

# Holly Lisle's



## Create A Plot Clinic

A Step-by-Step Course in Developing  
Plots from Beginning to End



NONFICTION

WRITING  
THE BASICS AND  
BEYOND

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A Step-by-Step Course in  
Developing Plots  
from Beginning to End

## WRITING THE BASICS AND BEYOND

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OneMoreWord  
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#### OneMoreWord Books by Holly Lisle

Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic (THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE)  
Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic (THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE)  
Hunting the Corrigan's Blood (reissue)  
Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic  
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#### Other Books by Holly Lisle

KORRE  
**Hawksparr: A Novel of Korre**, Tor, hardcover, for release in 2007  
**Talyn: A Novel of Korre**, Tor, hardcover, (ISBN: 0-765-30993-9) Aug 2005  
ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELS  
**Night Echoes**, Signet Eclipse (ISBN: )  
**I See You**, Onyx (ISBN: 0-451-41221-4), July 2006  
**Last Girl Dancing**, Onyx (ISBN: 0-451-41197-8) July 2005  
**Midnight Rain**, Onyx, (ISBN: 0-451-41175-7) Nov 2004  
THE WORLD GATES  
**BOOK I: Memory of Fire**, Avon Eos, (ISBN: 0-380-81837-X) May 2002  
**BOOK II: The Wreck of Heaven**, Eos (ISBN: 0-380-81838-8) Apr 2003  
**BOOK III: Gods Old and Dark**, Eos (ISBN: 0-380-81839-6) Mar 2004  
THE SECRET TEXTS  
**BOOK I: Diplomacy of Wolves**, Warner Aspect (ISBN: 0-446-67395-1) Nov 1998  
**BOOK II: Vengeance of Dragons**, Warner Aspect (ISBN: 0-446-67396-X) Oct '99  
**BOOK III: Courage of Falcons**, Warner Aspect (ISBN: 0-446-67397-8) Oct 2000  
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ARRHEL NOVELS  
**Fire in the Mist**: Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-72132-1) Aug 1992  
**Bones of the Past**: Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-72160-7) Mar 1993  
**Mind of the Magic**: Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87654-6) May 1995  
GLENRAVEN NOVELS  
**Glenraven**: (w/ Marion Zimmer Bradley) Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87738-0) Sept 1996  
**In The Rift: Glenraven II**: (w/ Marion Zimmer Bradley) Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87870-0) Apr 1998  
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**The Devil and Dan Cooley**: (w/ Walter Spence) Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87756-9) Dec 1996  
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CADENCE DRAKE NOVELS (SF)  
**Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**, Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-97768-2) Feb 1997; REISSUE  
OneMoreWord Books-- Mar 2006.  
STAND-ALONE FANTASY  
**Minerva Wakes**: Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-72202-6) --- Jan 1994  
**When the Bough Breaks**: (w/ Mercedes Lackey) (ISBN: 0-671-72154-2) Feb 1993  
**Hall, Mayhem and Magic**: (w/ Chris Guin), Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87678-3) Aug 1995  
**The Rose Sea**: (with S.M. Stirling), Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87620-1) Sept 1994  
BARD'S TALE NOVELS  
**Curse of the Black Heron**: Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87868-9) Mar 1998  
**Thunder of the Captains**: (w/ Aaron Allston), Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87731-3) July 1996  
**Wrath of the Princes**: (w/ Aaron Allston) , Baen Books (ISBN: 0-671-87771-2) Mar 1997

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And the remaining errors, of course, are all mine.

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### Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic

Anyone can write one book, and perhaps even sell it, and in the rarest of circumstances, become famous from it—because lightning does strike. To make a career of writing, though, you must take up the burden of making lightning strike regularly, where and when you want it.

#### **Introduction: What Is Plotting (And Why Is It So Hard?)**

##### **Plot Is...**

From a fiction writer's perspective, plot (the thing that is plot, not the act of plotting) is simple. Easy to comprehend, clear, plain, sensible.

##### **Plot is the series of events that move the characters and story forward.**

So to plot out a story or a book, all you have to do is come up with those events. Easy as falling off a log.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiight.

You'd better sit down. Maybe take a couple of deep breaths. I have a few things to tell you about what I've discovered about plotting over the last thirty-some novels and seventeen-plus years, and what I have to say includes good news, bad news, and news that could well make you run away screaming. Or want to, anyway.

##### **Where Plots Are Born**

##### ***Plotting's first home is your logic.***

Fortunately for all of us, logic is both a learnable and a teachable skill, and once learned, it doesn't throw curve balls at you. That's the good news. The things you do logically will work the same way every time. I know these logical techniques, I use them regularly, and I can show them to you. It's simple stuff—some of it pretty well known to most writers, some of it original to me, none of it anything that will make you crazy. You sit down to plot, you break out your logic and the tools that logic uses, and you get to work, and you will get logical, predictable results.

HOWEVER...

*Content* is not logic's strong point. Logic will not give you passion. It will not give you heart. It will not give you magic.

##### ***Plotting's second home is your life.***

From your life, you will rip out the moments when you screwed up, the times when you fell down in front of everyone, the places where you said stupid things, where you dropped the ninth-inning fly ball and lost the game for everyone. And you will bring back the pain, the humiliation, the shuddering anguish of being human and fallible like the trophies of experience and mortality that they are, and you will write these things down in new ways, so that your story will be human and recognizable, and people will understand and empathize with your characters. We know each other best through these shared moments of pain and failure and humility, because we have all had them.

You will give these pains and hopes to your characters, disguised with new names, new faces, and new events, but the pain and the hope are purely yours, and the way you will put them on the paper will create your unique voice. This is where your story gets its heart, and where it gets its passion.

So I can teach you *how* to do this, but I can't make you do it, and if you don't do it, you'll cut your chances of success drastically.

And that's the bad news, but it isn't the worst news. The run-screaming news. Because you can create logical structures and flowing storylines and emotional, heartfelt scenes, but if you don't manage to get that spark of magic into your story, that intangible bit of something that makes it new and fresh and different and compelling—if you don't manage to harness a bit of magic and nail it to the page, your odds of selling your work are slim.

And magic—that spark of life that will capture your editor's heart and bring The Call to your telephone, and win you readers, is the part of the plot that your subconscious (your Muse) will toss in your direction occasionally. At a whim. In a cranky, recalcitrant, obdurate, obfuscating fashion.

If you beg. Wheedle. Play tricks. Apply the occasional red-hot poker.

Because...

***Plotting's third home is your Muse.***

This is where, if you're inclined to such things, you run screaming. Because the parts of plots that make stories grab readers and make them remember what you've written, that make your readers *have* to go out and find your next book, and the one after that, **come from the part of you that you cannot control.**

Here's a confession. After all these years and all the books I've written, I have no better relationship with my subconscious (my freakin' Muse) than I did when I was just getting started. If I go to the door of darkness and I knock timidly and ask for an idea, the voice on the other side will still play the same games we were playing when I got up the courage to go there the first time, with the first story I tried: "I love you but I'm having a bad hair day. No, I don't love you at all. I don't even like you. I hate you. Go away. I don't know anything. I don't have anything you want. I'm busy, I'm bored, I'm tired, I don't want to play, I have a secret, but I'm not telling you..." And on. And on.

The thing is, while my subconscious and I don't get along any better than we ever did face to face, our working relationship has still changed drastically. This happened out of necessity, and not because my subconscious has suddenly developed reasonableness, or compassion, or a willingness to pitch in for the team.

It's changed because I got my hands on the writing equivalent of a crowbar, some tasty bait, a good live trap, a couple of thumbscrews, and an attitude toward dealing with that pain in the posterior, the Muse, than has given me the majority of the good stuff, the real magic, in my work.

When I went pro I got deadlines and contracts and people who were waiting for me to fill holes in product lists, and I had to learn how to write every day even when my subconscious wasn't playing nice. The tools came in handy for me, and if you want to make a living at this, they'll come in handy for you, too. So this book contains some useful tools.

**A word of warning on dealing with the subconscious**

There have been writers who have killed themselves because they couldn't come up with anything else to write, and because they had no idea how to grab their Muse by the throat and give it a few good shakes.

There have been writers who have resorted to alcohol and drugs to try to find something good way down deep where the magic dwells, and it has worked for a little while, because, like all Muse-bashing tools, alcohol and drugs gag the conscious self and let

the Muse speak. However, eventually, the Muse gets drunk or drugged, too, and the writer's work is lost. I know some of you won't listen to me, because there's this whole dramatic Ernest Hemingway/Hunter S. Thompson school of the hard-drinking, hard-living writer who eventually kills himself because of his art—an image we all have to contend with—and some people embrace self-destructive behavior because they think it's cool. It obviously doesn't end well.

Don't go there. There are other ways. This book is full of them. **How Plots Grow**

Now that I've warned you about where you'll be finding your plots, let me warn you about the second big issue in plotting. A plot isn't a do-it-and-forget-it, or even a do-it-and-use-it, creation. You'll be creating plot:

- Before you start writing
- While you're writing
- While you're revising first and subsequent drafts
- While you're plowing through your editor's final revision requests

***Before you start writing***

At this point in the game, everything seems logical. You've had some sort of idea, you've put together some characters who exist in a specific time and place, and now you're sitting down to figure out what to do with them. The thing is perfect in your head, you haven't made a single mistake on it yet, and all the potential in the world awaits. You get out your index cards, word processor, or notebook, and scribble down the first thing you imagine happening, and then the second, maybe with just one line per scene, maybe with a paragraph. You run, and the story gets

twisted, and things happen that you don't like. You stop, you stall, you begin to doubt. Or perhaps...

***While you're writing***

...Perhaps you simply start writing, caught up in the wave of the idea, determined that you'll let the story carry you. Until it doesn't, and you realize that you have sixty thousand words of middle to contend with, and no clue what happens in there. At which point, you drag out the notebook, the index cards, the computer outliner, or some other tool.

***While you're revising and editing your first and subsequent drafts***

Or you've managed to make it all the way through your first draft, and you're thrilled. The book has waited on your desk for the requisite month, you're going to read it with fresh eyes and a solid sense of detachment. And you start slamming into whole scenes and storylines that are dull, predictable, insanely convoluted, or pointless; you trip over dropped threads and forgotten characters; and something in the back of your head starts screaming "Burn this before someone reads it" but the saner part of you is pretty sure if you could rework the plot, you could make it into something good.

***While you're plowing through your editor's final revisions***



Or you got everything down the way you liked it (although perhaps with some squidgy bits in there where you feel uneasy, suspecting that something is wrong though you're not sure what), and you've now heard back from your editor, who not only nailed you on every single one of the squidgy bits, but came in with some "fix this" notes on things you'd thought were brilliant, until you read her comments and discovered that she was right, and they weren't. Now you have to fix things, and that's going to include some serious re-plotting.

**Don't panic!** I've been in all of these places, and re-plotting is part of all of them. A doable, *survivable* part of all of them.

### **The Seven Basic Plots (Plus A Mermaid)**

You've heard it. I've heard it. Everyone has heard it, or some variation of it: *There Are Only Seven Basic Plots*. Or One Plot, or Three Plots, or Twenty Plots, or Thirty-Six Plots.

This is one of those exquisite myths, like your basic mermaid, built to lead men astray. Only this is a cruel myth. It takes beginning writers from wild hope to horrific despair, because the hope-filled beginner thinks, "If there are only seven basic plots, I can memorize them all and then I'm set for life." But the beginner then sees these seven basic plots, and thinks "That's it, it's all over, my life is as nothing, because what in the world am I supposed to do with that?"

Go take a quick look for yourself. You can find this stuff of myth at The Internet Public Library

(<http://www.ipl.org/div/farq/plotFARQ.html>), and I suggest that you read all of it.

Imagine you have approached the temple of answers hoping to learn plotting, and the oracle tells you, "Your plot is Man versus Machines. That's it. Go write your book."

There's no path from Man versus Machine to a novel. Man versus Machine, or even worse, Pursuit, or Madness, lack characters, story, movement from beginning to end. They're a critic's answer— *This book is about man against machines* —not a writer's answer.

**The "seven basic plots" and the rest of their ilk are not plots.** They're conflicts. And conflict is not plot, though you need conflicts—lots of them—to put together a plot.

**Plot is the series of events that move the characters and story forward.**

These "basic plots" lack events, movement, characters, and story. Also series, because a plot is not just one thing that can be summed up in three words.

If you try to use any of this material as a plot, you'll end up beating your head against a wall. You cannot get from the beginning to the end of a novel with "man vs. nature," believe me. *But* each of these little lists can offer different directions you can consider taking when developing your own plots. Something along the lines of, "Hmm, do I have any elements of angry nature in this thing? Can I throw some in? How about my protagonist versus himself? Who else is he struggling with besides himself?"

Each of these generic conflict lists offers you different ways of looking at the struggles your characters can face. Like spices, you can toss in bits of these conflicts to make your story richer. But if you're writing a story deeper than a single sheet of paper, you'll introduce several different main sources of conflict in your main storyline, and additional conflicts in secondary storylines.

What you don't want to do is sit down and say, "My plot is Man vs. Machine." Because right there, you've made an assumption that you'll be dealing with one, and only one, main conflict, and the big thing we discover over and over again when dealing with assumptions is this: **Assumptions are only useful when messing with the minds of the people who make them.** You'll hit this in **Tools: Twist**.

Don't mess with your own mind. Leave the grinding of your plot down into some three-word sludge to future literary scholars and critics.

### **Plotting Is A Process, Not An Act**

You have to realize right from the conception of the idea you love that you will not be done with plotting the story of that idea until you are done with the book and it has gone to the copyeditor.

A plot is not some fixed and finished document that you work from and follow like a blueprint. A plot is a messy, chaotic combination of your logic, your passion, and your Muse's magic that is, at best, as stable as quicksand and as reliable as that uncle on the other side of the family who may show up on time and in his best suit, or who may show up three hours late, drunk off his feet and singing *You Shook Me All Night Long*.

You deal with this by bracing yourself, making sure your sense of humor is turned all the way to Extra-High, and breaking out your Muse-taming toolkit.

Got yourself in order? Then let's go.

### **How To Use This Book**

If you've read any of the other books in this series, you know they start out with a materials list, including worksheets to print off, a method for organizing your work, and usually an organizing list for the notebook you need to put together so that you'll be able to pick up and use the background you've developed for subsequent books or stories, even if you're going back to the world years after you've last written in it.



Character development, language development, culture creation, and the building of worlds all lend themselves well to this treatment.

Plotting does not. Plotting is inherently messy, and usually resists all attempts to nail it down into one neat, fixed structure.

Don't get me wrong. There are plotting structures, and we will use them. You'll learn how to do a three-act-structure, single-and multiple-POV character structures, a cliffhanger structure, organic structures, and timeline structure.

But the thing is, you *can* end up doing all of these structures on one plot. (And suddenly, all the way from here, I hear voices going "Yipe! Yipe! Yipe!")

Breathe. It'll be okay. Most of the time you don't use them all. Most of the time, you'll get away with using just one or two structures.

But structure is not everything in plotting. Structure is only a frame for your content, and, as many of you have already discovered, coming up with the content to put into the story and knowing whether or not you have the right content is the hard part.

So most of our work here is going to consist of you learning how to wheedle, cajole, blackmail and twist content from your Muse, the stubborn subconscious.

### **Order of Use**

This book is a plot walkthrough. Its objective is to get you from your starting point—wherever that might be—to the end of your plot by the time you have worked your way through the book.

#### **First:**

- No matter whether you're using this book to start a new novel, to work on an existing partial draft, to fix a completed first draft, or to get your final draft ready to go off to an agent or editor, **start by reading Structure**.

You won't need structure first, but you need to have a working knowledge of possible story structures while you're creating the plot segments that you'll eventually shape into a structure. It's helpful to know, for example, that you want to write a potboiler so that you can remember to create lots of exciting cliffhangers. Or that you want to have enough scenes in two different points of view to use in your alternating-POV-structured story.

But structure is not plot. Structure is only the coat rack upon which you hang your plot.

**This is big.** Huge. Insanely important. Writers get all tied up with structure when they get stuck plotting, thinking that if they had a different, better, smarter structure, they'd get unstuck.

In fact, in almost all cases, what they desperately need is fresh content.

#### **Second:**

- **Read Tools next. Try out each tool at least once.**

The **Tools** section exists solely to give you fresh content. You know that pitiful lament, "I don't know what to write about?" Writing tools give you things to write about.

You'll notice that the Tools section is divided into two sections— **When Things Are Going Well** and **When Things Go Splat**.

In **When Things Are Going Well**, you'll find the tools that you'll use every day to get new ideas, figure out middles and plot twists, and sneak up on resonant endings. During those times, you'll be able to get good stuff out of your Muse just by sitting down and writing.

In **When Things Go Splat**, you'll deal specifically and directly with breaking barriers between you and your Muse. When you can't come up with a story, or an idea, or get a plot to hang together, these are the techniques you'll use. I end up using a few favorites in almost every book, but I have dragged my Muse out of hiding with all of them at one time or another.

**IMPORTANT:** I need to mention something that should be obvious to all writers, that should, in fact, never need to be mentioned, but that all of us tend to forget when things get weird and frustrating and the Muse goes into hiding. If you write every day, (or at least as regularly as you can make—not find—time), your subconscious, your Muse, will stay mostly well-oiled and active and interested in tossing cool ideas to you when you need them. Think of regular writing as regular exercise for your subconscious mind. You put it on a leash, take it for a run every day, and it doesn't get bored or feel neglected and go sulking off into a corner every time you show

up. The more you write regularly, the less often things will go splat.

#### **Third:**

- While it wouldn't hurt to read straight through the rest of the book once, after you've finished **Plot Tools** feel free to skim, jump around, try bits and pieces of any of the other sections. If you have the book done except for a final edit, go ahead and read the section on **Plotting While Revising**. You might find things you can use in the other two sections as well, but reading the rest of the book out of order will work just fine. The same is true for those of you just starting a first draft, or for those of you who are stuck somewhere in the middle. **Plotting While Writing** is for you, but so is everything else. Feel free to poke around any of the sections, pull what you can use from them, and come back later to pick up more.

There's no one way to write a book, there's no one way to plot one, and one way or the other, you'll get through this. You have lots of tools, lots of options, and you'll learn more from every mistake than you ever would from getting it perfect the first time. Knowing that, the only way you can fail is if you give up.

### **What You'll Need**

While there aren't any worksheets in this book, you will be doing plenty of writing. Some of it you'll do longhand, some you'll do on the computer. There will be a few tools you'll need to develop structure, and to get you through the stuck bits. These will vary from writer to writer—don't buy everything in advance. Just get them as you need them. Besides—and I've said this before, but I'll say it again—on bad writing days, sometimes getting cool new office supplies will be the high point of your day. Save some of that shoppy goodness for the days when you need it most.

Here's what you'll be using:

#### ***Absolute Necessities***

- Paper, lots of it. Reams of both white printer paper for use with your computer, and lined notebook paper.
- Sticky notes. Any color, any shape, but when you get to the end of the book and start editing, you'll need a lot of them. I like the yellow 3"x3" squares with lines on them.
- Index cards. I strongly prefer the lined 3x5 variety because they prevent me from writing too much on a card, and I buy both all-white and multi-color packs. They have different uses.
- Pens. Smooth-writing, and lots of them.

#### ***Should Haves***

- A corkboard.
- A hole punch if you want to put drawings or maps or other unpunched pieces of paper in a binder, OR when, during editing, you need to build a four-color line-for-scene index-card plot.
- Ring binder, the kind you used to (or perhaps still do) drag around in high school. There is no organizational structure for this thing. Every plot is different, not all of them require notebooks, and you can accomplish just as much by letting your desk get really messy (my usual method).
- Outlining software.

#### ***Things You Might Need***

We start getting a little esoteric here.

- A sketchbook and drawing pencils, black and white or colored.
- Magazines you can cut up.
- Paste.
- Yarn. Knitting needles or a crochet hook.
- A lawnmower and a yard.
- A few good woodcarving tools and some wood.
- Whack-Pack cards, tarot cards, writers' decks.
- Flour, salt, chocolate, sugar, baking soda ...
- A blank diary.
- A candle and something fireproof upon which to place it.
- Other and sundry stuff.

Really. I have used everything on the list above, and more, to restart a stuck plot. You can't know what exactly you'll need until you need it. Some of it you might never need. Some you might need every single time you plot. That's why I said you shouldn't go out and buy everything before you start.

NOTE: Cork boards, white index cards, outlining software and most of your word processor can be replaced by:

Scrivener\* for the Mac

(<http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.html>)

Liquid Story Binder\*\* for the PC (<http://www.blackobelisksoftware.com/>)

\*I can personally recommend Scrivener as being the tool that has replaced all my other writing software except for Inspiration (<http://www.inspiration.com>). Better yet, you can try it for free before you buy it.

\*\*I don't have a PC anymore, so am in no position to recommend writing software for the PC. However, several PC users who read my weblog gushed about Liquid Story Binder and have said the things it does look like the things Scrivener does, so I'm adding a cautious I-have-not-tried-this-but-hear-it's-really-good recommendation, along with an aside that you can try the software for free before you buy it, too.

#### **My Assumptions**

I make three assumptions in this book.

- The first is that you already know how to develop characters.
- The second is that you already know how to develop background.
- The third is that you want to tell a story, with all the things that a story includes: scenes, forward momentum,

characters who grow and change, and a clear beginning, middle, and end.

If you don't know how to create characters, I can help you with free workshops on my site (<http://hollylisle.com/fm/>) and with my book, **Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic**, available at Shop.HollyLisle.com

([http://shop.hollylisle.com/index.php?crn=209&rn=356&action=show\\_detail](http://shop.hollylisle.com/index.php?crn=209&rn=356&action=show_detail))

There are also plenty of other good books out there on the same subject.

If you don't know how to develop background, I can help out with that, too. I have a number of articles on my site about worldbuilding—necessary for all writers, not just for writers of fantasy and SF (<http://hollylisle.com/fm/>), plus I've written:

**Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic**

([http://shop.hollylisle.com/index.php?crn=209&rn=367&action=show\\_detail](http://shop.hollylisle.com/index.php?crn=209&rn=367&action=show_detail))

**Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic**

([http://shop.hollylisle.com/index.php?crn=209&rn=372&action=show\\_detail](http://shop.hollylisle.com/index.php?crn=209&rn=372&action=show_detail)).

**Holly Lisle's Create A World Clinic** is still in the works.

There are other books that cover background, as well. If you aren't comfortable with creating characters or background, avail yourself of resources to help you with the basics and a few of the fine points. You can build on those as you go.

### Section I: Plotting Before Writing

You have not yet begun to write. This is the point in your project where your expectations of yourself and what you will accomplish by plotting are going to be the highest. You already have the idea in your head, probably the voices of some of the characters, and even a couple of scenes that you can see playing out and being brilliant. The book, in your mind, probably feels only a step or two away from completed. At this point, all that's standing between you and the story you feel is the writing, and the writing doesn't feel like all that big a deal.

Here's the funny thing about plotting before writing. That anticipation, that feeling that this time it's going to be easy, does not go away even after you've written a lot of books. You'd think you'd learn. Well, I'd think *I'd* learn, anyway, and since I haven't yet, and I've already written more books than the majority of writers write in complete careers, I'm guessing this is actually a part of the process, kind of like getting pregnant the second time. You know how hard pregnancy was the first time, you remember the delivery (Aieeeee!), and that stuff about you forgetting the pain is so not true, and yet. And yet. You're sure the second time will be easier.

I think this part of the process might even be critical. Without this bit of innocence, this lunatic optimism, this assurance that this time it will be different, a lot of babies and a lot of books would never be born.

Before you start the actual writing, you have two main objectives. The first, which you'll begin shortly, is to decide on your content—to figure out what you're writing about, to have some idea of where the story is going, and to know who the major players are.

Once you've finished that, though, you have a second goal. You need to put your story into seamless order—that is, you need to plan the way you'll present your story.

It would seem logical to deal first with the content, and then with the order. But if you know about three-act structures, multiple-POV character structures, timeline structures, and other variations, you can tailor the content you're planning to a structure that will meet artistic and genre goals for the project you want to write.

So we'll go over structures first.

While there is no end to structure variety, and while you can mix and match structures in the same book, creating something unique to you and your story, there are some basic structures that will let you begin the process of writing confident that you know how you're going to do it, and what you need to do to succeed.

Structure is about moving the story forward, about putting events into an order that keeps the reader fascinated and guessing, and that lets you tell your story while otherwise getting out of your way.

Onward.

#### Structures

A little note before we begin: I wrote the **Tools** first, and used each tool as I wrote it to build a plot from scratch. And then I wrote **Structure**, and used the material I came up with in **Tools** to demonstrate various structures. So you'll find in **Structure** examples some enormous spoilers related to what I developed in **Tools**. These spoilers can't be helped because you have to know **Structure** first, but you have to *use Tools* first.

So when you get to **Tools** and I start pulling rabbits and killers out of my hat, act surprised.

#### How Many Plot Cards Will I Need?

To answer this question, you need to know two numbers.

- How long do I want my book to be? (Total word count)
- How long do I want each scene to be? (Scene word count)

Say you're want the book to go 90,000 words, and you tend to write short, punchy scenes—maybe 1,150 words

apiece.

In the background, someone is shrieking: **I don't know how long I want my book to be! And I don't know how long my scenes are, because I haven't written them yet!**

Good point.

### ***Usual Novel Word Counts***

How long do you want your book to be? 90,000 words is a nice average length for a salable novel, first or otherwise. At 130,000 words, you're running into published-novelist territory unless you've written something screamingly brilliant. Shorter than 60,000 words won't sell well in most cases for adult fiction, but will work for fiction for younger readers.

