

STORY EVOLUTION WORKSHEET (WIESNER)

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

The Beginning

Plots, subplots, characters, goals, and conflicts are introduced in the beginning of a story. Your goal is to pull the reader in with an exciting opening, then begin setting up the basis for the rest of the book.

The beginning of your story is where you introduce your main characters' attributes and motivations. The qualities you give your characters are what makes the reader care about them. Your characters' behavior, reactions, and introspection, as well as their ever-evolving goals, draw sympathy and interest from the reader. Even character flaws and sins can draw the reader's sympathy. Why? Because flaws make the hero more real in the reader's mind. The reader understands and forgives because she can relate to these very human flaws.

From a reader's standpoint, the only difference between a hero and a villain is the reader's ability to forgive one and not the other. Both heroes and villains are human (unless you're writing a horror or paranormal story), both have a unique combination of good and bad traits, and both should be fleshed out enough to become real to the reader. The hero, however, will behave and develop in such a way that the reader will forgive all flaws. The villain will not earn forgiveness.

For a story to sustain the reader's sympathy, the hero must be understood and forgiven by the reader. This will only happen if the hero has a noble reason for any crimes. (A villain should also have a reason for his crimes, but his reason doesn't have to be noble.) The hero must also show marked growth throughout the course of the story, thereby redeeming himself for any human weaknesses. (The villain never repents or redeems himself.) There are, of course, always exceptions to these rules.

Conflict

Conflict is the root of everything exciting and suspenseful in your story.

Conflict can be internal or external. Each of your main characters should have internal conflicts—opposing desires, beliefs, or motivations. External conflict can (and should) occur between characters, but characters can conflict with other things as well (like fate or Mother

Nature). A solid plot gives *all* main characters (including the villain) internal and external conflicts.

When the treachery of the villain is revealed to the hero, the hero *must* take action. When characters or circumstances conflict, the result is action—and action is exciting to the reader. Uncertainty over the outcome of the action is suspense.

There's another way to look at it. In order to develop both plot and character, you need to give your characters both internal and external reasons to act in the face of conflict. In the example above, the hero's love for the heroine is his internal reason to act, and the villain's treachery is the external reason. There are internal and external obstacles in the path of the hero as well: The hero's wish to respect the choice of the heroine (or at least not to anger her) is the internal obstacle, and the danger presented by the villain is the external one. By using both internal and external motivations and obstacles in your story, you create suspense, excitement, and a hero who won't simply give up in the face of a monumental challenge.

The time to incorporate conflict and suspense into your novel is now. Your formatted outline should contain both of these elements as they will appear in your book. Be sure to lay the groundwork for conflict in the beginning section of your outline.

Keep the following tips in mind when building opportunities for action and suspense into the beginning of your story:

1. Keep the reader on edge with baffling contrasts in characters, setting, and dialogue. If you put two seemingly opposed characters in play together, you'll intrigue your readers and they will stick around to figure out why.
2. Take advantage of pacing, especially as you move toward and through the middle of your story. Don't rush in to pick up the story threads. Keep the reader guessing. Draw out scenes involving rescues and explanations. Offer the reader unsatisfactory alternatives to problems. Alternate suspense and action within your outline, even if just by giving yourself stage directions for accomplishing this.
3. Carefully construct mood by using description, dialogue, introspection, and action. If you want to create a sensual atmosphere, describe the scent of a candle burning, the touch of silk against bare skin, the strains of romantic music playing, or a heroine's reaction to the appearance of her lover. If you want to set the mood for danger, make the character tangibly aware of the temperature (if it's cold, give the character goose bumps), the lighting (darkness or shadows), a revolting smell, a sudden sound, or the eerie *absence* of sound.

4. Use foreshadowing: a whispered conversation, an event that has no satisfying explanation, an unexpected expression or reaction from a character that reveals he may not be who he claims to be. Foreshadowing shouldn't answer the crucial questions of a story, but instead create possibilities or uncertainties that will evoke mild or extreme tension in the reader.

Conflict, suspense, and motivation will be the driving forces behind your story. Lay the groundwork for them in your outline, and they will reach their full potential in your story. Remember: Never allow the reader to get too cozy.

