



# Create A Plot Clinic: An Introduction

By: Holly Lisle

Presented By: [Jeniffer Karas](#)



WRITING  
THE BASICS AND  
BEYOND



---

**You may freely distribute this sample e-book as a free download on your website, product or mailing list. You may not charge for it or change any part of it.**

**Holly Lisle's  
Create A Plot Clinic**

**A Step-by-Step Course in Developing Plots  
from Beginning to End**

WRITING THE BASICS AND BEYOND

---

OneMoreWord  
Contact at: [onemoreword@hollylisle.com](mailto:onemoreword@hollylisle.com)

Copyright &copy; 2007 by Holly Lisle

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

First OneMoreWord Edition 2007

OneMoreWord and colophon are trademarks  
of Holly Lisle Books

Cover design: Holly Lisle  
Image: BigStockPhoto.com &copy; Stephen Beaumont  
Interior art: Holly Lisle

First printing 2007

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

---

## OneMoreWord Books by Holly Lisle

[Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic \(THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE\)](#)

[Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic \(THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE\)](#)

[Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic](#)

[Mugging the Muse: Writing Fiction for Love AND Money \(free\)](#)

[Hunting the Corrigan's Blood \(reissue\)](#)

Available here: <http://shop.hollylisle.com>

### Other Books by Holly Lisle

#### KORRE

Hawkspar: A Novel of Korre, Tor, hardcover, for release in 2007

Talyn: A Novel of Korre, Tor, hardcover, (ISBN: 0-765-30993-9) Aug 2005

#### ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELS

Night Echoes, Signet Eclipse (ISBN:

I See You, Onyx (ISBN: 0-451-41221-4), July 2006

Last Girl Dancing, Onyx (ISBN: 0-451-41197-8) July 2005

Midnight Rain, Onyx, (ISBN: 0-451-41175-7) Nov 2004

#### THE WORLD GATES

BOOK I: Memory of Fire, Avon Eos, (ISBN: 0-380-81837-X) May 2002

BOOK II: The Wreck of Heaven, Eos (ISBN: 0-380-81838-8) Apr 2003

BOOK III: Gods Old and Dark, Eos (ISBN: 0-380-81839-6) Mar 2004

#### THE SECRET TEXTS

BOOK I: Diplomacy of Wolves; Warner Aspect (ISBN: 0-446-67395-1) Nov 1998

BOOK II: Vengeance of Dragons; Warner Aspect (ISBN: 0-446-67396-X) Oct '99

BOOK III: Courage of Falcons, Warner Aspect (ISBN: 0-446-67397-8 Oct 2000

Vincalis the Agitator, Warner Aspect (ISBN: 0-446-67899-6) March 2002

#### ARHEL NOVELS

Fire in the Mist; Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-72132-1) Aug 1992

Bones of the Past; Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-72160-7) Mar 1993

Mind of the Magic; Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87654-6) May 1995

#### GLENRAVEN NOVELS

Glenraven; (w/ Marion Zimmer Bradley) Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87738-0) Sept 1996

In The Rift: Glenraven II; (w/ Marion Zimmer Bradley) Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87870-0)

Apr 1998

#### DEVIL'S POINT NOVELS

Sympathy for the Devil; Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87703-8) Jan 1996

The Devil and Dan Cooley; (w/ Walter Spence) Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87756-9) Dec 1996

Hell on High; (w/ Ted Nolan) Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87780-1) May 1997

#### CADENCE DRAKE NOVELS (SF)

Hunting the Corrigan's Blood; Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-97768-2) Feb 1997; REISSUE OneMoreWord Books-- Mar 2006.

#### STAND-ALONE FANTASY

Minerva Wakes; Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-72202-6) --- Jan 1994

When the Bough Breaks; (w/ Mercedes Lackey) (ISBN: 0-671-72154-2) Feb 1993

Mall, Mayhem and Magic; (w/ Chris Guin), Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87678-3) Aug 1995

The Rose Sea; (with S.M.Stirling), Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87620-1) Sept 1994

#### BARD'S TALE NOVELS

---

Curse of the Black Heron; Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87868-9) Mar 1998  
Thunder of the Captains; (w/ Aaron Allston), Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87731-3) July  
1996  
Wrath of the Princes; (w/ Aaron Allston) , Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87771-2) Mar 1997

---

# Dedication

For Matt

---

## Acknowledgments

Huge thanks to Heather Wardell, Monica Jackson, Sandy Lunsford, Diane Moore, and Matt, who tore through this book with amazing speed and wonderful accuracy, pinpointing the places where ideas went wrong, where my typing wandered astray, and where I knew what I meant, but missed getting that across to my reader, all while building their own plots in three days.

And to the many unofficial beta users who raced alongside the official beta testers, and figured out what was missing, and asked for extra material to get them through their plotting woes. As much as I've been able to answer your questions, it's all in here.

And to those of you who asked me to write this book, sometimes loudly, sometimes pleadingly, but always with great good humor. I hope it's everything you hoped it would be.

Thank you so much for encouraging me, helping me, and letting me know this project mattered to you. The book is better for your parts in it.

And the remaining errors, of course, are all mine.

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

We Need Your Help	iv
Introduction: What Is Plotting (And Why Is It So Hard?)	3
Plot Is...	3
Where Plots Are Born	4
Plotting's first home is your logic.	4
Plotting's second home is your life.	4
Plotting's third home is your Muse.	5
A word of warning on dealing with the subconscious	6
How Plots Grow	7
Before you start writing	7
While you're writing	8
While you're revising and editing your first and subsequent drafts	8
While you're plowing through your editor's final revisions	8
The Seven Basic Plots (Plus A Mermaid)	9
Plotting Is A Process, Not An Act	10
How To Use This Book	12
Order of Use	13
First:	13
Second:	14
Third:	15
What You'll Need	15
Absolute Necessities	16
Should Haves	16
Things You Might Need	16
My Assumptions	18
Section I: Plotting Before Writing	20
Structures	22
How Many Plot Cards Will I Need?	22
Usual Novel Word Counts	23
Figuring Average Scene Length Wordcounts	23
The Number of Scenes You'll Need Is...	23
The Three-Act Structure	24
Pros	27
Cons	27
Character Structure, Single POV	28
Pros	28
Cons	28
Character Structure, Multiple POV	29
Pros	30
Cons	31
Cliffhanger Structure	31

---

Pros 32  
Cons 32  
Organic Structure 32  
Pros 33  
Cons 33  
Timeline Structure 34  
Pros 36  
Cons 36  
Mixing It Up 36

Section II: Tools—When Things Are Going Well 38

Plot Tools, and Why There Are So Many 39

Tool 1: Question 41

The Good Question 42

After you figure out your question and ask it, don't say anything else. 45

Exercise: Question 45

Tool 2: Twist 46

Doing the Twist 46

Exercise: Twist 49

Tool 3: Cliffhanger 51

You can leave your reader hanging: 52

Working out the cliffhanger: 53

Exercise: Cliffhanger 54

Tool 4: Character 56

What is Annalise's compelling need? 57

Exercise: Character 59

Tool 5: Line-For-Scene, Take One 61

Exercise: Line-For-Scene, Take One 65

Tool 6: Conflict 68

Exercise: Conflict 70

Tool 7: Language 72

Exercise: Language 76

Tool 8: Culture 78

Exercise: Culture 81

Tool 9: Map and Terrain 82

Exercise: Map and Terrain 85

Tool 10: Throwing Stuff Against A Wall 86

Get Stuff 86

Throw Stuff 87

Make Sense of Stuff 88

Exercise: Throwing Stuff Against A Wall 90

Tool 11: Theme and Concept 91

Exercise: Theme and Concept 96

Section III: Tools—When Things Go Splat 99

Tool 12: Awake—Timed Writing 100

Exercise: Timed Writing 102

Tool 13: Awake—Word Games 104

Goosebumps 104

---

Exercise: Goosebumps 107  
Pong 108  
Exercise: Pong 110  
Chase Your Tail 111  
Exercise: Chase Your Tail 113  
Tool 14: Awake—Drawings 114  
Random Drawing 114  
Exercise: Drawing 117  
Tool 15: Awake—Cards 119  
Everyone Can Use These Cards 120  
Recommended Tarot Decks 121  
Card one—my problematic character 124  
Card two—my character’s objective 125  
Card three—my character’s obstacle 126  
Exercise: Cards 127  
Tool 16: Awake—Making and Doing Things 129  
Exercise: Making and Doing Things 131  
Tool 17—Chop Wood, Carry Water 132  
Exercise: Chop Wood, Carry Water 134  
Tool 18: Awake—Bore Your Muse 136  
Exercise: Bore Your Muse 139  
Tool 19: Asleep—Dream Journal 141  
Exercise: Dream Journal 145  
Tool 20: Asleep—Dream Blackmail 146  
Exercise: Dream Blackmail 147

