



Outline Your Plot

in 60 Minutes



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c. 2016 by Alicia Rasley

This is a quick exercise designed to sketch out the major events of your story plot. It only gives you a map-- you have to make the drive yourself!

Getting Started

Get a kitchen timer or set your alarm. You're going to free-write for three to six minutes on several questions. In free-writing, you put your fingers to keyboard or pen to paper and write, without regard to grammar, spelling, sense, or organization, for a specified period of time. The trick is-- you can't stop till the bell rings. If you can't think of anything to say, you just write your last word over and over. Pretty quick you'll get bored and think of something else to write. But remember, turn off the editor. This is exploration, not real writing. Type or write the question, then set the clock, read the question allowed, and go.

I'll give an example for each, just to give you an idea of how basic we can



The Questions: Answer Quick! (With Examples)

1. At the start of your book, what distinguishes your protagonist from other people? What central strength does he/she have? How does this strength get him/her into trouble?

CHARACTER STRENGTH

Sue's really good at problem solving. Trouble: She's always being brought in at the last minute to clean up other people's messes.

2. When the story opens, what is s/he on the brink of doing? Why does he/she say she's going to do this? What does this action represent for the protagonist?

INCITING EVENT

She's just moved into a new town and has volunteered to do the stage managing for the community theater. She says that theater work is fun, and she'll get to make new friends. This represents her attempt to become part of the new community.

3. What external situation will require the protagonist's participation throughout the course of the book? How does this connect with #2? Does it help or interfere? Can you build in a deadline for extra tension?

STORY PROBLEM

The community theater's director absconds with all their money. If they don't somehow pull off an economical but successful Hamlet performance in a week, the community theater will go bankrupt.

4. What is the protagonist's goal for the time the book covers? How does this connect with the external situation? Or does the external situation divert the protagonist from his/her goal? Why does the protagonist SAY he/she wants the goal? Is there a deeper motivation as yet unknown to him/her?

GOAL AND MOTIVATION

She wants to participate in a successful theater presentation. She says it's because it will be good for the community. A deeper motivation is that she needs to be part of a cohesive group or she'll be lonely and lost. All the problems in the external situation will be obstacles to participating in a successful presentation.

5. What problem (external conflict) does the external situation present? How can the protagonist eventually resolve that conflict?

EXTERNAL CONFLICT

She is dragooned into taking over direction of the community theater's performance of Hamlet one week before the first show, and she's never directed a play before. She's a good problem-solver, and she will use these skills to tackle



6. List at least three obstacles in the way of her resolving this conflict. Make one an internal obstacle/conflict.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL OBSTACLES

- *There's not enough money for costumes.*
- *None of the other actors think Sue can replace the gifted Stockinsky, the former director.*
- *The actor playing Hamlet is a drunk.*
- *Five days before the performance, her mother announces she hates her nursing home and wants to move in with Sue.*
- *The theater's roof is leaking and rain is predicted for performance night.*
- *Internal—Sue needs to be part of a group and be loved makes it hard for her to take charge and say no.*

7. How will the protagonist change because of confronting these obstacles? **CHARACTER JOURNEY**

When she has to fire the drunken Hamlet and replace him with a young inexperienced understudy, she learns to trust her judgment, assert her authority, and risk alienating her fellows. That is, she becomes a leader.



8. What do you want to happen at the end of the book?

CLIMAX SCENE

I want the production to be successful despite some last-minute problems, and I want her to accept her position as leader.

9. What will have to happen to the protagonist against his/her will to make your ending come about?

INTERNAL RESOLUTION

Sue will have to get the courage to fire the popular Hamlet actor and still use her people skills to rally the shocked cast. She'll also have to inspire the understudy to a great performance.

Okay, the hour's up. As you can see, this set of questions will outline a plot driven by the protagonist's motivation and interaction with the world. Please note, not all books rely so heavily on the protagonist's personality. This works best with popular genre stories or stories with a "quest" structure. But the answers to these questions can help you determine where you're going and how you're going to get there. Most important, this will help you connect the plot to the character, and so individualize the story, and deepen the reader identification.

Putting It All Together in a Plot

Here's the plot blueprint I came up with after doing that exercise, just the basic story outline, expressed as a synopsis as I might send to an editor or agent.

