

13 Plot Principles



13

Prime

Principles of Plot

≡ **Alicia Rasley** ≡

13 Plot Principles

13 Plot Principles

Copyright 2016 by Alicia Rasley

13 Plot Principles

1. **Plausible plotting starts with cause and effect.**
2. **Your protagonist should save the day (or destroy it).**
3. **Give the protagonist a goal, then take it away.**
4. **The point of plot is change.**
5. **Lead readers to the story, but don't drag them.**
6. **Make the internal come external.**
7. **Twist a cliché.**
8. **Coincidence kills plausibility.**
9. **“Exposition is ammunition.”**
10. **Less is more.**
11. **Center each scene.**
12. **Find the excitement in every scene.**
13. **Always go back to character.**

13 Plot Principles

1. Plausible plotting starts with cause and effect.

Make sure each step in your plot has a causative event, and one of more effects. Character actions should be caused by some motivation, and should have some effect on the plot. In fact, a good way to outline your plot is to list the 6-10 major plot events (the "turning points"), and then identify the cause of each event, and the effect of each event. That way you'll create a frame of cause and effect, like this:

Cause-
Event-
Effect-

Then you can see how each of the events flows into the next to create the overall plot.

Cause: Jane is so afraid that she blew the SATs that the next morning she runs away from home.

Event: She joins the circus and learns to do trick-horse-riding.

Then look at that big event and jot down the EFFECT of the event-- internal and/or external.

Effect: The ringmaster notices her talent and suggests that she become a full-time employee and travel with them. (This is an "external effect".)

And/or:

Effect: (This is an "internal effect.") At the circus she is befriended by the bearded lady and realizes looks aren't everything.

Then go on to the next turning point event.

Then when you're done, you'll have a chain of causation:

The Cause, The Event, and The Effect—
a whole plot of them.

13 Plot Principles

EXAMPLE: In the start of *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy sensibly takes shelter from the tornado. But of course, the tornado is going to take her to Oz, so she has to get out of the tornado shelter, right? Notice though that the writer didn't just have her run out of the shelter; rather her beloved dog escapes, and she runs out to save him—the best motivation! This “cause/effect” doesn't just force the plot forward, but deepens the characterization: We now know more about what matters most to Dorothy.



Scene: The tornado scene (inciting event) in *Wizard of Oz*.

Cause: Toto escapes from the storm shelter.

Event: Dorothy scrambles after him into the storm-torn yard.

Effect: They are swept away to Oz.

Your turn! Be tough on yourself.

Consider your own plot. Find an event that “just happens,” like “he just happens to stumble and break his leg.” Now how can you change that to something that is “caused” by another plot event sequence, and “motivated” for the character? For example, “He is running for a touchdown in his company’s pickup game, because he wants to impress the boss.”

What event do you need to have happen?

What causes the event?

What does the event cause to happen?

What does that show about the character?

How does that change the plot?

How does that change the character?

You might find just identifying the problem event will inspire you to find a good cause/effect sequence!

13 Plot Principles

- 2. Your protagonist should save the day (or destroy it).** The protagonist is the “first actor”, the character most active in the story. Most importantly, he or she should be the one who resolves the conflict in the climactic scene. No one else should solve the mystery, or discover the secret, or arrive just in time to save the day. The plot should force the protagonist to make choices and take actions, and the course of plot events should change in response to those choices and actions.

Example: In *Casablanca*, Rick overcomes his alienation and with cunning and duress, gets Ilsa and her husband Laszlo safely on the plane out of Nazi territory. His sacrifice (he loves Ilsa) shows that he has reached the destination of his journey to affiliation and commitment. This is reinforced when, after he kills the Nazi major, he and his friend Renault join the Resistance, fully committing to the cause.



Your turn! Look at the climax towards the end of your story, that big exciting scene where the main external conflict (like the Nazis' attempt to send Laszlo to a concentration camp) is resolved. What can your protagonist do to resolve the conflict? How does this action show that the main character has reached the end of the character journey (like Rick's journey from alienation to commitment).

13 Plot Principles

13 Plot Principles

- 3. Give the protagonist a goal, then take it away.** The goal-driven protagonist is an active protagonist, but if you just let the protagonist achieve his goal, you'll have a linear or two-dimensional plot. Have him lose the goal, or sacrifice it, or achieve it and realize he doesn't really want it, and you'll add the complication that makes this a real story.