### ***Figuring Average Scene Length Wordcounts***

How long is your average scene?

You figure this by writing a few of your scenes, adding up the number of words in each, and dividing by the number of scenes. If you've written three scenes so far, and one is 2530 words long, and one is 130 words long, and one is 1271, then you've got an average scene length of 1310 words. However, because your scenes are of such very different lengths, you'll need to keep checking until you've written at least ten total scenes to get a reasonable estimate for the average.

If, on the other hand, you keep your scenes to a uniform length, say 1200, 1350, and 1150, and you intend to continue doing this, you can be fairly confident that your average scene is about 1233 words long.

### ***The Number of Scenes You'll Need Is...***

Divide your average scene length into your desired novel length.

1233 into 90,000 is roughly 73 scenes. So you'll need 73 plot cards.

Don't equate scene length with chapter length. If you're not sure of the difference, read my Scene-Creation Workshop. (<http://www.hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/scene-workshop.html>)

You can have any number of scenes in a chapter, but you won't have any chapters in a scene.

On to the individual structures. **The Three-Act Structure**

We'll start with the three-act structure, because at some level almost all writers have already met it. You've almost certainly heard of *Boy meets girl*. *Boy loses girl*. *Boy gets girl*.

That's the three-act structure in a nutshell.

- **In Act One, you set up the conflict and introduce the characters.**
- **In Act Two, you complicate the problem.**
- **In Act Three, you resolve the problem.**

Thinking about your story in acts simplifies the process of putting your plot cards into order.

Act One is usually fairly short. It's going to be less than a third of your book. In Act One you want to cover the following issues.

Get all your main characters into play, including the person who will be the antagonist around whom the end of the story will revolve. If you're writing a mystery, the readers need to have met not just your hero and the people who will lead your hero to the resolution of the book; they also need to have met your villain.

So go through your plot cards and find early scenes where each of your main characters (whom you have already listed in the **Theme and Concept** exercise, even if not by name) appears. If you don't have an early scene where your ultimate antagonist appears, now is the time to come up with one. Backtrack, pick any tool you really liked, and use it to get the antagonist on stage.

Make sure that each of these scenes has a character or characters engaged in interesting action, and that each poses a problem.

The problems should lead up to the main problem and introduce it.

For me, **Act One** will start with Dead Bob in the office, and will end when Annalise, discovering hidden material in Dead Bob's office, realizes he was involved in some horrific criminal activity involving the making and selling of illegal videos, and will hint that he was tied to murder.

At the point where the little problem (dead guy in the office) becomes the big problem—dead guy had a huge secret that involved the lives and deaths of others—**Act One** comes to a close.

**Act Two** is the meat of your book, taking up from sixty to eighty percent of the content. Most of your work will take place here, and most of your plot cards will land here. For **Act Two**, sort out the cards that include your middle action—the search for the solution to the problem you presented at the end of **Act One**. This search, whether it's for a solution to a rocky love relationship in which the couple can't get past their unhappy past, or the struggle of colonists to terraform an alien planet into a working colony while finding ways to work together instead of against each other, or a teen's coming of age, should include moments of seeming triumph and moments of abject failure.

And in the middle of act two, your main character's entire understanding of the problem he faces will undergo a massive shift.

In the case of Annalise and Dead Bob and Evil Lucy, that shift of consciousness will come when Annalise discovers

(by means of Lucy's murder) that Lucy was an incidental character and not the main villain, and that someone who knows her intimately is behind Dead Bob and the criminal acts he was committing, and that this person who knows her may be someone she trusts, and is certainly trying to kill her.

In the unhappy couple story, that shift of awareness could be the moment when, after half a book of trying to get him out of her life, and finally succeeding, the heroine realizes that, as angry as she is with him, she loves the hero and wants nothing more than to spend the rest of her life with him.

In the terraforming story, the everything-changes moment could be when the colonists discover native life on the planet they have colonized, and realize that to stay in regulations, they're either going to have to find a way to terraform their areas in such a way that it will have no impact on native life, or they're going to have to pack up their stuff and leave—and they don't have the material to travel to another planet and start their colony over.

In the teen's coming of age story, the moment when everything changes could come with the death of a parent, and the teen's need to let go of a long-held dream he had been pursuing in order to assume some responsibility for the household's desperate financial needs and the care of younger siblings.

The second half of the second act should deal with the aftermath of that everything-changes middle scene, and should lead up to the climax of the story—the big fight scene, the moment when the hero faces the heroine and finally admits his love for her, the terraforming team's desperate attempt to save their colony and the native life on their world from a massive volcanic eruption that could destroy everything, the teen's inner battle between following the dream that has been held out for him in the form of a full scholarship, knowing that if he leaves his family will not make it, and finding a way to pursue his dream at home while keeping his family going.

Or in the case of Annalise, it will be the scene where she faces Friend X, confronting him with everything she has discovered, and he tries to kill her, and she ends up killing him and Jim gets to her just in time to get her out of the burning building which

was supposed to have buried all the evidence of his crimes while Friend X escaped.

Which takes you to **Act Three**, where you will tie up all your loose ends. Annalise ends up, bloodied but unbowed, giving her statement to the cops and going to play hockey with Jim for the first time, and we see their friendship strengthened. Like **Act One**, **Act Three** is short, taking up only as much space as you need to tie up your loose ends and send your characters back out into the world to apply for unemployment, or to beg for sequels. It will be less than a third of the book, and usually significantly less.

#### **Pros**

With three-act structure, you know the story will have action and direction and a clear beginning, middle, and end.

You'll know when to start, and you'll know where certain types of action will occur.

You'll end up with a very tight story that, if the writing is good, will keep readers turning pages.

Your story will have an excellent chance of being what agents and editors refer to as "commercial." If you want to make money writing, being commercial can be very good.

If you sell movie rights, your story will already be put together in a fashion that will make turning it into a movie script a clear and simple process, whether you're doing it or someone else is.

#### **Cons**

You can feel very constrained using a three-act structure. You're not really free to wander and pursue sidelines while writing because you have a target and you're shooting straight for it.

You can end up passing up great ideas simply because they don't fit your direction.

Unless you are an extraordinary writer able to transcend the limitations of the structure, you will not end up with a work of literary art.

#### **Character Structure, Single POV**

In character structure, you don't worry about acts. You follow the story from the point of view of the central character, simply putting your plot cards into an order that pleases you, letting yourself play with flashbacks and flashforwards, adding twists when they entertain you and cliffhangers as you find them interesting, and you get your character from the beginning of the story to the end. If you have a good inherent sense of pacing and a strong central character that you and your readers love, you'll be able to get away with this relaxed variety of structure. I've used it in a number of novels, simply because I like following my characters and seeing what they'll get into. But its strength depends entirely on how rich and deep your characters are, and how much trouble they get themselves into.

#### **Pros**

Character-structured stories can be delightful to read. They ramble into the most eccentric places, surprising and delighting readers.

Character-structured stories lend themselves to whimsy, literary flights of fancy, and exploration, so tend to be a lot of fun to write.

The potential for creating a beautiful literary experience exists, though is not a given, in the character-structured

story.

### **Cons**

The story can wander aimlessly, getting caught in doldrums where nothing happens, or drifting off into directions you don't want to follow.

You can discover after you've written three hundred pages that that you've only just gotten to the part you're fascinated with, and it's a complete break from the first part you've written, and it'll take you about five hundred more pages to get to the story's end.

You might never be sure you've reached the end.

### **Character Structure, Multiple POV**

With a pure multiple-POV character structure, you'll still be following the lives of characters through their own eyes. You'll just be doing it through two or more pairs of eyes.

There are some special plotting considerations when you're writing in multiple points of view. You'll need to know how much of the story you want to dedicate to each character, and for this, you'll need to do some math. Well, maybe not. If you want the story exactly balanced between two characters, you'll simply write one plot card for Character B when you write a plot card for Character A.

Or Anna and Jim. If they're together, you write the card from the character who knows the least, and has the most to lose at that moment. If it's a toss-up, then write it from the POV of the character whose card stack is currently shorter.

If you have several POV characters, though, or some complex order like "Write 60% of the book from the heroine's POV, and 40% of the book from the hero's POV" (a situation that exists mostly in romance writing), here's what you do.

- Take your desired word count. 60,000 words for a Silhouette-line short romance? Works for me.
- Divide that by the average length of your scene. Say, 2,000 words.
- You get the number 30. That's the number of scenes you'll need to write to tell your story while not running over your word count.
- Next, figure your percentages. 60% of 30 is 18. (.60 x 30, if you've forgotten how to figure percentages. So your heroine will get eighteen scenes.
- 40% of 30 is 12, so your hero will get twelve scenes.
- This works exactly the same way if you're figuring for more than two POV characters. All of your chosen percentages have to add up to 100 percent, (you can't have three characters who each get 50% of the book, for example), and you have to make sure that you divided your desired number of words by the right scene length.
- Write out your plot cards with each character and his number of total scenes in mind, making sure that characters will tell the story from their points view of in a fashion that suits your story structure—alternating, or all of one character's POV scenes appearing together, and then all of the next character's POV scenes together.

There is no one right way to do this. **Pros**

Multiple POV structure allows you to get more sides of the story— to hear from both the hero and the villain (or protagonist and antagonist), to be in three or four places at the same time through the eyes of different characters, to run a series of stories simultaneously, weaving them in and out of each other. It can be tremendous fun to write, it allows you to speak with a range of voices all at once, and well done, it gives a novel a breadth and depth that's almost impossible to achieve in any other way.

### **Cons**

It's very easy to get carried away—to have too many voices and too many stories. You can lose track of where you were going and what you wanted to say. You can lose characters and threads partway through and never pick them up again. You can suck the life out of your main story with too many distractions. Multiple POV requires careful tracking, timeline-checking, fierce attention to the main story to keep side stories from taking over, and unusually rigorous revising.

### **Cliffhanger Structure**

Also known as the potboiler structure, you end every chapter, and sometimes every scene, with a cliffhanger. No worries about when you introduce characters, no worries about getting a major plot turn right in the middle of the book. You run up the hill, you dangle your hero over the edge, you break for the next chapter, you get the hero out of trouble and then get him into worse trouble, leaving him hanging over the edge again.

You can have a lot of fun doing this—potboilers are a blast to write because while you're writing, you're always focused on leaving one protagonist or another in the hottest of hot water right at the very end of the chapter. It makes you want to come back the next day to write more, and within limits, it makes the reader want to keep reading to find out what happens next. I did one potboiler, actually. It was my first novel, **Fire in the Mist**, an odd little fantasy novel that incorporated magic-is-science worldbuilding and threw in bits and pieces of modern technology disguised as magical items. It was fun, it won me a Best First Novel award, and it got me a follow-up novel and a three-book deal.

Charles Dickens wrote potboilers. Good ones, too.

Critics almost uniformly hate potboilers. Do keep that in mind.

#### **Pros**

The cliffhanger structure is fun to write, and because of the perpetual excitement, the writing seems to go quickly.

The structure permits the writer to maintain tension, and with a few caveats (listed below) keeps readers reading.

Cliffhangers are perhaps the easiest books to plot. Every chapter (or scene, depending on how you decide to write yours), incorporates a problem that leaves the protagonist in seemingly insoluble trouble at the end of the chapter. The next chapter (or next scene involving that character) resolves the problem, only to introduce a new one, leaving the character again in desperate need.

#### **Cons**

If you fail to vary the level of tension, permitting some problems to be bigger than others, and if you fail to vary the resolution, allowing some solutions to be tense, some to be sad, some to be funny, and so on, your work will feel repetitious—we hope to you, but if you don't notice it, your readers surely will.

Critics are likely to mock and revile you. But they didn't like Dickens, either.

#### **Organic Structure**

Some folks are linear writers. I, for example, am a very linear writer. I write the first scene of the book first, progress one scene at a time through, and write the last scene last. (However, I'm doing my secret project, **C**, in a nonlinear fashion in this version in order to force myself to let go of my preconceptions where the story is concerned.)

Other folks are nonlinear writers. They have an idea for a scene, so in rather the same fashion that we came up with plot cards from all over the story, they write out whole scenes. If the ending

occurs to them, they write the whole actual scene first. If they then conceive of something terribly cool happening in the middle, they write that scene next. And then maybe an opening scene, and then back to the middle, and then something they think is incredibly cool, though they can't imagine where it will fit.

When they have a lot of scenes, they start putting them together, in much the same fashion as we ordered our plot cards, trying out different things first, seeing how they play. When they have their scenes in an order they like, they write in transitions and smooth out inconsistencies, and end up with a book.

If this is you, either get software that allows you to shuffle your scenes just by dragging and dropping them (Scrivener will let you shuffle your plot cards and move the scenes at the same time without messing up a word of your work), or else do it the old-fashioned way: print out your scenes individually, clip them behind your plot cards, and then shuffle plot cards and scenes. Do a read-through, create smooth transitions, and when you have everything in an order you like, cut and paste text in your manuscript, saving frequently. And make sure you have an untouched backup of the file, in case you cut something, forget to paste it, and then cut something else.

#### **Pros**

You are absolutely free to write anything at any time, giving yourself maximum flexibility and the opportunity to explore every avenue that occurs to you.

You have the fun of writing cool scene after cool scene. You will escape from assumption-based plotting.

#### **Cons**

You may lose track of your story, or end up pursuing a bunch of irreconcilable avenues.

You may not be able to put all your pieces together at the end.

Your story might end up as a series of unrelated vignettes. **Timeline Structure**

You the writer can do some amazing things with time. Unlike mere mortals, you can stop it, slow it down, run it in reverse, and leap forward or backward days, years, centuries, and eons, all with the merest flick of your finger.

Like other powerful time-travelers, however, you can also forget where you are and where you've been and accidentally put yourself in two different places at the same time, a situation that can only lead to nightmares.

One of the most memorable Timeline-structured pieces I've ever come across is an episode of *Firefly*, the short-lived but brilliant western-in-space television series by Joss Whedon. The episode is titled "Out of Gas," and it starts with the hero of the series lying on a grate in his spaceship, bleeding and clearly dying, starting the episode with a mystery (who shot the captain?) and a cliffhanger (will he live?). Then it flashes backward a few hours, and you see a man offer to exchange a ship part for something the captain has that he wants. Only the trader shoots the captain and starts to steal his ship, but flees when the captain threatens to kill him, after which the captain collapses (where's the crew? What happened to the ship?). Back a few more hours. We see the crew abandoning the captain (another cliffhanger—what happened to put them in this situation?). Then back a few hours further, and so on, until we see the initial actions that caused such horrible consequences. All of these are projected as the memories of the dying captain. The final sequence is the Now, the moment when we find out how the captain manages to survive, and what happened to his crew.

It's a stunning piece of writing beautifully presented, and it demonstrates the power of time in giving a story depth and resonance.

Telling an entire story in reverse, with the next-to-last event happening first, and with each event prior to it unfolding



in reverse order, can be done in written fiction. I think it would get tiresome over the course of a long novel, but I'm interested to see how it would work over the course of a short one—say 60,000 words, and am very tempted to try it myself.

But a complete reversal is not the only way to use a timeline structure in a story.

You can also use a middle-of-the-story scene as your opener, then write in linear order to it. You can have intermittent or regularly occurring flashbacks or (if you're writing about a psychic or something futuristic) flashforwards.

Or run your character's childhood as one track and parallel his adult life in a second track, and alternate between the past and the present.

Or run your story from the middle, then alternate with a backward-time and a forward-time scene until you hit the beginning and the end at the same time.

With your plot cards in hand, you can experiment with time. You can put your scenes into any order and make sense of them by the use of transitions and flashback and flashforward frames, and you can get an idea of the shape your story would take if you played with time.

While you're working out additional plot cards, make sure that if you have events happening simultaneously in different places, you don't have them happening with the same characters (or if you do have them happening with the same characters, make sure the simultaneous action is the point of the scenes, and that the characters have consequences for being in two places at once).

#### **Pros**

**Using time as your structure gives you a very clear, focused format for your writing.** Make sure to include the time of each event as the header of your plot card.

**Using a time structure gives you whole new directions for your twists to take.**

#### **Cons**

**This technique can be wearing on the reader.** As noted before, you can use a lot of time-shifting in a shorter work, but use less of it in a longer work.

**Time-shifting can lead to enormous confusion.** Figure out how you're going to demonstrate time in your story, and use that method **every time** you change time.

#### **Mixing It Up**

As I've noted earlier, you can mix and match structures, using a combination of Character and Three-Act, or Organic and Cliffhanger.

You can invent your own structures. Roger Zelazny wrote a brilliant book, **Roadmarks**, in which a character traveling a timeroad had to find himself in order to save ... well ... that would be a spoiler. But he wrote the book from two points of view, the character when he first found his way to the timeroad, who was identified by chapters labeled I, and the same character as an older man, who had been traveling the timeroad so long he was weary of it, and who was identified by the chapter headers II. Zelazny didn't explain any of this; the book started with a Chapter II and went to a Chapter I, and then went back to a Chapter II, and the whole thing was absolutely brilliant—the reader figured it out as he went along.

My point is, your structure is your own—start with basic forms if you haven't successfully built a book before, or get funky if you've been doing this for a while and you want to look like a genius.

Mostly, though, use a structure that will let you get from the beginning to the end and finish your book.

### **Section II: Tools—When Things Are Going Well**

You're asking questions and your Muse is answering them, ideas are easy to come by, or at least not impossible, writing is fun, and you are filled with visions of a smooth project that you'll write to a successful end.

Excellent.

Here are the tools you need to make the most of your time with a cooperative Muse.

#### **Plot Tools, and Why There Are So Many**

The short answer is very short. I have so many plot tools in my writing kit because none of them work every time.

The long answer requires some explanation.

The biggest and most difficult part of writing any piece of fiction, from short story to massive, volume-spanning epic, is getting the subconscious (the Muse) to hand over the good stuff, the magic that makes the story come together, that pulls in and makes fit all those divergent threads that you wrote because back five chapters, you had this impulse that if you wrote them, something really good would happen.

The problem is that most of the time, you cannot simply sit there and have the Muse hand you the good stuff like it was your mom handing you cookies out of a jar. Your subconscious does not work in words. It works in emotions, intuitions, pictures, fears, hopes, beliefs, obsessions, paranoias, dreams and nightmares. It's full of memories that you've forgotten, bits and shards of your life that, when you no longer had need for them, it tucked away in jumbled boxes back in the dark. It kept them there, and when you sleep, it pulls them out and plays with them, mixing them with the things

you've done or seen lately, the problems you're having, the stuff you saw on television or at the movies, that jerk at work, and anything else that amuses it.

It has everything you need to fill all the books you can write in a lifetime tucked away in those boxes.

Problem is, you use words. Your subconscious mind doesn't respond well to words. So getting your subconscious—your Muse—to work with you involves subterfuge, sleight of hand, playing games, pretending you don't care what's in those hidden boxes, and sometimes, when you're up against the wall and the clock is ticking, it means using brute force.

Your Muse, to quote Herman Melville, "is not down in any map. True places never are." It's also as smart as you are, though in different ways, and will not fall for the same trick every time.

So when you get stuck on plotting—and *everyone* gets stuck on plotting, so don't feel like you're the only one who just isn't getting the hang of this—you try one tool. If that doesn't work, you try another. Then three or four more. Something will start shaking things loose for you, your Muse will get interested in one game or another and lean over your shoulder and start whispering again, and if it's a different something every time that kick-starts the Muse, that's okay. You're still moving forward, you have not permitted your Muse to block you, and you will get to the end of your plot, and the end of your book, more or less intact.

So before we get into the actual plotting—structure, development, pacing, balancing, twists, resolutions, and other goodies—we're going to do the tour of the tool chest.

- I'll describe each tool and how it works.
- I'll do a brief demo of each tool.
- You'll do a brief exercise using each tool.
- You can come back to the tool chest for refreshers whenever you need to.

### **Tool 1: Question**

Developing characters, building worlds, creating languages, and building plots are always more about asking the right questions than they are about getting the right answers.

The starter questions for plot can be simple and story-related:

- What happens first?
- Why does that happen?
- Who made it happen?
- What went wrong?

You can direct questions at your characters:

- Who are my characters?
- What are their needs?
- What are their problems?
- Who are their enemies?

Your questions can be more personal:

- What scares me?
- How can I use that?
- Who would be more afraid of that than I am?
- Where could I put this person to drive that fear to its worst possible pitch?

Your questions can be romantic:

- Why is the hero alone?
- Who would be the heroine he would be most attracted to?
- How could I keep him from being able to reach her?
- What could make him do crazy things to catch her attention?

Or they can be historical, or suspenseful, or mysterious, or wacky, or whatever it takes for you to get answers that lead you toward the book you want to write.

The trick with asking questions is to start with a good one, and the trick to starting with a good question is to figure out what makes a question good.

I was always pretty good at asking questions—it was a technique I refined in childhood, much to the chagrin of my parents. But nursing was where I learned how to do patient interviews, and discovered why my childhood questions had gotten such good results...sometimes. (I'll bet cops are taught to ask the same sorts of questions nurses are.)

### **The Good Question**

- **A good question is always open-ended**, and can never be answered with a "yes" or "no."

You want to get your subconscious talking. You want it to get involved, to spill all sorts of interesting bits of information into your hands. You don't want to ask it "Is Bob my hero?" and have it tell you, "No." *No* is not a helpful answer. So you rephrase the question to, "What does Bob do in the first part of the story?"

Then your subconscious is forced to think of useful answers like, "Maybe he could start fires. Or if you don't like that,

he could be the guy who steals the heroine's purse in the first scene. Only maybe she could have seen him first, and think he's really cute, and then when she isn't looking, he steals her purse."

I didn't have any idea for a story—any story—until I asked that question. Didn't know who Bob was, either. But I let myself answer that question, and now I have the stirrings of an idea about Bob. A vague glimmering of the plot to come. But onward.

• **A good question focuses on a broad topic** that lends itself well to expansion into a vast array of subtopics and details.

Narrow questions are easy to ask. "What did Bob do in the Smith Building?" is a narrow question. You get one and only one answer from that. "Bob stole Lucy's purse."

"What goes on in the Smith Building?" however, is ripe with possibilities. The Muse sits there for a moment and thinks. And then it says, "Well, the main floor is the lobby, where there used to be an elevator attendant, a receptionist, and a guard, but the place doesn't have any of those anymore, and public restrooms and a seedy little music store that gives lessons and takes trade-ins—their stock is mostly shabby second-hand stuff. But the guy who teaches guitar is really good. And the other half is a secondhand bookstore, and the guy who owns that is about a hundred years old. And the second floor has munchies machines, and the bathrooms are down the hall, and there are offices—"

"What kind of offices?"

"Hmmm. A video producer who's supposedly legit, but who's doing some pretty creepy stuff down in the basement..."

"There's a basement?"

"Apparently so. And there's a bottomfeeder law office at the end of the hall, right next to the public restrooms. And a detective agency with two detectives working in it. Partners. They're just getting started, and money's really tight. And an empty office—the guy who worked out of it committed suicide—he was a broker, and he got caught churning. The owners haven't managed to find anyone to rent the place yet. Might be because they haven't patched the bullet hole behind the desk. And the third and fourth floors are walk-up apartments. Only about half of them are rented, because of the neighborhood, you know."

• **A good question approaches the thing you really want to know sideways**, never directly. It avoids accusation and the making of assumptions.

Never put your Muse on the defensive. You want your Muse to think it's your buddy, not the enemy. (Don't make the mistake of actually believing it's your buddy, though, or it will stab you in the back and take off for Bermuda with your hero or heroine and the rest of your book.)

For current purposes, you might as well consider your Muse a hostile witness or a possible criminal being accused. You want to know the whole story here, and the Muse has it, or at least big parts of it, and it knows where it can get the rest. So you don't ask, "What can you tell me about what Bob was doing in the Smith Building last Friday at 3:27 AM?" The answer to that one is "Nothing." Trust me. The answer to that sort of question is *always* "Nothing."

What you want to ask is something like, "Bob seems a little odd to me. Has he ever seemed a little odd to you?"

Everybody seems a little odd if you think about it, and by asking the question that way, you're building a bit of rapport with your Muse, getting it to let its defenses down, encouraging it to say things that it knows won't really hurt anything. Like, "Well, he does collect rubber bands. Makes great big balls with them. And he likes to put on makeup, but only in his bedroom. He isn't one of those guys who goes public with it. And I know he likes to trap things. You know, rabbits and foxes and stuff."

And now you know that Bob would have a reason to be interested in the contents of a woman's purse other than for the money, that he has intentionally killed things—this may or may not be harmless, depending on what he does with them—and that he has an odd interest in rubber bands, which may or may not become a creepy plot point somewhere along the road. Ask yourself, what does he do with big rubber band balls?

**After you figure out your question and ask it, don't say anything else.**

Staying silent creates tension, and both people and Muses will blurt out some amazing things if you just ask your question and then wait, sitting still and not filling that silence with anything.

#### **Exercise: Question**

Come up with a list of five questions you want to ask about your plot. Ask them, and write anything and everything that comes to your mind when you start getting answers.

#### **Tool 2: Twist**

Plot twists in a novel are not a magic trick. They rely on two simple facts of human nature.

First, **based on what we human beings know, or think we know** about what is going on around us, **we make assumptions** about what will happen next.

Second, we are surprised to varying degrees when the things we assumed would happen don't.

