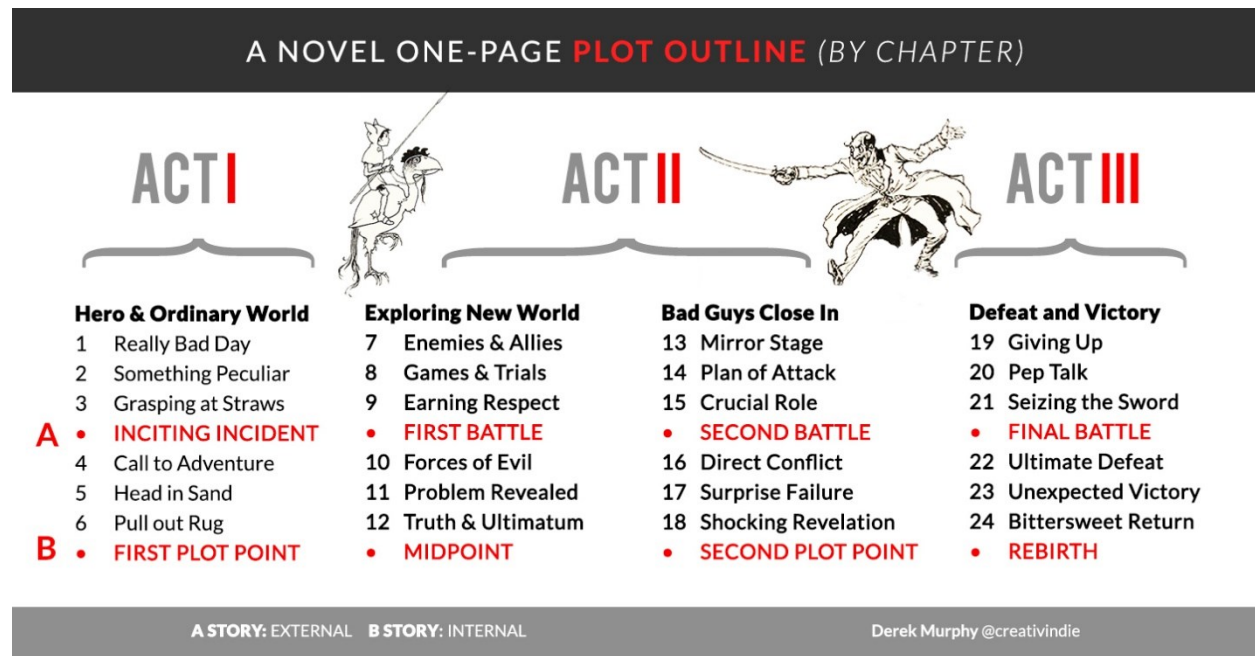


PLAN YOUR BOOK

A 24-Chapter Novel Writing Template

by Derek Murphy

Cheatsheet (Welcome)



Welcome! Originally I tried to squeeze this template down so I could call it a “one page outline” but I already have a graphic for that (below) – I decided this template will be more useful as an expanded template you can fill in with your own content, so I’ve made it available in Word, Google Docs and as a Scrivener file. If you want access, you can sign up for my [free course on writing here](#).

There’s also a detailed video walkthrough of the whole thing, as well as a discussion of how my template stands out from other similar book plotting structures. [Watch the video](#).

How to use this template: simply use this structure as a guide to plot your first draft or fix your story if you get stuck. You can delete my notes or titles once you replace it with your own ideas and plot events. I’ve give each section on its own page so you have plenty of space for notes – you can even print it out.

The RED DOTS are story sections – not actual chapters.

If this free plotting resource is useful for you in your writing journey, I’d appreciate shares: you can share [this blog post](#), pin the graphic on Pinterest, share on social media, or link back from your own blog or website.

“I've been listening to this non-stop. Dude has done his research on story structure.”

“I'm an author and have been studying story structure, narrative arc, and plot points for years....this is a REALLY good template. I can tell you've digested and synthesized more vague outlines and converted them into a more comprehensive map of the types of scenes that must happen in between the typical plot points.”

“When I put my story ideas into other outlines they seem to leave me still feeling lost, and confused with what should happen in certain chapters. But this one? I was able to connect the dots from beginning to the complete end. I had to study it for a week straight before I finally was able to really understand how to use this story structure completely.”

“Thank you so much for creating this story outline. I have been looking for a plot structure like this for a long time! It helped me to complete a a story blueprint that I'm so happy with. You don't understand what this means to me.”

“Man this right here helped me a ton. It cut out most of all the nonsense that the other outlines be giving.”

