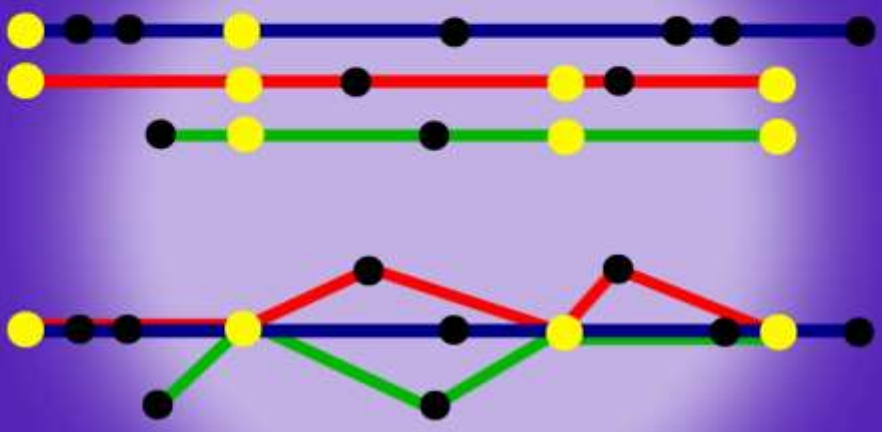
SUBPLOTS

HOW TO CREATE & INTEGRATE SUBPLOTS FOR NOVELS & SCREENPLAYS



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Introduction

What is a Subplot?

Let's begin with a couple of dictionary definitions. A subplot (or sub-plot) is, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms,* a "...secondary sequence of actions in a dramatic or narrative work, usually involving characters of lesser importance..." and it "...may be related to the main plot as a parallel or contrast, or it may be more or less separate from it." *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines it as a "...subsidiary action in a play or story which coincides with the main action..." which is "...usually a variation of or counterpoint to the main plot."

The prefix *sub-* suggests it is under, lower in importance, less than, or secondary to the main plot. I like the idea of it being 'subsidiary,' meaning it is 'related but less important'. I think a subplot should be *related* to the main plot in some way, and I'll talk about the different types of relationships later. The *Oxford* definition above says that a subplot can be 'more or less separate from' the main plot, but I'm not entirely comfortable with that. Something that is separate from the main plot of a story, totally unconnected to it, is a *digression* – something that is off-topic. I don't think we should be getting away from our main plot to spend time on something unrelated to it. The only possible exception to this would be something that is apparently unconnected to the current story, but which is relevant to a later story in the same series (or which sets up a spinoff series). A 'red herring' is something that *appears* to be related but isn't, and that's a special case I'll mention later.

Wikipedia tells us that a subplot may also be referred to as a 'side story' and is a 'secondary strand of plot' that is 'supporting' the main plot. "Subplots may connect to main plots, in either time and place or thematic significance. Subplots often involve supporting characters, those besides the protagonist or antagonist. Subplots may also intertwine with the main plot at some point in a story." *Wikipedia* also notes that subplots "...are distinguished from the main plot by taking up less of the action, having fewer significant events occur, with less impact on the 'world' of the work, and occurring to less important characters."

I wanted to get formal definitions out of the way first – I'll refer back to them as I talk more about *practical* uses for subplots, which is my main subject in this guide. One thing I do want to emphasise here is that a subplot *is* a plot – it is the structure of a mini-story that exists within the main story.

Plot versus Subplot

Plot is the main action of a story, typically involving the protagonist's attempts to achieve some sort of goal. This is the main visible action of the story, and it is what people usually refer to if asked what a story is about.

A *subplot* is a storyline or thread that centres on action to achieve a separate goal – either a second goal desired by the protagonist or the goal of another character. Some story theorists, particularly in the field of screenwriting, separate subplots that feature the protagonist or another primary character from those which only feature secondary characters. But not everyone does this.

Subplot versus B-Story

I've read some articles online that say there are two types of 'secondary plot,' one of which is a *subplot* and the other being a *B-story* (or B story). Some of these articles say that a subplot features one or more of the main characters and that a B-story features only secondary characters. Other articles say a B-story is the main character's secondary motivation or mission and that subplots feature secondary characters, often without involving the main character. This isn't particularly helpful.

As far as I can see, saying that subplots are separate from B-stories just confuses things. I will use A-story to refer to the main plot and B-story, C-story, etc. to refer to all subplots, whether on not they include the protagonist or other main characters.

I'll also adopt the convention of saying that the B-story is second in importance after the A-story, the C-story is the third most important in the hierarchy and so on. We'll tackle the issue of how many subplots you can or should have in a little while. Spoiler alert: You're unlikely to get much beyond a D-story.

As a rule of thumb, I'd say that the position of a subplot in the hierarchy is based on its relative importance, judged by how many words in the story are devoted to it, rather than being dependent on whether the protagonist or other main characters feature in it.

I'll also add a couple of caveats here. An *ensemble story,* which features several main characters of equal importance rather than a single protagonist is a special case. And so is something like an epic fantasy which may have two or more parallel plots that function like A-stories, each featuring a different protagonist or group of heroes.

Let's move on from definitions and look at what you can actually *do* with subplots.

Functions of Subplots

I've seen articles that say you can use a subplot to increase the wordcount of your novel. If you're coming up short, add a subplot to pad out the story. Please don't do that. This isn't what subplots are for. If you haven't hit the desired length for your novel – fifty-thousand words or ninety-thousand words or whatever – then you need to go back and look at your main plot, your A-story. Underwriting usually means that you haven't structured your plot properly, and you don't have everything you need in its proper place. Or you haven't given some elements of the plot the kind of coverage they need. Always check this first. I suspect that this sort of issue is more common with 'pantsers' than

authors who outline their plots. I had problems with meeting the required wordcount for a novel before I discovered the eight-sequence plot model that I write about in *Plot Basics* (2017) and my *Genre Writer* series.

Wordcount is less of an issue if you're writing a screenplay – fitting a whole plot into 110 pages or whatever is usually more of a problem – but you may still feel that your story feels too thin or superficial and wonder whether you should 'insert' a subplot.

In an ideal world, a subplot is not something that you *add* to a story after the fact. It evolves organically during the writing process. We don't live in an ideal world. If a gut feeling tells you that a novel or screenplay is 'lacking something,' then adding a subplot may help you fix it. But don't just add it to boost your wordcount or because you think a screenplay *ought* to have a romantic subplot. Look at the list of things you can do with a subplot and ask yourself if one (or more) of these is what your story is lacking. Begin with what your story *needs* and then see if a subplot is the answer.

If you're still at the stage of outlining your story, again, look at what you can achieve with subplots and see if you need to include one or more of these things in your plot. If you know you need to include certain kinds of material in order for a reader to understand your story, see if a subplot will allow you to present that material dramatically. A subplot can help you to *show* rather than *tell.* Subplots can help you make visible a lot of the invisible character and relationship-based material in a story. They can also help you set up things – plot situations, character's skills or abilities, features of the story world – that you will need towards the end of your story: 'planting' things within a subplot can help you avoid that 'rabbit out of a hat' thing that makes readers or viewers feel that the writer is cheating or underestimating their intelligence.

This list below probably isn't exhaustive, but it does give a good idea of the sorts of things you can achieve with subplots. We'll look in more detail at each of these items in Chapter 1.

- Add Depth
- Reveal Character
- Contrast Main & Secondary Characters
- Mirroring
- Character Arcs – Development or Growth
- Increase Tension and Drama
- Foreshadowing
- Set Up a Surprise Twist
- Fix Plot Holes
- Exposition & Explanation
- Setting Up a Series or Spin-Off
- Pace
- Change of Mood – Contrast or Relief
- Provide New Perspective
- Add Complications – Obstacles, Antagonism, Conflict, Danger

- Increase the Stakes
- Add or Enhance Genre Elements
- Variations on the Theme
- Red Herrings

Benefits of Subplots

- Add substance
- Multi-dimensional characters
- Avoid the monotony of a single plotline
- Additional problems for characters
- Set up characters and situations for later stories or spinoffs
- Red herrings to distract characters and/or readers

Types of Subplot – Content or Purpose

There are two ways to divide up subplots and I've seen a few articles online that mix the two. The first is by content and/or purpose and the second is by presentation or format. I'll deal with these separately, beginning with content and/or purpose.

We'll look at each of these in Chapter 2

- Romantic
- Character Backstory
- Character Arc
- Secondary Character Goal
- Comic Relief
- Expository or Explanatory
- Parallel Quests and Sub-Quests
- Two Worlds Collide – link with convergent subplots, see below

Types of Subplot – Presentation or Format

We'll look at each of these in Chapter 3

- Separate, Parallel
- Woven or Braided
- Sandwich or Bookend
- Divergent & Convergent

Dangers of Subplots

- Outshining main plot
- Distracting from the main plot
- Confusing reader
- Too many
- Not properly plotted (chapter on *Structuring a Subplot*)
- Lack of tension/drama
- Irrelevant – not linked to the main story
- Add nothing new – e.g. perspective or theme-wise

- Pulls the reader out of the story
- Too long
- Not interesting
- Insufficient resolution – unsatisfying for the reader (danglers)
- Dilute the impact of the main plot – especially the climax
- Focus attention away from important things
- Wrong style or tone – breaking the mood of the story
- Included for the sake of it – esp. romantic subplots (chapter on *Writing a Romantic Subplot*) – gratuitous, superficial

We'll explore many of these, and how to avoid them, in Chapter 6 – *How to Get Subplots Wrong*

How Many Subplots?

Whether or not a story might feature one or more subplots is, in part, determined by its length. A *short short story* or piece of *flash fiction* (anything less than about 1,000 words) doesn't have space for a subplot. A *short story* (up to 7,500 words) is meant to have a single effect on the reader and this is typically achieved via a single plot, though a combination of plot plus a single brief subplot could be used to achieve the desired effect. A *novelette,* at 7,500 to 17,500 (or perhaps 20,000) words could feature one or perhaps even two subplots in addition to the main plot but again these would be relatively brief. This sort of length is something like a 30-minute sitcom episode, so if you watch something like that you can see how subplots are handled. A *novella* runs from 17,500 (or perhaps 20,000) words up to 40,000, so one to three subplots of slightly longer length could be accommodated. I tend to think of a novella being something like a 45- or 60-minute television episode and this gives an idea of the sort of subplots that might be featured. A *novel* is anything over 40,000 words, and here you're likely to see anything from one to three or four subplots could be featured. I regard a novel and a film to be roughly equal in terms of plot. You're unlikely to see much more than that unless a novel is over 100,000 words and then you're getting into 'epic novel' territory.

Word length isn't the only concern, of course, we have to think in terms of the complexity of a story – a reader can only stay on top of a certain number of storylines. In some genres, more space is required for worldbuilding and in others, lengthy action sequences are described.

The above numbers are suggestions only and you need to look at your chosen genre to see what readers expect. Bear in mind that a series of novels is likely to have continuing subplots or throughlines as well as ones which play out within the space of a single novel. I explored these continuing storylines in *Writing a Series* (2024)

What Links Your Subplot to Your Main Plot?

If you want your subplot to feel like it *belongs* in your story, rather than being a pointless digression or something tacked on to pad out your wordcount, there needs to be some link between the subplot and your main plot or A-story.

You have a few options here and you might use more than one of them in a subplot:

- Shared characters
- Shared Setting
- Thematic Argument
- Mirroring of Situations
- Other?

Shared Characters – Ideally, you want one or more characters to feature in the main plot *and* the subplot. If only one character is shared, this might be referred to as a 'bridge character.' It could be your main protagonist who features in the subplot or it may be one of the secondary characters. If it is the main protagonist, a subplot allows you to show him or her in a different situation, revealing different aspects of their personality and/or different skills, abilities, or knowledge.

Shared Setting – A subplot will usually be set in the same story world as the A-story, but it may offer an opportunity for you to explore a different part of that world or the same part under different circumstances. In hardboiled detective stories and urban fantasy, for example, we often see two sides of the city. The city at night is a very different place to the bustling, brightly lit daytime. These stories also feature the ordinary world and a darker 'underworld' inhabited by criminals and/or supernatural creatures. Even an ordinary office building offers a very different atmosphere or mood when it is deserted after the end of the working day. Some parts of a setting are open and comfortable, others claustrophobic and oppressive. Warm or cold. Dry or wet. Clean or filthy. Use your subplots to provide contrast and a change of mood.

Thematic Argument – Your subplot could be linked thematically to your main plot. By that, I mean that it could explore the same human values and thematic argument. It might feature a very different set of circumstances from the main plot, but the issues at stake could be the same – jealousy, trust, integrity, justice, or whatever. I wrote about theme in my free guide *What are You Trying to Prove?* Available at www.paultomlinson.org/how-to

Mirroring – The situations or events in a subplot might mirror those in the main plot. A character might face the same sort of obstacle, opposition, or dilemma but on a smaller scale. The subplot might feature a lighter or even humorous situation, but the similarity allows comparisons to be drawn. This might be combined with a thematic link as mentioned above.

1 | Functions of a Subplot

The three most common uses of subplots that we see are romance with a 'love interest,' revelation of the protagonist's backstory – showing how incidents in their past turned them into the person they are today, and a separate mini-

story in which a secondary character serves as the protagonist. But subplots can be used to achieve many other things within a story. Ideally, you will create a subplot which serves *multiple* functions.

Subplots Add Depth

You will see it said that subplots, if used well, can add 'depth' or 'texture' or 'richness' to your story. But what does this mean?

The main plot of a story typically consists of three strands:

(i) *The External Action* – typically in the form of the protagonist seeking to achieve a tangible external goal – to get something or to stop something. Conflict arises when the character encounters obstacles and/or antagonists who hamper efforts to achieve the goal.

(ii) *A Significant Relationship* – a romance, a friendship, a parent-child or mentor-student relationship, or something similar. This relationship with a co-protagonist is often used as a way to show the protagonist's character development arc.

(iii) *Internal Conflict* – an inner battle between the protagonist's *false self*, a persona adopted to protect them from their greatest fear, and their *true self* – the version of themselves that they need to be to achieve happiness and fulfilment. The journey from false self to authentic self is the protagonist's character development arc.

While it is easy to show the external action of the story directly, often subplots are required to depict the relationship with the co-protagonist – typically using a romantic subplot or a 'buddy movie' style subplot – and the protagonist's journey or character growth. It is these subplots which explore the hidden aspects of characters and their lives, giving us a glimpse into the way another person thinks and reacts, that add depth and interest to a story. A story that featured only the external action, a quest towards a goal, seems superficial and uninteresting without these additional elements. Subplots give a story different levels, exploring the emotional and psychological consequences of the decisions a character makes and the actions they take.

Reveal Character

Character is revealed to a reader or viewer through the decisions a story person makes and the actions they take. This is part of the fundamental rule of 'show don't tell.' As the writer, we have to provide evidence that *proves* what we want to reveal about a character, rather than using narrative to tell the reader.

You can, of course, reveal character through scenes and situations in your main plot. But sometimes the thing you want to show cannot be done within you're A-story and then you might need a subplot to do it. We use the A-story to establish the character's *dominant impression* when they first appear, but if we want to add depth (that word again) to our characters, we have to look

beyond that and add some subtleties that show that our character is an individual human being and not a one-dimensional puppet or cartoon character. Real people have wrinkles and warts, physically and metaphorically.

In the examples that follow, I refer mainly to the revelation of details about the protagonist, but subplots can be used to explore any of the major and secondary characters in a story.

Backstory

What kind of things am I talking about here? Revealing a character's *backstory* is one example. There may be incidents in a character's recent or distant past that have a bearing on the current story. The reader or viewer needs to know about this history to understand how and why the character will respond to a current situation. You can provide evidence in the A-story of how past experience influences the character's behaviour – clues and hints that let the reader know an issue exists. But you might need to use a subplot to reveal the details about the events. Often, an action-adventure hero reveals details from their past in a heart-to-heart conversation that occurs as part of a relationship subplot. This conversation typically occurs in sequence five or six in the eight-sequence plot model. More on this model later.

This kind of subplot might involve a series of flashbacks, shown as full scenes. Or it could occur in a series of memories that are revealed as the character moves through the main plot. How significant the backstory events are to the character – and how great their impact is on the A-story – will determine whether past events need to be fully dramatised in scenes with action and dialogue rather than just revealed in inner dialogue.

If you want backstory events to play a significant role in your story, you might consider creating an element of mystery about them. What is the thing that the character avoids talking about and won't even think about? What was it that left such an obvious impression on them? Having the character deliberately *avoid* referring to these events piques a reader's interest – they *want* to know what happened. Once your audience wants to know something like this, you have their permission to move away from the main plot for a while and reveal the backstory. The can prolong the mystery by only giving out pieces of the story that the reader has to put together. Stretching things out like this should only be done for events that have huge importance for the character and/or main plot. Especially if you spread the mystery out across a series of stories. The mystery surrounding the abduction of Fox Mulder's sister in *The X-Files* is an example of this sort of extended subplot.

If a character doesn't want to reveal their backstory, for whatever reason, you could introduce a backstory where a secondary character decides to dig into your character's past. This may unearth things that your character wanted to stay hidden. And these things may not be what the secondary character – or your reader – was expecting to be found. Maybe there are events in your character's past of which they are ashamed or about which they feel guilty. These events may be the cause of your character's ruthless drive to succeed or

their desperate need to find redemption. You also have to show how your character reacts when they find out about the secondary character's investigation. Do they try and stop it before it reaches the truth? If so, what action is your character prepared to take to do this?

'Off-Duty' Moments

In a story's main plot or A-story, a character is often 'on duty' – we see them with their professional face on, doing the day job. But we can learn a lot more about a character when they are off-duty. What is their home-life like? How do they behave when they are not at work? You might need a subplot to show the character in their off-duty life. We need to see other aspects of the character beyond the obvious external ones. We allow the reader or viewer to see another side of the character or to see them in a new light. This is where we might discover things like habits and addictive or compulsive behaviours. We might also learn about their secret dreams and what motivates them to have such dreams. A character will have a 'life goal' as well as a story goal and we need to see whether the current story goal is a step towards that life goal or an obstacle in the way. Again, these off-duty moments often occur during a relationship subplot – typically a romantic subplot or a buddy movie-style subplot.

On a less positive side, off-duty moments can also reveal a character's weaknesses and flaws and also demonstrate what their anxieties and fears are, perhaps even their greatest fear. Showing a character's vulnerability can help establish empathy and/or identification – the reader or viewer can see that the character is subject to the same doubts and fears as anyone else.

A subplot can also reinforce things we've seen in the A-story. To establish that something is a character's typical behaviour, we need to see it in more than one situation. Showing it in a work situation *and* in an off-duty situation establishes that beliefs and behaviours are habitual. This can include things like skills, strengths, abilities, experience, traits, and knowledge.

Reveal and Increase Internal Conflict

I've already suggested that your main plot may provide clues that your character has some internal demons to deal with. In their professional life, they probably keep these issues tightly locked down. But in off-duty moments, this self-control might be weaker, and an unexpected situation can catch them off-guard. It is here that we can get a much clearer picture of what the character is dealing with. It might be a while before we learn what events in the past caused this person's internal conflict, but events in a subplot can bring the conflict into much clearer focus and they can even increase the conflict.

An increase in internal conflict typically occurs when external events bring a character closer to facing a situation that symbolises the thing they fear most. The character feels they are losing control and being pushed closer and closer to something that they feel they cannot deal with.

See also *Character Arcs* below.

Challenges & Tests

One way in which a subplot – and the main plot – can reveal character is by placing them in situations which *challenge* and *test* them. How a person reacts when placed under pressure reveals what they are really like. Do they respond well to stressful situations? What do their reactions reveal about them that we didn't see in normal everyday events?

Subplots can be used to challenge the strength of a character's beliefs or their motivation. In a private eye novel, for example, we might have the main character involved in a secondary investigation unconnected to the main plot where someone tries to bribe the hero to make them 'forget' whatever incriminating evidence they have uncovered. The hero proves the strength of his moral code by refusing to be bought – even though he may desperately need the money and may get beaten up as a result.