Section IV: Plotting While Writing 149  
Fix an Existing Project 151  
Start by building a line-for-scene outline on white index cards. 152  
Now you have to fix the line-for-scene. 153  
First you define the problem. 153  
Then you decide on a course of action. 154  
Then you write line-for-scenes for existing scenes on plot cards. 156  
Finally, create fresh plot cards for the rest of your book. 156  
Dance With the One Who Brought You 158  
Rethinking Plot Points 158  
Don’t panic. 159  
The Great (Late) Idea 162  
What do you do? 162  
Changing Characters 163  
When it happens: 163  
Changing the World 164  
If—probably when—this happens to you, how do you handle it? 165  
Changing the Crisis 165  
How to Fix the Crisis 166  
Plotting the Ending 169  
The Good Ending 169  
Exercise: Plotting the Ending 174

---

Section V: Plotting While Revising 176

No 177

Line-For-Scene, Take Two 179

First, break out your colored index cards. 179

Next, prepare your manuscript. 180

Look for these things: 180

Once you've finished putting together your revision line-for-scene: 184

And then: 185

Conclusion 187

Coming Soon To Shop.HollyLisle.Com 190

About the Author 191

---

**Holly Lisle's  
Create A Plot Clinic**

---

Anyone can write one book, and perhaps even sell it, and in the rarest of circumstances, become famous from it—because lightning does strike. To make a career of writing, though, you must take up the burden of making lightning strike regularly, where and when you want it.

---

## **Introduction: What Is Plotting (And Why Is It So Hard?)**

### **Plot Is...**

From a fiction writer's perspective, plot (the thing that is plot, not the act of plotting) is simple. Easy to comprehend, clear, plain, sensible.

Plot is the series of events that move the characters and story forward.

So to plot out a story or a book, all you have to do is come up with those events. Easy as falling off a log.

Riiiiiiiiiiight.

You'd better sit down. Maybe take a couple of deep breaths. I have a few things to tell you about what I've discovered about plotting over the last thirty-some novels and seventeen-plus years, and what I have to say includes good news, bad news, and news that could well make you run away screaming. Or want to, anyway.

### **Where Plots Are Born**

#### **Plotting's first home is your logic.**

Fortunately for all of us, logic is both a learnable and a teachable skill, and once learned, it doesn't throw curve balls at you. That's the good news. The things you do logically will work the same way every time. I know these logical techniques, I use them regularly, and I can show them to you. It's simple stuff—some of it pretty well known to most writers, some of it original to me, none of it anything that will make you crazy. You sit down to plot, you break out your logic and the tools that logic uses, and you get to work, and you will get logical, predictable results.

HOWEVER...

Content is not logic's strong point. Logic will not give you passion. It will not give you heart. It will not give you magic.

#### **Plotting's second home is your life.**

From your life, you will rip out the moments when you screwed up, the times when you fell down in front of everyone, the places where you said stupid things, where you dropped the ninth-inning fly ball and lost the game for everyone. And you will bring back the pain, the

---

humiliation, the shuddering anguish of being human and fallible like the trophies of experience and mortality that they are, and you will write these things down in new ways, so that your story will be human and recognizable, and people will understand and empathize with your characters. We know each other best through these shared moments of pain and failure and humility, because we have all had them.

You will give these pains and hopes to your characters, disguised with new names, new faces, and new events, but the pain and the hope are purely yours, and the way you will put them on the paper will create your unique voice. This is where your story gets its heart, and where it gets its passion.

So I can teach you how to do this, but I can't make you do it, and if you don't do it, you'll cut your chances of success drastically.

And that's the bad news, but it isn't the worst news. The run-screaming news. Because you can create logical structures and flowing storylines and emotional, heartfelt scenes, but if you don't manage to get that spark of magic into your story, that intangible bit of something that makes it new and fresh and different and compelling—if you don't manage to harness a bit of magic and nail it to the page, your odds of selling your work are slim.

And magic—that spark of life that will capture your editor's heart and bring The Call to your telephone, and win you readers, is the part of the plot that your subconscious (your Muse) will toss in your direction occasionally. At a whim. In a cranky, recalcitrant, obdurate, obfuscating fashion.

If you beg. Wheedle. Play tricks. Apply the occasional red-hot poker.

Because...

### **Plotting's third home is your Muse.**

This is where, if you're inclined to such things, you run screaming. Because the parts of plots that make stories grab readers and make them remember what you've written, that make your readers have to go out and find your next book, and the one after that, come from the part of you that you cannot control.

Here's a confession. After all these years and all the books I've written, I have no better relationship with my subconscious (my freakin' Muse) than I did when I was just getting started. If I go to the door of darkness and I knock timidly and ask for an idea, the voice on the other side will still play the same games we were playing when I got up the courage to go there the first time, with the first story I tried:

"I love you but I'm having a bad hair day. No, I don't love you at all. I don't even like you. I hate you. Go away. I don't know anything. I don't have anything you want. I'm busy, I'm bored, I'm tired, I don't want to play, I have a secret, but I'm not telling you..." And on. And on.

The thing is, while my subconscious and I don't get along any better than we ever did face to face, our working relationship has still changed drastically. This happened out of necessity, and not because my subconscious has suddenly developed reasonableness, or compassion, or a willingness to pitch in for the team.

It's changed because I got my hands on the writing equivalent of a crowbar, some tasty bait, a good live trap, a couple of thumbscrews, and an attitude toward dealing with that pain in

---

the posterior, the Muse, than has given me the majority of the good stuff, the real magic, in my work.

When I went pro I got deadlines and contracts and people who were waiting for me to fill holes in product lists, and I had to learn how to write every day even when my subconscious wasn't playing nice. The tools came in handy for me, and if you want to make a living at this, they'll come in handy for you, too. So this book contains some useful tools.

### **A word of warning on dealing with the subconscious**

There have been writers who have killed themselves because they couldn't come up with anything else to write, and because they had no idea how to grab their Muse by the throat and give it a few good shakes.

There have been writers who have resorted to alcohol and drugs to try to find something good way down deep where the magic dwells, and it has worked for a little while, because, like all Muse-bashing tools, alcohol and drugs gag the conscious self and let the Muse speak. However, eventually, the Muse gets drunk or drugged, too, and the writer's work is lost. I know some of you won't listen to me, because there's this whole dramatic Ernest Hemingway/Hunter S. Thompson school of the hard-drinking, hard-living writer who eventually kills himself because of his art—an image we all have to contend with—and some people embrace self-destructive behavior because they think it's cool. It obviously doesn't end well.

Don't go there. There are other ways. This book is full of them.

---

## How Plots Grow

Now that I've warned you about where you'll be finding your plots, let me warn you about the second big issue in plotting. A plot isn't a do-it-and-forget-it, or even a do-it-and-use-it, creation. You'll be creating plot:

- Before you start writing
- While you're writing
- While you're revising first and subsequent drafts
- While you're plowing through your editor's final revision requests

### **Before you start writing**

At this point in the game, everything seems logical. You've had some sort of idea, you've put together some characters who exist in a specific time and place, and now you're sitting down to figure out what to do with them. The thing is perfect in your head, you haven't made a single mistake on it yet, and all the potential in the world awaits. You get out your index cards, word processor, or notebook, and scribble down the first thing you imagine happening, and then the second, maybe with just one line per scene, maybe with a paragraph. You run, and the story gets twisted, and things happen that you don't like. You stop, you stall, you begin to doubt. Or perhaps...

