

A no-nonsense guide to writing fiction with a compelling plot and vivid characterizations.

The Fiction Writer's Handbook

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P R E S S**

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The story must have something that drives it onward and keeps the reader reading. This is often called forward motion or suspense. The best source of forward motion is conflict, one of the timeless techniques of good storytelling.

Human beings in general find conflict fascinating. Our lives are filled with daily minor conflicts — choices we must make between one desire or commitment and another. Most people need to juggle the demands of family, work, personal fulfillment — we all have many claims on our time and energy. The daily news is rife with stories of more dramatic conflicts at home and around the world, and we often find it hard to resist the urge to know what happened. Whenever an argument breaks out in public, our attention is immediately riveted.

Of course there are other methods of holding reader interest — aesthetic use of language, interesting ideas, and factual information interlaced with narrative — but nothing works quite as well as conflict. Dickens and Dostoevsky knew this. Both authors wrote some of their best books for serial publication. They had to hold their reader's interest in suspension from week to week by keeping them wondering what would happen next. Suspense is about what will happen next, what actions a character will perform.

Aristotle's *Poetics* may be the world's first work of literary criticism, but it is also a treatise on how to write a great play. After viewing the play festivals year after year, much like a film critic would watch all the films as Cannes, Aristotle felt the need to make a general statement about what works and doesn't work. He believed that in order to be effective, a play must have a good plot. He even went as far as to say that plot is more important than character. And on a certain level he's right. Using the example of the Oedipus story, he theorizes that when someone hears the bare outline, he wants to see the play. If you tell someone you've written a book about a man who murders his father and marries his mother, the chances are pretty good that they will want to read it just to find out how it happens and what are the consequences of such a horrific series of events. Readers are initially more curious about what happens than who it happens to. The opening lines of *Romeo and Juliet* are spoken by the Chorus, and they give the audience a summary of the plot — they give away the ending, the young lovers will kill themselves — so why watch they play? To find out how it happens. Fairy tales don't give us much character development, and other than the final transformation not much changes for them. We are interested in Cinderella or Beauty because of their single redeeming quality, their goodness or compassion, and the fact that this positive character trait brings about their reward. Our interest in the Beast is limited to the end result of his curse, and with the princess in *Rumpelstiltskin* we simply want to know if she will guess his name or lose her child. In other words, we listen or read to learn the outcome of the events of the story, not for the thoughts and emotional life of the characters. When we read fairy tales we don't gain much insight into who the central characters are in terms of their complex psychological make up, and may not really care to know them beyond finding out what they do to overcome the obstacles to their goal.

In conclusion, then, let's accept it on faith that readers find conflict engrossing, and a skillfully developed conflict in a story can grip them more strongly than anything else.

CONFLICT

As in life, literary conflicts form at many levels simultaneously and are multi-directional, i.e., an individual in conflict with himself may also be at odds with his condition, his wife, his colleague, etc. (think of Hamlet); however, a single conflict should emerge as the clear focus of a work of fiction.

All dramatic action should somehow grow out of this central conflict.

External or straightforward conflict

External conflict is the oldest and most common form. In its simplest terms, it can be understood as a struggle between a force and an opposing force of equal strength, a protagonist and an antagonist. Simplistic stories of good vs. evil use the good guy/bad guy stereotype with the conflict taking the form of a physical battle in which the bad guy is vanquished either permanently or temporarily. The outcome, or resolution of the conflict, is usually clearly understood. It gives the reader emotional satisfaction to know that good has clearly triumphed, as is often not the case in life.

For convenience, consider external conflict as an individual versus nature, society, a condition (such as poverty or racism), or another individual.

Internal Conflict

Internal conflict may be understood as an individual versus his or her inner demons. In modern literature, internal conflict is always present in the central character. In fact, it is the sine qua non of contemporary literature. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner stated that the only subject worth writing about is the story of the human heart in conflict with itself. I fully agree. Our motives are never clear-cut — we want to do something, and we don't want to do it at the same time. Rarely are our actions pure, simple, and straightforward — they are often tainted by self-interest. Do you, or does anyone you know intimately, have a single motivation for every action that is more involved than satisfying a basic need such as hunger? And yet, when you take someone to lunch there is always another reason beyond just sharing a meal. There's always more than one need to be satisfied, we feel torn between them, and one or more desires always go unfulfilled. We can't have our cake and eat it too, to continue the food metaphor, as most of us would like. So it is, or should be, with characters in contemporary fiction.

