

ACFW Online Class "Planning a Book"
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LESSON # 3 LET'S TALK ABOUT PLOT!

We've discussed the start of planning a book---developing rich, interesting characters with strong conflicts, finding a strong and interesting setting, and making sure that you keep track of all those details. What next?

How you approach plot depends largely on what type of book you are writing. In romantic suspense, you need emotional conflicts and growth, the conflicts that hold back the romance, and the faith elements, but you also need to have a strong spine of suspense turning points that drive the plot and concurrently also drive the changes in those emotional arcs. In women's fiction, the focus is more on the character's inner world and relationships than on a strong, dramatic action plot.

Interweaving the external plot and the evolving state of your characters makes for a cohesive story, where everything seems more logical as the story progresses. A reader can accept that the heroine's opinion of the hero is more positive if he has just saved her from a serious threat or has given her emotional support during a difficult time. If your heroine abruptly, capriciously lurches from "I can't stand that guy" to "I love him" without any reason, a reader is going to think she's a silly twit and not care whether she reaches her personal story goals or not. Believe it or not, I've read contest entries where the heroine did exactly that.

So look at your main characters and think about who they are in the beginning, and who you'd like them to be in the end.

An example I used before was the movie "Romancing the Stone." The heroine evolves from a mousy writer who lives vicariously through her books, to a heroine who grows stronger, overcomes great dangers, and wins an exciting life (and love) of her own. Rent the movie, and take notes. What events make her change? Can you see a progression? How does the evolution of her character tie in to the major plot events?

You can do the same analysis of your own story. Look at your hero and heroine (H/H) and ask yourself questions. Here are just a few as examples.

1. What do you hope the H/H will accomplish during your story? It should be something that the character couldn't have done before this story began. Be able to win love? Save the ranch despite impossible odds? Find the treasure before the villain does? Rescue the kids at an orphanage in Afghanistan?
2. How will s/he need to change in order to be able to do that? Is she terrified of heights at the beginning, but will have to overcome that fear to save the day at the end? Is he mired in grief and loss at the beginning, needing to deal with that pain before he can finally become whole again, and be able to love?

3. What kind of situations could make them change, give them new skills, or make them stronger?
4. What roadblocks could each one face?
5. What scenarios could illustrate either a descent into greater disaster...or progress toward personal growth?

SECONDARY CHARACTERS & SUBPLOTS: A WEALTH OF SUPPORT FOR YOUR STORY.

Secondary characters can be in a parallel situation, but make the opposite decisions, for better or worse, to illuminate the dilemma your hero and heroine are in. Or, secondary characters can help reveal flaws, virtues, or relay basic information about your main characters. They can serve as mentors, deliver backstory, add interest and tension, and help keep the story moving. They can also do foolish or amusing things that might be out of character for your H/H. One caveat: because they can be more outlandish, secondary characters can try to take over the story. So don't let them!

"I'm writing a series inspirational romance," you might say, "I don't have room for subplots!" But if you've written a whole manuscript, I can guarantee that you have subplots, even if you don't realize it.

Even in a novella, there can be multiple subplots. For example, in one of the 10,000 word eHarlequin serialized romantic suspense stories I wrote, the heroine had come back to her hometown to settle her dad's estate, and encountered both a villain and a handsome neighbor. I added her regret over misunderstandings regarding her relationship with her late father and how she came to terms with it, the hero facing his rocky past in the community, the villain's POV as he planned his next move, the heroine's growing regret over her plans to refurbish and sell her father's home, and the fact that this very solitary woman suddenly had to deal with two unusual animals and all the trappings of permanence and responsibility that she had always tried to avoid. Of course, in a 90,000 word novel everything would have been developed fully with a lot of space in the word count, but even in a short story, creating an arc of conflict and development of characters in subplots add depth and interest.

So, look at your plot and characters. Come up with a list of subplots-- things your main characters will have to deal with in the story, and the people who could be involved. Will this complicate your hero or heroine's struggle to reach a goal? What can you do to complicate their lives in every possible way? What support system do they have? Who can fail them? Family? Friends? Co-workers?

NEXT STEP: BRAINSTORMING LISTS

This can be done by yourself, or with your critique partners. Once you've got some ideas for subplots, you are ready to rock! Some of you might want to just start writing, while others like to plan extensively. This process falls in the middle, and it helps me a lot.