Example: In *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy has the goal of escaping from her boring Kansas farm and finding adventure. This goal impels her to take risks, meeting with the patent-medicine salesman (who later comes back as the Wizard) and daring the tornado to hurt her. She achieves her goal when the tornado whisks her off to the exotic land of Oz. But just coming up with a goal and attaining it makes for a linear plot! Instead, once she achieves her goal, she realizes it's not truly what she wants, and she forms the new goal of getting back home to Kansas-- a considerably more difficult quest!

Your turn! In the beginning of the story, what does your protagonist want to do or get? Think about why the character wants this goal, and what that indicates. Now should your character get the goal or not? Either way, what will the reader learn about this person from the getting or losing or sacrificing the goal?

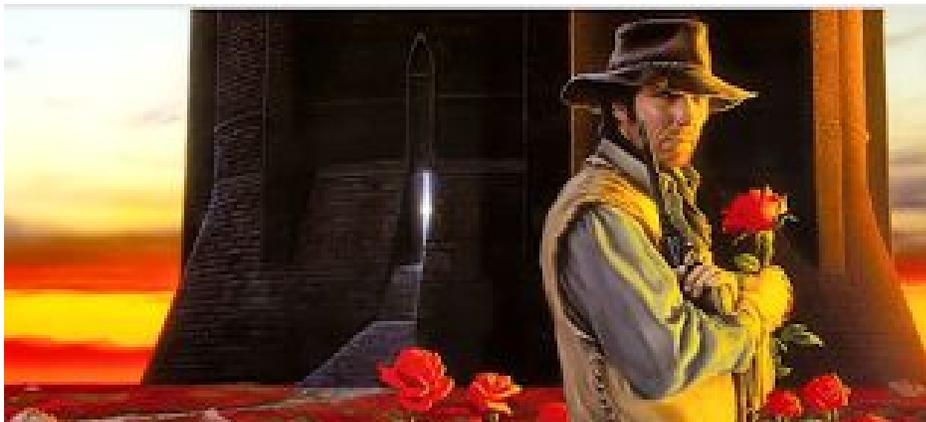
13 Plot Principles

4. **The point of plot is change.** The events should cause a change in the protagonist's inner life, for example, afterwards she might be able to trade her original goal for a more worthy one, to face a personal issue she's ignored before, or to resolve a longstanding internal conflict.

Example: Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series follows a gunslinger on his redemptive quest.

Roland has long been determined not to care or love again.

Through the events of the plot, he is forced to choose some unlikely allies to help him on his quest. After several battles, he learns to trust them. And in the end, it's his ability to love again that lets him complete his quest to reach the Dark Tower.



Your turn! Consider the progress of your plot events and how they change the protagonist. How is this character different in the end because of going through the plot events? What can he/she do in the end that was impossible in the beginning?

13 Plot Principles

- 5. Lead readers to the story, but don't drag them.** Set up your opening scenes so readers are led to ask story questions like “Who killed the film director?” or “What will happen to John and Sue’s love when Sue learns that John has been lying to her?” The posing of the questions, and the desire to find the answers, keeps readers turning pages. That’s called narrative drive. The story question is also an excellent tool to help the writer keep on track.

Example: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* opens with the baby Harry, branded with a lightning bolt scar on his forehead, being delivered to relatives who are frightened of him and who refuse to tell him why. This causes the reader to ask why would an aunt and uncle fear a tiny child. One answer (that Harry is a wizard with magical skills) is presented fairly soon, but what happened to him, why he is scarred, and what he can do take years of book time, and six other books, to be fully explained.



Your turn! Consider your opening chapters. How can you set up questions for the reader to ask? Then, scouting ahead,

13 Plot Principles

you can consider where and when and how to answer them.

1. What is a big plot problem that the characters must resolve?
2. What question do you want the reader to ask about that?
3. How can you pose that question in the early chapters?

13 Plot Principles

6. Make the internal come external. Explore your protagonist's internal needs and values, and consider, how will this affect her actions? The external events will cause internal change... and the internal change will cause new external events.