Contrasting Characters

You could use a subplot to have your main character interact with different kinds of people, allowing you to compare and contrast. Does your character behave differently when he is with a different set of people? We all tend to have a work persona and a different one when we are at home with our family. At work, we could be the big boss that tells everyone what to do but at home, a little woman with grey hair may order us about and have us fearing for our lives. We also behave differently when we're out with the guys or gals who make up our friendship group or with people who share our hobbies or other leisure interests.

Subplots can also show our main character engaged in conflict with different sorts of people, again revealing nuances of their behaviour.

Romances & Friendships

We already know that the most common sort of subplot is a romance – or the platonic equivalent of a close friendship with a 'buddy.' This sort of subplot should only be included if it (a) creates complications for the main plot, or (b) reveals something important about the two people involved. Ideally, it will do both and more besides. In *The Hunger Games,* for example, the relationships between Katniss and Gale and Katniss and Peeta complicate the main plot. The relationship between the pirates Stede Bonnet and Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach in *Our Flag Means Death* is another interesting example.

This sort of relationship reveals a different side of your main character as it pairs them with someone about whom they care deeply. And the trust required by such a relationship means that a character feels able to share their fears and vulnerabilities. It is a relationship where emotions can be expressed more freely.

In a detective story, an important clue or observation may be the result of something that occurs in the romantic subplot. The events may be unconnected, but the investigator realises something important about human relationships that has a bearing on his or her case. In a modern cozy mystery, the romantic relationship is often more closely woven into the investigation.

In Chapter 7, we'll look at how to create an effective romantic subplot.

Establish & Reveal the Story World

In some genres, the story world is an important convention and readers expect to learn about it and explore it. Certain sub-genres of fantasy and science fiction, for example, place emphasis on worldbuilding. In historical fiction, readers want to see the historical period recreated. And in urban fantasy and hardboiled detective fiction, the city after dark – particularly its 'underworld' – can play a significant role.

While the A-story of a novel or film takes place in the story world, you may need one or more subplots to help you explore this world and meet reader or viewer expectations. Subplots let you explore corners of the story world that the protagonist may not visit. Or you may want to show how people in different strata of society live in this world. You may have a subplot in which a secondary character or a 'love interest' takes the protagonist and shows them aspects of the world your protagonist didn't know existed. Often this involves seeing a darker side of the setting.

Mirrors & Foils

Mirrors and foils are types of character or rather, they are functions which a character can perform. Some sources will tell you that they are the same thing, that they are both reflections of the protagonist, but there is an important different between the two.

A *mirror* character serves as a reflection of the protagonist and emphasises *similarities* between the two. Sometimes a co-protagonist serves as a mirror, but more often it is a secondary character.

A *foil* serves as a reflection that emphasises the *differences* between the two characters. An antagonist or villain might be said to be a special kind of foil, but the term is more usually applied to a secondary character who serves to contrast with the protagonist. A foil gets its name from the foil that was placed on the back of cut gemstones to make them sparkle more brightly. In a comedy double act, the 'straight man' typically serves as a foil for their wackier partner and vice versa.

Mirroring Subplots

A mirror character is often shown to be in a similar situation as the protagonist's A-story situation but on a smaller scale. The decisions and actions the mirror character then makes are used to contrast with those of the protagonist, providing a different perspective on events. The situation of the secondary character is another way of proving the thematic argument. If the mirror character makes a wrong choice – or a right one – the main character may learn from this example. Or may fail to learn from it, not heeding the warning.

In relationship subplots, a mirror character's romance or friendship may be a reflection of that of the protagonist. If the mirror has chosen the wrong

person for a lover or is treating their lover in a disrespectful way, the fate of the relationship may provide a lesson for the protagonist. If the mirror character's relationship is successful and survives serious obstacles, this may provide a positive example for the protagonist.

Subplots with a Foil

A foil character's situation and/or personality contrast more strongly with the protagonist. Perhaps the foil character personifies the protagonist's darker side – they *shadow* self – such that their actions and fate show what could lie ahead for the protagonist if they choose the wrong path. Or perhaps the foil shows what happens if the protagonist fails to integrate their *denied* self – those aspects of their personality of which they are ashamed.

A foil character might face a similar situation to the protagonist and be faced with a dilemma, but they will choose a different way of resolving it, perhaps reflecting a different set of moral values (or a lack of them).

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* both Laertes and Hamlet are in similar situations, each seeking to avenge the death of their father. In Act V, Scene ii, Hamlet actually says that based on his own ignorance of how to act, he will serve as a foil to Laertes.

Contrary to what some sources say, a foil character isn't someone whose actions deliberately or accidentally foil the protagonist's plans – the two uses of the word have very different origins.

Spotlighting a Secondary Character

Subplots featuring a mirror or a foil focus attention on a secondary character as a way of reflecting or contrasting the protagonist. There are other subplots where a secondary character gets the spotlight but where they do not function as a mirror or foil. These subplots are connected to the main plot in other ways, perhaps thematically or perhaps by setting up major obstacles or conflicts that will affect the protagonist in later scenes. Such subplots might feature the co-protagonist, the antagonist's henchman, or a family member of the protagonist. The subplot often begins totally separately from the main plot and then intersects with it, causing problems, at a significant moment. If your story features a love triangle, each of the protagonist's potential lovers may have their own subplot, demonstrating to the reader which is more suitable as a life-partner for the protagonist. Or a subplot might have the protagonist's sister engaging in a relationship which the protagonist will have to rescue her from, diverting him from his main quest.

If a subplot is shown from the point of view of a secondary character, effectively making them the protagonist of this mini-story, it increases the importance of the character and of the subplot. This also allows you to explore your story's thematic argument from the perspective of another protagonist. Having different experiences in life and different knowledge of the story world, a secondary character is in a position to be a help to the protagonist or they can serve as a source of obstacles and conflict – either deliberately opposing the protagonist or harming or inconveniencing them by accident.

What is the Secondary Character's Goal?

Just as the protagonist in the main plot has a story goal or objective, secondary characters will also have goals of their own. In every scene in which they appear, they will be trying to achieve some outcome that is important to them, even if it is only to find a quiet spot for a snooze. And they will have longer-term goals that they make plans and take action to achieve. A subplot centring on a secondary character might feature a 'quest' to achieve a major goal or action to achieve a smaller objective that is a stepping stone towards a larger goal. Remember that secondary characters don't think of themselves as having supporting roles, everyone is the hero of his or her own life. A secondary character's goal, what they are trying to achieve at any particular moment, will determine their actions and reactions. Their actions may cause obstacles for the protagonist in the main plot. Or the protagonist's actions may cause obstacles that the secondary character must react to. Each is focused on the outcome of their own quest and regards anyone who gets in their way as a problem to be dealt with. Each might function as an antagonist for the other.

In larger subplots, the obstacles the protagonist and secondary character cause for each other tend to be on a larger scale and have more dramatic consequences.

If you're not sure what to include in a subplot, ask yourself what a secondary character's goal might be. Every character in a story will *want* something. With secondary characters, you don't have to explore how their *want* might not be what they really *need,* but in a larger subplot, you might get into this as a way of figuring out whether the subplot will have a happy, unhappy, positive-ironic or negative-ironic ending. A secondary character's wants (and possibly needs) may be linked thematically to the main story or they may act as a mirror of the main story's events, offering a different viewpoint on a similar situation.

Character Arcs – Development or Growth

In many stories, especially flawed hero stories, the protagonist needs to experience some form of change or growth before they can successfully complete the 'quest' that forms the A-story of a novel or screenplay.

I've mapped out the different stages of a character development arc in my book *Character Creation* and in my free guides *Character Basics* and *Plotting the Flawed Hero Story,* so I'm not going to repeat that material here.

Often it is not possible to show all of the necessary stages of a character development arc in the main plot or A-story. Instead, many of the stages are seen in a subplot that follows the course of a relationship – either a romantic relationship or the platonic equivalent in a 'buddy' story. This kind of subplot offers more opportunities for exploring relationship issues which reflect the protagonist's progress along their development arc. Early on, the relationship suffers because the protagonist hasn't grown sufficiently. As the protagonist gains experience in the A-story and subplots, he or she experiences growth

and the relationship is on firmer ground. I'll talk more about this in the chapter on creating a romantic subplot.

Increase Tension and Drama

You can use subplots to create tension or suspense, either through subplots which are suspenseful in their own right or through the way subplots affect the main storyline.

As well as having the potential to affect the A-story, a romantic subplot also adds suspense by including a 'will they or won't they?' element. Will the protagonist and 'love interest' enter a committed relationship when the main plot is over? Some people think the 'will they or won't they?' question refers to sex, but we're better than that. Aren't we?

I've already mentioned another example, a subplot where a secondary character investigates the protagonist's path and may be able to unearth some secret the protagonist wishes to stay buried. Will their secret be exposed? You often see this in superhero stories where someone tries to discover the hero's secret identity or the source of their powers.

There may even be examples where a character accidentally discovers the protagonist's secret and doesn't realise the potential harm revealing the secret could cause.

Another way in which subplots can add tension or suspense is by making the reader wonder when events in a subplot will affect the main plot. You can set up the subplot situation such that the reader or viewer knows it will intersect with the A-story at some point. Then you make them wait for the inevitable collision. The film *48HRS* opens with subplot – two men escape from a prison chain gang. The story then cuts to the ordinary life of the detective played by Nick Nolte and we wonder how and when the two storylines will connect.

Similarly, you can introduce an antagonist or a major obstacle or a conflict in a subplot letting the reader know these are heading in the protagonist's direction.

It's also worth saying here that a subplot can be used to provide relief from the tension of the main plot – I'll talk about this under the heading 'A Change of Mood' below.

Cutting between the main plot or A-story and a subplot situation can be used to manipulate tension. You follow the situation in the main plot for a while and then, when events reach a particularly intriguing moment or a minor cliffhanger, you cut away to what is happening in the subplot, making the reader or viewer wait to find out what happens next. You could then build the subplot to a significant turning point and cut back to the main plot, leaving the action of the subplot unfinished, and creating a new question in the reader's mind.

I've talked about the techniques that can be used to create and manipulate tension in *Suspense Thriller* (2018) and *Writing a Series* (2024).

Foreshadowing & Planting

Foreshadowing is a way of creating suspense. It lets the reader or viewer know that a certain thing is coming, creating anticipation. The promised thing may be a positive thing, creating excited anticipation, or it may be a bad thing, making the reader dread its occurrence. At its simplest level, it is the bully telling his victim, 'I'll be waiting for you after school.' Virtually the whole of the film *High Noon* (1952) is based on the protagonist waiting for the arrival of the bad guys on the train that is due to arrive at noon.

In the case of *High Noon*, Gary Cooper's character knew the bad guys were coming. But sometimes you want to let your reader or viewer know something that the protagonist doesn't – this is referred to as putting the reader in a superior position or as *dramatic irony.* The reader can see what's heading the hero's way, but they have no idea what's coming. If the approaching danger is a significant one, you might want to use a subplot to set it up. In *High Noon* it was the main plot. In *48HRS* it was a subplot that served as a prologue to the main story.

Planting is another way of setting up things that you want to use at a future point in the story. It's a way of playing fair with the reader or viewer. If your protagonist is going to use something unusual or unexpected during the climax of a story, a flamethrower for example, you need to set up the existence of the flame thrower earlier in the story. If you don't it will look like he conjured it from nowhere and the reader will feel that the writer has cheated. Pulling rabbits from hats to get your hero out of trouble is a no-no. Establishing the existence of the flamethrower, perhaps hidden in a subplot, saves you from accusations of cheating. If you 'plant' things in subplots, it helps distract readers as they won't assume that the item featured will play a major role in the A-story. It's another example of sleight-of-hand.

Let's say you want to have the chase at your story's climax occur in the middle of a St. Patrick's Day parade or a Mardi Gras – because that's *never* been done before! – you would need to establish that it's that time of year. You could have glimpses of leprechaun costumes of people preparing parade floats in an earlier scene, or you might want to set it up as part of a subplot.

Set Up a Surprise Twist

Another time you might want to avoid accusations of cheating is when you want to feature a surprise twist in your story. You need to set things up so that, in retrospect, the surprise twist makes sense within the circumstances of your story. You might need to plant hints or clues or prepare the stage in some way. Again, if you do this in a subplot – even if it is not a significant part of the subplot – it helps disguise the fact that you're setting something up for the main plot.

Fix Plot Holes

When you've completed your first draft, you may discover a plot hole. Or several of them. Often these occur because you came up with a great idea but didn't put in the necessary preparation so it looks like you've cheated. You've given the protagonist a very specific skill or object to get them out of a tricky situation, but you never mentioned this earlier in the story. You might be able to fix minor issues like this with a few lines of dialogue in an earlier scene or by inserting a new scene. But sometimes you'll need to add a new subplot or adapt an existing one to fix your plot hole.

Another example of a plot hole is having a character act on knowledge they can't possibly have. Or to refer to events that they didn't witness.

Whatever plot hole you discover in your story, ask yourself if it can be fixed in a subplot.

Exposition & Explanation

I've already spoken about including necessary elements of a character's backstory that might be required for a story to make sense to a reader. There may also be other bits of exposition or explanation that you need to include. Simple stuff can be sneaked in easily enough, but what if you have large chunks of stuff? How do you avoid an infodump? The last thing you want is characters telling each other things in dialogue that they already know. Those old B-movies often had someone say something like, "As you know, professor..." If the professor knew, why was he telling him? This is the writer cheating in order to give the reader or viewer vital information.

As I said above, one good way to sneak this stuff in is by making a mystery of it. Have a character hint that there is some important information available, and the reader or viewer will want to know what it is. You can then stop the action briefly to explain things. But what if your material needs to be dramatised in a scene with action and dialogue? Maybe you need to create a subplot to carry it effectively. The information may be technical details or the history of a place or the events of an earlier investigation into a similar crime.

Setting Up a Series or Spin-Off

If you are writing a series of novels or scripts, you might want to foreshadow events in future stories or plant skills or objects that will be used later. Or the surprise twist you want to set up could be that this first novel is the premise for a whole series featuring the same characters and/or story world. Or maybe you have a secondary character in an existing series who is heading off to be the star of their own spinoff series, as happened with Angel and Cordelia from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. You can use a subplot to set-up the situation that allows a spin-off to be possible and logical.

Pacing

Sometimes in a story, you need a change of pace. You don't want all of the scenes in your story to move at the same pace, that would become

monotonous. Pace depends on the amount of action and suspense present in your scenes. Your main plot or A-story will determine the overall pace of your story – think of it as a series of long waves of varying heights. You can make small adjustments in pace within scenes – longer descriptions, more exposition, and longer exchanges of dialogue can all slow down the pace. Doing the opposite and adding more movement and tension can increase the pace. But sometimes you need to make a larger adjustment to the pace of your story at a particular point. This is especially true in that long Act II that makes up the middle two-quarters of your story. You can use a subplot to achieve this. Think of subplots as a series of shorter waves of varying heights. You may want the peaks of your subplots to match those of your main plot. Or you may want them to be in counterpoint so that peaks in a subplot coincide with troughs in your main plot. Subplots give you more control over the shape of the rollercoaster ride that is your story.

Subplots can also give your reader or viewer a break from the frenetic pacing of your main plot. In many thrillers and action-adventure stories, you find a relationship subplot taking the spotlight soon after the midpoint of the story.

The climax of a subplot can provide a moment of high interest when the pace of your main plot is flagging – but you will need to begin your subplot at the right moment so the climax occurs where you want it.

See also *changing mood* below.

Change of Mood – Contrast or Relief

As well as affecting how quickly or slowly your story is moving, subplots can be used to alter its mood. The level of emotion in your story can also be imagined as a series of waves, with the main plot causing larger waves and subplots causing smaller ones. Again, you can have the emotional level in a subplot be in sync with your main plot or out of sync and in counterpoint.

In a serious film, the mood may be intense, and you might want to lighten things up for a little while. In his tragedies, Shakespeare often included some comic relief to give the audience a break from the drama. The scene with the gravediggers in *Hamlet* is an example. On the other hand, in a comedy, you might need a break from the slapstick and misunderstandings. A more serious subplot can help you prove the thematic argument of the story or introduce some pathos. Comedies and tragedies can also have romantic subplots.

A serious story can't be serious all the time and a comedy can't be hilarious throughout, you need something to stand in contrast or the comedy or tragedy loses its impact.

You probably shouldn't use a subplot solely to change the mood in a story, it should also be tied to the subject matter or thematic argument of the main plot in some way. Having a comedic mini-version of your main plot can be quite effective.

If you have a major dramatic twist coming in your main plot or a nasty shock, preceding it with something romantic or light-hearted can intensify the emotion of the twist when it comes. Depending on the scale and size of the twist, you may only need a single scene as a change of mood but for something huge, you might want a subplot to build up to it.

As with Shakespeare's gravediggers, you might have one or more characters who are there solely to provide comic relief. They can pop up at various points in the story to change the mood or tone. There are different kinds of comedy, from the gentle to the hilariously disruptive, so you can vary the level of comic relief as necessary. What you point where will depend on the kind of contrast you are trying to achieve. The comedy shouldn't be too far out there or seem to be in bad taste in comparison to what is going on in the main plot. Unless that is your deliberate intent with a particular character. Different kinds of comic relief may be more suitable for different genres of fiction or film.

Writing comedy requires a particular skill – some people have it and some don't. Some people have an ear for puns and some people are great at visualising slapstick situations. Play to your strengths. But be aware that poorly timed, clichéd, or badly constructed comedy will do your story more harm than good. And be careful not to include comedy at a point where it will ruin a mood that you have carefully built up. You want any anticlimaxes in your story to be deliberate ones.

Provide New Perspective

I've already hinted at this in previous sections. A subplot can allow you to give the reader or viewer a different viewpoint, showing story events and/or themes from a different perspective. You could have a subplot where a secondary character faces a very similar problem to that facing the protagonist. How that character responds to the situation – their opinions on it, their decisions, and their actions can contrast with those of your main character. How might someone with a different personality or a different level of experience tackle the same problem? Your subplot can let you explore this.

You can also use subplots to show how the events of the main plot affect other people. Your protagonist is in the middle of the main plot and his or her decisions and actions are causing events to happen. But what about someone on the sidelines? What about someone who suffers collateral damage? They didn't ask to be part of this. How might they respond? How might they suffer? Subplots can show how the protagonist's actions don't just affect those immediately involved.

Sometimes, a mentor is an older character who has experienced a situation similar to that faced by the protagonist. You might use their backstory as a way of advising the protagonist for or against a particular course of action. The mentor could be someone who successfully completed their own 'quest,' and can serve as a positive example. Or the mentor might be a bitter, wounded individual who made the wrong choices and failed in their quest, serving as a

negative example. If those last sentences made you think of knights in shining armour, they also apply to a maiden aunt who never found her one true love.

I've seen articles that suggest varying viewpoints – switching from third-person to first-person or vice versa – to enhance the change in perspective, but I would be very wary of changing the point of view in a story in this way. Unless changing point of view is something you've already established as being the norm for your story. But you could have a mentor or some other secondary character telling their own backstory in their own words. Treat that as dialogue rather than a change in point of view – and be aware that some people who tell their own stories are unreliable narrators. They may not tell the truth, wanting to make themselves look better – or more victimised – than they really are. You would need to write the dialogue such that the reader could read between the lines and discern what really happened.

Add Complications – Obstacles, Antagonism, Conflict, Danger

You may see references to stories having a 'conflict subplot,' suggesting that this is a particular type of subplot, but I think it is more helpful to think in terms of subplots providing additional complications, things that distract or get in the protagonist's way as they try to achieve their goal. Conflict is just one type of complication.

The *major dramatic question* in a story, the thing that creates suspense and makes readers keep turning the pages to find out the answer, is: Will the protagonist achieve their goal? As writers, we create complications to delay showing the answer to this question. Subplots are a great way of introducing new complications into a story.

