

The Just Write Life



What is a Plot?

By Ann Gordon

Let's take a look at Plot definitions. Writing teachers all seem to agree that an aspiring author should be able to explain the plot of his/her story in about a minute—definitely less than two minutes—like the length of an elevator ride. Here is an easy plot to explain in short ride from floor to floor:

A dastardly guy has been ogling a beautiful and shapely but shy female who's about to lose her hearth and home due to uncontrollable circumstances. He proposes that she become "his" (that's open to interpretation but presumably means marriage) so she won't become homeless. Advancements and refusals persist until a really good guy enters the story to save the female and her life from the bad guy. The beleaguered female looks up to the good guy, who in turn swears to take care of her and she readily agrees.

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(Yeah, it's a plot from the tales of Snidely Whiplash, Nell, and Dudley D-Right on the *Bullwinkle and Rocky* show).

For centuries that particular plot has been done and redone, but you have to admit: it's an easy plot to explain in an elevator.

For this article I'm listing a slew of Plot definitions. Hopefully you'll find one that works for you.

- Plot is organic—it takes hold of the writer and the work from the very beginning.
- Plot is structure—it's the skeleton, the scaffold, the chassis, the frame; take out the Plot and the story falls apart.
- Plot is the simplified answer to the tiresome question, "What is your story about?"
- Plot is diffusive, ambient, fluid—it permeates all the atoms of a story.
- Plot has electromagnetism—the force that draws the atoms of your story together.
- Plot is a process—it is not an object.
- Plot is dynamic—it should not be static. Plot and Character are closely entwined, yet main characters need to change in a novel so they are different at the end than they were at the beginning.
- Plot is your compass—it gives your story direction.
- Plot is your puzzle—there are no extra pieces; they all fit together.
- Plot is a container—it holds everything.
- Plot is story—it has a pattern of action and reaction.
- Plot is a sequence—it's a progression of casually-linked events that result in an outcome that matters to the reader. Action must be equal to cause. There should be balance between the importance of an event and the magnitude of the character's response.
- Plot is a flight plan—it's ready to taxi down the runway.
- Plot is your slave—you should make it work for you and your story.



Many writing tutors and teachers agree that fiction plots fall into one of four types: linear, episodic, parallel, and flashback. Linear is the most common because the flow is logical and quite easy to write, but the other types can be fun for the reader.

The problem for pantsers (those who write "by the seat of ...") is that they start writing a story and then come to a

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screaching stop several thousand words later because they don't know where to go next. That's because they didn't start with a plot.

A plot can be as short as an elevator speech, but I believe all stories should start with one—spoken by a reforming pantsner who has a cabinet full of unfinished stories. ✦

“The main plot line is simple: getting your character to the foot of the tree, getting him up the tree, and then figuring out how to get him down again.”
- Jane Yolen

New Members

We would like to welcome the following new members to Just Write:

- Misty Barnes
- Daniel Gonzalez
- Melanie Nielsen
- Erica Richardson
- Carl Riding
- D. Reed Whittaker



Member Spotlight: John Cullen



Nationally acclaimed Author JM Cullen is renowned as an author of business intelligence software and speculative science fiction with more than three decades of innovation in his field.

JM grew up in Yakima, Washington, the oldest of two sons of John L. and Rebecca L. Cullen. He served a mission for the LDS Church in Taipei, Taiwan, married in San Jose, California, earned a business degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and writes damn good code. Noted as an expert in .Net full-stack development, he holds additional credentials in artificial intelligence development and Azure fundamentals. He is proud to have amassed a professional reputation for on-time and under-budget project completion and implementation across his career. He credits his success to his ability to identify clients' needs while being unafraid to recommend alternative solutions to their challenges.

He lives by the motto: Don't be afraid to fail since we all fail at times in our lives. In fact, if we're going to fail, why not fail spectacularly? Fail huge, and fail with gusto! At least then, you'll have stories to tell.

Observing technological breakthroughs over the years, he began wondering how some of the predictions would come about and what life would be like. And how they could go wrong. He writes about the things that keep him up at night.

When he is not writing software or novels, JM travels worldwide. He fly-fishes, tried skydiving (once was good enough), and loves to SCUBA dive. His favorite places underwater are near Kawai, Hawaii, Grand Bahamas, Cancun (especially the Cenotes), and Grand Cayman. He is a certified life coach and has mastered the art of reading body language. So far, he has visited many parts of CA, CO, DC, FL, IA, ID, IL, MO, MT, ND, NV, NY, OH, OR, PN, SC, SD, TX, UT, VA, WA and WY, British Columbia, Tokyo, Japan, Taipei, Taiwan, Mexico, Bahamas, and Grand Cayman.

