

You're thinking on writing your first novel, or it could be your third novel. You are thinking and wondering how to get started. This are my *ABC's of Developing a Novel* quick guide that will casually guide you on the basics to novel writing.

A good story should start with an outline, but before you create an outline, you need to know more about the type of story you aim to write. Don't feel dismayed if you feel you are not accustomed to writing an outline, or if you feel an outline will restrict you. By the time you read through this document, you will learn that an outline is just a guide. It is like the white lines on a highway. The lines don't make the car accelerate, you do. They are just there to keep you and everyone around you safe and happy. This is the goal of an outline. Your readers want to be safe and happy as they read your story. They do not want to feel as though they are veering off the road with a series of, "huhs" or "whats" as they try to figure out your plot.

Consider the function of driving a car:

Genre: Type of Car Being Driven (and consider some road types require a certain type of vehicle)

Character: Driver

Premise: The Destination and Purpose of the Trip

Plot: The Engine

Plot Outline: The Lanes of the Highway

Your Reader: The Passengers

LET'S GET STARTED

Evaluate where you stand right now

- Where are you stuck?
 - Are you unsure what to say about your character
 - Are you unsure what happens to your character
 - Are you unsure what should be the point or premise of your story?
 - Are you unsure of your audience?

Tropes and themes

A Literary trope is a description of sorts for a particular genre, plot arc, or character. All genre fiction, also regarded as commercial fiction, typically follow a trope. Tropes are the preconceived expectations and beliefs that a reader of a genre will anticipate for the genre because they are so widely used. For example, in young adult novels, a very common trope is the main character is an outcast and struggles to find acceptance among their peers. In Romance, a common trope is a female lead character who is single and somewhat unhappy with something in her life. Then comes along a strikingly handsome male who woos her. She then finds that he has some type of issue, but in the end, he is redeemed and they run off into the sunset together.

While there is nothing wrong with following a trope, and in fact, you should as to not shock the typical reader of your genre, it'll be your responsibility to use craft elements of fiction to make your approach to the trope unique, engaging and unpredictable.

The common tropes for YA novels are

- “Need Acceptance” – Lead character is an outcast among his/her peers
- “Family Dynamics” – Lead character does not get along well with family, hates family situation, or dealing with a sensitive family situation like an absentee father or a sick mom.
- “Puppy Love” – Lead character is navigating adolescent romance

The common tropes for Romance novels are

- “Who to Choose” - Lead character caught between two or more lovers
- “From Different Worlds” – lead character is from one world or social status and meets love in someone different from them
- “Secret Lovers” – Lead character is engaged in adulterous affairs *or* two lovers are together who might not get approval from their friends or family
- “Healing Lovers” – Lead character is going through a tough time and runs into the love of a lifetime which seems to be a soul mate situation. She/he is now able to move on from their past, albeit with bumps in the road.

The common tropes for Speculative (Sci-fi) Fiction are

- “The Clairvoyant” – Lead character possesses psychic ability to some degree
- “From Space” – Lead character battles with aliens or some type of foreign power or presence
- “From Another Century” – Lead character encounters time travel either directly or indirectly

Keep in mind there are many other genres and these genres have tropes of their own. Do some additional research to find your niche. Also, consider that Tropes not only apply to plots, but they can be applied to characterization as well such as a ditzzy blond or a militant political up-riser.

Consider the tropes in your genre when creating your Plot outline. Consider if your use of a trope is a repeat of something someone has already done, or are you bringing enough creativity to your craft of writing the story.

Identifying Your Story's Premise

The **Premise** of a story summarizes the plot or what will take place. It serves as the foundation to the book. You should understand your premise before considering what happens during the story. Your premise sets the boundaries for your plot, where it can go, and where it should build. Everything on a house is somehow attached to its foundation either directly or through a joist.

The Four Steps of a Premise

1. What is the **overarching message** or theme or conflict being confronted or put on display with your story?
2. Develop your initial musing. You didn't get to the idea of writing your novel by chance. There was something that sparked. What was it? Was it a character? A situation you faced? Ask questions about this situation so you can establish a deeper foundation of what your book will ultimately be about. This should communicate the **overall goal** of your story and the **theme of the situations** that take place.
3. Character Development – Your premise should communicate **what is going to possibly happen with the character, or possibly what he/she/it will face**. Same works with plot development as well – If it's a plot-driven story, then this should be focused on what happens with the plot, AND why does it matter to your audience.
4. The above will help you get a premise out, and don't worry if it's too long. The fourth step is to condense it into a simple read, one to two sentences.

