

It's all in the Plot! With Lisa Wilde

2 PM Friday (50 min)

“How to build a plot structure you can really hang your story on! We’ll also look at plot devices and discuss our favourite tropes!”

Hello – and Welcome to It’s all in the Plot! My name is Lisa Wilde, and this is the first of three sessions I’ll be doing this weekend. Joining me in the background is Amanda Witow, author of Legends Legacy and Poseidon’s Wrath. She’ll be monitoring the chat box and will give me a heads up if someone has a question or comment to bring to my attention.

Just a note – this session will be recorded and included in the When Words Collide 2020 YouTube channel at the end of the weekend. If I’ve managed to push the right button ... I’ll also have materials available on this and my other sessions on my author’s website www.LisaDWilde.ca So far, it’s pretty bare bones. But it’ll soon include stuff on my future books (two in editing as we speak), as well as some other fun stuff. Maybe even a Blog!!!

So – you have an idea for a story. Or a character. Maybe a situation. Now what? Are you ready to write your masterpiece? Well.... Maybe not quite yet. Unless you are 100% a pantsner, you’re going to need a bit more than that to get your story off the ground. And that’s where Plot comes in.

But just what is “Plot?”

Plot is what happens to your main character. Where Narrative Arc is the journey, Plot is the road itself. It’s the sequence of events driving your story onwards. And today we’re going to discuss how to build your Plot, and how to make it a strong one.

Plot shouldn’t dominate your story at the expense of your Characters, nor should it take a backseat to them. It can be a bit of balancing act to let Plot, Characters, Setting, and Action shine without sidelining any of the others.

So, where to start?

Let's start with your Story. Ask yourself two questions:

- 1) What happens?
- 2) What does it mean?

What *happens* is your Plot. What it *means* is your Theme. Trying to answer these two questions at this early stage probably isn't going to give you fully developed answers yet, but they should start your brain bubbling and brewing. So let's move on, and see how we build a plot structure from just the bare bones of an idea.

Structure is the scaffolding you build the story on, and I'll go into it in more detail in a bit. But first – we are going to look at taking that idea you've started with, and looking at how to develop each element that goes into the development of your story and your plot. So how do we do that?

When turning an idea into a full-blown Plot, every writer will have a potentially different process. And technically, there isn't a single element you need to start with. Start with whatever feels natural to you. In no particular order, these are the important elements of your story that need to be developed as part of the process of developing your Plot, and your Story itself.

- 1) Main Character
- 2) Antagonistic Force
- 3) Overall Goal
- 4) Motivations & Consequences
- 5) The Beginning Situation
- 6) The Mid-Point
- 7) The Ending Situation

And remember:

“Make your characters want something right away even if it's only a glass of water. Characters paralyzed by the meaninglessness of modern life still have to drink water from time to time.”

— Kurt Vonnegut

Main Character

The hero or heroine. The star. The protagonist. Whatever you call them, they are the person, alien, animal, or plant the story revolves around. In this way, they are,

in fact, the centre of their universe. Now, today we won't be touching on stories with multiple point-of-view characters, but rest assured, the process of figuring out your Plot is the same, even if your Main Character is one of many.

So if you don't already have your Main Character, think of who you would want to follow through the upcoming journey you are beginning to envision. Maybe they're about to have their world turned completely upside down—in which case, you can extrapolate the kind of person they are—or maybe they're your idealized self in a trench coat. Doesn't matter. This is your character's starting point. But your character design shouldn't stop here.

You should think about who they are, not just in terms of what they look like and what they do, but in terms of their wants, fears, and dreams. If this was the spark to get your story started, then you probably already know a lot of this. If it wasn't, then you need to think about how these internal factors are going to interact with the world around them. Think of it like an iceberg – only a small portion is above the surface for everyone to see. But there's so much more beneath the surface ...

A shy character is going to see and move through the world in a very different way from an outgoing one. But what if the shy character's dream job requires them to give public speeches? What if the outgoing one becomes a viral meme, and not for a good reason? Not all "shy" characters are going to act the same, and neither will all "outgoing" ones.

