# INTRODUCTION

Why plot?

When I speak to other writers, they usually call themselves either plotters or “pantsers” (i.e., seat-of-the-pants instinctual writers).

Lately, I’ve been hearing “plontsers” (because “pantsers” didn’t sound nearly silly enough, right?) This means they fall on varying points of the plotting spectrum – maybe not writing intricate scene by scene diagrams, but definitely having a sense of the story arc before they sit down to type it.

I believe that if you’re a “pantser,” you need to respect that because forcing yourself to write in a way that isn’t comfortable to you tends to be a recipe for disaster. However, I have seen many self-proclaimed “pantsers” who are equally uncomfortable with their process; they simply haven’t found a workable system for their storytelling.

I’ll admit it: I am a die-hard plotting fanatic.

Having been a genre fiction writer since 1999, I’ve written and published sixteen novels, one non-fiction reference book, and two novellas.

During most of that time, I either held down a full time job or taught, edited and coached writing while raising my son. And there is no way on earth I could have pulled it off it weren’t for my plotting system. I’ve been streamlining and adjusting this basic process for over a decade, and I’m thrilled to be able to share it with you.

What this book covers.

This book will walk you through a specific process that will get you from vague story idea to completed rough draft, covering the following steps:

- Testing your premise for inherent conflict and sustainability
- Goal, motivation, conflict
- Character sketches.
- Plot Points
- Scene Outline

For each step, I give examples and concrete assignments to help you put the principles into practice in your own novel.

While this process can work for any fiction that uses traditional three-act structure, it works best for commercial genre fiction: romance, mystery, sci-fi/fantasy, Western, etc.

Who this book will help.
If plotting your story is a problem – for example, if you get to about the middle of a manuscript, stall out, and then move onto another story – this book may be able to help.

If you've been a “pantser” (seat-of-the-pants freeform writer) but you feel like you need something more structural to help you complete your projects, this may help.

If you've been rejected because your stories don't seem to connect with editors, this book may help.

If you want to write more (and better) self-published commercial genre novels, this could help.

If you're interested in increasing your writing productivity and speed by streamlining your writing process, then this book can definitely help.

A little about why I wrote this.

I've been a commercial genre writer for the past thirteen years, publishing over eighteen novels, mostly with Big Six traditional publishers. I was told, point blank, that if I wanted to be a success (in this particular case, writing series romance), I'd need to produce two to three books a year.

For whatever reason, despite my “hippie/granola” inclinations, I'm a systems girl. When I was balancing a day job, and then afterward writing and promoting while childrearing, I realized that if I didn't have a system which streamlined my writing process, I would be screwed.

After almost fifteen years of compulsively studying writing reference books and then writing blogs, this book encapsulates the streamlined system I've come up with.

Who this book is NOT for.

The key to this particular book is taking the “tools” of other well-known writing references, and showing you a hands-on, workable technique to use those tools. If you're an experienced writer looking for a plotting book that has something “new” to offer, this may not be a worthwhile exercise for you. (That said, I have received feedback from writers who are able to look at old techniques in a new way thanks to this process.)

If you're interested in writing avant garde literary fiction, non-commercial fiction, and/or feel that three-act structure is “formulaic,” this book is not for you.

If the mere thought of plotting gives you hives, for the love of God, don't pick up this book. It will make your head explode. Seriously.

At one point, I will walk you through how to write an outline that covers every scene of your book. If that makes you want to run screaming, don't buy this.

How to use this book.

I would strongly suggest reading through the book in its entirety to get the overview, then block out time to work out the assignments in the order they're given.

If you try to jump to your plot outline without doing the pre-writing stuff, you're probably going to wind up in the same place you've been: stuck, flailing around aimlessly while your protagonist stagnates.
Trust me, the system works as set up.

And, as with any writing reference (or pretty much anything I can think of), take what works for you and leave the rest. Not everyone is as pathological as I am when it comes to plotting, but if you can see beyond the madness and detail, you should find the lynchpins of solid fiction writing — and both absorb them and use them to your advantage.

EXTRAS

If you go to my writing website, http://rockyourwriting.com, you can download a free pdf companion workbook, covering the exercises in this book.
#Part I:
The Foundation
# Chapter 1: Test Your Idea

A quick Wikipedia search for story premise gives the following definition, and it's as good as any:

"The premise ... is the fundamental concept that drives the plot."

What I'd like you to notice is that it's not just the concept.

Randy Ingermanson, the author who runs Advanced Fiction Writing and who developed the Snowflake plotting method, suggests that you start all plots by writing down what your premise is in one sentence.

I don't know that I'd be that extreme, but it is a good way to start.

Why?

Because it helps you identify the protagonist; it should state your story goal and that's it. That's who we're rooting for and what we're rooting for.

If you don't have that, or if it runs longer than one sentence, you may have a muddy concept. If you can cut your premise down to bare essentials, you'll know immediately if you've got a story with an engine or not.

Your premise is the back cover blurb of your book, the illustration of what's wanted and what's at stake.

It's not the theme, as in “love conquers all.”

It’s not the character, such as “a rogue angel working for a mad god.”

It must encapsulate a character, a goal, and an obvious conflict.

I’m going to repeat that: obvious conflict.

Here’s an example: “A woman with agoraphobia is kidnapped and must figure out how to negotiate the outside world to escape from her captor.”

Or for a romance: “Sheila Carter pursues her longed-for promotion by planning the wedding of the century for her client — the man she’s been secretly in love with for ten years—to a woman who’s out for his money.”

The elements of conflict are right there. A woman getting kidnapped and trying to escape already has a built-in conflict. The agoraphobia adds stakes. A woman watching her secret love go off with someone else also has some built in conflict; the fact that she must plan the wedding, and that the future wife is horribly wrong for him, adds drama and increases stakes.

What the heck is “high concept” (and do I need to worry about it?)

So far, the best definition of high concept I’ve seen comes from New York Times Bestseller Lori Wilde. In her book *Got High Concept? The Key to Dynamic Fiction That Sells* she describes the elements of high concept as:

1. It’s different
2. It’s universal.
3. It has emotional appeal.
4. It’s visual.
5. It can be easily reduced to one sentence.

Tall order, but it’s a crucial one. Master this, and you’re going to automatically take your writing’s marketability to the next level.

High concept is not about “twists” or gimmicks. It’s about “doing the same, but different.” It should ideally show a new twist on a universal theme, with an emotional resonance, an “easy to visualize” story (not just dialogue, but dramatic action), and a story line that’s simple enough to get across in one line.

You might make the argument that, in a genre like romance, no storyline is truly original... that “voice” is the only thing that sets books apart. (I certainly wouldn’t – I would put money on most of the romance writers I know if it came to writer’s cage match – but if you’re brave, you could say that.) In any genre, I don’t think any storyline is completely, unequivocally original, simply because if you wander too far from genre expectations for the sake of “originality”, you no longer satisfy the readers of the genre who want to be surprised and absorbed while still maintaining the expected experience of the genre.

Take romance, again. If you end the story with one or both of the protagonists dying, you could have a great book, but you will also have a mob of angry readers who were expecting the HEA (Happily Ever After) that this genre guarantees.

(And no, Nicholas Sparks does not count. Any romance writer in the world will agree with me on that one.)

Field Testing for High Concept:

**DIFFERENT:**
Know what’s considered stereotypes in the genre you’re targeting. Read extensively. Don’t be different simply for the sake of being different, but don’t unintentionally fall into the trap of sounding like everything else that’s out there. Look for the “hole” in the market. What fascinates you that no one seems to be writing about? How can you make that a compelling story? What makes your story unique?

**UNIVERSAL:**
One of my favorite ways of approaching this is doing a re-telling, using a classic story archetype as a pattern for a modern day novel. In my novel Couch World, I used the myth of Persephone and Hades as a template, albeit a disguised one. You see re-tellings of the Cinderella story, Beauty & the Beast, and the Ugly Duckling stories in many romance novels. The Horatio Alger styled by-the-bootstraps success story is used often. Classic myths and biblical stories are also re-tooled. See if there’s a universal foundation to your current premise.

**EMOTIONAL APPEAL:**
This is a little squishier, sort of “you know it when you see it.” A good rule of thumb: if it makes you emotional, it should work for your readers. What emotion do you feel best embodies this book? Fear, passion, inspiration, determination?

**VISUAL:**
You can “see” the appeal: it’s not just narrative, or something cerebral. You can actively picture the action unfolding, like something that could play across a movie screen. (Not that you’re writing a screenplay, but you get the idea.)

**EASILY REDUCED TO ONE SENTENCE:**
If you feel you need a lot of details to get across why it's interesting, or who your character is, or the complexity of your story, then it's too long to communicate to a reader. You want to hit the core. This isn't easy, but the exercise alone is worth the price of admission – it trains your brain to focus on what’s important in your story.

Do you really have a premise?

But before we get too far into that, there's a more important question: do you really have a story, or do you just have a cool idea?

This seems like a dumb question, but it's really not.

You'd be amazed at how many people have "a cool idea for a book," but on further examination, you find out that they've just got an interesting character, or a neat plot twist... and nothing else.

“The government clones Genghis Kahn.”

“The great chess masters of Europe are dying.”

“An alien race invades Montana.”

Admittedly, some of these have interesting aspects, intriguing concepts.  But essentially, they are the seeds of a story – there is no goal, no conflict, nada. Not even a protagonist.

That's not a story. That's cocktail party conversation with other writers.  “You know what I've always wanted to write about...?”

