

PLOTTING TO KILL: WRITING MYSTERIES & THRILLERS

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How do you create compelling characters and put them in memorable conflict?

1. Plot

Plot is the main story of a literary or dramatic work. It is *not* simply a sequence of events. It's the cause-and-effect relationship between events in a story. It's the characters' journey toward a goal or desire through a series of conflicts.

2. Building Plot: Story Structure

Plot and character are two sides of the same coin. No story is ever solely plot-driven or solely character-driven. Plot develops from the characters' choices and actions.

- True character is revealed and shaped by the choices a person makes under pressure.

A story should build progressively. Put the characters under increasing pressure and give them bigger tests, culminating in a final, irrevocable choice.

- Try to give your protagonist a dilemma. Not simply a choice, but a wrenching choice. Put them in a position where they must choose between irreconcilable goods, or the lesser of two evils.

The crux of plotting:

- Create an active protagonist who wants something now.
- Create a powerful antagonist whose desires clash with those of the protagonist.

Obstructing desire: the essence of plotting

- What does the protagonist WANT?
- What's stopping him from achieving it?
- Your job as writer: thwart the protagonist's desire! Don't make it easy for him.

A protagonist and her story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them.

- Create an antagonist with equally powerful desires, motivations, and fears.
- Put the protagonist and antagonist in conflict. They can't both get what they want.

3. CREATING A CRUCIBLE

- From veteran editor Sol Stein: The crucible is “the container that holds the characters together as things heat up.”
- What throws the protagonist and antagonist together in a white hot cauldron and keeps their conflict boiling?

PROTAGONISTS

- Should be active. What do they want? What stands in their way? And what is at stake—that is, what will be won or lost depending on whether if they succeed or fail?

ANTAGONISTS

- VILLAINS should be clever and powerful.
- The antagonist stands in the way of the protagonist’s goals.

4. Structuring a plot

BEGINNINGS: Start as close to the ending as possible. Figure out what the chase is, and cut to it.

THE MIDDLE: Keep the Action Building. Build progressive complications into the story. Never get a hero out of trouble without putting him in a worse predicament. Tighten the screws: increase risk, tension, suspense, confrontation.

ENDINGS: Should be surprising yet inevitable.

GIVE THE AUDIENCE WHAT IT WANTS, BUT NOT THE WAY IT EXPECTS.