There are many lists of questions and prompts to help writers flesh out their characters. They may or may not work for you, and having all the details of a character written out may or may not help. Regardless of how much you write down, you do need to have a firm grasp on where your character is starting, and a rough idea of what you want their ending self to be. A 100% pantsner might reject that concept, and that's OK to! Your process is what it is – don't fight it just to conform to something you read or heard.

At the very least, imagine what an average day looks like for them. When do they wake up? What do they eat, if anything, for breakfast? Where do they go? What do they do? Who do they speak with? Etc., etc.

This image of your character is important because it's them before your story gets started. And if your character's arc includes change or reversals by the end of the story, you need to show what they were like before that happens.

Antagonistic Force

Someone, or something, is opposing your Main Character. It could be another character, the voice inside their head, the weather, their society, or some intangible force, like Fate or Death.

One of the main driving forces of any Plot is the Conflict. The opposing needs or wants of the Main Character and their Antagonistic Force. There are six general types of Conflict, which means there are six general types of Antagonistic Forces.

Person, Self, Nature, Society, Technology, and Supernatural.

- 1) Person vs Person is any conflict between two characters, whether they are friends, enemies, family, or strangers.
- 2) Person vs Self is any internal conflict, such as a desire for a relationship paired with a fear of being hurt.
- 3) Person vs Nature is a conflict between the Main Character and their environment. The go-to for this type of conflict is a natural disaster, but it could also be trying to live in the wilderness, or exploring some new world.
- 4) Person vs Society is a struggle between what the Main Character is, wants, or needs, and what their local community (whether that's a neighbourhood, city, or country) says is acceptable or expected.
- 5) Person vs Technology is usually a combination of Self and Society, where the conflict is intrinsically tied to scientific discovery, advancement, and development.
- 6) Person vs Supernatural is any conflict in which the opposing force is otherworldly. Ghosts, Wizards, Gods, Destiny, or a sentient Universe.

Many stories include multiple forms of conflict—combining any external conflict with an internal one is very common—but each story needs to have a single, focal conflict. This is the Antagonistic Force. It's the driving force behind the Plot.

Which brings us to...

Overall Goal

With a Main Character and an Antagonistic Force detailed, we can think about what the overall goal is. Which isn't to say the overall goal can't be your story spark, or that you can't decide on it before the working out details on your main

character and/or your antagonistic force, but most people find it far easier to shape the goal once they know who the main players in the story will be.

While every character will have *a* goal, *The Goal*, is where the Main Character and Antagonistic Force clash. In a sense, the Goal is the driving force behind the Plot.

Every obstacle, side-quest, complication, success, and frustration need to tie in to the Overall Goal in some way. Without this connection, we end up with a weak Plot or even no Plot at all!

You don't need to state how these story elements connect to the Overall Goal, but you do need to know it. How will pursuing a seemingly random task of browsing through a pop-up market impact the Overall Goal? Will the Main Character miss some time sensitive event? Will they find something or meet someone who can help them achieve their goal? Knowing how it affects things will help keep you from getting lost in the weeds as you write or outline.

Motivations and Consequences

The second big thing a story needs is Motivation and a Consequence tied to the Overall Goal. Combined, this sums up your Story Arc. How the story moves along based on those elements is your Plot.

In the most basic terms, Motivation is *why* your Main Character needs to embark on the journey ahead of them. Consequence is what will happen if your Main Character refuses their Call-to-Action, or fails at achieving it.

Based on the Kurt Vonnegut quote from before, if you have a character whose Overall Goal is to obtain a drink of water, the Motivation could be as simple as “they are thirsty.” You can, of course, make it more complicated. Maybe the water is for someone else, a pet, or their beloved bonsai tree. But it is what they need.

Then, the Consequence could be “they remain thirsty,” or even “they die of thirst.” The severity of the Consequence needs to be high enough for the reader to feel tension—they need to want the Main Character to succeed—but it also needs to feel reasonable. A character dying of thirst in their living room doesn't seem believable, but one dying of thirst after getting lost on a hike does.