In 2020, he published his first novel, *Unlikely*, followed by *Emotional Metamorphosis* and *Waking the Wight* in 2021. You can find links to all his works (print, Kindle, and Audible) on his website: <https://johncullenovels.me/home>.

In 2021, he was inducted into the Marquis Who's Who of America.

JM currently lives and works in Idaho and Utah. ✦



Five Rules for Naming Characters

By E.J. Murray

We've all been there: you've just had a brilliant idea for a plot twist, one that your readers will never see coming. The only thing you need to do is name the new character you'll be introducing. Easy, right? Except you sit there, staring at the blank screen (or page), waiting. Then you panic. You start visiting every baby name website you can think of. You watch the end credits of movies, hoping for inspiration. You even check out the contributors' page of every magazine in your local bookshop. What's a writer to do?

First thing is not to panic. Some writers can spit out character names at the drop of a hat, but the rest of us research and puzzle and scratch our heads until we finally hit upon one that strikes our interest. And finding a name you like is only half the battle—the name must fit the character and the story. It's enough to drive a writer to drink (coffee maybe?).



Here are five things to think about when choosing a character name.

1. Get the time period right. Names go in and out of fashion, just like clothing. Do a bit of research to find which names were popular in which eras. A reader happily immersed in Victorian England is going to be jarred right out of the story if they come across a flower girl named Courtney or Kaylee. And you can hardly name your cowboy protagonist Mykarious, can you?

2. Say them out loud. If you can't pronounce them easily, your readers surely can't. And while a name might look perfectly fine on paper, if read aloud (think audiobooks), it might create a different impression than you imagined. Especially watch for sound-alike words that might give the reader pause or even remind them of something naughty. Unfortunately, names like Dick or Peter are now suspect (unless you go back to Richard and pick Pete instead). Even good old John reminds you of the loo.

3. Check the meaning. One great way to create memorable characters is to use a name that indicates their personality. You don't have to actually name your character Stone to show that he's inflexible - the name Carrick would work just as well. If your readers don't already know that's what the name means, they'll get a little thrill out of looking up the name and discovering that fact.

4. Keep the cast separate. Avoid having more than one character with the same initials, or with names that sound alike. It's just too confusing to the readers, and eventually, to you as well. Lois Lane and Lex Luthor might work for Superman, but for the rest of us, stick to different names and sounds—and spellings. I changed a character's nickname once because it was spelled like a common word that would have been confusing if read aloud.

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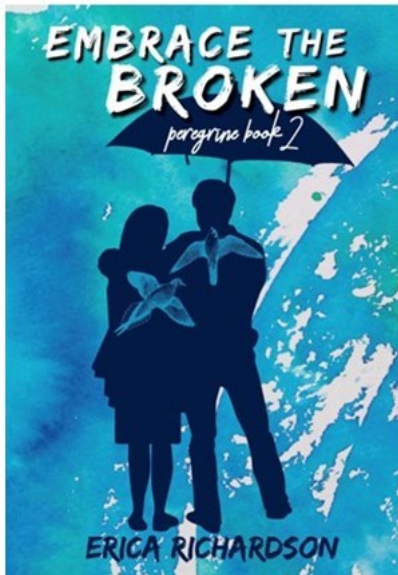
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5. Research the origin. There's little more embarrassing than being caught doing faulty research by your readers. One easy way to trip yourself up is by using ethnic names. Always research carefully to be sure your character has an appropriate name—or a convincing reason to have an unusual one. Just because your heroine is Hispanic doesn't mean she has to be named Maria Consuela.

There are plenty of other tips and tricks for naming characters, but this will get you started on the right foot. What advice do you have for naming your characters? ✦

Who's Penned What

A List of Published Works and Contest Winners



EMBRACE THE BROKEN: PEREGRINE BOOK 2

Erica Richardson

Genre: YA Fiction

Everything changed the day I met Miles Jenkins . . . It takes courage to live with mental illness. And sometimes, it takes more than courage; it takes a friend.

[Buy it on Amazon.](#)

RELUCTANT SPY: HACKED, Book IV

D. Reed Whittaker

Genre: Thriller

This is a story about ransomware. We start with the May 7, 2021 shutdown of the Colonial pipeline. What can five do against state-sponsored economic terrorism?

[Buy it on Amazon.](#)



Who's Penned What

(continued)

Linda Allison

Linda has had two pieces of creative nonfiction published within the last six months:

"All that we know" can be found in the Fall 2021 issue of *Pile Press*

"Let it Rain" was published in the Winter issue (Issue 9.4) of **82 Review*

Writing Award Winners

Linda Allison

Linda was a finalist in the McQueen's Quinterly Triple Q Contest.