### **While you're writing**

...Perhaps you simply start writing, caught up in the wave of the idea, determined that you'll let the story carry you. Until it doesn't, and you realize that you have sixty thousand words of middle to contend with, and no clue what happens in there. At which point, you drag out the notebook, the index cards, the computer outliner, or some other tool.

### **While you're revising and editing your first and subsequent drafts**

Or you've managed to make it all the way through your first draft, and you're thrilled. The book has waited on your desk for the requisite month, you're going to read it with fresh eyes and a solid sense of detachment. And you start slamming into whole scenes and storylines that are dull, predictable, insanely convoluted, or pointless; you trip over dropped threads and forgotten characters; and something in the back of your head starts screaming "Burn this before someone reads it" but the saner part of you is pretty sure if you could rework the plot, you could make it into something good.

### **While you're plowing through your editor's final revisions**

Or you got everything down the way you liked it (although perhaps with some squidgy bits in there where you feel uneasy, suspecting that something is wrong though you're not sure

---

what), and you've now heard back from your editor, who not only nailed you on every single one of the squidgy bits, but came in with some "fix this" notes on things you'd thought were brilliant, until you read her comments and discovered that she was right, and they weren't. Now you have to fix things, and that's going to include some serious re-plotting.

Don't panic! I've been in all of these places, and re-plotting is part of all of them. A doable, survivable part of all of them.

---

## The Seven Basic Plots (Plus A Mermaid)

You've heard it. I've heard it. Everyone has heard it, or some variation of it: There Are Only Seven Basic Plots. Or One Plot, or Three Plots, or Twenty Plots, or Thirty-Six Plots.

This is one of those exquisite myths, like your basic mermaid, built to lead men astray. Only this is a cruel myth. It takes beginning writers from wild hope to horrific despair, because the hope-filled beginner thinks, "If there are only seven basic plots, I can memorize them all and then I'm set for life." But the beginner then sees these seven basic plots, and thinks "That's it, it's all over, my life is as nothing, because what in the world am I supposed to do with that?"

Go take a quick look for yourself. You can find this stuff of myth at The Internet Public Library (<http://www.ipl.org/div/farq/plotFARQ.html>), and I suggest that you read all of it.

Imagine you have approached the temple of answers hoping to learn plotting, and the oracle tells you, "Your plot is Man versus Machines. That's it. Go write your book."

There's no path from Man versus Machine to a novel. Man versus Machine, or even worse, Pursuit, or Madness, lack characters, story, movement from beginning to end. They're a critic's answer—This book is about man against machines—not a writer's answer.

The "seven basic plots" and the rest of their ilk are not plots. They're conflicts. And conflict is not plot, though you need conflicts—lots of them—to put together a plot.

**Plot is the series of events that move the characters and story forward.**

These "basic plots" lack events, movement, characters, and story. Also series, because a plot is not just one thing that can be summed up in three words.

If you try to use any of this material as a plot, you'll end up beating your head against a wall. You cannot get from the beginning to the end of a novel with "man vs. nature," believe me. But each of these little lists can offer different directions you can consider taking when developing your own plots. Something along the lines of, "Hmm, do I have any elements of angry nature in this thing? Can I throw some in? How about my protagonist versus himself? Who else is he struggling with besides himself?"

Each of these generic conflict lists offers you different ways of looking at the struggles your characters can face. Like spices, you can toss in bits of these conflicts to make your story richer. But if you're writing a story deeper than a single sheet of paper, you'll introduce several different main sources of conflict in your main storyline, and additional conflicts in secondary storylines.

What you don't want to do is sit down and say, "My plot is Man vs. Machine." Because right there, you've made an assumption that you'll be dealing with one, and only one, main conflict,

---

and the big thing we discover over and over again when dealing with assumptions is this: Assumptions are only useful when messing with the minds of the people who make them. You'll hit this in Tools: Twist.

Don't mess with your own mind. Leave the grinding of your plot down into some three-word sludge to future literary scholars and critics.

### **Plotting Is A Process, Not An Act**

You have to realize right from the conception of the idea you love that you will not be done with plotting the story of that idea until you are done with the book and it has gone to the copyeditor.

A plot is not some fixed and finished document that you work from and follow like a blueprint. A plot is a messy, chaotic combination of your logic, your passion, and your Muse's magic that is, at best, as stable as quicksand and as reliable as that uncle on the other side of the family who may show up on time and in his best suit, or who may show up three hours late, drunk off his feet and singing *You Shook Me All Night Long*.

You deal with this by bracing yourself, making sure your sense of humor is turned all the way to Extra-High, and breaking out your Muse-taming toolkit.

Got yourself in order? Then let's go.

---

## How To Use This Book

If you've read any of the other books in this series, you know they start out with a materials list, including worksheets to print off, a method for organizing your work, and usually an organizing list for the notebook you need to put together so that you'll be able to pick up and use the background you've developed for subsequent books or stories, even if you're going back to the world years after you've last written in it.

Character development, language development, culture creation, and the building of worlds all lend themselves well to this treatment.

Plotting does not. Plotting is inherently messy, and usually resists all attempts to nail it down into one neat, fixed structure.

Don't get me wrong. There are plotting structures, and we will use them. You'll learn how to do a three-act-structure, single- and multiple-POV character structures, a cliffhanger structure, organic structures, and timeline structure.

But the thing is, you can end up doing all of these structures on one plot. (And suddenly, all the way from here, I hear voices going "Yipe! Yipe! Yipe!")

Breathe. It'll be okay. Most of the time you don't use them all. Most of the time, you'll get away with using just one or two structures.

But structure is not everything in plotting. Structure is only a frame for your content, and, as many of you have already discovered, coming up with the content to put into the story and knowing whether or not you have the right content is the hard part.

So most of our work here is going to consist of you learning how to wheedle, cajole, blackmail and twist content from your Muse, the stubborn subconscious.

### Order of Use

This book is a plot walkthrough. Its objective is to get you from your starting point—wherever that might be—to the end of your plot by the time you have worked your way through the book.

First:

- No matter whether you're using this book to start a new novel, to work on an existing partial draft, to fix a completed first draft, or to get your final draft ready to go off to an agent or editor, start by reading Structure.

You won't need structure first, but you need to have a working knowledge of possible story

---

structures while you're creating the plot segments that you'll eventually shape into a structure. It's helpful to know, for example, that you want to write a potboiler so that you can remember to create lots of exciting cliffhangers. Or that you want to have enough scenes in two different points of view to use in your alternating-POV-structured story.

But structure is not plot. Structure is only the coat rack upon which you hang your plot.

This is big. Huge. Insanely important. Writers get all tied up with structure when they get stuck plotting, thinking that if they had a different, better, smarter structure, they'd get unstuck.

In fact, in almost all cases, what they desperately need is fresh content.

Second:

- Read Tools next. Try out each tool at least once.

The Tools section exists solely to give you fresh content. You know that pitiful lament, "I don't know what to write about?" Writing tools give you things to write about.

You'll notice that the Tools section is divided into two sections—When Things Are Going Well and When Things Go Splat.

In When Things Are Going Well, you'll find the tools that you'll use every day to get new ideas, figure out middles and plot twists, and sneak up on resonant endings. During those times, you'll be able to get good stuff out of your Muse just by sitting down and writing.

In When Things Go Splat, you'll deal specifically and directly with breaking barriers between you and your Muse. When you can't come up with a story, or an idea, or get a plot to hang together, these are the techniques you'll use. I end up using a few favorites in almost every book, but I have dragged my Muse out of hiding with all of them at one time or another.