The Resolution Question: do readers need closure?

You will have to solve the problem of whether or not your major conflict will have a clear-cut resolution. At the simplistic level of an action film, the good guy always defeats the bad guy even if the bad guy may be back in an other episode. Leaving viewers wondering whether the villain was killed is a common device that leaves open the possibility of a sequel. *The Lord of the Rings*

trilogy has a major antagonist and a definite goal — when the villain is defeated and objective accomplished, the story’s tension and suspense are over, and we feel a sense of finality. What happens after that in terms of the Hobbits return to their village and their new life is of only minor interest. In an ongoing series like Harry Potter, we expect new obstructions and more powerful opponents in each book.

External conflict sets up reader expectations for some kind of closure. Internal conflict rarely has closure, just an adjustment or acceptance which may lead to peace or just continued survival at a price.

The outcome of internal conflict is seldom made plain. There’s rarely a resolution, just an awareness and an acceptance. A story about the adjustments of marriage may end with the newly-married woman having an epiphany about herself or her husband. Kimberly may, for example, realize that she did not marry Kevin purely for love, that he may, in fact, have some traits that she finds abhorrent. She goes through a crisis and comes to terms with her situation. She may want to leave him, but she doesn’t want to admit she made a mistake and lose face with her family, especially her sister who advised her to reconsider her decision. Perhaps she doesn’t love Kevin as much as she thought she did, but he has money and she likes their lifestyle, and, besides, she may grow to love him more with time . . . etc. So what does Kimberly do? Leave him? Of course not. The end of the story strongly implies that she goes on living her life with nothing but a change in attitude and the possibility of extramarital affairs to satisfy her emotional/sexual needs.

Multiple Levels of Conflict in Hamlet

In the most compelling stories, conflict exists at multiple levels simultaneously. In other words, a character may be in conflict with society, nature, another individual, a condition, and himself all at the same time. Think of the many conflicts in *Hamlet* — there’s Hamlet versus King Claudius, his mother, Laertes, Ophelia, Polonius, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, and, of course, himself. He even does battle with a storm at sea, though it’s not in the immediate action of the play. The only character of any importance with whom Hamlet is not in conflict is Horatio.

NARRATIVE DRIVE AND THE EMOTIONAL ARC

Your story needs some forward motion in terms of a sequence of events, rising action, falling action, developing to a climax, but the emotional build-up is equally important — think of your climax as the emotional peak of the story. Readers need an emotional pay-off that will justify their investment of care and concern for the life of the central character. Your central character, regardless of the upward or downward slope of his/her fate, should have fulfilled his/her potential to some extent. Perhaps she never becomes the superstar she dreamt of being and worked so hard to become, but at least she had her special moments of glory, pleasure, happiness, love, joy, which we have shared with her. Even if she dies at the end of the book, if she looks back and realizes, “I’ve tasted the joys of life,” readers will find that satisfying.

PLOT STRUCTURE

Overall Structure

Traditional plot structure develops conflict from complication to crisis to a climax or a series of climaxes. It progresses in a chronological sequence of events and has a narrative line with a beginning (complication), a middle (crisis), and an end (climax and resolution). It is described as rising action and falling action, and may be depicted graphically as an ascending line with an apex and a short falling line.

Beginning in *medias res* (in the middle of things) is a very effective way to start a story.

A storyline must seem inevitable but not predictable.

A powerful, compelling plot has a sense of the inexorable, i.e., a feeling that it couldn't happen any other way. Powerful plots are made up of a convergence of forces, not an intellectual structure superimposed by the author.

A good plot dramatizes the novel, novella, or short story's thematic idea.

A good plot has forward motion.

A good plot satisfies the reader's intellectual (design, structure) and emotional needs (inevitability, resolution).

There is no story until there is a plot that dramatizes it.

