

# Plotting Your Novel with The Plot Clock

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“Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.”

—Pablo Picasso



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## FOREWORD

“One of the biggest challenges aspiring fiction writers face is effectively handling plot. It’s so important, in fact, that our creative writing program at Ringling College of Art and Design has an entire class devoted to it called Story Fundamentals: Plot. When I teach that class, I offer students a different way of thinking about it each week. Freytag’s pyramid. Three-act structure. James Scott Bell’s LOCK. Randy Ingermanson’s Snowflake Method.

When I introduced the Plot Clock to the students in that class, I was shocked at how it unlocked the potential for story for them in ways that other ways of thinking about plot did not. Over the years, the majority of students who take Story Fundamentals: Plot report the idea of the Plot Clock as one of the three most valuable takeaways from that class which is bumper-to-bumper full of useful advice and time-tested ideas.

The idea of the Plot Clock is simple, clear, and flexible enough to be useful in any story enterprise from picture book to adult novels, and from genre writing to the most serious of serious literature. And that means *Plotting Your Novel with the Plot Clock* is a must-read for any aspiring writer, period.”

—Ryan G. Van Cleave  
Head of Creative Writing, Ringling College of Art and Design

## INTRODUCTION

For years as a writer, I beat my head on the desk, cursing the straight-line plot worksheet. I couldn't figure out the proper timing for the events of my stories and when I tried to apply them to the standard straight-line incline of rising action that builds to a climax, my page more closely resembled spaghetti highways clogged with stagnant traffic. What a cluster.

To make matters worse, I was working hard at it. Deeply committed to my aspirations of becoming a published writer, I'd assembled a library of books on writing craft and spent so many hours with my butt in the chair that there were days it went numb from sitting! I was faithfully rising early, giving up weekends, and fudging the edges of family time as my children were launching out of our nest. I diligently applied all of the advice: I wrote "bird by bird." I "killed my darlings" with heady dedication to making it a stronger story. I decoupled a vision board of my ideal writer life and attempted to manifest success. Sometimes I let Stephen King lull me to sleep with the audiobook version of *On Writing*.

In case you were wondering, it takes giant lady-cojones to listen to Stephen King before falling asleep—let me assure you—even if he's reading about my passion project.

None of this moved my story or writing career ambitions forward. I was stuck in a corner of my office, dangerously close to holding a match to my manuscript, and clutching a bottle of bourbon for my tear-stained disappointment.

Back when I was a young woman, sort of unexpectedly-expecting my first baby, I had what some would call a radical thought: I wanted a home birth. The grapevine at church (this was long before Google) eventually led me to a phone call with a midwife who caught all the home-birth babies in the North Florida region. Midwives don't deliver babies—they "catch" them, because the mother is in charge of her own laboring. Tina was a blissed-out herbalist who said she would be grateful to care for me as I grew my baby. During the

following eight months, Tina's holistic nurturing guided me over the threshold into motherhood. Midwife means "with woman," and that's truly the most accurate way to describe the role.

Fast forward to my writing woes: I craved a midwife for my words, someone to catch the books I was laboring to birth into the world. If only there were midwives for writers!

It turns out there are. The top Google search result was an article by Ryan Van Cleave for *The Writer*, a magazine that has published advice for writers since 1887. I knew Ryan Van Cleave's name from previous articles and book titles on my writing craft shelf: *Memoir Writing for Dummies* and *The Weekend Book Proposal*. Van Cleave is a well-established, published, professional writer and here he was, explaining why even he relies on a writing coach—in his case a guru named Jamie Morris.

"Morris explains that hiring a writing coach is like hiring a guide, a Sherpa. Your writing coach knows the terrain you want to travel; she knows how long the road is, how steep the climb, and where obstacles are likely to lie. A writing coach has enough distance from you and your work to see things as they truly are. If the coach is talented like Morris, she will shorten the learning curve on your writing career."

I felt like I'd been trying to write blindfolded á la Sandra Bullock in *Birdbox*. I was about to rip that blindfold off and stare at the monster of defeat. I was about to quit. The prospect of a trusted guide who could objectively advise me and shorten my very long, very frustrated learning curve triggered my curiosity. Why was I trying to do this all alone? I filled out Jamie's contact form and my phone rang within minutes.