How does this work? It isn't just the protagonist of your story that has a goal. Think of every character in your story as being a hero on their own quest. They each have a personal goal that they are trying to achieve, and they take action to move closer to it. Sometimes a person's actions might deliberately seek to obstruct the protagonist – the antagonist or villain in a story usually ends up *directly* opposing the protagonist. However secondary characters may perform actions that *accidentally* create a complication for the protagonist. The protagonist wasn't a target, they were just collateral damage. It may even be the protagonist's closest friend or a loving family member who creates the complication – they didn't set out to inconvenience the protagonist, it happened by accident. Though some 'accidents' are caused by subconscious jealousy or other repressed feelings, so there may be more to the situation than first appears.

In a subplot, you can create a mini story for a secondary character, setting them on a particular course of action, such that they will ultimately end up causing a problem for the protagonist. You can even create tension by having your reader see that the paths of the protagonist and the secondary character will eventually collide. This 'collision' doesn't have to be as dramatic as a car

crash, it could just be that the protagonist's sister borrows the dress the protagonist planned to wear for her big date tonight.

Generally speaking, a small-scale subplot will create small complications and a more elaborate subplot will create either a single large complication or a series of small to medium ones. Whenever you need to place an obstacle in your protagonist's way, ask yourself: Could a subplot involving a secondary character work here?

If a secondary character gets into trouble, for example, the protagonist may have to go and rescue them. This distracts the protagonist from their own planned actions. Misunderstandings and crossed wires can also be used to create complications which thwart a protagonist's plans. Or a secondary may do something that they believe will help the protagonist but make a mess of it and leave the protagonist in a worse situation. Sometimes two secondary characters just do things that distract the protagonist at a crucial moment, creating a complication. In a thriller, a romantic subplot is a distraction for the protagonist and it also gives him (or her) something new to worry about – it raises the stakes because they are now concerned with this person's safety as well as their own. More on romantic subplots later. A subplot introduced for comic relief (see below) can also serve as a distraction or can completely derail the protagonist's plans.

Complications might not even affect a protagonist and their plans directly. A secondary character might end up in an emotionally-charged situation – the end of a relationship, a relative injured in hospital, or whatever – and the protagonist may feel an obligation to be there to provide emotional and/or practical support. How a protagonist responds to situations like this tells the reader what sort of person the protagonist is.

With complications of this sort, there may be some 'back plotting' involved. You work out where you want a complication to occur and then look back and see where you can plant the beginning of a subplot that will eventually create the 'collision' you require. I'll talk more about plotting subplots in Chapter 4.

Complications caused by subplots force the protagonist to react, making them do things they would not otherwise have done. And the nature of their reaction may have consequences which are themselves complications.

Subplots also allow you to create different kinds of complications. If your action hero is facing physical danger in the main plot, a romantic subplot creates emotional danger. Or a situation which mirrors a character's 'childhood trauma' might create psychological danger. Subplots allow you to threaten and test your main character on different levels.

Raise the Stakes

The term 'stake' refers to a sum of money that someone has gambled in a game of chance. 'Stakes' is also used to refer to a pot of prize money that can be won, especially in horse racing. If you're a vampire or a witch, 'stake' has a very different meaning. In storytelling, we use the phrase 'What's at stake?' to refer to the thing a character stands to lose (or win) depending on the outcome of a

story situation. When we talk about 'raising the stakes,' we mean giving the character more to lose. Increasing the loss they could suffer. Or increasing the size of the prize that they could win or lose.

We can think about what's at stake on several different levels:

1. *Physical stakes* – the protagonist or someone they care about is at risk of physical harm or even death. This is probably the first thing we think of as we see it in action-adventure stories all the time. Physical stakes are often associated with the Warrior personality type or hybrids that feature it (Adventurer and Crusader). We may be talking about physical survival here, tapping into a person's primal instincts.
2. *Emotional stakes* – a relationship that is important to the protagonist is put at risk. This is often what is at stake in a romantic subplot or a 'buddy movie.' Emotional stakes are often associated with the Carer personality type or hybrids that feature it (Artist and Adventurer)
3. *Reputation* – this could be thought of as social or professional stakes, referring to how other people view the protagonist. The esteem they have earned, their public standing, may be at risk. In practical terms, poor performance may mean they lose their job or some other position, e.g. boxing champion, best of the best, rear of the year, or whatever. This is associated with the 'ideal self' or persona that any personality type wishes to protect. Subplots involving mysteries and secrets often revolve around this – there is something that the character doesn't want to be revealed because it will affect how people regard them.
4. *Psychological or mental* – risk to mental wellbeing is something that is only gradually being taken seriously in western society. Situations such as intimidation and bullying, coercion, blackmail, and disregarding the needs and beliefs of others can cause psychological harm. A person's whole life may be based on certain beliefs and if those beliefs are challenged or disproved, it can affect the balance of their mind. This is the realm of the Thinker.
5. *Wants and Needs* – what a protagonist *wants* is typically a tangible goal of some kind, something that symbolises success and/or fulfilment to them. It is an objective or prize that they choose for themselves or that their community expects them to achieve. What a protagonist *needs* may be entirely different, and the character may not be consciously aware of it. This is what the protagonist *needs* to be their true self and achieve genuine fulfilment. To take a clichéd example, a character may *want* wealth and power but what they really *need* to be happy is a loving adult relationship. While a protagonist may not be aware of the nature of their need, a reader is. Subplots can put both the want (the tangible goal) and/or the *need* (the intangible 'something') at risk. Wants and needs are related to the false self and true self of all of the personality archetypes.

6. *Community* – sometimes referred to as global or societal stakes, this refers to the protagonist's world within the context of the story. One way in which stakes can be increased in a story is by having the danger extend so that other people around the protagonist are now at risk. Think of it as a circle around them that widens to encompass more people or a larger geographical space. The protagonist then feels responsible for the fate of these people or this space. Both the Warrior and the Carer feel a need to protect their community – the Warrior to protect them physically and the Carer to protect them emotionally. The Thinker may also feel a need to come up with a smart solution to protect their community and to protect people from psychological harm.

To place something the protagonist cares about in jeopardy, you first have to demonstrate that this thing is important to the character. For some things, you can achieve this in a single scene. If a character's professional reputation is important to them, it wouldn't be difficult to show that to a reader or audience within a single scene. If it is *really* important to them, you could reinforce it in another scene. The importance of a familial relationship can also be established in a single scene or a couple of scenes. But something like a romantic relationship or a friendship between two buddies might need to be setup and demonstrated in a subplot.

As a rule of thumb, in writing, the more time you spend on something – the more screentime or words on a page it receives – the more important it is to the characters and the plot. If you want the thing at stake to seem *hugely* important to the protagonist, you probably need to establish it in a subplot. I'll talk about relationship subplots in more detail later.

Core Stakes

Every story has some core human *value* at stake, and this is what determines the story's theme or *thematic argument.* Your protagonist's goal and their personal need as a character will be related to this value, since the protagonist (usually) symbolises moral behaviour. This core moral value is something the protagonist cares about deeply and it's what is at stake in the situation that faces the protagonist in the main plot or A-story. Subplots in a story often show other characters in situations that explore that same value in a different way.

Why this particular value is important to this particular protagonist may need to be set up in a subplot. We may need a subplot to *show* something in the character's backstory that caused them to feel strongly about this specific moral value.

As we saw above, other things can be placed in jeopardy to increase the overall stakes for the protagonist as a story progresses. Other people get drawn into the character's orbit and he or she feels responsibility for their safety and happiness.

What's the Worst Thing That Can Happen?

To establish what is at stake, you have to show the reader or audience what will happen if the protagonist fails. What does failure look like? We need to be

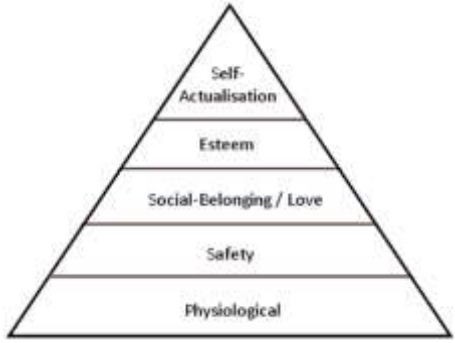
able to picture it. What does the loss look like and what will be its consequences? Who or what will be harmed? How badly? Is it irreparable harm?

For a protagonist in a story, the worst thing that can possibly happen will be directly related to the thing they fear most. A character's greatest fear grows out of their personality type. Each of the six types has a fear of a particular kind – the Warrior fears powerlessness/exploitation; the Carer fears being alone and being unworthy of love; the Thinker fears mental breakdown and being overwhelmed by feelings; the Adventurer fears exploitation and commitment, being trapped; the Artist fears loss of identity or personal significance, and the Crusader fears being judged and found to be not good enough. For individual characters, these fears manifest in different ways, brought on by unique personal circumstances.

The protagonist's greatest fear is something I talk about in more detail in *Character Creation* (2018), where I explore its role in a character development arc. I also talk about it in the free guide *Plotting the Flawed Hero Story* which can be found at www.paultomlinson.org/how-to

Hierarchy of Needs

One way of thinking about stakes is to consider Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, often represented in a pyramid:



Physiological needs (water, food, warmth, sleep) and safety and the most basic needs. Social belonging, the need for relationships, and the need for social and self-esteem are fundamental psychological needs. And self-actualisation is a need for self-fulfilment. Generally speaking, the needs lower down the pyramid must be met before those above can be fulfilled.

More Ways of Raising the Stakes

Another way of using subplots to raise the pressure on your protagonist is to use techniques designed to increase suspense. You could introduce a ticking clock or deadline, for example. I discussed ways of creating suspense in some

detail in *Suspense Thriller* (2018) and also wrote about using suspense in ongoing storylines in *Writing a Series* (2024).

Tom Afford writes that a subplot can introduce "...sinister or dangerous elements in the subplot. A spark that turns into a blaze. A drip that turns into a flood. Use the subplot to thwart the main character, to divert the story."

Add or Enhance Genre Elements

Each genre has certain conventions or tropes that readers or viewers expect to find. Some of these involve characters, settings, and props, but others are conventions of storytelling. There are certain types of situations and certain scenes that people expect to encounter. Oftentimes, you will include these in your main plot – I discuss typical plot structures at length in the *Genre Writer* series – but sometimes you may need a subplot so that you can include a desired situation or scene. In thrillers and action-adventure stories, for example, character relationship arcs and/or character development arcs are often carried in a subplot.

You've probably movies where a car chase or a sex scene seems to have been included simply for the sake of it – action, sex, and violence in such scenes are often described as gratuitous. There's no plausible reason for them to be there. If the writers had made the effort to create a suitable subplot, those same scenes could have been made to seem a legitimate part of the story.

Variations on the Theme – Adding Thematic Depth

I said above that the *core stakes* of a story are carried through the main plot or A-story and also that such stakes are related to the *thematic argument* of the story. The theme of a story is typically defined in terms of a human value and expressed in terms of moral behaviour. The thematic argument effectively says something like moral behaviour is rewarded and immoral behaviour is punished. In this way, stories promote the values of the culture in which they are written. Individual stories focus on a specific moral behaviour or value (and its opposing immoral behaviour or vice), and they demonstrate moral and immoral behaviour in a specific way in accordance with genre and plot expectations.

Thrillers, for example, often centre on some form of criminal conspiracy. The values at stake are typically trust – who can be trusted? – and integrity. The protagonist demonstrates through his actions that other people can trust them, they are a man or woman of their word. And also, they act in accordance with their own moral beliefs – threats and bribery do not turn them away from what they believe in. These things are shown in the A-story.

A subplot or B-story allows you to take the same value and the same thematic argument but explore them from a different angle. We may see a secondary character faced with a similar situation to that of the protagonist, but this character makes different choices. Perhaps they show that they are not someone who keeps their word, betraying another person, or they allow greed to influence them such that bribery is enough for them to abandon moral

behaviour. Showing this character's choices, behaviour, and the then the consequences – showing the secondary character's fate – provides a different angle on the moral argument.

To prove a thematic argument, you need more than one example as evidence to convince the reader or viewer. Having secondary characters make different decisions and take different courses of action from the protagonist is also a way of creating contrast between your characters.

In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* for example, the three Bennet sisters all have the same goal – marriage to a suitable man. Each of them has a very different approach to this. Elizabeth, the viewpoint character, pretends to be aloof, claiming no interest in men in general and Mr. Darcy in particular. Jane pursues a suitable but not exciting relationship. And Lydia elopes with a cad. The subplots featuring Jane and Lydia contrast with the main plot which focuses on Elizabeth's relationship. The Lydia subplot also reveals something important about the character of Mr. Darcy.

Sometimes the situation and action in a B-story may be very different to that in the main plot, but the same theme underlies this mini-story. The same values are at stake. Trust in the context of a criminal conspiracy may feature alongside a subplot about trust in a romantic relationship or between two 'buddies.' If a subplot appears, on the surface, to have no connection to the A-story, it can justify its place in a novel or screenplay if it is connected *thematically*.

In some circumstances, you might want to use a subplot which directly contradicts your main theme. In a romance, for example, a common theme is 'love conquers all,' showing that whatever obstacles or opposition two people face, if they are truly in love, they will find a way to make things work. In an edgier sort of romance, this might seem a bit twee, so you could have a subplot where two secondary characters who are in love don't manage to achieve their happy ending. This can add a hint of realism to your story and also enhance the value of the love your main characters have found.

You can also play around with irony. Instead of a situation involving secondary characters having a happy outcome or an unhappy one, it could have an ironic outcome. A positive ironic outcome involves a character who fails to achieve their desired goal but achieves something more valuable instead. They do not get what they (thought they) *want*ed but they do get what they *need*ed. A clichéd example is the hero who sets out to achieve wealth and power but fails and instead gains the love of a perfect woman (or man). A negative ironic outcome has a character achieving their goal – getting what they wanted – but finding that it doesn't give them the happiness and fulfilment they had hoped for. They got what they wanted but not what they needed. They got wealth and power but lost the person they loved.

Red Herrings

In some types of story, you may need to employ sleight of hand to mislead a character and/or the reader or audience. An obvious example is a murder mystery or whodunit where the killer leaves false 'clues' – red herrings – to divert attention away from themselves. Or you might need to create a misunderstanding between your hero and heroine (or same-sex equivalents) in a romance. You could have a set of circumstances that seem to indicate that X has occurred, but it will eventually be shown that those events were all related to Y.

One way to draw attention away from something significant is by creating a subplot, a C-story perhaps, which *appears* to be significant – but eventually proves not to be. This is the sort of misdirection that conjurors use to make people look in the wrong place.

You wouldn't want to use this sort of subplot frequently, but once in a novel or perhaps a couple of times in a series should be okay.

2 | *Subplot Types Based on Content*

In this chapter, I want to separate different types of subplots in terms of their *content* and function. In the next chapter, I will separate them in terms of their *presentation* on the page or on the screen.

We've already identified a list of things you can do with a subplot. Now I want to expand on that and look at how different types of subplots can fulfil those functions. I've come up with a list of eight different types of subplots. There may be more, but this is what I've got for you today.

- Romantic Subplot
- Character Backstory
- Character Arc
- Expository & Explanatory
- Secondary Character Goal
- Parallel Quests & Sub-Quests
- Two Worlds Collide
- Comic Relief

There is some overlap between these and a single subplot could perform more than one of these subplots – a romantic subplot could provide comic relief, for example, if it was presented like a romantic comedy.

Romantic Subplot

I have to keep mentioning this as it is probably the most common form of subplot in fiction and films. In the previous chapter, I referred to the fact that a romantic subplot can be used to add tension – 'Will they, or won't they?' – and increase the stakes. In Chapter 7 I will show how to create an effective romantic subplot.

Character Backstory

A character's *backstory* is their life history – everything that happened to them up to the point where they step on stage in your story. Some writers create detailed backstories for their main characters in the form of character biographies. They do this to help them get a clear understanding of who the characters are and why they are the way they are. Think of it as their 'origins' story. Those character biographies are 'behind the scenes' work, tools to help a writer present their character in a story. Most of what is in the detailed biography won't appear on the page in a novel or screenplay. But its existence helps the writer give a sense of a fully-rounded character, someone who has a life outside the story. Not all writers create biographies in this way. I don't. However, I do sometimes make notes about a character's past to help me get a feel for who they are.

Here we are concerned with the back story that you *do* put on the page of your story. *What* should you include? *How* should you include it? And *why* should you include it? I'll start with the last question first.

Why Include a Character's Backstory?

You should only include a character's backstory if it is necessary for your reader to have that information to make sense of your story. Backstory is optional, you don't have to include it. You shouldn't include it unless it's necessary.

I'm talking about the detailed backstory stuff here. For most characters, you'll include little snippets of backstory – where they grew up, if they have siblings, whether their parents are still alive, if they are married or were previously. Everyday stuff that we learn about the people around us. Including, perhaps, what their school life was like. Were they a jock or a nerd? Queen Bee or outcast? Bullied or bully? This is the sort of stuff that comes out in dialogue or character descriptions and its no big deal. But what about the deeper stuff – traumatic incidents in their childhood that caused emotional or psychological wounds? There are two reasons why you might want to include these details.

Firstly, emotional trauma can explain why a character is *motivated* to achieve a particular goal. Bruce Wayne was motivated to become Batman by the fact that his parents were murdered by a criminal. That incident in his backstory has been dramatised in various ways in movie adaptations and comic book retellings.

Secondly, this backstory is relevant if you want to portray your character's development arc. Character development arcs (see below) are the storytelling equivalent of psychoanalysis – we have to look back and see what caused a character's internal conflict so that they can find a way to overcome it.

There are other reasons why you might want to include small bits of backstory – to show how a character gained a particular skill or piece of

knowledge, for example. But the two reasons above cover why you would ever include major bits of backstory.

I should clarify that I'm talking about *genre* fiction and screenplays here. In mainstream or literary fiction, backstory plays a different part. In the novel *Q & A* by Vikas Swarup, the basis for the film *Slumdog Millionaire,* the main character's life story is a major part of the main plot. The film *Citizen Kane* is another example. It's very rare for something like that to be done in a genre fiction novel.

What Should You Include?

You should only include key moments from a character's past life that are *directly relevant* to the current story. Plus as much additional material as is necessary to place these events in the proper context. In a screenplay, you have less space to play with than in a novel, but even in a novel, you shouldn't use unnecessary digressions.

You do not have to show key incidents from a character's past directly. You could reference or hint at some tragic incident in the character's earlier life and then have a scene or subplot which *symbolises* that event, making its impact more real for the reader or viewer. Or your character may see a younger person facing the same sort of situation and go out of their way to help them avoid suffering as they did in the past. This saves you from having to use flashbacks showing a character's younger self.

As you are reading fiction or screenplays by other writers, take not of how they handle backstory. Pay particular attention to stories in your genre. But also look at other genres and mainstream stories – we can often learn things from looking outside our usual reading material.

How Should You Include Backstory?

In presenting incidents from a character's past, draw on your own life for inspiration. You may not have experienced exactly what the character is going through, but you have lived through something comparable. Think about how you remember events in your own life and how you feel about them, then use this as the basis of showing things from a character's life. Also, watch how people tell anecdotes about their own lives, the details they include, the spin they put on things, and the things they edit out. What is *not* said is often as important as what is said. If you have significant amounts of backstory material to include in a story, it might be worth reading interviews with or autobiographies by people who have lived through experiences similar to your characters. You might be surprised by the details people recall and the words they use to describe them. Adding similar details to the stories of your fictional people can make their backstories seem more real.

Given that one of our primary rules of thumb is 'show, don't tell,' you should try and present backstory material in dramatised scenes or – if necessary – longer subplots. Avoid large chunks of narrative or 'infodumps.' If a story isn't moving forward, there is a risk that a reader or viewer will become bored and

look away. Infodumps slow the pace of a story or bring it to a halt. We don't want to do that – at least not accidentally.

Always logic-check your character's backstory. Are they old enough to have experienced the events you refer to? Is their military experience likely to have been in the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Afghanistan, or something that occurred even later? Are they old enough to have completed the necessary training and experience to become a plastic surgeon? Make sure you don't include two things that couldn't possibly have happened to the same person in the time span you propose.