Similarly, Motivation needs to be believable—though most readers are a bit more forgiving of slightly outlandish Motivations. Remember when you thought about

your Main Character's wants, fears, and dreams? That'll help you figure out what is, and isn't, a believable Motivation.

The Beginning Situation

These last couple points might seem to be less important for the Plot, but they're actually quite necessary. Without them, your Plot will seem detached. Imagine if you had your thirsty character sitting on their living room couch, then all of a sudden they were in the middle of a desert. The Motivation, Consequence, and Overall Goal make sense in connection with each other, but not with how the character started. Without a strong connection to the Beginning Situation, the Plot can feel arbitrary and pointless—no matter how compelling the Motivation, Consequence, and Goal.

Your Beginning Situation can be anywhere from a paragraph to the first chapter of your story, but it is the introduction to of all the Plot Elements we've already discussed. It links the reader to the Main Character, it makes the reader empathize with their Motivation and Overall Goal, and it makes the reader scared of the Consequence. It grounds the story. This isn't necessarily the Inciting Incident that many Plot Structure diagrams talk about – you still need that, but it's a separate thing entirely. (The Inciting Incident is what happens or happened that precedes the character embarking on their journey. It's usually the catalyst for why the character goes on that journey as well. The Beginning Situation is where your story opens).

The Mid-Point

The Mid-Point is an important element because it is where you begin to weave all the disparate threads together. By the Mid-Point of the story, the reader should have a good idea of how the story will end. Despite visual media's current obsession with twist endings no-one saw coming, it is incredibly frustrating to readers to have an Ending Situation not tied to everything that came before. The Mid-Point is where you make a promise to the reader that there will be a logical conclusion. It's where the Overall Goal is finally on the horizon.

The Ending Situation

Now, all of this isn't to say you can't have a twist ending, but genuine twist endings are rewards for people who reread, or re-watch, a story unfold. There need to be hints, clues, foreshadowing, and a basis for the twist that makes a reader slap their forehead and ask, "How did I miss that?!"

Meaning a twist ending has the exact same requirements as a regular one.

It needs to make logical sense. It needs to provide a release of tension. It needs to resolve most, if not all, of the goals (little g) as well as the Overall Goal. It needs to show the reader what the Main Character's life will be like going forward. Will life go back to the way it was? What has changed? How has the character changed? Do any changes cause new tension? Will the character need a re-adjustment period?

These questions should also be answered, and can be especially important for books which are part of a series as it helps set-up the next story.

With all of that figured out, you've got yourself the beginning of a strong Plot and, very possibly, the beginning of an outline.

What about Plot Structure, Plot Devices, and Tropes? And how do they make our overall Plot, and Story, stronger?

Plot Structure is the scaffolding for your Plot. You lay your Plot along the structure to help you figure out pacing and where you can add in any secondary goals you want to include without drowning out the Overall Goal.

Thank you to Kristina Stanley, of Fictionary, who put this next bit on Structure together. I couldn't improve on how she put it, so I didn't even try! She's got lots of helpful and witty suggestions on becoming a better writer – check her out! But after we're done here!

Most of us are familiar with the three-act story structure in terms of a [story arc](#). The story arc has been around for over 2,000 years. It's a proven form that keeps readers engaged, but it's not about being formulaic: the story and the imagination behind it are unique to you.

A powerful story contains key plot events. To create a story readers love, these events must happen at the right time.

Once you have the plot in the form of an outline or a first draft, you can work out how your plot is going to fit on the story arc, then you can make sure you create the story you want to tell.

After you know the plot, you'll work on rearranging the events, creating the structure of the story.

The story arc is made up of the Inciting Incident, Plot Point One, the Midpoint, Plot Point Two, the Climax, and the Resolution.

Let's demonstrate a story arc in terms of the artist writing a novel.