Let me tell you the life-changing magic of hiring a writing coach: they know how to slice through confusion with the Ginsu blade of experience. Jamie said we wouldn't try to untangle my convoluted seventh draft. "We're going to do a Plot Clock workshop," she said. "Once you understand the Plot Clock, your days of writing tangled webs are over."

Shut the front door and sign me up, lady. You're hired. Visions of clear,

untangled manuscripts danced in my head.

\*\*\*

Years prior to this, Jamie Morris met fellow coach and workshop teacher, Joyce Sweeney. Joyce and Jamie discovered a mutual love of their clients, cats, and a curiosity—"What makes the perfect story template?" They wondered as they walked and talked together. "Is there a perfect template that fits every novel, short story, and movie? One that's always satisfying and makes the reader happy?"

In addition to teaching, Joyce was a successful YA novelist and writer. She'd begun to explore plot as a circle—as the face of a clock—instead of as a straight line. The circle was divided into quadrants for each act and included a Binding Point in which the character fully entered their story. Joyce and Jamie began to co-teach writing craft intensives—Next Level Weekend Workshops—and together they developed the idea of plotting according to a clock.

As the Plot Clock unwound, the major plot points were identified: The Inciting Event, Binding Point, Low Point, and Climax. Joyce and Jamie taught the distinction between plot and structure, a critical understanding when it comes to managing the order of an eighty-thousand-word novel manuscript. Over the next two years, the Plot Clock's beats in story timing developed into the magical mechanism it is today.

Through more than twenty-five years of teaching, coaching, and writing, Joyce has honed the formula for crafting compelling, satisfying stories. She's guided over sixty writers to successful publication and continues to run dynamic workshops for writers who want to grow their skills. She has also authored fourteen novels for young adults and two chapbooks of poetry, which have won numerous awards. Several of her books appear on the American Library Association's "Best Books List" and "Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers."

Jamie's mission is to help other writers reach their goals and she's worked with hundreds of them. Among them, more than forty have been agented, produced, or traditionally or independently published. Many more have won

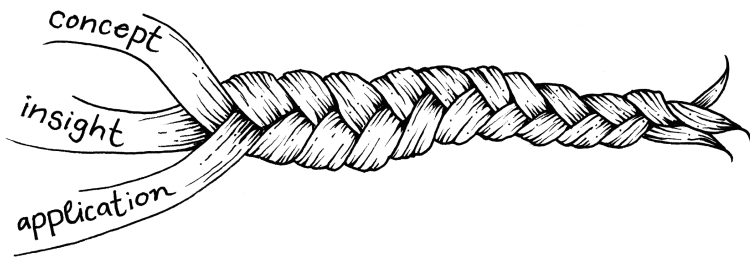
literary prizes, fellowships, and contests. Jamie loves to see her name on a successful client's acknowledgments page after the hard work they accomplish together. In addition to her thriving coaching business, she edits for Blue Angel Publishing and is currently working on a series of tarot-related writing prompt projects.

Joyce and Jamie are my favorite kind of people: collaborators. They want to share wisdom, not squirrel it away where no one else can benefit from it. The day I drove to Jamie's city to meet her for my first Plot Clock workshop, the air felt electrified. This was a two-lines-means pregnant moment, this time for the birth of words. As Tina had been "with woman," Jamie was "with-writer" and she guided me into the next level of my dream. It's a tremendous honor to be collaborating with Joyce and Jamie in the creation of this book and I hope you, dear reader, benefit greatly from the weaving together of our three threads of experience working with the Plot Clock: Teacher, Guide, and Student.

—Tia Levings, Writer and Creative Marketer

## HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

Our voices are woven together like a braid within the covers of this book. Joyce's piece is the central skeleton of the Plot Clock structure: the beats and plot points that time the major events in your story. Jamie's guiding thread twists insight into the layers that fall between those beats. Tia's third layer is woven in as student-action—a writer applying these elements to a story actively plotted as the book progresses.