**IMPORTANT:** I need to mention something that should be obvious to all writers, that should, in fact, never need to be mentioned, but that all of us tend to forget when things get weird and frustrating and the Muse goes into hiding. If you write every day, (or at least as regularly as you can make—not find—time), your subconscious, your Muse, will stay mostly well-oiled and active and interested in tossing cool ideas to you when you need them. Think of regular writing as regular exercise for your subconscious mind. You put it on a leash, take it for a run every day, and it doesn't get bored or feel neglected and go sulking off into a corner every time you show up. The more you write regularly, the less often things will go splat.

Third:

- While it wouldn't hurt to read straight through the rest of the book once, after you've finished Plot Tools feel free to skim, jump around, try bits and pieces of any of the other sections. If you have the book done except for a final edit, go ahead and read the section on Plotting While Revising. You might find things you can use in the other two sections as well, but reading the rest of the book out of order will work just fine. The same is true for those of you just starting a first draft, or for those of you who are stuck somewhere in the middle. Plotting While Writing is for you, but so is everything else. Feel free to poke around any of the sections, pull what you can use from them, and come back later to pick up more.

There's no one way to write a book, there's no one way to plot one, and one way or the other,

---

you'll get through this. You have lots of tools, lots of options, and you'll learn more from every mistake than you ever would from getting it perfect the first time. Knowing that, the only way you can fail is if you give up.

## **What You'll Need**

While there aren't any worksheets in this book, you will be doing plenty of writing. Some of it you'll do longhand, some you'll do on the computer. There will be a few tools you'll need to develop structure, and to get you through the stuck bits. These will vary from writer to writer—don't buy everything in advance. Just get them as you need them. Besides—and I've said this before, but I'll say it again—on bad writing days, sometimes getting cool new office supplies will be the high point of your day. Save some of that shoppy goodness for the days when you need it most.

Here's what you'll be using:

### **Absolute Necessities**

- Paper, lots of it. Reams of both white printer paper for use with your computer, and lined notebook paper.
- Sticky notes. Any color, any shape, but when you get to the end of the book and start editing, you'll need a lot of them. I like the yellow 3"x3" squares with lines on them.
- Index cards. I strongly prefer the lined 3x5 variety because they prevent me from writing too much on a card, and I buy both all-white and multi-color packs. They have different uses.
- Pens. Smooth-writing, and lots of them.

### **Should Haves**

- A corkboard.
- A hole punch if you want to put drawings or maps or other unpunched pieces of paper in a binder, OR when, during editing, you need to build a four-color line-for-scene index-card plot.
- Ring binder, the kind you used to (or perhaps still do) drag around in high school. There is no organizational structure for this thing. Every plot is different, not all of them require notebooks, and you can accomplish just as much by letting your desk get really messy (my usual method).
- Outlining software.

### **Things You Might Need**

We start getting a little esoteric here.

- A sketchbook and drawing pencils, black and white or colored.
- Magazines you can cut up.
- Paste.
- Yarn. Knitting needles or a crochet hook.
- A lawnmower and a yard.
- A few good woodcarving tools and some wood.
- Whack-Pack cards, tarot cards, writers' decks.
- Flour, salt, chocolate, sugar, baking soda ...
- A blank diary.
- A candle and something fireproof upon which to place it.
- Other and sundry stuff.

---

Really. I have used everything on the list above, and more, to restart a stuck plot. You can't know what exactly you'll need until you need it. Some of it you might never need. Some you might need every single time you plot. That's why I said you shouldn't go out and buy everything before you start.

NOTE: Cork boards, white index cards, outlining software and most of your word processor can be replaced by:

Scrivener\* for the Mac ([www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.html](http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.html))

Liquid Story Binder\*\* for the PC ([www.blackobelisksoftware.com/](http://www.blackobelisksoftware.com/))

\*I can personally recommend Scrivener as being the tool that has replaced all my other writing software except for Inspiration ([www.inspiration.com](http://www.inspiration.com)). Better yet, you can try it for free before you buy it.

\*\*I don't have a PC anymore, so am in no position to recommend writing software for the PC. However, several PC users who read my weblog gushed about Liquid Story Binder and have said the things it does look like the things Scrivener does, so I'm adding a cautious I-have-not-tried-this-but-hear-it's-really-good recommendation, along with an aside that you can try the software for free before you buy it, too.

## My Assumptions

I make three assumptions in this book.

- The first is that you already know how to develop characters.
- The second is that you already know how to develop background.
- The third is that you want to tell a story, with all the things that a story includes: scenes, forward momentum, characters who grow and change, and a clear beginning, middle, and end.

If you don't know how to create characters, I can help you with free workshops on my site ([hollylisle.com/fm/](http://hollylisle.com/fm/)) and with my book, [Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic](#). There are also plenty of other good books out there on the same subject.

If you don't know how to develop background, I can help out with that, too. I have a number of articles on my site about worldbuilding—necessary for all writers, not just for writers of fantasy and SF ([hollylisle.com/fm/](http://hollylisle.com/fm/)), plus I've written:

[Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic](#)(THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE)

[Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic](#)(THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE)

**Holly Lisle's Create A World Clinic** is still in the works.

There are other books that cover background, as well. If you aren't comfortable with creating characters or background, avail yourself of resources to help you with the basics and a few of the fine points. You can build on those as you go.

---

## Section I: Plotting Before Writing

You have not yet begun to write. This is the point in your project where your expectations of yourself and what you will accomplish by plotting are going to be the highest. You already have the idea in your head, probably the voices of some of the characters, and even a couple of scenes that you can see playing out and being brilliant. The book, in your mind, probably feels only a step or two away from completed. At this point, all that's standing between you and the story you feel is the writing, and the writing doesn't feel like all that big a deal.

Here's the funny thing about plotting before writing. That anticipation, that feeling that this time it's going to be easy, does not go away even after you've written a lot of books. You'd think you'd learn. Well, I'd think I'd learn, anyway, and since I haven't yet, and I've already written more books than the majority of writers write in complete careers, I'm guessing this is actually a part of the process, kind of like getting pregnant the second time. You know how hard pregnancy was the first time, you remember the delivery (Aieeeee!), and that stuff about you forgetting the pain is so not true, and yet. And yet. You're sure the second time will be easier.

I think this part of the process might even be critical. Without this bit of innocence, this lunatic optimism, this assurance that this time it will be different, a lot of babies and a lot of books would never be born.

Before you start the actual writing, you have two main objectives. The first, which you'll begin shortly, is to decide on your content—to figure out what you're writing about, to have some idea of where the story is going, and to know who the major players are.

Once you've finished that, though, you have a second goal. You need to put your story into seamless order—that is, you need to plan the way you'll present your story.

It would seem logical to deal first with the content, and then with the order. But if you know about three-act structures, multiple-POV character structures, timeline structures, and other variations, you can tailor the content you're planning to a structure that will meet artistic and genre goals for the project you want to write.

So we'll go over structures first.

While there is no end to structure variety, and while you can mix and match structures in the

---

same book, creating something unique to you and your story, there are some basic structures that will let you begin the process of writing confident that you know how you're going to do it, and what you need to do to succeed.

Structure is about moving the story forward, about putting events into an order that keeps the reader fascinated and guessing, and that lets you tell your story while otherwise getting out of your way.

Onward.

---

## Structures

A little note before we begin: I wrote the Tools first, and used each tool as I wrote it to build a plot from scratch. And then I wrote Structure, and used the material I came up with in Tools to demonstrate various structures. So you'll find in Structure examples some enormous spoilers related to what I developed in Tools. These spoilers can't be helped because you have to know Structure first, but you have to use Tools first.

So when you get to Tools and I start pulling rabbits and killers out of my hat, act surprised.

### How Many Plot Cards Will I Need?

To answer this question, you need to know two numbers.

- How long do I want my book to be? (Total word count)
- How long do I want each scene to be? (Scene word count)

Say you're want the book to go 90,000 words, and you tend to write short, punchy scenes—maybe 1,150 words apiece.

In the background, someone is shrieking: I don't know how long I want my book to be! And I don't know how long my scenes are, because I haven't written them yet!

