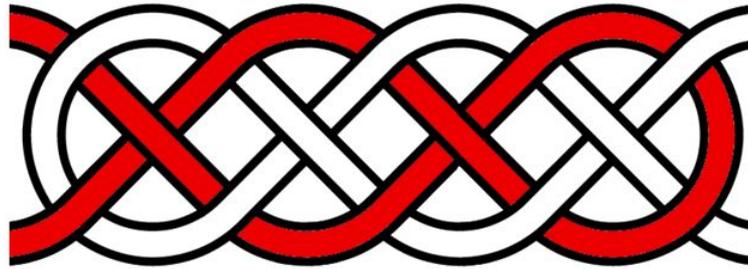


Subplot Sanity



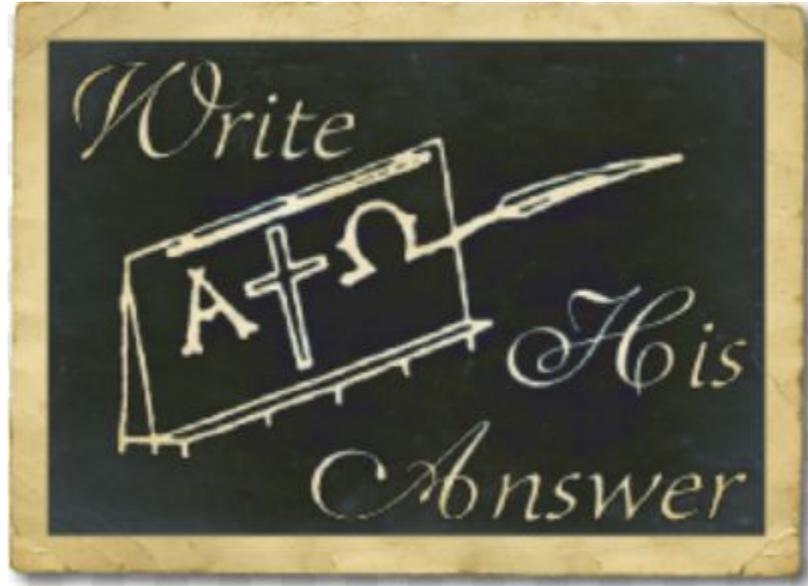
Write His Answer Conference 2023

Saturday August 12

Amy Deardon

amydeardon@gmail.com

www.ebooklistingservices.com



Write His Answer Conference
August 9-12, 2023

SUBPLOT SANITY

If subplots leave you confused, bring back some sanity. The narrative strands in a story can be categorized into five distinct types: main story, protagonist's hidden need, antagonist's story, gift at climax subplot, and protagonist's mirror subplot. Learn how to build a resonant story by developing each of these strands into narratives that weave and tangle delightfully.

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I give talks frequently and speak on a wide variety of writing and publishing topics. Get in touch if you'd like me to speak at your next conference!

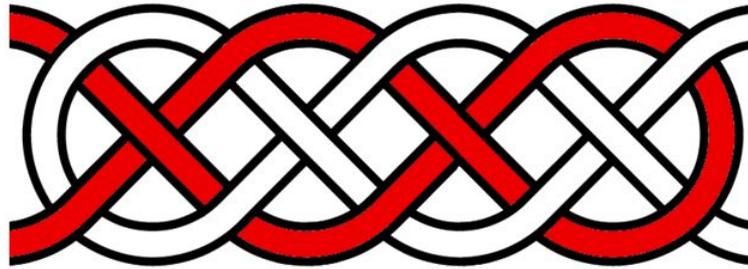
Amy Deardon

amydeardon@gmail.com

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Thank you!

Subplot Sanity



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amydeardon@gmail.com

www.ebooklistingservices.com



Note: This lecture will go really fast! Don't worry about writing down everything. You can get a copy of these slides by emailing me at amydeardon@gmail.com.