So the elements of a story twist are:

- You let the reader believe he knows the facts of the situation

- You withhold critical information about the real situation
- You figure out what the reader will assume is going to happen
- You make something else happen **Doing the Twist**

I already set up a bit of a twist back in **Question**, when I discovered that Lucy thought Bob was cute, and then Bob stole her purse. She made an assumption: Cute guy equals nice guy. He wrecked her assumption, and provided a very small twist, by stealing her purse.

But there was another bit of information that I got back in **Question** that has been bugging me, and this came from an accusatory question that I asked as an example of what you don't do (for your opening question—for follow-up questions, asking about specific details is just fine).

Here's the question. Let's see if your mind runs where mine does.

"What can you tell me about what Bob was doing in the Smith Building last Friday at 3:27 AM?"

He was stealing Lucy's purse. Fine. We got that.

But what was *Lucy* doing in the Smith Building at 3:27 AM, where she was in a position to meet Bob in the first place?

My Muse is sitting here bouncing in its seat, going, "I know this, I know this! She told him she lives there, in one of those skeezy apartments, and she was just getting home from work."

Now, at this point, we don't know a thing about Lucy except that she's female, she has a questionable selection process where men are concerned, and she used to have a purse.

So our big question here is, "What if Lucy lied?"

That brings up a whole nest of new, interesting questions, which we will now ask.

Why was Lucy in a bad neighborhood in a building she doesn't live in at 3:27 in the morning?

What does Lucy do for a living?

Why did she lie to Bob?

Bob assumes Lucy lives in the building because she told him she did. Let's say he met her when he was trying to get into an office, and she was doing...what? Coming out of another office at the same time? No, because then he'd assume, with pretty good reason, that she would work in the office she came out of, and that she would also know, if sight if not by name, the people who worked in the other offices. So he would react by running, by hitting her and then running, or maybe by killing her and then running.

If he didn't work there himself. Okay. Back to those questions.

The Muse is muttering, "If she was dressed like a hooker, he would assume she was there for the obvious reason."

And that makes sense. Bob's trying to get into, or maybe coming out of, one of those little offices. Lucy comes onto the floor, and she's wearing as little as is legally allowable in public. (Does she enter from upstairs? From downstairs? We'll figure that out later.) She sees him, she takes a little swig out of a hip flask, and she weaves up to him. Breathes boozily into his face and asks him something. Maybe if he's the new janitor, because she's locked out of her apartment, and she can't find her keys.

So, is this who she is, and what she is.

My Muse suggests that Lucy is nothing like what she appears to be, and that Bob's role in this book will not be as villain, nor will it be as hero. Bob is the victim, the guy who needs to survive.

"Lucy's an assassin," my Muse says, "and she was on her way to a hit. One of the lawyers at the end of the hall always works late on Friday, tells his wife he's sleeping over in the office, and has a hooker come up when he's done with his Friday paperwork. Lucy, studying him, has discovered this pattern, has already killed the hooker who was on the way up, and has swapped clothes with her. Bob, coming out of a different office, runs into her, and Lucy wants to get him out of the way. She doesn't care that he's seen her; she'd dressed as a hooker, the real hooker is dead in the trunk of her car, any investigation of the lawyer will reveal his Friday-night hooker habit and turn suspicion for his death on the missing hooker, the wife, or one of any number of disgruntled clients.

So now we've met the villain of the plot. And the victim of the plot. I'm guessing that the hero (or heroine) is going to work in that crummy little detective's office across the hall. Had no idea when I started this that it might trend toward a classic gumshoe novel.

Your turn. **Exercise: Twist**

First, remember that when creating twists, **assumptions are only useful when messing with the minds of the people who make them.** You cannot permit yourself to make assumptions. You have to question everything, though everyone benefits if your characters make false assumptions. Most of the time, your readers will assume what your characters assume.

But sometimes you want the readers to think that the characters have made false assumptions, and that the readers have seen through these false assumptions, and have figured out what's really going on. In these situations, you create a double-twist. You figure out the character's assumed truth, and you let that be in plain sight. You then figure out what

you want to be the reader's assumed truth, and you and your Muse figure out a possible second way the story could go that you can send your reader chasing after.

In the story of Lucy and Bob and the as-yet-unknown detective, I think I want my readers to come to the conclusion, at least for the first half of the book, that Lucy was hired by the lawyer's wife to off him because the wife is tired of his cheating, has discovered she's caught a nasty venereal disease, and wants the money the guy has socked away. I'll leave what's really going on for later exercises. (I don't know yet. But I'm getting ideas.)

Using the material you developed in the previous exercise, find places where it would be logical to make an assumption about a character, a place, or an event. For example, that the man

dressed as a mailman is a mailman, that the building where children go after school to hang out is safe or that they are doing what people assume they're doing, that the shooting witnessed by a dozen people in public involved the people they think it did, or happened for the reason they believe.

About each interesting character, place, or event, ask yourself these questions:

**What do the characters think is the truth?** (Example: Bob thinks Lucy is a hooker; Lucy thinks Bob is a nice guy working late.)

**How do these assumptions vary from character to character?**

**What do I want the reader to think is the truth? What is the real truth?**

Answer these questions with every bit of information you can suck out of them. Be wordy, be extravagant, take anything your Muse will toss in your direction, whether you think as you're writing it that it's good, bad, or horrible beyond words.

### **Tool 3: Cliffhanger**

Cliffhangers pop up at the ends of scenes, the ends of chapters, sometimes at the ends of books in a series, and usually right in the first paragraph.

The cliffhanger's sole purpose is to break the "This is a good place to put the book down" impulse of readers who have to go to the bathroom, to bed, or to work. Once a reader has voluntarily put your book down, the odds are surprisingly high that he will not pick it back up—that his attention will wander and he'll forget your story. And you. And all your other books—past, present, and future.

Your objective as a writer is to keep your reader reading—to make him drag the book into the bathroom with him, read it all night long, and crawl into work late the next morning, exhausted but exhilarated by the adventure he's just been through. Your job is to keep his fingers clutching the book from the moment he picks it up until the time he reads the last word.

Cliffhangers use the reader's need for resolution of conflict to keep him moving forward. **You create the cliffhanger by ending the scene not with its logical resolution, but at the point where the character involved in the action is in deep trouble.**

Cliffhangers come in a few varieties, varying depending on the number of POV (point-of-view) characters in your story, the sort of conflict you're dealing with, how you're using time in your story, and how much you want to torture, *er*, *entertain* your reader.

**You can leave your reader hanging:**

At the end of one scene, and give the resolution at the beginning of the next scene (single POV book, linear storytelling)

At the end of one chapter, and give the resolution at the beginning of the next chapter (single POV book, linear storytelling)

At the end of one scene, and give the resolution three or four scenes, or even chapters, down the line (multiple POV book, linear storytelling)

At the end of one chapter, and give the resolution several chapters later (multiple POV book, linear storytelling)

At the end of the first paragraph, with the resolution scenes or chapters later, or if you're really good, all the way at the end of the book, but be careful with really long extensions of suspense. If you don't do the story breathtakingly well, you'll just annoy your reader, which you never want to do (single or multiple POV book, using flashback or shifting timeline)

To plot out your cliffhanger, you select an exciting scene, you write your character into a corner, and then you either insert a scene or chapter break and continue with the resolution, or you insert a scene or chapter break and then write about someone else for the length of a scene or three, or a chapter or three. And then you write out your resolution. The longer you go without resolving the issue, though, the more you risk that your reader will lose interest and go do something else.

If, however, you end every scene and every chapter with a cliffhanger, you'll wear out your readers, and there are other ways to end chapters. Cliffhangers, like twists, are best used as the spice of your book, not the meat.

**Working out the cliffhanger:**

I can write from Bob's POV, from Lucy's POV, or from the POV of the unknown detective.

The Muse is whispering, "Detective! Detective."

This makes sense to me, because Bob knows part of the story, and Lucy knows part of the story, though neither knows the whole truth. The detective, however, does not know anything. And **your main character is the person in the story who A) knows the least, and who B) has the most to lose**. It is your job to make sure that whoever becomes your main character meets these two criteria.

So I ask myself, "How and why do Bob and the detective meet?"

And the Muse says, "They could meet because Lucy had something critical in her purse, and Bob stole it. And now she's coming after him to kill him. Or because she has something that scares the socks off of him in her purse, and he wants to have someone find out something about it. Or ... what, what."

The Muse stalls out on me here, so I ask, "So why this detective?"

"Bob really does work in the building," the Muse pipes up. "Bob has seen her going in and out of the office."

"The detective is a woman?"

"Apparently so."

See what I mean about Muses and those "yes" or "no" questions?

So now I get a bit of a scene in my head. Bob goes into the detective's office. He can't admit that he stole the purse, but a lawyer has been murdered in the building, and somehow the cops have figured out that Bob knows something, or suspects something, about the killing. He was there at the right time—he was dumb enough to admit that—and he knows about the lawyer's proclivity for hookers, and he even talked to a hooker who was in the building that night, though the woman he talked to said she lived in Smith and was just looking for the janitor to help her get into her apartment. The cops are now casting a fishy eye on Bob. Maybe Bob works for the video company, and the goings-on in the basement are suspect in the disappearance of the hooker, and the death of the lawyer.

Anyway, a freaked-out Bob goes into the detective's office, tells...um, um...Annalise, yeah, that's her name...that he found the purse and it was the one the hooker was carrying, but the hooker has since disappeared, and the cops are after him, and he needs help.

And then something bad needs to happen, right there in the office.

The Muse says, "We could kill Bob in the office while the detective looks on."

And since Bob is looking like several different sorts of scumbag, now that he's associated with the creepy video company, I'm inclined to listen to my Muse, and downgrade Bob from "victim who survives" to "first-act corpse."

Having Bob's body end up dead in Annalise's office by means as yet unknown gives us a pretty good cliffhanger, and certainly leaves Annalise in the position of person who knows the least and has the most to lose, considering there's a killer out there who doesn't know how much Bob knew, or how much Bob told her, and a corpse in her office.

#### **Exercise: Cliffhanger**

Go over the material you've developed so far, and ask yourself these questions:

Which characters' lives seem to be going smoothly?

What's going on around them, in place or in time, that can throw their lives into turmoil?

At what point can you leave the character who knows the least and has the most to lose dangling by fingertips from the edge of your cliff?

Write everything that comes to mind. Do alternate cliffhanger ideas for several different characters.

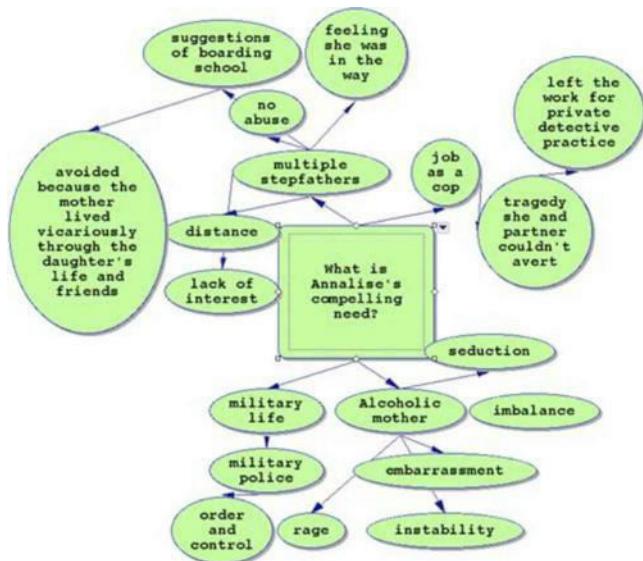
#### **Tool 4: Character**

So Annalise has a corpse in her office, but we know nothing about her except that she's a detective. She's going to become the main character, so not knowing her means we can't use her to develop the plot. She's a blank slate, a nothing, a cipher.

We'll use the character tool on her now to fix that issue, and to find more areas where we can twist the plot.

I'm only going to use a tiny snippet from one section from the **Create A Character Clinic** to develop Annalise. I know this will leave her a thin character, but we just want a brief example of how to draw plot out of your character development. I'm using *Inspiration* (<http://inspiration.com/> for either Mac or PC) to ask and then answer questions about Annalise's character in a technique called "clustering." You can opt to buy software or grab a sheet of paper when you do this.

To cluster, you write a word, a phrase, or a question, draw a circle around it, draw an arrow, write the first word, phrase or question that comes to your mind in relation to the first circle, and keep writing and drawing until you've formed a web. I'm pursuing the following question:



This snippet deals with Annalise's compelling need, that is, the thing that gets her out of bed every morning, that is the source of her goals and her ambition and her main desires. Compelling needs can be everything from safety to fame to wealth to a hunger for order or a need to make the world a better place.

The Muse, chomping at the bit to tell me about her, answers the question **What is Annalise's compelling need?** with, "Annalise had an alcoholic but well-off mother, and had run through one

#### **What is Annalise's compelling need?**

father and three 'uncles' by the time she was five. As Annalise grew older and her mother grew less attractive (though no less well-off), Annalise could never bring friends home. If her mother was sober, everything was fine—Lauren was the perfect hostess, the bridge-club matron, the still-respectable member of her respectable family. When she was drunk, though, she'd scream insults at Annalise's female friends, implying that they were cheap, tawdry, and sleazy, and she'd turn into the drunken debutante with Annalise's male friends, hitting on them and trying to seduce them. Annalise, in her search for **order and stability** in her life—her compelling need—and secondarily to horrify and spite her mother, joined the military at the age of eighteen, straight out of high school. Out of the military after four years, she went into police work, and from there, went into the detective business with her cop partner. Annalise's compelling need is for order in her life."

My Muse continues with: "Annalise stays free of long-term romantic entanglements, and has no children. She works in a field that allows her to create order out of chaos, and to find the truth behind multiple layers of lies. She plays the cello (something she learned as a child) preferring the ordered and mathematical precision of Bach to wild romanticism or modern experimental works. She voluntarily restricts her alcohol intake to a beer during hockey games—she's a Bruins fan—or when she and her partner go out after work to discuss cases. She does not permit herself anything alcoholic after a bad day, identifying this behavior as the path to alcoholism that her mother took."

Further, my Muse notes, "She and the partner were working a domestic violence call, and the husband, who had the wife and five kids cornered in the bathroom, shot the kids first, and then the wife while the cops were breaking down barricaded doors to get in. Then he shot a cop as they came through the door, and died in suicide by cop. Annalise was the one on the phone with the man, trying to reason with him—he was the one who'd called the police to tell them he was going to kill his family and then himself."

And finally, I get this. "She's really not going to like having a guy killed in her office, right in front of her. It's going to get way under her skin and bug her until she has to involve herself in the case just to get her world back in order again."

I have her motivation now. Some backstory for her. But where can I drag additional plot out of this?

Her mother could still be in Annalise's life, calling her at work, demanding that Annalise come home to take care of her.

Annalise's need for order can give me situations where her partner is saying 'let it go,' and she's just digging herself in deeper into danger and a non-paying gig.

From Annalise's past as a cop in this same city, she's going to have informants who can come through with information.

From Annalise's past in the military (what branch?), she'll have a friend in the area—someone she can hang out with, talk to, go to movies with. And this person can end up involved in this case of hers, and perhaps in danger because of



Annalise.

**Exercise: Character**

**Cluster information about all aspects of your main character's life**, from compelling need to work and play; to past, present and future; friends, enemies, and lovers; life and death; culture, religion, and education, and all the way to moral stance.

**Cluster other characters**, too.

Let your Muse talk to you and **write out everything you can think of about these characters' lives**.

From what you discover, ask yourself how you can use this information to create incidents and events in your story.

**Write down your ideas about each incident in a single short sentence.**

And then head to Line-For-Scene, where we'll take these sentences and do interesting things with them.

**Tool 5: Line-For-Scene, Take One**

First the answer to the obvious question—why "Take One"?

The answer is that the line-for-scene you can do while you're plotting before you write is a completely different animal than the line-for-scene you do when you're revising a completed novel and trying to get it to work.

This line-for-scene involves white index cards, single sentences, starting with the ones you were coming up with in **Character**, and a corkboard, or a large expanse of floor where you can spread out the cards and look at them all at once, or software like *Scrivener* or *Liquid Story Binder* that includes index cards and a board on which you can arrange them.

Off the top of my head, here are scenes I came up with, in the order in which they occurred to me.

- **Dead Bob**—A man Annalise knows only by sight is murdered in her office while seeking her help.
- **Mom Scene**—Lauren calls Annalise on the phone and demands she come home, while Annalise is chasing a suspect through downtown.

**Partner Scene**—The partner tries to talk Annalise out of pursuing Bob's death after someone ransacks the office.

- **Friend Scene**—Annalise realizes she is being watched while she and the friend are walking to a movie.
- **Music Scene**—Annalise loses herself in playing the cello while trying to figure out who is trying to kill her.
- **Video Scene**—Annalise, digging through Bob's stuff, discovers his link to what's been going on in the basement.
- **Lawyer Scene**—Annalise plays hockey with cop friend while grilling him about the investigation into the lawyer's death.

- **Hooker Scene**—Annalise tries to track down the hooker who disappeared from Smart Company Escorts.

- **Thug Scene**—A thug breaks into Annalise's house and she barely escapes out the window as he shoots after her.

You pin (and read) your cards from left to right, top to bottom.

Here's how the initial nine scenes look pinned to the board.



Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic

These aren't in any particular order, though. They're just the scenes as they occurred to me.

So I shuffled the scenes into one possible linear order.



like this starting with Bob dying in the office after getting out only a few strangled comments about the hooker, the dead lawyer, and someone trying to kill him. I can see some related scenes—the partner coming in as Annalise is dialing 911, Annalise and her partner discussing the information she wheedled out of her cop buddy, the horror on her face as she watches a piece of the video she finds in Bob's stash of stuff he shouldn't have, and the funny-awful scene where she's in the middle of running through town trying to keep track of someone who tried to kill her, and is trying at the same time not to let on to her mother how bad things are.



I like this one, too, because in it, we wouldn't know anything about Annalise, including the fact that she's a detective. We'd just see her waking up as a man bursts into her bedroom. She might or might not have time to grab for her gun, she might have to bolt for her escape route, which she will have planned out in careful detail beforehand, and will have practiced a few times, just because this sort of thing is always a possibility.

Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic

And a start-in-the-middle order.

like the mother calling in the middle of the night, too—the timing changes if I use the second order. And then we'd go to a flashback scene of Bob the Scumbag dying in her office, and how her orderly life got into such disorder. We'd move back to the present, with her playing hockey with the cop buddy, but this time, she'd be pointedly hiding the information that someone broke into her place and tried to kill her. Or maybe she'd tell him.

Either of those things would move the story in a different direction.

If I were doing this for real, I'd keep adding scenes until I had anywhere from thirty to sixty cards filled out. I'd leave blanks, not trying to create a card for every scene, because some scenes will be transitional, and because I don't want to get so nailed into one lineup that I'm not willing to chase a better idea if, halfway through the book, one presents itself.

I'd play with different orders on the cards, being willing to pull cards out of the lineup and do new cards as new arrangements suggested places to insert cool cliffhangers, neat twists, and particularly good conflict.

I'd stay loose, because I've found that for me, having too much detail in place sucks the life right out of me when I'm trying to write the story. And I remember vividly all the times I've sort of known the story ending right from day one, only to discover the way the book really ended as I was sitting there writing it. **Courage of Falcons** (the final book of the Secret Texts trilogy), **Talyn, Sympathy for the Devil**, and **Night Echoes**, to name just four, got their real endings the day I finished the first drafts of those books. **The Ruby Key** got its real ending the day I finished the *final revision* before turning the book into the editor.

Things change. Give them room to change for the better.

So now it's your turn.

**Exercise: Line-For-Scene, Take One**

**On white index cards write one line—one single sentence—for each event you can come up with.** Pin them up as you write them, don't bother looking at what you already have, and just keep letting the material you've already developed and your chattering Muse toss events at you.

Your cards should look like this:

Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic viii

**Here's an example:**

Mom Scene	
Annalise	
Lauren gets Annalise on the phone and demands she come home, as Annalise is chasing a suspect through traffic	

**LINE-FOR-SCENE TAKE ONE PLOT CARD**

TITLE	Other information you want to track
POV	
Your sentence	

**Don't censor yourself.** If ideas for scenes seem dumb, write a sentence for them and pin them to the board anyway.

**Do make sure you've included action and conflict in each sentence.** That is, make sure the POV character is doing something, and make sure each event includes a problem that must be resolved.

**Do allow yourself to stop when you get tired.** That's the perfect time to start playing with push-pins (or drag-and-drop if you're using software). The Take One version of the line-for-scene is a tool, not a master. You use it, you start writing, you add to it, you subtract from it, you shuffle things around... You don't have to finish it. Not before you start the book, not while you're writing the book, not while you're revising the book, not ever.

**Tool 6: Conflict**

We looked briefly at conflict in **Line-For-Scene, Take One**, in relationship to making usable one-line plot cards. (If there's no conflict on the card, you're going to have a rotten time writing a workable scene.)

However, conflict is a powerful generator of plot events in a story all on its own.

Conflict is not just people screaming at each other. It isn't just war. You don't need to have bloodshed, weapons drawn, fists flying, or a master of the Fighting-Bat School of Kung-Fu breaking out with the Vampire-Bat-Ninja Cartwheel of Death.

**Conflict occurs when two characters' compelling needs are different, and to some degree incompatible.**

Those words "to some degree" matter a great deal. Conflicts can be big, as where the Super-Villain *needs* to destroy the planet Earth and the Super-Hero *needs* to save it. Or conflicts can be small, as when your husband wants to eat at the Chinese buffet, and you want a slab of steak.

Novel-length stories require all sorts of conflicts, between all sorts of characters. So now we're going to build conflicts with the sole intent of turning them into plot events.

**I already know that Annalise needs to have order.** She

needs to have events make sense, even if she has to work her

butt off to create that sense. She needs peace and quiet, she needs personal space and private time, she needs music and physical exercise, she needs to feel that she is doing her part to create order out of chaos.

Let's look at the other people in the story.

Lucy, who killed the lawyer and the hooker on her way to see the lawyer, and who may or may not have killed Bob,

has needs. My Muse insists she's involved in something bigger than she is, and this is borne out by the fact that a thug who was definitely not Lucy broke into Annalise's house to kill her.

#### **What does Lucy need?**

She needs money—a lot of money. Three or four million dollars, or maybe more. Why? I don't know that yet. I'll let it come to me.

Lucy needs to have the power of life and death—she wouldn't have chosen to become an assassin if she didn't. She needs to hurt people, and she needs to kill them. Sometime, though, she needs to let them live. She needs to feel smart and powerful, better than everyone around her. She needs to be invisible to her victims, but she also needs to get close to them, to know them. Sometimes she needs to know them on a personal basis, to be their friends before she becomes their judge, jury, and executioner.

She also needs to take her dog for daily walks and to the groomer twice a month to keep that poodle cut perfect. She needs chocolate, and she has expensive tastes.

#### **How about the partner?**

Dude really needs a name. Jim works for me. Jim is, at this point, a complete cipher. He could be a younger guy, an older guy, maybe one who was close to retirement. But no, he would have held on for retirement for the benefits if he were close, I think. So he's a younger guy, maybe about the same age as Annalise, (who needs a nickname, because I'm already tired of retyping those letters). I don't know his religion, his philosophy, his race, his culture, his morals, his hobbies. I know that he needs to have conflicts with Anna (Hah! The straightforward nickname emerges.), and that these conflicts need to be low-key, because otherwise the two of them would not have chosen to work together all day every day, in situations where they only have each other to count on.

His basic need is to make the world a better place. This need meshes well with Anna's needs to create order out of chaos and to know she is doing something that matters, so the two of them are, overall, good partners. However, he can be messy and relaxed where she is right-angle corners and uptight. He can be divorced with a couple of kids he adores and sees regularly, where she is childless and has never been in a long-term relationship. He could like the Flyers. Or his winter sport could be football. Or hunting.

From these issues, I can start getting one-line scenes for my line-for-scene.

Anna runs into redhead Lucy when Lucy is walking her dog outside the Smith Building.

Brunette Lucy stops into the detective office to talk with Jim and Anna about renting the empty office across from theirs to convert into an accounting office.

Jim and Anna argue sports while staking out the place where they think the thug lives, finally agreeing to disagree about everything except that baseball is the perfect sport to listen to on the radio, while almost missing blonde Lucy walking right by them, but with the same dog.

#### **Exercise: Conflict**

**If you haven't yet figured out what it is, create the main conflict for your story now.** The main conflict for mine will be

between Anna's need to solve Bob's murder to resolve her issues about order, and the needs of the seen and unseen killers to stop her.

**Then take some time to play with the needs of various characters in your story,** seeing which of them are incompatible, and to what degree. Characters who like each other should have reasonably compatible needs, with a few needs that drive each other a little nuts. Characters who are pitted against each other can still have mostly-compatible needs.

**Finally, create a few line-for-scene cards from these conflicts of need.**

#### **Tool 7: Language**

Those of you who are writing SF or fantasy have already been dealing with the language issue for some time, as have you writers of historical novels. The languages characters use, and how those languages connect with other languages, change the characters and create conflict.

For everyone else, the concept of language as a plot tool probably comes as a bit of a shock. You're writing in your own language, your characters all speak your language, and your readers are going to read the book in your language (unless, of course, you sell translation rights, which is always really cool. But even then, your readers will be reading your book in their language, which you hope will be a well-translated version of your language.)

So how does language play into plot?

Language is the primary tool with which we think about the world, which which we interact with the world, and with which the world interacts with us. Facial expression, body language, and gestures can only get you so far.

