

Plotting the Novel:

Otherwise Known as The Real Reason Writers are Neurotic

By Lisa Gardner

Plotting a novel is one of the most daunting projects any writer can face. On the one hand, you have a really great idea (hopefully). On the other hand, spinning one idea into a 100,000 word novel filled with thrilling plot points and clever plot twists is something else entirely.

The following six-step process for plotting a novel is something I've put together from my years of writing suspense thrillers. This is a pretty hands-on technique and works best for people who are extremely anal-retentive (like me). If you consider yourself less anal retentive, I suppose there's still hope for you in the world, but you may want to do an abbreviated form of this process. That's okay, too. There is no right way to write a novel. There is simply the way that works best for you.

With that in mind, hope you enjoy the following plotting diagnostic.

Step 1: Brainstorming

- Get hit by a really big IDEA. You know, the IDEA. I don't know where they come from, but when you get yours, try to remember how so someday when the 18th well-meaning interviewer asks, "Where do you get your ideas?" you can say something clever such as, "Sometimes when I'm talking to annoying people, I imagine ways of killing them. Then I have an idea. I mention this to you, for no reason at all."
- Develop idea. Write down all thoughts you have on characters, scenes, etc. Don't worry about fitting things together, and don't worry about making sense. Brainstorm.
- *Corresponding Emotional Stage:* Euphoria. I am brilliant. This is the best idea ever, and will certainly sell oodles of novels, plus get me a seven-figure movie deal starring Julia Roberts/Brad Pitt. I will now go do the Snoopy dance on all available tabletops.

Step 2: Preliminary Research

- Identify main subject areas you need to understand:
 - Relevant legal, police procedural or forensics details for suspense plots
 - Geographic locations
 - Psychology—for a relationship book, maybe you want to find articles on children of alcoholics, abusive wife syndrome, etc. to flesh out your story
- Read articles and/or textbooks.
- Interview experts in the field.
 - Family, friends, and/or websites can help you identify leading experts.
 - Cold calling is also perfectly acceptable. Most of police/FBI offices have public affairs officers whose jobs are to take calls from the aspiring writers, er, the general public. If you explain what kind of information you need, they will help match you up with a suitable officer for an interview.
 - Be professional: Do as much preliminary research as you can up front. Rather than put someone on the spot, make an appointment to officially interview the person, then call back. If you need a lot of technical information, you can fax your questions to the person in advance so they understand what sort of things you are looking for. Also, don't be argumentative—you're not an investigative reporter, you are a fiction writer and these people are speaking to you out of professional courtesy. Finally, be appreciative. Always thank the person for their time, both on the phone and with a written note. Generally, you will end up with a few follow up questions, so you want this person to be willing to take your call again.
- *Corresponding Emotional Stage:* Even greater euphoria. I am brilliant. My plot is brilliant, and now, with the inclusion of this wonderful information on the mating habits of wild sea mammals, I will be even greater than brilliant. Julia Roberts/Brad Pitt, here I come!

Step 3: First-Attempt Outline

Hopefully, you now have a jumble of thoughts along with an equally chaotic jumble of research notes. It's time to start bringing order to your wild burst of inspiration.

- Write a brief summary of each known scene on an individual note card.
- Lay out note cards on the floor, seeking some semblance of order. For example, this scene is probably halfway through the book, while this scene is in the beginning, etc. Yes, there will probably be gaps in your layout. You know something else should be happening here or there, you just don't know what yet.

- Look at the cards individually:
 - Do you have an opening scene? Is that really a gripping, compelling opening or can you now think of something better?
 - Identify the key plot points of your story, e.g., where something significant develops such as the heroine learns her real father may be a serial killer.
 - Identify at least two plot twists, e.g., where something unexpected happens that takes the book in a whole new direction such as the main suspect suddenly turns up dead. In a suspense novel, you need many plot points and at least two or three key plot twists. The plot points and twists are the skeleton of your story. Character development, scene development, secondary relationships, etc., become the meat on these bones.
 - Finally, analyze your ending. Does it flow from steadily building tension, and is it exciting? The beginning and ending scenes are two of the most important scenes in a novel.
- Look at the note cards as a whole:
 - Do you have enough conflict in this story?
 - Do your hero and heroine have believable goals and motivation? Does the logic flow move from scene to scene?
 - In other words, do you have enough substance to pull this off?
- *Corresponding Emotional Stage*: First anxiety attack. Eeek! The only people getting sex in this book are wild sea mammals. I miss my old characters. I miss my old book. Must burn note cards, then eat brownies.