ACT I: ORDINARY WORLD (START WITH LACK)

Your First Act sets up your main character (MC) in their ordinary, mundane environment. You'll introduce their friends and family members, their home, school or workplace, in the first few chapters. But you need to show what's missing. You don't want to start with a perfect, happy character who has everything (unless you're going to take it all away, which is fine). You need to give them space to grow. Maybe they have unresolved emotional issues. They're probably shy, awkward, clumsy or embarrassed, or unpopular. Maybe they hate their job or just got dumped. You need to show what they want, their secret desires. What are they working towards? They probably have daydreams about things they don't think will ever happen.

How is their environment a reflection of their inner flaw? What is their favorite object? Where are the sources of conflict?

Don't write here...

1: Really Bad Day

*Ordinary world, empathy, conflict. Show flaw and lack. **Want, Problem, Need.***

2: Something Peculiar

Something unique or strange happens, but they dismiss it.

3: Grasping at Straws

Trying to regain control of ordinary world but setbacks mount.

- INCITING INCIDENT (call to adventure)

In most books, the inciting incident should actually happen in chapter one or two. It's an intrusion on the ordinary world. Something big changes. Maybe a stranger moves to town, or a family member dies, or there's an earthquake. It might be an invitation, or a friend inviting your MC to a party. It can't be a huge crisis, but it will be annoying and noticeable, or exciting—it's the beginning of your plot. That's why you want to get the ball rolling pretty early, otherwise nothing will be happening. Avoid writing a lot of history of backstory. Start your book as near to the inciting incident as you can. But don't think of it as just one scene or chapter.

The "call to adventure" is usually followed by denial or refusal. The MC doesn't trust it, or doesn't want to make a decision. They'll ignore it and continue focusing on their previous goals. They just want things to go back to normal. What object symbolizes the event and deepens character? How does the setting reflect the mood of the conflict? What's remarkable and novel about the character and their setting?

This is a section break: something big changes, so be aware that this is a big turning point of your story. Take a breath.

Figure out how it impacts your main character. Then continue writing the next chapter.

4: Call to Adventure

Something extraordinarily different happens, they can't ignore. Major setback.

5: Head in Sand

The new interrupts the old and causes conflict. Reveals dissatisfaction with ordinary.

6: Pull out Rug

Trying to fix ordinary world problems while resisting the lure of the supernatural world.

ACT II (part a)

- **FIRST PLOT POINT** (point of no return)

Things have been getting weirder and/or more intriguing for several chapters. Your MC tries to ignore the problems but they keep interfering with their normal agenda. They get roped in, and something happens that forces them into the action. Everything changes, and there's no going back to the ordinary world. They might have met a teacher, or they might have seen something that changes their perspective: a revelation of supernatural abilities; a murder or death; an accident or robbery or attack or disaster. Something pretty big, that shatters what they thought they understood of the world, and makes them feel vulnerable and exposed. This will be one of the major scenes in your book, so make it unforgettable.

This is your protagonist stepping off the cliff, or going into the rabbit hole. It may not be a physical change of location. What object symbolizes this transition? How does the environment reflect the inner change? What flash of color conveys the mood?

Also, this is the end of Act One, about 25% of your book—by now all the major characters should have already been introduced, or at least hinted at.

This is a section break: something big changes, so be aware that this is a big turning point of your story. Take a breath.

Figure out how it impacts your main character. Then continue writing the next chapter.

ACT II: 1ST PLOT POINT (point of no return)

7: Enemies & Allies

Explore new world; meet characters, find their place and role. Introduce all main characters.

8: Games & Trials

*Struggle to belong. Frustration and doubt. Trials and challenges. **Promise of premise.***

9: Earning Respect

Small victory as lead proves capable. Fun and games. Begrudging acceptance.

- **1ST PINCH POINT** (first battle)

After the *1st Plot Point*, there will be several chapters where the protagonist is learning about the new world. They might be doing research, or discovering things in conversations. There needs to be conflict and tension, which builds up to the *1st Pinch Point*. This doesn't have to be a literal battle, but it is the first major interaction with the antagonist. The antagonist might not be visible yet, but he/she should be the one wielding the strings. The antagonist is after something, and that something is tied to the MC somehow. Maybe the AC wants something the MC has, or needs the MC to do something, or has a score to settle.

The MC probably still has no idea what's happening, but they find themselves at the center of some conflict. They probably don't win, but they do survive. Now the stakes are clear. You should make them as dire as possible, almost inconceivable. Ask yourself, what's the worst thing that could happen? Then ask, how can I make it even worse for my protagonist? The stakes should always seem life and death to the protagonist... they represent a complete change, the "death" of the former self, which is why the antagonist resists them. If your protagonist doesn't have their self-identity shaken to its roots, you need to make this scene bigger.

This is the first major interaction with the antagonist or the forces of evil. It demonstrates what's at stake. What can you add to make the setting reflect the mood? What can you add to make it epic? What can you add to deepen character? What's remarkable about the setting?

