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FROM PREMISE TO PLOT

Finding a Structure
Method that Works for
You



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ONE-SENTENCE SUMMARY

THE DREADED OUTLINE...

I actually love outlining. (Or maybe it's something more akin to Stockholm Syndrome.) I do a lot of ghostwriting and work-for-hire books, and those projects almost always require an outline to be approved before the draft is written. I've tried dozens of different methods, and I've found

that there's no One True Way —it's just a matter of figuring out which way works for THIS book.

So which way is best for you?
Let's find out!

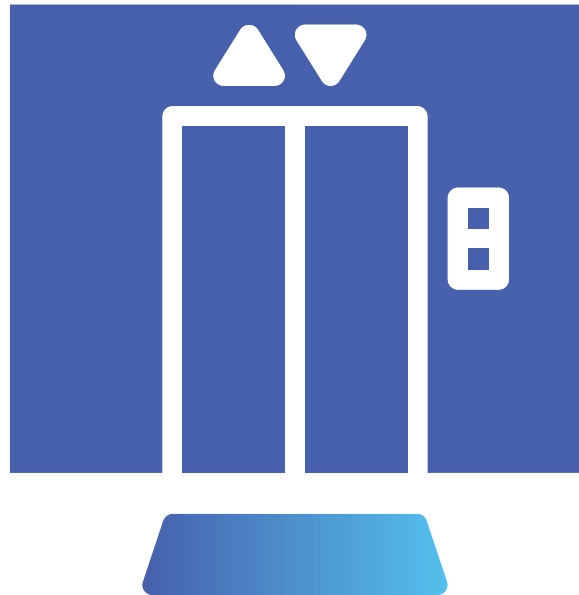
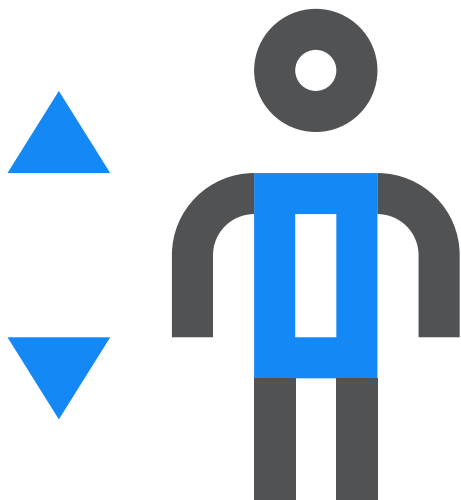


THE ELEVATOR PITCH

Agents love a good pitch they can use on editors. Editors love a good pitch they can use on their sales and marketing teams. Sales and marketing teams love a good pitch they can use on booksellers and the media, and ultimately, readers. As Cheryl Klein puts it in [The Magic Words](#):

"Editors love to publish books with both rich emotional promise and what I call a saleable premise. A saleable premise is a book concept that can find a satisfactory audience of book buyers."

Another term that gets tossed around frequently is "high concept," meaning the novel can be easily explained in a brief pitch, often by comparing it to other well-known artistic entities. For example, the popular podcast Welcome to Night Vale was originally promoted as "Lake Wobegone as seen through the eyes of Stephen King."



The opposite of high-concept, of course, is low-concept, which refers to quieter works that focus more on character development, introspection, and subtlety.

If this is the type of novel you're writing, you can still come up with an easily digestible pitch. Instead of looking for artistic works with comparable plots and settings, go for those who explore similar themes or whose main characters share an important trait in common with your own.

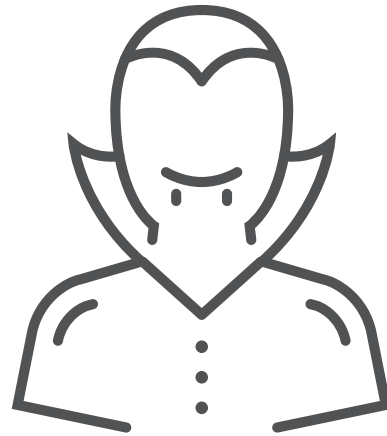
"A saleable premise is a book concept that can find a satisfactory audience of book buyers."

