

# PLOT SKETCH WORKSHEET (WIESNER)

SOURCE: Karen Wiesner, *First Draft in 30 Days* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2005).

## Understanding Story Threads

Your outline will consist of the following seven to eight threads (nine or ten for a romance novel), all of which work together to form your plot sketch:

- [Story goal](#) (or theme)
- [Romance thread](#) (optional, depending on genre)
- [Subplot threads](#)
- [Plot tension](#)
- [Romantic/sexual tension](#) (optional, depending on genre)
- [Release](#)
- [Downtime](#)
- [Black moment](#) (or climax)
- [Resolution](#)
- [Aftereffects of resolution](#) (optional)

Remember, at this stage you probably won't be able to fill in all of these sections, but it's important to start thinking about them. Simply write in whatever you can for each section and remember you can go back and add more later.

[Jump to Plot Sketch Worksheet](#)

## Story Goal [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

A story goal is the central idea of a novel. You will relate it to your readers through the plot, major conflict, and character interactions. **In all genres of fiction, the story goal is the catalyst of the book—the reason why the characters are there, the reason why the story evolves, the reason why the reader opens the book, starts and keeps reading.** All other threads and characters are involved in achieving the story goal.

In some books, the story goal seems more like the theme in that the main characters are not striving to accomplish any single major goal and there is no clear-cut course of action. Instead, such books rely on overarching central concepts that are represented through the plot and characters. However, especially commercial fiction, there is a clear-cut story goal that

can be identified and charted throughout the course of the story. If you don't feel your book has a clear-cut story goal, substitute the word "Theme" for this field and continue.

It's important that you identify the major conflict or main theme of your book before continuing, as this will affect your entire story. **What are all the characters assembled and striving for?** Write as much as you can on this important thread. Even one sentence is enough to begin with.

Let's take a look at a story goal example:

- In *Fear Nothing* by Dean Koontz, Christopher Snow has a very rare genetic disorder that leaves him dangerously vulnerable to light. In an attempt to save his life, his scientist mother comes up with a revolutionary new approach to the engineering of retroviruses. Unfortunately, the experiment has gone horribly wrong, and Christopher discovers it and begins to piece together the puzzle of what has now put the world at risk of contamination.

## **Romance Thread (Optional)** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

In a romance novel, the most important part of the book is the relationship between the hero and the heroine. This long-term thread is as important as the story goal, and it continues from the beginning of the story until it ties up with the happily-ever-after theme. It should be in every, or almost every, scene of the book, and should be woven in seamlessly with all other plot threads. Anything that happens affects the romance, just as the romance will have influence over the other plot aspects.

For more information, see chapter two, page 28 of Karen Wiesner's *First Draft in 30 Days*.

## **Subplot Threads** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

Subplots function as secondary plots. They typically contrast or run parallel to the main plot. They can also function outside the realm of the main plot, existing largely to provide a change of scene, emotion, or tone. These threads should work in harmony to effectively develop both character and plot. Each will depend on the others as the novel comes to a close.

Subplots can range from health conditions and financial worries to physical or mental conclusions a character must reach: returning home after a family member dies, moving out of an apartment, changing careers. In all cases, it should be clear to readers how the subplots connect with the main story goal.

How many of these subplot threads you include depends on the length and complexity of your novel. Books with more than 60,000 words generally end up with at least eight subplot threads. Books closer to 100,000 words may end up with a few more. The more main characters and conflicts you have, the more subplot threads you'll end up with. Remember that you will have to give regular attention to all of your subplots. Even with a complex plot line, you never want to leave *any* of your threads for too long.

At times, events in your story will cause some of your subplot threads to merge. You want your threads to mesh to the point that you've created a net your characters (and readers) won't easily find their way out of.

The subplot section on your plot sketch worksheet may prove to be the hardest for you to fill out simply because most stories have several subplots working together with the story goal. For now, write what comes to you, even if it's only a few words under each subplot number. Don't worry about putting the threads in order of importance.

Here is a subplot thread example:

- In the children's book *The Bad Beginning (A Series of Unfortunate Events)* by Lemony Snicket, twelve-year-old Klaus Baudelaire loves books. After his parents are killed in a fire, Klaus and his two sisters are sent to live with Count Olaf, a perfectly horrible situation and the main plot. The children only find solace in their neighbor, Justice Strauss, who has a library full of books—books that may help the Baudelaire children legally save themselves.

