

Outlining/Plotting

A lack of narrative structure, as you know, will cause anxiety.

—John Dufresne

I saw a movie once at a theater with a lot of action and breathtaking special effects. But an hour and a half later, when the movie ended, I left the theater asking myself what the movie was about. Yes, I walked away clueless.

The same thing has happened to me with novels. I have read stories with excellent grammar and great descriptions, yet I felt lost and did not know where the story was going. Without a plot, the story falls flat.

A critique partner informed me I am a pantsner because I wrote my last two books without a roadmap or a plot outline. That got me thinking. I did not want to fly by the seat of my pants anymore, so I investigated plotting/outlining.

After extensive research, I discovered more than I ever wanted to know about the subject. My mind could not digest all the information about outlining, plotting, and story mapping.

For outlining and plotting search:

A Disturbance and Two Doorways

Dan Harmon's Story Circle

Dean Koontz's Classic Story Structure

Fichtean Curve

Five-Act Structure
Freytag's Pyramid
A Hero's Journey
In Medias Res
Kishōtenketsu Structure
Red Herring Structure
Save the Cat Beat Sheet
Snowflake Method
Story Spine
The 7-Point Story Structure
The Flashcard Method
The Three-Act Structure
Tragic Plot Embryo

Not everyone can outline a story. It takes a certain type of discipline.

That said, sketch out a plot outline in your head or on paper before you write your story. The plot outline is your story's roadmap.

Some writers use a combination of the plot structures I listed. For me, the five-act plot structure seemed the most straightforward method. All story plots have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But there is more to the plot structure than that.

The five-act plot structure elements:

1. Exposition/introduction
2. Rising action
3. Climax/turning point
4. Falling action
5. Resolution/denouement

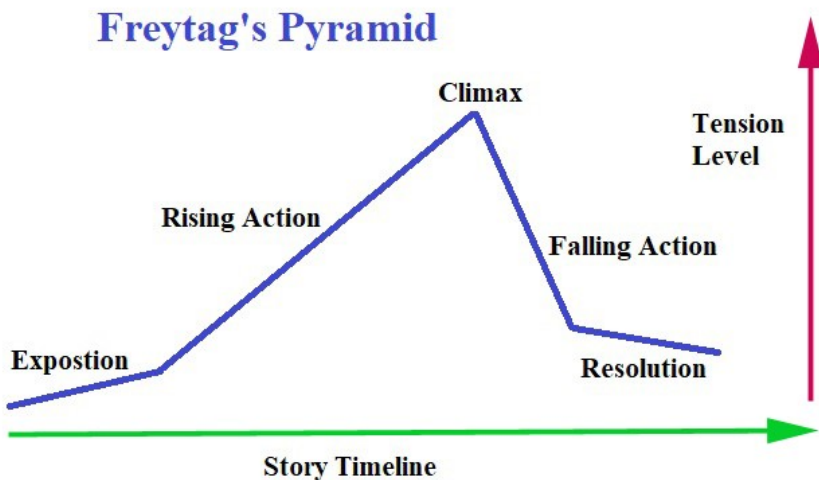
Some well-known authors don't even bother with outlines. However, there are some benefits to having one.

The benefits are:

- Assist in research
- Facilitate speedier writing
- Provide a sense of direction
- Saves time on editing
- Prevent plot holes
- Improves character development
- Accelerates story pacing
- Enables time tracking, which avoids extensive rewrites

The Five-Act Plot Structure

This is what the Freitag Pyramid outline/plot graph looks like. The Freitag Pyramid has a beginning, a middle, and an end. But there's more in between. The rising and falling action ties everything together.



You can use the following five-act plot structure elements with the descriptions as a template. Just fill in the bullet items with essential information and expand them before starting your first draft.

1. Exposition: (Can take several paragraphs, a chapter, or two.)

- Introduce the protagonists (who).
- Set the scene (where).
- Set the time period or circumstance (when).
- Introduce the central conflict “exciting force” that causes the character to act “Inciting Incident” (what).
- Describe the event/incident that sets your book’s premise in motion.

2. Rising Action: (Can take 20, 30, or 40 chapters.)

- The main conflict/obstacle begins with the primary character that he or she must resolve.
- Every conflict/obstacle is a stepping-stone that leads to the story’s climax.
- This is where the story can take a different path or a secondary conflict/obstacle can arise.
- Introduce secondary characters either to assist or complicate the main character’s goal. The conflict could affect a single or multiple characters.
- Build towards the climax, focusing on the main character and their new world.
- Placing the main character in difficult situations will build tension and conflict.
- It is acceptable to have questions not answered until the end of the story.

3. Climax: (This can take up 1 to 3 chapters.)

- This is the crucial point when the protagonist deals with the results of the events/conflicts. This is the moment that the reader has been waiting for and is unsure where your story will go next.

- Here everything changes in the story. The main character makes a life-altering decision. This could be a low point for the protagonist.
- Depending on the story, the protagonist does not always decide. (Plot twist.)
- The story can take two different paths: One, the story can build from bad to worse and end with a tragedy. Two, can build from bad to good and end with joy. For good or ill, this is where the characters have a change in fortune.
- This is where all the different subplots and characters converge.

4. Falling Action: (A few paragraphs or a chapter.)

- These actions occur immediately after the climax, with detailed consequences—good or bad—that the characters must confront.
- This is the time to resolve conflicts and subplots, so your story doesn't feel rushed in the last few chapters.
- As a result of the protagonist's decision, the conflict gives way to resolution during the falling action. This is where you tie up the loose ends and tension dissipates.

5. Resolution: (This can take a paragraph or more.)

- The resolution is the end of the story, which tells what happens to the characters after resolving the conflict. You can also introduce a plot twist, before resolving the conflicts the main character or the antagonist confront.
- The tension has peaked, but tension is still high here because the characters must decide what path to take.
- Some stories have happy conclusions; others have sad endings.
- If there is a series, this is the place to introduce a cliffhanger,

leaving the reader eager for the next story.

Outline Approach

After several attempts at outlining, I ended up with a routine that works for me.

- Open a blank MS Word document and start with Chapter 1.
- Add a few blank lines and list five or six writing points. Don't worry about perfect sentences. These writing points roughly lay out the contents of the chapter.
- Do this for all the chapters.

Outlining your complete story makes it easier to spot plot issues or missed time markers. You can fine-tune your outline until it has a smooth flow.

When the outline is finished, expand each of the writing points into several paragraphs or pages.

Example:

Chapter 1: Running Free

Writing Points

- Introduce Elizabeth. She blocks the driver's mind and relaxes for the first time in over a week.
- She is traveling with her mother Margaret. They just escaped from a secret underground military base.
- She reflects on the situation. Her age and living on Earth. How her father, Charlie was killed in front of her.
- Dealing with the rebel spirits. Temptation.
- She is now burdened with the responsibility of taking care of her mother.

Chapter 2:

Writing Points

In Summary:

The plot outline can serve two functions:

- Ensure the story's plot has a smooth meaningful flow
- Track the characters and the story's timeline