I would always suggest creating your subplot – the backstory in this case – separately, outside of your main story, so you can plot it fully. Then look at weaving it together with your main storyline. I will talk more about presenting subplots in the next chapter and in Chapter 5. Having plotted it out fully, you can then look at it and decide how much you need to include. As a basic rule of thumb, include as little as possible. And choose only the parts that are directly relevant to the story you are telling. If you end up with a lot of excess material, you can always use it in a short story about your character or in a factual piece about the character for your website.

Character Arc

I said earlier that a protagonist's character development arc is often presented via a subplot involving a relationship. People are much more likely to reveal their past history, their hopes and fears, and their emotions to someone they have grown to trust and care about.

I have written about character development arcs in some detail in *Character Creation* (2018), where I also present the basic outline of a character arc for each of the six main personality archetypes – Warrior, Thinker, Carer, Crusader, Artist, and Adventurer. I've also covered character development in *Writing a Series* (2024) and my free guide *Plotting a Flawed Hero Story.* I'm not going to go over the same material again here.

The basic outline of a character development arc looks something like this:

(1) Introduce a flawed protagonist and demonstrate their flawed behaviour
(2) The protagonist denies the flaw – but their flawed behaviour causes problems in their life and the lives of people around them.
(Midpoint) The protagonist recognises and admits their internal flaw
(3) The protagonist attempts to overcome their flaw, but it is difficult; they fall back into old behaviours, with catastrophic results
(4) The protagonist overcomes their flaw, usually with the help of a co-protagonist, and there is a happy ending. Or, in a tragedy, they fail to overcome their flaw and there is an unhappy one.

Expository or Explanatory

Where a backstory subplot shows something of significance from a character's past, an expository or explanatory subplot is related to something other than

a character. It might show how the current situation in a story came into being – the events leading up to it. Or it might show past events which have a direct bearing on the current story, either in a cause-and-effect manner or through thematic links.

The title sequence of the film *Soylent Green* (1973) serves in this way, showing a montage of photographs of the industrial progression of humankind and the way it polluted the planet, creating the world in which *Soylent Green* takes place. The movie *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* (1965) opens with old clips of film showing various attempts by men to conquer the skies. That one is played for laughs. Other stories may require fully dramatised scenes or even a complete subplot to explain their setup. Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987) has a subplot explaining the history and mythology of a puzzle box that opens a door to another realm. *Jurassic Park* (1993) has to explain how dinosaurs were recreated before we can get onto the fun stuff. Then there's the subplot that explains what triggers the fun stuff.

A subplot might be needed to explain a particular object, process, or skill that is central to the main plot of the story. In the original *Star Wars* film, Luke Skywalker had to learn about the 'Ways of the Force' because they were his heritage as a Jedi Knight and also because his abilities with the Force would play an important part in the climactic attack on the Death Star. The Force was also a major part of the mythology of the *Star Wars* universe, playing a central role in later stories in the series.

As with backstory material, if you have something that you need to share with the reader so they can make sense of the story, you might find that a subplot is the way to do it.

Secondary Character Goal

This is the sort of subplot that is a mini story within the main story where a secondary character takes centre stage for a while. They are effectively the protagonist of the subplot storyline. This sort of subplot could be the equivalent of a short story, perhaps a novella (or forty-five-minute TV episode), or maybe even feature the full eight sequences of a major plotline similar to a pared-down novel or screenplay. You'd probably only use the latter for another main character such as the co-protagonist or perhaps the antagonist.

Again, I would say plot this out as a separate story before you try and weave it into the main story. Structure it as a short story, novella, or use the full eight sequences. It will probably have a plot typical of your chosen genre, but for a shorter subplot, you could draw in the plot of something from another genre.

Parallel Quests and Sub-Quests

Parallel quests are... well... quests that run alongside each other. No kidding. In something like an epic fantasy, for example, you might have two bands of adventurers involved in goal-based journeys in different parts of the story world. The story cuts back and forth between these two groups. The two

plotlines may come together towards the end of the story, or perhaps they are only linked thematically. In a series, one group's adventures may dominate in a particular novel with the others playing second fiddle, and then in the next novel, the situation is reversed.

An advantage with parallel quests – and with subplots in general – is that you can cut between two storylines in a way that manipulates suspense. You can have one storyline reach a dramatic moment, perhaps even a cliffhanger, and then cut to the other storyline, leaving the reader wondering how the other situation will play out. You can then build to an exciting moment in the second storyline and cut back to the original one. This backward and forward movement can help maintain interest in longer stories where an ongoing quest can begin to feel like it is dragging on and not getting anywhere fast.

You can use parallel quests in other genres too. In a private eye novel, for example, there may be two separate investigations both involving the protagonist. He moves from one to the other. In that genre, the two investigations are (spoiler alert) usually shown to be linked in the end. In a romance, you can have a subplot in which a pair of secondary characters are also falling in love, the progress of their relationship contrasting with that of the main couple.

Sub-Quests, as their name suggests, are quests that occur within quests. Let's take a couple of obvious examples first. The King says that the hero can only marry the princess (or prince) if the hero successfully completes three almost impossible tasks. Each of those tasks is a mini story within the main story. Another example has the hero having to collect three mystical objects or three parts of a puzzle. There's an element of this in *Raiders of the Lost Arc.* In some stories, this creates a main plot broken into episodes, in other stories these mini-tasks are subplots. This technique isn't just used in action-adventure stories, you could use it in any genre where a protagonist has an overall story goal that consists of several tasks. Imagine a matchmaker in a romance novel trying to set up the perfect date for her best friend, having to get the friend, the blind date, the venue, and other elements set up and then bring them together – only to discover that she's met her own perfect partner during the process. Or something.

Two Worlds Collide

With this technique, we see two characters in their own story worlds which are typically very different from each other. We cut back and forth between the two in a way that makes the reader or viewer aware that at some point these two separate worlds will collide with each other. This creates suspense on two levels. First, we wonder *when* the collision will occur. And second, we wonder what will happen when they do collide. What will the impact look like and what will the consequences be?

One example would be to see a nice ordinary world with a likeable character intercut with the dark and violent world of a criminal or a vampire. Another

example is the screwball comedy where the calm and orderly world of the hero (usually played by Cary Grant) is contrasted with the chaos of the heroine's world. I'm sure you can think of other examples in different genres.

This is an example of when two plots seem to be unconnected but then come together. I'll say a little more about *convergent* plots in the next chapter.

Comic Relief

A comic relief subplot can centre on a single character, perhaps the co-protagonist or an inept henchman, or you might bring a comedy double-act onto the stage. Think of the Bill Hader and Seth Rogan characters in *Superbad* or Timon and Pumbaa in *The Lion King.*

Sometimes a comedy subplot might seem to have no connection to the main plot, but you should make it something to the thematic argument of the main story, serve character revelation or backstory purposes, or have the events converge with the main plot and have an impact on it.

As far as I'm aware, there is no such thing as a generic comedy plot. Comedy is a way of approaching material rather than a structure. If you look at films like *Airplane!* (1980) or the *Naked Gun* films, they parody the plots and conventions of other genres. Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* (1974), *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and *Spaceballs* do the same thing. Other comedies use the plots of thrillers, chase movies, coming-of-age stories, and a variety of other plot structures. Romantic comedy is a sub-genre in its own right, being a variation of the standard romance plot.

I said earlier that one way to create a comic relief subplot is to have it be a smaller-scale version of the main plot. A secondary character faces a similar situation to the main story's protagonist. The way the secondary character tackles the problem is likely to cause chaos and destruction or at least embarrassment. The outcome of the subplot might prove the thematic argument of the main plot in some skewed way and/or it may serve as inspiration for the main protagonist, showing him something he could do or something that he should definitely avoid doing. The failure or embarrassment of the secondary character could be related to their character flaw, a flaw which they share with the main protagonist. Their fate could be a warning, showing how the protagonist might end up if he doesn't successfully complete his or her character development arc.

3 | Subplot Types Based on Presentation

In the previous chapter, we looked at how subplots can be defined by their content and/or function. Here I want to explore the ways subplots can differ in terms of their presentation – specifically in terms of how the subplot and main plot and put together. We have a few options here:

- Separate or Parallel

- Woven or Braided
- Bookend or Sandwich
- Divergent
- Convergent
- One-off Episode

And also *hybrids* that combine two or more of the above.

Separate or Parallel Subplots

In their purest form, these are subplots which have *no* connection to the main plot of a story. The two never intersect and have no direct impact on each other. They are typically related to the main plot by the fact that they feature one or more characters from the main plot and/or there is a thematic connection – they explore a variation of the thematic argument.

These are probably the least common form of subplot, except perhaps as one of many subplots in an epic work. It is more common for subplots to connect to the main plot or to converge with them (see below).

Woven or Braided Subplots

Also referred to as 'in and out' subplots, these intersect with the main plot several times during the course of a novel or movie. This is probably the most common form and is what we tend to think of when the term 'subplot' is mentioned. I'm going to talk more about weaving together the plot and subplot in Chapter 5.

Bookend or Sandwich Subplots

This is a subplot that is introduced at the beginning of a story and then set aside while the main plot occurs and then the subplot is finally resolved at the end. Sometimes you see this used as a framing device. The movies *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Princess Bride* (1987) use it. It can also be used in comedy. If you're familiar with the film *Airplane!* (1980) you may remember that the hero arrives at the airport in a taxi – we completely forget about this until the payoff at the end of the film.

In other stories, the use of the bookend subplot is more subtle. We see a situation at the beginning, often involving the protagonist or someone important to the protagonist, and this situation is left unresolved. At the end of the story, often after the climax of the main plot, the open subplot is then resolved as part of the tying up of loose ends. This sort of subplot often focuses on an issue in a long-term relationship or an unsatisfying work situation.

Often it is something that a character learns or experiences during the main plot that enables them to resolve the bookend situation. In *Lord of the Rings,* Sam Gamgee lacks self-confidence at the beginning of the story and is too shy to ask Rosie Cotton to dance. In the end, having proved himself during the main adventure, he has the courage to court her.

Bookend subplots bring the satisfaction of a resolution at the end and the reader also feels pleasure in recalling the open situation from the beginning. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot about that! And if they *did* forget about it, the resolution is a pleasant surprise. Or an unpleasant one, if you're that kind of writer! This kind of subplot can be a great way to end a novel, screenplay, or series, especially if it hints at a new equilibrium in the ordinary world of the story. Sam and Rosie settle down and have a family, showing that the world is back to normal now that the evil has been thwarted.

Divergent Subplots

A divergent subplot is one that splits off from the main plot and then runs parallel to it. In the previous chapter, I referred to 'parallel quests' where two groups of adventurers pursue separate goal-based journeys. That sort of situation can be set-up by having a larger group of adventurers split off, with one of the smaller groups pursuing the subplot quest.

In *Lord of the Rings,* for example, Frodo and Sam continue on their journey to Mordor while Aragon, Legolas, and Gimli split off to go and save Merry and Pippin, who have also split off from the main group. Important things occur in both strands of the plot.

Divergent plots can be a good way of separating your main character from his or her support team, making things more difficult for all of them. Or they can be used to get a secondary character out of the way for a while.

Generally speaking, in a single novel or screenplay, the divergent threads of plot will converge again, often at the climax of the story. The separate storylines are rarely left to run in parallel without connecting again. But this might occur in a series, where each storyline forms the basis of separate books in the series. Or you might have a secondary character go off in a divergent subplot as a way of setting up a spin-off series. This happened with Angel and Cordelia who left *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to become the leads in *Angel.*

In a longer series, the plots might diverge and then come together and then diverge again. It may be the same group that goes off on another parallel quest or it may be a different subset of the gang.

Any subplot where a secondary character goes off to pursue a goal of their own could be a divergent subplot for at least part of its arc. This sort of subplot can be used in just about any genre.

Convergent Subplots

Two subplots that start off parallel might converge at a dramatic point in a story or novel. This often occurs at a major turning point, often the 'darkest hour' or climax of the story. Similarly, a subplot that diverged from the main plot might converge with it again at a suitable point.

The point of convergence won't normally mark an end to a subplot – though it could – instead by colliding with the main plot it creates a new complication or obstacle and will almost certainly raise the stakes. Let's take a really obvious example – a thriller or action-adventure story has a romantic subplot. At the

climax of the story, the villain kidnaps the hero's 'love interest' and threatens to kill her (or him) unless the hero surrenders. The fact that you've seen that so often only proves how effective it can be as a storytelling device. Your mission, should you accept it, is to come up with a less clichéd way of using a subplot to complicate your main plot in a similar way.

In the last chapter, I talked about the 'when worlds collide' subplot which is another example of a convergent subplot. In a thriller, this convergence might mark the start of a romantic subplot.

Dramatic Revelation

One way to add a twist to a story is to have two things that did not seem to be connected be shown to be connected. This could be two characters who were thought to be unknown to each other proving to be closely related by blood or through work or other activities. Or it could be two separate plotlines that are revealed to have a hidden link. I've mentioned previously the private eye story where two apparently unconnected investigations prove to be linked at a point midway or later in the main plot. If you set up your subplots correctly, readers will be surprised by the revelation of a link, but they can then look back and previous events and see that it makes sense in terms of the clues you've planted there.

As a sidenote, subplots are a great place to hide clues in a mystery or private eye story. If you hide clues relevant to the main plot – the investigation – in a subplot, your reader is less likely to see their importance.

The One-Off Episode or Diversion

This is perhaps the most straightforward form of subplot because it occurs all together as a mini-story. It might be a brief diversion away from the main plot or it may be an episode within the main plot. It is a story within the story. It may feature a secondary character in the spotlight or it may feature the protagonist of your main plotline. It could be a brief episode in which the character learns something about themselves or their situation, or it could just be something that supports the thematic argument of your novel or screenplay. It is as close to an unconnected digression or separate side story as you can include. If your main plot is a straight road, this kind of subplot is a scenic diversion that adds to the trip while still taking it in more or less the right direction.

4 | Structuring a Subplot

How Big is Your Subplot?

There aren't any official guides for quantifying the size of a subplot, so I'm going to make some categories up. In increasing size and complexity:

- *Tiny* – consisting of vignettes or snippets
- *Small* – equivalent to a short story or a short Film
- *Medium* – like a novella or TV episode
- *Large* – close to the size of a novel or movie

Which of these you choose for a subplot will depend on how much subplot you want to include and how important the subplot is in relation to the main plot. Before you begin structuring a subplot, you have to decide what you want to achieve with it. What is its purpose? You will also need some idea of how far you want it to feature in terms of the A-plot. I'm not talking about how many words or pages it takes up, I mean how far it stretches across the story's timeline. Even a very short subplot (one made up of few words) can feature across the whole of a story if you want it to. You have to decide where bits of it should pop up so that it has the most dramatic effect on your story as a whole. I'll write more about weaving together the plot and subplot in Chapter 5.

It's important to remember that no matter how small or large a subplot it, it is still a *plot*. It must have a structure – a beginning, a middle, and an end. We may not *see* all of those three, but they will be implied. And don't forget that some of the setup for a subplot – introducing the characters and story world perhaps – may be done in the main plot or within an earlier subplot.

Let's look at the different subplot sizes – tiny, small, medium and large – and see how they might be structured.

Tiny Subplots

The smallest form of subplot is told using one or more short snippets or vignettes and is perhaps the equivalent of a piece of flash fiction or a television commercial of the type that tells a story. It takes a great deal of skill, practice, and/or a particular mindset to be able to tell a story in miniature.

In the last chapter, I talked about the 'bookend' subplot which features a short section at the beginning and end of a story. The scene that sets up the subplot at the beginning and the one that resolves it at the end can both be vignettes. A vignette is a short piece, less than a dramatised scene, that vividly captures a brief moment in time. In *The Princess Bride,* it is the scene where Peter Falk sits down to read a story to his reluctant grandson and then the moment they share at the end where the grandson is shown to have been captivated by the story. In *Lord of the Rings,* it is Sam Gamgee being too shy to ask Rosie to dance at the beginning and then having the confidence to court her at the end. In both cases we see the *beginning* and *ending* of a subplot, with the middle being implied – the events of the main story effectively serve as the middle. In *Airplane!* we have the set-up and payoff of the gag involving the taxi – we don't need the rising tension of a middle. In my romance novel novel *Fandango* I refer to the romantic relationships of several secondary characters in a series of scenes that really only serve to support a theme of the story in a

minor way. Nothing dramatic happens, we just see snapshots of these relationships as the story goes along.

A piece of *flash fiction* is typically a little larger than a vignette. Flash fiction (also known as a short-short story or microfiction) offers more in the may of plot development, having a beginning, middle and end, and may include a bit more in the way of characterisation. A feature of these brief stories is that they can imply a much bigger story, they are not simply action in a brief scene. Often flash fiction will have a twist ending, but this is not a definite requirement. Writings such as *Aesop's Fables,* which began as part of an oral tradition, and even jokes can be compared to flash fiction.

This type of subplot is so short that there isn't a great deal to say about its structure. Here are some points to bear in mind:

- Connect it to the main theme of your novel or screenplay
- Select one or two characters from your existing cast
- Focus on a single moment in time and a single conflict, internal or external
- Think in terms of beginning, middle and end and then start with the middle, *implying* as much of the beginning as possible
- Place the main character in a situation where a decision is required or where action must be taken
- The ending may be shown or it can be implied left at a point where an action is about to be taken
- Keep dialogue and description to a minimum and make what you do use vivid
- Since the subplot is part of a longer work, think of how consequences arising from it might create a complication or conflict in the larger story

The length of a short-short or piece of flash fiction ranges from a handful of words to about 1,000 words – beyond that and you're getting into short story territory. Some markets and competitions specify word length and there are specific sub-categories of short-short fiction, e.g. a 'Drabble,' that have a set length. As part of a larger work, a 'short-short subplot' should be as long as it needs to be. And no longer.

If thinking of a short-short in terms of structuring a single scene would be helpful to you, have a look at my free guide *Making a Scene* available at www.paultomlinson.org/how-to

Small Subplots

I'm tempted to misquote Konstantin Stanislavski here and say, 'There are no small subplots, only small writers,' but it's not true, so I won't. As I said above, we can think of a small subplot in terms of a short story or a short film. Again, different markets and awards might specify the word count for a short story, but for our purposes, anything larger than a short-short but smaller than a

novella is a short story. And if you want to think of it in film terms, it's anything shorter than, say, half-an-hour. Half-an-hour gets us to the length of a sitcom episode.

There is no standard framework or model for a short story plot and it would take a whole book to explore all the options available. There are mystery stories, love stories, twist-in-the-tale stories, revenge stories, redemption stories, and so on. You could use any of these as the basis for a subplot in a larger work.

If we think in terms of beginning, middle, and end, then a short story is likely to have a setup that runs straight into rising action reaching a crisis/climax with very little after it in terms of denouement. Some stories begin with action, with the protagonist in the middle of the rising action, so as to have the strongest possible start. They then present some setup situation to show how the character got into this mess, and finally, there is the climax showing how they get out of the problem situation. Or fail to do so.

Again, as our small subplot is part of a larger work, you should think about what implications the outcome of the subplot has for the action of the main plot and for the characters. Try and come up with ways it could add a complication, increase tension, and/or create conflict.

Medium Subplots

I have compared a medium-sized subplot to a novella or a forty-five to sixty-minute television episode. It is large enough to require a suitable story structure but not so large that you should apply the full eight-sequence plot model to it. If you look online or at books about writing for television, you will see models suggesting a structure of between four and seven 'acts,' though these are not chunks of story of equal length and they don't necessarily have the same function as the eight sequences in the mini-movie plotting method. The 'acts' in a television episode were designed to allow commercials to be inserted at various points. More popular shows attracted more advertising and so ended up with more 'act breaks' that writers had to work around. Television series on streaming services aren't structured to meet these needs.

You might want to look at advice for television writers to see if it has anything to offer you. If I were planning to write a novella or a novella-sized subplot, I would definitely look to see what sort of structures television writers use for episodes. And I might even look at advice for sitcom writers if I was writing something shorter.

