying to help or hinder Elizabeth. It just means that, from an author’s perspective, they contribute to Elizabeth’s goal. The fact that they contribute to Elizabeth’s goal unwittingly while pursuing their own goals is beside the point.

Elizabeth is our protagonist. Everything mentioned in the book must contribute to her goal in some way.

What should you take away from this? *If there is a character or a situation that does not serve your central character’s goal, it does not belong in the story.*

So go ask yourself those questions, and see how much clearer your story becomes:

* What is my main character’s goal?
* What are my minor characters’ goals?
* How are my minor characters’ pursuits of their goals contributing to my main character’s pursuit of his/her goal?

If you can’t answer these questions easily, then you don’t have characters. You have stick figures. What’s worse, you don’t have a plot.

<http://menwithpens.ca/fiction-writing-creating-plot/>