Example: In *Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris, Claire (the FBI recruit) is shown in the opening as both charismatic and alienated from her classmates. She is popular enough, but sticks to herself. Even with her mentor/teacher, she is withdrawn and withholding. The question is posed, why is she so closed? This question becomes more focused when she is assigned to interview a serial murderer who used to be a psychiatrist. His canny reverse-interrogation reveals that her past (as an abandoned child traumatized by a gory event and "thrown away" due to her sensitivity) made her close herself off from others. But it's that very mix of alienation and empathy-- distance and intimacy-- that makes her a good profiler. While at first she's drawn into Lecter's seductive distractions, she can use her ability to distance herself to figure out what he's hiding and what she needs to know.

What's important here is that her "internal"-- the inner conflicts and needs-- draw her to this work and make her especially skilled at it, and that the "external"-- the plot events-- force the internal conflict to the surface where it can be revealed and perhaps resolved.... and then help resolve the external conflict (the mystery or quest or whatever).



13 Plot Principles

Your turn!

So what is the protagonist's role in the external story/plot?

- He might be the investigator, the one who must find the truth.
- He might be the contestant, the one who wants to win.
- She might be the leader of the team.
- She might be the one on the run from danger.
- She might be the helper.
- She might be the healer.
- He might be the one who subverts the organization from the inside.
- He might be the one who invents the machine
- She might be the mother of the king.

I always try to ask, What does he/she do in the plot that no one else can do?

If she's the mother of the king, she's the only one who can persuade him to lift the tyranny established by his father.

If he's the one subverting the organization, it's because only he has the cyber-skills to hack into the encrypted files, AND the motivation to bring down the company.

Then go inside-- how did she get to be the sort of person would would be in this role? What about him made him want to acquire these skills, or made him good at this? (For example, he was a frightened, secretive child, who had to learn hidden ways to deal with abusers and bullies.) That's the "internal".

Now think about what 'internal' motivates the protagonist to get involved and stay involved now, despite the obstacles and dangers? Like - *she was married off young to the king, and gave up her freedom in exchange for wealth and luxury... and only now understands that she is in a gilded prison and has learned to sympathize with others trapped in their lives.*

If you can identify the protagonist's role in the external plot, and also define the "why" of the internal motivation, you'll be deepening your story. The events will become the tunnel from the internal character to the external world.

13 Plot Principles

7. Twist a cliché. Do something new with the tried and the true. Use the clichéd plot not as something to reproduce faithfully, but as a classic human drama to explore in a new way. Show the human depth under the stereotype: the blonde bombshell who walks into the private eye's office is worried because her elderly neighbor won't answer the door.

Using the familiar conventions of your genre or story type will let you lull the readers into comfort... while the "twist" will jolt them into new excitement. You can juxtapose the old with the new to reveal facets of each. Just consider how vital an old story like *Romeo and Juliet* becomes when the basic plot is set in the tenements of New York (*West Side Story*), or is rendered in a new way (like my friend [Judith Whitmore's graphic novel](#)).

Example: JK Rowling's entire Harry Potter series twists many clichés of the late, lamented "boarding school dramas" which were popular in Britain in the mid-20th Century. (There were similar books in the US-- *A Separate Peace* being perhaps the most notable-- and I still see echoes of that old genre in newer books like *The Goldfinch* and *Fates and Furies*.) These books presented a static world with all sorts of expectations and rules, but above all were about children finding ways to belong-- in a world of children, with adults and especially parents as mere visitors or minor characters.



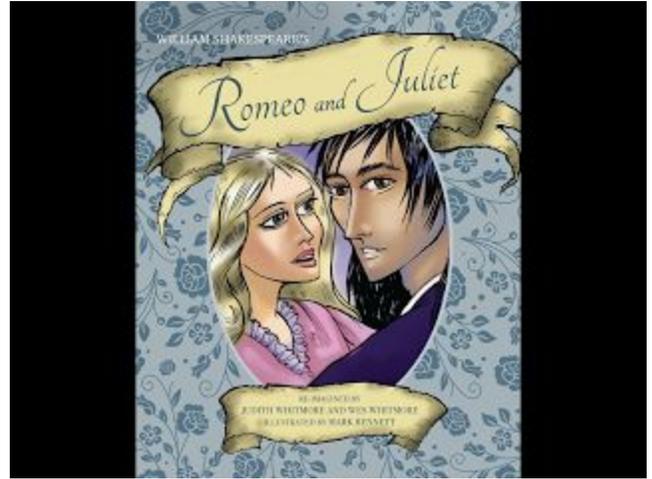
Rowling's twist was, of course, to make Hogwarts a boarding school for wizard and witch children. As exotic as that twist is, it gains more resonance by being juxtaposed against the familiar tropes of the boarding school stories-- the different "houses" with their common rooms, the sense of the school as a fortress against the outside world, the examinations and school supplies. Rowling makes great use of the school year as a time-setting-- each book in the series takes place in a year of Harry's schooling, so the

first book is set during his first year at Hogwarts, and the last book in his final year before graduation.