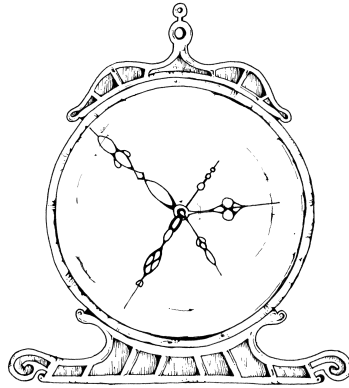
Joyce teaches the main overview of the Plot Clock: how it was designed, how it works, and how to use it to time the events in your story. This section is the foundational knowledge of the Plot Clock and will be your go-to tool while building your story. If you're brand new to plotting and want to absorb the high-level version of the Plot Clock concept, Joyce's thread will get you there.

Jamie's guidance weaves insight into what's happening between the hourly high points on the clock. Just like in their Next Level Workshops, Jamie and Joyce bounce back and forth and the harmony of their voices fills the face of the Plot Clock with every aspect of a thoroughly satisfying story.

Tia's role as an active Plot Clock student demonstrates how she applies what she's learned to a story she's currently writing. Her section illustrates how to turn theory into actionable content on the page.

*Plotting Your Novel with the Plot Clock* includes a Q & A section in the back, as well as blank templates you can print and use as you learn how to clock your own stories.





## STORIES & PLOT

### **Do You Want to Build a Story?**

JOYCE:

Storytelling is ancient. It's been hardwired into our brains and our beings since the beginning of time. Even the birds and bees are storytellers: birds broadcast news about food, predators, and conditions to their avian fellows. As soon as any tribal animal starts developing language, they start sharing information, expanding the knowledge of the whole group as each individual tells one another their story.

My favorite example is the mockingbird. The male mockingbird memorizes every sound he's ever heard in his lifetime, in order to attract a female mate. Snakes, birds, garages opening—he memorizes each sound and then weaves his knowledge into his own unique song. The male with the longest and most beautiful song wins a mate. This is because female mockingbirds assume the male with the longest song has the most life experience; he knows the world. He's storytelling to show off how sexual he is: I've been here, and I've been

here... and I'm valuable. The mockingbird is the totem of writers.

We tell stories for the same reason. The stories we're living and imagining. If this person goes through these things—what is the most likely outcome? From that, we learn about life, acquiring knowledge and experience that we couldn't have otherwise had. For example, I know something about being in jail because I've read other individual's experiences of being in jail. It's certainly not a personal experience, but it still adds to my knowledge of what being in jail is like.

JAMIE:

Stories are way-showers. That's the reason we read them. We read stories to know what it means to be human.

Plot is a mechanism for story. Plot provides wheels and cogs that force every character to move forward through the gates. They are like locks on a waterway—in one, out the other. Kick your characters in the pants. Make them move. Create so much tension for your readers to enjoy. Will the character, or won't they? Will they change? Will they wuss out? Will they leave?

The Plot Clock is a four-act map of a story, which can describe both the experiences a character is likely to undergo and her likely responses to those experiences. That's it in a nutshell. But time and time again, people's application of the Plot Clock has surprised and impressed me. It truly works for anything driven by story.

This was the case with Dr. Mark Winton, a Criminal Justice Lecturer at UCF who wrote, "I was not familiar with the Plot Clock, but it made complete sense when I started thinking about an academic piece I am working on, where I trace the lives of two genocidal perpetrators and what led to their outcomes. It is really a useful model in studying how people become criminals."

Wow, right? People become criminals through change—and change is what the Plot Clock maps.

Humans are hardwired to respond to certain story elements. The hero's call to adventure; her failures leading to an all-is-lost moment; the changes she must make to face the challenges required of her.

Throughout the years I taught with Joyce, and afterward with my clients, the Plot Clock continued to evolve as a tool to track both events and responses,

as did the distinction between structure and plot. As time passed, we each developed our own approaches to the Plot Clock and as I've experienced with my clients, very often through their use of it, they make it their own.

JOYCE:

A key fact every writer should keep in mind is that their readers have expectations from the stories they pick up to read. There are certain conventions in the story that readers want to be true. What they really want to believe is: if you go through something, particularly something painful, grueling, or complex, you will come out of it (if it doesn't destroy you) a better person. That's why we love a good story. "That character went through this and that and then that and that—they fought and battled through it all, they conquered, and at the end they were better."