Introduction to Subplots

A Strand: Main Story

B Strand: Hidden Need

C Strand: Antagonist/Obstacles

D Strand: Gift at Climax

E Strand: Protagonist's Mirror

Create Subplots

Introduction to Subplots

A Strand: Main Story

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Create Subplots

'PLOT THREADS'

BY JULIE JOHNSON

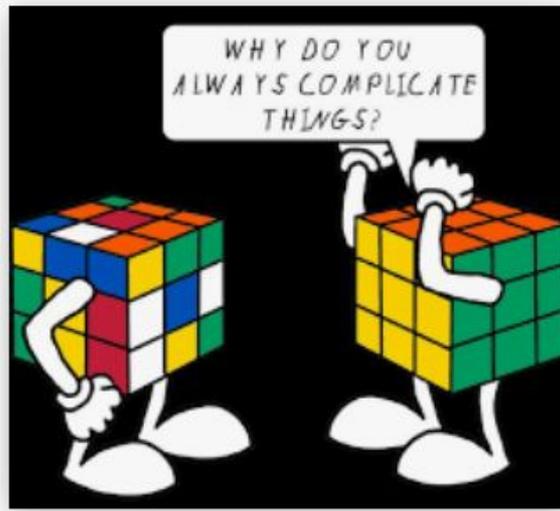
TRYING TO SORT MY PLOT THREADS AND
DETERMINE PLOT A, PLOT B, PLOT C...



WWW.BITSTRIPS.COM

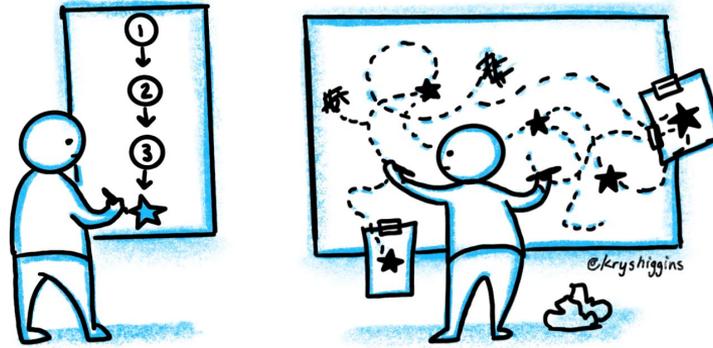
What is a SUBPLOT?

A subplot is a supporting narrative to the main plot.



Why include subplots in your story?

- Complicate the Main Story
- Provide Psychological Insight
- Deepen a Theme or Moral



How do you develop subplots?

- SOTPer (Seat-of-the-Pantster)
- Planner
- Some combination thereof

No writing style is **wrong.** If you can get words down, you are succeeding. The goal of this lecture is to get you to look at subplots in a new way and hopefully spark some ideas.



So let's start by looking at subplots in a new way...



Consider that in a story (except for the most simple ones) there are FIVE general narratives woven together.



These general narratives or STORY STRANDS can be identified as:

- A Strand — Main Story
- B Strand — Hidden Need
- C Strand — Antagonist/Obstacles
- D Strand — Gift at Climax
- E Strand — Protagonist's Mirror

Introduction to Subplots

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Create Subplots



The A Strand of your story, since it is your main story, by definition is not a subplot.



The story is a JOURNEY of some sort. A good story must have:

- Story GOAL and multiple mini-goals
- Story STAKES and multiple mini-stakes
- Story OBSTACLE (usually an antagonist) and multiple mini-obstacles



The STORY GOAL is the thing that your hero is pursuing throughout the story. It can be defined by several characteristics:

- The story goal is a real **external thing** rather than a wifty internal state of being.
- The attainment, or not, of the story goal is **very clear** by the end of the story.
- The hero actively pursues the story goal by creating a **series of mini-story goals** throughout the story.



Examples of a Story Goal:

- to win a dance contest
- to open a homeless shelter in the community
- to send a criminal to jail



The STORY STAKES are the **reason** the story goal is so important to the hero. Your hero must have very good positive and negative reasons for pursuing a story goal that will no doubt be uncomfortable and even dangerous to attain. For best results your hero should pursue the story goal for **altruistic** reasons.