This is a section break: something big changes, so be aware that this is a big turning point of your story. Take a breath.

Figure out how it impacts your main character. Then continue writing the next chapter.

10: Forces of Evil

Stakes are raised, antagonists revealed.

11: Problem Revealed

Surprise problem or situation. Demanding answers.

12: Discovery & Ultimatum

New information, vulnerable share. In or out?

ACT II (part b)

- MIDPOINT (victim to warrior)

After the *1st Pinch Point* (First Battle), the protagonist continues to face new challenges, but they are in a defensive role. They might be making some plans, but mostly they're waiting for something to happen and reacting to events or circumstances beyond their control. If they try to solve any issue, they end up being thwarted or making things even worse. They might accidentally hurt someone, or their friends and family begin to fear and distrust them (because they have secrets now). They begin questioning their identity and world view, which leads to a personality crisis, which leads to a shift in perspective. This is about half way through the novel, and marks the point where the protagonist decides to take action. They decide to stop being a victim and reacting to events, and vow to do whatever it takes to win. They'll probably form a new goal, and even if they aren't sure how to achieve it yet, they'll feel a deep conviction towards it. This might be based in rage or anger towards the antagonist, a newfound perspective or increased self-confidence.

This could even literally be the protagonist looking at themselves in a mirror, wondering who they've become. So far they've been refusing their quest. But now they're pissed off. They decide to fight back. What object symbolizes that shift? Where's the flash of color? What's remarkable about the setting?

This is a section break: something big changes, so be aware that this is a big turning point of your story.

Take a breath.

Figure out how it impacts your main character. Then continue writing the next chapter.

13: Mirror Stage

Self-realization or a discovery. Victim to Warrior.

14: Plan of Attack

Plan of action to thwart antagonist's forces or overcome main problem.

15: Crucial Role

Trusted with an important task.

- **2ND PINCH POINT** (second battle)

Second confrontation with the antagonist. It still may not be the main villain; it could just be henchmen that represent the main villain's interests. It could be an attack, or it could be the result of the MC taking action, such as setting a trap for the AC (or vice-versa, the villain can set a trap for the MC, for example by kidnapping a friend or relative). The protagonist is determined to see this through, and feels personally responsible, even though the chances of success are slim. The conflict erupts into an open battle, with escalating consequences; or it could just be something really bad that happens, as a result of the antagonist's actions. This confrontation makes the protagonist realize that everything is much worse than they thought, and they realize they've underestimated the antagonist's power. They rally with new determination, and might even score a seeming victory.

In this scene, the antagonist defeats the protagonist's forces, or foreshadows what's at stake in the next major encounter. What object symbolizes the danger and conflict? Where's the flash of color? What is remarkable about the setting?

This is a section break: something big changes, so be aware that this is a big turning point of your story. Take a breath.

Figure out how it impacts your main character. Then continue writing the next chapter.

16: Second Battle

They execute the plan, and come in direct conflict with antagonist's forces.

17: Surprise Failure

The plan goes horribly wrong, faulty information or assumption. Consequences.

18: Shocking Revelation

The antagonist's full plan/true identity is revealed. Stakes are raised. Guilt and anger.

ACT III

- **2ND PLOT POINT** (dark night of the soul)

The plan failed. The secret weapon backfired. The hero's team was slaughtered, or they lost their one advantage, or the AC's evil plan succeeded. The worst has happened. The antagonist has won. Alternatively, the 2nd Pinch Point can be elevated conflict, followed by MC reaction. Maybe the antagonist has stolen something or kidnapped an ally. They rally the troops, and try fix things, but things keep getting worse and worse, leading to a total, devastating loss. Usually this process happens over several chapters. But at the 2nd Plot Point, everything the MC feared could happen, has happened. They are destroyed. They cannot win. They give up. There's no hope.

They lose the battle, with serious consequences. Someone the protagonist cares about got hurt, and they feel guilty. Usually the failure is due to their character flaw or a lack of knowledge. This marks a period of depression, prompting a change in mindset—the AC has to give up what they want. They realize that the thing they've been holding on to (often it's just wanting to get back to the ordinary world, back to normal) is completely gone. There is no chance for victory. The only way forward is through. They are forced to change and go in a new direction. This is tied to the MC's flaw/lack of knowledge. When they figure out what they've been holding onto, what's been holding them back or limiting them, and when they're prepared to sacrifice what they want, for the greater good, they finally become the hero they need to be to defeat the villain.

The protagonist knew this was coming, and thought they were somewhat prepared, but they were wrong. Make this scene heart-wrenching by taking something permanent from them or one of their allies (destroyed house, lost limb, a death...). What object focuses the scene? What object does your MC cling to afterwards, as a reminder?

