

Plotting in Commercial Fiction

By Jeffery Deaver

Plotting is, to me, the most important part of the three elements of fiction (the others being characters and setting).

What is plot? Simply it is incidents that happen in your novel or short story. But there's plotting and then there's *plotting*. Your plots must be crafted to achieve your goal of telling the most emotionally engaging story you can.

And what is an emotionally engaging story?

This: It's a novel or short story in which living, breathing fully formed characters, both good and bad, pursue high-stakes goals—ideally over a short period of time—and in the process constantly confront increasingly difficult questions and conflicts, which questions and conflicts are ultimately resolved in a way satisfying to readers.

I have come up with ten rules I use in crafting plots to help me realize this goal, and I'll share them here.

Rule 1: Plan the plot ahead of time. Outline.

Rule 2: Have your characters constantly confront high-stakes conflicts.

Rule 3: Resolve every conflict you create—after an appropriate period of suspense.

Rule 4: In addition to the core crime-solving plot, incorporate subplots into your novels, including those involving personal and broader social/geopolitical issues.

Rule 5: Do not hesitate to be manipulative and keep readers constantly on edge.

Rule 6: Use internal plot reversals.

Rule 7: End every plot and subplot with a shocking twist (or twists, plural, if you can pull it off).

Rule 8. Threaten your readers with the risk of taking away characters and story lines they have come to love.

Rule 9: Avoid pitfalls in writing that can jeopardize even the best plots:

- a. No stupidity or give-me-a-break moments.
- b. No explicit gore. Use suspense instead.
- c. Don't preach from a soapbox.
- d. Don't digress with excessive research.
- e. Avoid excessive narrative explication. Tell the story through dialogue and action.

Rule 10: Plotting off the page. To become a successful published author, take your time in all aspects of your novel's or story's creation, placement with a publisher and subsequent marketing.