Good point.

### Usual Novel Word Counts

How long do you want your book to be? 90,000 words is a nice average length for a salable novel, first or otherwise. At 130,000 words, you're running into published-novelist territory unless you've written something screamingly brilliant. Shorter than 60,000 words won't sell well in most cases for adult fiction, but will work for fiction for younger readers.

### Figuring Average Scene Length Wordcounts

How long is your average scene?

You figure this by writing a few of your scenes, adding up the number of words in each, and dividing by the number of scenes. If you've written three scenes so far, and one is 2530 words long, and one is 130 words long, and one is 1271, then you've got an average scene length of 1310 words. However, because your scenes are of such very different lengths, you'll need to keep checking until you've written at least ten total scenes to get a reasonable estimate for the average.

If, on the other hand, you keep your scenes to a uniform length, say 1200, 1350, and 1150,

---

and you intend to continue doing this, you can be fairly confident that your average scene is about 1233 words long.

### **The Number of Scenes You'll Need Is...**

Divide your average scene length into your desired novel length.

1233 into 90,000 is roughly 73 scenes. So you'll need 73 plot cards.

Don't equate scene length with chapter length. If you're not sure of the difference, read my Scene-Creation Workshop. ([www.hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/scene-workshop.html](http://www.hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/scene-workshop.html))

You can have any number of scenes in a chapter, but you won't have any chapters in a scene.

On to the individual structures.

---

## The Three-Act Structure

We'll start with the three-act structure, because at some level almost all writers have already met it. You've almost certainly heard of Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl.

That's the three-act structure in a nutshell.

- In Act One, you set up the conflict and introduce the characters.
- In Act Two, you complicate the problem.
- In Act Three, you resolve the problem.

Thinking about your story in acts simplifies the process of putting your plot cards into order.

Act One is usually fairly short. It's going to be less than a third of your book. In Act One you want to cover the following issues.

Get all your main characters into play, including the person who will be the antagonist around whom the end of the story will revolve. If you're writing a mystery, the readers need to have met not just your hero and the people who will lead your hero to the resolution of the book; they also need to have met your villain.

So go through your plot cards and find early scenes where each of your main characters (whom you have already listed in the Theme and Concept exercise, even if not by name) appears. If you don't have an early scene where your ultimate antagonist appears, now is the time to come up with one. Backtrack, pick any tool you really liked, and use it to get the antagonist on stage.

Make sure that each of these scenes has a character or characters engaged in interesting action, and that each poses a problem.

The problems should lead up to the main problem and introduce it.

For me, Act One will start with Dead Bob in the office, and will end when Annalise, discovering hidden material in Dead Bob's office, realizes he was involved in some horrific criminal activity involving the making and selling of illegal videos, and will hint that he was tied to murder.

At the point where the little problem (dead guy in the office) becomes the big problem—dead guy had a huge secret that involved the lives and deaths of others—Act One comes to a close.

Act Two is the meat of your book, taking up from sixty to eighty percent of the content. Most of your work will take place here, and most of your plot cards will land here. For Act Two, sort out the cards that include your middle action—the search for the solution to the problem you presented at the end of Act One. This search, whether it's for a solution to a rocky love

---

relationship in which the couple can't get past their unhappy past, or the struggle of colonists to terraform an alien planet into a working colony while finding ways to work together instead of against each other, or a teen's coming of age, should include moments of seeming triumph and moments of abject failure.

And in the middle of act two, your main character's entire understanding of the problem he faces will undergo a massive shift.

In the case of Annalise and Dead Bob and Evil Lucy, that shift of consciousness will come when Annalise discovers (by means of Lucy's murder) that Lucy was an incidental character and not the main villain, and that someone who knows her intimately is behind Dead Bob and the criminal acts he was committing, and that this person who knows her may be someone she trusts, and is certainly trying to kill her.

In the unhappy couple story, that shift of awareness could be the moment when, after half a book of trying to get him out of her life, and finally succeeding, the heroine realizes that, as angry as she is with him, she loves the hero and wants nothing more than to spend the rest of her life with him.

In the terraforming story, the everything-changes moment could be when the colonists discover native life on the planet they have colonized, and realize that to stay in regulations, they're either going to have to find a way to terraform their areas in such a way that it will have no impact on native life, or they're going to have to pack up their stuff and leave—and they don't have the material to travel to another planet and start their colony over.

In the teen's coming of age story, the moment when everything changes could come with the death of a parent, and the teen's need to let go of a long-held dream he had been pursuing in order to assume some responsibility for the household's desperate financial needs and the care of younger siblings.

The second half of the second act should deal with the aftermath of that everything-changes middle scene, and should lead up to the climax of the story—the big fight scene, the moment when the hero faces the heroine and finally admits his love for her, the terraforming team's desperate attempt to save their colony and the native life on their world from a massive volcanic eruption that could destroy everything, the teen's inner battle between following the dream that has been held out for him in the form of a full scholarship, knowing that if he leaves his family will not make it, and finding a way to pursue his dream at home while keeping his family going.

Or in the case of Annalise, it will be the scene where she faces Friend X, confronting him with everything she has discovered, and he tries to kill her, and she ends up killing him and Jim gets to her just in time to get her out of the burning building which was supposed to have buried all the evidence of his crimes while Friend X escaped.

Which takes you to Act Three, where you will tie up all your loose ends. Annalise ends up, bloodied but unbowed, giving her statement to the cops and going to play hockey with Jim for the first time, and we see their friendship strengthened. Like Act One, Act Three is short, taking up only as much space as you need to tie up your loose ends and send your characters back out into the world to apply for unemployment, or to beg for sequels. It will be less than a third of the book, and usually significantly less.

## **Pros**

---

With three-act structure, you know the story will have action and direction and a clear beginning, middle, and end.

You'll know when to start, and you'll know where certain types of action will occur.

You'll end up with a very tight story that, if the writing is good, will keep readers turning pages.

Your story will have an excellent chance of being what agents and editors refer to as "commercial." If you want to make money writing, being commercial can be very good.

If you sell movie rights, your story will already be put together in a fashion that will make turning it into a movie script a clear and simple process, whether you're doing it or someone else is.

## **Cons**

You can feel very constrained using a three-act structure. You're not really free to wander and pursue sidelines while writing because you have a target and you're shooting straight for it.

You can end up passing up great ideas simply because they don't fit your direction.

Unless you are an extraordinary writer able to transcend the limitations of the structure, you will not end up with a work of literary art.

---

## Character Structure, Single POV

In character structure, you don't worry about acts. You follow the story from the point of view of the central character, simply putting your plot cards into an order that pleases you, letting yourself play with flashbacks and flashforwards, adding twists when they entertain you and cliffhangers as you find them interesting, and you get your character from the beginning of the story to the end. If you have a good inherent sense of pacing and a strong central character that you and your readers love, you'll be able to get away with this relaxed variety of structure. I've used it in a number of novels, simply because I like following my characters and seeing what they'll get into. But its strength depends entirely on how rich and deep your characters are, and how much trouble they get themselves into.

### Pros

Character-structured stories can be delightful to read. They ramble into the most eccentric places, surprising and delighting readers.

Character-structured stories lend themselves to whimsy, literary flights of fancy, and exploration, so tend to be a lot of fun to write.

The potential for creating a beautiful literary experience exists, though is not a given, in the character-structured story.

### Cons

The story can wander aimlessly, getting caught in doldrums where nothing happens, or drifting off into directions you don't want to follow.

You can discover after you've written three hundred pages that that you've only just gotten to the part you're fascinated with, and it's a complete break from the first part you've written, and it'll take you about five hundred more pages to get to the story's end.

You might never be sure you've reached the end.

---

## Character Structure, Multiple POV

With a pure multiple-POV character structure, you'll still be following the lives of characters through their own eyes. You'll just be doing it through two or more pairs of eyes.

