

FROM IDEA TO PLOT

SOURCE: *Structuring Your Novel*, Robert C. Meredith and John D. Fitzgerald
(New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1993).

All traditional novels begin with an idea that inspires the author to write it.

I. **Developing the Novel Idea through Statements of Intention, Attitude, and Purpose**

A. Intention

- i. An intention records the principal subject matter of the idea and commits you to writing the novel.
- ii. State your intention for the novel in a single sentence.
- iii. Examples of intention:
 1. *Madame Bovary*: "To write a novel about the wife of a physician living in small French villages whose adultery, extravagances, and self-indulgence drive her to suicide."
 2. *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "To write a novel based on personal experience as a child in a small southern town."

B. Attitude

- i. Your attitude is your stance toward your intention, how you feel about your intention.

- ii. State with integrity your attitude toward your intention in a single sentence.
- iii. Your attitude must be strong and all-consuming with no room for doubt. It must remain constant throughout the novel and never change or weaken.
- iv. Your attitude determines the theme of the novel.
- v. The strength of your attitude will be the backbone of your purpose.
- vi. Examples of attitude:
 - 1. *Madame Bovary*: "A strong belief in the sanctity of marriage vows."
 - 2. *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "A girl's profound love for a father who helped her grow up in a motherless home, and a strong belief in racial tolerance."

C. Purpose Statement

- i. Your attitude toward your intention must result in a statement of purpose for wanting to write this novel.
- ii. State your purpose for the novel in a single sentence.
- iii. Your purpose is the reason why you want to write this novel. What are you trying to prove about life through this novel? If it's not strong enough, fortify your attitude statement.
- iv. Your purpose is the novel's premise.

- v. The purpose statement points the direction you must take in writing the novel.
- vi. Examples of purpose:
 - 1. *Madame Bovary*: "To prove that violation of the marriage vows can lead only to the disintegration of character."
 - 2. *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "To prove that a good and wise father can successfully develop the character of his children in a motherless home, and that racial bigotry in the Deep South is a stronger force than civil law."
- vii. Question for consideration: Are you qualified by personal experience to write this novel and, if not, are you willing to do the research?

II. Developing the Basic Conflict

- A. To set the stage for the basic conflict in a novel, place the protagonist in conflict with his environment.
- B. The protagonist must be dissatisfied with the status quo of this environment or the change in the environment.
- C. Putting your protagonist in conflict with his environment:
 - i. Introduce a change in the environment that the protagonist doesn't like.

- ii. Uproot the protagonist from a comfortable environment and plop him in an uncomfortable one, and give him no control in being uprooted.
- iii. Place the protagonist in an environment in conflict with another environment (drop the protagonist in the middle of someone else's conflict).
- iv. Place the protagonist in an environment he wants to change.
- v. Place the protagonist in an environment he wants to conquer.
- vi. Put the protagonist in an environment he wants to escape (desires to flee).
- vii. Put the protagonist in an environment where he is not wanted (desires to be accepted).
- viii. Put the protagonist in an environment for which he is unsuited (fish out of water).
- ix. Change the status quo of the protagonist in the environment (have him stand for an unpopular cause or be considered a criminal or outcast).
- x. Change the status quo of the environment (war breaks out, coloreds move into the 60s neighborhood).

D. Chief motivating force

- i. To develop the basic conflict in a novel, give the protagonist a chief motivating force with a tangible objective (internal motivation with an external goal).
- ii. The protagonist's response to the conflict in his environment must result in (cause) his determination to do something about it (his chief motivating force) in order to achieve some tangible objective (a concrete goal):
Environmental conflict → determination (motivation) → action → goal
- iii. Example of chief motivating force: Emma Bovary is in conflict with a dull existence. Her response results in her determination to escape from it (internal motivation) with the goal of finding romance and glamour.

E. The basic conflict cannot be developed or sustained unless the author exaggerates the reaction of the protagonist to the conflict of the environment.

- i. The protagonist can't live another minute in the current state of the environment.
- ii. There's no other way out but for the protagonist to take action.

III. Events

- A. An event is an incident or a happening in your story.
- B. For an event to have any force in a novel, it must produce some effect.
 - i. You are therefore working from a cause (an event) that results in an effect (a minor complication that produces conflict or reveals something about character).
 - ii. Each event is the cause of an event that follows immediately or occurs later in the book. Events are links in the chain of causally-related incidents.
- C. Begin your novel with an event outside the protagonist that starts a chain reaction of causally-related events. Examples:
 - i. *Madame Bovary*: The novel begins with the event of Charles Bovary's becoming a doctor. This is completely outside of the character of the protagonist, Emma, who didn't know Charles at the time. But it starts the chain reaction of events that follow.

- ii. *To Kill a Mockingbird*: The novel begins with an event completely outside the character of Scout Finch--the arrival of Charles Baker Harris in Maycomb. This triggers the chain reaction of causally-related events that follow.