Field Testing for Premise:

- Do you have at least one main character who wants something?
- Does he want it very badly?  Will something bad happen if he doesn't get it?  Is there leeway to make the consequences even more important as the story progresses – a way to increase the stakes?
- Is something significant standing in the way of his achieving the goal?  Can these obstacles escalate?

ASSIGNMENT:

1.  What is your premise?

   One sentence, if possible. I've found it easiest to focus on the character, then what he/she wants, then what's standing in the way.  For example:

   “Teenage girl falls in love with vampire who is torn between his love for her and his lust for her blood.”  
   -- *Twilight*, by Stephanie Meyer

   “Homicide cop must solve high-profile murder, even if it means arresting suspect she fell in love with.”
   -- *Naked in Death*, by J.D. Robb
“Wizard detective must turn his back on all his closest held principles to rescue his daughter from ritual slaughter that will kick off an apocalypse.”

– Changes by Jim Butcher

Each one of these follows a format. Describe the protagonist. State goal of book. State conflict. Teenage girl’s goal is love: the conflict is love could equal death. Second book, homicide cop solving murder: the conflict is she could lose love as result. Third book changes it up a little: the conflict is detective turns back on all his principles, the goal is rescuing his daughter/stopping apocalypse.

You might read these sentences and think, “Well, that’s just a summary. What’s so high concept about that?” And, in part, you’d be right. The trick is to find the right words to summarize. Something in that sentence needs to be jarring enough to make the reader (in this case, an agent or editor) sit up and take notice.

2. Check your sentence for the principles of high concept, using the field test questions.

- Do you have at least one main character who wants something?
- Does he want it very badly? Will something bad happen if he doesn’t get it? Is there leeway to make the consequences even more important as the story progresses – a way to increase the stakes?
- Is something significant standing in the way of his achieving the goal? Can these obstacles escalate?

3. What is your target market?

This doesn’t mean a publisher necessarily, just the genre/sub-genre. (For example, YA romance, Urban Fiction, Chick Lit, Chapter Book/Middle Reader, series mystery.) Also, what generally is the word count for that genre? Knowing this will help you keep in mind what the expectations are for the genre – and what clichés to avoid. Also, the word count will come in handy when you’re doing the scene outline.

4. Why do you want to write this book? What appeals to you about it?

When you get to the heart of this, write it down, print it out, and put it somewhere very visible near where you work on your novel.

I’m not joking. You are going to reach a point where you don’t remember what possessed you to write this frickin’ thing. That little piece of paper may help shorten that period of delirium.

5. Do you have a message or a theme you want to explore with this book?

What do you want the reader to walk away with after reading this book?

You may feel this last question don’t apply to you. You just want to write a story, sell it, and have lots of people read it. You might not necessarily care if they walk away with anything other than a few laughs and some stress relief. (And yes, that’s a perfectly acceptable reason for anyone to write a book, in my opinion.) You might not want a theme for your book.

That said, I think theme adds a layer of complexity and depth to a novel, propelling it past the “eh, that was a fun read” that is quickly forgotten. It’s definitely worth exploring further, especially as you continue to write novels. Personally, I’ve discovered that the theme I go into a book with is rarely the theme I wind up writing about... and it varies depending on where I am in my life. But right now, it’s just a little “something to think about” as you move into setting the foundation for your story.
#Chapter 2: Goal, Motivation, Conflict

The key to all plotting is in what is commonly referred to as the GMC – the Goal, Motivation, and Conflict for your characters. Deb Dixon’s seminal work on the subject (also called *Goal, Motivation and Conflict*) covers this in fine detail, but the following points should give you enough to work on.

Essentially, you want to work on the assumption that your character has two driving desires: an internal goal, and an external goal.

**External goal.**

The external goal is going to be your *story question*, in terms of the protagonist.

Your reader will hopefully be compulsively turning pages, asking herself “Is this character going to (make a million dollars, save her sister’s life, get the big promotion) by the end of the story?”

That doesn’t mean that the character needs to achieve the goal by the end of the story in order for the reader to feel satisfied, or even for the story to have a happy ending.

Don’t get me wrong – a clear, triumphant win can be awesome. But often characters will want things that you, as the author, will know are not right for them.

If you can illustrate to the character and the reader why it’s better for her to ultimately “lose” her story goal in order to achieve something better (usually in terms of her internal goal, more on that in a second) then the reader can still be very satisfied.

The external goal needs to be tangible and measurable. The reader needs to know clearly when the character achieves it.

Therefore, “Sally wants to feel fulfilled in her work life” isn’t a solid goal, but “Sally wants to get promoted to Vice President” is.

Or “Sally wants to find someone to love and cherish” isn’t as clear-cut as “Sally wants to get married before she turns thirty.”

**Internal goal.**

Unlike the external goal, the internal goal deals with feelings and emotions, and by its very nature is not quantifiable. This can be a desire for security, unconditional love, acceptance, or accomplishment.

There won’t necessarily be a "benchmark" to reach – it’s much looser than external, which is why it’s rarely the story question.

The internal goal tends to be *how the character wants to feel* in his or her life. For example, “wants to feel safe” or “be happy” or “have unconditional love.”
Sometimes, the internal goal supports the external. If we used the “get married by thirty” goal, her supporting internal goal could be “Sally wants someone to share her life with.” Or, conversely, she could want to impress her family – all of whom married by thirty.

If you want to increase the tension, especially if you know that the character’s desired story goal isn’t one she’s going to achieve (because it’s not in her best interest), then you might make the internal goal one that is in direct conflict with her stated external goal.

Using the “married by thirty” goal again, let’s say Sally’s internal goal is to “have freedom” or “be independent.” In a Chick Lit, this would create a perfect conflict… she perhaps wants to escape an overbearing family, so having freedom/independence is crucial. But in thinking that she can use marriage as a vehicle for independence, she’s overlooking all the compromises and responsibilities that are related. It’s built-in conflict. A bit cliché, perhaps, but it’s an example we can work with.

**Motivation.**

I firmly believe that you can get away with absolutely anything in a story – *as long as you set it up well enough.* And that means creating a believable, compelling motivation.

Your story goal is the question your reader wants answered. “Will Sally get to the funeral in time?” As far as goals go, that’s clear – you know when it’s achieved.

Let’s say Sally’s family doesn’t give a hoot about Sally getting to the funeral. Let’s say the only reason Sally is going is because she felt vaguely obligated because the dead girl was her lab partner.

Yup. Not a whole lot of page turning going on there. Why? Because Sally’s got no urgency, and consequently, the reader doesn’t care if Sally gets there or not.

*The goal has to be important to the protagonist in ways that the reader will understand.* Some goals, like “saving a loved one’s life,” seem fairly easy. Others will require more explanation, which in turn requires more character work.

What you then want to do is delve into what I call the *why behind the why.* It’s not just ‘why is she going after the goal’. It’s why the motivation is important at all.

Let’s say the funeral in question is for someone Sally didn’t know very well. Let’s say it was for a high school classmate that she wasn’t very close to.

In fact, maybe she’s only going because it’s a small town and her parents want her there – the families know each other well. That makes for an interesting family dynamic: Sally’s internal goal is obviously *to please her family,* which becomes the motive for getting to the funeral on time.

If your reader is someone who is from a slightly dysfunctional, people-pleasing family, this motive will resonate very, very strongly. You will, on the other hand, get other readers who think “what’s her problem? Why doesn’t she just stand up to them?”

This is fine, incidentally. You don’t need to please everyone. In fact, *you shouldn’t.* You should know who you’re writing for, and then shrug off the comments of everyone else. But at the same time, you want to make sure the audience you are writing for is not incredibly niche-small.
For example, let’s say you’re writing a mystery, and you motivated a murder by saying that the victim left dishes in the sink overnight and her roommate snapped.

While you, as an author, might see that as totally believable – and justifiable – unless your readers share your same vehemence towards home cleanliness standards, this won’t make sense.

So, going back to our example… even if the reader doesn’t necessarily agree with Sally’s desire to please her family, the motivation here is understandable.

Maybe you blend in a little backstory: Sally’s parents are paying for her education, or she’s in hock up to her eyeballs to them for starting a company, and they’re employing a little emotional blackmail. No info dump – just a little phone conversation could get the point across. That provides some urgency.

Again, the reader does not have to relate completely (although I think it’s more powerful if she does.) The important thing is that the reader can say “I see why this is important to Sally.”

Which leads us back to character. If you like Sally, then even if you don’t relate to the situation, you’re going to want Sally to win.

The bottom line is: you can make almost any story believable if you’ve built characters with enough detail to support your premise. You needed to really dig to the root of the issue – find out what, exactly, is the motivating force.

Using a different example, if you say “Jessica doesn’t trust men” as her motive for avoiding the hero, then create backstory where her fiancé left her at the altar, it’s a set up, but it feels flat. Who hasn’t read that situation in a romantic comedy? And beyond that – how do we feel about Jessica if she was engaged to a cheating jerk?

So you expand it further. Jessica doesn’t trust herself, because she’d been with her fiancé who had lovingly helped her through school and who was her best friend, and then he left her at the altar because he realized he loved her but wasn’t in love with her.

That’s a level of detail that supports a story. We know that the fiancé didn’t just leave her at the altar because you needed a reason for her to not trust men: he’s enough of a real character that we can feel her pain at the response.

You also won’t have Jessica act stereotypically – no “I hate all men and will now go forth as a cat-collecting spinster, HA!” response. Sure, it’s an option, but the fact that she lost her best friend would suggest that it isn’t the “he cheated, the guy was an asshole” scenario, again seen a million times. In a complex, realistic situation, what is the nuanced, believable response?