Dramatic action is usually arranged in chronological sequence but sometimes begins in the middle of things, goes back to the events leading up to the crisis then returns to that point in time and builds to the climax.

Major Methods of Plotting

Most professional novelists, short story writers and dramatists work out a rough plot structure *before* beginning a first draft. If you know where your story is going, your work will have direction and the writing should continue to flow. This can save you a great deal of time and hard work; it will also help prevent having your creative energy dry up mid-story or, the reverse, writing a brilliant scene that does not belong in your story. Aristotle stresses the importance of planning the plot in *Poetics*: "And the argument of the play [or novel], whether previously made or in the process of composition by oneself, should first be sketched out in abstract form and only then expanded and other scenes ['episodes'] added."

As John Gardner states in his book *The Art of Fiction*, the three major methods of plotting are:

1. Base storyline on a legend, a myth, historical events, or a biblical narrative.
2. Work backwards from the climax
3. Work forwards from an initial situation.

Notes on Plot

Short fiction focuses on a single incident, an awakening or an epiphany of the central character. Think of short fiction as a single room in a large dwelling; it's like a ballad or a sonata; it has a single theme and one central conflict.

Long fiction, a novella or a novel, is like a large house with many rooms. It's architecture is complex; it has multiple themes and multiple conflicts, although one conflict usually predominates. Long fiction may have a chain of incidents linked in a sequence of cause and effect; it may be a cosmology of awakenings or a series of epiphanies. There is a sense of the sweep of time and of many destinies flowing together. Think of long fiction as an attempt to encompass the complexity of existence in the modern world.

Overall structure, the work's architecture, (it might also be compared to a symphony) may be a combination of the linear and the concentric. Linear structure is a cause-and-effect sequence of events moving forward chronologically, psychologically and emotionally as it develops conflict and builds to a climax. Concentric structure has an episodic format in that it is a series of minor climaxes in a cosmology of events that builds to a major climax. Each incident or episode begins at a fixed point in the cosmology and develops in waves to its own climax. Any number of episodes may develop concurrently at varying tempos moving outwardly from their own fixed centers until they converge, forming a linked superstructure with a main theme.

Fiction may imitate reality, or it may create its own reality — a cosmology of possibility in which the rational plays no role, in which seemingly unconnected elements are juxtaposed; however, the work must be consistent within its own context.

The Continuum of Time

Scenes from your story should not be considered as isolated incidents. They are all part of a vast continuum that will go on and on until the human race ceases to exist. In our daily lives time is divided into segments — days, weeks, months — but in truth time flows on without a break and our actions set off a chain of events and produce long-term consequences that we cannot see or comprehend. Think of the plot of your story as a highlighted segment from the continuum of time. The story has a structural ending, but in reality it goes on and on.

Writing a Genre Novel, or a Novel Based on Actual Events or a Synthesis of Both

You can simplify the extremely hard word work of writing a novel by using a “pre-fab” plot, a time-tested storyline. Shakespeare did this with almost every play he wrote since he was pressed for time (he had to write his plays between productions or while on tour — his usual deadline was 5 weeks!), but it also freed him to concentrate his efforts on creating beautiful dialogue and soliloquies. After all, he was a poet at heart. One convenient way to do this (and possibly increase your chances of success) is to use an archetypal story, something that’s embedded in our cultural history, or to play with the conventions in an imaginative and refreshing way. For example, your detective might be a nun. You can also combine this type of story with actual events from the lives of famous people — as long as they are public figures, you can’t be sued. Here’s a list of the most popular genres:

- Rags to Riches
- Murder Mystery
- Coming of Age
- The Quest (a journey of self-discovery)
- Rite of Passage
- Historical Fiction
- Thriller
- Fantasy
- Horror
- Science Fiction
- Romance
- Western

Writing Exercise 4, Treatment for a Plot-Driven Novel

Treatment for a plot-driven novel that fits into a single genre or combines the ingredients of two or more. The events must be plausible. Alone or in collaboration with a writing partner. Each genre has its own conventions and reader expectations, so use the one you are most familiar with from your own reading or movie viewing. For example, all murder mysteries include some of the following elements: a detective with integrity who fights evil, a beautiful woman who may have committed the crime, an inheritance, a motive, one or more individuals who had the opportunity to commit the crime, a prime suspect, a red herring, several plot twists, unity of place, unity of time (the crime is usually solved within a relatively short period, say several days), a logical solution to the crime.

