

**ACFW ONLINE CLASS "PLANNING A BOOK"
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LESSON #4

ROADMAPS AND RECORDS---HOW TO SAVE YOU AND YOUR EDITOR A MIGRAINE!

Has anyone tried the exercises from Lesson #3? Here they are again, with some additions:

1. Write a first person bio for your hero and heroine.
2. Describe your story in twenty-five words!
3. Brainstorm details for a new story, by yourself or with your critique group.
4. What is your hero or heroine's main, most desperate or heartfelt goal?
5. What roadblocks can you think up to make it harder and harder to achieve those goals? If you can think up at least five or six progressively difficult barriers to the story goal, you'll have a story framework leading up to the action at the climax. This works whether this is a suspense or a straight romance.
6. Remember the old saying about chasing your hero up a tree, then taking away the ladder, and then throwing rocks at him, to make things worse? Increase the threats/risks he faces, but also increase the stakes.

Here's an example: Maybe at the initial level, failure would mean frustration. Facing the next challenge and failing would lead to professional embarrassment, but as the hero gets in deeper and invests more into pursuing his goal, failure might mean losing his job...followed by actual physical danger, then the risk of losing his life if he continues to strive for his goal.

Does anyone have any questions? If these tools make you feel edgy and uncomfortable, there are simply not for you. But for some people, they can be a way to unlock their subconscious thoughts about what their story can be, and lead to revelations that will make their story stronger.

Whether you are totally a "seat of the pants" writer, who finds excitement in the discovery of your story only when there's little or no pre-planning, or you are a "middle of the road" person like me, or are a detailed plotter, you can still reach The End of your story in a satisfying way. Your readers won't know how you got there.

All of the previous information has been focused on the planning and early stages of writing a book. Even jotting a few scenes into the Plot Spine can give you a simple roadmap--some direction, so you do reach The End instead of wandering off into the desert. For some people, plotting backwards really works--that's when you can envision the grand finale, and then start working back through the possible steps that can bring your characters to that point.

But whatever route you take, do expect the unexpected. Things Will Change!

Why? If you do a good job of building believable characters (see previous lessons) they are going to evolve (their character arc) during the story as they face obstacles, struggle to find a way to overcome them, gain new knowledge or skills, and then either succeed or fail at each step. Since the characters evolve, the entire story may evolve as well. So, even though you may have plotted extensively, things may change as you get further into the story, and when even better, more realistic options might come up.

Remember those five (or four, or eight or ten!) main, progressively worse events you came up with, if you did the homework here? They can give you some helpful, big turning points to write towards. Along the way, make sure you keep a good balance amongst your main plot and subplots. Strong and interesting subplots help a lot with "bridging tension"--so there's always something uncertain or tense, or a new troubles in every scene.

Try to have unanswered questions, or an element of uncertainty or other tension on every page. Tension adds interest and spice to any story, and it's what triggers readers to keep turning pages. Tension isn't just in a shoot-em-up drama. It can be created through an unanswered question, a worry, a clue, someone just thinking about potential trouble, by someone overhearing something troubling, or by opening an envelope and feeling surprise/shock/worry/fear at the sender's name. Or even, delight--if you keep the moment as a hook, and save the sender's name or the message for the next scene.

A FEW HINTS:

1. BEWARE THE LACK OF WHITE SPACE!

Count the number of pages you go without dialogue. If you go more than a couple, you should probably take a hard look at what is happening. Are you telling information instead of showing action and conflict and emotion? Long passages of narrative, unless done very skillfully, are what readers skip!

How many of you have read *Gone with the Wind*? How many times? After a few times, did you start skipping parts? If you did, I'll lay odds that it was the long passages of narrative. I love that book. It's a whole writing course in itself, in how Margaret Mitchell so skillfully intertwined the relationships and conflicts. The first few times, I re-read every page. But later, I started reading only for the characters, the emotion and conflicts. What was I skipping? The pages of solid print---the narrative.