Roughly speaking, a novella is like a novel but with only a single plot, no subplots, and fewer characters. They range in length from about 20,000 words (some sources quote 17,500) and 40,000 words, where 40,000 words is the minimum length for a novel. Personally, I think 50,000 words is the minimum length for a novel, but that's an argument for another day. Obviously, the longer a novella is, the more like a (short) novel it will be.

There is more room for character development in a novella than in a short story, and you could even structure a character development arc as a subplot the length of a novella.

I looked online for advice on writing novellas and the only detailed guides I found with useful templates were for the romance genre. As an example, check out Marie Belrose's blog, she has templates for plotters and 'pantsers.'

https://authormariebelrose.wixsite.com/website/post/how-to-write-a-romance-novella-plotter-version

https://authormariebelrose.wixsite.com/website/post/how-to-write-a-romance-novella-panster

Large Subplots

Here we're into subplots that are almost of equal size, complexity and importance as a novel or screenplay's main plot. At this point, we can start applying the eight-sequence model that I have written about in *Plot Basics* (2017) and the *Genre Writer* series.

It's important to remember that a subplot should never outshine or overwhelm your main plot, so even though we're talking about a large-scale subplot here, it must still support and serve the main plot. If your subplot starts taking over or running amok, I would suggest (a) drastic pruning, or (b) uprooting it and turning it into a novel or novella in its own right.

My free guide, *Plotting a Flawed Hero Story* uses the eight-sequence model as a way of structuring a story based around character development. Find it at www.paultomlinson.org/how-to

I'm not going to go into detail about how to create full eight-sequence plots, I've written several books breaking plots down into eight sequence templates. *Suspense Thriller* (2018) contains models for nine types of suspense thriller plot. *Crime Thriller* (2019) breaks down fourteen more kinds of plot into eight sequences. *Mystery* (2017) features two variations of a standard whodunit. And *Romance* (2022) breaks down most of the main sub-genres.

In *Romance: How to Write a Romantic Novel,* I included a breakdown of a *medium*-sized subplot, based on the structure of a forty-five-minute to one-hour television episode. I'm including this below.

Creating a Medium-Length Subplot

The Four-Act Structure

A *teaser* is a scene or a short sequence of scenes that opens a television show and captures the a attention of the audience with an intriguing 'hook' that encourages them to stay tuned instead of flipping channels. This can run from four to ten minutes or more for a television episode and often occurs before the opening credits. It's similar to a pre-credits sequence in a movie. You might

want to include one for your subplot, but it's more likely you'll have 'hooked' the readers with the intriguing premise and characters of your main plot or A-story. The teaser may include the 'inciting incident' that sets the subplot in motion, or this may occur at the end of Act I or beginning of Act II.

A *tag* or epilogue or 'coda' is a final scene that typically has the main characters of the tv show back in their home or base location. They share a team or group hug moment, showing that equilibrium has been restored. In 1980s and 90s TV shows you often found a couple of clichés here – a restatement of the 'lesson' that a main character learned from the story of the episode and/or a cheesy joke that ends with a freeze-frame of all the characters grinning. In a novel, you probably don't need a tag for your subplot, unless it forms a small part of the resolution or epilogue of your main plot.

Act I

As in all stories, the first part of a subplot introduces the protagonists, the situation – a problem or opportunity, the potential conflicts, and what is at stake for the characters. Remember that some of your set-up will already have been done in the first part of your main story. Also, don't forget that the protagonist of the subplot may not be the heroine or hero from your main plot. But it could be.

Whoever the 'subplot protagonist' is, they must be someone the reader is interested in to the extent of wanting to see them achieve their subplot goal.

Ideally, by showing what is at stake in the subplot, this first act will tie the subplot into one of the main themes of your novel.

The 'inciting incident' or 'catalyst' that sets the subplot in motion will occur in this act, unless it appeared in the 'teaser.' Ellen Sandler, in *The TV Writer's Workbook*, points out that while this incident is vital to the subplot, the characters may not initially recognise its significance. She also writes that the inciting incident "...can be as small as a broken zipper or as big as a corpse."

Sandler also says that your set-up in Act I should explain why this incident is happening now. Incidents in a story shouldn't just happen because it is convenient for the writer to have them happen. If you answer the question, 'Why now?' your reader will more readily accept the situation. Remember, the 'meet cute' of your heroine and hero was probably a big, unlikely coincidence, so you can't have another one. Coincidences are cheating, you're only allowed one early in a story. Fortunately, your explanation doesn't have to be complicated. If a character decides to get a dog, ask 'Why now?' The answer might be that a neighbour's house was broken into and the character feels vulnerable living alone. Or the character recently ended a relationship and is feeling lonely.

In Act I of the subplot, a protagonist is faced with a situation that requires a decision. They can choose not to act, allowing themselves to be a victim, and suffering whatever consequences or humiliation this may bring. Or they can act. Which do they choose? Tune in to Act II to find out.

Act II

The subplot protagonist ether chooses to take action to resolve their situation or they are forced to take action when the situation worsens significantly. They must then take a moment to consider their new circumstances and decide what to do next. At this point we often present vital exposition or backstory to explain where we are and why the circumstances are significant. We may also learn some backstory, telling us who the subplot protagonist is and how they got to this point in their life.

The subplot protagonist sets out to resolve the situation, choosing a goal and actions to reach that goal. Their actions reveal or create new obstacles. How do you create new obstacles for your character? One way is to introduce a subplot antagonist, a character who actively opposes them. This antagonist may want to prevent the protagonist achieving their goal, either because they want the 'prize' for themselves, or because the protagonist's success would cause some other plan of the antagonist's to fail.

Another way to increase conflict here is to have one of the subplot protagonist's friends or family members oppose their plan. 'I don't want to.' If you're having trouble with this, Ellen Sandler suggests brainstorming a list of responses that an ally of the subplot protagonist might come up with to oppose them. Either the ally resists the subplot protagonist or the subplot protagonist resists the ally. Sandler suggests coming up with at least ten options here, including even ideas that seem unlikely or even stupid. You may find that an unlikely or stupid idea gives you the basis of an original and amusing confrontation.

Pamela Douglas, in *Writing the TV Drama Series*, says that your character may have underestimated the opposition in Act I, but now discovers that they face a determined subplot antagonist. And they may discover that the antagonist is not who or what they expected. Sometimes your subplot antagonist will follow a red herring in Act II and only discover they've been duped at the midpoint. Or they may overcome an obstacle or defeat an opponent and think they've won, only to discover that a stronger and more active antagonist awaits them.

In *Story Maps: TV Drama*, Daniel Calvisi says that Act II should contain a 'meaningful skirmish' that serves as the subplot protagonist's 'first trial.' It should also produce some sort of failure or victim – a 'first casualty' – who could be the subplot protagonist themselves or another character who suffers a "...figurative death, like a loss of innocence."

The Midpoint

This occurs at the end of Act II and sets up Act III. It is something unexpected that turns the story in a new direction. We often see that the stakes are raised at this point. Often, the subplot protagonist discovers that the problem they thought they were facing is much bigger or more serious than they anticipated. They discover what it is that they are really up against.

An element of this discovery is often connected to the subplot protagonists greatest fear. This character's fear will be related to their personality archetype in the same way as the heroine's or the hero's. There is something that they really don't want to do, and the midpoint discovery suggests that they might end up having to do this scary thing if things don't go right. And, of course, things don't go right. Immediately after the midpoint there is often a quiet moment when the subplot protagonist admits their fears and may explain the origins of this fear (revealing their backstory).

Daniel Calvisi says that the midpoint creates a new challenge that propels the story into Act II and which will ultimately pay off in the climax.

Act III

The subplot protagonist reacts to the change that has just occurred and sees the new obstacles it has created. They make decisions and choose new actions that they believe will help them achieve their subplot goal, hopefully avoiding them having to face their greatest fear. Daniel Calvisi says that the subplot protagonist's decision to act at this moment is a 'character-defining action.' He calls it an *assumption of power,* as the character assumes responsibility and fully commits to resolving the situation, come what may.

Calvisi writes that the subplot protagonist is faced with no choice but to make a (symbolic) 'declaration of war.' They will take a big risk to try and resolve the situation once and for all. There may be a moment when this action seems to have brought victory, but this is short-lived. Something goes wrong and the protagonist's situation ends up even worse than when they started. This is the 'darkest hour' in the subplot, the moment when all seems lost. This is what forces the subplot protagonist to 'go for broke' and do something to face their greatest fear.

Act IV

Climax & Resolution. The subplot protagonist comes up with a solution, overcomes the remaining obstacles, resolves the main conflict, and achieves the goal. Or doesn't.

The *climax* of the subplot is what everything has been heading for. It must be the decision and action of the subplot protagonist who comes up with the solution. If they don't, your reader will feel frustrated and disappointed. What was the point? Having someone else swooping in to solve the problem is like *deus ex machina,* having a god appear to solve a mortals problems in life. 'No *deus ex machina,'* is another one of those writer's rules of thumb.

The climax is where we see the subplot protagonist deal with the major obstacle. Often this means facing and defeating a subplot antagonist. Or it may mean doing something to confront their own fear. If they are facing an inner problem, we must see it resolved by some symbolic external problem. If your character was afraid of making a fool of themselves in public, for example, we might see them perform in a karaoke bar. The climax doesn't have to be a big race or a big fight. But it must be significant for the character involved and of

a suitable scale for the length of the subplot. Big subplot, big climax; minor subplot, smaller climax.

Remember that in a subplot, you don't have to have a happy ending. You could have the subplot protagonist *fail* to achieve their subplot goal. That could be an unexpected twist. And it might provide a salutary lesson for the heroine or the hero. Or you could have an *ironic* ending. There are two types of ironic ending. In the first, the subplot protagonist achieves the goal, but discovers that this thing (whatever it is) doesn't bring them the happiness or sense of fulfilment that they thought it would. Again, this might teach the heroine or hero a lesson. Be careful what you wish for. The second type is where the subplot protagonist *fails* to achieve the goal, but gains something much more important instead. One way you could use this in a romantic comedy is have a subplot protagonist trying to prove to everything that they are their false self, fail miserably, and then discover that they gain more when everyone accepts their true self. An ironic ending can give a nice twist in the tail to your subplot and it can be treated seriously or humorously. There may be implied consequences of this subplot ending that will have an impact on the main plot.

5 | Weaving Plot & Subplots

In Chapter 3 I showed that there are several ways to present a subplot – separate or parallel; woven or braided; bookend or sandwich; convergent, divergent, and one-off episodes. The kind that people tend to worry about the most are woven or braided subplots also referred to as an 'in and out' subplot. Those are the subject of this chapter.

Most people can grasp the idea that a subplot is a mini-story that exists within a larger story, but they then wonder how the two storylines should be brought together. When should a subplot begin? How often should you cut from the main plot to the subplot? What impact should the subplot have on the main plot and vice versa?

Some writers can dive right in and merge plot and subplot without giving it much thought, but if you're reading this, you're probably not one of the lucky ones. Some writers have a knack for handling subplots in the same way that some have a knack or dialogue or comedy. The rest of us have to learn how and practice.

I'm going to talk about weaving large or medium subplots together with a main plot. I think there's less difficulty in placing small and tiny subplots – and many of those use one of the alternative presentation methods from Chapter 3. If you are having a problem placing a smaller subplot, the principles I outline below can be applied.

One of the reasons why people sometimes have difficulties placing a subplot is because they follow the advice that I have repeated in this book: *Treat your*

subplot as a separate storyline to ensure that it is properly plotted with a beginning, middle, and end. I absolutely believe that this is sound advice. You should create separate threads and then weave them together. But this can leave you with a mini-story that you've then go to shoehorn into your novel or screenplay somehow. To figure this out, there are some questions we need to answer.

Note that I'm going to refer to the structure of a novel or screenplay in terms of the eight-sequence model, but I'll also try and cross reference this with the *Save the Cat!* beat sheet that many people are familiar with. As a quick reminder, a story has three 'acts,' with Act I being the *beginning* and consisting

From: *Plot Basics: Plot Your Novel or Screenplay in Eight Sequences* © Paul Tomlinson 2017

of roughly the first quarter. Act II is the middle consisting of two quarters separated by a midpoint. Act III is the final quarter, though this is sometimes less than a quarter of the overall length. The four quarters of a story can be broken down into 'eighths' giving us eight sequences. It's easier to visualise if you look at the diagram.

When Should the Subplot Begin?

Generally speaking, you should set up your main plot *before* you begin your subplot. An exception to this is the bookend subplot I talked about in Chapter 3. In most cases, though, you will want to introduce your main character, the story world, and the *inciting incident* (or 'catalyst') that triggers the action of the main plot before introducing a subplot. Typically, your inciting incident (or 'call to adventure') occurs at or before the end of Sequence 1, halfway through Act I, and the protagonist commits to doing something about the situation by the end of Sequence 2, the end of Act I. You might introduce one or even two subplot elements in the first act, but they will be minor ones. More substantial subplots aren't introduced until Act II.

In the *Save the Cat!* plot model, the B-story is introduced as Beat 7 at or near the beginning of Act II. It is described as a 'thematic secondary story' that is often about a romance, friendship, or mentorship. This implies that the subplot begins with a new character entering the protagonist's life or an existing

character taking on the role of lover, friend, or mentor. The *inciting incident* (or 'catalyst') for the subplot is the beginning of this relationship. This event then offers a new challenge or opportunity that the protagonist must decide how to deal with. A protagonist could accept it or try to resist or refuse it.

As we've already seen, not all subplots are relationship subplots. We'll look at relationship subplots and other types of subplots in later chapters, but for now, I think we can accept that a large or medium subplot is most likely to begin at or near the start of Act II after the main plot has been set up.

Although the action of a subplot doesn't properly begin until the beginning of Act II, elements it shares with the main plot – characters, story world and so on – will be introduced during Act I, potentially making the set up section of a subplot simpler. During Act I, you can also mention in dialogue or include other clues about something that will be developed as a subplot in Act II.

As a rule of thumb, all set up for all elements of a novel or screenplay should be complete by the midpoint of the story – you shouldn't be introducing new things after this point unless their potential existence has been established.

How Do You Begin a Subplot?

You begin a subplot in the same way as you would begin a main plot – you have the same options in both cases. I tend to think in terms of two kinds of plot openings. Either you begin with the set-up and build to action or you begin with action and then let the reader or viewer know how this situation came into being – effectively putting set-up second. In the example above from *Save the Cat!,* the beginning of the relationship serves as a setup for the subplot and comes first. But if you want, you can begin with the relationship already in existence, perhaps having begun before the story opens, and this can give a sense that the protagonist had a life before the novel or screenplay begins.

If you begin with set-up, you will want to get your subplot to the point of an inciting incident or challenge before cutting away to the main plot. You need to get to a point where the reader wonders what will happen next. What with the character decide to do? This creates suspense and keeps people turning the pages to find the answer. You could continue past this point in your subplot and get to the point where the character commits to accepting the challenge, again an interesting turning point in the story where the reader or viewer is curious about what will happen.

One of the great things about using eight-sequences (or the 'beats' of *Save the Cat!*) is that the end of each one gives you an interesting plot point that is designed to move the story forward and (perhaps) change its direction dramatically. Each of these is a useful point to end a section of your main plot and cut away to a subplot. Or cut away from your subplot back to the main plot. These plot points can also be used to tie plot and subplot together by having a particular plot event shared by both.

How Many Sections of Subplot Do You Have?

You need to look at your subplot material and decide how you want to divide it up. Even in a large subplot, you might not have eight full plot sequences. And you might want to combine a couple into a decent-sized 'chunk' of story. Once you know how many mini-episodes your story has, you'll have a better idea of how many spots in your main story you need to find to accommodate it.

If we look at the structure of our main plot, the first two sequences probably shouldn't be interrupted by subplots – you use them to set up your main storyline. The last sequence, the eighth, will be taken up by the climax and resolution of the main story, so you really only have a small amount of space to tie off loose ends of a subplot in a vignette. That leaves you five sequences where you can accommodate 'chunks' of subplot. You could push it to six if some of the action of the subplot is combined with the action of the main plot, but I'd advise thinking in terms of no more than five. You don't want a subplot to overwhelm the main plot. Most plotted subplots will have at least three major plot points or 'beats' – their beginning (set up), middle (rising action, tension and/or emotion), and end (climax).

The midpoint of a novel or screenplay often serves a particular purpose. There is often a moment of revelation or realisation. You could use this for an important moment in a subplot or for a significant turning point in the main plot. Or both. The midpoint and the crisis at the end of Act II are good places for a plot and a subplot to intersect with each other – and at the end of Act II, they might converge and become part of the same story strand. This will make more sense when we come to look at a specific example in the chapter on creating and weaving in a romantic subplot.

Create Scenes That Serve Both the Main Plot and Subplot

As well as having plot points that are shared by both the plot and subplot, you can create scenes that move both the plot and the subplot forward. A scene could show the protagonist pursuing his or her main story goal and also a secondary character pursuing their personal goal. An action taken by the secondary character could create an obstacle to the protagonist and the two might even become engaged in low-level conflict. And the protagonist might take actions that create barriers or frustrations for the secondary character.

What About the 'Midpoint' of the Subplot?

Just as the main plot has a moment of realisation or revelation, so does the subplot. It doesn't have to coincide with the midpoint of the main plot (which is the midpoint of Act II and the midpoint of the novel or screenplay as a whole). It *could*, but it doesn't have to. You could have it coincide with, and support, a plot point at the end of one of the other sequences – Sequence 5 or Sequence 6, for example. To some extent, it will depend on where your other 'chunks' of subplot slot into the main plot.

When Should a Subplot End? Where Should the Crisis and Climax of a Subplot Be Placed?

There are three choices here, depending on the relationship between the subplot and the main plot. If you want to end a subplot so it is done and out of the way before you tackle the climax of your main plot, a subplot can end at the end of Sequence 7 or very early in Sequence 8. The end of Sequence 7 is where the main plot reaches crisis point. It is often labelled the protagonist's darkest hour or the 'long dark night of the soul.' You could have your subplot end and be part of the cause of the crisis. Or the subplot ending at this point could be a coincidence that serves to make the protagonist's situation even darker. If you want a more upbeat end to your subplot, you could have it occur before the crisis, so that the crisis then ruins the moment for the hero. Have I mentioned that writers have to be sadists and make life miserable for their characters? Or you could have the subplot end after the crisis, providing a little light in the protagonist's darkness.

The second option is to have the climax of the subplot coincide with the climax of the main plot in a way that each helps boost the dramatic impact of the climax.

And the third option is a combination of the two. You often see this with relationship subplots. There is a crisis in the relationship subplot, a darkest hour, which coincides with the crisis in the main plot. It appears that the relationship is over and there is no chance of reconciliation. But then events building up to the climax help repair the relationship and there is a positive climax in the relationship that occurs during or just after the climax of the main plot.

It's worth saying that, in terms of endings, subplots don't have to adhere to the same rules as main plots. A main plot in genre fiction must have a definitive, unambiguous ending. It must answer the major dramatic question asked at the beginning of the story. With a subplot, you have a little more leeway and can have an ending which isn't quite so clear-cut. You can even leave a subplot such that the reader is left to decide what happens next. I would be careful doing this because there is a risk of disappointing the reader or viewer, but you should be aware that the option exists. If you're writing a series, you also have the option of delaying the outcome until a later novel and even ending a subplot on a cliffhanger in the current novel.

Scenes that feature subplot events do not have to occur at the beginning or end of sequences in the main plot. They can occur between scenes during a sequence. A scene might even serve both the main plot and the subplot. If there is a quiet moment in your main plot, you can keep things moving and up the pace a little by including something interesting from the subplot. Again, if we think of storylines in terms of waves, the peaks of your subplot could coincide with peaks in the main plot or you could have a subplot peak where there is a trough in the main plot. Peaks and troughs refer to the level of physical action and/or the level of emotion. If there is a lull in the action, you might have a

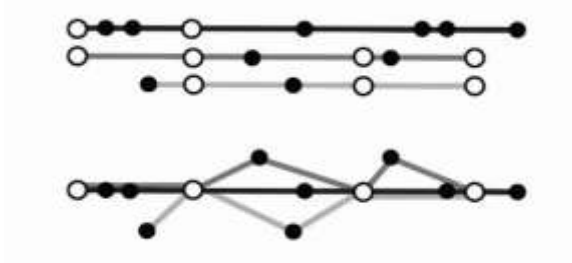
scene of intense emotion. You often see this in thrillers and action-adventure stories where there is a key scene for the romantic subplot in Sequence 5 (after the midpoint) or Sequence 6 (before the crisis). More on this in Chapter 7.