1. Conflict Is Introduced

Most writers have been advised to begin each story with a bang. There's good reason for that. You want to hook your reader as early as possible. Detail here what will happen in your prologue or first scene, and briefly describe how the conflict you introduce at this point will dominate your story through each section. Also, be sure to hint at looming conflicts. As your beginning progresses, you'll want to fully introduce the villain or threat.

Detail the major conflict:

2. Story Goal Is Introduced

The story goal, as discussed in chapter two, is your dominant plot thread. You will introduce it in the beginning of the book. Review your plot sketch worksheet from your preliminary outline (Worksheet 4 in Appendix C), then describe the story goal and how it will push your story forward through each section.

Detail the major story goal:

3. Characters Are Outfitted for Their Tasks

The character sketches you created in chapter two as part of your preliminary outline will help you continue to think about who your main characters are and how they're involved in achieving the story's goal.

Your characters should be designed with the resolution of the story goal in mind. They should have strengths they themselves aren't aware of at the beginning of the story—strengths that evolve steadily throughout the course of the book as the characters face adversity. They also should have internal and/or external weaknesses that hinder their progress. Detail these things in this section.

List and describe briefly the characters who will be involved in reaching the story goal and defeating the conflict. Detail each character's strengths and weaknesses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Additional:

The Middle

The middle is usually the largest portion of any book. In this section, plots, subplots, and conflicts work together to create a tug-of-war between the story goal and the opposition. Essentially, the action in the middle section of a book revolves around the main characters confronting the opposition, though most of the time this opposition is hidden from or unseen by the lead characters.

Your main characters must grow throughout this section of the book, proving themselves worthy opponents to the villains. Therefore, each of the events that take place within this section will require multiple scenes for each pull in the tug-of-war between your main characters and their opposition.

You could look at the middle section of a book as a series of actions and reactions. Your characters will react to conflict by creating short-term goals to get them through it. Characters will set new short-term goals throughout the book based on the experiences and emotions they go through. In almost all cases, old short-term goals will be revised or new ones created in response to a failure (or thwarting) of the original goals.

To maintain logic and flow throughout the middle of a book, it's important to show both action and reaction for every conflict. Each action produces a reaction, and each reaction justifies the next action. Every step your characters take depends on the previous step.

The character's reactions must match the intensity of the conflict. Keep in mind that reaction adds to the depth and dimension of the story characters. Since most people initially freak out in reaction to conflict (a commonality that helps build a bridge of empathy between character and reader), your characters may have an initial crazed reaction before they calm down and reason takes over, enabling them to focus on the next short-term goal. Your readers will root for a character with the ability to conquer fear with reason.

The crazed reaction stage is the ideal time to take a short break in the action and tension to reveal to the reader what could happen if the characters fail to reach the next step toward the story goal. In other words, the crazed reaction provides the perfect opportunity for downtime, which should occur near the end of the middle section of the book. It's during downtime that a main character reflects on his desires and motivations, imagining a happily-ever-after that is out of reach because of the obstacles presented in the book. At this point, the character may decide that attaining his goals is impossible, and it would be best to give up the fight. Or, he may have a "damn it all; I'm taking what I want, not thinking about what I have

to do” attitude during this time. Finally, the character decides on a course of action, creating new short-term goals in an effort to bring about the desired resolution. This will be his final, desperate attempt to reach the story goal. In some cases, the character will decide 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. The new danger propels the story to the next level.

It’s essential that a character’s actions propel him forward, even when short-term goals and conflicts make it seem like he’s not making any headway toward the story goal. That’s part of the tug-of-war that keeps the reader immersed in the story. Continue to raise the stakes between the main characters and the opposition. The opposition must become more and more of a threat to the story goal, creating more of a challenge as the main character attempts to reach the story goal in multiple ways by devising short-term goals to get him there.

In these concluding scenes of the middle of the book, 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.

1. Characters Design Short-Term Goals to Reach the Story Goal

For each main character, introduce short-term goals that will assist that character in reaching the story goal. Give a brief description of each goal and how each character is attempting to reach it. Use your plot sketch (Worksheet 4 in Appendix C) as a springboard for this section.

Character 1:

Briefly describe first short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe first short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe first short-term goal and how the characters will reach it:

2. Quest to Reach the Story Goal Begins

In this section, the characters put their first short-term goals into action. Sketch out what they go through during this time.