13 Plot Principles

(Judith Whitmore's [graphic "twisting" of *Romeo and Juliet*](#).)

Your turn! Think about your story and what basic category of fiction or story structure it might echo. This might not have anything to do with the actual genre of your story-- more about the structure. (For example, the Umberto Eco literary novel *Name of the Rose* used a format very similar to the Sherlock Holmes detective stories.) What movie or book or story or myth do you want sort of nagging at the reader's mind while reading your book? ("This story takes place in deep space, but you know, weirdly, I'm reminded of those surfer films of the early 60s!")



Now jot down a few "tropes" or "conventions" from the other category. You know-- "Those surfer movies always had bonfire parties at the end, and the main character was usually kind of shy and new at surfing, not one of the champions. And there was always a moment when he doubted himself, but found himself being encouraged by someone unlikely. Also, there were those strange long sequences where all the guys lovingly and lavishly polished their boards."

What use can you make of the familiar events or themes from the old story type? Think about set-pieces (like the "singalong scene" in so many films... including in *Casablanca*, where the singalong is actually a verbal duel between the Resistance and the Nazis.) Also think about time-frames like the surfing season or an election, or clichés like "the makeover where the nerdy girl is transformed to a glamor-gal" and how you can twist that (the nerdy girl is transformed into a vampire, maybe). Just remember to use enough of the old so that the readers will appreciate your subversion of the cliché.

13 Plot Principles

8. Coincidence kills plausibility. Don't let a one-in-a-million event rescue your protagonist from trouble, or readers will stop believing that this person is truly affecting the course of events.

But what if you NEED that to happen? Well, make it happen. don't just let coincidence take over. Use "cause-effect" to get from "I need" to "it happens."

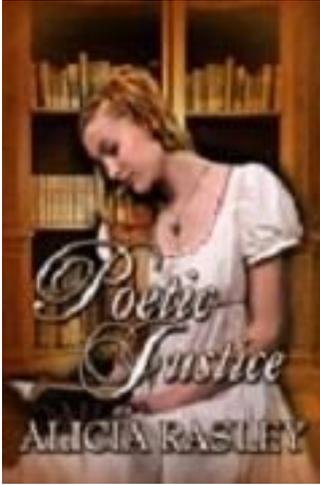
EXAMPLE: in my book *Poetic Justice*, I needed John to meet Jessica early in the story so that they can start their alliance to save the Shakespeare manuscript from destruction. When I started writing that section, I had that they "just happened" to meet at a party and start talking about their mutual love of Shakespeare. But right away, I knew that was lame. So I backed up, and made this meeting be the effect of some cause-- in this case, John learns that Jessica might have access to the lost Shakespeare manuscript, and sets out to meet her. She might think she just happened to meet the one other person in England who knows about this manuscript... but in fact, he planned the whole encounter.

One real benefit of making a coincidence into "causation" is that your scenes will be a lot more interesting. I went from one scene of John just stumbling into her at a party, to three scenes, the first where he finds out about her connection to the manuscript, the second where he gets his sister-in-law to invite Jessica to the party, and the third where he plays the mysterious stranger at the party and persuades her to ally with him.

This also gave me plenty of opportunity to deepen characterization. I got to show John as so obsessive about his quest, that he'll track down this woman and then blackmail his own beloved sister-in-law to arrange the meeting. I also got to show that Jessica might have been tricked at first, but is smart enough to figure that out, and exact a few concessions from him.

Poetic Justice by Alicia Rasley

13 Plot Principles



Your turn!

Think of a coincidence in your plot as the opportunity to go deeper into your plot and character. Consider:

1. If you could not "just happen" to get this to happen, what would be needed to make it happen? If you need him to get somewhere to meet someone, why might he choose to go there?
2. How can you use this "causation" to show something deeper about this character?
3. Look to see if you need to go back several scenes to set this up, or to find a way to subtly explain to the reader how this happened.