The fact that she couldn’t read her best friend – or maybe just didn’t want to – is an empathetic element for our readers, enough to get them to understand why she really has trouble trusting her judgment. You can really feel the pain and the confusion and the conflicted emotions of what happened to her.

The detail and the choice to dig past the cliché options will help move your book to the next level.

Dig a little deeper. Ask yourself: “If the premise is Jessica doesn’t want to get close to Phillip because she doesn’t trust men… what do I need illustrate, to convince readers that Jessica has damned good reason not to?”
Again: just about *anything* will work in a story, if you set it up properly. Motivation is the key to that set-up.

**Conflict.**

Once you’ve set that hook, you’re going to do everything in your power to prevent your character from getting there. And I mean *everything*.

Readers like to read about characters who go to the wall and face amazing odds and challenging obstacles, all of which forces them to change and become stronger people in order to achieve their goals (or learn lessons about what their true destiny should be.)

So how do you do that? Here are some pointers.

1. **The conflict should be related to the goal.**

   This seems straightforward to the point of stupidity, but it is surprisingly easy to get sidetracked and lose sight of this fact.

   Let’s say my heroine’s goal is to give a speech to a hundred people, and she’s terrified of public speaking.

   Let’s say if she doesn’t give the speech, she will lose her business, and consequently lose her house in the next sixty days. That particular conflict is obviously empathetic (security issues) and urgent (ticking clock deadline.)

   If her boyfriend suddenly breaks up with her because he’s cheating on her, that’s definitely a wrench of sorts, but it has *nothing to do with her goal.*

   Don’t get me wrong: it sucks. But unless it’s directly related — like he decided to cheat because her new-found speaking abilities are making her too confident and he feels threatened, or she’s relying on him for moral support or even a ride to the speaking gig or something — then it’s not *goal related.* The story will be stronger if everything is geared toward preventing the main goal.

2. **The conflict must escalate.**

   A simple story example: the character’s main goal is to borrow a lawn mower.

   So the character goes to her best friend. She gets turned down.

   Then she talks to some other friends about the first friend. They suggest a family member.

   Then she goes to the family member. And gets turned down.

   And then is sad.

   And then goes to yet *another* friend.
You get the picture. Yes, there are still obstacles to her goal. However, it’s all of the same level of intensity... it’s basically a repetition. You’ve got to make sure that, with every scene, the protagonist’s situation is getting gradually worse.

Yes, EVERY SCENE.

I’ll be discussing this more in the section on scene construction, but basically, you want a conflict that has obvious room for escalation. That means that the obstacles get bigger.

An easy way to help with this is to increase the stakes of the motivation. If the reason why a protagonist wants something grows increasingly more important, the steps that he will take to get the goal will become more drastic, forcing the obstacles to become proportionally larger.

If the goal is too small, and the conflict is internal – for example, “will the heroine eat a rutabaga?” and the motivation is “she’s never eaten a rutabaga” and her conflict is “she thinks they’re ugly,” then you don’t have a lot of room for escalation there. There are too many obvious, fairly trivial solutions.

Now, shift the motive. Say she’s starving to death – and all she has are rutabagas.

Shift the conflict. She is fatally allergic to rutabagas.

Now, despite the initial boring set up (“Will she eat a rutabaga?”) you’ve got a whole different ballgame.

3. Think of the worst possible thing that could happen to your character, again in terms of the story goal. Then think of whatever’s worse than that. Then go one more step, really stretch.

That last thing you thought of? That should be your “black moment,” also sometimes called the climax... it’s the moment in the third act when all hope seems lost and “things look bad for our hero.” (See? You’ve got one plot point down already!)

I will cover this more in the Black Moment, but do ask yourself how deep your conflict can get... and if you’re willing to go there.

ASSIGNMENT:

1. Write the external goal for your main protagonist.

What does he/she want? Without knowing the motivation, how much would your audience care if your protagonist achieves it?

2. Write the motivation for the external goal.

Why is it important? Again, is this reason something your audience would understand, or will it need explaining/set-up? Finally, is it something scalable... something that can increase in stakes and importance?

3. Write the conflict for the external goal.
What is standing in the way? Is it believably challenging, or could it easily be dismissed with, for example, a simple conversation? (This is where the deadly “misunderstanding” conflict comes in. While it can be tweaked – Jennifer Crusie does a brilliant job of playing off the cliché in her novel Bet Me – it’s probably better to avoid if possible.) And, similar to motivation, is the conflict something you can imagine escalating to truly epic proportions?

4. **Repeat for the internal goal, motivation and conflict.**

   Experiment with putting the internal goal *in direct opposition* to the external goal. Examine how it affects the conflict for both sides of the equation. I’ve found that having a character at war with himself is one of the best building blocks for overall conflict.

5. **Repeat all steps for any major character, especially an antagonist if applicable.**
#Chapter 3:  Character Sketches

Remember when I said that you can write just about anything if you set it up properly? That’s where the “motivation” in the “goal-motivation-conflict” question comes in.

You can only have a believable set-up if you create full-fleshed, three-dimensional characters that support what I call “the why behind the why.” Which is why I realized the GMC has to come before you fully draw out the character sketch, which is the next step in the process.

Creating compelling main characters.

Once you have your premise, you need a strong protagonist (or several) to support it. All of your plot is going to flow from character. If you don’t build complex characters, then you’re going to find that your story becomes either cliché or simply illogical.

I’m sure you’ve seen it: the story is going on well enough, but there was a big Black Moment that an author obviously wanted to pull off, or they knew something had to happen at the climax. So they threw in one little detail that was completely out of whack, but it got the characters to where they needed to go.

Like an amazing super-spy who suddenly opens the door without checking through the peephole, only to get captured on his doorstep.

Or a romance, where the couple were doing wonderfully well, but there is one forced episode where, despite no history of cheating on his part or even much insecurity on hers, the heroine sees the hero hugging another woman and breaks up with him. (This is of course resolved when she discovers the woman was his sister. *Ba-dum-bump!*)

The protagonist is the vehicle your reader travels in, as it were. If you suddenly start throwing in left turns, or starts acting in ways that are stupid or inconsistent, then you’re essentially throwing your reader out of the vehicle – out of the story. You want a smooth ride.

The key to a smooth ride: build a foundation for your characters. Start exploring them. And like an iceberg – 90% of the character work you do is stuff they’re never going to see. That’s how readers can flawlessly enjoy the 10% they do see.

My character method:

I’ve experimented with a number of different writing references. I highly recommend Robert J. Ray’s *The Weekend Novelist* and Mary Buckham and Dianna Love’s absolutely wonderful *Break Into Fiction*. (I also recommend some of the exercises from Donald Maass’ fantastic *Writing the Breakout Novel* work book, but I like to save a lot of those for revision stage. More on that later.),

1. **I start with a sketch.**
This is the physical description, a brief little blurb describing what I think the character is like. I like to get photos of the characters, as well, usually basing them on actors and actresses. (I use Pinterest for this now.) This helps start you out, at the very least. It also will give you a visual reminder of your stories, I find. (Might be good to have a board for your story, along with your “why I want to write it” paragraph.)

2. From there, I like to write an exploratory biography.

I include details of who the parents are, where they grew up, what sort of life experiences they went through – all with an eye toward the goal-motivation-conflict. A lot of times, I’ve discovered that when I write a premise, the initial character I envision simply can’t support the story that I’d love to write. For example, I love stories with nerds, geeks, and reluctant heroes. (They are, after all, my tribe.) But if I have a character with too much reluctance, there is no way that she is credibly going to step up to the quest – unless she is given a metric ton of backstory to support her overcoming whatever her particular issues are, and propel her forward. Write the biography chronologically, right up to when your story starts. Especially include details of how your character comes to find him/herself in the situation the novel presumably starts with.

3. Interviewing the character.

If you still are having trouble getting a grip on your character, or you want to see his or her “voice,” then I’d suggest doing an interview with your character. This is a great way to hook into your subconscious and get details that you wouldn’t have found any other way.

Yes, this may seem absurdly detailed. I think it’s important, but on the other hand, I wouldn’t spend too much time on this – I spend a day or two at the very most.

Why? Because the characters are going to change and evolve as you start to write your draft. The key to writing your book isn’t a set-in-stone pre-writing process – it’s adaptability. You’re going to trim and adjust as you go, both plot and character, until it’s a cohesive whole.

It’s sort of the difference between a back-of-the-envelope map and GPS. You’re not going for GPS. You just want to sketch a rough idea of where you’re headed, and character detail is your starting point. This is also what I call “loading your brain.” As you think about your character, asking questions, doing prompts, you are collecting ideas. Then, when you’re not consciously thinking about your character, your madly working Muse will gnaw on it, going “hey, why does the hero have such an aversion to butter? What’s up with that?”, and then surprise you with really creative answers when you least expect it.

Think weaknesses as well as strengths.

Ever heard of a “Mary Sue?”

In fan fiction, the term “Mary Sue” generally represents a character who is perfect, or damned near... she’s beautiful, she’s kind, she’s strong, she’s idealized. She is also beyond cliché. She has no known weaknesses – if she has any flaws, they are couched in job-interview styled terms, like “she’s too humble” or “she cares too much.”
At best, she strains the bounds of credulity. At worst, she is unbelievably annoying. (The male version of this type of character is called a “Marty Stu,” incidentally.)

Be sure to include real flaws and weaknesses when you’re composing your character’s rough sketch. Not just character tics and quirks – those may make your characters unique and memorable, but they can come off as gimmicky. Instead, give us a character that we won’t necessarily always agree with, but we can relate to. Imperfection is very empathetic.