Sue loves the theater and has always longed to be part of a Shakespearian production. But she's not a good actress. Her native shyness and reserve make her freeze with stage fright even during an audition. When she is transferred to Shakespeare, MI, where there's (natch) a once-thriving community theater, she once again tries out for a part, the role of Ophelia in an avant-garde production of Hamlet. Of course, she freezes halfway through the audition speech, and know she's failed once again. But when in the middle of the auditions, the lights go out in the theater, she finds her trusty penlight in her bag, makes her way through the panicked crowd to the backstage, and quickly changes the fuse to fix the problem.

That is what's best about Sue. She's really good at problem solving. Trouble is she's always being brought in at the last minute to clean up other people's messes. And when the director asks her to take charge of stage management, she agrees, even though she's already noticed that the theater is falling apart and the cast is full of divas and superstar-wannabes. She tells herself that theater work is fun, and she'll get to make new friends and become part of the new community.

But shortly after she joins the group, the community theater's director absconds with all their money. If they don't somehow pull off an economical but successful Hamlet performance on schedule, the community theater will go bankrupt. "Shakespeare" will be defunct in Shakespeare, MI.

Sue has only been working there for a couple weeks, but already her competence is recognized. So two weeks before the first show, she is dragooned by the city council into taking over direction of the community theater's performance of Hamlet, though she's never directed a play before. A pessimist might say that she's being set up to be the scapegoat for the inevitable failure. But Sue is an optimist. She knows she's a good problem-solver, and she can use these skills to tackle all the theater's problems.

If anyone asked her, Sue would say that she has to help because she wants to participate in a successful theater presentation, because it will be good for the community. But there is a deeper motivation: She needs to be part of a cohesive group or she'll be lonely and lost as she was growing up in a rootless "army brat" childhood.

But there are so many obstacles to making this a successful presentation.

- *There's not enough money for costumes.*
- *None of the other actors think Sue can replace the gifted Stockinsky, the former director.*
- *Many of the actors are territorial and resent even the most tactful suggestions, especially from this "little girl" who has no experience.*
- *The theater's roof is leaking and rain is predicted for performance night.*
- *And there's that internal obstacle too—Sue's need to be part of a group and be loved makes it hard for her to take charge and risk the opposition of her group.*

Finally, however, she is too good a director to let the Hamlet actor's drunken misbehavior ruin the performance. However popular he is with the rest of the cast, she knows she has to make the tough decision and fire him and replace him with the inexperienced yet talented understudy. In this crisis moment, she learns to trust her judgment, assert her authority, and risk alienating her fellows. That is, she becomes a leader. Then she must use her people skills to rally the shocked cast and inspire the understudy to a great performance. Finally, on opening night, despite several last-minute crises, the production is successful and Sue accepts her new role: Leader.

Reviewing the Plot Blueprint

As I turned the outline into a synopsis, I focused on two things: Urgency (only two weeks to go!) and coherence (her reason for joining the group—to be accepted—is what creates the conflict later when she must risk alienating her new friends). Free-writing fast made my subconscious take charge, so now it's all there in the outline, and my conscious problem-solving brain can take over to make everything fit.

In fact, my conscious mind, ever revising and scouting for more intensity, has created an expandable outline, because all the basics of her journey to leadership are laid out. Now I can add and subtract plot and subplot elements as I write. For example, I added more about her past (army brat childhood) and got rid of the Mom-moving-in conflict because I couldn't figure out how to make it fit (though I'd keep it in reserve just in case). If I wanted to add a mystery subplot, I could expand to have one of the actors killed by the real estate developer who wants the theater to fail in order to get its location downtown for a new shopping plaza. If I wanted to add a romance plot, well, that roof has to be fixed, so why not by a handsome bachelor roofer?

As long as I have the basic external plot interwoven with the character journey, the story will be coherent and focused, no matter what other complexity I add.

Your turn! Read over your answers, and come up with a plot summary. Then you'll have a great blueprint for your story.

About the author:

Alicia Rasley is a RITA-award winning Regency novelist who has been published by major publishers such as Dell, NAL, and Kensington. Her women's fiction novel *The Year She Fell* has been a Kindle bestseller in the fiction category. *Until Death*, a mystery, was released by Bell Bridge Books. She is also the author of the Writer's Digest book, *The Power of Point of View*, and *The Story Within Plotting Guide*.

From Alicia-

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