Examples for Exercise 4:

Plot Summary for a Murder Mystery

Well-known author, divorced, in his early forties, doing research on a new book at Yale becomes friendly with one of the librarians, a nice-looking woman in her late 20's. Writer has a good friend on the faculty — spends a lot of time with him and his wife. After a few weeks the librarian tells him she has a friend who wants to meet him, an actress who is appearing in a play at Long Wharf Theatre. Writer agrees to meet her after the show. He sees the play and goes backstage, watches in shock as she removes her make-up and realizes that she and the librarian appear to be the same woman. He tells her it was a good joke, but the actress doesn't know what he's talking about, claims that she and the librarian are two different people. "Oh, so you're identical twins . . . that explains it," the writer says. The actress is vibrant, sexy, very attractive — everything the librarian is not. The writer falls for her and they become lovers. He confides in his friend the professor and his wife about this affair with the actress and her identical twin, the librarian. This goes on until the show closes and the actress tells him she has to go to L.A. to do a film. He offers to go with her and she says she'll think about it. The next day he sees the librarian and she tells him that the actress doesn't want him to go with her to L.A. and has decided not to see him anymore. Writer becomes jealous, infuriated. Librarian defends the actress, accuses him of being a possessive sexist. In the heated argument, he discovers that they are not identical twins but are in fact the same woman with a dual personality. Librarian asserts that the actress is "dead" and demands that he love her instead. Writer is enraged and ends up striking her — she falls backwards, hits her head and dies. There is an investigation and a trial. Writer has a powerful attorney and he is acquitted. He thinks everything is over but the local detective assigned to the case, a townie who grew up resenting the privileged Yalies, gets wind of the disappearance of an actress who just finished a show at Long Wharf and did not turn up for a Hollywood film commitment. He investigates, finds out the writer was the last one to see her before her disappearance. Writer is again accused. He has no proof that they were the same person so there's no double jeopardy. There's another trial and this time he's convicted on circumstantial evidence.

— Anthony Maulucci

Story Synopsis: A Manhattan Love Affair

An aspiring playwright in his early 30's is house sitting an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan for a wealthy friend who's in Asia for the summer. He meets a beautiful woman in her early 20's who lives in the building — she tells him she's an actress and lets the writer believe she's married to the older man who owns the apartment and is away on an extended business trip. They have an affair and fall in love. Woman tells the writer she's not really a wife — she's a hooker. Writer is hurt, upset, they have a fight, wealthy businessman returns, writer is jealous, another fight. She leaves. Writer misses her, doesn't know where she is, tricks the businessman into telling him about a nightclub where she usually hangs out. Writer goes to this nightclub, finds her with a date, makes a scene — she follows him outside, they go to Riverside Park, there is a reconciliation. Writer confesses he wasn't completely honest, letting her believe it was his apartment, etc. No more lies — no more deceit — they pledge to be forever honest. Writer really is working on a play, hooker really does want to act. Writer is now living in his small

