



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Name That Plot Plot (overview)



The Plot Thickens: Conflict and Action

Good stories have conflict and action. Both of these components are necessary for a story to be interesting and keep readers engaged.

Conflict Keeps Readers Engaged

No one likes to read a boring story. Keep your story exciting by piling on the conflict. Consider the following ideas when writing your own riveting plot.

- Put your characters in hot water – then turn up the heat! Make the conflict as urgent as you can. Ask yourself, “Is the conflict critical and crucial?” “Are the consequences dire if the character does not achieve her goals?” “Does the character grow personally as a result of solving this conflict?”
- The age of the reader will influence the conflict you choose. Do not talk down to younger readers, but do make it age-appropriate.
- Know the kinds of conflict and use them to strengthen the story. Aim to give the situation a twist by varying the kind of conflict. One possibility is to have the character move from battling a natural disaster to having an internal struggle with him/herself. For example, if your character is pitted against a tornado, you can ratchet up the conflict by having him also struggle with his own feelings of inadequacy because of an event in his past. Perhaps the main character is a 16-year-old boy who still suffers from feelings of guilt from when his younger sister drowned in a swimming accident when he was responsible for her. Now, once again, he must care for a younger sibling, and he vows that he will not let his brother die.
- A more complex possibility is to layer the conflict by adding intensity as the story grows. For example, Alexis longs to have the lead female part in the school musical. She must compete against all the other girls trying out for the only part. By upping the stakes, suppose only Alexis and her best friend are listed for callbacks. Now Alexis must compete with a friend she’s known since kindergarten. What if Alexis tries to withdraw from the competition because she knows her friend wants the part as much as she does? What if her friend knows of Alexis’s intention and refuses to allow her to withdraw? Now both girls face a conflict; their friendship is threatened.
- Be aware of sources for conflict. Where do you find the kind of conflict that produces gripping, emotional stories? Past experiences, your imagination, or events in the newspaper are all sources of conflicts.

Action Keeps the Story Moving

Children like stories with fast action. Skillful children’s authors hook young readers into the story with the first sentence. Strong action keeps readers turning the pages in order to answer the important question, “What happens next?” When writing your own fast-paced stories, consider starting them with a bit of dialogue. One author began with a six-year old exclaiming, “Why didn’t you ask me before you went and ordered a baby?” In one sentence readers meet the main character, understand the problem, and want to read more.

Selecting a pattern of action provides your story with a framework that helps keep your writing on track. Many novice authors find their stories wandering aimlessly with extraneous details that confuse readers. This doesn’t mean a story shouldn’t have complex twists and turns, but each twist and turn should help move the story toward a satisfying conclusion.



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When wrapping up your story, resist the temptation to rely on coincidence to solve problems. Instead, have your character work to find the answer. Refer to skills or talents described earlier in the story, rather than throwing in a solution that has no foundation. Your character will have an opportunity to grow and you'll be more credible with your readers.

References:

Choate, J. M. (Dec. 2005). How to plot a children's story: your tale needs to raise-and answer-important questions. *The Writer*, 24.

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