Some years ago, Harlequin/Silhouette held focus sessions with pre-selected groups of authors at one of the RWA conferences. They asked us to talk to readers and bookstore owners, and bring them feedback on the line. I think they were expecting just verbal feedback, but I brought them a twenty-page summary of the information I'd gathered from my survey of readers. One of the memorable comments I heard several times over: "I skip over pages that don't have much white space. I want to read about the people! The romance! The dialogue and action between characters!" And a frequent variation of that: "If I open up a book and see pages of solid print, I put the book back on the shelf."

2. If you are writing a romance or romantic suspense, you will make your story much stronger if you make sure that every external plot point (action that brings about a significant change in circumstances) affects the romance or the hero or heroine's emotional development, and/or forces the hero and heroine closer together or forces them farther apart.

3. At the beginning of each scene, ask yourself: Whose scene is this? What does he or she WANT? It should be something he or she really needs--something that is driving her/him, and that is

specific to the situation right now. What are the roadblocks preventing the character from easily attaining this? Inward fears? Something physical? Someone else standing in the way? Your external plot can give you these moments.

This pertains to straight romance as well as suspense. Think of Legally Blonde--and the road blocks Elle faced while trying to be taken seriously. Not life and death--but humiliation, being ostracized, and the potential loss of her dreams were big conflicts to her.

At the end of each scene, think up the worst thing that can happen right now, given the current circumstance, to the main character in the scene.....and do it next! If everything is all roses, and happy characters succeed at every step, where is the story? The tension?

For those who have heard about the Dwight Swain "Scene-Sequel" structure, here's an explanation: Very briefly, Swain says "Scenes" are the periods in a book where the hero/ine has a goal and plan and is working on it (ACTION), then faces conflict, and either succeeds or doesn't. Failure is a stronger ending than everything working out just right. Thus, the best answer to the scene question "Will Jack get to the bank in time?" is not only "No", but "No, and furthermore, this and this happens to make his plight worse!"

Following each scene, in the Swain formula, is a "Sequel" --a moment where that character asks himself the question "What on earth should I do next?" and then makes an adjustment in his plan (formulates his next action step to take.) it can be a sentence a paragraph or even a lot more.

This doesn't mean you want a lengthy, boring analysis in the character's thoughts, though. It can be as brief as a sentence or two, at the end of the scene or at the beginning of the next one.

WHAT IF YOU ARE BLOCKED--AND JUST DON'T KNOW WHERE TO GO NEXT? HERE'S A QUICK CHECKLIST.

1. Take a hard look at your characters. In order to lead the story in an expedient way, did you "force" them into doing something illogical, given their personality or situation?
2. Have you let your subplots flounder?
3. Take a look at the progression of your external plot. Have you gone astray? Do you have a strong goal for the main character in each scene? A good conflict preventing success? Have you failed to up the stakes with each succeeding scene? In the wonderful writing book called STORY, McKee says that the mood of a scene needs to flip between the start and finish. Start with things happy, end on tension. Start with trouble, end with lighter emotion at the end, because the action in that scene has created change. If everything is all roses at the start and ends the same way, did anything significant change? Probably not.
4. Is your current scene flat, and you have no idea where to go next? Stop right now...and do a "List of Twenty." Maybe you already did a brainstorming session at the start of your story, but do one for this scene. Think up twenty (at least) things that could happen. Let your mind just flow about what could happen RIGHT NOW.

Now, study your list. The first few ideas are probably cliches. The last might be getting sort of wild and crazy. But study each one. Try to flip each of them 180 degrees--for an opposite. Which of them could you logically use to challenge your character? Force her to take risk, to grow, to change? Which are the most fresh and new?

If this doesn't work, go through the following list to find a way to make things worse for your character (and better, more intriguing, for your reader.) I have this list in some old notes of mine, and don't recall if I came up with it, or if it is paraphrased from another source.

- Losing her main support person
- Losing her job
- Finding out a dark, dangerous truth
- Discovering that a close friend is no friend at all
- Discovering a truth held dear has always been a lie
- Facing public humiliation
- A body in the living room ☺
- Physical danger
- Hearing a devastating rumor....
- Discovering evidence that points at someone dear
- A letter, or a phone message containing the last things she wants to hear.

Can you come up with even better ideas? I'd love to hear them!

Thanks so much for being a part of this class!

Blessings,
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