apartment in the Village. She visits him there and a collaboration develops, writer finishes his play with hooker's help. They need a cast and a place to showcase it Off Broadway — they start asking their friends to join the project and it all comes together — rehearsals get underway. Everyone thinks the play is a winner but they need a lot of money to mount an Off Broadway production. The hooker decides to pay a visit to the wealthy businessman and persuades him to become their secret backer, but he still lusts after her and is resentful that she left him for the writer. He sees an opportunity to get her back and get his revenge, so he offers to help on the condition that she come back to live with him. She is torn but agrees, planning to put him off for as long as possible, because she wants to help the writer and launch her career as an actress. Everyone involved with the play is thrilled by the news that they have a backer, but writer grows suspicious when actress repeatedly refuses to tell him who it is. When he eventually finds out, he explodes and announces he is canceling the production — his friends persuade him not to blow his big break, etc. — he gives in and play is scheduled to open. She keeps postponing the move into the businessman's apartment — he is controlling, exerts relentless pressure on her and threatens to shut down the production — the longer she delays the more he wants her — she puts him off with the excuse that she needs to rehearse. By opening night she has run out of excuses and decides that the best thing to do is to give in, but first she must hurt the writer enough to drive him away. She tells him it's over, "once a hooker always a hooker" — "I'm a rotten person, forget me for your own good." Writer is shattered — friends tell him she's lying, "she really loves you." He doesn't believe them, decides to take revenge by ridiculing her, humiliating her and destroying her career. He goes to the theatre on opening night in this bloodthirsty frame of mind but when he sees her on stage he is captivated by the beauty of her performance and is aware of her effect on the audience — the play is going to be a hit. When the play ends there is a standing ovation — he goes backstage to see her and watches as the businessman and his thugs take her away in his limousine. He leaves the theatre and walks the streets in bitterness but with the growing realization that he too is a "whore" to his art and has no right to judge her. Six months go by. She comes to see him at his "garret" in the Village. She tells him she's sorry for all the pain she caused him. He tells her he's sorry too for being such a hypocrite — he's no better, has no right to judge her, etc. "At last we can be honest with each other." In this chastened, sad and renewed spiritual state they go out for a walk, stop at a cafe on MacDougal. We learn that the actress has been offered a leading role in an important new play, the writer has been unable to start a new play but has a contract to write a film script based on a novel — he is leaving for Hollywood in a few days. The actress tells him she has left the businessman for good and her life as a hooker is "totally finished." The writer says he's happy for her. They have left the cafe and are standing on the street looking wistfully at each other. It starts to rain. She hails a cab. The writer says something pithy and witty or repeats the epigram that is his motto — something he said to her about honesty in the early days of their love affair. Actress smiles. They look poignantly at each other and there is pain, hunger, sorrow and hope in their eyes. Then the moment evaporates. She gets into the cab, closes door, another look through the rain-splattered window, more guarded now. Cab pulls away. Writer is left standing alone with a stricken look of loss on his face. It starts to rain harder and he ducks into a doorway. A beautiful young woman walks by — she is sexy and smiles at him. He smiles back and there is a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

— Anthony Maulucci

Plot and Character

Naturally, the plot of a story cannot function without characters. There must be individual agents who perform the actions and bring about the unfolding of cause and effect. Fiction must be peopled by individuals who create **the dynamics of motion** — choice, consequence, and change.

What triggers the action and sets the plot into motion? A problem . . . Some kind of complication which must subsequently build to a CRISIS involving a STRONG EMOTION. Passion. Fear. Rage. Grief. Jealousy. Overpowering love. We are fascinated by human behavior under the stress of extreme emotion.

Good fiction is rarely about well-adjusted people who get everything they want without a struggle. It is about people who feel unfulfilled. Something must be lacking in your characters' lives, and they must first determine what it is and then figure out a way to achieve it. And in the struggle to overcome the obstacles to achieve their goal, they pay a price by losing something of value. However, this something of value turns out to be worth the sacrifice because of their transformation. For example, a man who considers himself happily married meets a woman who makes him realize he is not really very happy at all, or not nearly as much as he'd like to be. He has everything he's ever thought he wanted in life, but something important is missing. In the pursuit of the new woman, he loses his wife and makes his children suffer. The new woman dumps him. He is alone and wracked by guilt. Is he destroyed, or does he emerge as a better human being?

A story just wouldn't be interesting without a major problem which causes conflict and crisis. As a conflict develops into a serious crisis, your characters will be forced to make different choices and the results of these choices will change the circumstances as well as themselves.

SHORT STORY = BRIEF CHARACTERIZATIONS

If you are writing a 10-20 page story, you are essentially creating a moment or an incident that ends with a resolution or a realization, and you may not need to know everything about your central character's life in order to create a believable individual. Just a glimpse at who they are is enough for the purposes of the story, and, in fact, a certain amount of mystery about their background may be more effective. How they behave and what attitude they possess during the crucial moment or incident may suggest all we need to know about their character.

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