

Building a Plot

Directions: Before you start writing, read these tips for creating engaging plots:

1. Strong plots are character-driven.

Suspense author Andre Jute says, "Plot flows most easily and genuinely from character . . . and the actions characters undertake because of the relationships they have and the frictions built into such contact. On the other hand, if you first work out the plot and then simply people it with characters who can carry out the actions you've dreamed up, your characters will seem wooden and unreal." When outlining a story's plot, be careful not to depend solely on events and actions. Focus on the characters so that their events and actions are authentic. Plot is not simply a sequence events, but a specific sequence of events that develop from a specific character.

2. Avoid too much plot.

Don't create a crisis every two pages, too many characters and story lines, characters that are "in action" so much they do not have time to think and feel. This will result in a superficial story. Many writers go back through a first draft and look for storylines, characters, and plot events they can cut to improve the story's focus on the theme. In this way, they ensure a story with depth.

3. Know when to start the story.

The action of your story should begin at the point at which the characters start moving toward the end of it. For example, a story about a family coping with the breakup of the parents' marriage might begin on the day one parent moves out. Beginning a story too soon may bore the reader and result in an unfocused narrative.

4. Pace the plot.

Think of your plot as having a kind of wave motion: with ups and downs, action sequences and calm scenes (sitting, talking, thinking, etc.). There should be moments of tension that come to a crest, and then settle down. A plot should be a diverse collection of events, emotions, actions, ideas, and thoughts executed in a particular choreographed way. This kind of pacing sets your reader up for the final climax.

5. Make your characters grow.

In most stories, plot is about how life affects people or characters. Between the beginning and the end of your story, your main characters should learn, grow, and be in some way affected by the events they have just lived through.