Congratulations

Upcoming Events



The Pre-Quill Conference

Date: April 23, 2022

Location: Utah Museum of Contemporary Art; Online

From the League's website: "Attendees to live sessions must be fully vaccinated and wear masks while not actively eating or drinking."

Punctuation with Quotation Marks

By Lisa Forsyth

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) is generally recognized as the default style guide of the U.S. publishing world, though some houses may keep their own style guides, which may vary from this standard. Nevertheless, here are the CMS's rules regarding punctuation with quotation marks. Note that the punctuation rules are listed in groups of two, in order of typical usage.



Periods and Commas—Always Inside

Periods and commas are the most common forms of punctuation. They always go inside the quotation marks. For example:

1. Jeremy called the venture “high risk.”
2. “First raise your hand, then speak,” the teacher pleaded.

Question Marks and Exclamation Points—Inside or Outside

These are the second-most used forms of punctuation and may go inside or outside, depending on context. If the quotation marks apply to the sentence as a whole, question marks and exclamation points will always go inside the quotation marks. If the quotation marks apply to a single element within the sentence but not the entire sentence, the punctuation will go outside the quotation marks. For example:

1. Have you read the poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”? (The question mark is placed outside the quotation marks because the title of the poem is merely one element of the complete sentence.)
2. “Don’t let anyone tell you it’s impossible!” (The exclamation point goes inside the end quotation marks because the quotation marks apply to the entire sentence.)

Colons and Semi-Colons—Always Outside

These are the least-used forms of punctuation and always go outside the quotation marks. For example:

1. Abby could utter nothing else but “leave now”; her throat burned from anger.
2. Use the following tips to “call in sick”: lower your voice; speak softly; phone from a quiet room (FYI: I don’t recommend calling in sick when you’re not :-}).

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Dialogue and Commas

In dialogue and direct quotes, a comma plus a space precedes the beginning quotation marks unless that direct speech fits within the context of the sentence. For example:

Before slamming the door, Jesse yelled, “Good luck finding your hamster!”

Alice claimed she “lived on the edge.”

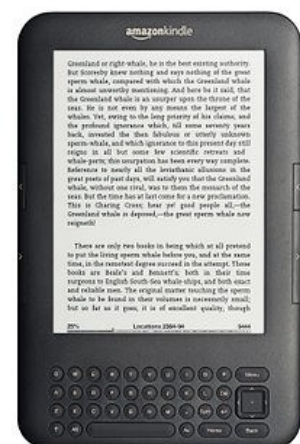
A Brief Recap

- Periods and commas always go inside.
- Question marks and exclamations could go inside or outside, depending on context.
- Colons and semi-colons are always outside.
- Commas with direct quotes are contextual.

I hope these explanations help demystify the rules regarding punctuation placement around quotation marks. ✦

A Call for Beta Readers

If you need beta readers for a full-length novel, novella, nonfiction work, etc. let Ann or Lisa know so they can feature your request in our next newsletter.



Critique Sessions and Submission Guidelines

Critique sessions run twice a month. Invitation emails are usually sent the first and sixteenth of each month; these invitations include an RSVP deadline. Once the deadline has passed, the spreadsheet with current group information is sent. Each session is generally divided into two or three groups with three to six participants each, depending on how many members participate.

Submissions are then emailed to each member of the participant's group and returned by the end-of-session deadline, usually the fifteenth or the last day of the month. If you want to read a submission from someone in a different group in addition to those in your own group, you may request their work, but please do not expect them to read yours in return.

Fiction and non-fiction chapters, short stories, articles, and poems are all welcome in our critique sessions...query letters too.

Submission Guidelines

- 3,200 words or less (not including any synopses at the beginning)
- Include a synopsis if there are chapters/sections prior to your current submission
- 12-point or larger serif font (such as Times New Roman or Cambria)
- Double or 1.5 spaced lines
- Word document format (.doc, .docx)
- Include your name or initials in the filename
- Submit within two days of receiving the group spreadsheet

Critiquing Guidelines

- Please make at least six suggestions or comments in your reviews
- Be honest, kind, and encouraging
- Corrections and comments are made using the "Track Changes" and "New Comment" features under the "Review" tab in Word
- Include a note at the end of the document with an overall review or comment
- Ideally, return your reviews by the last day of the session

"Some old-fashioned things like fresh air and sunshine are hard to beat."

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

Happy Spring :)

