

PLOT

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT PLOT

- Is there any point where a reader might feel like putting the book down?
- Does the novel feel like it's about people doing things?
- Does the plot feel forced or unnatural?
- Is the story out of balance? Too much action? Too much reaction?

COMMON FIXES

Keep Nabbing Ideas

All through the revision process your mind will be working on your plot. When you sleep, eat, shower, drive. The boys in the basement never stop.

So be able to nab any ideas that occur to you at odd moments. Have pens and paper handy in your home, car, office, backpack. Don't hesitate to jot down what occurs to you, without judgment. Later, you can sift through your notes and decide what to incorporate.

Create Two Trajectories

Create two trajectories for your main character: a personal problem and a plot problem.

- He's in his personal problem as the story begins, or it develops soon thereafter.
- The plot problem arises when the main conflict is engaged.

The two don't necessarily intersect as the story moves along, though they can. But the personal complicates how he deals with the plot.

In *Chasing the Dime* by Michael Connelly, Pierce, the Lead, is dealing with a divorce, then starts getting strange calls for "Lillie" over the phone. The divorce makes him a little more vulnerable to the plot twists.

Create a Calendar

If you haven't done this already, either when first drafting or afterward, print out a blank calendar covering the time of your novel. You can do this for historical novels as well as contemporary or futuristic ones.

The reason for this is you want to avoid having something happening on a Saturday that, according to what's taken place before, must be happening on a Monday. Or by the "next day" be for regular business, only to discover that it's really Sunday by the calendar.

I find it helpful to have a hard copy of this so I can pencil in the main events of each day. Almost always I have mistakes in the timing of the first draft that need to be corrected.

Revitalize Your Plot

Does your novel feel like a lazy uncle, overstaying his welcome, sitting on the couch and boring you with pointless anecdotes? Then get it up and moving.

Analyze the *stakes*. Ask yourself what the main character will lose if he doesn't achieve his objective. Unless it's something that threatens tremendous loss, either physically or emotionally, readers won't care what happens.

It's helpful to think of your plot as involving the threat of *death*. In a thriller, it's usually physical death. If the Lead doesn't get away from the bad guys, he will die (John Grisham's *The Firm*). But it can also be professional death—the FBI agent who doesn't catch the serial killer will be a failure (Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*).

In a literary novel, psychological death often hangs over the character. This is the feeling that pervades *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden Caulfield must find some reality that he can embrace, or he will die inside.

Another major area to explore is *adhesive*. What is it that bonds the Lead and the opposition together? If this adhesive isn't strong enough, the readers will wonder why the plot should continue at all.

Duty is often the key to adhesive. If the lead has a professional duty (e.g., a lawyer to his client, a cop to his case) then we accept that he can't resign. Duty may be moral, such as the duty to save a friend or loved one. *The Odd Couple* works only because Neil Simon planted a moral duty early: Oscar's best friend Felix is suicidal over his divorce. That is enough to remove the question *Why doesn't Oscar just kick his annoying roommate out?*

Next, see if you can add *another level of complication*. In Robert Crais's thriller *Hostage*, burned-out hostage negotiator Jeff Talley is suddenly faced with a tense standoff in an otherwise placid bedroom community.

Fine and dandy on its own, but Crais then adds another level: The hostage inside the house has in his possession incriminating financial evidence

against the mob, because he's the mob's accountant! The mob needs to get that evidence before the cops.

To put pressure on Talley, the mob kidnaps his ex-wife and daughter and holds *them* hostage. This added level of complication supercharges the entire book.

Add a Character

Too few characters can result in a thin plot.

Too many can render it overweight.

But just the right character added at just the right time presents a whole universe of plot possibilities.

If your plot is plodding, consider adding a new, dynamic character to the proceedings. Give this character a stake in the plot. Give him plenty of reasons to be for or against the other characters. Search out possible backstory relationships between the new character and the existing cast.



BEWARE OF UNMOTIVATED ACTIONS

Do you have characters doing things that aren't justified in the story?

A character can't just show up. You need to give your characters a reason why they act the way they do. Look to:

- desires
- yearnings
- duties
- psychological wounds
- passions

Add a "Pet the Dog" Beat

In screenwriting parlance, writers sometimes talk about the pet the dog beat. It's best to explain this with an illustration.

Let's say Clint Eastwood is playing a cop (I know—it's a bit of a stretch). He's got his .44 Magnum out and is chasing a killer through the dark streets. He's getting shot at. He has his back against the wall in an alley when he hears something crash. He spins around and points his gun at this scraggly old dog who has tipped over a trash can. The dog comes up to Clint's leg.