If your language does not have words for such concepts as freedom, individual rights, private ownership of property, privacy ... or cookies, pies, and cakes ... then you will not be able to think about these concepts in any meaningful way. You will not be able to talk about them with others, protest for or against them, request them, or create them. You'll have

raw existence and vaguely lumpy generic baked goods.

But we're all still speaking English, right? Not really.

Conflict from language arises from two basic sources, and three more complex sources. The two basic sources are incomprehension and misunderstanding, while the more complex sources are slanging, word-breaking, and censorship.

**Incomprehension**—Two people who simply cannot understand anything the other is saying. One speaks French and the other speaks Chinese, for example, with no crossover.

**Story conflict potential:** Minor to major—if the stakes are asking a girl out on a day, you're looking at light humor. If your character has to tell someone that a bomb is about to go off beneath the nearby bridge, you're looking at suspense. Wrangling the story of the monster that haunts the Japanese village out of a local gives you potential horror. And so on.

**Misunderstanding**—This can occur when people are speaking each other's languages badly, when they both speak the same language but with different regional accents and dialects, or when they both speak the same language but with different cultural or operational vocabularies. Examples of the first are obvious. An example of the second would be someone with a Boston Brahmin accent trying to talk to someone with a Louisiana Creole accent. And the third would be a doctor talking with a patient, a soldier talking with a civilian, a computer tech talking with Ms. Is-That-The-On-Button, or a parent talking with a high-school student. Some words and concepts in one vocabulary simply don't exist in the other, or sound so different they are unrecognizable, leading to breakdowns in communication. Misunderstanding also includes **slanging**: many intentional language manipulation processes, from word-coining to development of technical vocabularies to the creation of code words for military units, teenagers, and criminal classes. Slanging in all its many forms operates to create

an in-group sub-language to make communication between insiders easier, and comprehension by outsiders harder.

**Story conflict potential:** Again, the conflict comes from what's at stake—if your character is trying to order a hot dog and the street vendor gives him incomprehensible directions to the other side of town, you have humor. If the taxi driver delivers you to the wrong address and your character was trying to save a relationship before the ex-lover took off for a five-year-stint in Africa, you have a potential tragedy. If the doctor gives the patient an all-clear on what they thought was a life-threatening illness, and the patient thinks the phrase, "All your tests were negative" was a death sentence, and goes out to do the things he swore he'd do before he died, starting with killing his wife, you have—well, at least a law-suit, and maybe a horror novel.

**Word-breaking**—While slanging creates words for specialized vocabularies and may be either a good thing or a bad thing, **word-breaking** is always negative. It is the erasure of the meaning of words and entire vocabularies to further a social or political agenda and to prevent the possibility of informed debate and dissent.

The novel **1984** by George Orwell gives very scary examples of word-breaking, all of which are used to render words (and concepts) meaningless and powerless. "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?... Has it ever occurred to you, Winston, that by the year 2050, at the very latest, not a single human being will be alive who could understand such a conversation as we are having now?... The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact, there will be no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness." We have examples of Orwellian Newspeak going on in North America, under the guises of political correctness, the abuse of patriotism, the whitewashing of criminal behavior, and many more. There are concepts you aren't supposed to speak or think about, and you aren't supposed to question why you shouldn't speak—or think—about them, and more and more special interest groups are jumping on the word-breaking bandwagon and trying to destroy useful concepts in order to silence debate.

**Story conflict potential:** I can't think of any happy conflicts you can have with word-breaking, but you can definitely go as sinister as you want to with it. Government or social oppression, secret societies, star chambers, holocausts and nightmares all lend themselves well to places in which word-breaking has a large presence.

**Censorship**—Censorship occurs when certain words, concepts, ideas, religions or philosophies are made illegal, and where people who use them are punished. Censorship is the blocking of websites about democracy and human rights in China, and it is the attempt of governments in the US states to prevent the sale of books those governments deem objectionable. It is also the actions of school boards to remove books they deem objectionable from school libraries. Some forms of censorship always exist, and within reason are necessary—*Playboy* and *Penthouse* don't belong on the racks next to **Pat the Bunny** and **Hop on Spot** in the elementary school library. Parents have a right and an obligation to limit their children's exposure to material they believe would be harmful. The trick is, and always has been, in figuring out where to draw the line.

**Story conflict potential:** Small issues like who gets to decide what books a child reads; larger issues, like who reads the contents of an employee's website; and, huge issues like who gets to be heard by government, who gets to hear what is going on in government, and who gets to protest or question authority, and in what manner.

**The drawing of lines is where you find your conflict where language is an issue.** I've already sort of figured out that my protagonist, Anna, has an upper-class heritage. If I make her actually from Boston, a Brahmin daughter with a

DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) pedigree and a debutante-eligible

past that she walked away from, I've given her an accent that will travel with difficulty in some parts of the country. So if I move her into the Deep South for her police and private careers, I'm in an excellent position to play with the conflicts of misunderstanding and incomprehension.

With her military/police technical vocabulary and occasional lapses into upper-class starchiness when she's furious, I can create tensions through misunderstanding between her and clients, suspects, victims, and even friends. I can figure that she could be hard to get to know, and sometimes hard to like. That even after all these years, she'll have trouble fitting in with the primarily blue-collar and white-collar working folks who inhabit her chosen world. She'll be the perpetual outsider—something good from the writer's perspective when developing an interesting character. It's not the only way to go, but I like the possibilities here.

**Plot card example:**

Anna, fresh from dealing with her lowlife informants, gets a call from an old Boston friend, and makes a serious social gaffe. Her friend laughs it off, but Anna, realizing the same slip elsewhere could have gotten her killed, reevaluates her life.

I won't bother with political language issues. Neither word-breaking nor censorship are going to have much place in a series of classic gumshoes, and I want to keep these light.

**Exercise: Language**

**Consider the region or regions your character inhabits or will be visiting** during the course of your story. Write down the different languages spoken in that area.

In my area, which is not even remotely cosmopolitan, we have English, Spanish, Chinese (we have a fairly large population of Chinese-speaking immigrants and resident aliens), Tagalog

(Philippine), Pakistani, and Hindi (India) speakers, as well as rare instances of other unidentified languages caught in passing. Furthermore, English here exists as a distinct regional southern accent that is further varied depending on whether the speaker is white or black, and that can be either very thick and hard to follow to non-locals, or almost nonexistent, depending on the speaker's background. Beyond the local dialect, our English is spiced up with "the rest of English"—which is made up of accents from transplants from the northern and western US and English-as-a-second-language speakers. We have teenagers, too, who intentionally alter the language in order to be less comprehensible to adults. Communication in our area, then, can be a challenge. In the world as it exists now, where towns in which everybody knows everybody and everybody speaks the same are an endangered species, the idea of going through a day without once having to stop and figure out what the person next to you just said are increasingly rare.

**Brainstorm situations in everyday life when your character will have difficulties with comprehending the speech and meaning of others.** My character has to interview people daily. Language will sometimes prove to be a real hurdle to her. If you're writing a serious novel, language issues can delve into the deeper and darker issues of censorship and twisting and breaking of language, the ways in which cultures whose languages do not share common concepts cannot deal with each other meaningfully, and of course the issues of incomprehension and misunderstanding. Lighter novels should probably stick to the first two language issues, though there's no hard and fast rule about this.

**Consider how language situations can cause your character problems with, endanger his or her life, provide for comic misunderstanding, or otherwise create conflict.** Write down everything you can think of, and put your best results onto line-for-scene cards.

**Tool 8: Culture**

All cultures are comprised of people:

- who share **common ground**
- and adopt a **shared philosophy**
- who adhere to **specific goals**
- which require the **setting aside of differences**
- and demand of each member **personal sacrifices of time, effort, and resources**
- in order for **all members to work for the good of the group**
- and to **survive, propagate, and grow beyond the lifetimes of current members**

(From Holly Lisle's **Create A Culture Clinic**)

Cultures can be found in anything from a writers' group to a religious organization to an ethnic group to a political group. How the people interact with each other, what they are willing to do for each other, how they will sacrifice to help each other, and who they keep in the group versus who they get rid of will determine how long the culture will survive, how much it will mean to those who are a part of it, and how much it can accomplish.

And at each of the points that make a culture what it is, you have points of conflict.

You will find conflict in your characters' cultures where there is:

- an attempt to enlarge or decrease the area of common ground

**Example:** A writers' group that, having grown too scattered, decides to focus solely on the writing of mysteries or science fiction or romance, thus cutting from the group everyone who wrote in another genre.

- a struggle between an established philosophy and one that is struggling to emerge

**Example:** A religious organization previously pacifist in nature that is dealing with a sizable number of members who feel the nation's defensive war is critical to the survival of their religion and its members, and who want to enlist.

- debate about specific goals, and whether or not they are worthwhile

**Example:** Anna's desire to pursue the cause of Bob's death, even though she won't get paid for it, and Jim's perfectly rational assessment that time she spends on that case is going to cut their working resources for paying customers, decrease their income, and possibly get one or both of them killed for no reason.

- a refusal to set aside differences

**Example:** A fight between members of a writers' group over art versus commercial success, with some members holding that both art and commercial success are valuable for different reasons and are equally worth pursuing, while a second group contends that only art for art's sake is truly writing, and a third group of members declares that commercial success is a better indicator of worth than critical acclaim, since if more people like it, it must be better.

- a squabble over demands for personal sacrifices

**Example:** A political grass-roots movement wants everyone to volunteer time at the headquarters and passing out pamphlets, but some members declare that since they have contributed money or are celebrities or of a high social standing, and thus able to add value to the organization simply by having their names and faces publicly linked to the cause, they shouldn't have to volunteer actual work for the cause.

- contention over what really is good for the group

**Example:** One section of a religious organization thinks the group should focus primarily on gaining converts, the other group thinks it should spend most of its money and energy improving the lives of its members.

- the value of the survival of the group is called into question

**Example:** Extremists within a culture look for ways to kill off 90% of the members of that culture, in order to spread greater wealth and property between fewer people.

In the case of Anna, she's a past member of military and cop culture, and she maintains strong friendship ties within those groups. She'll have some conflict with both cultures because she left them, even as a member in good standing. She has conflicts and reservations about her membership in the upper-class culture into which she was born, questioning the values and mores of her ex-social group and whether or not any part of her still fits within that group's mold.

I can land her in situations where she has to put on the skin of one group or another in order to get information or save her life, though she risks serious legal and criminal ramifications if she goes so far as to impersonate a cop or acting member of the military; the risks for slipping back into her old social standing would be social—word getting back to her mother, her cover being blown by someone who knows who she is versus who she's pretending to be, her being out of the loop for so long leading to her not knowing some vital bit of social information she should have known.

In fact...

Example line-for-scene:

Annalise, browbeaten into attending one of her mother's social things, calls up a divorced childhood friend to take her, and while there, gets an undercurrent of people she used to like watching her with wariness and perhaps disdain.

#### **Exercise: Culture**

**Determine what culture or cultures your main character belongs to.** Let your Muse spend time scribbling out the details on each of the seven points of culture.

Figure out **how the details related to membership in these cultures will work with your character to help him achieve his compelling need** in your current plot, and how they will work against him. (Internal conflict.)

Decide how **membership in various cultures will create conflicts (minor and major) between your main character and other characters**, and how it can help create strange alliances in some areas of your story. (External conflict.)

**Write a few line-for-scene cards** and pin them to your board.

#### **Tool 9: Map and Terrain**

All characters in fiction, just like all people in real life, exist in a specific time and a specific place. While you can stretch the boundaries of fiction, allowing time-traveling characters as well as those who travel through their spaces in manners not available to people existing in the real world and the here-and-now, you as the writer must be intimately familiar with the spaces they inhabit and the time or times they live in. You need this not only because you want to avoid such continuity errors as having one character in two places at the same time, or having a character in a tightly plotted suspense novel lose an hour moving from one side of the house to the other, but also because when you know the time and the terrain of your story, you can use it to create conflict, and conflict furthers plot.

SF, fantasy, and historical writers have an advantage over other writers when working with maps and terrain. They've



had it ground into them from the time they picked up their first fantasy, SF, or historical novel that details of place and time were both interesting and essential to the progress of the story. Writers of contemporary novels, on the other hand, are entirely capable of overlooking the very good, very careful worldbuilding that exists in good contemporary novels, and they are equally capable of writing books that exist in a temporal vacuum and a gray, featureless place. Their times and locales never provide problems for the characters who inhabit them. Writers may treat horses like cars, gaslights like electric lights, ignore the difficulties of cooking over an open fire or in a cast-iron wood stove, or going

to the bathroom while wearing a corset and sixty pounds of silk skirts, underskirts, and whale-bone skirt-shapers, but contemporary writers totally ignore the importance of the cell phone, the computer, the automobile, instant information, GPS tracking, and other now-common facets of contemporary life when plotting their stories.

How would map and terrain work in a contemporary book?

Let's look at Anna. She lives and works in a smallish city we haven't yet chosen, somewhere in the Deep South. If you choose a real city or town, you can acquire maps of the place and use them for reference. You won't be able to know how much has changed since the maps were made, but if you use one of the online map-and-directions services, you can get pretty close to real-time and real-feel. This was the technique I used in **Last Girl Dancing**, which was set in Atlanta.

Because I don't want to violate map copyrights by putting images of them in this book, I'll act like I'm going to set Anna's first book in the small city—150,000 people in the city itself and the three surrounding counties—of Hallanby, Alabama, which I'll invent. If I actually wrote this book, I'd choose a real city of about the size I wanted, in the area I wanted, and I'd research it to pieces, buying maps of the city as well as using available online resources, making online contacts with people who live there, finding all available-online pictures of places within the city and gathering them into a folder, along with useful information like how far they are from where she lives, what sort of neighborhoods they exist in, what cultural groups reside in those locations, and so on. With my hand-drawn or printed maps, my pictures, and hand-drawn or cut-out-from-a-magazine floor plans of her house, the Smith Building, and the place where the big climactic ending scene will take place, I would then do the following things:

- **I'd figure out how she gets from home to work**, and

how long that takes, and what potential obstructions (road-work, picketing truckers, bad intersections, etc.) exist along her usual route. Under some circumstances, I'd figure out a backup route.

- **I'd know where she lives**, how someone could break into the place, how she could escape, where she keeps weapons, where she could hide, and where she could use her surroundings, both inside and outside her home, as a trap for people who are trying to hurt her. This info will go into her escape-from-the-thug scene. A useful set of information to know about your own home, incidentally, because the home advantage is only an advantage if you know your terrain better than the enemy does.

- **I'd know which places around the Smith Building serve food**, and what sorts of food, and how long it would take her to get to each one, plus her method of travel for each—walking, biking, car, public transportation, or other.

- **I'd know where she liked to hang out in her free time**,

and who else liked to go there, and what sort of natural and man-made dangers exist there. Hockey rinks, for example, could have slippery ice, big grumpy guys waiting for ice time, dark corners, risky bleachers, questionable restrooms and food-service areas, and employees that could pose risks.

- **I'd figure out (eventually) where the bad stuff in the climactic scenes would take place**, and plot out escape routes, colorful places for big action sequences, with lots of obstacles and dangers already built into the terrain, and something that provided a personal and special risk to Anna herself, maybe dealing with a phobia about heights, or spiders, or elevators, or stairwells, or whatever.

And maybe I'd also figure out details of Jim's place, and Lucy's.

Only if I needed them, though.

And when I did that, I'd figure out line-for-scenes to move my story forward. A scene toward the end of the story where Anna

and Lucy are stalking each other through the Smith Building and Anna using better knowledge of the building to hide, just as the man who has been after both of them comes across Lucy and kills her, so that Anna could find Lucy's corpse and realize the secret person behind the whole mystery has now put himself in play.

Right. Here it is.

Example line-for-scene:

Anna, trying to get the better of Lucy, who is stalking her through the Smith Building in complete darkness, discovers Lucy's freshly-murdered body.

#### **Exercise: Map and Terrain**

Take at least some of the steps I've listed above, and **figure out scenes in which you use your character's location and elements of the time in which he or she lives to create conflict**. Write out a few line-for-scene cards for your plot.

### **Tool 10: Throwing Stuff Against A Wall**

Think of this as the last refuge of sane plot building. (We'll start insane plot-building in **Section II: When Things Go Splat.**) You

use this technique to insert bits of real life, serendipity, and magic into your plot.

There are three steps to **Throwing Stuff Against A Wall**, and

two of them are as easy as falling down a well. The third involves getting out of the well, frequently while blindfolded and with your hands tied behind your back, and so is a tiny bit harder. But anyway, here are the steps.

• **Step One: Get stuff.**

• **Step Two: Throw stuff.**

• **Step Three: Make sense of stuff.**

#### ***Get Stuff***

Time to go scavenger hunting. Drag out magazines; hook up to the Internet and randomly surf, saving links to five or six pages you find interesting; grab a few newspapers from the local newsstand or racks; pull a handful of nonfiction books (do it straight from your bookshelves with your eyes closed for double fun and extra points), pull out old family photo albums. Get your camera and walk around taking pictures of items that catch your eye—falling-down buildings, strangely-dressed people, public sculptures, cool architectural details, great gardens, horrible lawns, the yards of people who decorated for Christmas as if they owned the local power company, rivers, streams, junkyards, anything that made you turn your head and look.

#### ***Throw Stuff***

Get your three-ring binder and hole punch, some paper, and some glue. If you have a copier or scanner, get it. If you need to go to a copy place for copies, now's the time to go. Take your toys with you.

**Cut out newspaper articles that catch your attention.** Not

ones that catch your attention as being sort of related to your book...just ones that make you stop and look at them. Sports scores, garden club news, a random killing that made the front page, the Chamber of Commerce droning on about the new industrial park or the little accident with too much fluoride in the drinking water (eep!)—whatever. Copy them, or cut and paste them, one article per page, on sheets of your paper. Hole-punch and file these articles in the ring binder.

**Print off interesting pages from those internet sites you found.** These are for your personal use so copying the pages and filing them in your notebook is not a violation of copyright, but if you end up quoting from a site, you should give an author credit and a site link-back in your acknowledgments.

**Go through nonfiction books and, again, make note of things you think are cool.** Write down book titles, page numbers and topics you liked, and file these in your ring binder, or if you have your own copier or scanner, go ahead and copy, then file in your ring binder. Again, these are for your own personal use and are from books you already own—copying is for your convenience in keeping research material together, not to acquire copies of books you don't own. Ask a librarian what constitutes fair use if you want to make copies from library books. Hang on to titles, authors, and details of the books' printing and copyright information in case you use the material and need to include acknowledgments or bibliography notes.

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**From those old pictures, find pictures of people you don't quite recognize doing things you can't exactly identify.**

Scan, copy, or otherwise reproduce these pictures, one to a sheet of paper, hole-punch and file them.

**Clip odd pictures (including those from advertising) and interesting articles or ads from magazines, or copy them.**

Again, hang on to bibliographical data in case you need it later. Writing it down now will save you from having to dump a great quote or interesting factoid because you can't locate the magazine, or even remember which magazine it was.

**Copy the best pictures from your weird photo trip.** *Best* is not most artistic. *Best* is whichever five or ten pictures give you a little shiver in your gut, or fill your head with questions, when you get them home and look at them.

#### ***Make Sense of Stuff***

Blithely and jauntily drag out your Muse. The Muse not in a blithe and jaunty mood? Drag it out by the hair if you must.

Look at your first item, and start asking yourself questions.

**For example:**

- How was one of my characters involved in this?
- Where did he see it?
- Where and when did he do it?
- Where in my story's time and place does it exist?

- In what ways are my characters affiliated with commercial salmon fishing, the nude beach near Saint-Tropez, an all-organic free-range cattle operation in Montana, the lion fish, and an online community of miniature sheep fanciers?
- How can this item cause a problem for my main character?

- Who is this person, and how does one of the characters know him? How does he ruin that character's plans?

In my story, Jim had to go to Saint-Tropez to investigate a missing persons case, and had to go undercover on the nude beach there—the most embarrassing event of his life. He did meet a girl, and he did find the person he was looking for, who was bigger and better-looking than him, and gave him a ferocious inferiority complex. That person was also with the girl Jim had taken a liking to, and threatened to break Jim into component parts if he didn't take off. Anna gives Jim a hard time about that investigation.

The all-organic free-range cattle operation sends out hermetically-sealed fast-frozen steaks to subscribers, and Anna has just joined what Jim calls the Meat of the Month club, though he is angling for an invitation to dinner.

Jim has a lion fish in his aquarium.

Anna found the miniature sheep site while researching something else and tells Jim she found the perfect pet for him. The sheep thing will become a running gag through the series, and at some point one of them will actually go out to the farm and discover how adorable the lambs are, and how ditzzy the adults are.

Jim spent a year after he quit college as a commercial salmon fisherman in Alaska, and discovered that police work was a lot safer, and that he could do something he considered useful and valuable to society.

The items you get from throwing stuff against a wall frequently end up as background. However, in some cases, they can become background that generates a plot event.

#### **Here's my example:**

A photograph of my family with friends of my parents who I don't remember yields a massive fireplace with a tall, club-like glass vase full of marbles that hold the flowers in place. This vase sits on the mantle. That club-like vase, weighted with marbles and full of water, makes me think of smacking it over someone's head, and that takes me back to Anna and the thug in her house. Running, she could grab it, duck around a corner (depending on how I draw her apartment)—be assured that I'll draw it so that she has a corner to duck around—and she can drop the intruder with that vase. Or, if he doesn't fall down immediately, she has a floor covered with sharp glass and a sharp glass vase neck in her hand as a weapon.

Written as a line-for-scene, that comes out as: Anna escapes thug, grabs vase from mantle, knocks out and injures thug, and searches him while police and rescue are on the way to her house.

Yes, this does change some of my other plot items. That's okay. I make the card and pin it up. Once I play around with the order again, I'll find places where I can rewrite cards and change the plot to include this much more proactive scene.

#### **Exercise: Throwing Stuff Against A Wall**

Follow the steps listed above for yourself. **Do the complete exercise, including writing line-for-scenes, for at least three items.** Keep going if you're getting good material from this.

#### **Tool 11: Theme and Concept**

At this point you have gone through **Question, Twist, Cliffhanger, Character, Line-For-Scene Take One, Conflict, Language, Culture, Map and Terrain, and Throwing Stuff Against A Wall** (though if we're lucky, not literally). On your board, you have a nice pile of line-for-scene cards—ten if you only did one per exercise, a lot more if you found exercises you liked and ran with them. You might have spent some time getting them into an order you like, and you probably have a good idea of what your story is going to be about.

It's time to start looking for your story's soul.

Things you need to know to do this:

- **Your theme is the unifying idea of your story**, the underlying moral, the writer's struggle to make sense of the world and create order out of chaos.
- **Your sub-themes are secondary unifying ideas** that may or may not relate to the main theme, but that explore other issues of importance to the characters and the story.

Here's the process of finding your themes for the book.

**Pull out the plot cards and put them into a reasonable temporary order.** Earlier, I debated one story order where we opened the book with Bob becoming Dead Bob in Anna's office, and one where we started far later in the story, with the thug

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breaking into Anna's house to kill her, and where we flashed back to the Dead Bob scene. For now, at least, I've decided to go linear, and start with Dead Bob. Here are the line-for-scene cards I've done so far, now in tentative working order:

- **Dead Bob**—A man Annalise knows only by sight is murdered in her office while seeking her help.

- **Video Scene**—Annalise, digging through Bob's stuff, discovers his link to something awful going on in the basement of the Smith Building.

- **Meet the Accountant**—Brunette Lucy stops into the detective office to talk with Jim and Annalise about renting the empty office across from theirs to convert into an accounting office.

- **Blast from the Past**—Annalise, fresh from dealing with her lowlife informants, gets a call from an old Boston friend, and makes a serious social gaffe. Her friend laughs it off, but Annalise, realizing the same slip elsewhere could have gotten her killed, reevaluates her life.

- **Party Time**—Annalise, browbeaten into attending one of her mother's social things, calls up the same friend, a divorced childhood neighbor, to take her, and while there, gets an undercurrent of people she used to like watching her with wariness and perhaps disdain. The friend is kind and encouraging.

- **Lawyer Scene**—Annalise plays hockey with cop friend while grilling him about the investigation into the lawyer's death which occurred a week earlier in the same building.

- **Hooker Scene**—Annalise tries to track down the hooker who disappeared from Smart Company Escorts.

- **Thug Scene**—A thug breaks into Annalise's house and she barely escapes out the window, as he shoots after her.

- **Dog-Walking**—Annalise runs into redhead Lucy when Lucy is walking her dog outside the Smith Building.

- **Stake-out**—Jim and Annalise argue sports while staking out the place where they think the thug lives, finally agreeing to disagree about everything except that baseball is the perfect radio sport, while almost missing blonde Lucy walking right by them, but with the same dog.

- **Mom Scene**—Lauren gets Annalise on the phone and demands she come home, while Annalise is chasing a suspect through downtown traffic.

- **Friend Scene**—Annalise realizes she is being watched while she and the friend are walking to a movie.

- **Partner Scene**—The partner (Jim) tries to talk Annalise out of pursuing Bob's death after someone ransacks the office.

- **Music Scene**—Annalise loses herself in playing the cello while trying to figure out who is trying to kill her.

- **Surprise**—Annalise, trying to get the better of Lucy, who is stalking her through the Smith Building in complete darkness, discovers Lucy's freshly-murdered body.