13 Plot Principles

9. Exposition Is Ammunition.

This edict comes from Robert McKee, the great story doctor who works with major screenwriters. In his great text *Story*, McKee makes clear that adept use of exposition can take your story to a new level. "Skill in exposition means making it invisible. As the story progresses, the audience absorbs all it needs to know effortlessly, even unconsciously."

Exposition is just "information that the reader needs." Most exposition is handled right in the narration of scenes: We learn something about the setting, and we learn about something about the characters, and we learn something about the situation. But... the story is about action, not just exposition. You don't want to bog the reader down with historical detail, or the character's life story, or minutiae about the room.

The trick is to determine what the readers need to know right now to understand just as much as you want them to understand. In the beginning of the story, especially, we might be tempted to explain too much, but we really need to give enough information that the readers are drawn into the story to find out the rest.

And about "ammunition"? Well, when and how we reveal information can lead to greater drama and reader involvement.

A famous example is the opening of *Hamlet*, an exchange between two minor characters that is sometimes called the world's first knock-knock joke.

BERNARDO Who's there?

FRANCISCO Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

BERNARDO Long live the king!

FRANCISCO Bernardo?

BERNARDO He.

FRANCISCO You come most carefully upon your hour.

BERNARDO 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.

FRANCISCO For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.

Okay, it's not a very funny knock-knock joke! But in the very first lines, we get that they are standing watch, that it is winter, that it is night, and that this is a place where there is a king. That's all the readers need to know at this point. The most important bit of information is

13 Plot Principles

that last-- "I am sick at heart."

This poses the question in the readers' minds: Why is this sentry sick at heart?

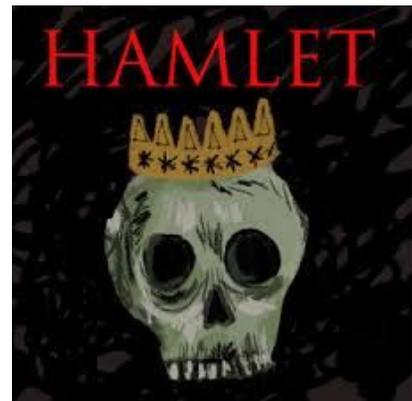
Exposing some information but withholding other information leads to questions, and it's the desire to answer those questions that impel readers to read on. And later in this first act, there is another question set up-- why do they call for Horatio, a high-ranking courtier, and what is it they told him to get him to come?

That's explained (partly) by Shakespeare's laconic scene direction: ***Enter Ghost.***

Shakespeare is a master at doling out just enough information to keep us asking question-- and answering questions only after they're asked. Who is the Ghost? (Oh, it's the late king.) What does he want? (To talk to his son Hamlet.) What does he want of Hamlet? (Revenge.) Revenge for what? (He was murdered.) And the most important information-- is this all true?-- is left ungiven until much later in the play, so that reader can be in doubt just as Hamlet himself is.

"What you conceal is what you reveal." Keep that in mind.

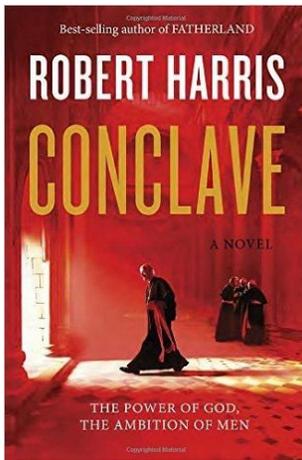
Withholding information (and letting the reader realize there's information being withheld) is a way of signifying something important is being hidden, and for presumably a good reason. We are much more tantalized by secrets than we are by facts.



13 Plot Principles

EXAMPLE: In Robert Harris's *Conclave*, the world's cardinals meet to choose the next pope. Most of them are known to each other and immediately begin politicking and negotiating. But one is unknown, arriving at the last minute and without luggage. While this unlikely entrance is explained (Benitez would have been arrested at the airport if his country's dictator had realized he was leaving), the author carefully sets up more questions.

Everyone at the conclave knows of Benitez-- he is famous for his resistance to fascism and his service to the poor in Africa-- but no one has ever met him. Additionally, one odd factoid is passed on by the maid that cleans his room-- he has not even opened the package of toiletries they provided for him. This seeming irrelevancy becomes a clue to the essential mystery of "Who is Cardinal Benitez?"