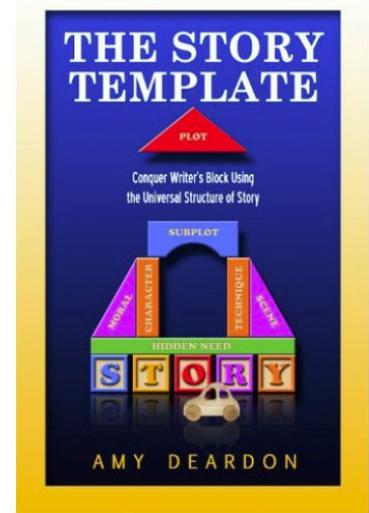
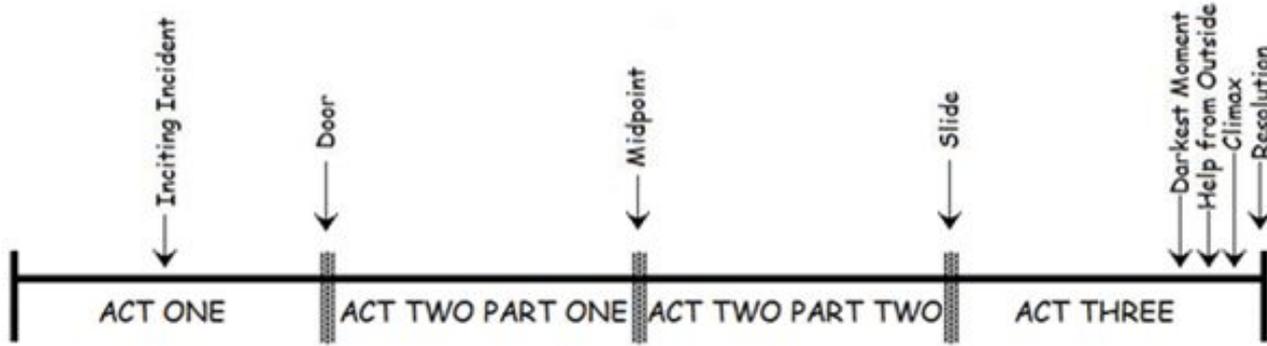


- The hero wants to win a dance contest so that he/she can use the prize money to pay for little sister's college tuition
- The hero wants to open a homeless shelter in the community so that people like the hero's uncle, a Vietnam veteran, won't die on the streets
- The hero wants to bring the criminal to justice so the criminal won't continue to hurt people like the hero's parents



The STORY OBSTACLE works best when it is personified into an antagonist or **villain** that fights your hero tooth and nail for the story goal. *We'll talk more about this in the C Story Strand.*

Your hero also will fight **many smaller obstacles**—internal and external—throughout your story.



This diagram is from my book *The Story Template: Conquer Writer's Block Using the Universal Structure of Story*. The "shape" of the story is universal. There are many iterations of demonstrating the story shape in the how-to literature eg *Save the Cat*, *Hero's Journey*, *Syd Field*, etc. etc.

Introduction to Subplots

A Strand: Main Story

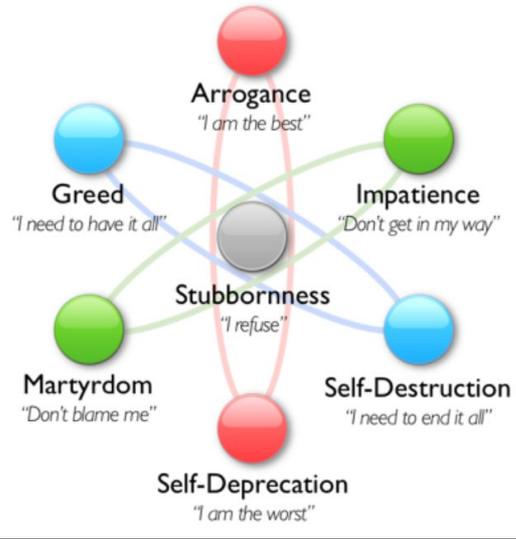
B Strand: Hidden Need

C Strand: Antagonist/Obstacles

D Strand: Gift at Climax

E Strand: Protagonist's Mirror

Create Subplots



The B Strand describes your hero's character arc by showing how he or she solves their **hidden need**.