Take a few minutes to consider all parts of your novel: characters, plot, setting, world-building, theme, any unique elements.

Make a list of any standout details (e.g. West African folklore, disabled heroine, genderless ghosts, an absurdist exploration of depression). Now:

- List five novels that share at least one of those traits with your novel.
- List five TV shows that share at least one of those traits with your novel.
- List five movies that share at least one of those traits with your novel.
- List five other artists or artistic endeavors (authors, showrunners, podcasts, comic books, musicals, anything goes!) that share something in common with your novel.

Now mix and match! You'll likely find a few combinations that do a surprisingly decent job of representing your novel.



The X meets Y pitch can help you out on the trends front, too. Let's use *Twilight* as an example. At the height of that series' popularity, editors were acquiring YA paranormal romance at lightning speed. Today, not so much. But that doesn't mean you can't sell your vampire paranormal romance, nor does it mean you can't use *Twilight* in your pitch. You just have to choose a Y that highlights a completely unique and compelling element of your novel.

Twilight meets *The Handmaid's Tale*: vampires living in a misogynistic totalitarian state? Now that's different. *Twilight* meets *Fargo*: black comedy-mystery with vampires? Sounds pretty original. *Twilight* as seen through the eyes of Lewis Carroll? Well, I can't say that will sell, but I've definitely never read anything like it!

If you find the publishing industry's constant search for the next version of the last big hit irritating, you're not alone. What about originality? What about that whole "write the book you can't find on the shelves" advice editors love to dole out, even as they acquire yet another Chosen One series?

You don't have to write to trends. You *shouldn't* write to trends. But you should be aware and mindful of them.

Write a wholly unique and original novel, then use your knowledge of trends to pitch it.

TURNING PREMISE INTO PLOT

The secret to finding your plot is in one simple acronym...C.O.W.

By C.O.W., I mean Character-Obstacle-Want. That's plotting at its most basic: someone wants something, and something else stands in his way. So if a student tells me her idea for a story is "a girl who can stop time," I'd say awesome! What does she want?

Let's say the answer is "to save her imprisoned father." Great!

What's standing in her way? Considering her power, I would think that would be a relatively easy task! "Well, her father is in a timeless prison, so her powers don't work." WHOA. Now we're getting somewhere.

Of course, pretty much all characters want more than one thing. In fact, even at this early stage in the process, it's important to think about two types of wants: **the external, and the internal**. Stories with strong plots but weak character arcs tend to lack the internal want; stories with strong character arcs but weak plots tend to lack the external want. In his first book, Harry wanted to find the sorcerer's stone (external) and Voldemort/Quirrell stood in his way (the antagonist is often the obstacle to the external want). He also wanted to find family, friends, acceptance, a sense of belonging (internal) but his fame and notoriety made it challenging (obstacles to internal wants tend to be abstract).



The rest of this lesson is devoted to different types of plotting techniques. I've split them into sections to make it easier to find what you're looking for. If you've tried a certain method and you know it doesn't work for you, feel free to skip it! Conversely, if you've used one with success in the past, but it's not working on your current project, try playing with a different method. I used the Snowflake Method for several books, then hit a wall with it on one particular project. I switched to using notecards, and the plot came quickly.

Every idea, every story, is unique: you might have a well-developed, highly opinionated protagonist with clear wants in mind, but the premise is still forming. Or you may have a vivid setting and an exciting man-vs-nature conflict ready to go, but you're still getting to know your main character. Allow yourself to play with different methods until you find the right one for *this* idea.

ONE LAST THING...

Years ago, I read a piece of writing advice that really stuck with me. Alas, the source did not, and I can't seem to find it anywhere so this paraphrasing will have to go uncredited (if you know the source, please enlighten me!):

**WHETHER PLOTTING,
OUTLINING, OR
DRAFTING, HOLD YOUR
IDEA IN YOUR HANDS
LIKE A FRAGILE BIRD.**

As authors, we set the rules of our worlds. But if we do this too early in the process, we end up restricting ourselves. We crush the bird. Your outline—and your first draft—will have contradictions.