**How many sketches, and which characters?**

I’d strongly recommend doing the character work for any major characters: definitely the protagonist; both the hero and heroine, if it’s a romance; and especially the villain or antagonist. In fact, when dealing with the villain, for a brief period of time, pretend he is your hero.

Why?

*Because villains always think they’re the protagonist.* They think the story is about them, and their eventual triumph.

Give us a villain who feels totally justified in what he’s doing. He might not think he’s the good guy, but he’s damned sure that he’s the guy who’s going to win. We don’t have to agree with him or what he’s doing, but we should at least be able to understand why he's doing what he’s doing, and feel that he's more than just the stock “bad guy.”

If the force opposing your protagonist is two-dimensional, the steps that he takes will come off as either weak, unrealistic, or contrived. There’s nothing worse than seeing a villain who is nothing more than a flat, broadly-drawn caricature, a throwback to the mustache-twisting baddies from silent films.

The best villains are the ones that have a vein of sympathy, or even something we can empathize with. Ones that believe in a cause or have real issues. It’s the undercurrent of not-evil in most villains that makes them that much more intimidating.

You want your antagonist to be strong enough that the protagonist must really bring his A-game in order to conquer him – otherwise it’s the Yankees versus your local little league team, and it makes what will become your Black Moment (which should be the darkest, most despondent “things look bad for our hero” moment in the whole book) look utterly fabricated, usually relying on coincidence and dumb luck for the bad guy to get the upper hand even once.

You’ve seen it, I’m sure: the hero is going around, feeling impervious, when all of a sudden he forgets he's allergic to peanuts or doesn’t look at the cab driver and next thing you know, bam. Captured by the relatively stupid villain, who doesn’t realize he’s not clever, he’s just lucky.

Please, on behalf of readers everywhere… *don’t do that.*

**ASSIGNMENT:**

1. Describe your character.
Note physical description, age, tags (things you'd use to describe them if you're writing a series – what are their notable features, what makes them memorable,) favorite gestures, and possibly favorite sayings.

2. Using the character's age as a starting point, write a life history of your character while keeping the GMC and your premise in mind.

How did they wind up here? If it's a romance, I like to write the romantic history of the character, for example. In a mystery, I like to emphasize why the character is interested in justice or puzzles, depending. Again, this is just a sketch – play with it, and don't get too attached.

3. If you like, write either a page or two in the first person POV of your character, or “interview” your character to get a sense of his/her beliefs and how he/she is “entering” the story.
#Part II:
The Plot Points
# Chapter 4: Overview of the Plot Points

Over the years, I’ve devoured hundreds or writing reference books, studying plotting and story theory and three act structure.

This won’t go into the details behind the theory. (If you’re interested, I’m including a list of writing reference books at the end.) Instead, this will include brief descriptions of each particular plot point, showing an example of how it’s used in a story, and then a prompt to help you create the same plot point for your story.

## The Plot Points

After I’ve done the GMC charts and background character sketches, my next step is figuring out the plot points. These are the plot points I cover:

1. The Inciting Incident: The moment something changes.
2. Plot Point 1: Establishing the story question.
3. Pinch Point 1: Opposition shows itself.
4. Midpoint/Plot Point 2: New information shifts protagonist from reactive to proactive.
5. Pinch Point 2: The antagonist strikes back.
6. Plot Point 3: Ramp up for third act.
7. Black Moment: Worst thing ever (in terms of story question.)
8. Resolution.

These may not seem important or particularly substantial now, but they are the guideposts to get you from beginning to the end of your novel.
#Chapter 5: The Opening, a.k.a. “The Inciting Incident”

The inciting incident is many things. It's a hook. It's an introduction. It's a big, fat tease.

Robert McKee, author of the writing reference book *Story*, points out that the inciting incident is the “moment when something changes.” But what does that mean?

It’s conventional wisdom that your first chapter sells your book. We’ve all been in a bookstore, and we’ve probably all done the same thing: picked up something because the cover looked neat, then glanced at the back cover blurb, and then flipped through the first few pages.

You want to hook your reader, or agent or editor, in those first five pages. So your inciting incident should have a hook, something intriguing, a puzzle or an outrageous character or my personal favorite, something that makes the reader want to find out what’s going on.

Knowing your first plot point will help you create your inciting incident.

The thing that you're hinting at, the teasing “hook,” will by necessity lead you towards the story question – towards your first plot point. Your reader is going to wonder what the heck is going on... and why she cares.

Right now, as far as the writer is concerned, “why she cares” is more important than “what's going on.” You need to establish trust with your reader, give her something entertaining, pique her interest. That doesn't happen if you bury her in back story.

You're going to give enough background to intrigue, but not overwhelm. No info dumping! Yes, the first act sets up the rest of the novel, but not all at once, and not in encyclopedic detail.

Some examples.

For those of you who've read the *Hunger Games* series, the book opens with the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, waking up and describing her surroundings. On the second page, she sets the hook: normally, there are coal miners out at that hour, headed to work, but not today. Something called “The Reaping” is happening at two... and you immediately get the sense that it's not a holiday.

Let’s look at a romance. In Jennifer Crusie’s *Bet Me*, she opens with a woman getting dumped at a sports bar. Min’s hilarious inner monologue not only hooks us on her character, but neatly sets up the motivation: it explains exactly why Min would go along with dating a handsome, possibly untrustworthy stranger to get a wedding date in a month’s time.

Finally, I’ll include a thriller. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the opening scene involves a naked, dead guy in the Louvre... and hints that his nakedness and death isn’t what’s weird about the whole set up. (Because, of course, a naked dead guy simply isn't intriguing enough.)

Ideally, you want an empathetic character with an urgent goal, one backed with an understandable motivation. You’re going to show the character and sow the seeds of the motivation in the *set up* portion, the first quarter of your book. You’re then going to nail them with the full bore external goal by the first plot point.
Creating one from scratch: let’s use a hypothetical secretary for our protagonist. Let’s say that she’s learned that she’s about to lose her job unless she proves that she’s worth keeping.

Going completely over the top (high concept!), let’s say she’s actually a serial killer. A funny serial killer. Let’s say she’s Dexter meets His Girl Friday.

Maybe she’s been systematically killing bad guys she finds in the files from her job (it’s an investment brokerage that launders money for the mob or something.)

Inciting Incident: Serial killing secretary finds out that the criminal defense law firm she works for is having budget cuts -- and that it means there are going to be layoffs and possible firings of both admin and lawyers.

Considering the tone, a black comedy, it might be best to have her come in late from lunch where she'd killed someone, and have her co-workers remark “if you keep taking long lunches, you're going to get fired.”

The hook there is the strange character and her proclivity for killing. You might not even spell it out that clearly, but simply hint: she's got a body in her trunk, or something. Maybe she has to work overtime – with hints that she might get fired. So she has to make a choice. Does she stay late, to keep the job that pays for her house? Or does she leave, and bury the incriminating evidence?

ASSIGNMENT:

1. Write down your inciting incident.

What’s the “something different” that is going to start to push your protagonist towards an inevitable change? What knocks down that first domino? Look for something that prompts curiosity in your reader... something that hints at interesting things.

Also, if you can find a scene that simultaneously showcases your protagonist, something that hints at what’s interesting about the character and perhaps why a reader should care, that would be ideal. But you can also get to that in revision, so don’t get hung up.
# Chapter 6: Plot Point 1

This is the end of the first act, and the gateway to the vast wilderness that is The Middle. At this plot point, you firmly establish the story question, as well as giving the motivation for why your protagonist wants her goal and what the (dire) consequence is if she tries to avoid it. Plot Point 1 is the point of no return.

Since you've done the goal-motivation-conflict chart, you have this in mind. Usually, this is the easiest plot point to write.

Let's use our hypothetical secretary again.

Thanks to the work we've done in her character sheets, we've hopefully created someone the reader already wants to root for.

In your GMC, you've established a motivation that supports the goal: if she loses the job, she'll lose access to those files, and she might feel driven to kill people randomly—which she absolutely doesn't want to do because deep down she feels that she's a good person who performs a valuable service.

Or maybe in whatever line of work she’s in (secretary for lawyers?) she knows there will be a background check and she’s not sure she’ll pass. Or whatever.

Conversely, you could emphasize this by showing what exactly will happen if she doesn't get her story goal. If she loses the job, she won't be able to afford her house, and she’s got bodies in the basement or something.

The important part is, we as readers have to not only understand but also believe that her motivation is important: she has to have this story goal, or life as she knows it will suck.

**What the first plot point shows.**

I usually tell my students and coaching clients that Plot Point 1 is where your character knows what he or she needs to do, and has absolutely no frickin' clue how to go about that. Usually, a sense of panic and headless-chicken-running-around ensues... in my stories, at least!

Going back to our specific example: we know her goal, basically, is to keep her job. We also very clearly know her motivation – that she won't kill anybody else, so she can stay (sort of) a good guy, etc.

What we're missing, and what will create the actual plot point, is the conflict. It's not enough for her to start suddenly filing up a storm and filling out immaculate TPS reports. She needs to have something tangible and big standing in the way of what she wants.

**Plot Point 1:** Lawyer at firm "saves" her job... then reveals he knows about her killing, and will turn her in unless she kills a senior partner, making way for his own partnership.

The conflict is that she's now exposed. Her motivation is about keeping her little hobby a secret, staying out of jail. The fact that she must 1) break her justice-based code to kill an innocent partner (thereby breaking what I'd assume is her internal goal of being a good guy) or 2) risk exposure by bad partner guy both lay the foundation for a very strong story question.