The hidden need is your hero's **psychological or moral weakness** that needs to be solved.



Every well-balanced story should have a hero with a hidden need. A hidden need is a lack of something that holds the hero back from emotionally functioning well.

Some examples of a hidden need are

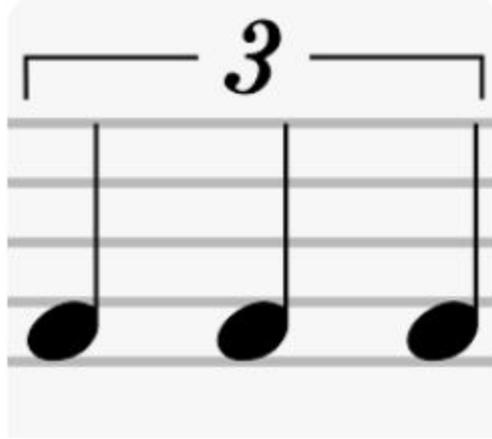
- fear to love
- fear to work with others (lone wolf)
- love of money over ethics



It's important to remember that your hero's hidden need **hurts other people**, not just the hero.

During the story your hero solves this hidden need.

This solution is the story quality that resonates with your readers.



How is the Hidden Need solved? I'm glad you asked. I discovered during my story analyses that the hidden need generally is solved in the third quarter of the story (act 2 part 2). This solution occurs in a specific sequence called a **Hidden Need Triplet** that often takes place as a separated mini-story right after the midpoint.

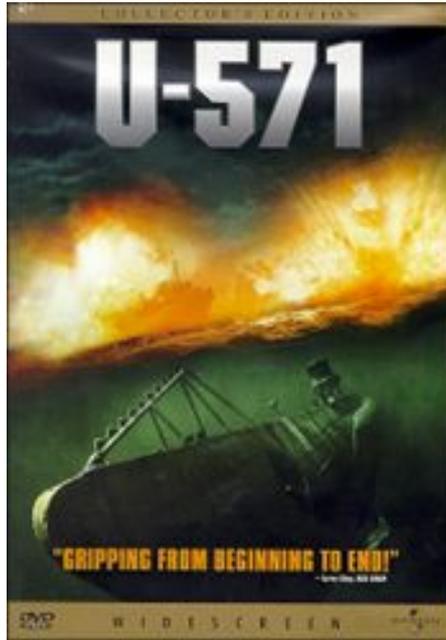


The stages of the Hidden Need Triplet:

- The weakness is shown
- The weakness is solved
- The weakness is shown to be solved



Two Examples...



U571 is an exciting movie that is flawlessly structured and well worth watching. It came out in 2000 and stars Matthew McConaughey, Bill Paxton, and Jon Bon Jovi. The story is about an American submarine crew that stealthily attempts to capture a German submarine to obtain the Nazi Enigma encoding machine.

HERO SET-UP

The hero, Tyler, is second-in-command of an American submarine who, while he is a good “big brother” to his crew, does not decisively command. At the midpoint Tyler is thrust into the leadership role when he and his crew are stranded on a crippled Nazi U-Boat with limited options to safely reach shore.

HIDDEN NEED DEMONSTRATED

The crew asks Tyler what they will do. Tyler tells them he doesn’t know.

HIDDEN NEED SOLVED

The chief petty officer takes Tyler aside and tells him he must never say he doesn’t know—the captain must always have the answer. The confidence of his men and their ability to perform depends on this.