It's called the character arc. And while it may not always roll out true to life, it's what the reader expects from a satisfying book. As we're going through these external events of our story, we ought to see the main character growing. They grow through different experiences and they grow at different rates.

Successful writers and storytellers learn how to craft their story so the reader says, "That was so satisfying. I went through this emotion, that emotion, and I really pulled for that main character. And in the end, they conquered (or were destroyed) and in the end I cried for them. What a great story!"

You want to take them through a range of emotion and that's when we come to plot templates, because this kind of thing doesn't come naturally.

Plot is the series of individual, external events that happen to your main character in chronological order. You don't necessarily have to write them in chronological order, but the plot is everything that happens in the story in the chronological order that has happened.

My first book was a true story, so it naturally had a plot. But my second and third books didn't fare as well because I didn't know how to plot. I come from writing short stories—you can simply set up a situation, have an epiphany, and you're done. But in a novel? You have a full multi-level plot with a multitude of things happening simultaneously. I didn't know how to plot, and I had to learn quickly. The first place I learned was the movies. Watching movies is not only an enjoyable study; it's also a highly-informative demonstration of a story's external and visual events.

Around that time, I got a commission to write a screenplay, so I picked up

Syd Field's *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. It had a template, foundational to the ones I use now. The movie-makers had figured this out a long time ago, before novelists knew what they were doing. Studying the movies is the first place you go.

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**Coach's Tip:**

Movies provide excellent visuals and character studies. Sometimes you may find it easier to "think in Screenplay mode" when you're writing a scene. Where are these characters? What's going on around them that might impact the action? What are the sensory details? Characters may physically fall down during the low point in movies or go down "low," like to a basement or down stairs. It's remarkable how often this is true, once you start paying attention.

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**Fulfilling the Reader's Expectations for a Good Story**

When we use templates, we're not controlling our creativity or prohibiting our ability to make it happen. It just means we have a map so we can track where the reader might emotionally be going, so we can fulfill what they expect from a story.

We've heard so many stories in our lifetimes and storytelling is hardwired into our brain, so we expect it. When we read a novel that disappoints us, because it's happy when we expect it to be sad, or it's lax when it should be tense, we don't feel it and start to get bored with the story.

So, we use the templates to map our way. With a template the events and creativity are yours, but following the map allows you to know you're going toward the emotion that correlates to the event—before you know it, you will produce a climatically-satisfying story. The map simply guides your book in the right direction.

**TIA:**

I'm using the Plot Clock on a short story I'm submitting to a cinematic writing contest I enter annually. With a short story, the word count is lower than a novel or novella, while the plotting expectations are the same. Efficiency is a necessity.

When I get an idea for a story it usually begins with a character. An image comes to mind of the character in a moment in time, and then my curiosity begins asking questions. My imagination materializes the numerous details that contributed to making that moment possible. So began my exploration of Lila, a young farming wife I watched (literally, in my mind) burying a glass jar of trinkets in the ground of a fallow field. I immediately wondered, “What is she burying? Why is she doing that?”