There has to be a payoff, of course. The "seeming irrelevancy" shouldn't actually be irrelevant, or the reader will feel cheated. And the withholding has to be done adroitly enough that the reader notices-- "Wait a minute. She was all set to put an offer in on that house. Then she saw the chandelier in the dining room, and changed her mind. What's the big deal about the chandelier?" But it can't be too obvious too early that this is a clue, or the reader will be too aware of the clumsiness of the intrusion. It's a balancing act, to be sure! It's probably best to

set this up as you draft the earlier scenes, then refine the exposition/ammunition dynamic in revision.

13 Plot Principles

Your turn! Look at your own story, and think about what revelations are important, and what the reader needs to know early in the story.

1. What is a major character trait you want to emphasize (like Hamlet's need for certainty before he can act)?
2. Are there any secrets the characters are keeping from each other? (For example, Hamlet doesn't realize that his father had been murdered.)
3. Look to the early scenes. What information can you hint at, but withhold, in order to focus the reader on some plot or character mystery?
4. It might help to look at stories you've enjoyed, and see how the exposition is handled, especially in the early scenes. What did the author withhold, and to what effect?

13 Plot Principles

10. Less is more.

Don't dilute the power of your story by layering on too many conflicts and motivations, or featuring too many secondary characters and viewpoints. Instead, focus on strengthening what you have.

Often when we write without a plan, “flying by the seat of our pants,” as the “pantsers” call it, our drafts are full of great inspired stuff—powerful emotional moments, vivid descriptions, sparkling dialogue. But the draft might also be filled with junk—

- plot events that turned out to be irrelevant,
- blind alleys that were supposed to lead to potential plot events we never put in,
- several events of the same type, like “three songwriters get murdered,”
- double motivations for character actions because we forgot what we'd figured out about the person,
- extra characters who exist for only one purpose, like to say one funny line,
- long scene openings because we were searching for a place to start,
- passages of exposition (information) that sound like lectures,
- extra conflicts that make the plot like *Perils of Pauline*.

It's great to be so inspired that we just add more and more... but that makes it even more imperative to streamline and simplify when you revise. Consider the reader experience: There is more impact in one event well-told, than five of the same thing thrown out without discrimination.

Example: Years ago, I watched two films in one evening, trying to get through everything I'd DVR'ed! The first film was *True Lies*, a fun but violent thriller, where in the first ten minutes, Arnold Schwarzenegger (who is, by the way, the GOOD guy) kills about twenty men (but, as he points out, “They were all bad!”). Bodies were strewn all around the lawn like autumn leaves, and that's about how much impact they had on me.

The next film I watched was *Simon Birch*, where the main character is a

13 Plot Principles

boy with dwarfism who has a sense of heroic destiny at odds with his tiny stature. Spoiler alert! In the end, Simon dies to save a



schoolbus full of his classmates. Just one death... and I was sobbing and crying, “Simon! Don’t die!”

The lesson learned is that the reader or viewer will be much more invested with one event than with multiples of that same type of event.

Some tips:

Decide what’s important and must be kept (“This is a murder mystery, so someone has to be murdered!”), and what is duplicated or unnecessary (“If she’s already motivated to save her ranch, she doesn’t also need to pay for dental surgery”).

If you have minor characters, see if you can combine a couple with few or no functions in the plot (two curmudgeons each making a skeptical comment can pretty easily be combined into one curmudgeon making TWO skeptical comments). Give *names* only to those who will appear more than once or have a speaking role.

Do a scene or event outline where you list every event in the plot in order. Notice the duplicates of types of events, like “six times Josh mourns his father,” and see if you can trim that to three or four, and/or make them escalate or change in a sequence. So in the first instance, Josh might mourn in a negative way (getting drunk at Dad’s favorite tavern and passing out in the gutter), the second time he might mourn in a more repressed way (sending the funeral director out of the room so he can be alone with his father’s casket), and the third time he can mourn in a healthy way (holding a memorial service so he can be with all the others who cared for his dad).

Watch especially for the blind alleys – plot paths you started to set up some payoff event that you later discarded or never wrote. Blind alleys can be really frustrating for the reader, and confuse the

13 Plot Principles

coherence of the character journey.

Remember... one perfect rose has more impact than a big bouquet of weeds.



Your turn!