There are some special plotting considerations when you're writing in multiple points of view. You'll need to know how much of the story you want to dedicate to each character, and for this, you'll need to do some math. Well, maybe not. If you want the story exactly balanced between two characters, you'll simply write one plot card for Character B when you write a plot card for Character A.

Or Anna and Jim. If they're together, you write the card from the character who knows the least, and has the most to lose at that moment. If it's a toss-up, then write it from the POV of the character whose card stack is currently shorter.

If you have several POV characters, though, or some complex order like "Write 60% of the book from the heroine's POV, and 40% of the book from the hero's POV" (a situation that exists mostly in romance writing), here's what you do.

- Take your desired word count. 60,000 words for a Silhouette-line short romance? Works for me.
- Divide that by the average length of your scene. Say, 2,000 words.
- You get the number 30. That's the number of scenes you'll need to write to tell your story while not running over your word count.
- Next, figure your percentages. 60% of 30 is 18. ( $.60 \times 30$ , if you've forgotten how to figure percentages. So your heroine will get eighteen scenes.
- 40% of 30 is 12, so your hero will get twelve scenes.
- This works exactly the same way if you're figuring for more than two POV characters. All of your chosen percentages have to add up to 100 percent, (you can't have three characters who each get 50% of the book, for example), and you have to make sure that you divided your desired number of words by the right scene length.
- Write out your plot cards with each character and his number of total scenes in mind, making sure that characters will tell the story from their points view of in a fashion that suits your story structure—alternating, or all of one character's POV scenes appearing together, and then all of the next character's POV scenes together.

There is no one right way to do this.

### Pros

Multiple POV structure allows you to get more sides of the story—to hear from both the hero and the villain (or protagonist and antagonist), to be in three or four places at the same time through the eyes of different characters, to run a series of stories simultaneously, weaving them in and out of each other. It can be tremendous fun to write, it allows you to speak with

---

a range of voices all at once, and well done, it gives a novel a breadth and depth that's almost impossible to achieve in any other way.

## **Cons**

It's very easy to get carried away—to have too many voices and too many stories. You can lose track of where you were going and what you wanted to say. You can lose characters and threads partway through and never pick them up again. You can suck the life out of your main story with too many distractions. Multiple POV requires careful tracking, timeline-checking, fierce attention to the main story to keep side stories from taking over, and unusually rigorous revising.

---

## Cliffhanger Structure

Also known as the potboiler structure, you end every chapter, and sometimes every scene, with a cliffhanger. No worries about when you introduce characters, no worries about getting a major plot turn right in the middle of the book. You run up the hill, you dangle your hero over the edge, you break for the next chapter, you get the hero out of trouble and then get him into worse trouble, leaving him hanging over the edge again.

You can have a lot of fun doing this—potboilers are a blast to write because while you're writing, you're always focused on leaving one protagonist or another in the hottest of hot water right at the very end of the chapter. It makes you want to come back the next day to write more, and within limits, it makes the reader want to keep reading to find out what happens next. I did one potboiler, actually. It was my first novel, *Fire in the Mist*, an odd little fantasy novel that incorporated magic-is-science worldbuilding and threw in bits and pieces of modern technology disguised as magical items. It was fun, it won me a Best First Novel award, and it got me a follow-up novel and a three-book deal.

Charles Dickens wrote potboilers. Good ones, too.

Critics almost uniformly hate potboilers. Do keep that in mind.

### Pros

The cliffhanger structure is fun to write, and because of the perpetual excitement, the writing seems to go quickly.

The structure permits the writer to maintain tension, and with a few caveats (listed below) keeps readers reading.

Cliffhangers are perhaps the easiest books to plot. Every chapter (or scene, depending on how you decide to write yours), incorporates a problem that leaves the protagonist in seemingly insoluble trouble at the end of the chapter. The next chapter (or next scene involving that character) resolves the problem, only to introduce a new one, leaving the character again in desperate need.

### Cons

If you fail to vary the level of tension, permitting some problems to be bigger than others, and if you fail to vary the resolution, allowing some solutions to be tense, some to be sad, some to be funny, and so on, your work will feel repetitious—we hope to you, but if you don't notice it, your readers surely will.

Critics are likely to mock and revile you. But they didn't like Dickens, either.



---

## Organic Structure

Some folks are linear writers. I, for example, am a very linear writer. I write the first scene of the book first, progress one scene at a time through, and write the last scene last. (However, I'm doing my secret project, C, in a nonlinear fashion in this version in order to force myself to let go of my preconceptions where the story is concerned.)

Other folks are nonlinear writers. They have an idea for a scene, so in rather the same fashion that we came up with plot cards from all over the story, they write out whole scenes. If the ending occurs to them, they write the whole actual scene first. If they then conceive of something terribly cool happening in the middle, they write that scene next. And then maybe an opening scene, and then back to the middle, and then something they think is incredibly cool, though they can't imagine where it will fit.

When they have a lot of scenes, they start putting them together, in much the same fashion as we ordered our plot cards, trying out different things first, seeing how they play. When they have their scenes in an order they like, they write in transitions and smooth out inconsistencies, and end up with a book.

If this is you, either get software that allows you to shuffle your scenes just by dragging and dropping them (Scrivener will let you shuffle your plot cards and move the scenes at the same time without messing up a word of your work), or else do it the old-fashioned way: print out your scenes individually, clip them behind your plot cards, and then shuffle plot cards and scenes. Do a read-through, create smooth transitions, and when you have everything in an order you like, cut and paste text in your manuscript, saving frequently. And make sure you have an untouched backup of the file, in case you cut something, forget to paste it, and then cut something else.

### Pros

You are absolutely free to write anything at any time, giving yourself maximum flexibility and the opportunity to explore every avenue that occurs to you.

You have the fun of writing cool scene after cool scene.

You will escape from assumption-based plotting.

### Cons

You may lose track of your story, or end up pursuing a bunch of irreconcilable avenues.

You may not be able to put all your pieces together at the end.

Your story might end up as a series of unrelated vignettes.



---

## Timeline Structure

You the writer can do some amazing things with time. Unlike mere mortals, you can stop it, slow it down, run it in reverse, and leap forward or backward days, years, centuries, and eons, all with the merest flick of your finger.

Like other powerful time-travelers, however, you can also forget where you are and where you've been and accidentally put yourself in two different places at the same time, a situation that can only lead to nightmares.

One of the most memorable Timeline-structured pieces I've ever come across is an episode of *Firefly*, the short-lived but brilliant western-in-space television series by Joss Whedon. The episode is titled "Out of Gas," and it starts with the hero of the series lying on a grate in his spaceship, bleeding and clearly dying, starting the episode with a mystery (who shot the captain?) and a cliffhanger (will he live?). Then it flashes backward a few hours, and you see a man offer to exchange a ship part for something the captain has that he wants. Only the trader shoots the captain and starts to steal his ship, but flees when the captain threatens to kill him, after which the captain collapses (where's the crew? What happened to the ship?). Back a few more hours. We see the crew abandoning the captain (another cliffhanger—what happened to put them in this situation?). Then back a few hours further, and so on, until we see the initial actions that caused such horrible consequences. All of these are projected as the memories of the dying captain. The final sequence is the Now, the moment when we find out how the captain manages to survive, and what happened to his crew.

It's a stunning piece of writing beautifully presented, and it demonstrates the power of time in giving a story depth and resonance.

Telling an entire story in reverse, with the next-to-last event happening first, and with each event prior to it unfolding in reverse order, can be done in written fiction. I think it would get tiresome over the course of a long novel, but I'm interested to see how it would work over the course of a short one—say 60,000 words, and am very tempted to try it myself.

But a complete reversal is not the only way to use a timeline structure in a story.

You can also use a middle-of-the-story scene as your opener, then write in linear order to it. You can have intermittent or regularly occurring flashbacks or (if you're writing about a psychic or something futuristic) flashforwards.

Or run your character's childhood as one track and parallel his adult life in a second track, and alternate between the past and the present.

Or run your story from the middle, then alternate with a backward-time and a forward-time scene until you hit the beginning and the end at the same time.

