

# Dramatic Structure and Plot

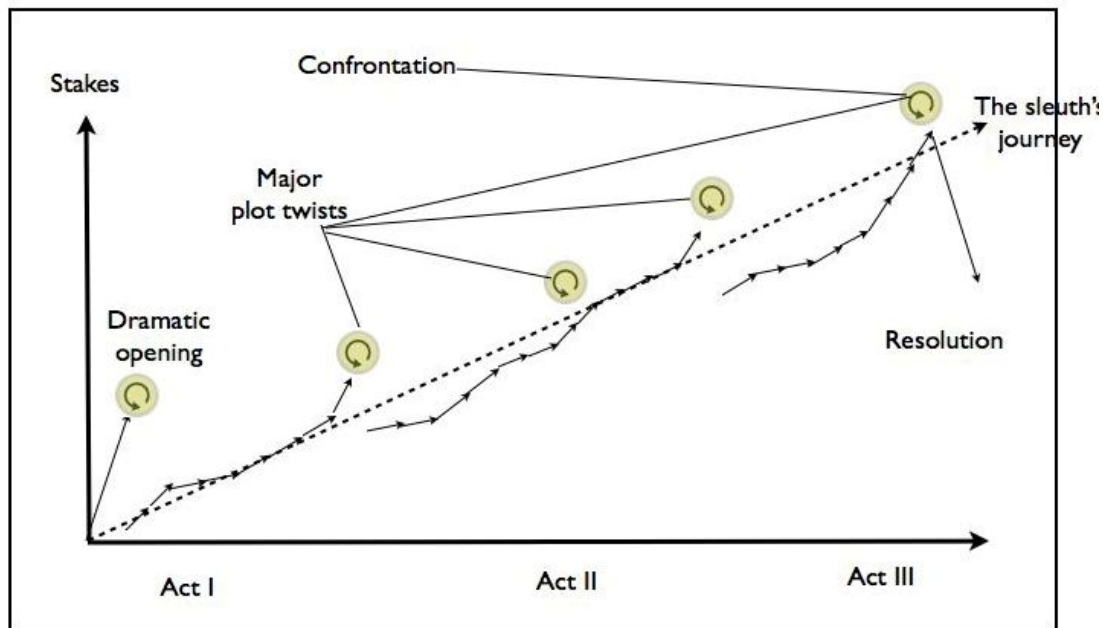
...or how to keep your story from circling the drain

-- Hallie Ephron

As I was planning to teach my first session for MWA University on dramatic structure and plot, I thought a lot about what works in a mystery novel and what doesn't. After all, I write them. I read gobs of them. Is plotting simply sequencing scenes?

If only. Because then they'd be a whole lot easier to write. But nothing loses me faster in a mystery novel than a plot in which this happens, and then this happens, and then this happens, and things just keep on happening but there's no tension building. That's a plot that's circling the drain instead of heading toward the finish line.

So, how do you build in forward momentum? It helps to pay attention to something as basic and ancient as the three-act structure.



This diagram shows how the plot of a mystery novel can be laid out in three acts.

- Across horizontal axis are the pages of the novel, separated into acts.
- The vertical axis is rising stakes, and with them, tension.
- The little arrows represent scenes strung together (of course there are more of them in an actual novel) and grouped into three acts.
- The dashed line is the journey of the main character (the sleuth).
- The curly arrows are major plot twists, surprises that change the direction of the story and reversals that leave the sleuth's investigation back to square one.
- The plot is framed by a dramatic opening at the start and resolution at the end.

## An opening that hooks

There is no one-size fits-all way to decide the best way to open a mystery novel. It might open with a dramatization of the crime that starts the story rolling. Or maybe a scene from the past that sets a context. Or maybe it's a scene that introduces an intriguing main character and establishes some of the elements needed for the mystery to unfold.

Whatever it is, the essential role of the opening scene is to get the reader interested enough to keep reading. The opening scene sets up the mystery, and often poses an *unanswered question* that got answered by the novel's end.