Your premise is the statement you include in your “elevator speech” or what the industry calls your pitch. Imagine if you were on an elevator with a potential editor or publisher and they find out you’ve written a book. How do you tell them about it without boring them with a long spill?

Your 1 -2 sentence premise summarizes what the books is about, talks about the character(s) and what situation they are in, and what the result is.

For example, the premise of *The Bow after the Storm* is,

Pre-condensed version:

“Two journalism students, Brandon and Tyler, embark on a backpack journey to document the struggles young adults face with coming out as gay in a hostile religious society. This journey causes them to face their own traumas of being thrown away by their families, and dealing with their sexuality and acceptance from their families. Ultimately they learn to live for themselves and become more self-loving.”

Condensed Version:

“Two Journalism students embark on a backpack journey to create their breakthrough documentary that forces them to come to terms with their own internal struggles and view on homosexuality and religion.”

Build upon your premise:

1. Who is designated as your main protagonist?
2. What is the situation they are facing?
3. How will they progress with the situation?
4. Why is the character willing to face the situation, or is he/she/it willing to face it?
5. Is there something else the character needs or wants that the situation does not give them?
6. What is stopping them from getting what they want?

Now we should be at a place where we can identify the central conflict of the story

7. Identify the main conflict
8. How does the main conflict tie to the premise?

Character vs. Plot lead story – understanding the difference

Identify if you are a character-driven writer or plot-driven writer.

- When you think about your story, what settles on your heart most, your main character or what will happen to her or with her in this story?

A character-driven story is one that is written with the character development as the main course of this story. The plot is secondary, and the plot is a tool to develop the character. In a character-led story, we should see the character start out in one state of mind or “revelation” either about themselves or their surroundings, and then we see them develop overtime alongside the plot. In the end, we see the character learn new lessons or things about themselves, or they accept or overcome an internal conflict they were dealing with in the beginning.

My novel, *The Bow after the Storm*, is a great example of a character-driven story. Brandon, the main character, struggles most of the novel with his internal traumas from being cast aside by his parents for being gay. The novel develops his reaction to that trauma and coupled with plot elements, we see that he eventually ends the novel better than he started. Also this follows the same with the secondary character, Tyler.

A plot-driven story is action-heavy and focuses more on the characters driving the plot. There will still be some component of character development taking place in these sub-plot, but mostly, the plot itself will be the focal point of the story such as Scooby Doo and the clan attempting to discover who the mystery villain is. The story is centered on the characters taking steps, conducting action, and interacting with each other to discover a climax and resolution to the story. A plot driven story highlights the effects of action on the character, or plainly the effects of the external conflict on the character.

A really great example of a cohesive plot driven story is *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. Although we get to see Dana, the main character, display key components of her character, there was nothing that she inherently learned or faced internally that drove this story. The story was full of external conflicts that moved the story along. I read this one recently, actually, and my only critique is that there were points in the story where I found the plot slip a little. There were a lot of climaxes to navigate. You don't want to ever make your reader say “what?” In their mind with a look of confusion on their face because a plot jerked too quickly to the left or the right. A solid outline helps with this.

Key differences with Plot-led vs Character-led stories

- Plot-driven stories focus on external conflict

- Character-driven stories focus on internal conflict
- Plot-driven stories require a robust outline that 'oversees' what happens next
 - They also include a variety of subplots and plot twists that engages more action. (ensure these are congruent)
- Character-driven stories will focus on the character development and you will also find a bit of backstory, commonly delivered through the use of **flashbacks**, to help the reader identify and empathize with the character
- Character-driven stories are strong on **voice**. The narration of the character either through first person or dialogue, if it's a 3rd person narration, will help deliver the character development a readers needs to see in a main set of characters.
- Character-driven stories benefit from an outline as well, but the outlines are constructed differently and focus more on how the character is affected or his/her reactions to the events happening along the plot arc.

Character Profile

The character profile is the ultimate description of your character(s). You should identify all aspects of your character from their full name to their age, to where they lived and grew up, to what color hair they have. Imagine this character is your best friend. Keep in mind, as you are writing your story, you will spend a lot of time with this character in your head. You should know them like you know yourself.

Use the guide below to create a character profile for your main character. Then do the same for the rest of your prominent characters. To a much lesser degree, do the same for your flat characters.