The first thing you'll notice with your plot cards is how thin they feel without all the supporting background material behind them. You have the story filling out in your head, but the skeleton is very bare and has some huge time and place gaps. You may also find cards that no longer fit the story as you envision it. I'm no longer sure about the death of the lawyer, for example. Don't throw these cards away. Just move them to the bottom of the board and pin them there as possible other avenues to explore.

Imperfection is necessary at this point. You'll keep filling in gaps as you go, and all the places where you see scenes you could add are places where your Muse is working with you. Don't add extra cards now, though. Instead, glance over the bare bones and

make notes about the elements in the story the cards you already have represent.

For me, the struggle between Anna and her need for order, shattered when Bob was murdered in her office and right in front of her, pops out first.

- Order versus Chaos

Then there's the struggle between Anna's old life into which she was born—the life she fled at age 18, but which still hasn't let go of her, and her new life, which she chose.

- The Past versus the Present, or maybe Autonomy versus Duty.

Then there's the obvious fact that she has stepped into the middle of something nasty and much more complex than it first appeared, and that now she's a target.

- Life versus Death.

And then there is a clear sports subthread:

- Hockey versus inferior sports. (I pause until screaming subsides.)

Once I have a few possible themes, and have considered using some of them as sub-themes, I move on to the next step.

**I write a single sentence describing what I think the book will be about.** In this case: When a man is murdered in her office, a detective has to find out why, and discovers layers of evil, a ring of corruption, and betrayal by someone she loves.

**Then I write down a one-sentence story arc for the main character.** My revised attempt at this is "Anna, determined to find the truth about the man murdered in her office, connects the murder to criminal activities in the building where she works, and

traces the network of criminals back to a friend she has trusted with her life."

**Finally, I write down my main characters and a concept paragraph of no more than 250 words.**

**I'll come in with the following tentative example:**

Main Characters:

- Annalise
- Jim
- Bob the Corpse
- Lucy
- The guy in the shadows

**Concept Paragraph**

When the nice wedding videographer across the hall is murdered in detective Annalise (Last Name)'s office as he is asking for her help, Anna decides to find the truth behind his death. Against the advice of friends, colleagues, and her impossible mother, Anna begins digging into his life, uncovering his horrifying secret and following threads deep into a web of lies, double-crosses, assassinations, and greed in search of the hidden puppet-master who has targeted her for death. (80 words)

Meh. The paragraph above doesn't thrill me, but it's a start. I'll revisit it during different phases of the writing and it will change drastically by the time I hit the final revision. For now, though, it gives me a feel for the book itself and what I believe I'm shooting for. And, not inconsequently, it and the other materials in this section give me a way to pitch this project to editors and agents before I've written the whole thing. Pitching partials is useless until you've already completed and sold a first novel, but once you've done that, this is the first part of the process you follow to create a pitch from a partial manuscript.

You write down the main character for a couple of reasons. The first is that, in the heat of writing, especially with long books, you can forget individual characters for immense sections of the story. Or you can forget them entirely. I forgot Hasmal (from the **Secret Texts**) for a huge part of the first draft of **Diplomacy of Wolves**, then had to write him back in. This is annoying and time-consuming. If you have your main characters always in front of you, they tend not to wander off to Vale with that romance heroine from the book on the floor next to your desk. You also write them down so that, if you decide to kill them off in the middle of your story, you can then draw a line through each victim's name, and the time and place of death... so that you don't forget you killed them, and then kill them again.

Nobody would do this, right? Wrong. I did. **The Rose Sea**.

Keep everyone rounded up in one place, and they won't have accidents you didn't plan.

**All of this is subject to change.** You haven't even started page one of the book yet, and that military maxim *No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy* applies to you and your plot.

**Exercise: Theme and Concept**

**Write down a possible theme in fifteen words or less.** Three or four words will usually do the trick. Some of my regular themes are Love Conquers Evil, God Is A Good Guy with Bad PR, Self-Sacrifice Is the Highest Form of Love, and The Individual Can Change the World, but the theme comes from the story you're telling and the characters you're telling it about—it isn't something you impose from the outside. Tacking on a theme that doesn't arise from the story will give you *Preachy Message Book*. And...ick?

**If you have inklings about any sub-themes, write them down too.** Some people, those with internally organized minds, come up with an idea and, before they've written the first word, know the themes and sub-themes they want to pursue. I don't have a clue about theme or sub-themes until I've had a chance to start writing. I organize my mind externally, with software and on notebook paper, or I'd never get anything done. People with internally organized minds might be able to recognize their final theme and sub-themes before having written three or four hundred pages, too. Me...not so much. But I usually end up with one theme and from three to six sub-themes by the end of my final revision. You may have more or less.

**Write down what you currently think the book will be about in twenty-five words or less.** Keep it as short as possible, polish it up, and memorize the sucker, because when someone asks you what you're currently working on (an agent or editor, for example), you're going to smoothly recite this line.

**Write down a one-line story arc for the book's main character.** Here, you shake off anything that might be a sub-theme, anything that might be cool background, anything that is not how your main character moves from the beginning to the end of the action. No flashbacks here, no frills, no fancy writing. This is you knowing what your target is. If you can't see your target, you can't hit your target. Rewrite it as many times as you need to, but get it right.

**Write down the main characters, and a concept paragraph of no more than about 250 words describing the story,** sort of like the blurb on the back of a paperback.

As you get each item in this section in line, you'll discover new information that you can use to create new line-for-scene cards.

**For example:** I didn't know that Bob the Corpse covered his basement activities with a fairly successful front business filming weddings. He had a couple of employees who were only aware of that part of the business, and even

though they're now out of work, Anna can visit them and get information from both of them on Bob.

**So my final activity in this section will be to write out a-line-for-scene for one of these visits:** Anna contacts Weye Hanna, Bob's first assistant, to find out about Bob's work, and discovers that Bob almost never filmed the weddings himself, and that his employees found this odd because he was extremely enthusiastic about the art of filming.

**If you have a line-for-scene idea that came to you while you were working through this material, write it now.**

### **Section III: Tools—When Things Go Splat**

What had been a workable relationship with your Muse has taken a turn for the worse. You're not on speaking terms, the story is stalled, you don't know what happens next, and the thought of killing off all the characters and pitching the existing manuscript into the river has taken on a seductive appeal.

Hang on. In this section you'll start with tools that use words—the writer's comfort zone, and move to tools that use everything else—the Muse's comfort zone, and you'll discover techniques from the amiable, to the deceptive, to the frankly coercive that will get your Muse out of hiding and back to work.

#### **Tool 12: Awake—Timed Writing**

When your Muse goes slouching off into the dark places of your mind, sulking all the way, you want to reestablish communication as soon as possible. And if you can, you want to do it on your own home turf, which is words.

Timed writing is your first tool for doing that. Get out an egg timer, use the timer on your microwave, use a stopwatch if it makes noise when the timer goes off. Or, if you do first drafts directly on the computer as I do, get yourself a software timer.

I use the Mac-only Minuteur

(<http://www.macupdate.com/info.php/id/19356>). But if you search for "cooking timer software" on your favorite search engine, you'll find all sorts of cool timers, some of which are sure to work on your hardware.

Set up your timer for ten minutes. This is long enough that you'll be able to break the barrier between you and your Muse, but not so long that you get tired and lose your focus.

And then you write. If you're stuck, start with questions. Don't correct errors, edit content, or change anything. Keep putting words, any words, on the page from the time you start the timer until the time it rings.

Here's my ten minutes. I'm leaving it not corrected or cleaned up in any way so that you can see you don't start with anything too sharp when you're doing this. It's all free-association with words

from the story and images, and then the Muse says, "Here, idiot, let me work with this."

What follows, then, is a block of word-barf spewed out in messy, rambling fashion. It's hard to read. Some of it's stupid. But I got some amazing information out of it, so I'm going to send you through it to see if you can catch the place where things started working.

*Darkness, shadows, spiderwebs, not sura about the way the door works in the basement, what it means. change the pattern on the wall, check the floor, pattern on the wall. it means something and I don't know what. Lines marked around the door, white chalk would be too obvious, something scratched or incised. A pattern. Check the lines, check the door, walk around the room and smell rot and decay, blood and death. Hear music from somewhere upstairs. In the basement there are boxes, not crates. The sort of boxes you get from stores and other places when you're moving but want to be cheap and not buy boxes from the movers. Broken down, stained, torn, holes in them, things poking out. What? Bits of old clothing, broken toys, books, other things that look like they come from the homes of people, not stuff from businesses. Little bit of a chill there, could the victims of whatever happens in the basement be from the apartments upstairs? We don't know about those people, but the neighborhood is bad so most of the people who live in those apartments probably don't have a lot of money. If they were selected from applicants because they didn't have nearby family or anyone likely to miss them, they could become a renewable source of material for... bad movies. Each one written for the person chosen to be the main actor or actress. Every movie different. A subscription service for the movies, someone with political or social clout moving people like chessmen, pulling strings, getting horrifying material to people willing to pay inordinate amounts of money to get it. Nightmare stuff, filtered and passed from the lowest of lowlifes to the highest pillars of society. And in the middle of all this, Anna who has stumbled into it because somebody else's lines got crossed. Bob wasn't supposed to die, which means Lucy isn't working for the person who is doing the big bad. She's a good red herring, someone who is involved in this accidentally, too. We find that out when Anna trips over her corpse, but until then, she's keeping close to Anna, and when Anna catches on, she thinks she's getting close to the death of Bob when in fact she's fallen into the same trap as Lucy, making a false assumption about cause and effect. And Jim is trying to drag Anna out of the mess while Anna is digging herself in deeper, stirring up all the wrong people with very smart, very dangerous questions.*

I get the following line-for-scenes:

- Anna digs through some of the boxes in the basement, and finds things in them that she cannot believe people would willingly abandon. She also finds a photograph of one pretty young woman tucked away in a book on acting. She recognizes the woman.

• Anna and Jim discover the method of distribution for the DVDs, and managed to drag additional information out of their informant that leads them into the same society Anna spent most of her life getting out of.

#### **Exercise: Timed Writing**

**Ten minutes, any words that you can put on the page, as fast as you can put them there.** Trust your Muse to show up when given something as tempting as free-writing to play with.

Stop when the timer goes off, **dig through the jumble of stuff in your writing**, and find any new directions you can pursue, any new characters who show up, any new events that will move your story forward.

**Write your new material as line-for-scenes**, making sure that each line-for-scene contains a character, a problem, and action, and add your plot cards to your board.

#### **Tool 13: Awake—Word Games**

We've already established the fact that your Muse, your subconscious, is more comfortable with images than with words. However, words that create a strong emotional response from you do so because your subconscious already has a connection to them.

When you're stalled at any point in the plotting process, here are some word games that may lure your Muse out of hiding.

#### **Goosebumps**

You want to find the words that give you goosebumps, that make your stomach knot up a little, that make your heart beat a little faster. These are usually concrete nouns, names for things that stirred your imagination or scared you when you were a kid.

You're going to make a list of them now. For me, that list starts with:

- **mirror**—for me, mirrors always made me imagine that there was a whole world on the opposite side, that the reflection staring back at me was not really my reflection, but someone wearing my skin backwards, someone who looked like me but wasn't like me at all. That there might be some way to get from here to there, and that what I found there might be nothing like here.

- **attic**—full of creepy stuff, lurking memories, small animals that are heard but not seen, secrets hidden away, ghosts and whispers.

- **river**—usually placid, going from the place I can see to places I can't even imagine, carrying beneath the currents secrets that might thrill or horrify me. Rivers overflow their banks, too, and come hunting the nearby unwary in the middle of the night.

- **road**—I always imagined the roads listening to the people traveling over them, and those people being somehow connected to the road itself and to others who traveled it. I wondered if people left parts of themselves behind in passing, and if the road could record those parts, or if other people might find and follow them.

- **twilight**—like most kids I was scared of the dark, but twilight was the thing that really spooked me, because it was so deceptive. There you were, like a frog in a pot of heating water; you were playing outside and the sky got a little darker but you didn't notice because you were having fun, and your eyes adjusted, and then it got still darker, and all of a sudden twilight became darkness. You couldn't see anymore, you were usually not right at home where you could just go inside. Bam, boiled frog. I ran home like the devil was at my heels more nights than I can count, scared to death that the thing in the dark would get me, betrayed by the twilight that was so gentle and so subtle and so treacherous.

And so on.

When you have a list of words, write one on an index card. Lure the Muse to the card with this question—**Where in the book can I use this word?**

Follow-up questions include **What happens to my main character with this word?**, **How does the trouble start?**, and **What does this word mean to him?**

For my example, I'm going to stare at the word Twilight on the card for a little while, and run those questions through my head, and then I'll let my fingers run for a bit.





**What happens to my main character with this word?**

Anna and twilight. Anna in her bad neighborhood, confident because she was a Marine and she was a cop and she is a licensed detective who can feel her handgun riding comfortably in her shoulder holster. Weapon loaded, safety on, but years of practice make that a mere formality, not an obstacle. It can be in her hand, aimed and fired in the blink of an eye. Anna is careful, then, but confident. And in the gathering dark, with night slipping up on her, something moves in shadow, in shadow pushed back into a corner, coming up from under the ground. Basement, almost as scary as attic, sometimes more scary. From up under, a guy with a big black plastic trash bag, full of something awkwardly shaped, wrong, vaguely human maybe. Anna catches a glimpse of something, a flicker of movement, there then gone, from the corner of her eye, but when she turns to look, nothing is

there. Just the corner, the stairs leading down to the basement from outside. No sound of a door opening or closing, nothing wrong, everything okay.

But her gut says not.

That was pretty useful. A word, a question, and my subconscious offers up the following line-for-scene:

Anna first crosses trouble in the basement of the Smith building when she catches a glimpse of something her subconscious identifies as man with corpse, even though her conscious mind insists what she saw was either nothing or the janitor carrying out trash.

**Exercise: Goosebumps**

**Revisit your childhood or adult fears, your obsessions, your compulsions, your desires.** Find the words that move you. You can just make a list, or if you want, you can write out explanations of what the words mean to you.

**Take a single word. Use it as the title of an index card.** Ask

yourself questions about the card, and answer them by writing without censoring yourself—with single words, phrases, or whole sentences, conjuring images and bits and pieces of thought until something in your head goes *click*, and you know what the scene might be.

**Write out your line-for-scene on the card,** and pin it to your board.

**Pong**

You might have played the video game Pong. For those of you who haven't, it's a simple game. You are a paddle, and you face an opponent on the opposite end of a court who is also a paddle, and who is usually played by the computer. A ball is shot from center court, and you and your opponent swat it back and forth. The player who makes the other player miss the ball wins a point.

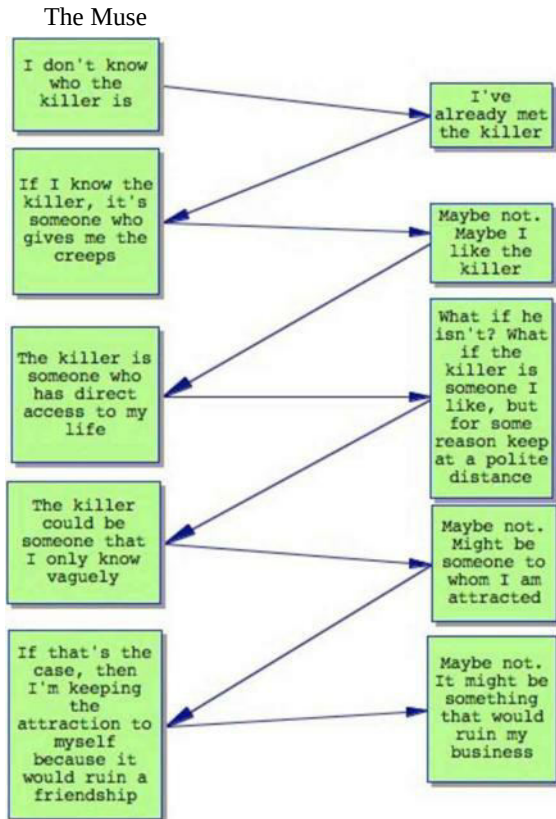
Back and forth, back and forth, to opposite sides of the court.

Pong the writing word-game looks pretty much the same. Here are the rules. You take the issue you're struggling with and write it on one side of your page. In a pinch single words or phrases can be forced into use at the beginning of the exercise. I prefer to start with a phrase or sentence that gets to the heart of what I *think* is stalling me. Granted, sometimes I only think I know what the problem with the manuscript is, and the only thing this exercise does for me is let me know I'm actually hung up on something else. In that case, I've sometimes hit my Muse with the "I'm stuck on this section" volley and the Muse comes back with, "No, you're not. You lost control of the story three chapters ago." And of course sometimes I get nothing useful whatsoever.

Most of the time, however, I set myself up on one side of the court, and I make my Muse stand on the other side of the court, and I tell my Muse its only job is to disagree with me. Even the crankiest of Muses can't resist the temptation to be an argumentative pain in the behind.

We bat things back and forth, then, and this is what happens.

Me



And so on. You can look at this and almost hear the 'bap, bap' of the ball going back and forth, with *yes* and *no* volleying steadily.

At some point, you'll hear a tiny subliminal click, and you'll realize you know what happens. For me, that click gave me this line-for-scene:

Anna, pursued by hired thugs, runs to Friend X for help and safety, and Friend X is waiting for her with a gun and some black plastic bags.

That's about as bad as your day needs to get. I don't have the name for Friend X yet, because I haven't yet built any of Anna's friends. But between various incarnations of Marine friend, cop friend, childhood friend, ex-boyfriend friend, and socialite friend, I have some nice options.

You won't ever hit a point in plotting your story where you can't stop for a game of Pong to get a fresh perspective. Pong is also a good way to come up with plot twists, because your Muse is taking whatever assumptions you're making and arguing against them.

### Exercise: Pong

Set up your character (or yourself) on one side of your paper and your Muse on the other, and state one thing you think is true about the problem you're having.

#### Example:

[MC name] doesn't know anything about her husband's affair.

Let your Muse volley. You choose some part of that volley to respond to, and your Muse will offer an argument.

Work until you suddenly realize how you can solve the problem.

Write a line-for-scene sentence on a plot card and pin it to your board.

### Chase Your Tail

This is for times when you have no clue what is stalling you. You can't formulate a statement about the problem, you can't think of a thing you can fix. You're simply sitting there, staring at the screen, awash in discontent and the certainty that something is wrong.

Write the names of your characters and words that are central to the part of the plot you already have on a sheet of paper.

In my case, I get:

Anna

Jim

Lucy

Bob the corpse Marine friend Female cop friend Male cop friend Childhood boyfriend Next door neighbor killer  
basement Smith Building evil videos black plastic bags  
dead lawyer wedding videos thug  
layers of deceit and so on...

Now, depending on how into this you want to get, you can either say good enough, or cut out each name or word or phrase and dump the lot of them into your hat.

Either way, close your eyes, put your pen down on a word or draw it from the hat.

Write the word on a sheet of paper, or type it into your word processor.

Write for one to three minutes on that word, not allowing yourself to stop writing, to back up, or to correct. Immediately choose by random means a second word from your list. Start writing again, connecting this word to what you were writing about before. Write for two or three minutes; then pick another word which you connect to the subject you've been writing about with the first two. Run with this pattern of choosing and following until you start getting a sense that, whatever your problem might have been, you've fixed it.

**My example:**

Evil videos—DVDs in fancy sleeves, found in a black box, tucked beneath boards pulled up in Dead Bob's closet, each DVD professionally labeled with a nicely printed and deceptive title like *Snow White at Night*, *Red Leather Dress*, and *Breakable*. In the box, too, jewelry and locks of hair, fingerprints on paper in dark brown ink. The smell of fear and the hint of death.

Smith Building—pictures of the Smith Building basement in the box, too, nothing odd about the basement at first glance, but a

boarded-over door in in an inner wall. Otherwise the basement is full of furnace stuff, tools, boxes, trash receptacles, fire equipment, and belongings of tenants who took off without paying rent. But in the basement, unseen on photos, the smell of dead things in the place, same smell as the black box, same feel, and the odd glimpse of one shiny piece of metal right beside the boarded-over door.

Marine Friend—calls via cell phone as Anna is doing her illegal search of the black box, and the friend scares the daylights out of her. Friend want to go someplace together, says it's important, says he'll pick Anna up wherever she is. Has news.

And so on.

From this, I get the following line-for-scene card:

Friend calls Anna before she can make sense of the box and its contents, claiming urgent news; she has to delay finding out what is in the box until later—but she takes two of the videos.

**Exercise: Chase Your Tail**

Make your word list.

Choose random words from the list, and write briefly on each one.

Connect each word to the thought you were following from the previous word.

When you have new information on your story, write a line-for-scene card and pin it to your board.

**Tool 14: Awake—Drawings**

You don't have to know how to draw to make use of drawings. You're not doing artwork for a book, you're not creating anything that another living soul needs to see.

All you're doing is trying to trigger your subconscious to hand you something you can use.

While there are a bunch of ways to do this, there is one I recommend because it works so well for me.

**Random Drawing**

In random drawing, you put a pen down on a sheet of paper and doodle whatever comes to mind while you're sitting there, not lifting the pen until something clicks. It's only partially random, though, because you do want to have your mind on the problem at hand, at least a little.

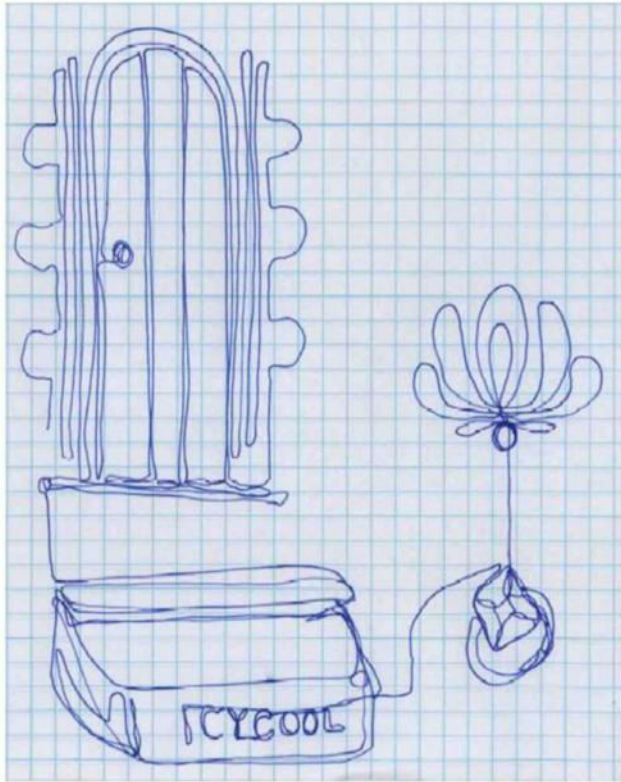
In my example, I had the plot as I knew it in my head already. I took a ball-point pen and some graph paper, and found I was a bit curious about victims that my character hadn't seen, and aside from watching the DVDs, whom she would never know. I didn't think much, though. The line starts at mid-left, moves upward through three bumps, and then turns and walks back down the page. Then up. Then down. I have no clue yet what this means, what it might be. Up and down lines, boxes and circles

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are my way of getting the process started. At the point where the Muse gets bored with them, interesting things begin to happen.

On the third trip up the page, the Muse said, "Enough, already," and threw in a curve. Suddenly something clicks and my hand moves faster. The drawing is going to be an elaborate door with fancy plaster work on the sides and a heavy

hand-planed solid oak door set into the archway.



I finished the door, and wandered downward with the line, making a sort of blobby scribble that initially looked to me like a bar of soap. It developed a sort of lid on the top as I scrawled, and it had a thickness about it that reminded me of drink and picnic coolers. The Muse doodled the name IcyCool across the front, and about that time, announced to me that the black box Anna is exploring is a cooler, not some elegantly carved trophy box. Which leads to the question, What was kept in there that needed to be refrigerated? Considering everything else that we know is in there, if the thing that had to be kept cool was meat-related, Bob the Corpse becomes a very scary guy.

Next, the ring. The Muse says it might be a clearly identifiable souvenir in the box, but it might not. It could also be something Anna can spot on the shadowy origin of all this badness that will tip her off to the killer's identity. Or some sort of membership token that ties other people into this whole basement business.

The doodle up at the top right? Muse won't say yet, but tosses out possibilities. It might be a corporate logo, a fabric design, a mark scratched on the door drawn in the doodle to its left, a symbol Lucy the Assassin leaves on a card on the body of each person she kills, or it might be nothing. Sometimes you'll end up with something on the page that refuses to mean anything. That's okay. I got three out of four on this doodle alone.

#### **Line-for-scene examples I get from this:**

Anna, searching the cooler the second time after having seen the DVDs in her apartment, finds a now-decomposing finger wearing a ring. She recognized the ring as one worn by the "star" of *Snow White*.

Anna, at the door of the apartment where she thinks the *Snow White* victim might have lived, discovers an odd symbol scratched lightly into the wood at the bottom near the hinges. She's seen the symbol before, but can't remember where.

#### **Exercise: Drawing**

**Use a regular blue or black ball-point writing pen and paper with lines on it.** This tells both your conscious and subconscious selves that you aren't trying to make art (no special tools, no fancy preparation). If you're not comfortable with drawing, special tools and special paper mean art, which the Muse and your conscious mind agree has to be good.

You don't want good. You want to play without either side of your self telling you you're doing it wrong.

So rip a sheet of paper out of a spiral-bound notebook and leave all those hanging chads in place. That piece of paper is obviously nothing but scrap, and you're just going to play with a piece of scrap paper for a couple of minutes.

All you're doing is doodling. Scribbling. You're only going to make one line. How could that be bad? Nobody can judge you for making one lousy line, right?