Briefly detail the events that take place:

3. First Short-Term Goals Are Thwarted

The first short-term goal proves impossible. What events take place to make this failure come about?

Briefly detail the events that take place:

4. Characters React With Disappointment

Characters react differently to disappointment, and these reactions show the kind of people they are. Provide insight into each major character's reactions.

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe reaction:

5. Stakes of the Conflict Are Raised

Giving up the quest to reach the story goal is never really an option, though the characters may wish they could. In every exciting story with worthy heroes, something always happens to make it impossible to concede defeat. Inevitably, the stakes are raised and a new danger is introduced; the threat is immediate, and the hero can't simply ignore or walk away from it. Detail the new danger and its effect on all subplots.

Detail the new stakes of the conflict and how they affect all subplots:

6. Characters React to the Conflict

In this section, describe each main character's initial reaction to the new danger or problem. This is often the "freak out" stage, where few are capable of being rational.

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction to the conflict:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction to the conflict:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe reaction to the conflict:

7. Characters Revise Old or Design New Short-Term Goals

Though the initial reaction to the danger is usually one that's far from calm and logical, this must be a temporary reaction. Eventually, each main character will need to devise a new short-term goal to lead him closer to reaching the story goal. Briefly describe each character's plan of action.

Character 1:

Briefly describe new short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe new short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe new short-term goal and how the characters will reach it:

8. Quest to Reach the Story Goal Is Continued

The characters put their new short-term goals in action. In this section, sketch out what they go through during this time.

Briefly detail the events that take place:

9. Short-Term Goals Are Again Thwarted

The new short-term goals prove as impossible as the first. What events took place to make this failure come about?

Briefly detail the events that take place:

10. Characters React With Disappointment

Character reactions will run the gamut here, but each character will be tiring of the battle a little more each time he fails. Restlessness to get closer to the story goal works to create edgier personalities.

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe reaction:

11. Stakes of the Conflict Are Raised

Remember that each time something happens, it must create ever more dire consequences if the characters don't act quickly.

Detail the new stakes of the conflict and how they affect all subplots:

12. Characters React to the Conflict

Show marked growth in the characters, even if it seems as though they're making no progress in reaching the ultimate story goal. Make the readers empathize with them, root for them, and possibly even love them.

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction to the conflict:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction to the conflict:

Additional Characters (optional):

Briefly describe reactions to the conflict:

At this stage in the middle of your story, you can repeat the following steps (items seven through ten as discussed previously) as many times as necessary to accommodate your story's length and complexity:

- *Characters revise old or create new short-term goals*
- *The quest to reach the story goal continues*
- *Short-term goals are thwarted*
- *Characters react with disappointment*

Items eleven and twelve aren't repeated here because the cycle becomes more dramatic with each repetition, thus allowing the last half of the middle portion of your book to be even tenser and your characters more desperate. Even if your characters revise their goals and continue onward, they no longer have any confidence that they'll actually reach their goal, thus setting up the looming downtime.

13. Downtime Begins

The last section of the middle portion of the story begins with the downtime, which precedes the black moment. Here, your characters are close to giving up for good because the story goal seems impossible to reach. At this critical point in the story, your characters are coming to feel they have nothing left to hold on to. Detail these feelings.

Detail the events that lead to downtime:

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction to these events:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction to these events:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe reaction to these events:

14. Characters Revise Old or Design New Short-Term Goals With Renewed Vigor

Your characters are going to make their next decisions out of sheer desperation. From this point on, they seem to lose much of their confidence—or worse, they're feeling a reckless sense of bravado that may have tragic consequences. What are their new goals and how do they plan to reach them?

Character 1:

Briefly describe desperate short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe desperate short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe desperate short-term goal and how the characters will reach it:

15. The Quest to Reach the Story Goal Continues, But Instability Abounds

Though your characters are plowing ahead bravely, each step is taken with deep uncertainty. How does this action unfold?

Briefly detail the events that take place:

16. The Black Moment Begins

The worst possible failure or horror that was introduced in the beginning of the book has now come to pass. The short-term goals made in desperation are thwarted, and the stakes are raised to fever pitch as the worst of all possible conflicts is unveiled. Describe it in as much detail as you can.