HIDDEN NEED SHOWN TO BE SOLVED

Directly afterwards, as Tyler’s crew surveys the area from the deck, a small Nazi airplane approaches the crew. Since they are on a Nazi U-Boat Tyler instructs his men to wave as if they are Germans. However one of Tyler’s enlisted men orders another man to fire the deck gun. Tyler shouts “NO!” The sailor does not fire the gun. The plane passes over.

Tyler punches out the crew member and growls, “This is not a democracy!”



This was the first Star Wars that came out in 1977. The story goes that George Lucas wrote this script with a copy of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* on his knee. I don't know if that's true, but this story certainly has the mythic elements that are so popular with some storytellers. BTW if you're interested in using myth structures and archetypes I recommend Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* and James Frey's *How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth*.

HERO SET-UP

Luke is a kid who has not yet learned to act as an adult. Once Han Solo's Millennium Falcon is pulled into the Death Star (the midpoint), Han and Luke decide to rescue Princess Leia who is locked in a prison cell on the Death Star. They grab two uniforms to impersonate Storm Troopers then find the prison block.

HIDDEN NEED DEMONSTRATED

Luke and Han release Leia from her jail cell, but once they have her Luke doesn't have a clue for how they'll escape. Leia blasts a hole into the wall and they slide down a garbage chute.

HIDDEN NEED SOLVED

In the garbage collection area, Luke is pulled underwater and almost drowns, then resurfaces. (Note: this is also a mythic death-and-rebirth beat).

HIDDEN NEED SHOWN TO BE SOLVED

Right after they escape from the trash compactor, the group is chased by Stormtroopers. Luke and Leia are separated and trapped at the edge of a canyon. Luke swings Leia across the chasm.

Introduction to Subplots

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Create Subplots



The C Strand follows all narratives from the **obstacle perspective**. This strand includes any conflict perspective that is fighting the protagonist's (or protagonist associates') goals.

Some examples for this story strand include

- problems from the main antagonist (the villain)
- problems from secondary antagonists
- problems from temporary/changing antagonists and other bystanders
- problems from generic obstacles such as a fire or a lack of knowledge



You are wise to use a person/entity (a villain) to be the main opposition to your hero's goals.

This antagonist should be tailor-made in opposition to your hero to attack your hero's weakest points and force him or her to grow.

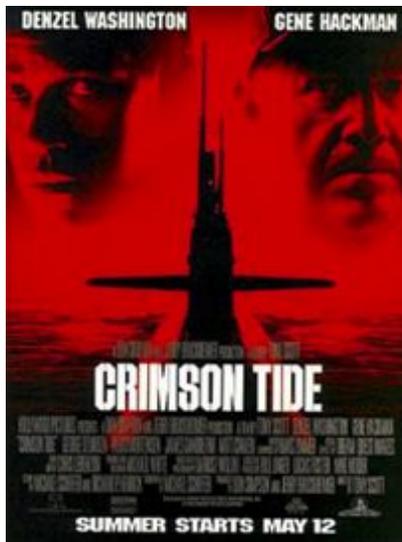
Writing a story without a villain is certainly possible, but this is an advanced technique that makes shaping a good story more challenging.



Don't make your villain bad just for the sake of being bad! Just like your hero, **your antagonist has a story with a goal, stakes, and obstacles** (although often the only obstacle for your antagonist is your hero). It's helpful to write a summary of your story from your antagonist's point of view, just to **understand the good reasons (in his mind) for doing what he does.**



You can go further to write a complex and gripping story if you **make your antagonist a sympathetic figure**. Perhaps he's been hurt. Perhaps he strongly believes in something that is tragically wrong. Perhaps it's difficult to tell which side is the correct one.



By making your antagonist sympathetic you can infuse your story with interest. One of the most gripping stories I remember is *Crimson Tide* (1995) in which two officers on a nuclear submarine have legitimate but opposite interpretations of garbled orders to launch nukes at the Russians. Incorrect action will either start a war or else destroy the US by preventing an effective counterattack, as well as cause the deaths of millions of people (stakes). Who is right? It's hard to tell.