Inciting Incident: You've been living your life, but something just isn't right. AND THEN...your brain tells you that you need to write a story. You don't know yet how hard this is going to be, but your world has changed, and you're going to roll with it. So here's the problem. How are you going to write 80,000 to 100,000 words and get people to like it? This happens before 15% of your total work count.

Plot Point One: You've written 20,000 words or so, spent hours doing this, and there is no turning back. You've invested emotion, time, brainpower, and you won't give up. This happens between 20% and 30% of your total work count.

Midpoint: You've made it halfway. Now you really get working. Everything you have is going into the story. This is where you figure how hard it is to write a novel, but you're determined to solve the problem. You're proactive in your writing, but you still make mistakes. You guessed it... this happens right around 50% into your story.

Plot Point Two: Your structure is a mess. Everything you've written since the middle is making it difficult to bring the story together. You don't know how to end the story, but you know you must work hard to finish or you'll lose the whole story—and maybe a little part of yourself, too. This happens between 70% and 80% of your total work count.

Climax: You are going to overcome your demons and finish the story. Your adrenaline is rushing. You've got this. You just have to fight your way through.

You're almost at the word count you need, and you've solved your problem. This happens between 85% and 95% of your total word count.

Resolution: You've changed from a would-be writer to an author. The hard work was worth it. There may even be a part of you that's looking forward to writing the next book.

You can use the key scenes to analyze your plot and determine if you have each scene in the right place. You'll have noticed there is a range for the placement of each event, so don't get stressed if you're not exact. You'll come back to these later and check the scene placement after you've worked on the final step.

Once again, thank you to Kristina!

If you are a Plotter kind of writer, you will want to lay out your Plot Structure before you start writing, jotting down all the plot points – major and minor. If you are a Pantser, you can do this after you have finished your first draft. Now - what is a Plot Point? This is an event that takes the story and swings it in another direction. It has to be something that forces the protagonist to stop and change direction (not necessarily literally!) A complication can be a plot point, but not necessarily. The complication could and should be something that leads to a plot point. For example – your protagonist's brother is having major life problems. A complication. The plot point is when the protagonist decides to stay and help his brother deal with the mess his life is in. The situation changed from what it was, to something else.

Your Story Arc deals with the overall layout of your story. How it is broken up into chapters and scenes, what is the main conflict and the climax, what will be the final resolution. The Plot is the specific series of events that make up your story. Once you have the big picture (the story arc) worked out, then it's time to start plotting how you go from point A (The Beginning) to Z (The Ending) – ie your Plot. It's the roadmap on your story's journey. And maybe that's a plug for my Sunday session – A Map is Not A Journey Or Not.

Plot Devices are the tools you use to progress the story forward. It could be an item, another character, a situation, or coincidence that forces the characters onwards. These types of Plot Devices are the most commonly used and, because of

this, can seem clichéd to your readers. Whether your readers mind or not will depend largely on how well the Plot Device is incorporated into the story.

A character who shows up exactly once in the story to declare that the item the Main Character needs to achieve their Overall Goal is at a specific location is *not* a good use of a Plot Device.

A character who crosses paths with the Main Character several times throughout the story and shares gossip each time, but whose gossip is only helpful to the Overall Goal a few of those times, *is* a good use of a Plot Device.

Plot Devices can also be internal. They can be the result of a secondary conflict, a realization, or some other change happening to the Main Character that makes them renew their efforts, or change their approach. When a reader says they prefer “Character Driven Plots,” this is what they mean. The Main Character, or an important secondary character, is their own Plot Device.