You'll get to chapter nine or the Act Two Disaster or the B story and realize something crucial about your characters, conflict, world that's at odds with everything you've written thus far.

Don't ignore this burst of inspiration and force yourself to squeeze your plot into a rigid framework. Nothing should be rigid at this point in the process. Let your imagination wander and explore every corner of your idea. Cleaning and clarifying should be done during the revisions stage, not the plotting stage.

Be messy!



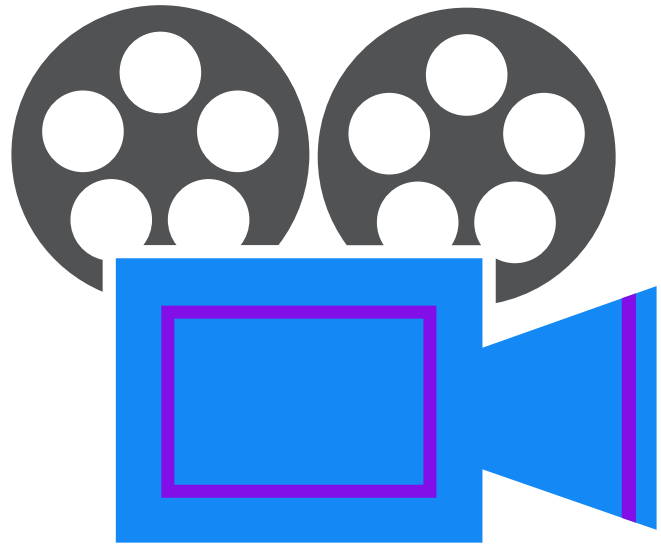
THREE ACT STRUCTURE

This is the classic structure for stories in any format—novel, film, short story, play. Act 1 and Act 3 each take up about a quarter of your book, while Act 2 takes half. When I'm trying to sell a novel on proposal (full synopsis + sample chapters), this is the structure I use to create the synopsis:

OPENING SCENE

Introduce the protagonist and any side characters important to the start of the book. Explain what the protagonist wants (internally and/or externally), and include any pertinent information about the setting.

Be brief; this isn't the time for lengthy descriptions of a fantasy world's centuries-long war. Hone in on the most critically important details of your setting (i.e. "sleepy rural town with swamplands and buried secrets" or "post-apocalyptic pastoral society where uncontaminated livestock are worth their weight in gold.")



INCITING INCIDENT

Explain what happens that sets the protagonist's story in motion. In the vast majority of stories, this is either "someone new enters the protagonist's life and shakes things up" or "the protagonist ventures away from home and into the unknown." It could be a choice the protagonist makes, or it could be something that happens to the protagonist against her will. However, it's important to note that after this point, it's vital that the protagonist drives the plot forward with her choices. **A good story isn't about things happening to someone; it's about someone making things happen.**



THREE ACT STRUCTURE (CON'T)

ACT ONE PROBLEM

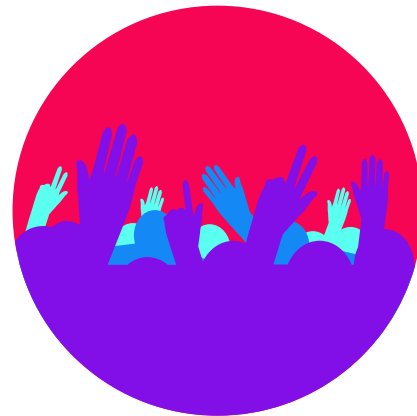
Something goes wrong, and your protagonist acts on it. This is where the core conflict of your story emerges. Show what's at stake for the protagonist if she fails to achieve her goal.