Clint looks down the dog, out to the street, then back to the dog. He bends over and pets the dog and says, “Better be careful, little fella. It’s dangerous out here.” And then he takes charge of the dog. What he has done here is to take a moment from his own concerns to look out for something weaker and more vulnerable than he is. He has shown he cares just as much for this little dog at that moment as he does for his own safety.

A pet-the-dog beat, properly executed, creates great sympathy for the character, while at the same time may add to the suspense. It doesn’t have to be a literal dog, but any other character who is vulnerable.

In the movie *The Fugitive*, there’s a wonderful pet-the-dog beat.

Dr. Richard Kimble (Harrison Ford) has disguised himself as a maintenance worker for a busy Chicago hospital. His plan is to access the records of the prosthetics section so he can find the possible identity of the one-armed man who killed his wife. Meantime, he’s being hunted by the police and the federal marshal played by Tommy Lee Jones.

As he’s trying to leave the hospital without being noticed, Kimble comes to the emergency ward. It’s a mass confusion of gunshot wounds and accident victims.

He waits for his opportunity, but as he does he hears a groan next to him. He looks down. There’s a boy on a gurney. Kimble can’t help wondering what’s wrong with the boy. He’s a doctor, after all, and healing is what he does.

An on-call doctor tells Kimble to wheel the boy down to an observation room. As he does, he asks the boy where it hurts and checks out the X-rays. In the elevator he figures out that the boy has been misdiagnosed and changes the chart. Kimble takes the boy to the emergency operating chamber so he can get immediate attention.

Kimble has taken time from his terrible trouble to care about someone. The movie makers use this moment masterfully, because it gets Kimble into more trouble. When he gets back to the emergency floor, the on-call doctor, who had seen him looking at the X-rays, stops him, takes his identification badge, and goes to call security.

And the fugitive is on the move again.

Look for a place where you can add a pet-the-dog beat.

Change a Setting

Usually the main setting of your plot is going to remain as is, because you have so much invested in it. You’ve done research, set up locations for scenes, and so on.

But if it's possible to change, give it some consideration. Will it add levels to your plot? More exciting possibilities?

Even if you can't change the main location, many of your scenes can be enlivened this way.

Look especially to these locations:

- restaurants
- kitchens
- living rooms
- offices
- cars

These are the places most of us are in most of the time. For that reason they're overly familiar.

Look at each instance of a location like the above and see if you can't find a fresher venue. For example, instead of a restaurant scene, what if the characters were outside eating hot dogs on a pier? Or at a carnival where there's too much noise?

You don't have to move every scene, of course, but this is one way to sharpen a plot.



DON'T HOLD BACK ON MAKING TROUBLE

Have you been resistant to making things as bad as possible for your Lead? Did you pull your punches when creating obstacles, challenges, points of conflict? Were you too nice to your characters?

Go through your manuscript and for each scene define what the point of conflict is.

- Are there two characters with opposing objectives? Can you rework it so this conflict is clearer?
- Can you ratchet up the conflict by making these objectives more important to each character?
- Can you show us, through inner thoughts, just how important it is to the viewpoint character?
- Can you make the conflict hotter, more intense?
- Think things through. Don't worry about going too far. You can always pull it back a little in your final polish.

THE OPENING

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE OPENING

- Do I open with some part of the story engine running? Or am I spending too much time warming up?
- How do my opening pages conform to Hitchcock’s axiom (“A good story is life with the dull parts taken out”)?
- What is the *story world* I’m trying to present? What mood descriptions bring that story world to life for the reader?
- What is the tone of my novel going to be? Are the descriptions consistent with that mood?
- What happens in Act I that’s going to compel the reader to keep reading? What danger to the Lead?
- Who is the opposition to the Lead? Is he as strong, or preferably stronger, than the Lead? How do I show this?
- Is there enough conflict in the setup to run through the whole book?

COMMON FIXES

Rev Up a Flat Opening Line

Give us a character in motion. Something happening to a person from line one.

Make that a disturbing thing, or have it presage something disturbing. Remember, a disturbance is any sort of change or challenge. It doesn’t have to be “big” to hold interest.

If you want to open more leisurely, at least give us these elements within the first paragraph or half page.

Weed Out Too Much Backstory, Exposition, or Cast

While some backstory is good in the opening, it should come only after action is established, and then dropped in sparingly.

Exposition (information) can also usually be put off until later.

Remember the rule *act first, explain later*.

Remember the chapter two switcheroo (see page 134). Try opening with your second chapter and see how it feels.

Another error is the introduction of too many characters in the opening chapters. Readers want to know who the main character is and why he should care. If you bring on too many characters, that bond will be diluted. You can:

- Eliminate characters.
- Delay some character introductions until later.
- Make sure you are strongly in your Lead's point of view throughout.
- Combine characters to reduce the size of the cast.