Here is a list of common Plot Devices:

1. **Red herring:** A red herring is a fakeout—a plot point that appears to be crucial but later proves to be a distraction from material that’s actually important. Agatha Christie loaded her whodunit mystery novels with red herrings, and her readers actively looked for them, hoping to spot the frauds among the actually important characters.
2. **Plot voucher:** A plot voucher is essentially the opposite of a red herring. It refers to a character or object that is introduced early in a story but does not become critical until later in the story. This follows the Chekov’s Gun theory. The Russian playwright Anton Chekov wrote that people and objects should not be introduced to a story if they will not later play a role in the narrative. Specifically, Chekov believed that if a gun was hanging on the wall in the first scene, at some point that gun would have to go off. A Chekov’s gun can provide foreshadowing in thrillers or mystery whodunits.
3. **MacGuffin:** Also known as a plot coupon, a MacGuffin is a plot device wherein the characters of the story pursue an object that is ultimately insignificant beyond its ability to move the story forward. The term was popularized by Alfred Hitchcock, who enjoyed putting MacGuffins into his thriller films. In Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, multiple characters obsess over the delivery of a briefcase, though what the briefcase contains is never revealed. J.K. Rowling pays homage to this

in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, where Harry and Voldemort both seek a stone with magical powers.

4. **Love triangle:** A love triangle is a love story involving three characters. Typically two of the characters are both in love with the third. In William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, both Nathan and Stingo are in love with Sophie, although the story is about so much more than romantic love.
5. **Quest:** Like in Homer's *Odyssey*, many of the world's most popular and timeless narratives involve characters on a quest. Indiana Jones is forever on a quest in films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the Jedi knights embark on one epic quest after another in the *Star Wars* series. These quests drive the narrative, and various subplots fall into place around them.
6. **Cliffhanger:** A cliffhanger is one of the most commonly used plot devices for good reason. By not resolving an ending, an author keeps their readers yearning for more and certain to come back. Most comic books end each installment on a cliffhanger—often with the hero dangling over a death trap.
7. **Deus ex machina:** A deus ex machina is a plot device that connects the loose ends of an entire plot and brings them to resolution. Authors from the Greek tragedian Euripides to Charles Dickens to Stephen King have relied on a deus ex machina to resolve dense dramatic conflicts. In the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the wizard Gandalf often functions as a deus ex machina character—able to appear in tense moments to resolve situations that may otherwise seem hopeless. Note that a deus ex machina is often a crutch. A sudden, unearned resolution to a conflict (especially one that egregiously violates the rules of the real world) can literally elicit groans from a dissatisfied audience. So use this plot device with prudence

And now, 12 Plot Devices that are considered “bad”:

1. Love Triangle

A story about a boy and a girl falling in love seems a bit on the boring side, but the love triangle seems to be done and dusted. We do enjoy a good love story, but this one has been covered way too many times. You can always get lit review help if you are stuck, but it might just be time to get more creative.

2. The evil one

Good thrillers go a long way in literature and that is because we love the thrill of them being defeated. When creating an evil or bad character, make sure to give some personality. No one is completely evil, so add some spice just to make the reader relate to the character.

3. Average person takes the crown

There is something about an average person who suddenly discovers that there is something special about him / her. We all wish that this could happen to us, but this has been one of the most overused tropes.

4. Ugly turned beauty queen

The story of the ugly duckling has been around for ages and it is time to stop. The story of a girl who is considered less than attractive goes on to become prom queen is not original at all. Hiring literature review writing services can help writers discover their own originality.

5. Cop falls in love with criminal

A lot of shows on television might have killed this one for writers, but it is overdone. The cop looks for a suspect, only to find that there is a spark between the two of them. This does not even happen that often in real life, so many we should stop.

6. Save the world

The hero who saves the world is definitely overused. When you start reading these types of books, you can already predict the ending. This does not add any excitement, which might be what the writer had in mind.

7. Back to my small town

This person is from a small town but moves to the city. Once they have reached success, they return to their home town for some reason. Usually, this is when the

parents have died. Then eye contact with the school sweetheart results in magic and they live happily ever after.

8. The sheriff

In a small town, there is this cowboy cop who seems to be undefeated. He always wins over the bad guys, until an entire army decides to take over the town. The rest of the town gets involved in helping, but ultimately the sheriff with his cowboy hat wins the day. This has been over used for ages.

9. The conspiracy

We love conspiracy theories, but if it involves a secret weapon that is about to destroy the earth, you might want to rethink that plot. Literature review writers would probably advise the same.

