

Plotting and Pacing: An Outline

(Originally drafted as a presentation, but adapted here. Use this outline together with the plot paradigm diagram for best understanding. Please note that some diagrams referred to in this article are not part of the plot paradigm.)

My favorite definition of story is this one by Jack Bickham: "A story is the formed record of a character testing conflict, told from a point of view." In a nutshell Bickham addresses plot, character, and voice, which together comprise the heart of storycrafting. I'm only addressing plot and pace, that "formed record" incorporating "conflict." Plot is, of course, driven by the actions of the main character; I'm going to assume that you'd like to understand the basics of plot construction or architecture.

Before I get down to the details I'd like to point out a couple of things. First, there is no one right way to plot. My purpose is to bring many of these ideas into focus so that you can pick and choose your tools. Second, I'm going to show you patterns, but don't try to match them, especially while drafting. Allowing your story to flow while being aware that there is an internal structure to story will free you.

A term I'd like you to be familiar with is the *story-worthy problem*. Les Edgerton defines it as the "deep internal problem your main character must resolve." It's at the heart of any good story, it's deep, it's emotional, and it links the character to the plot. It's the culmination of the romantic relationship, or the achievement of the life's dream.

I'd like to examine the architecture of plot by starting at a macroscopic level - the full arc of the story - and then examining the architecture at a microscopic level - the level of scene.

So let's start with macroscopic shape.

As far as we know, the first person to dissect story structure was Aristotle, in his Poetics, written in the third century B.C. Aristotle was, of course, talking about the theatre, since the novel form had not been invented, but we've adopted his basic scheme and applied it to narrative. In particular, we think of story as having a beginning, middle, and end, with the second act of the three-act structure twice as long as Acts 1 or 3.

Henry Fielding introduced the world to the novel form in the eighteenth century, and story structure became more complex, notably with the introduction of the idea of turning points, or energetic markers. There are five turning points in this simplified early structure, one at the turn of each act and two smaller turning points within Act 2. Notice also that there is a point that begins the action, known as the inciting incident. This is the point at which the story-worthy problem is first identified.

Turning points are important because they serve to increase tension in story, which is the result of correct pacing. Tension is achieved by placing your main character in a sticky situation and making her suffer, and turning points are places in the arc of your plot at which your main character's action turns in another

direction and the stakes are raised. For example, in The Hunger Games when Katniss Everdeen arrives at the Capitol and she must take on the role of warrior - that's at plot point one, the turning point into Act 2, and after that turning point she must face a new set of obstacles and challenges. Pacing your novel - hitting the turning points and propelling the action at the right tempo - will result in a novel that contains the kind of tension to keep your readers engaged.

In the first half of the traditional Aristotelian structure, the protagonist makes foolish, dumb, dangerous choices; in the second half she learns from her mistakes and begins to choose wisely. Remember that this doesn't mean she chooses well - she still will march from one catastrophe to the next - but her choices will be better, based on her prior experience and her growth.

To give you an example of this simple three-act structural shape as it relates to the main character and her story-worthy problem, let's look more deeply at The Hunger Games. The three turning points I've identified in my diagram - plot point one, the midpoint and plot point two - represent change in the nature of the relationship between Katniss and Peeta, which I'm assuming is the story-worthy problem in this novel. The story-worthy problem sets the stage and the plot is built around that problem and must focus on it, most especially at each turning point.

Aristotle gave us a nice three-act structure that's basically a line. But the shape of plot can be further enhanced, and I'd like to introduce you to three additional and more complex paradigms of plot shape: Freytag's pyramid, the hero's

journey, and crisis to climax. As you'll see, this is where plot shape is enriched by the ideas of change and movement at a macro level.

The first of these more complex paradigms is Freytag's pyramid. In 1863 Gustav Freytag wrote an analysis of Aristotle's plot in which he carried the simple linear structure to another level, by introducing the concepts of rising and falling action. In doing so, he also introduced the notions of movement and change into the Aristotelian formula.

Freytag's pyramid looks like a triangle. Rising action is portrayed as literally rising, and falling action as descending. This creates a third dimension to the previous two-dimensional structure, so that visually we're now seeing not only the progression of action, but also the progression of tension, as rising action creates more tension. Freytag's point of highest tension is at the climax, at the apex of his pyramid. He also interchangeably called the climax the crisis.

But while Freytag took the 3-act structure to a new level and took a step toward integrating change and movement into shape, there are a couple of things misleading about his diagram.

The first is that Freytag's pyramid places the crisis/climax at the midpoint of an equilateral triangle, but this is a false representation, as I'll show you in a minute. Secondly, he did not, but we now think of crisis and climax as having separate functions in the plot.

A better representation of Freytag's ideas would be this, in which the crisis and climax occur late in the story arc and are turning points of great significance. However, this idea fails to incorporate Freytag's notion of rising and falling action so it's not quite perfect - but we'll get there in a minute.

The second plot shape paradigm was introduced by Joseph Campbell in the 1940s and refined by Christopher Vogler in the 1990s and is called the *hero's journey*. There are multiple stages to the hero's journey. What's important here is the following: first, notice how the circle uses Aristotle's three acts to define the shape but add layers of meaning to the journey of the main character. Second, there is a huge increase in the number of turning points that Vogler defined in his plot paradigm.

Furthermore, and most importantly, the Vogler hero's journey is the first time we see a clear correlation between the actions of the character and the turning points of story. Freytag touched on this but Vogler expanded it and related it to the archetypal story structure of the mythic quest identified in thousands of stories by Joseph Campbell.