**Assignment:**
1. Write down your first plot point... basically, your GMC, in one scene that illustrates why it's important and how serious the conflict is.
Chapter 7:  Midpoint, a.k.a. Plot Point 2

Plot Point 1 is when your protagonist knows what she needs to do, but has no frickin' idea what to do about it.

Plot Point 2, also known as “the Midpoint,” is when your protagonist figures out what she needs to do. Usually, this involves learning something vital somewhere after casting around and getting blocked left, right, and sideways. The Midpoint shifts the protagonist from reacting and bouncing off of events to becoming proactive, and gaining both direction and momentum.

This proactive quality is usually the best way to define a midpoint, in my opinion.

The midpoint is also an escalation. Now that she’s pieced together how she’s going to achieve her story goal (generally speaking, anyway) it’s best to ramp up the other two elements of the GMC equation. When that the goal appears to be achievable, turn up the motivation, and turn up the conflict.

Turning up the motivation.

Let’s say you’re writing a romantic suspense. The hero is a private investigator, and he thinks that the heroine might have stolen money. Plot Point 1: he rents a room in her house to keep an eye on her, pretending to be a handyman, getting closer to her. By the midpoint, something happens… someone tries to kill her. He realizes at that point that while he’d seen clues that pointed to her innocence, he now understands that not only is she innocent, but she’s been set up and she’s in real danger. Being the kind of guy he is, he’s not going to just take his fee and let her fall. He is falling in love with her and feels compelled to take action to save her.

New information is introduced.

I got this handy tip from Larry Brooks’ wonderful Story Engineering, and it changed the way I look at midpoints forever. In order to shift the protagonist from reactive to proactive, he needs to learn something new that clears up the solution. It doesn’t actually solve the problem, but it gives him a roadmap and allows him to actively pursue a clear goal. At plot point 1, he had a ton of options, but no clear path. Now, he’s got a path – usually with a ton of obstacles, but still more direction than he’s had up to that point.

Choices are made.

It also means that some of his options are pruned, which is great, in terms of your story. When he gets to the inevitable climax, you want the reader to feel that given the character he is and the choices he’s made, he has no other reasonable option. The Black Moment needs to have a ring of inevitability – like a train wreck you can’t look away from.

To do that, he’s got to burn some bridges. The last thing you want is a hero that gets to the resolution, and goes “you know, I guess I want to just run away, after all.”

And then he proceeds to avoid the battle altogether, simply changing his mind and becoming a dairy farmer with the heroine, with no consequence.

It’s unsatisfying, and it generally means that you didn’t have enough conflict or enough stakes set up for his choices. By the midpoint, not only does his motivation need to be strong, the stakes need to continually raise, and the conflict must gradually and inexorably escalate.

As in, every single scene.

Decisions lead to action.

The midpoint is an escalation, and it has to force your protagonist to take action. It’s also important to ensure you don’t have the dreaded “sagging middle.” The first half of the book was about reacting, research,
and getting a handle. The second half is about taking steps to solve the problem. Even if it’s a period piece, the key to the second half of the book is action.

**ASSIGNMENT:**

1. **Write a brief description of your midpoint.**

   Check in with your GMC charts, and write what your character has learned and what his action towards achieving the goal is going to be. Also, check to see if the conflict is greater now than it was in plot point 1. What has escalated?
# Chapter 8:  Plot Point 3

The third plot point is the “squishiest” plot point to describe, and one of the hardest to figure out. It’s the calm before the storm of the third act: like the “click-click-click” of a roller coaster, just before the plunge.

Similar to the midpoint, this usually also has a new information aspect to it. In fact, this should be the last big reveal, and the thing that sets up your last act. What the reader and protagonist learn at this plot point should set the protagonist up for the big dramatic conclusion.

**No new information after this point.**

By the third plot point, everything that needs to be set up to get to the resolution should be in place. I think the best reason for this is to prevent someone from introducing something that miraculously “solves” the problem. When the protagonists head into the final act, they need to have all the tools and info necessary to solve the problem, and it will be a matter of their choices and their actions that bring the story to a satisfactory close.

Personally, I like Plot Point 3 to create a more positive note, contrasting the final act with the Black Moment right on its heels (which we’ll be talking about soon.) If Plot Point 3 is positive, or at least hopeful, I find it makes the Black Moment really, really bleak, which is what you want. Still, the third plot point sets up everything.

**Save this one for last.**

I’m going to talk about a possible way to “attack” writing down your plot points in case you get stuck, but I will say this: I always write the third plot point after I write the Black Moment and Resolution points. Why? Because then I’ll know what information needs to be set up by this point, and I’ll know what would be the most devastating lead-in for the Black Moment.

**# ASSIGNMENT:**

1. **Write down a brief description of your third plot point.**
   I’d suggest saving this for after the Black Moment and resolution.
# Chapter 9: Black Moment

The Black Moment should be one of the easiest plot points to write down. (The only one that might be easier would be Plot Point 1, because if you don’t know that, you don’t know your story question.)

It’s just like setting the corners and straight pieces that outline a puzzle before filling in the tough parts. If you know the first plot point, then your question to arrive at the Black Moment is:

*What is the absolute worst thing that can happen in terms of his goal?*

External or Internal?

Now, note that this can be your internal or external story goal.

I often like to develop internal conflict by forcing the protagonist make a tough choice, one that forwards one goal at the expense of the other: in order to achieve the external goal – let’s say your heroine wants to get a huge promotion – she needs to give up her internal goal of having someone who loves her unconditionally. (This is pretty common in romance fiction especially.)

In that context, she could get the promotion, but lose the love.

Or, conversely, she could choose to stay with the man she loves – and not only lose the promotion, but lose her job entirely and perhaps be blacklisted from her career.

Go for the soul-crush.

To make a really powerful Black Moment, try taking both away, especially if your character thought there would be a choice.

Not only does she not get the promotion, she doesn’t get the guy either. And not only does she not get the guy, he now appears to hate her guts. And she doesn’t look like she’ll be getting into that industry again, either.

Have her really, really hit rock bottom. There needs to be loss, pain, a price to be paid.

It has to actually happen.

Keep in mind: your characters aren’t simply threatened by this loss. They need to actively experience this loss. Your characters also need to have been heading this way during the whole book. The reader needs to see this as a possibility that grows stronger and stronger with every decision your protagonist makes.

This can’t be a surprise, and the reader shouldn’t be able to see an obvious solution that your protagonist is simply ignoring. That only creates reader frustration.

We’ve all read a book where the protagonist loses something like a cherished job or a dream or something. And we say, “Why didn’t she just buy the shop?”

Lo and behold, you get to the resolution... and she rallies her friends and family, and buys the shop. It’s not hideously terrible, but it’s not tremendously satisfying, either.

When the reader gets to the Black Moment, you want the reader to feel like your protagonist did everything he or she could, based on what your character would believably do, to avoid the worst. And that, by the time it hits, there was nothing else he or she could do... and it was inevitable.

This isn’t easy. But it is worth it.
Most new writers pull their punches: they don’t want to torture their characters and don’t think that readers want to see their protagonist in pain. Trust me: they do. Or at least, for most genre fiction, they do if they know you’re going to make things right.

How much better is it to see a triumphant ending when you know just how much they paid for it?

ASSIGNMENT:

1. Write down a soul-crushing Black Moment. Make sure that it ties in to the character’s GMC, either internal, external, or both.
#Chapter 10: Resolution

The tricky part about really disastrous Black Moments? Figuring a way out of them.

This is why a lot of writers pull their punches when it comes to Black Moments. A lot of writers won’t dig a deep hole, because they don’t know how to extricate themselves from it.

The *really* hard part (because it wasn’t tough enough) is making sure that the resolution is believable *based on what we know of the characters*, and that it’s satisfying... not too obvious, but still very resonant.

It’s tough, sure. But it can be done – and it should be.

How to resolve a soul-crushing Black Moment.

First, brainstorm, either by yourself or with some trusted writing friends and readers. Donald Maass often suggests writing down a list of twenty or so possibilities, knowing that the first ten are going to be obvious and probably too easy, and that you’ll strike gold as you’re forced to stretch for the next ten. This is very good advice.

When brainstorming with others, keep an open mind. You might not get the answer you’re looking for, but your brain will probably click into an answer trying to defend whatever it is your subconscious wants.

There are going to be times when you’re stuck and you feel like banging your head against a wall. That’s not a bad thing. If it comes to you too easily, it’s probably cliché – and you don’t want your readers to find the third act too predictable.

Second, have faith. You will get out of it. Take a little breather, give yourself some space, and believe that you’re going to find the solution. Odds are good it’s going to blind side you when you’re falling asleep or taking a shower or doing something repetitive.

Resolution is in the details. (Or, you can add details later.)

Often the best resolutions are rather innocently set up in the first act. You will reveal a simple detail about your character: she’s stubborn, she’s obsessed with U2, she’s (whatever.) So in the end, she may give up her prized U2 collection to save the hero, or something. This seems like something she never, ever would have done, but her new sacrifice will pay off.

Look at what details you have in the set up to create the resolution. Maybe it’s doing something that she never thought she’d be able to do but, in the course of the story, has developed enough believable character to accomplish.

On that note, look at how your protagonist has changed in the course of the story and how you want him/her to be in the end. The strengths she develops and the weaknesses she needs to deal with will also tell you your resolution.

Land the plane softly.

Make sure that the resolution isn’t too sharp a drop off. Let’s say you were writing a romantic suspense. If your heroine saves the hero’s life and shoots the bad guy, don’t just write “the end.” You need a little slow-down, time for the reader to absorb what’s happened and “cool down” from all the action. That’s a good time for some of the internal stuff to resolve, and for us to get a sense of what’s going to happen in the future for your protagonists.
ASSIGNMENT:

1. Write down how the story resolves. What is your ending? Does it tie up all loose ends necessary in this novel?
# Chapter 11: Pinch Points

These are sort of “extra credit.” I usually only walk through the main plot points already listed when I'm helping a writer during a plot session, but Pinch Points are very handy, especially when you're building a full-fledged, scene-by-scene outline.