10. Vampires are just normal people

After Twilight became a hit, everyone seems to be into writing about vampires. The vampire who is actually just a normal person who falls in love has been covered enough. Sure, this book sold a gazillion copies, but that is because at the time, it was in fact original.

11. Falls in love with the unnoticed

This story begins with someone shy who is in love with a girl. After some time passes, the girl notices this strange looking character and suddenly realizes that she is in love with him. Let's just stop right there and move on to the next plot.

12. The airport rush

I think movies killed this one for us, so using it as part of your literature might be a bore. The person only realized that in fact, the person about to board a flight is the love they did not see. Come on people, we can do better than this. Then this is followed by the rush to the airport, where they just make it in time to tell the person not to leave. We get it. Airplane companies do delay flights for love sake.

Conclusion

None of these are bad writing, but they've just been overused. If your story does include these, you might want to add a surprising twist, just to keep the reader intrigued.

Finally, there are Tropes.

“Trope” has become something of a dirty word in the world of storytelling, but it's important to remember that almost every aspect of a story is a trope in some way. While the original definition was the use of figurative language, it has since become a device, motif, or cliché seen commonly across various creative works. Even trope subversion is, in itself, a trope!

It can be hard to not get defensive if someone accuses your work of being “trope-y,” but try to remember that they're using the description as a sort of short-hand. They *could* be using it as an insult. Or they could mean they found the story to be predictable. Or boring. Maybe they thought a certain aspect would have been better if it used a different trope or a trope subversion. Maybe they even meant it to mean they thought the story had some of that old-school campy fun that can be seen in some re-runs of Scooby Doo, Star Trek, and Twilight Zone.

Unless the person calling your work “trope-y” is a critique partner, beta-reader, or editor, then try not to worry about what they meant. If the person was one of those, then you are most certainly allowed to ask for clarification.

And just because one person doesn't like the Trope you used doesn't mean it's not someone else's favourite Trope.

And yes – the word “trope” is often exchanged with the term “plot device”.

However, the difference is that all Plot Devices are Tropes, but not all Tropes are Plot Devices!

Some common Tropes:

- Chosen One
- Damsel in Distress
- Femme Fatale
- Girl Next Door
- Mad Scientist
- Wise Old Man
- Dumb Muscle/Jock
- Antihero
- Achilles Heel
- Adults Are Useless
- Big Bad
- Bigger On The Inside
- Boss Battle
- Cowardly Lion
- Creepy Child
- Defends Against Their Own Kind
- Decoy Protagonist
- Evil Is Sexy
- Evil Laugh
- Face Death With Dignity
- Good Cop Bad Cop
- Comic Relief Sidekick
- Humans Are The Real Monsters
- I’ve Got A Bad Feeling
- Jerk With A Heart Of Gold
- She Doesn’t Know She’s Beautiful
- Love Triangle
- Love At First Sight
- Found Family
- Enemies-to-Lovers
- She/He’s Like My Sister/Brother
- Scrappy Mechanic
- Wizards In Pointy Hats
- Dragons
- Last Stand
- Rousing Speech
- Character Removing Impossible Number Of Weapons
- Redemption Arc
- Secret Royalty
- Magical Academy

And many more...

And that’s about all the time we have! If you have some questions for us, please feel free to linger a bit, if you don’t have another session to get to. As I said at the beginning, this session was recorded (hopefully I clicked the right button to do

that!) and will be uploaded to the When Words Collide 2020 YouTube channel at the end of the weekend. I will also be uploading a few things on my own website – my notes for this session, for instance, which will include the definitions with some of the lists. The website is www.lisadwilde.ca It's pretty bare bones right now – but keep visiting and watch it grow! Hope to soon add publishing info on my two books currently in editing, for instance. Maybe even that Blog I mentioned earlier!

Hope to see everyone in person next year at When Words Collide 2021! Feel free to come over and say Hi! No really! Thank you for joining me for It's All in the Plot! Enjoy the rest of the conference!