Integrating Subplots

There is a great article by Gabriela Pereira at the *DIY MFA* website that shows visually how subplots might intersect, using a subway (underground railway) style map of *The Hunger Games* as an example:

https://diymfa.com/writing/mapping-out-your-story

Here's my version of a simplified map of how a story featuring three subplots might look – at the top are the three parallel plotlines – with the black line being the main plot or A-story – and below is the map of how they intersect. Black story points are unique to one of the plotlines, white story points are shared by two (or more) plotlines:



Something that Gabriela Pereira didn't show in her example, but which I have included above, is that some subplots may begin *after* the main plot begins and may end *before* the main plot ends. You may want to tie up a subplot in Sequence 6 or 7 so you can concentrate on the ending of your main plot in Sequence 8.

What If You Have More Than One Subplot?

You have a main plot. You've looked at integrating your subplot or B-story using the advice above. What about your C-story? And your D-story? And the rest of the alphabet? As a rule of thumb, we assume that the deeper you get into the alphabet, the smaller and less significant subplots become. Your B-story might be structured like a novella or television episode. Your C-story may be structured like a sitcom episode or a short story. And anything beyond that is going to be in the 'tiny subplot' category involving vignettes rather than a fully plotted story. In a standalone novel or screenplay, you're unlikely to get beyond a D-story, assuming you even get that far.

The exceptions would be (a) an *ensemble story*, where each character has their own plot; (b) an *epic* historical or fantasy novel of 100,000-plus words where there is room for several significant subplots or side-quests, and (c) a *series*, where subplots might span two or more novels – these continuing story arcs often occur as well as the usual subplots you have in a novel.

I've explored subplots in series in *Writing a Series* (2024), but the advice below is also relevant to these.

Cork Boards and Coloured Cards

When weaving together multiple subplots, particularly where they involve different characters, you might want to write plot points and/or scenes on different coloured cards for each subplot and for the main plot. You can then lay them out on the floor or pin them to a cork board and shuffle them around. Sticky notes can be used instead. Some writing software includes virtual cards and corkboards, but I think the real thing offers a more satisfying experience. But that's just me. You could do something similar with colour-coded cells in a spreadsheet or a table in a word processor.

The purpose of this exercise is to see what might fit where and it also lets you see if there are long gaps between sections of a particular plot, risking a reader forgetting about it, or if lots of pink cards are bunched together skewing the story towards one subplot at that point. You can overlap cards or stack them if a particular scene serves to storylines.

6 | How to Get Subplots Wrong. Or Not

If they are used well, subplots can markedly enhance a story and turn it into something special. Used badly, they can mar a story and confuse the reader. Let's take a quick look at the possible risks and some ways to avoid them.

Outshining the Main Plot

If your subplot features secondary characters who are more fun to be with than your main protagonist or which contains events that are more action-packed, dramatic or emotional than those in the main plot, you have a problem. You either have to tone things down, beef up your main plot, or pull the subplot completely and allow it to be a main story in its own right. Your original story might then need a less shiny subplot to replace the first one.

Smothering Main Plot

Where the previous problem was one of quality, this is a problem of quantity – your subplot is receiving too many words or too many pages in comparison to the main plot. There may be times when it is appropriate for a story to have two plots (or more) of more or less equal importance – an ensemble story or a parallel quests story, for example – but these are deliberate plotting choices. If your subplot has just grown and grown until the main plot is being lost or we're spending too much time away from it, you have to consider serious pruning of the subplot. Or, again, you can remove it completely and allow it space to be a story in its own right, replacing it with something that is in proper proportion with the main plot.

Even if a subplot is of a reasonable size, it could swamp the main plot if you present 'chunks' of it that keep the reader away from the main plot for too long.

Distracting from the Main Plot

This can be caused by any of the issues above or below. Or sometimes a subplot is just in the way and there is a risk of people skipping over it so they can get back to the main plot. You should always ask yourself if a subplot is absolutely necessary. Does it add something to the plot? If not, it may just be a distraction.

Not Linked to the Main Plot

Why is the subplot there? What purpose does it serve? And, most importantly, is it connected to the main plot in some way? As we've seen, there are all sorts of ways for a subplot to be connected to the main plot. It can share characters with it, be set in the same story world, offer a smaller-scale version of similar story events, or it can be a variation that serves to prove the thematic argument in a different way.

If there isn't any connection – obvious or subtle – you again have to ask yourself if the subplot belongs in the story. If there isn't a connection, the subplot is irrelevant and is only a digression or a distraction. You either have to find a way to link it to the main plot or cut it.

Contributes Nothing New

Even if a subplot *is* connected to the main plot, you should ask yourself what it adds to the story. Does it add a new perspective on story events, does it explore aspects of the story's main theme, does it reveal significant aspects of character? In sort, does if perform any of the functions listed in Chapter 1? If it only repeats or confirms what already exists in the story, you again need to question whether it has a place in the story. Perhaps you can improve it so that it does contribute something fresh. If not, it probably needs to go. Don't keep it just because you need it to prop up your wordcount.

Focusing Attention on Unimportant Things

There is an unspoken rule in storytelling that says if the writer draws attention to something, that thing will play a significant role at some point in the story. And the more attention that something is given, the more important it will be. The example that is often quoted is Chekhov's gun. This isn't a reference to phasers in *Star Trek.* The playwright Anton Chekhov said, "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." He is saying that you shouldn't include things that are irrelevant. According to this rule, if you introduce something in a subplot, that thing must play a significant role in either the subplot itself or the main plot of the story.

Red herrings in mysteries and other stories are a special case since they are deliberately included to mislead the reader.

Not Properly Plotted

One of the reasons I suggest outlining your subplot away from the main story is so you can see that it exists as a proper storyline in its own right. At a minimum, it needs to have a beginning, middle, and end – even if those parts aren't shown explicitly. The more substantial a subplot it, the more important it is to concentrate on the plotting. Where a subplot shares setup with the main story, make sure the items are set up in a way that serves the subplot properly. And make sure you haven't missed out vital plot points or 'beats,' or glossed over them too quickly. Content and pacing matter in a subplot just as they do in the main plot. If a subplot wanders around with no clear direction, the reader will feel that it is wasting their time.

Unconvincing Plot Twists

This can be a problem in the main plot or the subplot. You might think up a brilliant twist to surprise the reader or viewer, but that surprise needs to be properly prepared for if it is to be convincing. You have to be able to hide the fact that you are deliberately manipulating the reader by misleading them, tricking them into believing that one thing is coming and then pulling the rug out from under them by presenting something very difference. The surprise has to be plausible in terms of what you have set up earlier in the story. The reader must be able to look back and see that you haven't cheated.

For the most part, this is a matter of set up, including foreshadowing and 'planting.' You might have obvious clues to the fake outcome, red herrings that lead a reader to expect one thing. But you also need to plan subtle clues to the surprise outcome. I've already mentioned that hiding clues relating to the main plot within subplot scenes can work quite well as a way of misdirecting the reader or viewer.

Uninteresting Subplots

Even if your subplot meets all of the technical criteria, it still has to pass the entertainment test. Is it something a reader will enjoy reading or a viewer will enjoy watching? A subplot can't simply fulfil a necessary function in the story, it also has to be worth reading in its own right. Does it offer the reader an emotional experience? Is it engaging? Challenging? Intriguing? If not, it needs work or it needs to go.

Lack of Tension, Drama or Emotion

Readers of novels and viewers of movies are there to have an emotional experience. They are seeking a story that makes them *feel* something. Every part of a story should contribute towards that emotional experience. We often liken the peaks and troughs of that experience to a rollercoaster ride. Your subplot and its individual parts must add something to the experience. It must include peaks and troughs of its own and also work together with those of the main story and any other subplots. A subplot that doesn't have suspense, drama, and/or emotion isn't pulling its weight.

Too Many Subplots

A short novel can get by with just a single subplot. A full-length novel or screenplay might have two. And an epic novel or three-hour movie might have three or more subplots. But if you have more than three subplots in a story, ask yourself if they're absolutely necessary – especially if they're all of the medium to large kind. The more subplots you have, the more difficult it is for you to juggle them as a writer and the more difficult it is for a reader or viewer to keep track of them.

Breaking the Mood

I said before that you can use a subplot to provide a change in mood – comic relief being one popular example. But this should be a deliberate and carefully planned result. You don't want a subplot to alter the mood of your story by accident or in the wrong way. If you've been slowly building a feeling of unease and paranoia, a mistimed joke can ruin that. If you have a subplot that is written in a different style or has a different tone, it can stand out like a spider on a cupcake, to misquote Raymond Chandler. Your subplot has to feel like it belongs in the main work and isn't just stuck in to add a bit of variety. Misjudging the tone of a subplot can ruin everything you've created to that point and that's difficult to recover from. Yes, you can use a subplot to change mood or pace, but it still has to be in context and fit with everything around it. You might want to include a shock to shake things up, but it has to be the right kind of shock. You may not always see this problem yourself and may need an editor or beta reader to point it out to you. Trust them when they tell you there's a problem. If you can fix it, fine, but sometimes you have to murder your darlings.

Pulling the Reader Out of the Story

Reading fiction depends on a 'willing suspension of disbelief,' a phrase coined by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Watching movies and theatre plays requires the same thing – the audience *knows* that what they are seeing isn't real, but they are willing to go along with the storyteller and accept the suspension of reality. They accept the 'truth' of the story world. But sometimes a writer accidentally does something that breaks the spell and pulls the reader out of the story. They draw attention to the fact that the reader is participating in an illusion. And once the spell is broken, it's hard to get the reader to re-engage. It's a bit like being 'in the zone' when you are writing.

You don't want anything in your plot to break the spell. Breaking the mood, as mentioned above, is one thing that risks doing this. Including something that doesn't fit in the accepted story world is another. So is springing things on the reader that haven't been properly prepared for.

Insufficient Resolution

If a novel or movie has a weak ending, it can ruin the whole thing. People feel disappointed by it. A weak ending for a subplot can have the same effect. The plotting of a subplot builds towards a climax and it must then deliver. The

climax may be on a much smaller scale than the main story one, but it must still be of an appropriate scale to suit the rest of the subplot. It must be proportionate. As a rough guide, in terms of wordcount or page length, I think the climax and resolution of a story should be at least 10% of the overall length. This works for the main plot and for a subplot. Less than this and your ending might feel underwhelming.

Satisfaction isn't just a matter of scale. The ending must be of the correct kind. If you have an emotional subplot, a big action-based finish isn't going to provide the reader with the fulfilment they were anticipating.

I said above that you can sometimes have an ambiguous ending, leading the reader or viewer to ponder what happens next. This can be effective in some (limited) circumstances, but in most cases, a reader is expecting a 'proper' ending and you would be advised to deliver one. Why risk disappointing people?

I've seen unresolved subplots referred to as 'danglers.' You don't want to be the writer who gives readers a story with danglers.

Diluting the Impact of the Main Plot

The main plot of a story has several dramatic turning points, the major one being the crisis and then the climax in Act III. You don't want the events in your subplot to dilute the impact of any of these turning points, especially the climax. For this reason, you might want to avoid having the dramatic turning points in your subplot coincide with those in the main plot – unless they serve to enhance the impact of the main plot.

Confusing Reader

Many of the issues above, and combinations of them, can serve to confuse the reader or viewer. They may fail to grasp the meaning or purpose of the subplot. Or its construction and placement may detract from the main plot, causing confusion. We don't need to make the meaning of every part of a story blindingly obvious, but we should construct our plot and subplots and join them in such a way that the reader has a good chance of figuring out what we want them to mean. This is another case where you might have to trust the opinion of an editor or beta reader.

Gratuitous Subplots

This is a criticism hurled at movies and television shows more often than novels. And it most often refers to sex and violence. If you include a subplot simply so you can insert a sex scene, a gunfight, or a car chase, you are doing your story – and your reader – a disservice. I said earlier that you can use a subplot to enable you to include genre elements that perhaps your main plot doesn't feature. But creating a subplot simply so you can include a certain type of scene or situation is probably not a great idea. It will feel superficial and insincere. You need to ensure that your subplot has some other function – related to theme, character revelation, mirroring main plot events, or

whatever. This is true for subplots of all kinds. Ideally, you want a subplot to serve more than one story function.

Some writers feel it is necessary to include a romantic subplot in their thriller or action-adventure story. But including one because you think it *ought* to be there is flimsy justification. It should only be there if it serves a genuine purpose. I'll talk more about creating effective romantic subplots in Chapter 7.

7 | *Writing a Romantic Subplot*

What's the difference between a romance novel and a novel with a romantic subplot? In a novel or movie in the romance genre, the romantic relationship between the two main characters forms the main plot or A-story. A romantic subplot is a B-story or even a C-story and is of lesser significance than whatever makes up the A-story. This is obvious, but I thought it was worth saying.

A romantic subplot is plotted in much the same way as a romantic novel (or novella or short story, depending on the scale of your subplot) but it is not necessarily subject to all of the same rules and conventions as a romance novel. To take an obvious feature, a romantic subplot does *not* have to feature a 'happily ever after.' Most of them do, but not all. And in a series, the final outcome of a romantic subplot might be delayed as the romance stretches across several novels or television episodes.

I'll begin by looking at the full eight-sequence plot structure for a major romance subplot and at how it might be woven together with an A-story plot. Then we'll look at the reduced novella-scale and short story variants.

A romantic subplot isn't just a case of the hero of a story finding a woman (or man) that they like and spending time with them. It has an arc – a beginning, middle, and end – that needs to be plotted. There needs to be conflict and suspense. And the subplot needs to have an impact on the main plot or A-story. The scale of the impact depends on the size of the subplot relative to the main plot. At one end of the scale, you have the equivalent of a short romance novel woven together with the main plot. At the other end of the scale, the romantic subplot is more like a short story.

What is the Purpose of a Romantic Subplot?

The main functions of a romantic subplot are to reveal and develop character – particularly that of the protagonist; to raise the stakes for the protagonist, and to add one or more complications or obstacles to the protagonist's main goal. A romantic subplot can also contribute to proving the thematic argument and it could perform any of the other functions listed in Chapter 1, but we'll concentrate on its main functions.

Revealing Character

Most people have a public *persona,* an image they want to present to people in social situations. At work, they want to appear professional and capable. Out with friends, they want to appear cool and fun-loving. In both cases, there are feelings and aspects of their personality that they keep hidden. These hidden parts include the darker sides of a personality, the *shadow self*, and also those aspects that a person feels ashamed of, the *denied self*.

When someone is with someone they trust, a lover or close friend perhaps, they let down their guard a little and reveal some of the hidden aspects. In particular, they are likely to reveal their fears and vulnerabilities – which are part of the denied self.

Character Development

A character's development arc is a journey from *false self* to *authentic self*. During the journey, the character must acknowledge the existence of their *shadow* and *denied* selves and find a way to integrate them and become a whole person, comfortable with who they really are.

In storytelling, the shadow self is often explored through an antagonist or villain who symbolises the protagonist's shadow. And the denied self is often explored via a close relationship with a lover or 'buddy.' I talk about this in detail in *Character Creation* (2018) and in my free guide *Plotting a Flawed Hero Story* available at www.paultomlinson.org/how-to

Raising the Stakes

In many thrillers and action-adventure stories, the hero is a lone wolf. He takes care of himself. He feels an obligation to help others, but he tends to be distanced from the people he is helping. He's just helping people in general. A romantic subplot introduces a person that he cares about as an individual. This person – the 'love interest' if you insist on that term – gives the hero a *personal* stake in the A-story situation – he now has to help everyone else and protect a person her cares deeply about.

In many stories, demonstrating the argument that writers are sadists, the hero is then placed in a situation where he must choose between saving the person he (or she) loves, or saving a whole bunch of other people. Will he choose to sacrifice the person he loves in order to save everyone else? Or will he come up with a third option?

Obstacles & Complications

There are a couple of ways that this can work. Firstly, falling in love can be a distraction, keeping the protagonist from his or her main quest. They would sooner spend time with their 'love interest' than be out there tackling whatever the big external problem is. Secondly, the 'love interest' can get into trouble meaning the protagonist is diverted from the main task to rescue them. A villain can also take advantage of the protagonist's relationship by

kidnapping the 'love interest' and holding them hostage to try and force the protagonist to give up all efforts to prevent the villain's evil plan.

If you want to add maximum complication and conflict to a story, you can make your romantic subplot follow the enemies-to-lovers plot. I wrote about this in *Romance* (2022). The 'buddy movie' plot is a platonic version of this, and I wrote about it in *Crime Thriller* (2019) and in *Urban Fantasy* (2023).

Structure of a Romantic Subplot

The structure of any romance story follows the basic stages of a real-life romance:

1. First Encounter or re-encounter – the 'meet cute'
2. The awkward stage of first getting to know each other
3. Falling in love
4. Being a couple and bonding
5. Uncertainty – the 'honeymoon period' is over and reality intrudes
6. Power struggle – two people afraid of giving up their independence and becoming 'a couple'
7. Intimacy – sharing their deepest fears and supporting each other
8. Commitment – the 'happily ever after' or 'happy for now'

In *Writing a Series* (2024) I talked about how a romantic subplot can show stages one through four across one or more novels and then get stuck as stage five or six, cycling through those stages across several novels, perhaps getting as far as stage seven before falling back again to five or six, keeping the romantic subplot alive and never completing it. Here, we'll assume you want to complete the romantic subplot in a single novel or screenplay.

There are several romance plots used in the romance genre. I broke down six or seven of the main ones in *Romance: How to Write a Romantic Novel* (2022) using the eight-sequence model. Those models were for a story where the romance is the A-story, but any of them could be adapted for a significant B-story in a novel or screenplay in another genre. In that book there is also a generic overview of the romance plot – I'll include the headings from that below to give an idea of how a romance might develop across the eight sequences of a novel or screenplay.

Note: In the example below, I use the terms 'hero' and 'heroine' to refer to unnamed characters. The story structure applies to characters of any gender and to those who reject gender labels. I'm also going to assume that the main character in a romance is the heroine, which is the case in a traditional romance novel, but in a romantic subplot the plotline might be seen from the hero's point of view or it may switch viewpoint between hero and heroine.

Note 2: In the structure below, I have left the headings for Acts and Sequences. If you use this for a framework, these won't necessarily coincide with the act and sequence breaks in the main plot or A-story.

Act I: Girl Meets Boy

Act I makes up roughly the first quarter of a story, consisting of sequences one and two. It serves to set up the story.

Sequence 1

Introduces the two main characters, having them meet in a way that means they cannot ignore or be indifferent to each other. In a 'second chance' romance, two characters who were previously in a relationship meet up again.

Introduce the Heroine – Her personality, appearance, and situation

The Heroine's Ordinary World (Optional) – Also referred to as her *status quo*. There is often a suggestion that something is lacking in her life – perhaps a hint of her backstory, though this will be revealed more in Sequence 2 and a later 'confessional' scene in Sequence 4 or 5.

Introduce the Hero – His personality and appearance. Details of his backstory are typically not revealed until he and the heroine are dating – in Sequences 4 and 5.

The Hero's Ordinary World (Optional) – Some stories begin in the heroine's world, into which the hero intrudes at the cute meet. But in stories like the Hollywood screwball comedy, the heroine intrudes on his world, so we initially see his status quo rather than hers.

Meet Cute – External circumstances or a coincidence cause the hero and heroine to meet. Or one of the two may encounter the other and deliberately engineer an 'accidental' meeting. Or their meeting may be arranged by a third party – perhaps a matchmaker or someone with evil intentions. This is similar to the *Call to Adventure* in the hero's journey, but here it is more of a *Call to Love.*

Sparks Fly – When the heroine and hero first meet, they experience strong emotions. These may be positive – one or both of them experiences love at first sight. Or they may be negative – the situation of their meeting may be such that they hate each other on sight. Or one or both may experience contradictory feelings – being both attracted and repelled.