## **Plot Tension** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

In all genres, plot tension is essential. This kind of tension is anything that brings the reader to a fever pitch of anticipation.

Plot tension is tricky to achieve and sustain. You need to bring readers to the snapping point and only then give them what they want—*temporarily*. You can tease the reader by snatching a resolution away just as it seems the tension is about to break, but don't do this too often. If you grab resolution out of the reader's hands too many times, you may lose him. On the other hand, if you give him what he wants too soon, you take away his motivation to keep reading.

Take a look at this example of plot tension:

- Summer McAfee is the owner of the Daisy Fresh cleaning service in Karen Robards's *Walking After Midnight*. She's cleaning the mortuary at 2 A.M. She's exhausted and her mind is working overtime because of the dead bodies in the room with her.

Telling herself there's only one way to reassure herself that one of the bodies hadn't moved, she reaches out to touch it. Her hand is suddenly in the grip of—not a corpse!—a man very much alive. I won't give it all away here, but needless to say tension can't be far behind in a setup like this.

## **Romantic/Sexual Tension (Optional)** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

In a romance novel, romantic/sexual tension is essential. You want to start this tension as early in the story as you possibly can. If you don't start the suspense promptly and keep it intense, the reader will be disappointed—or worse, embarrassed—during moments she should be temporarily relieved or exalted.

For more information, see chapter two, page 31 of Karen Wiesner's *First Draft in 30 Days*.

## **Release** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

A release is an easement of plot or romantic tension. In a mystery, a release might take the form of a resolution of one aspect of the main problem. In a romantic or sexual thread or subplot, a release could be a kiss, lovemaking, or a declaration of feelings. The final words in a story should also produce a release that satisfies the readers and makes them long to revisit the story again, even if only in their minds. Here is an example of release:

- In *The Princess Bride* by William Goldman, three criminals kidnap Buttercup, the prince's future wife. The four of them have been followed every step of the way by the Dread Pirate Roberts. However, Buttercup has realized that the pirate is in fact her beloved Westley. Westley rescues Buttercup and they rush away from her captors, straight into the Fire Swamp. As they're making their way through snow sand and bursts of flame, Westley tells Buttercup how he became the Dread Pirate Roberts and made his fortune so he could return to his autumn-haired love. While the action is intense as Westley reveals his pirating adventures, there's an easement in the plot tension as he tells his tale.

## **Downtime** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

Downtime is a form of release, but it happens during a time of incredible tension. It should be one of the most poignant scenes in your novel. During downtime, which comes at the end of the middle section of the book, the main character may step back from the action and reflect on what happily-ever-after could have been (if not for all the obstacles you put in his way).

For a time, the main character also may believe that the story goal is unachievable, and he may seem to give up the fight.

The reader is led to an even higher level of anticipation because of downtime. In a romance, this is a glimpse of the hero and heroine living happily ever after—a sensual or emotional scene, or a stolen moment in a chaotic time. In any other genre, downtime is a temporary respite from the extreme tension the plot is creating—a bittersweet moment of some sort.

Following downtime, your character will again realize that he must act, and he'll find a new way to attempt resolution. Never for one moment, however, will the main character feel a sense of satisfaction or contentedness about this new course of action—he must be utterly tormented at every turn. This new plan of action will be his final, desperate attempt to reach the story goal, and the ground won't feel at all solid as he moves forward. In some cases, your character will come to the decision to act because the stakes of the conflict are again raised—danger is near, and he must move forward whether he wants to or not. This episode will provide the motivation to propel the story to the next level.

In nearly every situation, downtime must be followed with a black moment. Downtime releases the tension for a short period, and that tension must be built back up quickly or you risk losing your reader.

Here are some examples of the calm before the storm with downtime:

- Edward is a neuroscientist in *Acceptable Risk* by Robin Cook. He and Kim have just moved in together, but the arrangement has been anything but ideal. His new designer-drug research has taken over his entire life, to the point where he and his team of researchers are actually taking this experimental new drug themselves. He apologizes to Kim out of the blue and takes her to dinner. He tells her all about the progress they've made with the drug Ultra. The drug makes them feel relaxed, focused, confident, and content. It's enhanced their long-term memory and alleviated fatigue, anger, and anxiety. It's an absolutely perfect drug for the socially awkward. Kim is happy that Edward seems to be with her again ... until he insists that she take Ultra, too.
- In H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the beast people have killed their creator, the evil genius Dr. Moreau. The Law is gone, and the unnatural abominations Moreau tormented in the name of science and discovery now have a taste for blood and revenge. As the humans Prendick and Montgomery lock themselves in the compound, Prendick realizes there is no way off the island.