---

With your plot cards in hand, you can experiment with time. You can put your scenes into any order and make sense of them by the use of transitions and flashback and flashforward frames, and you can get an idea of the shape your story would take if you played with time.

While you're working out additional plot cards, make sure that if you have events happening simultaneously in different places, you don't have them happening with the same characters (or if you do have them happening with the same characters, make sure the simultaneous action is the point of the scenes, and that the characters have consequences for being in two places at once).

### **Pros**

Using time as your structure gives you a very clear, focused format for your writing. Make sure to include the time of each event as the header of your plot card.

Using a time structure gives you whole new directions for your twists to take.

### **Cons**

This technique can be wearing on the reader. As noted before, you can use a lot of time-shifting in a shorter work, but use less of it in a longer work.

Time-shifting can lead to enormous confusion. Figure out how you're going to demonstrate time in your story, and use that method every time you change time.

---

## Mixing It Up

As I've noted earlier, you can mix and match structures, using a combination of Character and Three-Act, or Organic and Cliffhanger.

You can invent your own structures. Roger Zelazny wrote a brilliant book, *Roadmarks*, in which a character traveling a timeroad had to find himself in order to save ... well ... that would be a spoiler. But he wrote the book from two points of view, the character when he first found his way to the timeroad, who was identified by chapters labeled I, and the same character as an older man, who had been traveling the timeroad so long he was weary of it, and who was identified by the chapter headers II. Zelazny didn't explain any of this; the book started with a Chapter II and went to a Chapter I, and then went back to a Chapter II, and the whole thing was absolutely brilliant—the reader figured it out as he went along.

My point is, your structure is your own—start with basic forms if you haven't successfully built a book before, or get funky if you've been doing this for a while and you want to look like a genius.

Mostly, though, use a structure that will let you get from the beginning to the end and finish your book.

---

## **Section II: Tools—When Things Are Going Well**

You're asking questions and your Muse is answering them, ideas are easy to come by, or at least not impossible, writing is fun, and you are filled with visions of a smooth project that you'll write to a successful end.

Excellent.

Here are the tools you need to make the most of your time with a cooperative Muse.

---

## Plot Tools, and Why There Are So Many

The short answer is very short. I have so many plot tools in my writing kit because none of them work every time.

The long answer requires some explanation.

The biggest and most difficult part of writing any piece of fiction, from short story to massive, volume-spanning epic, is getting the subconscious (the Muse) to hand over the good stuff, the magic that makes the story come together, that pulls in and makes fit all those divergent threads that you wrote because back five chapters, you had this impulse that if you wrote them, something really good would happen.

The problem is that most of the time, you cannot simply sit there and have the Muse hand you the good stuff like it was your mom handing you cookies out of a jar. Your subconscious does not work in words. It works in emotions, intuitions, pictures, fears, hopes, beliefs, obsessions, paranoias, dreams and nightmares. It's full of memories that you've forgotten, bits and shards of your life that, when you no longer had need for them, it tucked away in jumbled boxes back in the dark. It kept them there, and when you sleep, it pulls them out and plays with them, mixing them with the things you've done or seen lately, the problems you're having, the stuff you saw on television or at the movies, that jerk at work, and anything else that amuses it.

It has everything you need to fill all the books you can write in a lifetime tucked away in those boxes.

Problem is, you use words. Your subconscious mind doesn't respond well to words. So getting your subconscious—your Muse—to work with you involves subterfuge, sleight of hand, playing games, pretending you don't care what's in those hidden boxes, and sometimes, when you're up against the wall and the clock is ticking, it mean using brute force.

Your Muse, to quote Herman Melville, "is not down in any map. True places never are." It's also as smart as you are, though in different ways, and will not fall for the same trick every time.

So when you get stuck on plotting—and everyone gets stuck on plotting, so don't feel like you're the only one who just isn't getting the hang of this—you try one tool. If that doesn't work, you try another. Then three or four more. Something will start shaking things loose for you, your Muse will get interested in one game or another and lean over your shoulder and start whispering again, and if it's a different something every time that kick-starts the Muse, that's okay. You're still moving forward, you have not permitted your Muse to block you, and you will get to the end of your plot, and the end of your book, more or less intact.

---

So before we get into the actual plotting—structure, development, pacing, balancing, twists, resolutions, and other goodies—we’re going to do the tour of the tool chest.

- I’ll describe each tool and how it works.
- I’ll do a brief demo of each tool.
- You’ll do a brief exercise using each tool.
- You can come back to the tool chest for refreshers whenever you need to.

---

## Tool 1: Question

Developing characters, building worlds, creating languages, and building plots are always more about asking the right questions than they are about getting the right answers.

The starter questions for plot can be simple and story-related:

- What happens first?
- Why does that happen?
- Who made it happen?
- What went wrong?

You can direct questions at your characters:

- Who are my characters?
- What are their needs?
- What are their problems?
- Who are their enemies?

Your questions can be more personal:

- What scares me?
- How can I use that?
- Who would be more afraid of that than I am?
- Where could I put this person to drive that fear to its worst possible pitch?

Your questions can be romantic:

- Why is the hero alone?
- Who would be the heroine he would be most attracted to?
- How could I keep him from being able to reach her?
- What could make him do crazy things to catch her attention?

Or they can be historical, or suspenseful, or mysterious, or wacky, or whatever it takes for you to get answers that lead you toward the book you want to write.

The trick with asking questions is to start with a good one, and the trick to starting with a good question is to figure out what makes a question good.

I was always pretty good at asking questions—it was a technique I refined in childhood, much to the chagrin of my parents. But nursing was where I learned how to do patient interviews, and discovered why my childhood questions had gotten such good results...sometimes. (I'll bet cops are taught to ask the same sorts of questions nurses are.)

---

## The Good Question

- A good question is always open-ended, and can never be answered with a “yes” or “no.”

You want to get your subconscious talking. You want it to get involved, to spill all sorts of interesting bits of information into your hands. You don't want to ask it “Is Bob my hero?” and have it tell you, “No.” No is not a helpful answer. So you rephrase the question to, “What does Bob do in the first part of the story?”

Then your subconscious is forced to think of useful answers like, “Maybe he could start fires. Or if you don't like that, he could be the guy who steals the heroine's purse in the first scene. Only maybe she could have seen him first, and think he's really cute, and then when she isn't looking, he steals her purse.”

I didn't have any idea for a story—any story—until I asked that question. Didn't know who Bob was, either. But I let myself answer that question, and now I have the stirrings of an idea about Bob. A vague glimmering of the plot to come. But onward.

- A good question focuses on a broad topic that lends itself well to expansion into a vast array of subtopics and details.

Narrow questions are easy to ask. “What did Bob do in the Smith Building?” is a narrow question. You get one and only one answer from that. “Bob stole Lucy's purse.”

“What goes on in the Smith Building?” however, is ripe with possibilities. The Muse sits there for a moment and thinks. And then it says, “Well, the main floor is the lobby, where there used to be an elevator attendant, a receptionist, and a guard, but the place doesn't have any of those anymore, and public restrooms and a seedy little music store that gives lessons and takes trade-ins—their stock is mostly shabby second-hand stuff. But the guy who teaches guitar is really good. And the other half is a second-hand bookstore, and the guy who owns that is about a hundred years old. And the second floor has munchies machines, and the bathrooms are down the hall, and there are offices—”

“What kind of offices?”

“Hmmm. A video producer who's supposedly legit, but who's doing some pretty creepy stuff down in the basement...”

“There's a basement?”

“Apparently so. And there's a bottomfeeder law office at the end of the hall, right next to the public restrooms. And a detective agency with two detectives working in it. Partners. They're just getting started, and money's really tight. And an empty office—the guy who worked out of it committed suicide—he was a broker, and he got caught churning. The owners haven't managed to find anyone to rent the place yet. Might be because they haven't patched the bullet hole behind the desk. And the third and fourth floors are walk-up apartments. Only about half of them are rented, because of the neighborhood, you know.”