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Create Subplots



There's no such thing as "luck" in a story.

Your reader gladly enters your narrative, accepting all sorts of bizarre circumstances, as long as they are consistent with the story world you build.

However, when your hero "luckily" finds just the thing he needs to escape, or your antagonist "luckily" finds the weapon he needs to destroy the world, **your reader gets angry.**



Another name for “luck” in a story is “**Deus Ex Machina**” (god from the machine). Deus Ex Machina is named for the Greek plays in which the hapless hero got into terrible trouble, only to have Zeus or another god/goddess lowered down from the roof to rescue him from his chaotic world.

Fifth graders write dream stories (“these horrible things were ready to get me, and then I woke up”) which is another manifestation of Deus Ex Machina.

Don't do this. Don't be that guy or gal.



Gift at Climax subplots are the easiest to write because they don't require a story structure.

In your story, just explain how the “lucky” circumstance occurs so that it doesn't come out of left field.

For example, if your hero needs a car to get away from the bad guy, two scenes back show someone leaving a car with a key in the ignition (and give a reason—they think Bob will get it, they're drunk, whatever).

These arrangements pay off during conflict or at the end of the story.





The Two Towers (2002, directed by Peter Jackson) is the second of three *Lord of the Rings* film adaptations of Tolkien's groundbreaking series. In this movie Aragorn and company are riding to Rohan's Keep to help defend the country from Saruman's army of Orcs. **Gandalf, the wizard leading the group, tells them he is going to get help and will return "on the fifth day" then merrily rides off.**

Aragorn and company arrive and engage in battle. It is bravely and spectacularly fought but ultimately our heroes have lost and are preparing to die. Aragorn and company decide to ride out into the fray to make **one last, suicidal stand.**



Just as they cross the bridge and engage, the sun clips over on the horizon, and **Gandalf appears on the hillside with a vast army behind him** (Riders of Rohan). They ride down the hill and rout the enemy. The End. (Actually Tolkien could never end the story easily so this has a bunch of resolution scenes that go on for awhile, but I digress).

You can see how someone would be really annoyed if Gandalf just appeared... but since the story was set up for this action to make sense it is a satisfying conclusion.

Introduction to Subplots

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Create Subplots



The E strand follows a different character, and therefore is **usually the narrative we think of as the “subplot.”**

The E strand describes the **Mirror Character.**

The Mirror Character is a useful device for the writer to build unity, depth, and breadth to the story.

What is a Mirror Character?
The Protagonist's Mirror:



1. Is similar to the hero in some way
2. Confronts the same essential problem as the hero
3. Solves the problem in a different, usually bad, way

This solution **raises the stakes** of the story because it clearly demonstrates what can happen to the hero if he makes a bad choice.



The poor solution of the Mirror Character's choice is often demonstrated in the Just How Bad is the Antagonist beat (at the end of Act 2 part 2).

In this beat the villain demonstrates the **very worst** they are capable of by trapping the mirror character—and this is what could happen or will happen to the hero and those he loves if he is not able to outsmart the bad guy.



The Fellowship of the Ring (2001, directed by Peter Jackson) is the first of three *Lord of the Rings* film adaptations of Tolkien's groundbreaking series.

In this story Frodo is a hobbit, a creature who loves comfort until he comes into possession of great power in the form of the One Ring. Frodo's **essential problem is POWER.**

Frodo must find the strength in himself to master the One Ring by destroying it. He plans to enter Mount Doom and throw the ring into the river of fire (the Story Goal).

Frodo has at least two mirror characters who struggle with power and have subplots.



Two Mirror Characters...



Mirror Character #1: Gollum

Gollum cannot give up the power of the One Ring, and thus is ruined.

Gollum is another hobbit who found the One Ring many years ago. By hoarding this Ring over many years, he became a twisted and evil thing. When he lost the Ring (in Tolkien's prequel *The Hobbit*) he is dominated by the drive to steal it back from Frodo by any means.