## **Black Moment** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

The black moment in the story is commonly referred to as the **climax** of the book. The worst of all horrors is happening or has happened, and the main characters (as well as the readers) are now thoroughly convinced the future will never be happy. The black moment, which occurs in the first part of the end section of the book (when tension is at its highest), leaves the reader and the characters wondering whether evil will overcome good.

If you're writing a romance novel, you'll have two black moments—one black moment for the story goal and one for the romance thread. The black moment for the romance thread usually occurs in the end section of the book, just after the story goal has been resolved satisfactorily. Most genres have only one black moment—for the story goal.

You can see that the black moment has arrived in this example:

- In *Relic* by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, a creature has murdered unsuspecting patrons in the New York Museum of Natural History and taken out a heavily armed SWAT team. FBI agent Pendergast has trapped it and shot it repeatedly. Yet moments later, Pendergast hears shooting in the hall. The creature is still alive. Is it possible to kill it?

## **Resolution** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

The resolution, or denouement, of a story, comes after the climax when the story's main problems have been resolved. This is your chance to tie up any loose ends and provide satisfying conclusions for your subplot threads. The resolutions for the long-term story threads (story goal and, in romances, the romance thread) should be relatively clean, but subplot thread resolutions may not tie up quite so neatly. Tying up these loose ends is crucial to leaving the reader satisfied. I don't mean you have to provide a happy ending. A satisfactory resolution doesn't allow the reader to wonder about dangling plot threads or to feel cheated—you, as the writer, must fulfill the underlying promise of a logical, acceptable conclusion, even if it isn't a happy one.

Here are some stories that leave the reader satisfied without a happily-ever-after:

- In Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones*, you, as the reader, desperately want all wrongs to be righted for the main character, Suzie. In many ways, that's achieved during the course of the story, yet realistically there's no way for Suzie to get all she deserves. There isn't really a happily-ever-after in this story, but you're satisfied with the conclusion, and you accept the resolution.

- In the novel *The Tommyknockers* by Stephen King, the hero, **Gard**, sacrifices his life to save the town and the woman he loves. As a reader, you're devastated because you've come to care about Gard and believe he deserves to be happy after all he's been through, yet realistically you know there was nothing else he could do to remain a hero in your eyes. You accept the resolution because it's the only logical choice, and you're satisfied.

## **Aftereffects of Resolution (Optional)** [\[Jump to worksheet\]](#)

An aftereffect of a resolution may come in the form of an emotional reaction or an event that carries a story goal or subplot thread beyond its conclusion. In other words, the thread may continue even after it's been resolved.

Very few writers include aftereffects of resolution, though they're used frequently in movies. The novel below used aftereffects of resolution in the form of a twist ending:

- In *Presumed Innocent* by Scott Turow, a twist ending completely takes the unsuspecting reader by surprise. While Rusty Sabich is found not guilty on charges of killing a former lover, the reader is never entirely certain throughout the book that he didn't do it. He had motive, opportunity, and the evidence pointed to him. In fact, you can't help but believe he did it and got away with it. Following his exoneration, Rusty is working in the yard and finds a clawed crowbar with blood and hair on it—clearly the murder weapon. He starts to wash it clean. Again, I hate to ruin this incredible surprise for those who haven't read it, but the murderer—someone whom you'd never have suspected—appears, and suddenly it all makes sense.

## **Weaving Threads Into Your Plot Sketch**

As you're puzzling out your outline, keep all your plot threads in mind—they'll come up again and again. Once you've added detail and depth to your outline and developed your story, the threads should become almost invisible.

Go into as much detail as possible on your plot sketch, but keep in mind that your first pass will be light on details. Don't worry. Over the next twenty-seven days, it will grow significantly.

## Plot Sketch Worksheet

---

### **Story Goal** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

The story goal is the catalyst of the book—the reason why the characters are there, the reason why the story evolves, the reason why the reader reads. All other threads and characters are involved in achieving the story goal. What are all the characters assembled and striving for?