So, what are pinch points?

Right smack in-between Plot Point 1 and the midpoint, and then again in-between the midpoint and Plot Point 3, are scenes that Larry Brooks calls “pinch points.” He describes a pinch point as:

“An example, or a reminder, of the nature and implications of the antagonist force.”

Basically, a Pinch Point is a scene where the antagonist force is fully evident, acting against the protagonist.

So if your first plot point is the protagonist making a decision to pursue a goal ("I gotta do something!") and the midpoint is when the new revealed information helps move the protagonist from being reactive ("Oh... I see what you did there, and now I'm going to do this!") to being proactive, then the pinch point would be somewhere between those two.

What does this mean?

It means you see what the protagonists are up against, up close. It's all about conflict.

In a suspense, if your heroine is afraid that someone is stalking her, the first pinch point (right smack in the middle of the second quarter of the book) is when he does something that shows he’s not harmless, like leaving a dead kitten pinned on a switchblade to her door. (Ew, sorry, grossed myself out with that. But it’s direct.)

The second pinch point, right in the middle of the third quarter of the book, would be the antagonist there, again. By this point, your heroine is aware of the stalker, has learned something new (at the midpoint) that suggests she knows who he is, and she’s starting to be proactive about protecting herself. By the next pinch point, the stalker also brings his best game: for example, he shuts down the fancy-schmancy security system she had installed, showing no matter what you do, I can get to you.

But what if you’ve got a romance? What if there is no villain?

Let’s say your heroine is agoraphobic. The antagonist, then, is her own phobia.

She’s already met the hero and has some reason she’s entwined with him in the first plot point. At the first pinch point, we need to see her agoraphobia front and center: maybe the hero is trying to coax her out in the hallway, and you have a scene where she hovers in her doorway, wishing she could go to him but simply can’t. It seems like a small scene, but her torture, torn between desire & fear, becomes paramount.

After the midpoint, she’s learned something about her phobia and how she deals with things. Then let’s say the next pinch point, before Plot Point 3, is one where she thinks she’s made a breakthrough... she’s gone down to her condo’s rec center to have a romantic candlelit dinner with hero. She’s made progress.

So her phobia, the conflict, needs to strike back in a big way. If she was agoraphobic because she’s had a very unstable past or something, then perhaps the rec room kitchen catching fire can trigger her and she’ll bolt back to her apartment. Or maybe the hero can push her to go on vacation somewhere out of town – or something big, like Maui, while she lives in a small town in Wisconsin. The fear will push her back to her home.

The First Pinch Point
Basically, the first Pinch Point acts as a reminder for the protagonist of why the goal is important, and is a clear illustration of the conflict that the protagonist is up against.

If you're writing an action novel where there's a clear "villain," this does not mean you need to reveal the identity of the villain. (In fact, in something like suspense, you really shouldn't.) But you should show the protagonist in some kind of real peril.

In a cozy mystery, this would probably be after the first plot point ("I'm going to figure out who killed Marsha Higgenbottom!") but before the midpoint ("I have discovered that Marsha Higgenbottom was a satanist... and the killer is probably in the cult!") Since this is a cozy, odds are good you're not putting your amateur sleuth in too much real jeopardy. However, that pinch point would be the "wait, something weird here" moment -- the thing that shows readers this isn't going to be a quick solve. The villain probably does something that impedes the solution of the case: shows either that the detective could get in some kind of peril, yes, or perhaps puts other direct obstacles in the way. The action *impedes the goal of solving the crime*, which shows the conflict. It should be clear: the detective now realizes "there's more going on here" and it's not going to be easy.

If you're writing a love story without a villain, then the antagonist (or "force opposing love") might be something like the hero's feeling of shame, because he used to be in prison. Or the heroine's agoraphobia. In that case, your pinch point would illustrate the conflict generated by the shortcoming. For example, the hero is refused a job because of his criminal record, illustrating his past and his feelings of shame in a very tangible way.

The Second Pinch Point

This is after the midpoint, but before the third, and definitely before the Black Moment.

In a villain scenario, this is when the villain steps up his game. The protagonist has figured out something important in the midpoint: he or she has gone from a reactive chicken with his head cut off to a proactive player on the trail of the villain. The villain needs to strike back and strike hard.

In a cozy, this would be when stakes are raised. It's probably not a bad point for a second corpse, if you're headed in that direction anyway. Otherwise, it would be when the amateur sleuth is put in some kind of real jeopardy.

In the case of our love story hero and heroine, you could try attributing human qualities to your trait. Let's take agoraphobia. Perhaps your heroine learned at the midpoint what her problem was, why she's agoraphobic. Maybe she thinks she's on the road to recovery and the hero is helping her. If you were Mr. Agoraphobia, and you saw that you were losing her, what would you do? You'd prove you were right. This would be taking whatever it was that's her trigger, and not only hitting her with it, but *flattening* her with it. She's afraid because she was once raped? Have her rapist be released from prison. She's terrified because her Mom died? That's probably a good time to have the Mom's death anniversary. Something gripping and hard, but remember, you've still got the Black Moment coming.

Pinch Points are tricky, and odds are good you'll find them one way or another if you're simply plotting your way from your Plot Points. That said, having a strong Pinch Point is a good way to shore up your story arc and keep the conflict tight and escalating.

**ASSIGNMENT:**
1. Write down Pinch Point 1 and Pinch Point two for your novel.
#Chapter 12:   Troubleshooting and FAQ's

If you find yourself having difficulty figuring out the plot points in sequence, I'd suggest figuring them out of sequence in the following order:

1. **Plot Point 1.** You should know your character's goal-motivation-conflict, and this simply puts that in play.

2. **Inciting Incident.** Again – you know Plot Point 1. This is the point that sets that up. What needs to happen to make Plot Point 1 necessary?

3. **Black Moment.** This is the corollary to Plot Point 1. If you know what the character wants, you can figure out what the absolute worst thing is in terms of that.

4. **Resolution.** Now, how do you get out of it?

5. **Midpoint.** What does the protagonist need to learn, and what needs to change, to force him to hit the Black Moment? What happens to change the protagonist from chicken-with-his-head-cut-off frantic to seeing a path towards solving his problem?

6. **Plot Point 3.** Reverse engineer this point. Given what you know of the Black Moment and the Resolution, what information does the reader prior to this point to be considered a “fair” ending, as opposed to a cheesy/coincidental one? How are all other possible options pruned away? How can you make the stakes as high as they can go?

7. **Pinch Point 1.** This is where the antagonist first does something that shows he's there. It doesn't have to reveal him, but it needs to show the protagonist what he's up against. Look at the midpoint and the Black Moment. See what would make sense to reveal about the antagonist at this point.

8. **Pinch Point 2.** You want the antagonist to strike harder... by this point, we should probably know who he is. You probably want the protagonist to be different enough, far enough along on his character arc, that he has a victory or at least holds his own. Conversely, this will show just how much of a badass he is up against, raising both stakes and conflict.

**What if I have more than one protagonist?**

If I have a novel with more than one major POV character, and more than one “protagonist,” then I like to create plot points for all of them, weaving them together. They will still play out at around the same time in the book — plot point 1 will happen more or less at the quarter mark, the Midpoint will still happen largely in the middle — but it will be staggered. Also, if their goals are conflicting, the interplay will affect each other’s plot lines and character arcs.

I'd try writing the plot points for each one, then looking to see where they line up and tweaking until you're happy that it's at least workable. Also, usually one protagonist “owns” the novel more than the others, even if you have several major characters. In a series, different novels might be “owned” by different characters.

**Doesn't writing this much of the plot out beforehand suck the life out of the story?**

Not if you approach it with an open mind.

Plot Points are like back of the envelope instructions, given to you by a friend. It points out landmarks and gives vague directions, like “turn left at the abandoned Italian restaurant” rather than “at point five miles, curve slightly to the north.”
Your novel will change as you write it. This gives you simple framework. If something looked good on the plot points, but winds up feeling contrived or unworkable in the draft, by all means ditch it. But realize that changing one point will by its nature alter the others somewhat.

If I find something going horribly awry as I’m writing, I go back to the points and fiddle with them, adjusting course so I still wind up someplace with an arc that makes sense for the character.

**What if nothing seems to be working?**

When in doubt, always go back to the character and the GMC. If you can get a good handle on that, all the plotting will work itself out... organically.
#Part III:
The Scene Outline
#Chapter 13: Basics of Scene Construction

This is a precursor for the scene outline. Even if you don’t write a full scene-by-scene outline, it’s something I want you to consider as you write scenes in your draft.

I gleaned most of this information from Jack Bickham’s phenomenal book *Scene & Structure*. While it might read “dry” and seem boring as all hell, it works like gangbusters.

It is also not “formulaic” – not any more than putting a foundation, structural supports, and walls on a house is considered “blasé.” This actually works, and more importantly, it keeps the roof on.

The most surprising, stylish, and daring house is worth squat if it collapses.

**You want disaster.**

Bickham’s main point is:

*Unless it’s a resolution scene, every scene needs to end with a disaster.*

This does not mean that every single scene needs to end on a cliff hanger, or the equivalent of a bomb’s ticking clock – to do that would not only stretch things to a complete lack of credulity, but also creates a pacing issue that my friend calls “falling asleep at the edge of your seat.”