ACT TWO CHOICE

The protagonist makes a difficult but necessary choice. She means well, and it seems like the best course of action (or, if she's the impulsive sort, she knows it's a bad choice but can't help herself). Either way, the consequences will send her careening towards disaster.

the stakes yet again, forcing the protagonist to make another, bigger choice, making you sit up and pay even closer attention

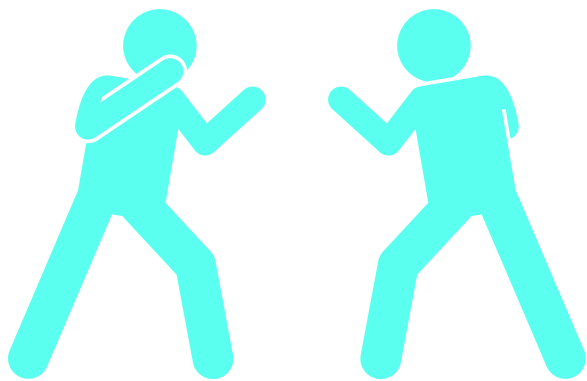


MIDPOINT TWIST

New information is revealed that sends the story sideways. For many writers (myself included), this is often the solution to those muddy, meandering chapters in the middle of a book. Too often, we take off sprinting from the inciting incident, then lose steam and wander around in the middle, unsure of how to get our characters to Act Three. A well-paced book will usually have a twist in the middle that raises

ACT TWO DISASTER

The protagonist's chickens come home to roost. This is her "dark night of the soul," where everything has gone wrong and it's all her fault, and there is no viable solution in sight. The reader can't imagine how she'll get herself out of this one.



ACT THREE PLAN

The protagonist resolves (or at least confronts) her innermost fears, addressing her internal want. Then she rallies and comes up with a new plan of action.

CLIMAX

The protagonist puts her new plan in motion, confronts the antagonist, and wins the day (or flames out, if that's your jam!). This is where she deals with her external want.



THREE ACT STRUCTURE (CON'T)



WRAP UP

The aftermath of all that's happened. Show how the protagonist will move forward after everything she's learned/lost/found.

If you're writing the first book in a series, the wrap-up will also explain how the aftermath of the climax set the wheels in motion for what comes next.



HERO'S JOURNEY

Arguably the most well-known and widely used formula for story structure. At its most basic, The Hero's Journey includes:

DEPARTURE

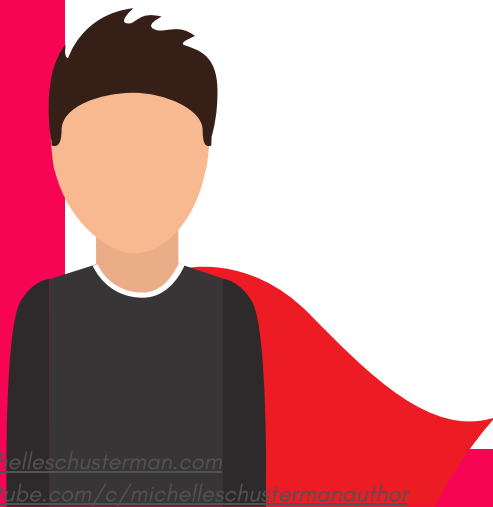
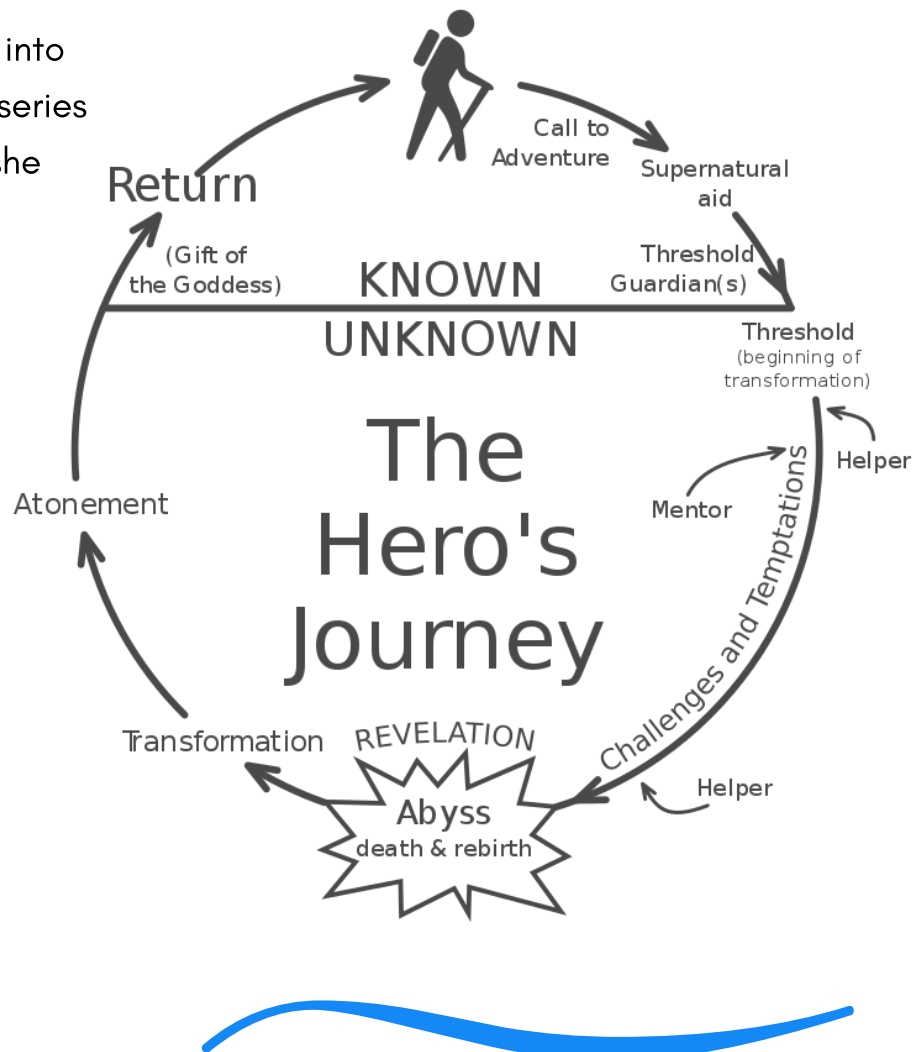
Your protagonist leaves his home and comfort zone (physically, metaphorically, or both).

EXPLORATION

Your protagonist ventures into new territory and faces a series of obstacles to get what she wants.

RETURN

Your protagonist returns home with a new perspective.



SAVE THE CAT!

Save the Cat! is a series of books on plotting by screenwriter and author Blake Snyder. The beat sheet below shows the essential points a story must hit, and the books go into detail about when exactly that beat should happen.

It's a highly useful guide—and a rather infamous one, because once you memorize those beats and become aware of them, you'll see them in every action movie you watch, to the point where you feel positively clairvoyant.



Beat Sheet		
(from Save the Cat! By Blake Snyder)		
Beat	Page	Summary
Opening Image	1	<i>Set tone for story</i>
Theme	5	<i>Main idea</i>
Set-Up	1 to 10	<i>Background for story</i>
Catalyst	12	<i>Change the world, set story in motion</i>
Debate	12 to 25	<i>Choices for the protagonist</i>
Act II	25 to 30	<i>Leave old situation, enter new one</i>
B story	30	<i>Secondary plot line</i>
Fun & Game	30 to 55	<i>Promise of the Premise</i>
Midpoint	55	<i>Stories A and B cross, false victory or false defeat</i>
Bad Guys Close In	55 to 65	<i>Villains regroup and push forward</i>
All is Lost	75	<i>Mirror Midpoint, false defeat</i>
Dark Night of the Soul	75 to 85	<i>Why is all this happening?</i>
Act III	5	<i>Eurea Moment</i>
Finale	85 to 110	<i>Solve problems, defeat villains, change world for better</i>
Final Image	110	<i>Mirror of opening image, lessons learned, how the world has changed</i>

FOR MORE, VISIT [HTTPS://SAVETHECAT.COM/](https://savethecat.com/)



THE SNOWFLAKE METHOD



This method, designed by Randy Ingermanson, is my go-to when I'm starting a new project. Sometimes I stick to every step; sometimes I veer off into another method after Step 2.