1. Imagine that your editor says, "I'll buy this book if you cut 30,000 words out of it!" (This really happened to me.) You know you can't achieve that by trimming a few words on every page. You're going to have to cut scenes, characters, plot events. So... what can you cut?

2. (Here's what I actually did. Thanks, Lynn!) Ask a friend to read the book and tell you where to cut scenes and events. The friend will be more objective, not having slaved over every word.

3. Create a new document in your story folder, called "Cut File." Or "Brilliant Stuff No One But I Appreciate," whatever. Instead of deleting the extra material, move it into this document. You might never look at it again, but having the extra text saved might make you feel better.

Keep in mind that the reader will read only what is there, and if that's coherent and intriguing, miss none of what used to be.

13 Plot Principles

11. Center each scene.

Build each scene around some irrevocable event that changes the plot, and your pacing problems will vanish. Readers won't be able to skip because they'll know they will miss something important. Even if the scene seems "throwaway," you will have trained the reader to pay attention.

The first requirement for a powerful scene is that it be necessary—necessary to advance the plot and develop the characters. Non-essential scenes waste the reader's time and slow down the pacing. But we can immediately make a scene meaningful by selecting for it a central event which changes the plot in some way.

Consciously selecting a central event for a scene is especially helpful if you feel like your scenes don't all really advance the plot, that they're more episodic (one by one) than cumulative (like a snowball gathering force as it rolls down the hill). A plot-changing event will connect the scene more coherently to the overall plot and give greater "narrative velocity". The reader can't skim or skip a scene which causes real change.



And

What constitutes an event? It's *irrevocable*-- can't be taken back.

most important: *An event changes the course of the story plot somehow.*

13 Plot Principles

Example:

In *Casablanca*'s great "singalong scene," Rick is in the casino he owns when a group of Nazi officers start singing their anthem. It is an affront—deliberate—to all the refugees there trying to escape the concentration camps. Rick's romantic rival Laszlo (a Resistance leader) doesn't hesitate. He walks up to the band and demands they start playing "La Marseillaise," the anthem of the Resistance. The bandleader looks to Rick (his boss) for permission, and after a moment, Rick nods agreement. The band plays, Laszlo's voice booms out the song, and soon everyone joins in, drowning out the Nazis. This is an irrevocable event, because, after all, a song can't be unsung, and Rick's approval was witnessed by the evil Major Strasser.

Laszlo's feel-good moment doesn't last. As soon as the last strains of the Resistance hymn die out, Major Strasser takes his vengeance, ordering the casino closed, and threatening Laszlo with either death or a return to the concentration camp. This sets in motion the climactic events of the final act of the film, because now Laszlo has no choice but to somehow find a way to escape—and isolationist Rick is inextricably associated now with the Resistance.



Irrevocable... and plot-changing.

13 Plot Principles

Events are especially meaningful when they aren't just happenings, but rather the *result of action or the cause of reaction* by a character. This keeps the character active, and makes her more important to the story—she causes things to happen.

Your turn!

1. Pick out a scene that you secretly worry doesn't have a real event:
 - A happening (like the Dorothy/Oz/tornado).
 - An action (like Harry Potter choosing to go to Hogwarts)
 - A reaction (like Rick signaling the band)
 - An interaction (like Dorothy angering the Wicked Witch)

What doesn't constitute an event:

- Sitting and thinking.
- Making decisions unless they lead to immediate action.
- Arguing unless the argument causes change.
- Conversation unless it causes change.
- Physical action unless it causes change.

You can have all these in a scene, but you still need some "change event".

2. What do you need around this point to happen in the scene?
Com up with an event that motivates it. Rick needs to get more invested in the Resistance, and that's only going to happen if his comfortable existence is disrupted. Dorothy needs conflict that will make her stop adoring Oz and start longing for home.
3. Jot down where you want the character or the plot to go, and come up with an event that will further that progress.

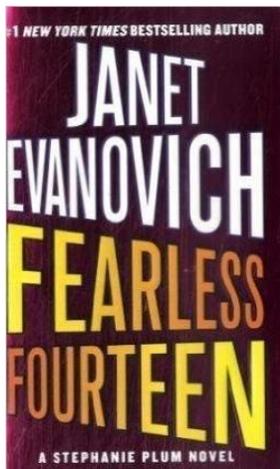
You need only one plot-changing event to make a scene essential, and provide a purpose for all its other attractions.