**Move the pen back and forth in a slow, steady rhythm, making zig-zags, circles, loops, bumps, or just straight**

**lines, until your Muse suggests that some other sort of line might be interesting.** Watch the curves and squiggles you get as you go, and if you notice a squiggle that looks like something, refine it a little (but don't lift the pen) so that you'll remember what it was when you're done. Avoid labeling anything if possible, though—words are not your friend here. You and your Muse are communicating on the Muse's home turf, now, and labeling your drawings can break that spell.

When you've filled your page to all four corners with doodles, stop.

**Ask your Muse, "Where in my story does this item appear?"**

and let the Muse tell you anything about it that it can. Don't

cancel, don't question or argue, don't mention that some ideas seem stupid. Think of this as the date you managed to wheedle out of the girl or guy you broke up with after a stupid fight that you started. Your date is always right. Everything the Muse says is fine by you. Nod and smile. Nod and smile.

You will, of course, delete anything stupid after you get home from the date.

**Write your line-for-scenes onto plot cards and pin them on the board.**

**Tool 15: Awake—Cards**

At this point we're drifting far from the places where logic and words reside, into the cluttered, dark lair in which your Muse stores all its goodies.

You're at the point where you're going to do the equivalent of throwing darts at a wall and turning whatever they hit into something useful.

Cards are small, easy to use, they're not messy, and they require no scissors and glue to work. And there is something about being able to shuffle and drop them on a table one at a time that frees the conscious mind from the fight of having to make sense of the story it's writing. If you're dropping little squares of cardboard on the table that removes responsibility. An exciting image of a fight or a party or someone playing saxophone in the street can send your imagination soaring and feed your Muse useful prompts.

Step one is to find a deck that you'll be able to use. Having been raised a missionary kid, I know the strong religious sentiment against tarot cards. So for those of you who are of a faith that forbids tarot decks, be assured that there are a few good card decks available that are designed purely for creativity, and that have no ties to fortune-telling or the paranormal. We'll start with Everyone Can Use These decks first.

NOTE: A standard deck of playing cards is useless. The images on the face cards are repetitious and lacking in odd detail, and the pips on the number cards aren't going to inspire anything.

**Everyone Can Use These Cards Archetype Storytelling Cards**

<http://www.thecards.com/>

These are great, and are my number-one recommended cards for writers who cannot buy tarot cards, and my number two recommended deck for those who can.

HOWEVER: While Archetype Storytelling cards are designed specifically as a writers' tool (and are excellent as such), the creators, hoping to garner a wider audience for them, figured out a way that they could be used as a tarot deck. (Tarot decks sell much better than writing decks, I would guess.) I highly recommend these cards, and assure you that their contents will not be a problem for most religious folks, but I do recommend that you look over the cards first. (You can see every card in the deck here: <http://www.thecards.com/fullpage/index.html>.)

**Bright Idea Deck: Breakthrough to Brilliance**

<http://www.amazon.com/Bright-Idea-Deck-Breakthrough-Brilliance/dp/0738705950/>

While this is fairly low on my overall picks list because I think the artwork is plain and lacking in odd background detail, this deck is completely religion-safe, designed for use in business or at home, with contemporary take-it-to-the-office imagery. These cards will work for writers of any religious persuasion.

If you cannot get the Archetypes cards, get this deck.

**Once Upon A Time Storytelling Card Game**

<http://www.amazon.com/Once-upon-Time-Storytelling-Card/dp/1887801006>

and

**Once Upon A Time: Dark Tales**

<http://www.amazon.com/Once-Upon-Time-Dark-Tales/dp/1589780604/>

The Storytelling cards are designed as a game to be played by a group of people, with very pretty fairy-tale images. They are useable for the purposes of plotting, though the Happy Ending cards aren't going to help you. Set them aside. The Dark Tales set may have imagery offensive to some religious writers. And the whole fairy-tale theme, with its emphasis on wicked witches, fairy godmothers, and other Sleeping Beauty/Snow White tropes, may be off limits to some folks.

**Recommended Tarot Decks**

My strong preference in decks, however, is to go with tarot cards. The really good ones are designed with imagery that's intended to ping on your subconscious mind—little mice and rabbits scurrying in the background, a row of coins

spilled on the ground, people in the background having a party while those in the foreground work...things like that.

**Here's a largish list of tarot decks:**

<http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/cards/list.shtml>

First off, as a special note to writers who know tarot: You aren't going to be using this deck as a tarot deck. Don't look for an affinity for the deck, for it to speak to you, for vibes. Look for recognizable human beings on every card (this is really hard to find), pictures with a lot of detail in the foreground, and a lot of stuff going on in the background and around the edges. There are a bunch of abstract-art decks out there—very pretty, and perhaps useful for some folks doing divination, but for your purposes as a writer, useless.

I have three recommendations for tarot decks that meet the needs of writers. The first is the Universal-Waite deck.

**The Universal Waite deck**

<http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/cards/uni-versal-waite/>

The artwork on the cards is old-fashioned, and the details and the odd little subliminal cues can offer some interesting directions for your story. This is as traditional as tarot decks get. You'll find excellent imagery, lots of foreground detail, and in some cards, quirky background detail. Men, women and children are about equally represented, animals, buildings, and terrains are varied, and there are quirky little details like symbols, boats, little roads running off into the distance.

The deck has three problems. Some cards—aces come to mind—are bare of detail. A lot of backgrounds have nothing in them. And everybody in the deck is white. So this deck isn't perfect.

It is, however, really good, and I've used its pictures successfully to get plot ideas.

The second deck I recommend is the Artists' Inner Vision Tarot, which is an odd collaborative artwork deck.

**Artists' Inner Vision Tarot:**

<http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/cards/artists-inner-vision/>

These are gorgeous cards, and they come nicely packaged. Some of the cards are fantastic as inspiration sources, others are a bit thin, lacking in the sort of background detail and oddity

Finally, I recommend the Wheel of Change Tarot, which I've used and enjoyed for years.

**Wheel of Change Tarot**

<http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/cards/wheel-of-change/index.shtml>

The cards are fascinating; the images are beautiful, artistically rendered, and primarily contemporary; there's a nice mix of races represented, the backgrounds are as detailed as the foregrounds; and, the images have quirky details that provide fascinating prompts for your plotting. The deck's downfall is that you'll find a shortage of people cards—that is, cards with humans as the central figures. But I've still managed to use these cards successfully to generate ideas.

**How to Use the Cards**

Behind this game is the fact that your subconscious mind responds more immediately to images than to words. The wonderful thing about tarot cards is that they are designed for story-telling. They're specifically designed to be linked to each other, to suggest relationships, to offer connections between one card and another that turn issues and problems around and offer suggestions and solutions. Since the non-tarot cards I've suggested above are designed for the same thing, you'll find they may work as well for you.

Cards designed to catch the Muse's attention are more effective in breaking barriers between you and it than, say, random images created by advertisers to sell you products. This is why I don't recommend flipping through a magazine and randomly pointing at pictures. Or, for that matter, flipping through picture books. There are some books that could work (the artworks of Pablo Picasso in a small collected-works volume, perhaps).

However, cards are outside of the writer's daily life of reading and writing, while books are not. Cards' forms do not suggest work waiting to be done, or work stalled out by a stubborn Muse.

You want to make associations between the pictures on the cards and the story you're writing. You'll play three cards. The first will represent the character with whom you're having trouble. The second will represent that character's goal. And the third will represent the obstacle that character must overcome to reach his goal.

You do not need to know anything about the cards you're using to do this. If you bought tarot cards but don't read tarot, don't go through the book that tells you how. You're approaching this process with no preconceived ideas about how to read them. You want them for the pictures only.

If you have tarot cards and do read tarot, this is going to be a little tougher for you. Forget what you know about the cards, look at the pictures with fresh eyes, find the tiny details that you forget to see when you're reading the deck.

If you bought one of the game or business decks, the same thing applies. The meanings of the cards intended by their authors do not apply to you. Read the book that accompanies the cards if you like, (or the game instructions), but ignore the writing on any cards, and while you're looking at the pictures, ignore the rules the authors of the decks suggest.

Here's what I get.

***Card one—my problematic character***



I decided I needed more info and plot cards on Annalise.

So when the first card that comes up is a king on a throne out in the middle of nowhere, I am for a moment nonplussed.

But...the man can represent a couple of things: Anna's masculine side, a man who will pose a problem to Anna, some sort of legal issue (the king thing, you know). He's holding a sword in one hand, frowning and looking stern. He's sitting outside, with storm clouds building in the background behind him and some cloud-like stuff carved into the back of his throne, beneath the crown. The trees are sparse, the ground beneath his feet falls away on all sides so that whoever he's waiting for is going to have a heck of a time reaching him.

He's stuck, I think. He wants to dispense justice, to make things right, but he's in a place where he can't move, where he is

relegated to waiting for someone else. With the ground dropping off in cliffs beneath his feet, he might even be trapped.

Trapped is interesting. Storm clouds are interesting. I hold those thoughts in mind and move on.

***Card two—my character's objective***

I have before me a chick in a moon hat in front of a beach towel covered by pomegranate pictures that's hanging from a clothesline. Behind her is a big lake, (I know this because I can see low hills on the other side) beneath her feet is sand. On my left, her right, is a big black pillar with the letter B on it. On my right, her left, is a big white pillar with the letter J on it. She has a cross woven into her white dress, she's holding a scroll that says TORA on it, and a tiny crescent moon that has fallen to the ground has ripped a hole in her skirt. The sky is blue, the day is lovely.

Since we're looking at goals, my Muse in smart-alecky mode suggests that Anna wants to go to the beach. If I've figured that she's trapped with a storm (either real or metaphorical) coming on, then she'd probably trade her current situation for a day at the beach. But Moon-Hat girl is sitting on a big block of stone with a serious expression on her face, and those pillars look like business.

My Muse suddenly says, "Hey, the black pillar can stand for Dead Bob, who's a bad guy, and the white one with the J on it can stand for Jim, who's a good guy." (My Muse pulls this stuff out of the air, I swear.) Black and white could represent seeing the issue in very clear-cut, black and white ways. (If she's still at the point in the story where she doesn't know what's going on, that is a reasonable goal.)

"Or," my Muse offers, "we could take this literally. That for some reason, she needs to find a place near a lake. Big lake. Maybe some sort of summer house out in the country, where she'll find a scroll, a letter, something written that will make things come

clear. Black and white. That's her goal, maybe that was what she was searching for when she was trapped."

And this, I think, sounds like a promising approach.

So.

***Card three—my character's obstacle***

And here I have an man in a traveling cloak staring out at the distance. In his left hand he carries a walking stick fresh-cut from a tree, a handful of leaves still green on it, in his right hand, a globe. The sea lies to his left, a mountain range and hills leading down to the sea to his right. I see a scattering of charming little houses, and a road traversing the rolling hills and heading toward the mountains.

But the man, though dressed for traveling, and though clearly yearning to be going someplace, isn't going anywhere. A second walking stick, identical to the one he carries, is bracketed to his right on the crenellations of a low stone wall. He is clearly at the top of a tower, trapped, with his only way out a steep drop down to unseen (by me) ground below. An interesting detail in the picture is that on his left, on another portion of the crenellated tower, there's a symbol of a black equal-armed cross tipped forty-five degrees, with red roses on two opposing arms of the cross, and white lilies on the other two.

My Muse said, "White lilies are a symbol of death."

I know this. So I wait for more.

"The red roses, those could be life. Maybe a fifty-fifty chance between the two, which, when one of your options is death, is dreadful odds."

I agree, and wait.

"The obstacle has to be being trapped, in danger for her life, in some place where the only visible means of escape will be the

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thing that kills her. She has a map, she knows where she needs to go (that globe), but even though she's ready, she can't get there. And again, water—a big lake or a sea—is involved.

And from this, I can figure out my plot card.

**The Trap**—Anna discovers that the place where Bob was storing the majority of his hidden videos is a summer



house on a lake, a location not that far from the city. But while she's been discovering this, the killer has caught her in Bob's apartment, and has set a trap for her so that, as soon as she tries to exit, she'll die.

#### **Exercise: Cards**

**Shuffle your cards vigorously.** Decide before you lay out any cards which character you need to develop.

**Lay out your Character card on a flat surface in front of you.** Study the picture, looking for little details as well as the picture as a whole, and write down any ideas your Muse tosses to you about how this card is associated with your character of choice. If the card does not seem to be related to your character in any way, you can decide that it represents someone he or she needs to deal with—but give your Muse time to make direct connections first. I've found that having the first card be the character in question almost always gives me better results.

**Lay out your Goal or Objective card next.** Again, with the idea of your character's needs in your mind, write down everything your Muse can come up with, even if it seems silly or pointless. Remain flexible about the ideas you get, and be willing to change or revise them once you've had a good look at all three cards together.

**Finally, lay out your Obstacle card.** Write down everything that comes to mind. Let the ideas you came up with for the first and

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second cards suggest alternate meanings for the third card, and try to come up with a story that fits all three.

**When you have finished getting ideas from the cards,** write out your best idea or ideas as line-for-scenes, and write them on plot cards.

#### **Tool 16: Awake—Making and Doing Things**

When the going gets tough, the tough start knitting. Or they cut out pictures from magazines and ruined books and paste them into a collage. Or they locate a nice piece of wood and their carving tools and start carving a replica of the box the hero of their story owns. Or they sit down with graph paper and design the floor plan of the house the hero lives in, and if they're deeply, deeply frustrated, they buy model board and tape and put together a three-dimensional scale model of the place.

The things you can do to connect with your characters and sink into their lives for a bit are endless. Does your character tie flies for fly-fishing? Get the stuff, learn to tie your own flies. (It's a lot of fun.) While you're working, be your character. Have the things going on in your head become the things going on in his. Have your own frustrations (tying tiny flies to a strict pattern is quite challenging) become your character's frustrations. Figure out why he does this activity, what he gets out of it. Figure out when he does it. Let yourself sink into your character's skin, with your hook held tightly in the tiny clamp, with your fingers wrapping thread around a feather to hold it in place at exactly the right angle, with the smell of the varnish-like adhesive you're painting on thick in your nose. Listen to the creaks of your house, to the weather outside. Note the way the light falls on your work, and the way the shadows puddle around you.

You hear a thump, and something moves in the corner, and you jump a little because you're alone in the house. But it's just a

neighbor's cat that has jumped to your outside window sill, and the movement you saw was the shadow of the cat, cast by the streetlight outside at the street.

You're not alone in the house, are you? The cat isn't watching you. It's watching someone else. Who?

Or, as I did, sit with knitting needles and a supply of woolly yarn in your hands and imagine a people who have been forbidden writing or reading, but who are expert knitters. Who have managed to create a written language hidden in the patterns of the cloth they knit. Be a knitter of those people, oppressed, subjugated, but determined to break free, swearing to reclaim your land for yourself and your heirs. Scribble patterns on paper, knit them into a sock, line by line, thinking about how you will, with this sock, pass news of your planned rebellion to others, how you will inspire them, how you will spin a subtle magic around them that will keep them hidden from the oppressors, that will bring them luck.

The shapes of the land begin to fill in around you. The faces of people who hold your people in low regard appear, and so do the people who are yours. You feel the coldness of their land, see your larder filled with dried fish and dried meat and dried greens and a few tuberous vegetables that were brought at great cost from a warmer, lush land. You feel the tiredness in your fingers as you weave in your words and your magic, you feel the fear in your heart that someone will realize the clothes you wear speak for you when you are forbidden words.

And you begin to understand the shape of a scene in which you must travel as a messenger, right under the noses of those who would kill you if they knew what message you carried, and present yourself before the leader of your rebellion, who has worked himself into a position close to the king who has conquered your lands. And you realized that you are posing as an illiterate carrying a message to the king, while the real message goes to your spy while the king stared right at you.

#### **Exercise: Making and Doing Things**

I cannot tell you which things to make, which tactile impressions you need to feel, which smells you need, or which

tastes. I can only say that to do this successfully, you first need to **choose an activity that consumes your thoughts**. You need to focus your mind on the thing you are making or doing, be it paddling a canoe or sewing a costume one of your characters might wear, or painting a picture that hangs on your character's bedroom wall.

**When you are fully engrossed in the activity, become your character.** Let go of yourself. Let your own world slip away and the world your character inhabits move in. From the background, looking over your own shoulder, make note of what your character thinks, does, says, feels, tastes, smells.

At some point you'll have an idea that you want to write down. Just a few notes, perhaps, an image, a bit of vocabulary. **Write down everything you get.**

And when you've finished, when you've put away everything but pen and paper, or keyboard and word processor, **do a Timed Writing on what you learned**, using the bits and pieces you've written down and letting your Muse play with the entire process.

**Out of that, pull a line-for-scene**, or as many line-for-scenes as suggest themselves, and write plot cards from them.

#### **Tool 17—Chop Wood, Carry Water**

Your Muse has buried itself so deeply in the dark corners of your mind that not even making things will pull it out.

It's time to release the writing process for an hour.

Leave the office, leave the desk, put pen and paper aside. Now is the time to do the chores you avoid. Laundry. The dishes. Sweeping the floor, or vacuuming. Dusting blinds. Mowing the lawn. Cleaning out the gutters. Scraping paint off the side of the house so you can repaint the wood before rot gets under the cracked and peeling parts.

You don't just go out and do chores, of course. While that might make your spouse or parents or neighbors happy, it won't do a lot for your writing.

You have let go of your writing. You have let go of your story. But you bring one little thread with you. A line of dialogue you liked, perhaps—something that suggested possibilities back when things were going well. An image you have of a scene that you want to write, but can't because you've managed to scare yourself off from it.

You hop on the lawnmower, say, (or pull the rip cord a few hundred times) and fire it up. And as you walk or ride through the grass, smelling the wonderful outdoor smells (or revel in the freshly piney odor of the house as you wax the floor), you run that tiny snippet of your work through your mind.

"Mike, I'm pretty sure I **saw** something hanging out of his trunk as he drove away."

And again.

"Mike, I'm pretty sure I saw **something** hanging out of his trunk as he drove away."

And again.

"**Mike**, I'm pretty sure I saw something hanging out of his trunk as he drove away."

And one more time.

"Mike, I'm pretty sure I saw something hanging out of his trunk as he drove **away**."

Back and forth across the lawn, nice straight lines. Good smells, fresh air in your face, movement, a good mix of attention and inattention, and tasty bait for your Muse, who, sulking in the dark, still cannot help but wonder what in the world you are up to.

"Mike, I'm pretty sure I saw something hanging out of his **trunk** as he drove away."

"Bit of red cloth," says the Muse.

"Mike, I'm pretty sure I saw something hanging out of the back of his trunk as he drove away."

"So what did Mike see?" asks the Muse.

"Don't know," you say.

"I do," said the Muse. "Mike saw a glint of gold. A necklace, he thinks, or at least part of one."

And you're off.

"He couldn't have seen a necklace."

"He did. The sun was at a long angle like it is right now. And the car, when it pulled out of the driveway and turned, would have been at just the right angle for any thin little thing like that to have glinted. It would have been faint, but Mike has good eyes, right? He's a sharpshooter."

"But why would there be a necklace, broken or otherwise, hanging out of the trunk?"

"Body in there?" asks the Muse.

"Too cliched."

"He cleaned stuff out of his house." "No."

"Then he cleaned it out of the house of the girl he's dating, or the woman who wanted to take away custody of his kids. That busy-body social worker. Because he got rid of her in some other way, and then he cleaned out her place and cancelled her utilities and had it look like she just packed up and moved overnight—paid with her credit card over her phone lines for movers to come and pack the place up and get rid of everything..."

And on, and on. Once your Muse is on a roll, you're golden. You just disagree with it, and let it toss things at you

until you've finally got your next line-for-scene, your next plot card, and a once-again-useful Muse.

**Exercise: Chop Wood, Carry Water**

**Engage in work around the house**, something physical that will get you a little dirty and make you a little tired.

**While you're working, think about one tiny segment of your work that left you hanging.** Again, a single line you have not yet followed up on, a single enigmatic image like a door hanging

open with just the visible edge of the skirt of someone who just walked in still showing. Something small. Something seemingly inconsequential. Play with it, changing tiny bits of it. The color of the skirt, the stresses placed on words, a noun you use, the verb you use. Don't try to work on any of this or develop it further. Just keep repeating it, over and over, making it a little different each time.

**When the Muse starts offering changes, be difficult.** "No, that's not what he does." "No, blue wouldn't work." "No, that's too expected, too easy, too ... whatever."

**Don't stop disagreeing until the Muse starts running at full-steam.** When it starts tossing you a full description, characters, action, background, and everything else, just shut up and let it run.

**Do a line-for-scene and plot card.** As soon as you finish the chore, anyway.

**Tool 18: Awake—Bore Your Muse**

This is either the first stop for the focused writer or the last refuge of the utterly battered writer. Either way, it is a direct attack on your Muse, so expect some resistance.

What you're going to be doing is sitting. And counting. Seriously.

Not even tricky counting.

You sit facing a plain wall, in a quiet room, looking away from all windows. No TV on, no music on, nothing that will offer you any sort of entertainment or distraction. You choose chair-sitting or floor sitting. I sit on the floor because it's less comfortable so I'm less likely to doze off—my Muse's secret weapon when I go on the attack with this particular dirty trick.

You count to four on the inhale, and to four on the exhale, and you repeat. The only thing you allow yourself to think about is the numbers in your head, and whether you're breathing in or breathing out.

This is...well, if you ever saw the movie **Ghostbusters**, you'll remember a scene where Bill Murray is in Sigourney Weaver's apartment, and he starts tinkling the keys of the piano. He says something along the lines of, "This always drives 'em nuts."

Well.

"In 1. 2. 3. 4. Out 1. 2. 3. 4. In 1. 2. 3." is designed to drive your subconscious nuts. It's boring. It doesn't allow for the sort of cool input your Muse craves. It pushes out interesting thoughts, it slows everything down, and the subconscious can only stand so much of breathing and counting before it starts offering suggestions.

"In 1. 2. 3. 4."

"Don't you have to pee?" asks the Muse.

Just keep counting and keep breathing.

"I just remembered that you didn't pay the electric bill."

Yes, you did. The Muse knows some dirty tricks, too. Just keep counting. Keep breathing.

"Out 1. 2. 3. 4."

"This is about the book, isn't it?"

Don't respond. These little back-of-the-mind questions aren't useful. The Muse knows what you need.

The Muse knows what I need, too.

"In 1. 2. 3. 4." I think as I inhale.

"That whole trapped-in-the-room thing is what you're looking for, isn't it?"

"Out 1. 2. 3. 4."

Long sigh from the Muse here.

"All right. Here's what I've been thinking. She doesn't know about the guy out there who wants to kill her. And getting her out of that room not dead is going to be nearly impossible. But what does the guy out there waiting to kill her know? Just that she's in the room, right? Right? C'mon, give me something, here."

"In 1. 2... 3. 4..."

"I don't like you, you know," the Muse says.

Believe me, I know. I just keep breathing, and keep counting.

"Anyway," the Muse says, still out of sorts but getting into a groove with its cool idea, "look, she always has her cell phone. And she finds something that completely freaks her out. Maybe a finger. Maybe something so gross she just about passes out. But she finds it, and even though she's searching the place illegally, and even though she hasn't given her information to the cops which is really going to get her in deep trouble, she calls her cop friend and tells him, 'Look, I need you over here as fast as you can get here, but absolutely don't tell anyone else you're coming. I've found something

in a place I'm not supposed to be, and you aren't going to be able to be here, either.' So her cop friend comes over and is quiet coming into the place, and catches the guy waiting for her. So he steps out, calls her back on her cell, and tells her what he found, and then he goes back in and the guy runs from the cop, straight into the apartment where he expects to find Anna waiting, only Anna has moved out a window and onto a balcony, and the guy ends up shooting at the cop who comes in, and the cop kills him. And then, because he can say he was chasing the guy for some made-up infraction, and because the guy is dead in a room where the thing Anna wanted to show the cop was, the cop has reasonable cause for search and seizure, and Anna can pretend she was never there, and still show her cop friend the thing she found without getting in trouble for it. Or maybe the guy isn't dead, he's just badly hurt, but anyway, you get the idea."

My Muse really hates to be bored.

And this definitely gives me a great twist on how I thought that whole thing was going to work out, and it gives me the following line-for-scene.

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Annalise's cop friend catches her would-be killer staking out Bob the Corpse's apartment, where Anna has just found stuff that requires cop handling, and the cop friend manufactures a clean probable cause for search, but Anna withholds the details about Bob's place in the country.

Your turn.

### **Exercise: Bore Your Muse**

**You need a clean, bare corner in your house.** A chair or cushion you can sit on. No noise, no pictures, no window in the direction you're facing, and a reasonable amount of time which you can allot to sitting and staring at a wall while breathing. You can focus on the flame atop a candle, too, but I don't because I get too interested in the flame. (I'm frighteningly easy to entertain.) Plan for half an hour.

**Don't expect a miracle the first time.** If you haven't done this before, your Muse may not realize that you've come carrying bazookas, so figure that results might be slow in coming. You'll find distractions rampant even with no outside input.

**Stay focused, and if you have to, inhale and exhale while counting out loud.** Eventually you'll be able to count in your head, and not long after that, your Muse, catching the first sniffs under the door of its equivalent to tear gas, will come tearing out to surrender pretty quickly. The first few times are the hardest.

**Don't respond to the back thoughts that float through your mind.** The Muse will use worry, niggling doubt, your bladder, your knees, your lower back, and flat dishonesty to make you stop doing this. However, definitely respond to screams, crashes, and the smell of smoke.