**What is the story goal?**

---

### **Romance Thread (Optional)** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

In a romance novel, the most important part of the book is the relationship between the hero and the heroine. This long-term thread is as important as the story goal, and it continues from the beginning of the story until it ties up with the happily-ever-after theme. It should be in every, or almost every, scene of the book, and should be woven in seamlessly with all other plot threads.

**Describe the romance thread:**

---

### **Subplot Threads** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

Subplots function as secondary plots. They typically contrast or run parallel to the main plot. They can also function outside the realm of the main plot, existing largely to provide a change of scene, emotion, or tone. These threads should work in harmony to effectively develop both character and plot. Each will depend on the others as the novel comes to a close.

Subplots can range from health conditions and financial worries to physical or mental conclusions a character must reach: returning home after a family member dies, moving out of an apartment, changing careers. In all cases, it should be clear to readers how the subplots connect with the main story goal.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Additional:

**Plot Tension** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

Plot tension is anything that brings the reader to a fever pitch of anticipation. Bring readers to the snapping point and only then give them what they want—temporarily. You can tease the reader by snatching a resolution away just as it seems the tension is about to break, but don't do this too often. If you grab resolution out of the reader's hands too many times, you may lose him. On the other hand, if you give him what he wants too soon, you take away his motivation to keep reading.

**Describe the plot tension in your story:**

---

**Romantic/Sexual Tension** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

In a romance novel, romantic/sexual tension is essential. You want to start this tension as early in the story as you possibly can. If you don't start the suspense promptly and keep it intense, the reader will be disappointed—or worse, embarrassed—during moments she should be temporarily relieved or exalted.

**Describe the romantic or sexual tension in your story:**

---

**Release** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

A release is an easement of plot or romantic tension. In a mystery, a release might take the form of a resolution of one aspect of the main problem. In a romantic or sexual thread or subplot, a release could be a kiss, lovemaking, or a declaration of feelings. The final words in a story should also produce a release that satisfies the readers and makes them long to revisit the story again, even if only in their minds.

**Describe the release:**

**Downtime** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

Downtime is a form of release, but it happens during a time of incredible tension. It should be one of the most poignant scenes in your novel. During downtime, which comes at the end of the middle section of the book, the main character may step back from the action and reflect on what happily-ever-after could have been (if not for all the obstacles you put in his way). For a time, the main character also may believe that the story goal is unachievable, and he may seem to give up the fight. Downtime is a temporary respite from the extreme tension the plot is creating—a bittersweet moment of some sort.

Following downtime, your character will again realize that he must act, and he'll find a new way to attempt resolution. Never for one moment, however, will the main character feel a sense of satisfaction or contentedness about this new course of action—he must be utterly tormented at every turn. This new plan of action will be his final, desperate attempt to reach the story goal, and the ground won't feel at all solid as he moves forward. In some cases, your character will come to the decision to act because the stakes of the conflict are again raised—danger is near, and he must move forward whether he wants to or not. This episode will provide the motivation to propel the story to the next level.

Downtime releases the tension for a short period, and that tension must be built back up quickly or you risk losing your reader.

**Describe downtime:**

**Describe the character's thought process and decision that follows downtime:**

---

**Black Moment** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

The black moment in the story is commonly referred to as the climax of the book. The worst of all horrors is happening or has happened, and the main characters (as well as the readers) are now thoroughly convinced the future will never be happy. The black moment, which occurs in the first part of the end section of the book (when tension is at its highest), leaves the reader and the characters wondering whether evil will overcome good.

**What is the black moment in your story?**

---

**Resolution** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

The resolution, or denouement, of a story, comes after the climax when the story's main problems have been resolved. This is your chance to tie up any loose ends and provide satisfying conclusions for your subplot threads. The resolutions for the long-term story threads (story goal and, in romances, the romance thread) should be relatively clean, but subplot thread resolutions may not tie up quite so neatly.

**What is the resolution of your story?**

**Aftereffects of Resolution** [\[Jump to description\]](#)

An aftereffect of a resolution may come in the form of an emotional reaction or an event that carries a story goal or subplot thread beyond its conclusion. In other words, the thread may continue even after it's been resolved. In some novels, the aftereffects of resolution come in the form of a twist ending.

**What are the aftereffects of the story resolution?**