13 Plot Principles

- 12. Find the excitement in every scene.** Aim for the strongest, most dramatic events that are plausible within the world of your plot and your characters. Your scenes will be more exciting if you put the excitement in!

Here's where you might consult your inner reader. Remember, you are your real target reader. What is the experience you want the readers to have in this scene? What will your readers think is fun or emotional or adventurous? Try to build the scene to set up for that.

Example: Janet Evanovich writes comic novels with a sympathetic woman detective (Stephanie). Stephanie's downfall is her desire to make other people happy. So, for example, she can't bear to break the hearts of either of her boyfriends. And she's always helping some loser friend in some caper that's bound to be a failure. Her readers love watching Stephanie have to rescue a friend from some idiotic adventure (or be rescued by one of the boyfriends).



In *Fearless Fourteen*, Stephanie takes in a couple of stoner buddies from high school who keep experimenting with various crazy weapons inspired by videogames. When Mooner produces his latest invention, a “potato gun,” the reader starts chuckling. And Evanovich doesn't disappoint. When she is in pursuit of the bad guys, Mooner and Zook show up with their potato guns, and start shooting. Baked potatoes, tater tots, twice-baked save the day. That's the fun and excitement the reader has been waiting for.

Your turn!

1. Define the character's goal for this scene. For example: Sadie wants to find out when the dental hygienist was fired.

13 Plot Principles

2. What are some ways she can try to get that goal? For example, she could ask the dentist's receptionist. She could track the hygienist down at a coffee house and overhear her complaining about the firing. Or she could break into the dentist's office at night and go through the personnel files. Or...
3. List these in order of "excitement". You don't have to choose just one. For example, she could start by asking the receptionist, and get escorted out of the building by security, and then take the more extreme measure.
4. Think of the obstacles that will happen when your character tries to get that goal that way. How can you increase the conflict or make it more difficult? (For example, Sadie could just have her hand on the file folder when the outer door starts to open.)
5. Make sure, especially when you push the character to extremes, that you give her enough motivation to do what she probably wouldn't ordinarily do. Sadie isn't going to break into an office and risk arrest just because she hears her favorite hygienist has been fired. But if the hygienist has been murdered... and Sadie's dad has been arrested... well, yeah.

So think about what you can do to make this scene more dramatic, fun, and exciting. Think about setting a goal early in the scene and then making sure the character can't wimp out with boring ways to achieve the goal. Go for the excitement your reader is waiting for.

13 Plot Principles

13. Always go back to character. The plot should show how these particular people with these particular strengths and values and conflicts react under stress or when pursuing a goal. You'll lose readers as soon as they sense you're forcing your characters to behave in a way that fits the plot instead of their personalities and needs.

But of course, if you want a dramatic plot with exciting scenes, you can't confine the characters to what is comfortable or customary for them. Go back to the character journey—where this person starts out and what the psychological/emotional destination is. Provide the character with the motivations and the challenges to get to that internal destination.

Example: In *Casablanca*, Rick's journey is from isolation to alliance. He starts out neutral, unwilling to commit, unwilling to feel passion. The reason for his deliberate isolation is that his heart was broken by Ilsa. So of course it makes sense that Ilsa will return to challenge that isolation and force him to face his "cowardice," as she calls it. So she provides the motivation for him to progress on his journey. The more he gets involved in trying to win her back, the deeper he gets enmeshed in the anti-Nazi resistance and the more his safe way of life is threatened. (By the way, Rick is meant to be a symbol of the US before Pearl Harbor, trying to stay neutral as the world dissolves into war.)

In the end, he even sacrifices his goal of getting Ilsa back in order to fully commit to the Resistance cause. That sacrifice completes his journey to alliance, with Ilsa and the Resistance leader Laszlo, with the anti-Nazi cause, and with the refugees and escapees.



Your turn! When you want to create a more exciting and yet meaningful plot, go back to your main characters.

1. What is this character's journey, start and finish? How will this

13 Plot Principles

- external plot force this journey to happen?
2. What is the character's main strength as the story opens? How can this strength become a problem and cause conflict in the plot?
 3. In the end, how can reaching the end of the character journey help resolve that external plot problem?

Just as your character is going on a journey, so are you as a writer. Your goal is to bring your plot together with your characters to create a full and individualized story.

For more help with your story journey, [join my newsletter community for more free plotting articles!](#)

And you'll find other writing information at my [story-coach](#) website.