Step 4: Brainstorm/Research Round II

- Contemplate characters and plot all over again. What do you need to know to flesh out this book? Go on walks, work in the garden, talk to critique partners, eat chocolate, whatever, but get the gray cells churning
- Conduct more in-depth research as more questions/issues become clearer to you. Research is a great way of getting more ideas.
- *Corresponding Emotional Stage*: Stupid, stupid freaking characters. Where are those brownies? Stupid, stupid freaking plot. I want a dozen chocolate morsels. Mating habits of wild sea mammals. What was I thinking? Gimme chocolate, now, now, now!

Step 5: Serious Outline Attempt

- Return to writing a brief summary of all known scenes on individual note cards. This time, you should have more note cards.

- Lay out note cards on floor, in sequential order.
- Down two aspirin and get serious:
 - Analyze major plot points:
 - Do they move the story forward, or are they merely repeating a pattern (heroine starts to trust hero, gets burned, moves back. Heroine starts to trust hero, thinks he lies to her, moves back, etc.) Each major plot point, aka fresh complication, needs to reveal something new. It can be either new action/evidence to advance a suspense novel, or deeper layers of a character to advance a relationship story. If you are not exposing something new every few chapters, your story will lose momentum and your reader will lose interest.
 - Do the plot points steadily build tension?
 - After major plot points, do you have resting moments to ease the tension for the characters and reader? Comedic action, love scenes, etc., all provide great resting moments. For more information on resting moments, see Syd Field’s guide to screenwriting. Or watch the Indiana Jones movies. Ever notice how there is always a little comedic moment after an intense action scene? Indy runs from boulder, then goes “Eeek!” when he sees a snake, etc.
 - Analyze major turning points:
 - Do they take the book in a new direction, someplace the reader didn’t see coming?
 - Are they appropriately foreshadowed, or so well motivated that when the reader does know the entire truth, the turning points/plot twists still make sense. In other words, turning points should be clever, but also believable.
 - Analyze individual scenes:
 - Do you have a strong opening hook that immediately establishes tension?
 - Are too many scenes alike, e.g., hero/heroine talking, eating, walking all the time, etc. My editor once complained about a book where every single scene took place in a doorway. That’s just odd.
 - Are the scenes fresh, or do you rely on too many clichéd romantic moments, e.g., the heroine has a nightmare in the middle of the night, the hero rushes to comfort her, then they both realize they’re naked, etc. Yes, such a moment provides a good excuse for sex, but it’s also been done thousands of times. I know, I’ve used it. ☺

— Analyze resolution:

- Do you end with an appropriate black moment and/or action sequence that builds logically from your major plot points and provides emotional release for the characters and reader?
- Is the resolution fresh or can the reader see it coming? One method is to write down six solutions to your conflict, throw them away, and use the seventh. If the resolution of your novel was that hard for you to figure out, it will be that hard for the reader to figure out.
- *Corresponding Emotional State:* Nervous breakdown. Why did I think I could write this book? Why did I think I could write? My plot sucks, my characters suck. I have no conflict, no goals, and a resolution a two-year old could deduce. Screw brownies. Must get Hershey's cocoa and find a vein!

Step 6: Wrestle Pesky Plot Into the Ground, Once and For All

- Lay out problem areas in your plot from above diagnostic.
- Bother family, friends, and critique partners by discussing the book out loud over and over again until they help you realize “where you went wrong.” (P.S. Beware of husbands who want to make all novels into Rambo movies. If his first idea for fixing your unmotivated heroine is to “kill her,” you might find another book doctor.)
- Revisit outline until you feel comfortable in the story.
- Start writing.
- *Corresponding Emotional State:* My plot is brilliant! OhmyGod, I'm never going to be able to write this thing. I love my characters. OhmyGod, this is soooo hard. I am brilliant. Eeeek, it's like giving birth through your eye sockets. In other words, the writer's normal state of mind.

Conclusion:

Congratulations, you are now on your way to writing a novel. Beware that most of your carefully outlined scenes will probably change. That's okay. Beware that writing a book is generally more difficult than outlining it. That's okay, too.

And finally, you may complete this process only to discover that now that you have outlined the story, you have no interest in writing it. That means outlining is not for you. You are probably an “out-of-the-mist” writer, meaning that the story must be unfolding fresh for you to be interested in telling it. That's okay as well. Some of the best writers out there are out-of-the-mist writers. The trick is to discover which method of writing works best for you.