**Force the Muse to spill all its beans before you quit.** Even after your cool, useful idea shows up (it took mine about four minutes), sit another minute or three, counting and breathing,

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just to be sure the Muse isn't holding back on you. You can get some awesome material that way.

**When you're sure your Muse is done talking,** go write down your line-for-scene, and any details the Muse gave you.

### **Tool 19: Asleep—Dream Journal**

The dream journal is a staple for some writers. I don't keep a standard one, though I do use cool dreams that show up voluntarily and are memorable enough to stick in my mind. I make note of the really good dreams, (in my case, the really bad nightmares) in my online writing diary—

<http://hollylisle.com/writinadiary2/index.php/cateaorv/personal/nihtmares/>—in case they aren't workable for my current project but I want to keep them for later.

I've found uses for a lot of my nightmares after I've gotten over the heebie-jeebies of having them, incidentally. They show up in barely-altered form in a number of my novels.

Aaaanyway...

The garden-variety dream journal is a notebook you keep at your bedside, along with some variant of a pen and flashlight/nightlight combination. The writer is supposed to log in every remembered dream, training himself or herself to wake up after each one and write it down. This is an excellent habit, and kept regularly probably contributes tremendously to communication between the writer and the Muse. I, however, am a lazy sleeper, meaning that I'd rather sleep at night than keep track of every dream I can catch. And I have this issue with nightmares anyway—the dreams I've found most useful are the ones that wake me out of a sound sleep and won't let me close my eyes again until the next night. Those dreams I still

remember when I get up to write, so writing them down at the bedside would be redundant.

In any case, I don't actually have a dream handy at the moment for this particular book—my hours over the past month have been strange, and my sleep, when I get it, has been completely lacking in dreams. So at the moment I don't

have any volunteer dreams, and I don't have any blackmail dreams either (but more on blackmail dreams in the next chapter.)

I do have the dreams I logged in on my writing diary, though, and I'm going to snag one here as a demo of how you use a nightmare to get plot.

*I was in the heart of a cave—a developed, built-up, inhabited cave, faintly lit, with grottos in which people were trapped, frozen in postures of horror or pain, and surrounded by equally frozen monsters attacking them. And I was dealing with a voice. Just the voice. Imagine Darth Vader speaking while chewing bones and you're most of the way there. Couldn't see what had trapped me, couldn't move, but I could see to one side of me some sort of torture device and a few stalls of the sort you'd keep horses (or monsters) in, and on the other side, a massive, slightly arched wooden double-door banded and studded with brass.*

*I was told I had to bring someone I didn't like to be the sacrifice, or I would be the sacrifice. And I was released.*

*The dream jumped immediately to me leading a dozen people through the heart of the cave. I didn't know any of them except my youngest child, but when I saw him, I knew that somehow, something had gone very wrong. I tried to back up, to change the dream so that my child wasn't with me, but that didn't work. We moved forward. A giant spider sat to the left of us, and as I looked at it, I could see that it was mechanical, and fixed in place. If we stayed along the wall, we could avoid it. So we moved along the wall, and a live spider twice as large as the mechanical one raced out of a dark hole behind us and came after all of us, grabbing those closest to it and dragging them away.*

*I backed up the dream, and found another way to go, thus avoiding the spiders entirely. And suddenly I realized that what I had to do was get everyone out of the cave. Not just my little party of healthy folks, but the ones who were frozen in the midst of monsters, and held in place by frozen torturers, and everyone in the rest of the grottos. Something told me I had to free the monsters, too. That we all had to reach daylight.*

*The dream jumped forward again, and behind me and my son strung a line of hundreds—humans, monsters, and other things—and I had just pushed open the gate that took us into daylight. Before me lay a long earthen causeway with grassy but impossibly steep sides, one person wide, hundreds of feet high, with what looked like safety on the other side. No guardrails, of course. I started out onto the causeway, then stopped and turned to see if everyone was coming. And the ground beneath my feet softened and began to swallow me.*

*I backed up the dream, and was at the doorway again. I had everyone join hands, I told them to keep moving at all costs, and said that each had to help the one behind him to get across. And that we had to move fast. And we fled across the causeway with our feet moving as quickly as we could make them, with all the monsters crumbling into dust as the sunlight hit them, and the humans joining hands with other humans as quickly as the monsters they'd been hanging onto crumbled.*

I let my mind relax. There are a couple of things that jump out at me from this dream. The spiders, both mechanical and live, fit in with the image I've had while plotting Annalise's story—a spider sitting at the center of a web, pulling everything else into him, unseen and hungry. The spiders are my ultimate villain, the one who has been controlling everything from the background. I

bypassed him by backing up on the dream, but at the end, I'm going to have to deal with him.

I get the monsters, a whole line of them, crumbling into dust as sunlight hits them. The death of the monsters suggests this could be an image for the book's climactic scenes, or maybe its final resolution. The light of day suggests the truth coming out to me, and further suggests that the way Annalise is going to solve this mess is going to be to get people who were involved in a lesser degree to confess, and to bring forward the evidence she has found from the dead.

There is the issue of heights, of having to cross a narrow causeway in difficult circumstance, and of Anna having to bring other people with her through this dangerous passage. To me, this suggests that in order to survive, Anna and everyone she's located who is connected with Bob's death and the making of the videos and the surviving victims of whatever has been going on are all going to have to hold on to each other—that the gauntlet they have to run will devour them all if any of them try to go it alone.

Though we already know that the monsters are going to get what's coming to them when the sunlight hits.

And then there's the odd issue of Annalise being recruited to betray someone she doesn't like. The dream suggests this, but then doesn't pursue it farther. I, however, see something in this—a friend, perhaps *the* friend who ends up betraying her, suggesting that she do something unethical in order to get herself out of trouble. Would this permit the friend/villain to blackmail her and keep her from taking any of what she's found to the police? Would it, in effect, turn her into one of those people frozen in the nightmare's grottos, surrounded by frozen monsters?

I have several scene ideas from this nightmare now. I'll do one as a line-for-scene, and turn it into a plot card:

While Anna is illegally searching Bob's country house, Friend X calls and listens to Anna describing in vague terms her dealings with a cop colleague whom she suspects is dirty, and possibly involved with the case she's dealing with, and Friend X suggests that she's surely right, and that she should plant a little evidence on him just to make sure justice is served.

### **Exercise: Dream Journal**

**Start a dream journal, or log memorable dreams when you wake up.** You can keep a notebook by your bedside, or if you have vivid dreams that wake you up, you can write them down when you get out of bed. Either way, commune with your Muse by letting it seek you out and tell you what it's been thinking.

**Use your dreams the way you would use cards in the Cards tool.** Don't look at them literally. Instead, consider how you can take a dream and find ties to your plot in its imagery, action, and symbolism. Monsters crumbling to dust when the sunlight hits them as the truth being made public, giant spiders as the villain hiding in the dark, and so on.

**Write down all the ideas that come to you.** Don't settle for just one interpretation. Ask your Muse good questions, and let it offer alternative explanations for the various elements in your dream.

**Build the elements you like best into a line-for-scene.** Write your line for-scene as a plot card, and pin it to your board.

### **Tool 20: Asleep—Dream Blackmail**

I'm not the world's most patient writer: I live on deadlines in order to get paid, so I don't enjoy the process of logging in random dreams and searching them for symbolism and characters and meaning and hoping my recalcitrant subconscious will come through for me of its own good will. When things get tight and I'm in a writing corner, I've seen precious little of that sort of generosity sometimes.

To commit dream blackmail, I have to get myself through the Muse's door and go rummaging around in the boxes and bins it keeps in its lair myself.

I have a couple of different ways I do this. I decide before I go to bed what I really need to have when I wake up—a great ending, a scene in which my character gets herself out of her corner, a good way to kill off the villain. I phrase what I need in the form of a question, something like "*How does the final villain die?*"

With my question in place, I go to bed, use my usual trick for falling asleep in a hurry (the Bore Your Muse exercise, only lying down and with eyes closed) and as I'm drifting off, I repeat my question or request in my thoughts three or four times. Or I write my question down before lying down and put it on my bedside table. The first method works better, though.

I pay attention to my dreams, and wake myself up if something seems useful. I write down everything about the dream that I can remember right then. I also try to get a line-for-scene out of it, though admittedly in that post-dream state, I have come up with some useless line-for-scenes.

The next day, I go back over the dream, write it in a more coherent form, and again dig for the useful bits of it, drawing correlations between the imagery and what I'm working on in the book, and trying different ways to make it fit.

You saw my method in the previous chapter, so I'll save you some reading and not do it a second time.

Though this technique only works for me a little more than half the times I try it, it's still useful enough that I strongly recommend it when you're tired of beating your head against the computer and all else fails.

### **Exercise: Dream Blackmail**

**Come up with a good question for your Muse, and ask it as you're falling asleep.** Make sure that you focus on the question, and that you intend to have an answer for it in the morning. Intent is critical. Make it clear that you *expect* an answer. Remember, no matter how difficult your Muse can be, it's still you, and approached in this fashion, it will do its best to provide you with the answer you need.

**Write down the details of your dream immediately upon waking.** In this regard, dream blackmail requires you to take the path of the garden-variety dream journalist and get that puppy on paper the instant you wake up. You aren't looking for a memorable, wake-you-from-sleep dream this time. You're looking for whatever your Muse will give you.

**Take the dream apart, looking for symbols, action, characters, and ways that you can tie it in to your work in progress.** This isn't to say that sometimes the Muse won't just hand you the answer on a platter. I have on occasion simply dreamed the scene I needed to write the next day. But it usually isn't that easy. So if it isn't, follow the steps I took in the previous chapter, and write down everything your Muse will tell you.

**Do your line-for-scene.** And write out and pin your plot card into place.

## **Section IV: Plotting While Writing**

You'll find two different paths you can follow in **Plotting While Writing**. Use **Fix An Existing Project** if you're coming to this with some or most of your book already written. If you've started your story from scratch using the **Plot Clinic** process, skim the **Fix** chapter (it contains useful information about dissecting scenes that everyone can use), but get to work in **Dance With The One Who Brought You**.

Either way, you both start here:

You're doing pages, getting words every day. You know where you're headed, everything is going smoothly, and you're well on your way to making your deadline.

And then...

- **You lose faith in your plot.**

- **You have a better idea that will force you to make major changes.**
- **One of your characters develops into someone you don't know.**
- **The world you've developed starts spitting out its own interesting quirks.**
- **Your big finale doesn't seem all that cool anymore.**
- **Your Muse goes on strike.**

**Fix an Existing Project**

You've read **Structure** and **Tools** and now you're here. And almost certainly stuck, because while a method is working, people rarely go off to find a different method.

So the first thing we're going to do is get you unstuck. It isn't hard.

You already have a chapter or three, or maybe just about an entire novel, or perhaps even most of a revision on an entire book. But something is wrong, and you can't move forward with the book.

So let's go through everything you have, starting from the first scene, and find out where things went wrong.

There are lots of places where the story might have gone wrong, but all of the places that will actually keep you from writing will occur within scenes, not within sentences or paragraphs.

The scene is the smallest discrete unit in fiction. It contains the element that moves the story forward--change. When something changes, you have your scene. And when things don't change and the story stalls, your Muse balks.

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**Start by building a line-for-scene outline on white index cards.**

Basically, you'll be retrofitting your book using the Plot Clinic process. You're going to read through your first scene, and identify the moment when the critical *something* changes that moves your story forward. Then you'll write it down on your index card, using the Take One format.

**LINE-FOR-SCENE TAKE ONE PLOT CARD**

TITLE	Other information you want to track
POV Your sentence	

If your character, worried about his wife finding out that he's gambled away their bill money for the month, suddenly takes a butcher's knife out of a drawer and stops looking worried, there's your change.

If, from the omniscient POV you see that a critical fuse on a spaceship has shorted out, but that no one notices because the bulb that would have flashed a light to let them know has burned out, that's your change.

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If your character sits at a table drinking tea and thinking about her boyfriend, however, and you end the scene when you run out of tea or she runs out of thoughts, you have a problem.

Nothing happens in that scene to move the story forward. There is no critical change.

**Now you have to fix the line-for-scene.**

**First you define the problem.**

You have three questions to ask.

- Is the character doing something interesting?
- Is the action moving the story forward?
- Does the change matter?

The guy contemplating killing someone, perhaps his wife, to hide his gambling issue, is doing something interesting.

Taking up the knife is moving something forward, because either he has to use it, or someone has to take it from him and use it on him.

Whether he kills someone or someone kills him, the change-picking up the knife and making a decision—matters.

The fuse, the character of the omniscient scene, is breaking, and going to result in the deaths of hundreds. That's pretty interesting.

The breaking is definitely moving the story forward, because when the protagonists go to use their shield against enemies and they have no shield, things will get messy.

The change—the breaking—matters.

Miss Tea-Drinker, on the other hand, is sitting (yawn), and drinking (yawn), and thinking about her argument with her boyfriend (maybe not a yawn, but let's assume she isn't thinking anything particularly compelling about him). Bad.

She makes no decisions, arrives at no conclusions, and the finishing of the tea is not helping anything, so the story stands still.

The change—the emptying of the teacup—is meaningless.

***Then you decide on a course of action.***

There are three places to fix a broken scene.

- At the character
- At the action
- At the change **Change at the character**

You can look at Miss Tea-Drinker being alone as the problem. Add another character into the scene, and have the two of them argue about her boyfriend. The other character could be her mother, her sister, the guy who wants to date her, a jealous co-worker who wants to date her boyfriend, or her boyfriend, who wants her to stop telling him "no."

The scene will end with the change: when the mother tells her to stop dating him and she refuses; when the sister tells her to go to bed with him and she tells the sister to drop dead; when the guy who wants to date her tells her he loves her; or, when the boyfriend tells her he's dumping her because she's a prude.

**Change at the action**

Miss Tea-Drinker can be alone if she isn't just sitting there thinking pointless thoughts and drinking tea. Add action to the scene. She can be sitting and drinking poisoned tea while thinking pointless thoughts. She can be sitting and drinking tea and deciding to dump the boyfriend, or feed him to alligators or something like that. She can be sipping tea while climbing Mt. Rainier, or thinking while climbing Mt. Rainier, and slip, and be hanging off a cliff by her fingertips, and have a revelation about the thing she's been thinking about.

The scene will end with the change: When she passes out from the poison; when she decides her boyfriend needs to meet the alligator that haunts the canal behind her house; when she loses her grip on the cliff and tumbles.

**Change at the change**

Miss Tea-Drinker can still sit drinking her tea and thinking meaningless boyfriend thoughts if change comes to her. You can do this internally or externally—that is, the change will happen within her, or it will happen to her. For internal change, she can be sitting thinking dull thoughts when a gorgeous guy crosses her path and takes her breath away, and she decides to get up and follow him. For external change, a car could jump the curb and hit her, or a safe could fall on her head.

The scene will end with the change: When she follows Gorgeous Guy home and discovers he's her new next-door neighbor; or, when the bus or the safe crushes her, and she spends a few agonizing minutes before she passes out reviewing her life and praying for a second chance to be less dull.

Incidentally, before the Tea Drinkers International, the American Sitting Team, or the Thinkists come after me, I like sitting, drinking tea, and thinking—all at the same time. I, however, am not a character in a book. So I'm allowed to be boring for very long stretches of time. Nobody is paying to read about me.

**Then you write line-for-scenes for existing scenes on plot cards.**

Write them for the book you want to write, not the book you've already written. If you find scenes while you're reading through your existing work that have no business in the story, throw them out. Where you find scenes that have to be completely rewritten, rewrite the plot cards, but NOT the scenes! Not yet. Where you find scenes that work with the book you want, be grateful.

Put your plot cards into a tentative order. Try a few different orders first, consider a couple of structures or structure-mixes that appeal to you, get used to thinking of the book that stalled on you as the book you want to write.

NOTE: In answer to the inevitable cries of "I'm not going to fix the problem scenes yet?" the answer is "No, you're not." I have a very good reason why you aren't. You don't know what's going to change yet. You think you do, but as you write toward the ending, you'll have better ideas. Some of them will affect the beginning of the book.

If you change the beginning every single time you make changes at the end, you will either devour yourself with rewriting, or you will stop listening to your Muse's better ideas and stop pursuing them, which will cause your Muse to stop giving them to you. Once you have written your fixes on a plot card, let the actual writing go. Pretend everything you have written to this point is perfect, and go on to write your remaining material as if it were.

**Finally, create fresh plot cards for the rest of your book.**

Don't create every single scene you think you'll need. Situations, events, and characters change, and you don't want to close off the possibility of better change by writing a completely restrictive, overly detailed, comprehensive stack of plot cards.

Now, with plot cards and some new ideas in front of you, move on to **Dance With the One Who Brought You.**

**Dance With the One Who Brought You**



These are not happy times. I've been there. In fact, I've been there with every novel I've ever written save one. **Sympathy for the Devil** I wrote without an outline, a plan, or a plot in mind, at the rate of twenty pages a day because I was desperate, a deadline loomed, and I had no other options—and for that book, my Muse and I were one. The pages were there, the story was there, I sat down not knowing what I was going to write and it was just there. I met my deadline, got paid, the book came out on time, and we ate for another few months.

That little miracle had never happened before, and it has never happened again. With every other book, I have run into at least one of the problems listed above, and with real problem children like **The Wreck of Heaven**, I ran into all of them.

So we'll go over *What do I do now?* for each of these scenarios. **Rethinking Plot Points**

This is the most common scenario. You're somewhere in the middle of the writing and you hit a bad plot card. It sounded like a great idea at the time, or maybe it only sounded like an iffy idea at the time but you put it in there anyway, confident that when you got to it, you'd be so into the story that you could make it work. Only now you and your Muse look at each other and go, "Uh-uh. Not gonna do it."

Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic

**For example:**

Now that I have a good idea what story I'm going to write, I have to admit that the dead lawyer has to go. He doesn't have anything to do with the story. Also the dead hooker in the trunk, the one that Annalise killed. And the stolen purse. I'll have to go back and rethink who is Lucy's employer. I'll have to refigure what she was doing up on the second floor of the Smith Building at 3:47 AM. I'll have to decide if maybe she was up there casing the detectives' office because her boss got nervous about them catching on to the movie studio in the basement.

But I'll do that as I go. I know what I need. I'd rather hang a little loose, though, and keep the story fun to write by not knowing everything that will happen in advance.

At the point, though, where you have to rewrite those wrong cards...

**Don't panic.**

• **First, back up a copy of your work as it exists right now**, name it something you won't overwrite, like *Annalise-Before-I-Changed-Everything.doc*, and save it everywhere. Everywhere. Hard drive, backup hard drive, memory card, online storage space, CD that goes into your file case. The possibility exists that you are wrong, and the scene or scenes you can't write at the moment is actually brilliant. (Probably not, but act on what could be, not on what is most likely.) Always back up your work before getting drastic.

• **Next, look through your plot cards to the next good card, to the next scene that you know is going to be great, and count the number of scenes you aren't sure of that lie between the problem scene and the good one.** If you're lucky, you'll only have the one scene to rework. If you're not, you will discover some number greater

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than one, and some number less than the total number of cards you have on your board.

• **Break out the word game Pong and and play it on a rewrite of your plot card.** Take the assumption of the plot card, and write it down as your statement.

**For example:**

**Annalise realizes she is being watched while she and the friend are walking to a movie.**

This is kind of a boring card. She realizes she's being watched after she knows people are trying to kill her. Are we surprised? Not a chance.

The Muse says, "Actually, she doesn't notice she's being followed at all, because she's so enchanted by the friend."

"She wouldn't be that enchanted. Things have been rough and dangerous for her by this time, and someone is trying to kill her."

"Then she and the friend would be pretty stupid to go to the movies, where they'd sit in the dark for two hours with doors behind their backs," says the Muse. "What kind of ex-Marine ex-cop is she anyway to make a bonehead mistake like that?"

"They go to a restaurant where they can sit facing the door?"

"No, because they're still out in public," says the Muse. "The friend comes over to her house to comfort her, and the friend is Friend X, and Friend X has romantic ties to her from the past and hits on her, and she's vulnerable and chooses to make a really stupid mistake."

And there's my better scene.

If you have to rewrite more than one or two cards, use any tools necessary. But **save your old cards**, and in most cases, **just rewrite one or two at a time.**

Because the Muse, in a fit of frustration, will tell you that every card you've written after the last one where you got something is utter garbage, and that you have to redo them all. Most of the time, this is a foul lie, a plot against you by a Muse who is looking for an opportunity to go back into the dark to sit watching slides of your vacation to the Bahamas

five years ago.

In most cases, you'll get a new plot card and scene done and realize that everything else you had in there was perfectly sound.

In some cases, you'll realize that you took that wrong left turn in Albuquerque, though, and that you're going to have to do all new work.

It's not the end of the world. It's better to realize it early and rework your plot cards than to keep plowing through writing things that feel wrong, only to discover in edits that you got the first two chapters right, but have to toss about sixty-thousand words into the trash. I've done that, too.

It's been a while since I've had to throw away most of a book. (November 5th, 2004, Last Girl Dancing, 59,000 words out of 110,000 total...

<http://hollylisle.com/writingdiary2/index.php/2004/11/05/prewriting-on-lgd-revision/>).

I'm sure some day I'll have to do it again, because you do what you gotta do.

You treat a re-plot like you'd write a new plot, by the way. You use every tool in your arsenal, and you go through one card at a time, and you get it done.

### **The Great (Late) Idea**

This is a pernicious beastie. You're writing along and halfway through the book you suddenly realize that your story would be so much cooler if your hero could fly. Man, that would be great, and you can see how it would work in the big climactic fight scene, and you can envision a couple of other reworks of the later scenes that would be just stunning.

But...um...you've already written 45,000 words where your character can't fly, and, well...

### **What do you do?**

- **First, sleep on it before you do anything drastic.** You

might just be 5000 words into a very long writing day, living on Diet Pepsi and those scary fat-free potato chips that can cause the sorts of bathroom accidents you used to have when you were two, and it's entirely possible you're hallucinating. Ideas that seem great when you're fried might not be so great tomorrow morning.

- **If it still seems like a great idea in the morning, back up all your work to this point, as above, and for the same reason.** The possibility exists that you are wrong.

- **And lastly, replot only the portions of the book that you have not yet written, using any tools you like.**

Pretend that everything you have done to this point is perfect, and that your guy has been flying around the place like Superman since page one. You'll update the written scenes when you do your revision. For now, let done work stay done.

### **Changing Characters**

Let me give you an example from my own work of a changing character. I started the novel **Hawksparr** with one of the two main characters being Talyn's little brother Riknir, and Hawksparr being the other main character. I discovered, however, that even though he was fifteen years older in **Hawksparr** than he had been in **Talyn**, I still remembered him too vividly as a little kid, and when it came time to write the hot scenes between him and **Hawksparr**, I couldn't do it. I ended up having to take him out of the book completely and create a new character in his place, and to do significant replotting of scenes that had been related to him and his sister Talyn.

In another example, Baanraak in **The Wreck of Heaven** was evil when I started the book—and somehow, in the midst of being evil, I discovered who he was and found out that he was something other than what he appeared to be. He was changing from what I'd envisioned him being into a sort of anti-hero. Had I made it to the planned book seven, he would have ended up as a tragic hero.

In both of these cases, I had my plots worked out, and in both, I ended up doing big revisions because the characters changed as I was writing them, and wrecked my plans for them. In the case of Baanraak, I revised to accommodate the changes. In the case of Riknir, I yanked him from the book and replaced him with someone new.

These situations will happen to you if you're writing characters that live and breathe. It's just part of the gig, and you roll with it.

### **When it happens:**

- **Back up your work.**

- **Mark every scene in the book where the character appears or where his actions change the story.** As

above, in first draft you'll **only make changes to the scenes you have not yet written**. Go through each of the affected plot cards one at a time, and determine which of them will work as written, and which will need to be reworked to fit in with your new understanding of the character.

- **Using any tools that work for you, revise only those cards that have to be changed.** It's easy to get too happy with changes and start changing everything. This is generally A) a waste of energy and, B) a way to wreck some really good material with overzealous tinkering.

### **Changing the World**

You want to move your story from Atlanta to New York because all of a sudden New York seems more true to the

characters and the story, and you start yearning to research Manhattan all the way back to the first settlers. Or you want to change your fantasy setting to a science fiction setting because you just read something in SF that was so brilliant and fascinating that magic suddenly seems kludgy and stupid. Or in the middle of writing about your medieval scholar, you tire of his problems and wish he had the Internet to help him with his research because you're tired of the slow process of finding out anything in the Middle Ages, and you have come up with some great forensic evidence you want him to be able to use.

Hang on.

While mid-book I have yearned for new settings and new genres and new times, I have never changed my world for the sake of the story.

In every case, I've discovered that my problem was slow plotting, or bad plotting. The story was off-track, I had one or two scenes that had gone badly wrong, and I could no longer see the book as something I could love.

**If—probably when—this happens to you, how do you handle it?**

- **Read everything you've written so far, from start to finish.** Draw a little circle in the corner of every scene you love, and a little X in the corner of every scene you hate. If you're like me, you might have a scene or two in the first portions of the book that you hate now, but you don't run into all Xs until about three or four scenes back from the place where you stopped writing.

- **Go back and look at those scenes critically.** Are they boring? Do your characters start doing stupid things, or acting like strangers? Is nothing happening? Are things happening that are pointless?