In my opinion, it's the most organic and useful method out there for turning an idea into a premise into a plot into a story. (Bonus: if you do just the first two steps, you'll have a solid start to your query.)

For detailed step-by-step instructions, check out the link below. But here are the basics:

- 1. WRITE A ONE-SENTENCE SUMMARY OF YOUR NOVEL.**
- 2. EXPAND THAT INTO A FIVE-SENTENCE PARAGRAPH (SET-UP, THREE DISASTERS, AND THE ENDING).**
- 3. CREATE A ONE-PAGE SUMMARY SHEET FOR EACH MAJOR CHARACTER'S ARC.**
- 4. EXPAND EACH SENTENCE FROM STEP #2 INTO A FULL PARAGRAPH (ONE PAGE TOTAL).**
- 5. WRITE A ONE-PAGE DESCRIPTION FOR EACH MAJOR CHARACTER AND A HALF-PAGE DESCRIPTION FOR EACH SUPPORTING CHARACTER.**
- 6. EXPAND YOUR ONE-PAGE SYNOPSIS FROM STEP #4 INTO A FOUR-PAGE SYNOPSIS.**
- 7. EXPAND YOUR CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS FROM STEP #5 INTO DETAILED CHARACTER CHARTS.**
- 8. DESCRIBE EACH SCENE IN ONE SENTENCE.**
- 9. EXPAND EACH SENTENCE FROM STEP #9 INTO A FULL PARAGRAPH OR PAGE SCENE SUMMARY.**
- 10. WRITE YOUR DRAFT!**

FOR MORE, VISIT [HTTPS://WWW.ADVANCEDFICTIONWRITING.COM/ARTICLES/SNOWFLAKE-METHOD/](https://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/articles/snowflake-method/)



OUTLINE-BY-NOTECARDS

If your brain is bursting with scene ideas and plot twist reveals and big emotional moments but you're not sure how to tie it all together, and/or if you're a visual/hands-on thinker, then this is the method for you. Here's how you do it:



1. GET A STACK OF NOTECARDS.

2. WRITE SCENE IDEAS ON EACH ONE. THESE CAN BE AS VAGUE OR DETAILED AS YOU LIKE. DON'T WORRY ABOUT ORDER, JUST WRITE AS MANY AS YOU CAN THINK OF.

3. SPREAD THEM OUT ON A TABLE OR THE FLOOR.

4. START ARRANGING THEM IN ORDER. MOST LIKELY, YOU'LL HAVE A FEW THAT ARE DEFINITELY AT THE BEGINNING, AND A FEW THAT ARE DEFINITELY AT THE END. GET THOSE IN THEIR SPOTS FIRST, THEN START SHUFFLING THE OTHERS AROUND INTO THE MOST LOGICAL ORDER FOR NOW. (YOU CAN ALWAYS MOVE THEM AGAIN LATER.)

5. AS YOU DO THIS, THE JUXTAPOSITION OF CERTAIN SCENES WILL LIKELY TRIGGER IDEAS FOR EVEN MORE SCENES. WRITE THEM DOWN AND SLIDE THEM INTO PLACE.

6. REPEAT UNTIL THERE ARE NO GAPS BETWEEN SCENES AND EACH ONE LEADS LOGICALLY TO THE NEXT.



ONE-SENTENCE SUMMARY

Ready to start plotting your novel? This is the best place to begin!

Summarize the premise of your novel in one sentence. This can be incredibly challenging—in some cases, it's taken me hours to really hone in on the core concept of a novel. But this is a necessary step whether you're a plotter or pantser.



It's also essential for pitching your book to agents and publishers. A well-crafted one-sentence summary is something you can come back to later in the drafting process if you feel stuck or suspect your story is going off the rails. Check the descriptions of shows and movies on Netflix for examples of great one-sentence summaries!

LOOKING FOR MORE WRITING ACTIVITIES?

CHECK OUT MY WRITING WORKSHOP WEDNESDAY SERIES ON YOUTUBE!

