

Fundamentals of Plot Construction

Plot and Structure

Plot is simply the **events that comprise a story**.

In traditional storytelling techniques the plot elements, or events, are outlined in a linear fashion. This is the easiest story for an audience to follow because it relates the events simply. This type of story is unified by time. The first event occurred first, the second occurred second, etc. In standard construction, each event has cause and effect and the relationship between the cause and effect are evident. For example:

- **Exposition:** George's parents are poisoned by Sarah,
- **Conflict:** George seeks Sarah to exact his revenge.
- **Resolution:** George finds Sarah and inflicts revenge.

These events follow the traditional **three-act structure**. Three-act structure clearly describes **exposition, conflict, and resolution**. It is the one of the oldest and most common storytelling structures in the western world:

Exposition

Exposition sets up the story's trajectory. It provides the situation and provides the basis for the conflict. The exposition must reveal character, provide event background and propel the central characters toward the conflict.

Conflict

Conflict is the key ingredient to effective drama. Stories need conflict to provide momentum. Without conflict, characters have little reason to do anything and audiences have little reason to watch. Conflicts may come from external forces acting on a character, or from a character's own internal struggle.

Resolution

Resolution completes the story by providing the finishing events. Resolutions for a story are varied, but all resolutions should relate directly to the conflict. It is in the resolution that most themes are made apparent.

The above example involving George is a straightforward plot construction. The story is familiar and easy to understand. The problem is that it does not offer much mystery.

What is Mystery?

Mystery encourages an audience to ask questions. It engages the audience by baiting them with the questions what, why, and how.

Consider an alternative construction of the previous plot:

- George's parents are dead. (Why? How?)
- George discovers his parents were murdered because they witnessed a political scandal (**Answer:** why. **Question:** by whom, to what end?)
- George exacts revenge when he finds out that Sarah killed his parents to preserve her Father's political career. (Answers)

This is truly the same set of events, but with mystery added. In constructing mystery driven plots it's important to follow the question-answer model. In good mystery, the audience is engaged because they ask questions. As the story progresses, these questions are answered in part, but their answers should precipitate new questions.

When adding mystery to a plot, it is also important to preserve *unity of action*.

What is Unity of Action?

Unity of action is the term used to describe an author's ability to relate each of the events of the plot. Poor unity of action is full of "random" events that do not seem related:

For example:

- George finds out his parents are dead.
- George's girlfriend goes to College
- George discovers he loves to Salsa dance
- George discovers his parents were murdered
- George exacts revenge on the killer, Sarah.
- George learns to fish.

If George's love of Salsa dancing, the girlfriend, or fishing has no apparent relationship to the key events of the story, then they do not preserve unity of action. Such events may have thematic or character related purpose, but they are still not key events in the story. Such events are both misleading and extraneous. These extra events only distract the audience from the key events.