



Plot and Structure

One notch up

Mastery of any craft is achieved through understanding and applying the craft's basic principles. That applies to plot and structure in fiction writing as well.

James Scott Bell has developed a simple set of foundational principles he calls the LOCK system that will help you come up with a solid plot. Every time.

LOCK stands for Lead, Objective, Confrontation, and Knockout. A grasp of the LOCK system will serve you well in all your fiction writing activities.

L is for Lead

Imagine a guy on a New York Street corner with a *will work for food* sign. Not very interesting, right? We've all seen it before and we wouldn't stand and watch him for a minute.

But if, what if the guy was dressed in a tuxedo and his sign said, *Will Tap Dance for Food*? Little more interesting. Maybe he has a yellow pad and the sign says, *Will Write a Novel for Food*. We might buy, him a hamburger, just to see what he comes up with.

The point is that a strong plot starts with an interesting Lead character. In the best plots, that lead is compelling, someone we have to watch throughout the course of the story.

Consider Clyde from An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser. We meet Clyde, the son of fundamentalist evangelist, at 16 and then watch as he descends to the point that he lets his pregnant lover drown.

Why does this work?

Because Clyde is compelling. The writer gets us into his head, there is a "car wreck" dynamic at work here. We can't resist seeing what happens to fully drawn human beings who make an unalterable mess of their lives. A skilled writer can make us feel that "there but for the grace of God go I."

O is for Objective

Back to our *Will work for food* guy. What if he tossed down his sign, put a parachute on his back, and started climbing the Empire State building?

Interest zooms... Why?

This character has an *objective*. *A want. A desire.*

The objective is the driving force of fiction. It generates forward motion and keeps the lead from just sitting around.

An objective can take either of two forms: to *get* something or to *get away* from something.

In *Jaws*, Brody desperately wants to *get* the shark.

In *The Firm*, Mitch McDeere wants to *get away* from the Mafia.

Solid plots have one and only one dominant objective for the lead character. This forms the “story question” –will the Lead realized his objective?

You want readers to worry about the story question, so the objective has to be essential to the well-being of the Lead. If the Lead doesn't *get* it or (*get away* from it) his life will take a tremendous hit for the worse.

C is for Confrontation

Now our human fly is halfway up the Empire State Building. We already know he is interesting because he has an objective, and with a little imagination you can think of a reason why it is critical to his well-being.

Is there anything we can do to ratchet up the engrossment level? Yes! New York City Cops are trying to stop him. They have plans to nab him around floor 64. Worse yet, a mad sniper across Fifth Avenue has him in his sights. Suddenly, things are much more interesting.

The reason is Confrontation (conflict). Opposition from characters and outside forces bring your story fully to life. If your Lead moves toward his objective without anything in his way, we deprive readers of what they secretly want: *worry*. Readers want to fret about the Lead, keeping an intense emotional involvement all the way through the story.

You’ve heard this before. “Get your protagonist up a tree. Throw rocks at him. Then get him down.”

Throwing rocks means putting obstacles in the Lead’s way. Make things tough on him. Never let him off easy.

K is for Knockout

Why do people watch boxing?

People watch boxing for the knockout. They’ll accept a decision but they prefer to see one fighter kissing the canvas. What they hate the draw. That doesn't satisfy anyone.

Readers of commercial fiction want to see a knockout at the end. The literary novel can play with a bit more ambiguity. In either case, the ending must have Knockout *power*.

A great ending can leave the reader satisfied, even if the rest of the book is somewhat weak. But a weak ending will leave the reader with a feeling of disappointment, even if the book up to that point is strong.

So take your lead to the journey toward his objective, and then send the opposition to the mat.

How Many Plots are There?

While there are a number of plot varieties, you can boil them all down and fit them into the LOCK system. A lead with an intense objective, thrust into confrontation, runs through the story until it ends.

These are notes condensed and abridged from Plot & Structure by James Scott Bell, Writer’s Digest Books 2004

Love plot – Boy wants girl. Girl denies boy his objective. He battles to win her love. He confronts her resistance by buying her flowers, singing her songs, protecting her from bad guys and all that romantic stuff. He gets her at the end (or not).

Change plot – Here the plot focuses on the inner transformation in the lead character. The lead desires to stay as he is. Forces arise that challenge his complacency. He tries to resist the forces. But he is overcome at the end, and he changes. (*A Christmas Carol*).

Literary and commercial plots?

The difference between a literary and a commercial plot is a matter of feel and emphasis.

A literary plot often is more leisurely in its pace. Literary fiction is often more about the inner life of the character than it is about fast-paced action.

A commercial plot on the other hand is mostly about action, things happening to the character from the outside.

This is an oversimplification. There can be both literary and commercial elements in a story.

Settings

Can you take us to a place we've never been before? That will liven up any plot. It need not be far away from home although that's an option. It means simply setting your scenes in places that are fresh.

Setting includes the details of life surrounding the lead character. Readers love to read about the details of other people's working lives. Do research yourself in some occupation by training and interviewing an expert. Find the original details that will make your lead more interesting.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a great opportunity to spice up your plots. Dialogue helps to create original characters and move the plot along. If it isn't doing either of those things you probably should be cut.

Structure

Robin Hood went riding. A bad guy came. They fought. He won. This is a story written by a fourth-grader and illustrated with a crayon drawings.

It can certainly be fleshed out with details. Interest can be enhanced by adding other characters, adding details about the setting and spicing it up with some dialogue and setting appropriate scenes. Along with the crayon drawings, it does contain all the elements necessary for a story. And it is easy to see the LOCK System working.

With some attention to Structure a conventional adventure story can emerge. Once a plot is worked out with the LOCK system a story, even a novel, can be completed by applying the three-act structure.

Plot is about elements, those things that go into the mix of making a good story. Structure is about timing – where in the mix those elements go.