Challenge – Inherent in this first meeting will be a suggestion that one character will challenge the other or that they will both challenge each other. Here we're talking about challenging them to grow as a person and face their fears and their hidden shame. Unless one character presents a challenge to the other – or they both challenge each other – your story isn't going to work. Romance stories need sexual tension – Will they or won't they? – and you can only create this by introducing something that suggests that they *won't*. If they just meet, fall in love, and live happily ever after, you don't have a story worth telling.

Potential – Even if the two characters hate each other on sight, we will see a glimpse of the fact that they could be a good match romantically.

Sequence 2

The three basic functions of this part of the story are – to show how the two characters react to the 'call to love'; hint at why they react in this way, and trap them in a situation where they can't get away from each other, forcing them to do something in response to the call. Once they are locked together in this way, the set-up of our story is complete and we move into ACT II.

Heroine's Initial Reaction to the Call to Love – Either the heroine falls in love with the hero at first sight or she refuses to accept that she is attracted to him. If her initial reaction is to *refuse the call to love*. She can remain in this state of denial or indecision until she is pushed, pulled, or lured into responding to the call and making a decision to act, which is usually the result of the *lock-in*, see below.

More About the Heroine and Her Ordinary World

Heroine's Greatest Fear & Defences – (Optional) Required if the story features a character development arc for the hero.

Heroine's Confidante or Confidant

Heroine Says 'No' to Love – The heroine puts forward her argument against accepting the call to love. Typically, she will say that she doesn't need a man in her life right now or that she's not yet ready for another relationship. Or that she has sworn off men for good because her last relationship was a complete disaster.

Heroine's Decision & Action

More About the Hero

Hero's Initial Reaction to the Call to Love – He might fall in love at first sight and decide to woo the heroine. Or he may refuse to accept that he is attracted to her.

Hero's Greatest Fear & Defences – (Optional) Required if the story features a character development arc for the hero.

Hero's Confidant – (Optional)

Hero Says 'No' to Love – (Optional – If the hero falls in love at first sight, this doesn't apply).

Hero's Decision & Action

The Lock-In – External events force the heroine and hero together or trap them together in a way that means they can no longer avoid or ignore each other. They are compelled to deal with the other person and their feelings.

End of Act I Turning Point

The End of Act I Turning Point is typically a point where the romance (the B-story) and the external subplot (the A-story) come together and begin influencing each other. The A-story provides obstacles for the romance and the romance provides obstacles to the action of the main plot.

Stakes Established – The turning point at the end of Act I raises the stakes in the B-story and the A-story. There is now a romance at stake and the outcome of the main plot events. By the end of Act I, we know what is at stake in the A-story and the B-story. We also have some idea of the emotional and psychological stakes for the heroine (and perhaps the hero), in terms of their greatest fear. Put simply, we know what the story is about.

Act II (Part 1): Sexual Tension

The second quarter (approximately) consists of Sequence 3 and Sequence 4. The function of these sequences is to raise the level of sexual tension between the hero and heroine.

Sequence 3: Refusal of the Call

This sequence and Sequence 4 are concerned with the *denial* of romantic feelings by one or both characters. And this denial gives rise to *romantic suspense* as the reader wonders, 'Will they or won't they?' This question is not answered until the *midpoint* of the story at the end of Sequence 4.

Heroine's Backstory – At this point, we may learn something that helps explain the heroine's reluctance to begin a romantic relationship. This is typically because of a previous romance that ended badly or because the heroine lacks experience.

Cross-Purposes – At this point in the story, the heroine and hero do not understand each other. They may want different things in terms of a relationship and in terms of external goals. Their very different viewpoints and goals mean that there is plenty of scope for doubts and misunderstanding.

Heroine (or Hero) Says 'No' to Love – This may be an intensification of the same character's argument as was expressed in Sequence 2 above, or it may be the other character expressing a similar argument.

Hero Says 'Yes' to Love – If the hero is in love and has decided to woo the heroine, instead of arguing against love, he will provide an argument in favour of love.

Hero Displays His Sensitive Side – One of the reasons why the heroine struggles to deny her feelings for the hero is because she sees evidence of his gentler side. He demonstrates kindness in his interaction with a child, an old person, or a pet. He has a hidden ability to be a carer and the heroine finds this attractive.

Increased Attraction – Despite her denial, the heroine (or hero or both) feels their attraction to the other person growing. There may even be a romantic moment – a kiss or an attempted kiss – that is interrupted, to the heroine's relief.

External Obstacles – As well as internal conflict experienced by one or both of the main characters, events in the A-story or another subplot also act as obstacles to the development of the romantic relationship.

End of Sequence 3 Set-Up – At the end of this sequence, we can set up something that will pay off at the end of Sequence 5, paving the way for the *dark moment* (Girl Loses Boy). This set-up or 'plant' doesn't have to be a major incident, just something that the reader will remember when it crops up again later.

Sequence 4: Falling in Love

Although I designate Sequence 4 as the 'falling in love' phase of the story, some things in Sequence 3 also contribute to the development of the heroine and the hero's feelings for each other.

Final Attempt at Denial – The heroine (or the hero) may instigate a meeting of some sort to try and end all of this sexual tension nonsense. The meeting doesn't go as planned.

Getting to Know You – The heroine and hero are spending more time together and will often find themselves doing the sorts of domestic things that couples do.

More Humour/Chaos – In a romantic comedy, the heroine is likely to do something else that upsets the balance of the hero's life (or vice versa). This event serves either the *denial* function or the *attraction* function or a bit of both.

Admitting Attraction – This is a key moment that marks the beginning of the end of the *denial* phase. One or both characters admit – to themselves, to their confidante, and – ultimately – to each other that they are physically and romantically attracted to the other person.

Something Sexy – The hero does something that the heroine finds sexy – he either rescues her or demonstrates his caring nature in some other way. The heroine does something that the hero finds sexy, perhaps demonstrating her strength and feistiness. These are the first indications that each character can overcome their inner flaw and are also glimpses of their *true selves*.

Change in Behaviour – As the heroine and hero grow to know each other and their feelings of attraction develop, we will see some changes in their behaviour.

The Midpoint

This marks the middle of Act II and the middle of the story as a whole. Something happens that shows the relationship has moved to a new level and taken on added significance for the heroine and hero. In a clean or sweet romance, this is likely to be the first significant kiss. In a spicier romance, the heroine and hero have sex for the first time at the midpoint of this subplot.

The midpoint also marks another change in the story. In the first half of the story, external circumstances served to push the heroine and hero together, with the lock-in and the midpoint being significant examples of this. At the midpoint, the two characters acknowledge their feelings for each other and decide that they *want* to be a couple. After this point, external events serve to try and force heroine and hero apart – and this is what happens at the end of Act II.

Act II (Part 2): Being in Love & Fighting for Love

Sequence 5: Being in Love

Aftermath of the Midpoint – This is the story equivalent of an after-sex cigarette, if people still do that. After the sexy kiss or the sex, the heroine and hero take a moment to acknowledge that something has changed. There may be dialogue here or it may be expressed only in terms of each character's inner thoughts.

Hero in the Heroine's World – Their relationship now enters the public sphere. The hero may see her at work and/or meet her friends. Her feelings about him are no longer a secret.

Heroine in the Hero's World – (Optional)

Family – Having spent some time in isolation with the hero, when the relationship enters the public phase, the heroine may introduce him to her family or they may return to a place where family is present.

Romantic Dates – The heroine and hero may have gone on dates in Sequence 4 or even Sequence 3. In Sequence 5 they date as an established couple.

Domesticity – I mentioned this in the previous sequence, but it can occur here instead or as well. We see the heroine and hero doing ordinary domestic tasks together, being comfortable in a domestic environment.

Romantic Attraction – This is a significant part of this part of the story. We see how the hero feels about the heroine, from his actions and his point of view, and also how she feels about him. There is some physical description here, but a lot of it is related to being attracted to aspects of the other character's personality.

Heroine's Backstory – The heroine now trusts the hero to tell him about significant events in her childhood and details about her previous marriage or relationship.

Hero's Backstory – The hero now trusts the heroine enough to allow himself to be vulnerable around her. He shows her his caring side, which she has seen a little bit previously – it is one of the things that attracted her to him. He will also reveal something of his fear and shame. By accepting and loving him despite his faults, the heroine helps him *begin* to overcome his character flaw.

Confidante – The heroine and/or hero may have a scene where they tell their closest friend how they feel about the person they are falling in love with.

Cloud on the Horizon – At some point during this sequence, you need to hint at trouble to come. This may be a subtle reminder of the thing that was set up in Sequence 3 or it may be something that will lead, like the first event in a chain reaction, to that set-up being paid off. Often, the hero or heroine has a secret, and we see something here that threatens to expose this secret.

Sequence 6: The Unravelling & Girl Loses Boy

Sequence 6 builds to a situation where, at the end of the sequence, boy loses girl. Or girl loses boy. Before that happens, we will see more situations of the heroine and hero doing things as a couple, acting as if everything is fine. But there will be an undercurrent of tension as we lead the reader to wonder, 'Can their happiness last?' There is much more of a bittersweet tone here because the reader knows something that the two characters don't – something bad is going to happen. We don't want the reader to be in tears, not yet. We save that for Sequence 7, but we do want them to feel uneasy. This apparently perfect relationship is doomed.

Friends/Family Interfere – (Optional) People around them may tell the heroine and hero that they are perfect for each other and that they should get married.

Fake Proposal – (Optional) In some stories the hero makes a jokey 'proposal' or refers to the heroine as Mrs. Whatever-his-surname-is. The heroine will have mixed feelings about this, thinking that he doesn't get to decide about a marriage proposal without her input, even a jokey one.

Set-up Dark Moment – There is an even stronger hint that something isn't right. Perhaps the heroine's (or hero's) confidante suspects something or has heard rumours. Or a mysterious character – perhaps someone from the hero's past – makes an appearance or a second appearance.

Heroine's Ideal Man – (Optional) The heroine may talk to her confidante or to the hero, describing the qualities of the sort of man she could settle down with permanently. She is essentially describing the hero – but the reader knows that the hero has a secret that may ruin his chances of being this ideal man. Or the heroine has a secret that the hero will react to in a way that will show he isn't the ideal man.

Real Proposal – (Optional) The hero makes a proper proposal or some other gesture indicating a more permanent commitment to her. The heroine may

refuse, ask for time to think about it, or accept. Or there may be some external interruption that means she can't give him an answer right now.

Confession Interrupted – If the hero (or the heroine) has a secret, they must make an attempt to confess it. This is a vitally important part of the story because it shows that the hero is basically a good, honest guy and it is one of the reasons why the heroine is able to forgive him after their break-up. If the hero was able to make this confession, coming clean about the secret in his past or present life, it would prevent the *dark moment*. The dark moment is caused by this secret and by some misunderstanding related to it.

The hero tells the heroine that he has something important to tell her. But circumstances conspire against him. He has to give up for the moment, but he believes he'll have another opportunity to come clean. But Fate has other ideas. In terms of the story, it is vitally important that he *tries* to do the right thing.

The Dark Moment – The 'boy loses girl' moment in a romance, the *break-up,* is sometimes referred to as the 'dark moment' or the main character's 'darkest hour.' The break-up marks the beginning of a new phase in the story, in which the heroine is alone again and in Sequence 7 we will see that she is upset and feeling low as a result.

Confidante – It may be the heroine's confidante who reveals the hero's secret to her. Or the hero's confidant may reveal the heroine's secret to him.

Reality Shift – The dark moment needs to be sudden and sharp – and from the point of view of the characters, unexpected. But the reader knew it was coming, they've been *dreading* it but also anticipating it. To ensure it has maximum impact, you should keep this brief. It happens. There aren't too many details, there is no long explanation – that can wait until Sequence 7 – it just drops like a bomb, leaving the character(s) stunned. We don't even see their reactions until the next sequence. Think of it as being something awful happening and then a freeze-frame on a face that is too shocked to respond.

Act III: Climax & Resolution

Sequence 7: Reaction to Loss & Fighting for Love

Sequence 6 ends with a shocker – a situation that looks set to end their relationship for good. In Sequence 7 we see the *reaction* of the heroine and/or hero to this devastating revelation.

Heroine Berates Herself – She is angry at herself for having let down her defences and trusted the hero. And for allowing herself to dream that a perfect relationship was possible. (Or the hero berates himself)

Family/Friends Interfere – Unaware of the potential rift between heroine and hero, people around them may continue to push for them to make the relationship with a marriage proposal or a marriage. They may even start planning the wedding.

Heroine Wants to End Relationship – The heroine's gut feeling may be to end the relationship, but some part of her wants to deny the truth of the dark moment.

Decision Time – Having learned the 'truth' during the dark moment of revelation, the heroine (or hero) must decide what to do next.

Heroine Tries to Discover the Truth – The heroine sets out to discover if what she learned at the dark moment is true. She may sneak around like a private detective. Or she might talk to other people who know the hero. Or she could try to trick him into revealing the truth.

Truth Admitted – The hero may admit the truth, confess his secret, or the heroine may find some other kind of proof.

Betrayal – The heroine feels that the hero has betrayed her. He isn't the man she thought he was.

Heroine Confronts Hero – Why did you lie to me? The heroine makes it clear that she feels he has betrayed her. (Or the hero confronts her)

Hero's Response – How the hero responds to the confrontation will depend on the nature of the misunderstanding that exists between them.

Hero's Backstory – This explains why he did what he did. It reveals details of the emotional trauma he suffered in the past – as a child or in a previous relationship – and shows how his fear and shame came into being.

End of Relationship – The heroine (or the hero) ends the relationship. They are emotionally and physically separated. This may be a permanent break, or they may say that they need some time apart to think about what has happened.

Heroine Tries to Avoid Hero – But Fate has other ideas.

End of Lock-In – The lock-in has been keeping the heroine and hero together since the end of Act I. You might need to find some way to end these circumstances or to circumvent them at least temporarily to keep them apart.

Hero Goes Away – The hero may decide that he needs some time alone to sort things out.

Family/Friends Interfere – The confidante, a family member, and/or members of the circle of friends try and persuade the heroine that she should give the hero a chance to prove himself. He deserves a second chance. Initially, she argues against that. She is feeling hurt, there are no second chances.

Loss – The end of the relationship brings a profound feeling of loss, similar to a bereavement. One or both characters may experience the five stages of change/grief as seen in the Kübler-Ross model.

Change of Appearance – The heroine no longer wants to impress the hero and the way she dresses reflects this.

Character Growth – The break-up serves as the catalyst for the final stages of the hero and/or heroine's *character development arc*. If he or she wants to win back the other, they are going to overcome their character flaw by integrating their shadow and denied selves, achieving wholeness, and abandoning the defensive mask of their false selves and committing to being their true self.

Misunderstanding – Despite the *seeming* disaster of the dark moment, you do want your characters to be reconciled. And that reconciliation must be believable in the context of their situation and their personalities. You can't have something horrible happen and then have them immediately forgive, kiss and makeup. That would be unfulfilling for the reader. We must see them *earn* their happy ever after. One way to allow room for a properly motivated and believable reconciliation is to have the break-up based, in part, on a misunderstanding. The heroine *believes* that the hero has betrayed her (or vice versa), but this belief is based on an incorrect or incomplete understanding of the hero's motives.

The *interrupted confession* in Sequence 6 is another way of setting up a believable reconciliation. He *tried* to do the right thing and reveal his secret before someone else did. This counts in his favour.

Alone Again – The heroine and the hero are alone. Each is missing the other and they are feeling unhappy. They do not believe that there is any chance of the two of them getting back together.

Hero 'Punishes' Heroine – (Optional) In the old-school romances where she was a virgin and he was a rake, the hero would demonstrate his displeasure at the heroine by engaging in rakish behaviour. He might date another woman to show the heroine that he doesn't need her. This doesn't typically happen in modern romances.

Hero Returns – Having spent some time alone, the hero decides that he can't live without the heroine. He returns and professes his love for her. She rebuffs him.

Hero Demonstrates His Caring Side – The hero may complete some task that helps the heroine or her family. Or perhaps he completes some part of the A-story. This is a sort of farewell gesture and it typically accompanies a more permanent going away.

Sequence 8: Reconciliation & Happy Ever After (Girl Gets Boy)

The ending of a romance is relatively simple. A misunderstanding is cleared up, the heroine and hero prove their love for each other, and there is a commitment to the relationship, usually in the form of a literal or symbolic proposal or a marriage.

Tentative Move by the Hero – The hero may do something to try and make things right.

Family/Friends Interfere – (Optional) Family members or close friends may intervene or conspire to bring about a reconciliation.

Heroine and Hero Miserable Without Each Other – Both characters are unhappy, but their defences are back in place, and they don't want to take the risk of showing their vulnerability.

Hero's Epiphany – The hero knows he loves the heroine and now he reaches a point where he realises he doesn't want to live without her. He cannot live without her.

Hero Completes Character Growth – The 'epiphany' is the final push the hero needs to overcome his character flaw. He deals with his fear and shame, abandons his false self and defensive behaviours, and accepts his true self.

Grand Romantic Gesture/Sacrifice – The term 'grand gesture' is sometimes used to refer to the romantic things the hero does when he is wooing the heroine. Here we're talking about something much more significant. What we're looking for here is something that proves to the heroine that the hero has changed. It demonstrates the fact that he has completed his character growth and overcome his flaw. He is no longer employing defensive behaviours. This 'gesture' or action is typically a sacrifice that the hero makes that shows he is prepared to make himself vulnerable.

The Race Against Time – After the hero has his epiphany, he may need to chase after the heroine and stop her from doing something. She might be planning to board a plane and leave his lie forever. Or she may be planning to marry another man. If the hero doesn't get there in time, he will lose her forever.

Heroine Epiphany and Completion of Character Growth – This tends to be more low-key and occurs more quickly than for the hero. Typically, it is triggered by the hero's 'sacrifice.' She sees what he is prepared to do for her, and she comes to see herself as worthy of this sacrifice.

External Events Push Them Apart – Having recognised they need each other, the heroine and hero may then find themselves pushed apart by events in the A-story. The cliché is that the villain kidnaps the heroine, and the hero must rescue her.

Reconciliation – The epiphanies and the hero's grand gesture bring the heroine and hero together emotionally – there are usually some tears shed here. Then they will sit down and sort out the misunderstanding that separated them.

Commitment and Happily Ever After – Finally they make a commitment to one another.

Epilogue – (Optional) Sometimes you might want to show the heroine and hero living happily ever after some time after they made a commitment to each other. In romance novels this is often a scene with them six months later or after their marriage or after their child is born. It shows the heroine and hero's

new 'ordinary world' – this is where they now live (together) and they have achieved a new and comfortable equilibrium.

Given that the details above are designed for a full-length romance novel, you will need to select only those parts that you think are necessary for your story's subplot. You will probably leave out all or most of the things marked 'optional.'

Read or reread novels from your chosen genre and take note of how romantic subplots are portrayed. Look out for any of the elements listed above.

Weaving Together the Main Plot and Romantic Subplot

Once you have decided which parts of the romantic plot you want to include in your subplot, you weave it together with the main plot using the techniques discussed in Chapter 5.

The Novella-Length Romantic Subplot

A novella is only about a third of the length of a novel and so the plot must be somewhat reduced. Some plot points are omitted and some are presented in a briefer form. There isn't room for a full character development arc, so you are likely to begin with your character someway along the path of growth that they need to make, with only a final backslide into 'immoral' or unhealthy behaviour to be witnessed and overcome.

The setup stages of meeting and falling in love will be about the same as for a full-length romance novel. The being in love stage will probably be just one scene or perhaps two – a nice date and something domestic. The falling out and 'darkest hour' will occur at about the two-thirds stage in the plot and will be based on a smaller-scale misunderstanding that will be a little easier to overcome. The epiphany and reconciliation will occur over the space of only a couple of scenes or so and there won't be much in the way of loose ends to tidy up after the couple get back together.