There is one final shape paradigm we need to incorporate, and this is the one defined by Robert McKee and Martha Alderson and that I've named the "crisis to climax" paradigm. These two authors have given us a way to see rising tension as a value, while also defining the crisis and climax more specifically both in terms of what they do and where they are in the arc of plot. In this case, the crisis is the

moment of irreconcilable choice, and the climax is the moment of irreversible change.

The crisis and climax are therefore two additional turning points. Notice also how tension increases and decreases at points throughout the arc of the plot, and how the turning points are now assuming a kind of hierarchy with respect to tension. For example, the moment of highest tension in the story arc comes at the climax, and understandably this becomes the most important scene in the story, which is why McKee also calls it the "obligatory scene." What this plot paradigm does is pull in the rising and falling action of Freytag, gives it more detail, and places that action on a linear graph that makes it easier for us to use.

So from Freytag comes the visual idea of changing tension in the story. From Vogler comes the relationship between the character and the story. And from McKee and Alderson come the ideas of crisis and climax and ebb and flow of tension.

An analysis of most novels shows that the author consciously or unconsciously hits these marks spot-on, and I would urge you to try analyzing something you are reading and mark the turning points in a published novel.

Now, I will caution you again not to try and conform your draft to this plot plan. This is not a prison. But an analysis after you've finished your first draft may help you tweak your scenes or move them around to have a greater impact. Most importantly, as you'll see next, you can adjust your scenes so that those with the greatest tension hit the mark with respect to the crisis and climax.

Let's pull closer in and look more carefully at microcosmic change and movement, which impact the scene level of plot.

First, what's a scene?

Jack Bickham defines it this way: "a segment of story action written moment by moment, without summary, presented onstage in the story 'now'." The character is actively engaged in doing something. Within each scene is the following pattern: a statement of a goal, the development of conflict through action, resulting in disaster.

A sequel according to Bickham is the "glue between the scenes". It's reflective, takes place within the character's head, and here is the pattern of sequel: emotion, followed by reflection, followed by resolution to push on.

Change at the level of scene and sequel reflects how your protagonist learns from her mistakes. The most significant moments of change in your story must happen at the turning points of the story. And, by the way, with each change, there is no going back.

Within the scenes and sequels at each of these turning points your character will face an immediate problem, in the first act by making bad choices, and only after the midpoint and in the second act by making good choices.

Movement between scene and sequel at the microcosmic level means the alternation of positive and negative values between these two. A scene ends with a negative value as problems arise for the character. A sequel ends with a positive value that allows the character to move forward.

Scenes move the story forward but down to a negative ending - the "oh, no!" moment. Sequels don't move the story very far forward (that is, left to right) but they do end up with a positive value - as in - "okay, let's try this!" With each "oh, no!", the tension rises as the protagonist tries harder and harder to make things right. With each "okay" the protagonist renews her commitment to her story-worthy goal. And at the crisis and climax points, the character must face a truly difficult choice, trying to make the right decision that will result ultimately in victory.

Let's take a look at an example from The Hunger Games of this scene/sequel microcosm. I've chosen the opening of the story - specifically the inciting incident because it's so clearly laid out. In the opening scene, Katniss makes it very clear that it's her desire above all things to keep Prim safe. The reaping introduces a possible conflict, and indeed that scene ends with the drawing of Prim's name. Now there's a negative value, a death stakes. In the seconds that follow, during the sequel (no action, remember) Katniss has to reflect on what this means and then step up and volunteer - a positive value action that has immediate and horrifying consequences, setting us up for greater tension, higher stakes, and the next scene.

Plot incorporates turning points and tension, scene and sequel, so that the story moves with a balanced pace, neither too fast nor too slow. The arc of the plot moves the character to irreversible change, as she makes decisions both at a large and small scale that lead her to resolve her initial story-worthy problem. Ideally,

each story moment - each scene - incorporates tension to a generally increasing degree until the story's climax.

The elements of a great story are a balancing act but ultimately it is conflict - the character facing tests and making choices and then taking action - conflict over the resolution of the story-worthy problem - that is the glue that holds a story together.

Terms and Resources:

Terms

Plot point 1 – turning point between Act 1 and Act 2

Plot point 2 – turning point between Act 2 and Act 3

Midpoint – turning point at center of novel

Pinch 1 – minor turning point between plot point 1 and midpoint

Pinch 2 – minor turning point between midpoint and plot point 2

Inciting incident – the incident that propels the protagonist to action; occurs within the opening pages of the novel

Story-worthy problem – the deep, internal problem the protagonist must solve

Scene – a segment of story action, presented in the story “now”

Sequel – reflective moment between scenes

Value – the positive or negative attribute given to a story moment

Crisis – irreconcilable choice = story problem test = “ordeal”

Climax – moment of irreversible change = moment of highest emotional response from reader = obligatory scene = catharsis = “resurrection”

Terms from the Hero's Journey:

- ordinary world
- call to adventure
- refusal of the call
- meeting with the mentor
- crossing the first threshold
- tests, allies, enemies
- approach to the inmost cave
- ordeal
- reward (seizing the sword)
- the road back
- resurrection
- return with the elixir

Resources:

website address for downloadable pdf of plot diagram: <http://www.janetsfox.com> Go to "Fox's Den" to "Plot Paradigm"

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