Briefly detail the events that take place and how they affect all subplots:

17. The Characters React to the Black Moment

Characters react to this major conflict with a sense of finality—the quest stands on the edge of a knife. Never will there be a moment when the outcome is more in question than in this concluding section of the middle of the book. Will evil triumph over good? That question won't be answered here; it belongs in the end section of the book.

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe reaction:

The End

At the end of a book, all plots, subplots, and conflicts are resolved. Getting to that point—as we’ve just seen—should be a hair-raising ride that produces intense emotions in the reader.

Here’s how the end of the book takes shape through the story evolution worksheet:

1. A Pivotal, Life-Changing Event Occurs

Something crucial must happen in the first part of the end section—something that will change the lives of the characters irrevocably and take them a millimeter from losing everything they hold dear. The main characters must become profoundly aware of everything they’ll lose if the story goal isn’t reached. This could be an injury or death. It could also be a terrifying experience of some kind that shakes the characters to their very cores.

Detail this event and how it affects all subplots:

2. Characters Modify Short-Term Goals One Last Time

Whatever the life-altering experience the characters face, the desperation that drove them only a few chapters earlier is completely gone. They’ve never had such clarity of purpose as they do at this moment. They know exactly what they have to do now, and absolutely nothing can stop them from doing it. One final time, they revise their goals with the kind of determination that convinces the reader they can’t possibly fail.

Character 1:

Briefly describe final short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe final short-term goal and how the character will reach it:

Addition Characters (optional):

Briefly describe final short-term goal and how the characters will reach it:

3. The Showdown Begins

The main characters and opposition come face to face. there’s no hiding as in the middle of the book. It’s in these moments of confrontation that the main characters rise above the human state and become truly phenomenal as they move to accomplish the story goal.

Showdown details (including all main characters who are involved):

4. The Opposition Is Vanquished and the Conflict Ends

You know the showdown that follows the moment of clarity very well. I'm sure most of you have an unforgettable story in mind where exactly this happened. Here's an example of such a heart-charging moment: In *Frankenstein*, the horrifying creature kills the doctor's beloved Elizabeth, and Dr. Frankenstein's fury drives him to pursue the creature to the ends of the earth. But he's unsuccessful in his purpose. When Dr. Frankenstein is on his deathbed, however, the creature comes to him in agony and self-reproach and ultimately kills himself.

Details:

5. The Story Goal Is Achieved

That which all the characters have been striving for has come to pass—hallelujah!—and this will affect everything. In this section, detail the consequences of victory to all plots and subplots.

Detail resolution plot and all subplots:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Additional:

6. Characters React to the Resolution of the Plot and Subplots

In this section, release is given to the characters who have worked so hard to achieve the story goal. Describe their reactions.

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction to the end of the conflict:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction to the end of the conflict:

Additional Characters (optional):

Briefly describe reactions to the end of the conflict:

7. The Relationship Black Moment Is Addressed (Optional)

In a romance novel, the black moment in the relationship refers to the moment when the characters have to evaluate whether the resolution of the story goal has cleared the path toward togetherness for them. Despite the resolution of the story goal, this is the place to detail the bit of wavering that almost always seems to happen between a man and a woman now faced with the age-old question of, “Can you spend the rest of your life with this person, no regrets?”

Character 1:

Briefly describe reaction:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe reaction:

8. Characters Revise Their Life Goals

At this point, the main characters have learned what they’re capable of and gained that which is most precious to them. Now their life goals are revised or made anew. You can almost imagine a microphone being shoved in a character’s face as someone asks, “You’ve done it! You’ve fixed all that was broken! Now what are you going to do?” This is the place to answer that question.

Character 1:

Briefly describe life goal:

Character 2 (optional):

Briefly describe life goal:

Additional Characters (optional):

Briefly describe life goals:

9. Possible Reemergence of the Conflict or Opposition

At the end of a book, especially in thrillers, horror novels, and mysteries, it’s possible for the conflict or opposition to reemerge. The villain may rear its ugly head, implying that the conflict is about to happen all over again—just when you and the characters thought it was safe.

Remember that the reader should be left satisfied with logical resolutions to the conflicts at the end of a novel. In a truly memorable story, the reader should be reluctant to close the book despite her satisfaction.