This is a section break: something big changes, so be aware that this is a big turning point of your story. Take a breath.

Figure out how it impacts your main character. Then continue writing the next chapter.

ACT III: 2ND PLOT POINT (dark night of soul)

19: Giving Up

Lead loses confidence; the forces are too great. What they want is unattainable.

20: Pep Talk

Encouragement from ally. Vulnerable share, inclusion. What's at stake; choice.

21: Seizing the Sword

Deliberate choice to continue, even if slim chance of success.

- **FINAL BATTLE** (triumph-knowledge)

Usually the MC needs a pep talk from a close friend, to “gird the loins.” They need a reason to fight, even if it’s hopeless. Even if they don’t see how to defeat the enemy. There’s no choice but to confront them. But now they are prepared—they might have gained a valuable piece of knowledge or information. They might have been given a new weapon or power, or learned the villain’s weakness (or maybe not... they might find that just by going into battle on faith, whatever they need materializes in the critical moment). The final battle scene often includes a “hero at the mercy of the villain” scene, where the hero is caught, so the villain can gloat (or this can come earlier, just before the *2nd Plot Point*). Anyway it’s not a clear, easy victory. They fail at first, all is lost, the hero is captured, the enemy gloats, then the hero perseveres... usually simply by not giving up. With resolve and tenacity, the hero escapes and overpowers the villain. Often the final battle scene also includes a “death of the hero” scene, where the hero, or an ally/romantic interest, sacrifices themselves, and appears to die... but then is brought back to life in joy and celebration. (Or if you want to keep it dark, just have them die, so the victory will be bittersweet). This doesn’t have to be a literal “battle.” It’s just the last, final straw, the most dramatic part of your story. It’s what forces the MC to make a realization, change or grow. And it’s the place where the MC has a victory.

The antagonist is fully revealed. The protagonist rides off to meet their fate. At first they fail, and are captured—all seems lost, but in a sudden twist, the protagonist reaches into themselves and finds the motivation and tenacity to persevere, unlocking access to their secret weapon, and defeating the antagonist.

This is a section break: something big changes, so be aware that this is a big turning point of your story. Take a breath.

Figure out how it impacts your main character. Then continue writing the next chapter.

22: Ultimate Defeat

Triumph of Villain. All hope is lost. Confront fatal flaw.

23: Unexpected Victory

Secret weapon or ability, deep resolve, new understanding, unlikely ally. Remove glass shard. Sacrifice.

24: Bittersweet Reflection

Temporary victory. Innocents saved. How far they've come.

- **REBIRTH** (return to ordinary world)

Optional: Hints of future challenges or antagonist lives.

25: Death of Self

From ambition to service. Death of former self. Acknowledgment ceremony.

Optional: Hints of future challenges or antagonist lives.

Characters

- the main character
- best friend (supporter, optimist)
- best friend (skeptic)
- comedian or jokester
- teacher (in a literal sense)
- mentor (wise role model)
- boss
- parents
- siblings
- nosy neighbor
- nemesis
- cute sidekick
- main antagonist
- antagonist's henchmen
- traitor

Here's a list of important character traits:

- where they live
- what they wear
- hair/eye color
- an object they treasure
- something they love
- something they hate
- something they'd never do
- a unique skill or ability
- a weird habit
- what they want (immediately, and permanently)

Scene Checklist

Crucial things to add to every scene that will increase intrigue, suspense, drama and conflict.

This will be more useful to edit your manuscript after the first draft is finished.

[Click here to watch the free, one-hour video](#) on how to improve your writing with this checklist.

- What happens
- Motivation (what do the characters want, and why?)
- What's stopping them? (Opposition: 3 hurdles or obstacles)
- Reaction, synthesis, action
- Change or reveal (action or new info)
- Pause for effect
- 3x Conflict (light the fuse - two opposites that create tension)
- Tension (pull the string - unresolved story questions)
- Snapshot (picture it)
- Momentum (urgency - why does this have to happen NOW)
- Relevancy: does this matter to the REAL story conflict or quest?
- End scene with unresolved conflict (cliffhanger)

Notes

Here you can add notes, questions, or anything else you're not sure what to do with.

About the Author

AUTHOR BIO

This would be a more official, short biography touting your accomplishments or sharing your website or social media links. You may also want to include a call to action or optin offer, to give people a reason to follow you or sign up to your newsletter.

Author's Note

WHY YOU, WHY THIS?

It's a great idea to end your book with a short note from the author, about why you wrote this book, what it means to you, and reveal a bit about your writing process or lifestyle. Include a vulnerable share or sympathetic touchstone to help readers connect to you as a person.

Extra Resources

Thanks for reading! I hope this plotting template was useful! If you need more help...