- A good question approaches the thing you really want to know sideways, never directly. It avoids accusation and the making of assumptions.

Never put your Muse on the defensive. You want your Muse to think it's your buddy, not the

---

enemy. (Don't make the mistake of actually believing it's your buddy, though, or it will stab you in the back and take off for Bermuda with your hero or heroine and the rest of your book.)

For current purposes, you might as well consider your Muse a hostile witness or a possible criminal being accused. You want to know the whole story here, and the Muse has it, or at least big parts of it, and it knows where it can get the rest. So you don't ask, "What can you tell me about what Bob was doing in the Smith Building last Friday at 3:27 AM?" The answer to that one is "Nothing." Trust me. The answer to that sort of question is always "Nothing."

What you want to ask is something like, "Bob seems a little odd to me. Has he ever seemed a little odd to you?"

Everybody seems a little odd if you think about it, and by asking the question that way, you're building a bit of rapport with your Muse, getting it to let its defenses down, encouraging it to say things that it knows won't really hurt anything. Like, "Well, he does collect rubber bands. Makes great big balls with them. And he likes to put on makeup, but only in his bedroom. He isn't one of those guys who goes public with it. And I know he likes to trap things. You know, rabbits and foxes and stuff."

And now you know that Bob would have a reason to be interested in the contents of a woman's purse other than for the money, that he has intentionally killed things—this may or may not be harmless, depending on what he does with them—and that he has an odd interest in rubber bands, which may or may not become a creepy plot point somewhere along the road. Ask yourself, what does he do with big rubber band balls?

After you figure out your question and ask it, don't say anything else.

Staying silent creates tension, and both people and Muses will blurt out some amazing things if you just ask your question and then wait, sitting still and not filling that silence with anything.

### **Exercise: Question**

Come up with a list of five questions you want to ask about your plot. Ask them, and write anything and everything that comes to your mind when you start getting answers.

---

## Tool 2: Twist

Plot twists in a novel are not a magic trick. They rely on two simple facts of human nature.

First, based on what we human beings know, or think we know about what is going on around us, we make assumptions about what will happen next.

Second, we are surprised to varying degrees when the things we assumed would happen don't.

So the elements of a story twist are:

- You let the reader believe he knows the facts of the situation
- You withhold critical information about the real situation
- You figure out what the reader will assume is going to happen
- You make something else happen

### Doing the Twist

I already set up a bit of a twist back in Question, when I discovered that Lucy thought Bob was cute, and then Bob stole her purse. She made an assumption: Cute guy equals nice guy. He wrecked her assumption, and provided a very small twist, by stealing her purse.

But there was another bit of information that I got back in Question that has been bugging me, and this came from an accusatory question that I asked as an example of what you don't do (for your opening question—for follow-up questions, asking about specific details is just fine).

Here's the question. Let's see if your mind runs where mine does.

"What can you tell me about what Bob was doing in the Smith Building last Friday at 3:27 AM?"

He was stealing Lucy's purse. Fine. We got that.

But what was Lucy doing in the Smith Building at 3:27 AM, where she was in a position to meet Bob in the first place?

My Muse is sitting here bouncing in its seat, going, "I know this, I know this! She told him she lives there, in one of those skeezy apartments, and she was just getting home from work."

Now, at this point, we don't know a thing about Lucy except that she's female , she has a

---

questionable selection process where men are concerned, and she used to have a purse.

So our big question here is, “What if Lucy lied?”

That brings up a whole nest of new, interesting questions, which we will now ask.

Why was Lucy in a bad neighborhood in a building she doesn't live in at 3:27 in the morning?

What does Lucy do for a living?

Why did she lie to Bob?

Bob assumes Lucy lives in the building because she told him she did. Let's say he met her when he was trying to get into an office, and she was doing...what? Coming out of another office at the same time? No, because then he'd assume, with pretty good reason, that she would work in the office she came out of, and that she would also know, if sight if not by name, the people who worked in the other offices. So he would react by running, by hitting her and then running, or maybe by killing her and then running.

If he didn't work there himself.

Okay. Back to those questions.

The Muse is muttering, “If she was dressed like a hooker, he would assume she was there for the obvious reason.”

And that makes sense. Bob's trying to get into, or maybe coming out of, one of those little offices. Lucy comes onto the floor, and she's wearing as little as is legally allowable in public. (Does she enter from upstairs? From downstairs? We'll figure that out later.) She sees him, she takes a little swig out of a hip flask, and she weaves up to him. Breathes boozily into his face and asks him something. Maybe if he's the new janitor, because she's locked out of her apartment, and she can't find her keys.

So, is this who she is, and what she is.

My Muse suggests that Lucy is nothing like what she appears to be, and that Bob's role in this book will not be as villain, nor will it be as hero. Bob is the victim, the guy who needs to survive.

“Lucy's an assassin,” my Muse says, “and she was on her way to a hit. One of the lawyers at the end of the hall always works late on Friday, tells his wife he's sleeping over in the office, and has a hooker come up when he's done with his Friday paperwork. Lucy, studying him, has discovered this pattern, has already killed the hooker who was on the way up, and has swapped clothes with her. Bob, coming out of a different office, runs into her, and Lucy wants to get him out of the way. She doesn't care that he's seen her; she'd dressed as a hooker, the real hooker is dead in the trunk of her car, any investigation of the lawyer will reveal his Friday-night hooker habit and turn suspicion for his death on the missing hooker, the wife, or one of any number of disgruntled clients.

So now we've met the villain of the plot. And the victim of the plot. I'm guessing that the hero (or heroine) is going to work in that crummy little detective's office across the hall. Had no idea when I started this that it might trend toward a classic gumshoe novel.

---

Your turn.

### **Exercise: Twist**

First, remember that when creating twists, assumptions are only useful when messing with the minds of the people who make them. You cannot permit yourself to make assumptions. You have to question everything, though everyone benefits if your characters make false assumptions. Most of the time, your readers will assume what your characters assume.

But sometimes you want the readers to think that the characters have made false assumptions, and that the readers have seen through these false assumptions, and have figured out what's really going on. In these situations, you create a double-twist. You figure out the character's assumed truth, and you let that be in plain sight. You then figure out what you want to be the reader's assumed truth, and you and your Muse figure out a possible second way the story could go that you can send your reader chasing after.

In the story of Lucy and Bob and the as-yet-unknown detective, I think I want my readers to come to the conclusion, at least for the first half of the book, that Lucy was hired by the lawyer's wife to off him because the wife is tired of his cheating, has discovered she's caught a nasty venereal disease, and wants the money the guy has socked away. I'll leave what's really going on for later exercises. (I don't know yet. But I'm getting ideas.)

Using the material you developed in the previous exercise, find places where it would be logical to make an assumption about a character, a place, or an event. For example, that the man dressed as a mailman is a mailman, that the building where children go after school to hang out is safe or that they are doing what people assume they're doing, that the shooting witnessed by a dozen people in public involved the people they think it did, or happened for the reason they believe.

About each interesting character, place, or event, ask yourself these questions:

What do the characters think is the truth? (Example: Bob thinks Lucy is a hooker; Lucy thinks Bob is a nice guy working late.)

How do these assumptions vary from character to character?

What do I want the reader to think is the truth?

What is the real truth?

Answer these questions with every bit of information you can suck out of them. Be wordy, be extravagant, take anything your Muse will toss in your direction, whether you think as you're writing it that it's good, bad, or horrible beyond words.

---

## Want more?

Eighteen more tools are waiting. Help on how to fix your plotting while you're writing. Instructions on how to fix your plot while you're editing. Exercises. Encouragement. All from Holly Lisle, the author of thirty-plus novels written in genres from fantasy to SF to romantic suspense to YA and sold not only in the US, but from England to France to Russia to Germany and more, in multiple translations.

**[Buy Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic now.](#)**

Like this book? Want to get paid when people you recommend it to buy this and other HollyShop books?

**[Join the free HollyShop Affiliates Program](#)  
and get paid to help spread the word about good books about writing, and well-written books.**