Mirror Character #2: Aragorn

Aragorn must learn to righteously wield power as a King

Aragorn is the heir to Gondor. However he is afraid to rule because his ancestor was seduced by the One Ring and thus could not master his own power. The ancestor's actions unleashed bad things into the world for many generations. However, Gondor is in a bad way and needs Aragorn to take command.



You can see how both Gollum and Aragorn contrast with Frodo's struggle with power in destroying the One Ring.

Gollum shows what will happen to Frodo if he can't give up the power of the Ring. Aragorn shows what will happen to Frodo if he is afraid to do what he can—it is necessary to wield power righteously to change the world in a good way.

Introduction to Subplots

A Strand: Main Story

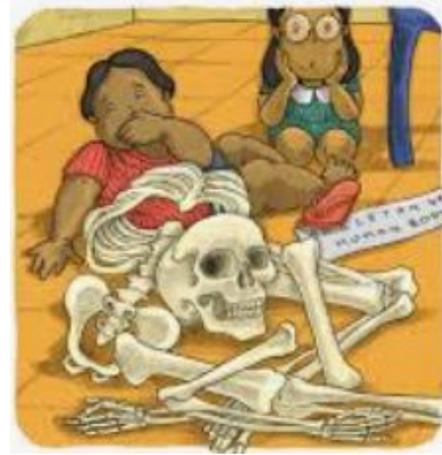
B Strand: Hidden Need

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Create Subplots



Step One

Figure Out Your Story Skeleton

See if you can determine some important story points:

- Goal, Stakes, Obstacles
- What gets story going (inciting)
- Point where hero goes from reaction to action (midpoint)
- Darkest Moment
- Climax Event that shows story goal is reached (or not)

Note: if you're a pantster just figure these out once you've written your first draft.

THE SEVEN-POINT SYSTEM

Building a Story

1. Have a story in mind.

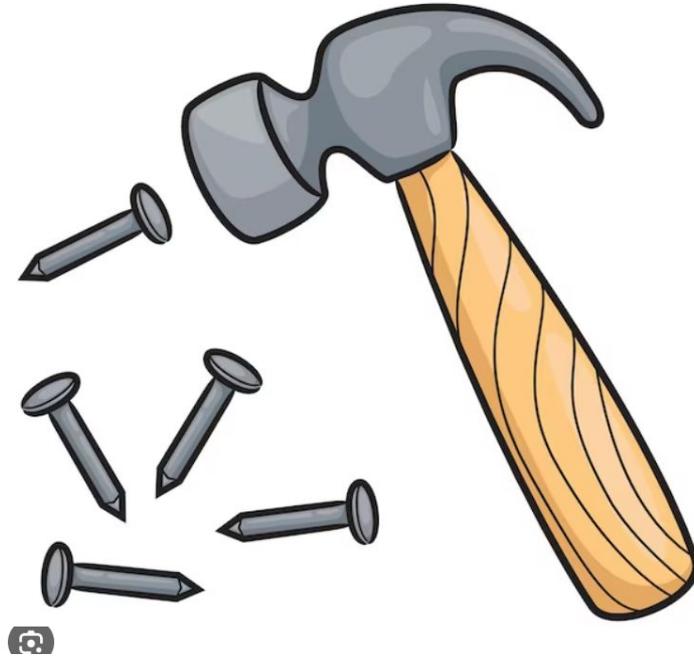
» Once you have a premise, develop a general idea by asking yourself the following questions:

- o Who are the characters?
- o What is the setting?
- o What is the major conflict?