IV. Complications

- A. A complication is something unpleasant that happens to a character that he wishes hadn't happened.
- B. To create causally-related events in a novel, create the following complications:
 - i. A major complication (beginning)
 - ii. At least one minor complication within the framework of the major complication (middle)
 - iii. An ante-climax complication that resolves the major complication (end)
 - iv. Putting the protagonist in conflict with his environment creates the major complication.
- C. By giving the protagonist a chief motivating force with a tangible objective, you create the means to sustain the conflict throughout the novel.
 - i. Put the major complication into the following question: "Will the protagonist's chief motivating force succeed or fail to reach the tangible objective?"
 - ii. Your purpose statement tells the answer to this question.

iii. Examples of story questions:

1. *Madame Bovary*: Will or will not Emma Bovary find romance, glamour, and the indulgence of her sensibilities?

2. *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Will Atticus Finch succeed in preventing a miscarriage of justice? Will Scout Finch succeed in adjusting to her changing environment?

iv. As the author, you know the answer to this question, but the reader doesn't. This is what makes the reader turn the pages!

D. The ante-climax complication

i. This event is the result of the irreversible causally-related events that have preceded it.

ii. This in turn forces the protagonist to make a decision that resolves the major complication, whether he makes that decision of his own free will, or it's forced on him by another character.

iii. Do not resort to sentimentality or abandon the vision of truth in your attitude and purpose and so destroy the theme.

- iv. The result of the ante-climax complication is a moment of truth for the protagonist--the protagonist's point of recognition whether he will succeed or fail to achieve his tangible objective.
- v. When writing a storyline novel, if the reader's point of recognition and the ante-climax complication aren't clear to you as the author, let "character possession" decide for you.

V. Plot v. Storyline

- A. In a novel with a plot the emphasis is on events (things that happen), and the protagonist emerges from the novel with his character relatively unchanged from what it was at the beginning.
- B. In a novel with a storyline the emphasis is on character, and the protagonist always emerges from the novel with his character different from the way it was in the beginning of the novel because of character development or character disintegration.

VI. Point of Recognition

- A. There is a point of recognition for the reader in all traditional novels when he knows whether the protagonist's chief motivating force will succeed or fail to reach its tangible objective.

B. Plots and storylines

- i. In a novel with a plot, the reader's point of recognition is always delayed until near the end.
- ii. In a novel with a storyline, the reader's point of recognition may occur at any point in the novel once the major complication has been revealed to the reader.
- iii. Although in storyline novels the point of recognition can come anywhere, the protagonist may be blind to the truth and the reality of the situation, and will continue to operate according to his chief motivating force, struggling to reach his tangible objective.

From Idea to Plot: Worksheet

Developing the Novel Idea

My idea for a novel is...

My intention for the novel is... [\(I.A.\)](#)

My attitude toward my intention is... [\(I.B.\)](#)

My statement of purpose for wanting to write this novel is...
[\(I.C.\)](#)

Developing the Basic Conflict

How will you put your protagonist in conflict with his environment? [\(II.B.,C.\)](#)

What action must your protagonist be determined to take to resolve the conflict? [\(II.D.ii.\)](#)

What is your protagonist's chief motivating force? [\(II.D.\)](#)

What is your protagonist's tangible objective (goal)? [\(II.D.i.\)](#)

How will the protagonist employ his chief motivating force to achieve his tangible objective? [\(II.D.ii.\)](#)

How can you exaggerate the protagonist's reaction to the conflict of his environment? [\(II.E.\)](#)

Novel Events

What event outside the character of the protagonist starts the chain reaction of causally-related events in your novel? [\(III.C.\)](#)

Putting your protagonist in conflict with her environment creates your major complication for the beginning of the novel. What is this major complication? [\(II.C.\)](#)

State your major complication in the form of this question: "Will the protagonist's chief motivating force succeed or fail to reach the tangible objective?" [\(IV.C.ii.\)](#)

What is the answer to this question (determined by your purpose statement)? [\(IV.C.ii.\)](#)

What are the causally-related minor complications in the middle of your novel? [\(IV.B.ii.\)](#)

What is the ante-climax complication at the end of your novel? [\(IV.D.\)](#)

What is the decision that your protagonist makes that resolves the ante-climax complication? [\(IV.D.ii.\)](#)

The result of the ante-climax complication is a moment of truth for your protagonist, his or her point of recognition about whether he or she will succeed or fail to reach the tangible objective. What is this moment of truth for your protagonist? [\(IV.D.iv.\)](#)

Plot v. Storyline

Is your novel event-based (plot), or character-based (storyline)? [\(V.\)](#)

When will the reader's point of recognition occur in your novel? [\(V.B.\)](#)

If your novel is a storyline, is your protagonist blind to the truth and reality of the situation? [\(VI.B.iii.\)](#)