

How Do You Write a Story's Plot?

Resources for Writers from Laura Williams McCaffrey and Dean Whitlock

Author Discussion with Laura Williams McCaffrey and Dean Whitlock

LWM: How to form a plot? This is a tough question. And there's no one right answer, isn't that what's so tricky about creative writing? But I suppose if there were one right answer, I wouldn't be so interested in storytelling. The plot, for me, is really the central character(s) thwarted desire and his/her/their attempts to fulfill this desire. Maybe what I mean will be easier to explain with an example. In *Lyla's Flight*, Lyla's family is poor. Lyla wants to escape poverty by earning a patron who will send her to university. This is the beginning of the story's plot. Now, obstacles stand in her way, and one of the most important obstacles she faces is herself: she has a hard time behaving as potential patrons think she should. The plot develops as Lyla works increasingly hard to fulfill her desire, while obstacles increasingly thwart her.

When you construct a plot, how do you begin?

DW: Well, I define plot as "what happens next": the sequence of events that carries the characters toward and over the obstacles. So I start like you do, with a character and a desire. Then I spend a lot of time collecting ideas and images and events that will flesh out the character and fit into the action somewhere. That includes the major obstacles, the sidekicks, the villains, the setting, and so on. Early

on, I try to decide how I want the story to end. I usually envision the final scene before I know the beginning. But once I have a beginning, an end, a few scenes in the middle, and some idea of the people who are going to star in this tale, I'm ready to begin plotting. I sit down and write a synopsis of the story, several pages of crude narrative that puts each important moment in its place. To be honest, this is the hardest part of writing for me: not coming up with ideas and events, but choosing the right ones and putting them in the right order. If you have a secret formula, I'd love to hear it!

LWM: I don't have a secret formula, and my process is messy, messy, messy. Like you, I have some sense of how the story is going to end, and I aim for that ending. I try to build the story from the beginning (where the character has a desire and an obstacle that prevents her from fulfilling that desire) to the ending (where the character fulfills her desire or in some way resolves what to do about her desire and obstacle). I know I have to portray the character's desire and the specific obstacle standing in her way at the beginning of the story, in the first chapter. This scene tends to have a conflict. Something results from the initial conflict between the character and the obstacle: my character makes a choice or responds, which leads to the next important scene that depicts her quest to get what she wants. And so on, and so on. Frequently, I'm not as clear about what the character wants as I should be, and so I

create scenes with conflicts that don't truly create her story: they have action but not action that relates to her getting what she wants. When I find myself straying like that, I tend to go back to the story's beginning. I cut the scenes that don't really form the story, and write new ones that do. (I hope!) I revise the beginnings and middles of stories a lot. More times than I can count: to be honest, I throw out hundreds of pages. But I tend to only write/rework the endings a few times. Which leads me to ask, are your endings always what you initially expected they'd be?

DW: My endings are usually close to my first imagining, but a lot of the stuff leading up to the end changes. I change what I've already written while I'm writing (as do you), and about halfway through, I'll rework the synopsis based on realizations that have come up in the first half. And three-quarters of the way through, I'll rework the final quarter. And the last couple of chapters (or pages, in a short story) will sometimes surprise me. I have found that the final scene usually matches my original image. But not always: Although the action of the final scene in *Sky Carver* was what I'd first envisioned, the visual image no longer worked with the physical world I had created, so I crafted a new one. With all the reworking, my "first" draft is actually a second or third draft. I hand that to my first readers and try not to worry about it for a couple of months. The rewriting process, I think, is another topic.

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Writing Activities

Plot Squares – Draw six large blank squares on a piece of paper. Cut these out. (You could also form cubes, if you prefer, or you could use large Post-It notes.) Label one, "The Goal." Label another, "The Obstacle." Label the next three, "What's Done to Reach the Goal." Label the last one, "The Solution." Once you have all these, write and/or draw the following in the appropriate boxes (or cubes, etc.): your main character's goal, your story's obstacle, the three things done to get around the obstacle and reach the goal, and your story's solution. Then set these out on the floor in the order you think they might happen in your story. You might find you have to rearrange the three "What's Done to Reach the Goal" boxes. Once you think you have the right order, paste all the boxes onto a large piece of paper or poster board. Then – sit down and write the story you've plotted!

What happens during...? Take a look at our "Plot Diagram" sheets. (You can find other examples if you search for "Freytag's Pyramid.") Print two blank Plot Diagram pages. On one, brainstorm answers to the questions for each section (Introduction, First Try, etc.). Once you decide on the answers that work best, rewrite your final answers on the other blank Plot Diagram page. Now, using your final Plot Diagram page as a guide, launch into writing your story.

Resources for Designing Plots

Elementary School

- "Cook up a Story" and "What's Your Problem" in American Girl Library's *Writing Smarts*.
- Eileen Christelow's *What Do Illustrators Do?* and *What do Authors Do?*
- Peggy Kaye's "Story Maps" in *Games for Writing*.

Middle School

- Marion Dane Bauer's "Getting from Beginning to End...The Plot" in *What's Your Story: A Young Person's Guide to Writing Fiction*.
- Gail Carson Levine's "Happily Ever After—or Not" in *Writing Magic*.

High School

- Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*.
- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.

Adult/Advanced -- all of the above, plus:

- James Scott Bell's *Plot and Structure*.
- Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction*.
- John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*.

Author Bios

Laura Williams McCaffrey is a full-time writer and writing teacher. Her forthcoming novel is a dystopic fantasy for teens. She's the author of two other YA fantasy novels, *Water Shaper* (NYPL Books for the Teen Age list 2007) and *Alia Waking* (IRA Notable Book). Laura is on the faculty at Solstice, the low-residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College. Additionally, she teaches writing at Pacem Learning Community, a learning center for homeschoolers, and is regularly a writer-in-residence at schools and writing camps.

Dean Whitlock is a military brat who likes to think that living in so many different places naturally drove him into a fantasy world. Now he does most of his traveling through his stories (but only for want of money and time!). He is the author of two YA novels (*Sky Carver* and *Raven*, both from Clarion Books), three handfuls of short stories, and several plays and murder mystery events. He also visits schools to read and teach whenever he can. He believes that imagination is the key difference between humans and other animals, because his students can always envision such wonderful stories, no matter what grade they're in or how much they know about commas.

For more information or resources, visit:
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