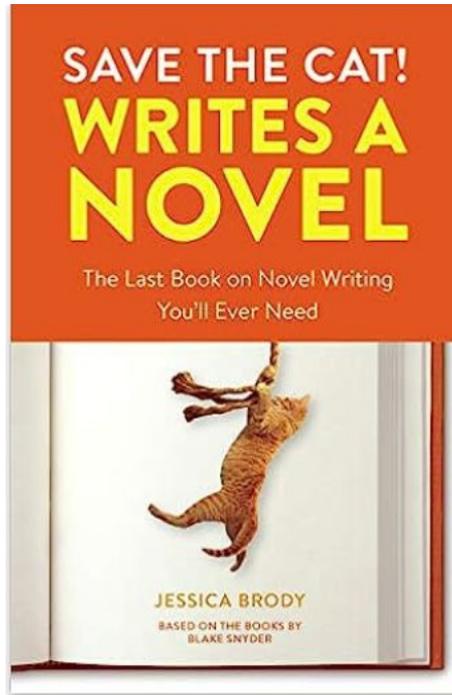
2. Start at the end.

This is a helpful **7 point story system** from from Dan Wells, author of *I am Not a Serial Killer*.

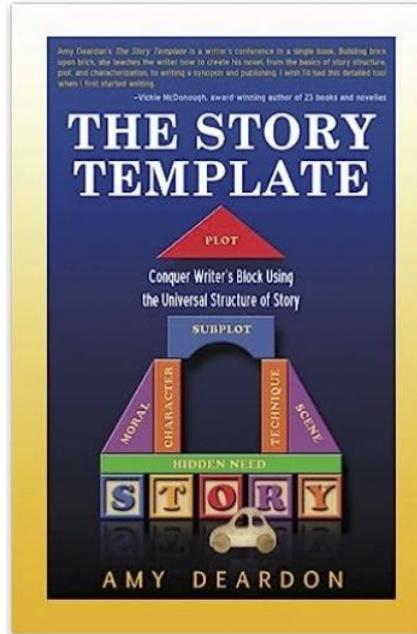
<https://gwwui.com/2016/05/04/writing-method-7-point-system-by-dan-wells-printable-summaries/>



Three other helpful resources to nail your story...



A great book that walks with you step by step to creating your story is Jessica Brody's *Save the Cat Writes a Novel*. Jessica's algorithm is directly adapted (with permission) from Blake Snyder's brilliant screenwriting book, *Save the Cat!*



My own book, *The Story Template: Conquer Writer's Block Using the Universal Structure of Story*, discusses the four story pillars (plot, character, moral, and story world) and helps you build from small elements to a complete manuscript. Write to me with questions — I'd love to hear what you think!

Romancing the Beat

STORY STRUCTURE
FOR ROMANCE NOVELS



Gwen Hayes

★ HOW TO WRITE KISSING BOOKS ★

Romance story structure is a little different since there are two main characters plus the villain. A helpful step-by-step book is Gwen Hayes *Romancing the Beat: How to Write Kissing Books*.

Note: Gwen's sample story outline at the end of the book uses two men in a sweet romance. I found this book helpful despite the author's foray into different territory.



Step Two

Figure Out Your Hero's Hidden Need

See if you can determine your hero's hidden need:

- Often comes about from a wound (traumatic event) before the story begins
- Prevents hero from interacting effectively on an emotional basis
- Hurts others not just hero
- How can this be solved? (Hidden Need Triplet)



Step Three

Figure Out Your Villain

Try to make your villain emotionally complex and a powerful adversary for the hero:

- What does your villain want? Why?
- Why does the villain engage with your hero?
- How is your villain more powerful (smarter, stronger, richer etc) than your hero?
- What weakness does your villain have that your hero can exploit at the end to win the battle?

Step Four

Figure Out Lucky Breaks

Avoid the Deus Ex Machina in your story:

- Will your hero need some help especially at the climax?
- Will your villain have a “secret weapon” of some sort?

Just remember to set up your coincidences so they make sense in the story.





Step Five

Figure Out Mirror Characters

These characters will be what are typically thought of as “subplot” characters. Adding one or two can build resonance and complexity in your story.

- What is the main problem your hero is wrestling with?
- What are better and worse ways to solve this problem?
- How might you integrate a character who has the same problem as your hero?

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Create Subplots



Your story is irresistible!





Don't forget to write to me to get a copy of these slides and/or if you have questions.

Happy conference!

Amy Deardon
amydeardon@gmail.com