The structure for a medium-length subplot that I outlined in Chapter 4 can be used as a guide. Romance author Rachelle Ayala has written about how she created her 20,000 word novella *Christmas Stray:*

http://www.rachelleayala.com/2015/01/how-i-wrote-20000-word-novella-in-48.html

In her book *Romancing the Beat: Story Structure for Romance Novels* (2016), Gwen Hayes, shows how she plotted her 15,000 word Christmas romance 'Don't Stop Believing,' which is at the longer end of the short story category.Both her book and the story are worth checking out if you want to write romantic subplots.

The Short Story-Length Romantic Subplot

Hero and heroine meet and experience a spark of attraction. They spend time together, combining elements of falling in love and being in love from the main template. There is an issue or obstacle to love – it looks like their romance could be over. This may be an external problem or an internal one – e.g. self-doubt. One or both determine that they must be with the other. An attempt to resolve the issue or remove the obstacle. It may succeed or it may fail in a dramatic or humorous way. Because of or in spite of the efforts to deal with the problem, the hero and heroine are reunited and it seems like their relationship will now continue towards commitment.

This could be presented in terms of a series of dramatised scenes or perhaps it can be carried in a few vignettes.

8 | Side Quests & Secondary Character Subplots

A *side quest* is an episode within a larger story and usually involves the protagonist seeking to obtain something that is required to achieve his or her larger story goal. Or it could see the protagonist taking action to remove an obstacle that stands in the way of the main quest. The object sought or the obstacle to be tackled is a stepping stone along the journey towards the main objective of the story.

This makes it sound like something from mythology or fantasy, where the hero has to obtain a magical weapon or elixir. But it could just as easily describe a 'side quest' to find an outfit for a special event or to recover a lost or stolen item.

In these cases, the line between a subplot and an episode within the main plot is a fine one. An episode needs to be plotted and woven into the main plotline in the same way as a subplot.

Raising the Stakes

If you establish the importance of the subplot or side quest goal, then a threat to the success of the side quest takes on added importance. The object sought or the obstacle to be removed is vital to the main plot quest, so failure in the side quest potentially means failure of the whole quest. You need to show the reader or viewer what value the side quest goal has for the protagonist and what the consequences of failure would be.

In a side quest, the protagonist will likely have to make three attempts to achieve the goal. This is another example of the 'rule of three' in storytelling. First, your character will take the easiest and most obvious path. This might be as simple as *asking* someone to hand over the object or to stop doing the thing that causes the obstacle. When this fails, the protagonist might try something that borders on immoral behaviour – bribery, threats, lies or whatever. Finally, the protagonist does the right thing, perhaps involving some sort of sacrifice on their part, and achieves success. Or not, it's your story so

you decide. Ironic endings can be used in side quests. And even something that looks like success can have unforeseen consequences later in the story.

Revealing Character

Any subplot can be used to reveal aspects of a character's personality that we haven't yet seen in the main plotline. Putting your protagonist in a different sort of situation, perhaps with different characters, can lead them to behave in a different way. We all tend to behave differently when we're at home with a parent or spouse to when we're out with 'the guys' or on our best behaviour at work. We might behave differently when we're engaged in a leisure or sporting activity. Or when we're faced with a challenge that takes us outside our comfort zone.

In storytelling, using a subplot to reveal something new about a character is usually a chance to introduce something that will be important later in the story. Remember Chekhov's gun? If we spend time on something, it must be relevant. A side plot should reveal something directly relevant to the main plot. Or it can reveal something significant in terms of a character's development arc, making it indirectly relevant to the main plot.

As well as revealing facets of personality, a side quest can reveal skills, abilities, and/or knowledge that the protagonist already has. Or the purpose of the subplot could be for them to *gain* these things. This serves as a 'plant,' setting up something that will be used during the climax of the story. And it also serves as foreshadowing. A reader may never have heard of Chekhov's gun, but they're aware that anything that appears in a story should have some relevance later.

Secondary Character Subplots

Secondary character subplots are like side quests except that a secondary character takes the main role instead of your protagonist. Your protagonist might feature as a secondary character in this mini-story – perhaps serving as co-protagonist, love interest, mentor, antagonist or whatever – or they may just be a background character or not appear at all. Sometimes one of these subplots is used to get your main character off stage for a while.

A secondary character subplot can serve any of the functions I listed in Chapter 1, and it will probably serve more than one of them. I've said already that this type of subplot might mirror situations and events in the main plot or A-story. The resemblance may only be slight and the subplot might be a lightweight or humorous variation, but it still serves to highlight the thematic argument and provide a different perspective on it.

The plot of a secondary character subplot can, in theory, be based on any kind of plot. I've probably broken down three or four dozen plots in different genres by this point. It will depend on the needs of your story whether you choose a genre-specific subplot or something more general. Your secondary character might be a grizzled old mentor who needs a redemption arc. A naïve youngster experiencing first love. Or someone trying to solve a mystery

related to their own life or that of the protagonist or antagonist. Whatever you choose, you will need to find a way to weave it together with your main plot and add complications immediately or as unexpected consequences (positive or negative) at a later point.

9 | The Character Arc Subplot

I've written about creating characters and developing their development arcs at some length in *Character Creation* (2018) and at slightly less length in *Character Basics* (2024) which you can get for free at www.paultomlinson.org/how-to

For completeness, I'm including here my variation of a character development arc based on the twelve-step programme originally developed by Alcoholics Anonymous. The list below is taken from *Character Creation* and was also included in *Writing a Series* (2024).

The basic sequence of character development looks something like this:

(1) Introduce a flawed protagonist and demonstrate their flawed behaviour
(2) The protagonist denies the flaw – but the flawed behaviour causes problems in their life and the lives of people around them.
(Midpoint) The protagonist recognises and admits their internal flaw
(3) The protagonist attempts to overcome their flaw, but it is difficult; they fall back into old behaviours, with catastrophic results
(4) The protagonist overcomes their flaw and there is a happy ending. (Or the protagonist fails to overcome the flaw and there is a tragic ending).

1. *Evidence* of the hero's flaw in the form of a typical behaviour in response to problem situations. This standard pattern of behaviour causes him to lose out in some way. It protects him, but he must pay a price.
2. *Denial* by the hero that there is a problem. He believes his 'luck' will change, and fights even harder in his typical mode.
3. *Realisation* that there is a problem resulting in failure, but refusal to believe that it is within himself. He continues to experience frustration and anger, probably blaming others for his failure/unhappiness, and hurting those around him.
4. *The admission* that the problem is in him. Depression because he believes this is a part of himself that cannot be overcome.
5. *Belief* that change is possible and behaviour patterns can be changed. Possibly as a result of observing someone else (e.g. the co-protagonist) or through some minor change on his own part.
6. *Decision* by the hero to try and overcome his flaw.
7. *Self-examination*. He must learn about himself and search his own character to identify his weakness(es).
8. *Identification and admission*. He identifies his flaw, and admits it to himself and others. He also identifies and admits the harm he has done to others. He begins to investigate the nature of his problem.

9. *Humility*. The hero admits that he needs help from those around him, and prepares himself for change.
10. *Apology and reparation*. He seeks to make amends with the people he has upset, offended, or harmed, and where possible he repairs the harm he has done.
11. *Reinforcement*. Change is achieved, and the hero practices his new 'typical behaviour.' He continues to monitor himself for any return to his old ways.
12. *Example*. He makes the most of his life, and having become more self-aware, he seeks to help others achieve similar self-development.

A character may experience situations that cause them to fall back to a previous stage and once more engage in 'immoral' and inappropriate behaviours.

10 | The Redemption Subplot

A redemption story features a particular kind of character development arc. It follows a bad or morally grey character, showing how they change from using immoral behaviours to achieve a selfish goal to taking action for an unselfish cause. Since these characters are often antiheroes, their actions at the end may still be in a moral grey area, but they are working for a good cause.

Perhaps one of the most famous redemption stories is that of Rick (Humphrey Bogart) in *Casablanca.* The thief Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables* is another example. In *Game of Thrones/The Song of Fire and Ice,* the character of Jamie Lannister earns redemption in the latter stages of the series.

A character in need of redemption is an example of a *flawed hero.* Their selfish goal and immoral behaviour mean that they are allowing the shadow side of their personality archetype to possess them. Often, they are the victim of undeserved misfortune which has made them cynical. Having experienced the unfairness of life, they have come to believe that since good behaviour is not rewarded, they may as well just do whatever they need to to get what they want.

In most redemption stories the protagonist is a wounded romantic. They wanted to believe that the world was a good and fair place, but experience has taught them it isn't. This woundedness is what makes them redeemable. There is still a chance for them to return to the moral path.

Wounded Byronic heroes are a popular archetype. Part of the attraction is that they don't give a hoot about everyday standards of polite behaviour. They are rude and disrespectful, especially to authority figures. They behave in a way that we secretly wish we could, defying the rules. Their woundedness means that we forgive the negative sides of their behaviour, even when they step over the line. As readers or viewers, we want to see this character redeemed and

find happiness, overcoming the effects of their emotional wounds. I wrote a chapter on 'Bad Boys, Rebels & Byronic Heroes' in *Romance* (2022) and one on 'Tricksters, Rebels & Antiheroes' in *Character Creation* (2018). I outlined the character arc of the flawed hero in my free guide *Plotting a Flawed Hero Story* available at www.paultomlinson.org/how-to

Raising the Stakes

If you create a rebel or antihero character that readers like to spend time with, they will care what happens to this person. They are invested in them and will read on to find out what their fate might be. As I said above, they enjoy seeing the character's rebellious behaviour, but they also want to see something good happen to them – something that will heal their woundedness and make them happier. At least a little bit. No one wants a good antihero to change completely – they have to keep some of the characteristics that made us like them in the first place.

When readers care about a character, we can raise the stakes by putting that character in jeopardy. And with this type of character, we can do this from two different directions. Firstly, we can have them at risk from authority figures who want to punish them for their immoral behaviour. Secondly, we can offer the character an opportunity for redemption and happiness, a chance to become a better person, and then put this opportunity at risk. A chance for redemption is often externalised and made tangible by a relationship – either a romance or a friendship, so we can use the romance or 'buddy movie' plot beats.

There is also a danger that the rebel or antihero cannot be redeemed. They may be too far down the wrong path to be able to make their way back. When placed in stressful situations, they might engage in immoral behaviours that are unforgivable. Such a character can be their own worst enemy. Taking the character to the edge can raise the stakes and make the reader long for someone to steer them back in the right direction.

Revealing Character

The whole of the flawed hero/redemption story arc is about exploring a character fascinating and damaged character. It can also reveal things about other characters in the way that they behave around and towards the rebel/antihero. He (or she) represents the more attractive aspects of our shadow side. He is someone who has given into temptation. Some characters will be drawn to that and some will be repulsed. The ones that are most strongly repulsed are likely to be the ones that have deep internal conflicts of their own. They project their fear and discomfort outwards onto the outsider character as a scapegoat.

Notes on the Plot of the Redemption Subplot

In a typical plot, we introduce a protagonist and seek to make them likeable. We want the reader or viewer to feel empathy and identify with the character. We do this by having them behave in a way that makes them attractive. With a

rebel or antihero, someone in need of redemption, we do the opposite. We bring them on stage and have them behave badly. Their actions are immoral – breaking the rules of the community in which they live. They are rude and disrespectful or grumpy and standoffish. But despite this, there is something about them which makes them attractive. They are the bad boy (or girl) we want to spend more time with.

Being attracted to something that we *ought* to be repulsed by is referred to as morbid fascination or a fascination with the abject. It is something we see in the attraction of vampires in urban fantasy and paranormal romance.

A typical protagonist is then provided with depth by showing flaws in their character. With an antihero, we begin with the flaws, so we need to show a more attractive side to their character. This is the equivalent of the 'save the cat' moment. We should see a hint that there is a better side to them. This gives us a clue that they are redeemable. A selfish and cynical character is shown to have a personal code of ethics that while skewed and not typical of the rest of society is still strong. This more caring side is probably something the antihero is ashamed of. He feels that his 'soft centre' makes him weak and leaves him open to exploitation, a repeat of whatever harm caused his original wounding. It is this glimpse of a softer side that attracts the lover or friend who decides that the antihero is misunderstood and is worth saving.

The *inciting incident* that kicks off the character's development arc is something unexpected that makes them question their status quo. Often it is meeting a 'love interest' or 'buddy.' The antihero believed he had abandoned all thoughts of caring for someone else, so the feelings this person evokes are unsettling. The antihero may deny these feelings, effectively refusing the call to adventure. We're then into the antagonistic phase of the enemies-to-lovers plot or the 'buddy movie' plot. Circumstances or the actions of the other person mean that the antihero cannot get away from them and so must find a way of dealing with the unwanted feelings.

The relationship between the two characters develops alongside the external events of the A-story, reaching a point where the antihero feels the other person is more important than maintaining the wall he has built around his feelings. Whether he is strong enough to complete the journey towards character growth and redemption then becomes the issue at hand.

During the *darkest hour* towards the end of Act II of this subplot, the antihero will have faced a difficult challenge in the A-story and may have resorted to immoral behaviour to get the outcome he wanted. This crosses a line for the lover/buddy and creates a huge rift in the relationship. The two separate. The antihero's behaviour now will determine whether or not they can be reconciled.

The antihero will be back into his Byronic hero mode, moping around in the shadows and being rude to people. He faces a dilemma. If he wants to be reconciled with his lover/friend, he has to be prepared to make a major

sacrifice. He must prove himself capable of behaving altruistically. The A-story offers him an opportunity to do this.

Whether your antihero has a happy ending, a tragic one, or an ironic one depends on you and your genre. If you're planning on writing a series featuring the antihero character, you might want to take them some of the way along their development arc but leave the journey unfinished, keeping the question of whether or not he can be redeemed open.

11 | The Mystery Subplot

In this instance, I'm using 'mystery' to refer to something broader than a murder mystery or whodunit. I mean mystery in terms of secrets, things that are hidden, or things that are not understood. This can include a murder mystery or a hidden criminal conspiracy, but it could just as easily mean a secret from someone's past.

Once you make your reader or viewer aware of a mystery, there's a good chance they will want to stick around to discover the solution or to see the revelation and its consequences. A mystery is essentially a question and questions keep people turning the pages so they can learn the answer.

Raising the Stakes

You can use a mystery subplot to raise the stakes in your story. Firstly, the person who is keeping a secret – whether that is the protagonist, antagonist or a secondary character – is motivated to keep it hidden. They have a stake in keeping the mystery a mystery. It is up to you to decide what lengths a person is prepared to go to to keep their secret. How desperately someone wants to keep a secret depends on what the consequences will be for them if their secret is exposed. They stand to *lose* something – perhaps their reputation, their job, a relationship, a competition or a prize... something that makes sense within the context of your genre.

On the other side, there may be someone who is trying to solve a mystery – again it could be the protagonist, an antagonist, or a secondary character. They potentially have something to *gain* something by solving the riddle or exposing the secret. And if the secret relates to something like a criminal conspiracy, there are consequences if the character *doesn't* solve the mystery.

Revealing Character

A mystery subplot allows various opportunities for revealing character. Often it is the introverted nerdy character whose abilities help unravel a puzzle or some sort of code. A mystery is also a challenge and if there is some kind of deadline or tickling clock adding pressure to the situation, it places characters under stress, and this is often when they reveal things about their true selves that are usually hidden. We get to see another side of someone's personality when they are out of their comfort zone.

A mystery subplot might also be used to fulfil some of the other functions listed in Chapter 1.

Structure of a Mystery Subplot

If we think about the four quarters of a mystery story – one for the beginning, two for the middle, and one for the end – we get a plot something like this:

(1) Set up the mystery situation
(2) Gather clues
(3) Evaluate the clues and spot the pattern or anomaly
(4) Explain the solution

In something very short like a riddle or joke, the clues are included in the setup. The solution or punchline comes from being able to think outside the box and interpret the clues in an unusual way. You find a more involved version of the same setup in a short story such as the Sherlock Holmes story 'The Adventure of the Silver Blaze.' Sometimes, as in the case of a detective story, a character is the investigator faced with a mystery. In other stories, it is the reader who is faced with a mystery – especially in a 'twist in the tail' story such as those written by Roald Dahl or Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery.'

At novel length, the plot works up to fifty- or sixty-thousand words in mysteries such as those by Agatha Christie – especially her Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple stories. In those novels, the identity of a murderer was usually the mystery – leading them to be dubbed 'whodunits.' But the same plot structure be used for an investigation into any sort of mystery. Where someone is trying to keep the solution to a mystery secret from an investigator, you have the plot of an 'inverted mystery.' Again, that sort of novel is usually focused on a murderer trying to get away with their crime, but the same plot structure could be used for any story where a person has a guilty secret. Whether or not the person 'gets away with it' depends on the author and the thematic argument they want to prove.

The mystery writer Mary Roberts Rinehart wrote: "The mystery story is really two stories in one: the story of what happened and the story of what appeared to happen." In a whodunit, what happened was that the murderer had the means, motive, and opportunity to kill the victim and did so. In order to get away with it, the murderer arranges things so that it appears that they lack the means, motive, or opportunity. They give themselves an ironclad alibi to remain undetected. They make it *appear* as if something else happened, a course of events that makes them seem innocent. It is the job of the investigator to look beyond what appears to have happened and find the real story.

The basic structure of a murder mystery looks something like this:

(1) A murder is committed and an investigator – amateur or professional – is introduced

(2) The investigator investigates and finds one or more clues that point to either a potential murderer or to a vital witness
(Midpoint) The potential murderer or vital witness is murdered
(3) The investigator re-evaluates the evidence so far, investigates some more, and proposes a second theory. But a twist disproves this theory and makes it seem that the situation is even more baffling and impossible to solve
(4) Final solution – the murderer is identified and brought to justice

I provide a full eight-sequence breakdown of this plot and a common variation of it in *Mystery: How to Write Traditional & Cozy Whodunits* (2017)

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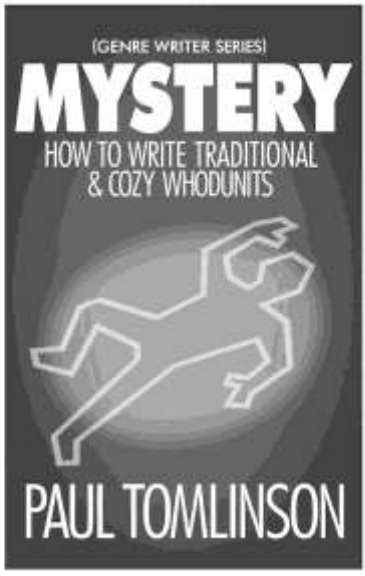

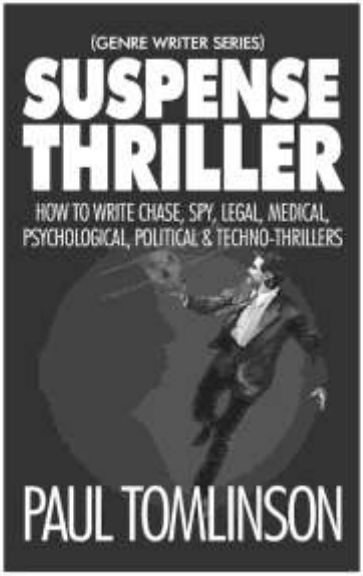

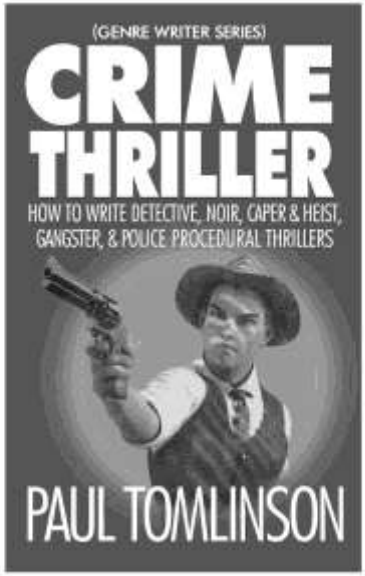

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