That said, again, every scene needs to end with a disaster!

In this context, here are the possible results of a disaster:

- **No.** The character tries to do something, and gets denied.
- **No, and furthermore...** Not only does the character get denied, the situation gets worse.
- **Yes, but...** The character gets what he or she wanted, at the expense of something else, creating a worse situation.

From a pacing standpoint, I strongly believe that every single scene should tie into your story goal, the question for why your reader is flipping pages and seeking answers. This could be “will she get the job,” “will he get revenge,” or “will they solve the crime?”

Whatever it is, your reader desperately wants to know the answer. Emphasis on *desperately*.

If you’re writing literary fiction, where the emphasis is more on the lyric quality of the prose, the lush, picturesque descriptions, and what have you, then you’re probably not going to worry so much about the pacing of your story craft.

However, if you’re reading this, I’m assuming you’re writing with an eye toward commercial genre fiction. In genre fiction, story is king; polished prose, so much the better, but if your story’s not there then your audience won’t be, either.

Your reader needs to be emotionally invested in the outcome of your story, which means she needs to have a connection with the protagonist(s) – and that protagonist must have a strong motivation for what he or she is pursuing. This drive on the part of your protagonist should be reflected in every single scene.

**Why the disaster?**
Let’s say your character’s goal is to get a job, because her sister needs medication. That’s a fairly strong motivation and a clear-cut goal.

The conflict: the only job that pays enough is with an ex-boyfriend who wants her back, but she wants nothing to do with him because he was a gambler. He’s in recovery now, but she’s been burned by him before (maybe he’s responsible for her current finances somehow.)

It’s twisted even more when you see her internal goal is to protect herself.

With this in mind, let’s say you’ve got a scene where your heroine is having lunch with her sister. Her sister outlines the past a bit, they have some light banter about your heroine’s state of celibacy. The heroine then says that she’s got some savings put aside, so she might take the ex-boyfriend’s job and if she doesn’t like it she can always leave. They toast to it over chocolate mousse.

There is a distinct lack of tension here.

Yes, it sort of mentions the story goal, getting a job. But there’s no urgency, little at stake. This would be the point where your reader puts the book down and does dishes or watches television or checks email. She’s not driven to keep reading, because at this point there’s nothing at stake.

Take the same scene. Shift it to lunch in a hospital room. They’re eating hospital food. Her sister tells her that she doesn’t have to take the job with the ex-boyfriend if she doesn’t want to… she’s fairly sure she’s got some savings somewhere. Cough, cough. Weak pat on the hand.

This is a yes, but disaster. The heroine has been given the go-ahead: she can avoid the ex-boyfriend. But, if she does, it certainly looks like her sister will get worse… therefore, it is an untenable situation.

She must take the job.

**“Sequel” and where that fits in.**

Protagonists are characters that undergo change; they do this as a result of the choices they make in the story, the sequels of the scenes.

In the above scene, your heroine makes a decision, based on the previous goal, conflict, and disaster. She decides to choose taking the job with the ex-boyfriend. Her decision is called the sequel.

A sequel can be as short as a few paragraphs. It can be longer. I would not recommend having an entire scene dedicated to a sequel. It can open the next scene, if you like, or be hinted at during the disaster of the prior scene.

Ideally, your story should open with your hero or heroine facing a number of choices. As they make choices, their avenues of opportunity start to close off: each choice prompts a different, smaller set of decisions, and based on the people they are, they are nudged forward until they reach the Black Moment, which simply cannot be avoided.

Every choice they make is logical based on their personality. When you get to the Black Moment, you realize that they were almost destined to get there... and you still want to see how it all turns out.

**Resolution.**

Like the Black Moment, the resolution also needs to be logical, prompted by the changes that they underwent through the course of the story.

It should also be active: you can’t have some caped superhero or dead millionaire aunt come in and solve the problem. The seeds of the resolution are planted in the first act.

Your resolution scenes should happen in the last quarter of the book, shortly after the Black Moment. Once that happens, the climax is right around the corner and the rest of the book tends to pitch like the
downhill slope of a rollercoaster, dropping like a bullet before gradually slowing into a smooth, reassuring coast.

Look to your resolution scenes to tie off any plot “knots” that need it. Showcase the changes in your protagonist(s), the decisions and consequent actions that are a result of everything that went before, in order to close the novel.

**Why it matters in an outline.**

If you’re doing a thorough scene outline, you should include this information.

*Why?*

It trains you to end each scene (except for the resolution scenes) with a disaster.

You'll also look to make sure that, overall, you're not doing repetitive scenes. (See the example of asking three people to borrow a lawn mower in three different scenes and getting "no" from each. It doesn't worsen the situation; it's just repetitive.)

Blocking out the scenes shows you how one scene needs to move to the other, and what needs to happen to get you from one plot point to the next, *escalating the conflict as you go.*

**Always. Increase. Conflict!**

Now that you understand the basics of what each scene should contain from a plotting standpoint, let’s look at how to create a scene-by-scene outline, laying out your novel like beads on a string.
Chapter 14: Creating the Outline

By now, you should have:

1. Your character background (at least for the protagonists)
2. Your character GMC charts (again, at least for the protagonists)
3. Your plot points:
   - Inciting Incident
   - Plot Point 1
   - Pinch Point 1
   - Midpoint
   - Pinch Point 2
   - Plot Point 3
   - Black Moment
   - Resolution

If you’ve got more than one protagonist, you might want to sketch out plot points for each.

Whether you’re a plotter or a pantser, having the character background and plot points readily on hand will be enormously helpful. They help you test for structure: you can see, before you start writing, whether there are any glaring, inherent flaws in conflict.

That said, once you get into draft, you will probably notice that things quickly go awry.

Why have a scene outline?

When I sold my second novel, I had to write to a tight deadline and I had no idea how to go about it. I developed this method out of sheer self-defense from juggling writing time with a day job. Since then, I’ve streamlined and tweaked it, improving it with tools and techniques I’ve gotten from my mad writing reference addiction. Still, I’ve used this basic system for seventeen novels.

I write an outline of every scene I think will be in the book.

Again, things go awry – it’s to be expected. However, having a scene outline means that when I get to the computer for my daily page count, I don’t freeze. I don’t spend time pondering “what should I write today?” I sit down and get some pages done.

Even better, each scene supports the story as a whole. And if things go wrong, I’ve got a diagram that shows me why.

I might discover in the writing that what I thought would be a full scene doesn’t quite work. Or something might strike me as funny, or off. Unless it’s huge, I try to power through it. I also find that the act of simply writing draft solves a lot of these problems. Unexpected things happen.

It’s like Google Maps.
Going back to the driving directions analogy, when I use Google Maps I often find that what they say is there doesn’t take into account things like detours, street closures, and the occasional “oh no, this only goes the opposite way!” errors.

It does make it harder to get where I want to go, but it gets me into the neighborhood.

Writing your rough lightning draft is not about getting it perfect; it’s about getting into the neighborhood. You’re still going to work through a revision draft to iron out the details.

The good part about a scene outline or just putting down the plot points is that it’s like the very roughest “rough draft” possible in about a third of the time. It’s an energy-saving device.

Writing the scene outline can be off-putting for a number of creative writers, but trust me – it can also be freeing. Constraints are what allow creativity to bloom.

Beyond that, readers find the three-act structure a comfort and a necessity. Understanding the form, and writing to that pace, will help your genre craft bloom, as well.

The System.

1. **First, pick a word count/page count that fits your target genre. Then, pick an arbitrary number of scenes.**

   I know, this seems insane. However, in my experience, it beats starting blind.

   You can look up basic genre guidelines through Google, researching publishers who put out books similar to what you’d like to write. See what word count they ask for in their submission guidelines.

   To give you an example from my work, I’d say that for a category romance (about 55,000 words, or 220 pages) I like to have about 36 scenes. I break this down to three scenes per chapter in twelve chapters. Again, arbitrary, but it gives me a landscape to work with. At that rate, it means that each scene has about 6 pages.

   If I’m writing a single title or mainstream novel, which runs between 95k and 100k words or about 380 to 400 pages, I generally use about 60 scenes. Now remember: that’s arbitrary. It just gives me something to start with.

   That means I’m going to be writing down the details for 36 to 60 scenes.

2. **Then, create the empty outline.**

   I’ve created the outline a number of ways.

   If you’re of the more tactile, pen-and-paper persuasion, I’ve found that colored index cards or sticky notes work wonders.

   Right now, I always start with a different color per POV character, so I can see if I’m leaving anybody out or if the scenes are disproportionate to any one character.

   I also lay the sticky notes in columns... for example, for a category romance, I’ll spread out twelve “columns” of three sticky notes, so I know what the chapters look like.

   In the past, I’ve also numbered the lines on spiral notebook paper. The good part about the sticky notes, though, is that you can juggle stuff around as you’re figuring it out.

   If you’re digitally inclined, you can do the same with a spreadsheet, or a writing program like Scrivener, which I love for rough drafts. (It makes it easy to juggle the scenes themselves around!)
Personally, I take my sticky notes and then type them into a spreadsheet that I refer to, sort of like a writing schedule. I generally write in a linear fashion, not hopping around a lot from scene to scene... but this gives me the flexibility if I decide I want to.

Once I've got the format and the slots, and I know how many scenes the work will have (approximately), I start filling them in.

3. Pop in the plot points.

Look! You've already got eight scenes ready to go, right there! If you're writing a romance, or a novel with more than one main character, you might have as many as 16 to 24 scenes!