- **Back up your work as it exists right now.**

- **If you can fix the problem scenes, fix them.** Remember, you need characters you care about, or hate, or fear, doing something interesting while struggling against obstacles or creating obstacles for others. Any scene that doesn't give you that has to go.

- **If you can't fix them, dump them, and plot new scenes.**

You know how to do this. You can handle it. Have some fun with it, get your Muse to play along, come up with something cool.

- **If you want to set a book in New York or Beta Helgamon II, make it the next book, not this one.**

**Changing the Crisis**

Your character is chugging through the book, altruistically suffering and slogging along with people in her community to rebuild homes, put up shelters, and salvage anything that can be saved following a devastating flood, and all of a sudden you decide you have to start over, because what she really needs to be doing is hiking across the Alps writing the Next Great American Novel and finding herself while meeting bunches and bunches of good-looking men who all fall in love with her, and whom she spurns.

This is in the same category as changing your world. You've lost faith in your theme, in your characters' goals and needs, in your story.

This is not a good thing, but in almost every case it's fixable, and the fix isn't even particularly hard.

**How to Fix the Crisis**

- **First, revisit the Theme and Concept tool, and make sure that you came up with a good theme the first time around.** Your protagonists have to care about what they're trying to accomplish, but you do, too. Do you care that your main character needs to have a hand in rebuilding the town destroyed by a flood?

Do I care that Annalise has to get to the bottom of what Bob the Corpse was doing while getting out of the story alive? My answer is yes.

If your answer is no, don't change what your character needs. Add to that need with other needs. People need a lot of things. Food, shelter, intimacy, safety, goals, hope. Don't just pick a need at random, though. Dig into yourself, and find what you need, what you'll work for free to get. Love? Fame? Power? Recognition? Admiration?

Give her one of those needs, too—something that *you* need, that makes you desperate with desire, that drives you to get up early and stay up late in order to get it.

And because we're all writers, here, let me just say that the

answer to *What do I need?* isn't "writing." While we are all driven to write, we don't write for the act of writing, fun as it might be. For each one of us, writing is a means to an end, and frequently a means to an unrecognized or unadmitted end. We write for what lies behind our words, or what we imagine could lie behind our words if we were good enough, or famous enough, or published enough. Frequently we writers have a need to be heard, or a need to be recognized, or a need to be adored. We want everyone to love us, or we want one specific person to love us, or we want to get revenge on our pasts. We are human, and humans are all needy, and the trick to getting characters you can write all the way to the end of your book is to be honest about all the places where you are needy, and then to make your character needy in similar ways, but using different means to get to that same end. You write because you need to be loved, your character goes out and slogs through the mud cleaning and rebuilding and getting cut and bruised and battered because *she* needs to

be loved.

- **Back up your work as it exists right now.**

- **Once you've identified the need that's missing from your story, add new plot cards that will let your character fight for that need.** Using the tools you like best, create new line-for-scenes and new plot cards in which she has to fight against obstacles to reach her new need—in which the man she hopes to win is impressed by her work, but has been told someone else did it, in which she cannot be young enough or pretty enough to catch his attention by looks like the young woman he seems to have fallen for, in which she has to choose between saving someone from death while risking her own life or finally meeting him on a date, and in which she chooses to do the right thing, and loses him. Until he finds out the truth of what happened. In which she wins him.

What you're doing with all of these issues is fighting your subconscious. You've been struggling because you and the Muse don't speak the same language, and sometimes the only way the Muse can get you to realize you've taken a wrong turn is to balk.

Don't look at getting stuck as the end of your book. Look at it as your Muse trying to tell you that the two of you need to stop, identify places where you made wrong turns, and then fix them. It's a challenge, not a problem. It's the way you make the book better while you're writing.

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### **Plotting the Ending**

The ending of any good story is foreshadowed in the beginning. The problems with this are that:

- **Problem:** Sometimes you've written the wrong beginning, and the story actually starts elsewhere.

**Solution:** Find the real beginning.

- **Problem:** Sometimes you haven't put all the goodies in the story that you'll need to get to the ending, and sometimes you don't even find those goodies until you're revising.

**Solution:** Rewrite the beginning to have seeds of your wonderful ending.

- **Problem:** Sometimes the goodies are already in the beginning, but you don't recognize them.

**Solution:** Play with everything you foreshadowed there, and figure out how to use the elements present to craft a tight, satisfying ending that includes the events you foreshadowed.

### **The Good Ending**

Good endings contain the following elements:

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- Resolution of the problem introduced at the beginning of the story.

- The tying up of loose ends introduced in the middle of the story.

- A surprise that leaves the reader delighted, and makes him want to read more of your work.

Good endings aren't easy. You'll frequently have the wrong ending in the first draft, and just as frequently, you'll have some sort of placeholder card plotted out for the ending, but you won't have a clue about the way your story really ends until you're starting to write it. I almost never have the final line until it clicks off the tips of my fingers and onto the page.

This is the element of daredevil madness that drives writers just a little crazy, but it's okay. Really.

I'm going to write the first draft beginning of the Annalise book right now, and show you from that where I can find clues to what my ending will be. And then I'll show you how to carry those clues forward to figure out what needs to be in the ending.

*Annalise Gaines was trying to figure out how to pay seventy dollars' worth of bills with forty dollars worth of checks when the guy from the wedding video place across the hall bolted into her office.*

*Anna pushed the bills back into the mail drawer of her desk and grinned at him. "Jim went out for coffee. I'll tell him your copier's stuck again as soon as he gets back." Jim Miller, her long-time best friend and recent partner in the adventure of trying to get a private detective agency off the ground, was also the handy guy on the floor. Word got around that he could fix anything, and the folks from the other little businesses on the second floor of the Smith Building had latched onto him like he was the best thing since the Center Ice hockey package.*

*"Someone's trying to kill me," he said.*

*"Okay. So not a copier problem. Have a seat," she said, and pointed to one of the chairs in front of her desk. The chairs were older than she was, but not in a charming antique way. More of a "the Salvation Army wouldn't take these, so we're giving them to you" way.*

*He didn't seem to notice. He sat. "I was here at about two in the morning, two weeks ago. When the lawyer in C was murdered. I saw the hooker who was going to go in to meet him, but she said she was just looking for the janitor."*

*Anna frowned. The lawyer murder had been solved almost immediately—the wife had hired someone to kill him. She'd paid by credit card. While the police were having no luck tracking down the person she'd paid, the amount, \$25,000 dollars, had been damning.*

*"Wrong place at the right time," she muttered. "You saw the hooker go into the office?"*

*"No. She got flustered and left. I guess I saved her life by being there."*

*Anna didn't think hookers on their way to tricks got flustered. She didn't point that out. Instead, she said, "So what did happen?"*

*And the guy looked at her like she'd asked him to figure pi to the hundredth decimal. He stared, his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide.*

*But he kept staring. And his face was starting to turn red. "Are you okay?" she asked.*

*He turned redder, and his eyes began to bulge. And his lips, which had seemed a bit full even when he barged into the office, looked positively cartoonish. And he wasn't breathing anymore, she realized.*

*Was he choking? Choking people grabbed at their throats, she thought, and turned blue, not red. But she ran around behind him, pulled him up, and Heimlich'd him anyway.*

*Nothing came out. She could hear air moving from his lungs and out his mouth, so the path was clear.*

*He jerked out of her arms then, spasming and frothing at the mouth, with his neck and spine arched backward so sharply he looked like a bow about to snap, and with his arms rigidly straight and twitching and, as he hit the floor with a solid thud, his heels drumming the floor.*

*A nerve agent, she thought. She'd seen people die that way before.*

*She grabbed the phone as she was dropping to the floor to check for breathing and pulse, her fingers ready to punch in 911. But he was stone-dead, the skin of his lips were covered with little blisters, and Anna had second thoughts. She wasn't going to do CPR. Whatever had killed him might kill her, too.*

*She didn't dial 911. Instead she dialed Karen Howard, one of the dispatchers for the police, and told Karen a guy had been murdered in her office right in front of her, and asked if Charlie was around to come take a look.*

*Then she called Jim on his cell and told him to beat feet back to the office, and why.*

*And then she did a couple of things she shouldn't have done.*

*She took out his wallet without leaving prints—her years as a cop came in handy in a lot of ways, and this was one of them. She got his name and every other piece of information she could find on him. She fished out his keys and made impressions of each one. And she pulled out his cell phone and copied off the names or nicknames and*

*numbers of each of the people in his directory. She was pulling the last of those when Jim raced into the room, and she had the phone back in his pocket and the body looking undisturbed when Charlie showed up five minutes later.*

*When he'd come to her for help, Anna hadn't even known the guy's name. It was Robert. Robert Hoke. She hadn't saved Bob's life. She'd failed at the task he'd asked of her. But she could find out who'd killed him and do her best to bring the killer to justice.*

In my ending, I have to provide satisfactory justice for the death of Bob the Corpse. I have to make sure that Anna and Jim, whether living or dead, are accounted for, as well as Charlie. I could make Charlie, a police detective and close personal friend of both Anna's and Jim's, the kingpin of the video distribution ring if I wanted. Or I could make him the guy who shows up fifteen minutes too late to see Anna and Jim mopping up the case that had ended up being his. Or he could end up a victim, and Anna and Jim could mention him sadly, noting how much they miss him and how much he would have loved to know he'd helped take the video kingpin down.

I also need to come around to mentioning the money situation in the agency. The agency can still be dirt-poor. Or it could be doing a bit better. If I'm clever, I'll make one of the keys Anna makes an impression of in this scene a key that will only open something in the office of the video kingpin who had Bob killed—that key could be the reason Bob was killed.

But in this first scene, I build the ending of the book, the final summing up. Had Anna been pondering her nonexistent love life when Bob entered the office, I would need to give an update on that. If I mentioned her new kitten, the larger, cleverer kitten would make an appearance.

**What you show first, you show last.**

**Exercise: Plotting the Ending**

**Make notes of everything, whether small or large, that happens in your first scene.** Find interesting bits of business that you just threw in there (the keys) and rework the scene by adding in things you used later in the book (the swollen, blistering lips were a revision add-in).

**Note who's in the scene.** Incidental characters (the police dispatcher, in my case, or in yours maybe the members of the forensics team, or the cheerleading squad in the background at your high-school pep meet, or two fishermen standing with their backs to the main characters fishing off a dock) need not show up or be mentioned, but all characters who will have an actual role in the story and who have not been tied off resoundingly in the center of the story need to have one last bow on the stage.

**Note what promises you made.** I promised that Anna would find out who killed Bob. I promised to let the reader know why the Center Ice hockey package is cool to Anna. I promised to give the reader some insight into why Anna has

seen people die from nerve agents. I've promised to fill them in on her and Jim, and how two best friends ended up starting a private detective agency. I promised to touch on the death of the lawyer, and the wife who seems to have paid to have him murdered. And I promised to follow up on the hooker who was going in to see the lawyer, but who got spooked and fled.

**Write your line-for-scene for your ending.** Mine will be:

Anna unlocks the box that fits the crate she found in Friend X's office, and discovers [Y—the evidence everyone has been looking for the second half of the book. I don't know what that is yet, because I haven't actually written any of the book beyond the first scene]. Charlie arrives to find Friend X dead, and the evidence discovered, and calls in medical help for both Jim and Anna. Anna tells Charlie he owes her a rematch in the hockey rink as soon as her arm's working again.

Please understand that your ending may not hold up. You might find a better ending halfway through the book, in which case you'll need to go back and rework the beginning to get your important elements in there, and rewrite the ending, and perhaps retrofit the rest of the book in your revision. You might dump your beginning. As I did. You'll note that in between doing the first draft of *this* book, the **Create A Plot Clinic**, and this final draft, I decided I didn't like the dead lawyer or the dead hooker—that they no longer fit the rest of my book. So at least portions of the scene above are going to have to be rewritten. I might have to redo the whole thing.

That's writing. You fix what needs to be fixed, and you move on. So let's move on to **Plotting While Revising**.

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### **Section V: Plotting While Revising**

Things change. It's an adage of life. In fact, it's probably **the** adage of life, and it's as true in writing as it is in life. You start the book going in one direction, end it going in another, and have to bring both directions together and create a smooth, coherent story for your readers.

The problems you'll face in plotting while you revise are:

- Fixing small but cool changes you made while writing the second half of the book that require bringing the first part up to speed.

- Coming up with small but cool changes that would require retrofitting throughout the book, or through portions of it.

- Coming up with great ideas that would change everything.

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### **No**

You'll use two tools to fix your plot in revision. The first is the Line-For-Scene, Take Two. The second is the word *no*.

Let's deal with the easy fix first—the word *no*. The Muse gets a bit freaked out by bringing books to an end. What if there is no other book in you, it asks. What if this was it? Or what if there are a hundred other books in you, and you intend to write them. Sounds like a lot of work to your Muse. Either way, better we should piddle with the book we already have, polishing it and tinkering it and *changing it completely*, because on the one side there's the cliff of never writing again, and on the other side there's the mountain (of work).

The Muse waits until you've finished the first draft, and perhaps your revision. And then the Muse says, "Oh, oh! STOP! I've just had this great idea for how you can fix it. You have to, if you did this, it would be BRILLIANT!"

Muses get kind of loud when they're trying to pull a fast one on you. So what you do is smile. Write down this brilliant idea. (It will probably be really good—your Muse is no dummy). And then you sound sincere as you say:

"No, we won't use that now. It's a brilliant idea. We'll use it in the next book."

Be prepared for wailing, flailing, and stomping. Be prepared to feel guilty for not rewriting the whole book to fit this great idea.

You will. Be prepared to have your Muse tell you that everything you did in the book is utter crap, and that if you don't fix it with a massive total overhaul, you might as well burn it. And maybe your computer, too. All of this will happen, if not with your current book, with one down the line. My Muse pulls it on me about one out of two books. Yours might be better behaved. It might be worse.

Now, we're not going to let your book go out into the world as utter crap, and the possibility always does exist that in this one instance, your Muse is right about it. Or, more likely, that it's right about portions of it.

This is where the **Line-For-Scene, Take Two**, comes in.

### **Line-For-Scene, Take Two**

This process must be done by hand, with your printed-out manuscript, a pen and real, physical index cards.

### **First, break out your colored index cards.**

If you can find them, you want a packet of cards with four colors. (If your book is longer than 120,000 words, odds are good that you'll need two packets.)

I like the fluorescent cards in red, orange, yellow and green, but any four colors will do.

Assign a meaning to each of the colors. The system I use is:

- **Green means Light Changes**—no more than 24% of the scene will need to be redone.
- **Yellow means Moderate Changes**—from 25%—49% of the scene needs to be reworked.
- **Orange means BIG Changes**—from 50%—74% of the scene needs to be reworked.
- **Red means Redo or New**—from 75% to 100% of the scene needs to be reworked, or this is a card for a new scene that needs to go in the book.

**Next, prepare your manuscript.**

Print out a physical copy of your book, and with your stack of cards beside you, start reading it. Your objective is to get the story you've written—as it exists on the page, not as you thought you wrote it—into your head, and to understand what you're going to have to fix to make it the book you want it to be.

Break out your pads of sticky notes, too.

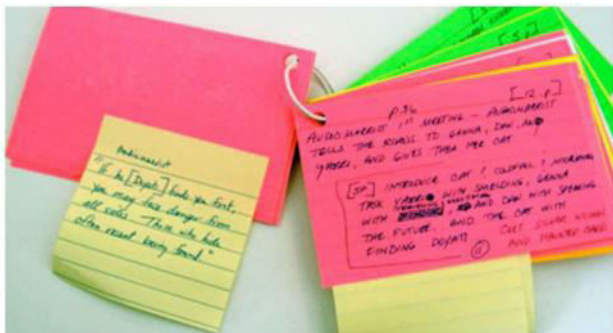
While you're building your revision line-for-scene, what you're doing is reading your raw manuscript and getting a feel for how your work turned out. What are you looking for?

**Look for these things:**

- The point of view character and his or her part in the scene, whether he has changed in the right ways from the beginning to the end of the book, and whether his point of view is the best choice for that scene (is he the character who knows the least about that situation, and has the most to lose?)
  - The main action of the scene as it exists, and how you'll need to change that action to fit with earlier or later changes in your story.
  - Other characters in the scene, and whether you continued to write about them, or forgot them—and continuity details like whether you killed them three scenes earlier.
  - The time of the scene—time of day and date—and how this information relates to other scenes. Have you inserted a day scene in between two hours of the same night, have you accidentally jumped a year forward or two days back?
  - Whether anyone is present in the scene who couldn't be there because he's simultaneously in another scene.
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  - Whether character descriptions remain consistent (blue eyes, brown eyes, etc.), or if they change, whether the changes are accidental or intentional (character dyed hair vs. writer forgot hair color).
  - Scenes that don't need to be there—nothing happens in them, or you've changed the later part of the story, rendering a particular scene a dead end.
  - Scenes you need to write to replace deleted scenes, or to fill in action that relates to your final version.
  - Changed terminology, titles, names, or language that will need to be updated throughout the book (put these on stickies and attach them to the first scene where you find them—you'll catch all of these on your type-in).
  - Theme elements and underlying structural elements you need to add to existing scenes, for example, "Develop teamwork, introduce danger and beauty, learn moonworld structure"—taken directly from one of my **Ruby Key** plot cards.

One of my plot cards from **The Ruby Key** revision line-for-scene, with added note about a bit of dialogue I want to fit in.

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The sticky note on the left was an idea that came to me as I was doing earlier cards. I wrote down, and when I came to a scene where it would fit, I attached it.

With each scene, read it first, figure out what it needs, choose an index card of the color that you guesstimate represents the amount of work you'll have to do on the scene, and fill it out as shown in the diagram.

PLOT CARD DIAGRAM

POV	Page # In Manuscript	Number of pages currently in the scene
Line-for-scene that you need to have in the scene, not the line-for-scene for what's already written.		
Specific points you need to be sure are in the scene		

Do not try to do this from your computer screen. It won't work.

As you go through the material, your revisions will probably get a bit lighter, meaning you'll be using fewer red and orange cards and more yellow and green ones. You knew where you were heading by the time you hit the middle, and you got closer and closer to doing it right as you roared toward your ending.

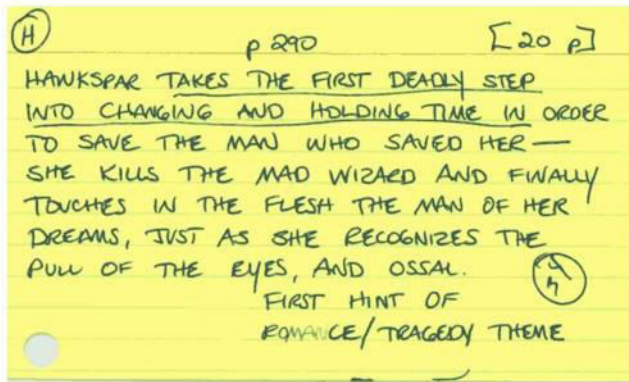
This is the way it usually works. But not always. **The Ruby Key** was primarily red and orange right to the end, and I ran through

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the red and orange cards from two packs revising **Hawksparr**. So be prepared.

Actual Line-for-Scene card from **Hawksparr**



The circled H on the top left corner of the plot card stands for Hawksparr—this scene is from her point of view. Page number and number of pages in existing scene are self-explanatory. The underlined section in the line-for-scene as I want it to be marks a section that exists but that I want to emphasize a bit more. And the indented note at the bottom is the material I have to add into this scene in the revision.

That 34 in the circle? That's the card number (also the scene number). After I had moved them around to make sure they were in the best order, but before I hole-punched all of the cards in the left bottom corner and bent a staple into a circle to use as a key ring for cards, they were loose. I didn't want to have to struggle to put them into order if they ended up on the floor in a mess, so

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I numbered them. I recommend it as a fail-safe to save yourself from some headaches.

**Once you've finished putting together your revision line-for-scene:**

- Put your cards in best-possible order. If you want to change your scenes around, this is the time to do it.
- Number your cards.
- Bind them together.

And I **strongly** recommend hole-punching your cards and binding them together—whether you use a bent paper clip, as I did, or come up with a cooler binding. Make sure your cards will lie flat on your desk in front of you, though, so that when you're doing your write-in, you can refer to them easily, and move from each to the next without difficulty.

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Finished revision line-for-scene for the 180,000-word **Hawksparr** looks like this:





### **And then:**

Start writing changes in your manuscript. You should have prompts on every single card that tell you what you have to fix, and how to make sure the beginning of the story relates to the ending of the story. Hang on to your line for scene until the end of your write-in—the process of writing directly on the manuscript. You can keep it longer if you'd like. I turn mine into personal souvenirs.

Why do you color-code the cards? Because as you're revising, you'll get from them an idea of how much work you still have to do. Figure you'll spend about four times longer on a red card than a green one, three times longer on an orange card than a green one, and two times longer on a yellow one than a green one. This is *interesting* information if you're not yet writing on deadline. It's *critical* if you are. You maintain a constant sense of about how much work is ahead of you and how much is behind. In the **Hawkspar** stack on the previous page, by the time I hit the middle of the book, I was about seventy-five percent of the way done with the revision, which let me let my editor know I was closing on sending in the manuscript, and the project, though late, was still in control.

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Why do you need to read your whole book through on a printed manuscript while going through the admittedly time-consuming process of making plot cards? Why shouldn't you just open the document on your word processor and ad lib your revision from page one? You could save a lot of paper that way. (One reader noted that, doing it that way, she went through six revisions and actually used much more paper. I've found that to be true. But *theoretically*, if the ad lib revision method worked worth beans, you could save a lot of paper.)

Well, you can do that. But if you do, you'll have inconsistencies that you don't catch, dropped threads, spellos, typos, places where you could have made the story richer by adding in elements of your themes, places where fragments of your early story, now outdated, survive...

Because plot cards can help you make sure that you get all those little pieces of foreshadowing you imagine into the right places. They can help you retrofit the beginning to the ending, so that readers get to your big finale, and sit in awe at your brilliance for having so cleverly planted those cool clues in the beginning of the book, and then having written such a neat ending that tied all those clues up. Because plot cards can keep you from losing the heart and soul of your book to bad cutting, to careless editing, and to off-the-cuff revising.

Plot cards can make you look smart to your readers, and they can help you keep your book revision on track so that the first revision you do is the last. Or at least closer to it.

### **Conclusion**

I've done my best to include every plotting technique I know in this book from every point in the writing process. However, I've written quite a few essays on related subjects that I did not cover in this book. If you need additional information on the writing process, here are what I hope will be useful links:

Finding Your Themes

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Articles/feature9.html>

Apples, Bananas: The Writer's Need for Experience <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Articles/wc1-5.html>

Creating Conflict: or, The Joys of Boiling Oil <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/conflict-workshop.html>

Say What You Mean

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Articles/feature4.html> Character Creation Workshop

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/character-workshop.html> and

How to Create a Character

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Articles/wc2-2.html>

(These are to the **Create A Character Clinic** what one slice of cheese is to a seven-course meal, but they will definitely get you started if you're stuck.)

Ten Steps to Finding Your Writing Voice <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Articles/wc1-6.html>

A Little Bit of Me, A Little Bit of You: Our Lives as Fiction Fodder <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Articles/wc1-7.html>

Scene Creation Workshop: Writing Scenes that Move Your Story Forward

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/scene-workshop.html>

Maps Workshop: Developing the Fictional World Through Mapping <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/maps-workshop.html>

Pacing Dialogue and Action Scenes: Your Story at Your Speed <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/pacing-workshop.html>

Lost on the Border at Twilight: Finding and Using Your Life's Essential Strangeness

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/using-strangeness.html> The Description Workshop

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/description.html> One-Pass Revision

<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/one-pass-revision.html> This was my process before I got fully on-board with plot

cards. Now the process is the same, except I've added developing and working with revision plot cards in order to make the actual revision easier. This has a much more detailed description of the revision process than you'll find in this book, but no mention whatsoever of how to use plot cards.

And finally,

Burn It, Bury It, Let It Live: Evaluating Your Finished Manuscript <http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/burnit.html>

I was asked to include a list of useful sites for plotters and I tried my best to come up with one—however, every book is unique, and where one reader will need massive amounts of info on underwater treasure-hunting and the poisons that can be made

from marine animals, another will need medical information and diseases common to people living in the Himalayas, and a third will need tons of details about life in Pittsburgh, and roadmaps of the city and surrounding counties.

So.

Make friends with several search engines, get to know your local librarian, get used to asking complete strangers questions about their jobs. Join a live or online writers' group, and ask other writers if they know where you can find information about your subject. Search for specialty bulletin boards and ask the members your questions. See if anyone you know knows anyone who does what your character does—find detectives, artists, professional musicians, rock climbers, and others this way.

And remember to give credit in acknowledgements to the people who gave up their time to share details of their lives with you.

Good luck with your writing. I hope I've helped you get your plot finished and that, if you haven't done so already, you'll finish your book and send it out.

Let me know how it goes. Drop by my writing diary— <http://www.hollylisle.com/writingdiary2/> , and say hello.

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**About the Author**



Holly Lisle has published more than thirty novels (and counting) with publishers from Penguin and Tor to HarperCollins, New American Library, Scholastic, Warner, and Baen. She writes fantasy, science fiction, YA, paranormal suspense and the occasional secret project in other genres, as well as a growing

library of nonfiction writing books, maintains a vast website (<http://hollylisle.com>), and a mostly-regular weblog, Pocket Full of Words (<http://hollylisle.com/writingdiary2>), and a little web store (<http://shop.hollylisle.com>). She has likeable cats, but not very many. And her family is pretty cool.

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