For example, here are brief descriptions of a few dramatic openings and the questions they posed:

- A baby is found abandoned on the steps of a church.  
*Unanswered question:* Who left the baby on the church steps, and what happened to the baby's mother?  
(*In the Bleak Midwinter*, Julia Spencer-Fleming)
- A criminal defense attorney meets her new client—a woman accused of killing her cop-boyfriend. The woman extends a hand and says, “Pleased to meet you, I’m your twin.”  
*Unanswered question:* Is this woman the defense attorney’s twin sister and is she a murderer?  
(*Mistaken Identity*, Lisa Scottoline)
- PI Bill Smith receives a late night telephone call from the NYPD, who are holding his fifteen-year-old nephew Gary.  
*Unanswered question:* Why would Gary ask for Smith? Smith hasn’t seen Gary for years and is estranged from Gary’s parents.  
(*Winter and Night*, S. J. Rozan)

Bottom line: write an opening that captures the reader's attention without shooting yourself in the foot. Here are a few of the mistakes that are all too easy to make:

- *Stealing the novel's thunder:* An opening that is fabulously exciting all right, but it reveals something that serves the overall novel better by being revealed later.
- *False promises:* An opening that feels stylistically at odds with the scenes that follow.
- *Too much too soon:* An opening with so much graphic sex, gruesome violence, or profanity that it turns many readers off; writers can get away with going over the top in all these categories without losing readers once they've gotten their story rolling and earned their reader's trust.

### **Giving your sleuth a hard time**

What unifies a mystery novel is that dashed line in the diagram: the sleuth’s quest. Drama works in direct proportion to how miserable you make your protagonist. Roadblocks and setbacks make it an interesting journey.

Here are some ways to plague your protagonist:

- *Discomfort*  
The hungrier, thirstier, colder (or hotter), achier, and generally more pissed off he becomes, the more heroic the quest. Give him a scraped knee, sprained ankle, dislocated finger, bloody nose,

broken arm, or gunshot wound, and show how he pushes past pain and disability in order to continue his pursuit. Make sure the reader knows he feels the pain, but be careful about letting him bitch and moan too much about it—no one likes a whiny hero.

- *Inner demons*

If you throw your character into a snake-filled pit, be sure to establish beforehand that she's terrified of snakes. If your character is an alcoholic, make his quest for the killer take him into bars. If your character is devoted to his brother, give him a blind spot that makes him unable to face the evidence mounting incriminating his brother.

- *Mishaps*

Throw obstacles at your character to slow him down. His car can break down, or he can be set upon by thugs who turn out to be protecting the villain, or his car can roll over and end up in a ditch after being nudged off the highway by a semi. After each setback, the sleuth comes back stronger and more determined.

So give your character trouble, and have some of it be of his own making. But modulate the misery. Begin with minor woes and build as the story progresses to its final climax. From time to time, things should improve. Then, just when it looks as if your protagonist is out of the woods, let the next disaster befall him.

Finally, keep raising the stakes, insert a ticking clock, and above all, make it personal. Reaching the end goal should feel heroic, worth all the pain and misery your protagonist had to overcome along the way.

## **Confrontation at the end**

Mystery novels culminate in a climactic scene in which the final shoes drop and the puzzle is solved. That climactic scene contains the payload for the entire novel. It's one of the most important scenes in your book—second only to the dramatic opening. Often that scene is fraught with mortal danger as a clock ticks down. The sleuth and the villain duke it out, face to face -- if not physically then verbally.

After the climax comes a coda, a more contemplative scene in which the reader gets a chance to breathe again and mull over what happened.

In most mysteries, the protagonist triumphs, the villain is defeated, and justice is served. The ending should be plausible, surprising, and most importantly, satisfying. Don't feel rule-bound if some unusual ending suits your story, but whatever you do, be sure that in the end it is crystal clear whodunit, why, and how. Your reader should never be left scratching his head.

By the end, too, the protagonist has completed a journey, solved the puzzle, and often come to terms with some unfinished issue from his own past.

Finally, here are a few endings to avoid:

- *Duh*: This ending is obvious to everyone but the sleuth.
- *Over the top*: An overdose of violence that feels out of proportion to the rest of the book.

- *You've got to be kidding:* The villain is the least likely suspect, one who would seem to be incapable of this crime (an anorexic teeny-bopper strangler).
- *Spill all:* The villain, for no apparent reason, begins to talk-talk-talk, spilling every detail about the crime.
- *If only I'd known:* Yeah, the reader could have solved it, too, if the sleuth hadn't withheld key information.
- *Yeah, right:* Some key part of the solution is due to a coincidence.
- *But, but, but:* The ending that fails to tie up all the loose ends and explain how and why everything happened.

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