Generally speaking, the plot points happen at about the quarter marks throughout the book. That means if you've got, say, 40 scenes, then your first plot point will happen at scene 10, your midpoint at scene 20, your third plot point at scene 30. Your Black Moment will be not far after, let's say 31 or 32. Your resolution? It happens after that. And your opening was your first scene.

So, instead of a big blank expanse, you suddenly have:

1. Opening scene:  Secretary returns to work, hears about layoffs.
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  
6.  
7.  
8.  
9.  
10. Plot point 1:  Junior partner blackmals secretary:  kill senior partner, or I will send you to jail.

... and so on.

4. Fill in the set-up scenes.

Once you've popped in the plot points, you're not going to try plotting a book from beginning to end – you're just filling in the necessary set-up and reaction scenes, getting you from one point to the next. It cuts the space you've got to fill down by three-quarters!

It also gives you a framework and a clear beginning and end. You're not trying to figure out how to get your heroine from losing her job in the opening scene to living happily ever after as head of an intergalactic
crime ring at the end. You’re sketching out how she gets to plot point 1: discovering there are aliens living among us.

Check in with the GMC for the protagonist, and ask “given what just happened, and what he wants, what will he do now?” Don’t try to force him to do something that doesn’t fit with his character, simply because you’ve “got a plot point to get to, dammit.”

Think of it like a crossword puzzle: if he’s this kind of guy, and you want the story to go here... how would he do it? (Always double-checking to ensure that yes, he would actually do that thing.)

So in the case of our serial killer secretary: the example outline might look like this –

1. **Opening scene:** Serial killer secretary returns late from a long lunch, with a body in trunk, and hears about possible layoffs from a co-worker.

2. Secretary is about to leave and dispose of body when boss warns her that her performance needs improvement.

3. Secretary disposes of body, goes home to check bills, sees how bad her life would be if she lost job. House payments become unaffordable, and she’d lose access to victim files, preventing her from killing according to her code.

4. Goes in early to work to show “dedication” – sleazy junior partner catches her in file room, returning victim file.

5. Secretary is given first warning by boss and is denied access to file room.

6. Senior partner makes announcement that he’s heartbroken by layoffs and will work with auditor to get back on track; junior partner fires several people, tells secretary he wants to speak to her after work. Include hints that he’s really sleazy, and might want a sexual favor.

7. Secretary sneaks into file room, steals several files “in case” so she has victims to feed her addiction. Overhears management talking in conference room – she’s next on chopping block, just needs two more warnings.

8. Applies for job at similar firm. Background check required; though her records are sealed, she’s afraid of further scrutiny. Decides to talk to junior partner, do whatever’s needed to keep job.

9. **Plot point 1:** Junior partner blackmails secretary: kill senior partner, or I will send you to jail.

**These are just sketches and notes.**

If you find yourself sketching in “filler” scenes, because you can’t figure out what needs to happen, don’t worry. Once you’ve got all the scenes laid out, if some seem extraneous, cut ‘em. Or trust that you’ll excise them when you get to the revision round. This outline is just to fuel your lightning draft... the super-quick, rough, story-testing draft that I recommend, especially for commercial genre fiction writers.

**What each scene note in the outline should contain.**

Remember the last section? In every scene, you have the goal-motive-conflict-disaster pattern, and the sequel either at the beginning or at the end.
In my scene outlines, I include the following information:

1. **POV.** I want to know who the main POV character is, because that's whose scene goal I'm looking at.
2. **Goal.** What does the POV character want?
3. **Motivation.** Why does the POV character want it so badly? More importantly – how does it relate to the overall story goal, the big GMC?
4. **Conflict.** What's standing in the way
5. **Disaster.** This is the no, yes-but, or no-and-furthermore. Unless it's a resolution scene, it's going to end in a disaster.

Yes, I do this for sixty scenes before I sit down and write a single-title, 400 paged novel.

This idea can cause hyperventilating panic in some writers. Don't worry – it can be easier than you think to get the scenes down.

This doesn’t have to up a lot of space, either. It should be able to fit on a three inch by three inch sticky note. Here’s an example:

**SCENE 21**

**POV:** Serial Killer Secretary

**GOAL:** “Case” senior partner’s daily habits to find best place to kill him.

**MOTIVE (tying into story question):** She needs to kill senior partner because she’s being blackmailed by junior partner.

**CONFLICT (to the scene goal):** She studies him, watching as he helps homeless orphans get puppies, buys a surprise present for the wife of fifty years whom he obviously loves, and does other magnanimous things. She feels worse and worse about whacking this nice guy who is completely outside of her victim profile.

**DISASTER:** Because she’s so upset, senior partner actually sees her, and talks to her. Now, she’s compromised if she does kill him – and she’s still screwed if she doesn’t kill him.

I’d probably write this in more of a shorthand on a sticky note, admittedly, but that’s about what I’d sketch out. And I’d do this for every scene.

In the PDF on my website, I will include a full scene outline for one of my old novels, with this level of detail, just so you can get a sense of how it looks and what’s involved.

**The scene outline, while wonderful, should not be sacred.**

Again, you’re just going to use it as a guideline. It's a living document: it will change as you start drafting. You might write down what you think will be a long scene, only to discover it’s about a paragraph and it isn't working anyway. Since every scene influences all the others, it’s easier to project changes and fix an outline than it is to try maneuvering a whole meandering draft.

**If you get stuck trying to fill in the blanks.**

Sorry, but it bears repeating: when in doubt, **always go back to your GMC chart.**

Your characters have goals; they need to want them with enough passion and enough motivation to propel the story forward. When you see a draggy story, it's usually because we don't understand why the character is pursuing that particular goal, or don’t believe it's important enough to struggle towards. (Or they
are missing a clear "hi, why don't you just have a conversation/stay in the house/do something else completely logical" point.)

Once you know what your characters want, and you've got plot points in mind, ask yourself: "they want X. They can't have X, because of the previous scene. What will they do now?"

And most importantly "How will I prevent them from getting X? HOW WILL I CONTINUE TO MESS WITH THEM AND INCREASE CONFLICT AND STAKES?"

"Where do the chapters go?"

There is no hard and fast rule on this.

I've said I put twelve chapters in my series romances, with three scenes per chapter, because that works for me, but I have varied that formula from time to time.

I like to do the scene outline first, then look at where the most natural “breaks” occur for chapters.

For example, if you look at the little example scene notes, some scenes end on a “soft” disaster (like the secretary realizing that she won’t be able to afford her house payments and will lose access to victim files) or “hard” disasters (like the junior partner catching her returning a victim file in the file room.)

I like ending chapters on a “hard” disaster, because it’s more like a cliff hanger. In some cases, it is an actual cliff hanger.

The idea is to keep readers turning pages, and chapter breaks are the natural spot to lose them: “I'll just read to the end of this chapter and then I’ll go to sleep.” So give your chapter endings a strong hook to keep your readers on the line.

That said – this plotting method is specifically designed to get you through the rough and dirty first draft.

Honestly, at this stage of the game, chapters don’t matter.

It’s like trying to pick drapes before you’ve put in plumbing. Focus on the basics, and don’t get hung up on the details.

“When can I stop putting in disasters and start wrapping things up?”

Don’t start resolving your story until after the Black Moment, obviously.

That said, the third act is wide open to resolving things. After the Black Moment, ask yourself what would get you from the worst-of-the-worst to the ending. What has to happen? And resolve things naturally, logically, as necessary. But only in the third act.

Otherwise, like a soufflé falling, all of your tension and conflict will dissipate like so much hot air.
Once your outline is filled in...

You’re done! You have a full road map, you know where your story goes (in theory,) and you’re ready to rock a quick-and-dirty lightning draft.

Adjusting the outline.

Once you’re in the draft, you may notice that things change: something that made sense in capsule form suddenly doesn’t work when you write it out.

You may realize that you’ve made an error in motivation, or something doesn’t flow, or you really, really want to add a scene/change a scene/lose a scene.

Look at the outline overall: one change will affect the entire novel. That said, it’s usually a matter of tweaking, here and there. Write little notes to remind yourself, or add a few new sticky notes, and you’ll be good to go.

And that’s it.

In a nutshell, this is how I plot a novel and create a working, scene by scene outline.
#Conclusion

These days, with the rise of relatively convenient self-publishing and quick digital publishing turnaround, it seems more important than ever to produce more books in shorter time spans. Success depends as much on backlist availability and catalog of work as it does on concept and writing quality.

“I know I could be successful,” I hear many writers say, usually with a manic gleam in their eyes, “but I’ve got to come out with more books!”

I am not necessarily a proponent of “cranking out” books, but I also know that beyond the “art” of writing, there is a true “craft” – and like any craft, if you can streamline your practice, you will be able to do more with less effort.

It’s my sincere hope that this process will help you absorb the technical aspects of story structure, enabling you to write both more quickly and more easily, without sacrificing quality.

I’d also love for you to tinker with it, study what works and what doesn’t work... and create your own system, your own processes, and your own best practices for creating the stories we all love.

Happy writing!
#Special Offer

If you found this book helpful, you can get free downloads for GMC charts and scene outlines, as well as a lot of other cool stuff, by signing up for my newsletter:

http://rockyourwriting.com/sign-up-for-monthly-tips/

You can also get a free email course, called *Jump-start Your Writing Career*, when you sign up.

Enjoy!
#Recommended Reference Books

Robert J. Ray, *The Weekend Novelist*

Mary Buckham & Dianna Love, *Break Into Fiction*

Larry Brooks, *Story Engineering*

Donald Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook*

Elizabeth George, *Write Away*

Carolyn Wheat, *How to Write Killer Fiction*

Orson Scott Card, *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*

Robert McKee, *STORY*