I simply start lists on my computer, one for each major subplot. I head each one with boldface underlined font...and then I just start typing fast as I can, as I brainstorm every possible thing I

can think of, that could happen to a specific character or in a given subplot. I might end up with ten or twenty brief ideas under each heading.... an uninterrupted, stream of consciousness list of random thoughts about what could happen.

Then I start assessing those lists: eliminating the mundane or useless, and organizing the best of the ideas into chronological order.

The beauty of this is that I now have come up with many things that can happen. Some of these must occur, some are just possibilities. Now, I may not use even half of them. I may go back and add whole new categories, brainstorm new subplot lists and eliminate others, as the story starts to come alive for me. Still, this document goes on the bulletin board above my computer monitor, and it's a constant source of ideas for where to go next with the story. And, since each category of ideas has been put in a semblance of chronological order, I won't discover a hundred pages later that I've given away something, or have forgotten an essential step. I posted an example of just such a brainstorming list on my website, for a book that's long out of print, called Operation: Mistletoe.

I do this sort of brainstorming for the hero, heroine, main secondary characters and villain, remembering that everyone is the hero in his own story--in his own mind. Everyone has their personal goals and efforts to achieve them. It's essential that secondary characters not take over the story, but why have them be cardboard characters--flat and uninteresting?

Donald Maas has an exercise that I think is unique and valuable regarding secondary characters. I heard him say in a workshop that one should write down the name of each secondary character on a piece of paper, then toss them all in the air, blindly pick up at least one of those pieces of paper, and eliminate that character from the story. Give that character's role to someone else, so s/he becomes more complex, more interesting. By the way, the book "Writing the Breakout Novel" by Donald Maass is fantastic, and I highly recommend it!

DISTILLATION OF YOUR PLANNING--AN "ELEVATOR PITCH"

At some point you will need to describe your story in an editor/agent appointment, or if you are already published, you're going to need to tell your editor about this fabulous new project you're working on. The editor needs to know:

What is the hook?

What makes this book truly unique and special and exciting?

What are the main goals, motivations, conflicts and resolution?

How can we market this to our own sales team?

How can we convey the story to the art department?

How can we sell this to readers and make good money?

Can you describe your story in 25 words or less? Think of it as in "elevator pitch"--how you could tell somebody about your story in just a few seconds.

In an editor appointment at a conference, editors want to hear a simple, direct statement of what your story is about. After that, you can go into greater detail during the minutes you've been allotted, but you have already delivered an interesting, succinct hook.

If you are published, it's helpful to have this kind of statement when pitching an idea to your editor over the phone, if you want to test the waters before you write up an actual proposal.

Finally, having this kind brief, catchy description can help you stay on task while you are writing. Now of course, plans change. Perhaps you have a vision for your book that shifts as you write. You find new and better directions. Maybe your initial idea wasn't strong enough. Deep enough. Intriguing enough. So of course, your 25-word distillation of your story idea may evolve. Go with it. Type up your new one-liner, one that helps you focus on the core idea of your story, and keep it above your computer.

MY FINAL PRE-PLANNING TOOL: THE PLOT SPINE

I know there are people who can plan their chapter and scenes before even starting. I'm not one of them! Are you? If so, more power to you! But for me, it helps me to have a simple roadmap: the Plot Spine. I fill it the lines as I go--just a very brief description. I also use it to type in reminders (in red italics) in future chapters, reminding me of events that I've set up and have to include. As with the other handouts, a copy is at my website. It would not be possible to post such charts on the ACFW loop, because they would be scrambled.

SUMMARY of PRE-PLANNING

Does this all sound like a lot of work? Maybe. But really, we have just discussed setting, characters, conflict, and subplots. We have looked at the value of First Person Bios, a simple way to work on the conflict between your main characters (The Conflict Grid), brainstorming, and a simple, plot-at-a glance Plot Spine.

My advice? Try these ideas. Keep what works for you and ignore the rest!

EXERCISES:

- 1. Write a first person bio for your hero and heroine.**
- 1. Write a twenty five-word description of your current story**
- 2. Brainstorm subplot ideas for your current story, by yourself or with others.**
- 3. For your MAIN external plot, figure out five or six progressively worse events leading to the action at the climax.**
- 4. Pencil those events onto the plot spine as key Turning Points**

Best wishes to you this week. Happy trails!s

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Fatal Burn, February, 2010 Steeple Hill Love Inspired Suspense