

## Plots and Subplots

By Azalea Dabill

In a good plot, our characters' wants and desires drive them. The clashing desires of the protagonist and the antagonist drive plot. The plot thwarts the characters. Do you see the cycle? Conflict animates plot and gives it life.

In James Scott Bell's book, *Revision and Self-Editing*, he has a wonderful acronym. LOCK. He says L is for the lead character, O is for their objective, C is for confrontation, and K is for knockout. This covers the basic elements of a plot in linear form.

A good "lead character" must be someone that the reader identifies with. A character's insecurities, struggles, and reactions to both the inner and the outer world are key to plot. Admiration and sympathy for the lead character are two emotions that a good writer arouses.

This can be done in many ways. A flawed yet strong character with his or her share of quirks makes a character approachable, like ourselves. We relate to trouble, hard times, the threat of defeat, pain, death: in a word, vulnerability. Everyone likes a lead character who deals with his conflict with a sense of humor, self-sacrifice, and caring, while not always getting it right.

What makes you identify with your character? Make sure you portray what you see in your lead character in your writing. Sometimes a weak lead is simply not getting into your character's head enough, or not throwing enough trouble at him/her. Get inside your character's head, inside his skin. (Or "her"/"its" skin.) Trouble is coming.

See the trouble, feel it, sense it, think inside your character's mind. Get it down on the page. A rest, respite, or pause for reflection then comes to your character. Get it down. Then go through the same process again. I have seen some stories with few rests, only action. There are differing opinions about rests in the tension and pacing of a story. The stories I remember and read over again are those with adventure, and a rest (that deepens the character or the story), and more adventure.

The "objective" is whatever the lead wants. It should be a strong desire. Mr. Bell says this desire is to "get something", or to "get away from something". There is the main objective, and then there are secondary objectives. These make up the main plot and the interwoven subplots on the way to achieving (or not achieving), the object of desire at the climax of your story.

Over the course of your story the lead's objective/objectives can change. They usually do. Whatever the objective or the goal is, it gives your story momentum, propelling your characters forward. Give your characters goals, or ask them what their objectives are, and what fuels their desires. The protagonist's and the antagonist's objectives should always differ, at least in some respects. They may both want the same woman, but one wishes to love her, the other to possess her. Conflict between characters makes their story interesting, which is key to a fascinating plot.

“Confrontation” is the opposition thrown at the lead. The opposition can come from almost any place, thing, or person, but it must temporarily prevent, or appear to prevent, the lead from gaining his object. This drives your character along the plot curve or story arc.

The “knockout” comes at the climax, the point of great danger where all seems hopeless. Here is the lead’s final battle for the object of desire. Whether he/she wins or loses, whether the lead discovers the object was not the one wanted, or that the object has changed because of an experience endured, the lead character must end the story in a way that satisfies the reader. This ending can be different for different genres.

For example, a “Romance” must be disappointed or fulfilled, but the end can come about unexpectedly. Unforeseen consequences of earlier actions can satisfy the reader’s curiosity in an unexpected way, and leave him thinking, “Yes, I see it. It had to happen that way because of what he/she did.” Or the hero’s quest can end in personal fulfillment, or discovery, or saving the world, or deciding that he does not want to save the world, that he will be a hero to himself. In which case we are mad at him.

There are many plot forms, or structures. Here are two from various sources. The first is from a close writer friend who explained the hero’s journey to me.

Ex. 1 It begins with your lead character in the ordinary world. The first conflict throws the lead into trouble, calling him away from his ordinary world. How he reacts to it drives him through the first door of no return, and he cannot go back to where he was. (Otherwise your story ends.)

The conflict builds as he goes through various tasks, trials, and challenges while he pursues his object of desire, coming each time to a new ordinary world. After a second door of no return, new conflict catapults him forward. Then comes the final test, or the climax, and the return to his new ordinary world.

This last world should be an end that satisfies in an unexpected way. That is the fascination that stories hold. All are complex and different, often giving us the unexpected: which we should expect from reality.

(A note to fantasy writers: Fantasy can often get “reality” across better than many so-called novels of “realism,” which frequently claim grittiness, and regularly portray humanism and despair. It depends on the skill and the heart of the author, and what the author perceives as real. Does the writer see God and His goodness, or a godless, hopeless universe with no mystery, no power, and no joy?)

Ex. 2 The second plot structure usually occurs in three acts, Bell says. In Act I, the lead is introduced, his world presented, the tone of the work is set, and the opposition comes on to the scene. At approximately the one-fifth mark on the plot line stands the first door of no return. A “disturbance” shoots the lead through it. In Act II, the stakes are raised, your characters expand relationships, and you lay ground work for the last battle. At the  $\frac{3}{4}$  mark or later comes the second door of no return. The “something or someone” that forces the lead into the third act, or makes the final battle possible. Act III contains that battle, ties up most of the story’s loose ends, and resonates with readers’ souls, satisfying them in a “unique way.”

A caution here. Write what, to your gut, fits your story's characters. You know them better than anyone: or you need to eat, sleep, and play with them awhile until you do. Happy writing!

*Note: James Scott Bell's Revision and Self-Editing, and Plot and Structure, are excellent for writers who are starting out, and Sol Stein's Stein on Writing, has been immensely helpful to me farther along the writing road.*

*In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.*