CHARACTER PROFILE WORKSHEET

Basic Statistics

Name:

Age:

Nationality:

Socioeconomic Level as a child:

Socioeconomic Level as an adult:

Hometown:

Current Residence:

Occupation:

Income:

Talents/Skills:

Salary:

Birth order:

Siblings (describe relationship):

Spouse (describe relationship):

Children (describe relationship):

Grandparents (describe relationship):

Grandchildren (describe relationship):

Significant Others (describe relationship):

Relationship skills:

Physical Characteristics:

Height:

Weight:

Race:

Eye Color:

Hair Color:

Glasses or contact lenses?

Skin color:

Shape of Face:

Distinguishing features:

How does he/she dress?

Mannerisms:

Habits: (smoking, drinking etc.)

Health:

Hobbies:

Favorite Sayings:

Speech patterns:

Disabilities:

Style (Elegant, shabby etc.):

Greatest flaw:

Best quality:

Intellectual/Mental/Personality Attributes and Attitudes

Educational Background:

Intelligence Level:

Any Mental Illnesses?

Learning Experiences:

Character's short-term goals in life:

Character's long-term goals in life:

How does Character see himself/herself?

How does Character believe he/she is perceived by others?

How self-confident is the character?

Does the character seem ruled by emotion or logic or some combination thereof?

What would most embarrass this character?

Emotional Characteristics

Strengths/Weaknesses:

Introvert or Extrovert?

How does the character deal with anger?

With sadness?

With conflict?

With change?

With loss?

What does the character want out of life?

What would the character like to change in his/her life?

What motivates this character?

What frightens this character?

What makes this character happy?

Is the character judgmental of others?

Is the character generous or stingy?

Is the character generally polite or rude?

Spiritual Characteristics

Does the character believe in God?

What are the character's spiritual beliefs?

Is religion or spirituality a part of this character's life?

If so, what role does it play?

How the Character is Involved in the Story

Character's role in the novel (main character? hero? heroine? Romantic interest? etc.):

Scene where character first appears:

Relationships with other characters:

1. Character's Name: -- (Describe relationship with this character and changes to relationship)



over the course of the novel).

2. Character's Name: -- (Describe relationship with this character and changes to relationship over the course of the novel).

3. Character's Name: -- (Describe relationship with this character and changes to relationship over the course of the novel).

4. Character's Name: -- (Describe relationship with this character and changes to relationship over the course of the novel).

How character is different at the end of the novel from when the novel began:

Additional Notes on This Character:

Your Outline

Once you have established whether your book is character-driven or plot-driven, your premise, and your main character profile, then you finish with your outline.

Before you begin with your outline, establish your setting. Where will your story take place? If you will write about a setting you are personally unfamiliar with, do some studying on the place. This process is called world-building. You want to build a world that is believable. Remember as the driver, you don't want to jerk your passengers around with an unbelievable narrative. When world-building, learn little quirks about the area. Mention things that the locals would recognize. Imagine that character is truly from this place or truly living in this place, they would see and describe the setting just as it really is. Also keep in mind the timing. Is it in 1960s Harlem or modern day Harlem, etc? Also consider how fast the story takes place. Does it happen over a period of years, weeks, days, or hours?

Organized these thoughts:

1. Where does my story take place?
2. What year does it take place in?
3. What time span will the story span across?
4. Will there be a use of flashbacks? Are my flashbacks in line with the time that I'm flashing back to?

At last, you are ready to construct your detailed story outline. Follow the template below.

This is the outline I used. See how I incorporated it in the supplemental attachments. It's very complex and will likely not work for you.

Screenplay Plot Outline: Famous Beat Sheet by Blake Snyder

Opening Image – A visual that represents the struggle & tone of the story. A snapshot of the main character's problem, before the adventure begins.

Set-up – Expand on the “before” snapshot. Present the main character's world as it is, and what is missing in their life.

Theme Stated (happens during the Set-up) – What your story is about; the message, the truth. Usually, it is spoken to the main character or in their presence, but they don't understand the truth...not until they have some personal experience and context to support it.

Catalyst – The moment where life as it is changes. It is the telegram, the act of catching your loved-one cheating, allowing a monster onboard the ship, meeting the true love of your life, etc. The “before” world is no more, change is underway.

Debate – But change is scary and for a moment, or a brief number of moments, the main character doubts the journey they must take. Can I face this challenge? Do I have what it takes? Should I go at all? It is the last chance for the hero to chicken out.

Break into Two (Choosing Act Two) – The main character makes a choice and the journey begins. We leave the “Thesis” world and enter the upside-down, opposite world of Act Two.

B Story – This is when there's a discussion about the Theme – the nugget of truth. Usually, this discussion is between the main character and the love interest. So, the B Story is usually called the “love story”.

The Promise of the Premise – This is when Craig Thompson's relationship with Raina blooms, when Indiana Jones tries to beat the Nazis to the Lost Ark, when the detective finds the most clues and dodges the most bullets. This is when the main character explores the new world and the audience is entertained by the premise they have been promised.

Midpoint – Dependent upon the story, this moment is when everything is “great” or everything is “awful”. The main character either gets everything they think they want (“great”) or doesn't get what they think they want at all (“awful”). But not everything we think we want is what we actually need in the end.

Bad Guys Close In – Doubt, jealousy, fear, foes both physical and emotional regroup to defeat the main character's goal, and the main character's "great"/"awful" situation disintegrates.

All is Lost – **The opposite moment from the Midpoint: "awful"/"great"**. The moment that the main character realizes they've lost everything they gained, or everything they now have has no meaning. The initial goal now looks even more impossible than before. And here, something or someone dies. It can be physical or emotional, but the death of something old makes way for something new to be born.

A Standard Fiction Outline – this one is simpler

THE NOVEL TEMPLATE: AN EXAMPLE

You probably want an example of what your outline should look like, right? OK. So let's say your name was Jane Austen and you had a great idea for a story about a prideful guy and a charming but somewhat prejudiced girl. Your story outline might look something like this:

Character

Elizabeth (Lizzy) Bennet, one of five daughters in Regency England.

Status Quo

Lizzy and her sisters will be plunged into poverty if her father dies, so they need to marry (and marry well)

Motivation

Lizzy wants to marry for love.

Initiating Incident (Spawns the initial conflict)

Two wealthy gentlemen, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, arrive.

Developments (aka rising action, explores the conflicts and how the character managers them)

Lizzy meets proud Mr. Darcy and dashing stranger Mr. Wickham. She despises Mr. Darcy and likes Mr. Wickham. She discovers Darcy loves her and that Wickham isn't all he seems.

Crisis (Conflict climaxes)

Lizzy's sister elopes, threatening the social ruin of her family. It now looks like Lizzy can't marry anyone.

Falling Action

Lizzy's sister is in trouble. Lizzy trusts Mr. Darcy more and they began to bond.

Resolution

Mr. Darcy helps Lizzy's sister. Lizzy agrees to marry him, deciding now that she loves him, after all.

A Simpler Outline – this one is industry standard for plot outline

Exposition. The necessary character, setting, and background details readers need to understand the context of your novel. (Note: exposition is **not** the beginning of a novel, though most often exposition is revealed during the first few chapters in order to set the scene).

Inciting Incident. This highlights something pivotal that has happened to disposition the main character into a set of circumstances (or emotions) that drive the story forward. Usually covered in the initial set of chapters.

Rising Action. Spawning from the inciting incident, this is the series of events leading up to the climax of the story.

Crises. Peaks in tension or conflict that occur throughout the rising action of the novel.

Climax. The most intense crisis found in the narrative, though not necessarily the final crisis.

Falling Action. The series of events after the climax of the story where questions are answered and any remaining crises occur and are resolved. This could be where needed discussions between conflicting characters occur leading to the resolution.



Journey Home. A specific type of falling action where the hero returns to their ordinary world bearing some memento of his otherworldly journey. Typically found in fantasy and science fiction novels. In other novels, this could be where actions are taken that resulted from the events in the falling action to move the story to the resolution.

Resolution. The final moments of a novel where any remaining threads of tension are resolved and a new reality is established.

The plot outline need not be a chapter by chapter prediction of what will or should be written for the novel. It is an overall guide to keep the writing on track in a cohesive series of events and to keep it in tune with its premise.

PLOT OUTLINE TEMPLATE

Application: *Before you create your outline, practice using a couple of your favorite books or movies. See if you can layout the plot arc of these stories. Also consider if you can identify any subplots. Were they resolved before the end or did they run parallel with the main plot?*

Exposition:

Inciting Incident:

Rising Action:

Crises:

Climax:

Falling Action:

Journey Home:

Resolution:

Additional Resources

Follow these links for other reference material.

[Create If Writing Podcast](#) – Podcast by bestselling novelist

[Reedsy.com](#) – set up an author profile here to use this platform to write your book. It will organize the chapters for you and automatically convert them into file types that can be used on Amazon to self-publish. Also a great place to find editors, publicists, and designers.

[Fiverr.com](#) – great resource to find affordable freelancers who do graphic work.

[ISBN Official Website](#) – space to secure your own ISBN. The book will show published under whoever the ISBN is registered to. If you plan on publishing multiple titles, I recommend buying in bulk. It'll cost less over the long run.