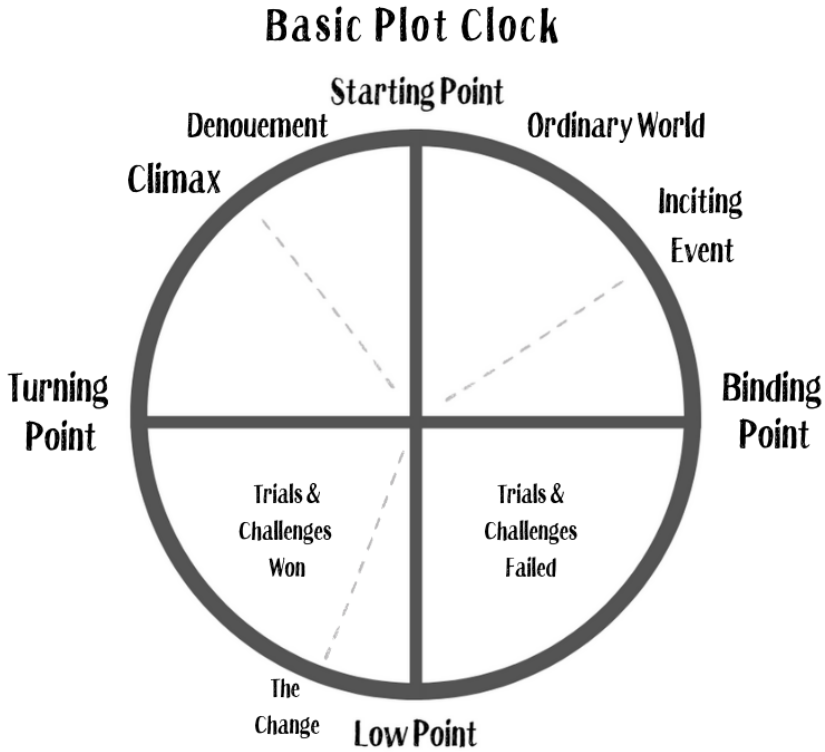
My next step is always to take action through a freewrite. As the majority of writers do, I maintain a day job, and mine is for a writing company that caters primarily to the homeschooling market. Brave Writer coaches parents on how to teach their children how to find their writing voice. While my role has included many aspects of book marketing, I’ve also been an avid student of one of the primary tools Julie Bogart, the creator and owner of Brave Writer, utilizes: the pressure-free freewriting session.

The instructions are simple: set a timer and go. Jot down everything that comes to mind around a topic. Nothing is edited or censored—just let the words pour out. Freewriting is my favorite habit when I’m blocked, when I need to think/write through a complicated emotion, or when I need to explore a new idea, such as when I have a character come to mind. It’s the very first place I start when I want to write a story.

## **The Four Act Structure**

JOYCE:

Jamie and I teach four acts, not the traditional three. We found a lot of people leaving out the third act and it really makes the book more disappointing. The character has a lot of work to do in the third act, before their final confrontation and climax. Writers struggle with it—it’s not called the muddy middle for nothing—but the third act is essential ground for strong character development. Our four-act structure is a round circle divided into four quadrants and each quarter contains vital work.



JAMIE:

Why four acts instead of three? People typically divide plot into three acts. For example, a hundred-page screenplay will use twenty-five pages on the first act, fifty pages for the second, and the final twenty-five for the climax and ending. A similar breakdown is used for a four-hundred-page novel.

What the Plot Clock does is break down that monstrous middle section, making it easier to determine what is happening where, thus creating four acts instead of three. Once the Low Point is built out, with an entry, the disastrous events that go wrong, and the Internal Change, it could almost be considered five acts.

JOYCE:

The first question that often comes up is, “Where do you start your story?” A lot of people would answer, “Well, what does your main character want?” However, I don’t think that advice is valuable. What your character wants is

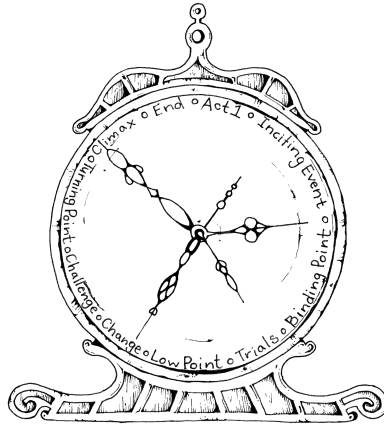
not necessarily what they need. I believe a story is about what needs to happen to the main character. Very rarely do we want the growth we require.

Your story will have two worlds—the Ordinary World and the Special World of the story. Act One is the time your character spends in the Ordinary World and it includes the Inciting Event: the event that will make the main character change. By the end of Act One your character is fully immersed in their story, into the Special World. So, you first need to start with a main character who needs to change. That's the first thing you want to show through your words.

Your main character should be likable enough that his or her role entices the reader. That doesn't mean the character is a saint or an angel—it's just an interesting role that an actor might want to play. That's how you chase your main character through the story. There should be an apparent need, a lack, flaw, vacuum—something wrong in their life. That's the first thing you show your reader to keep them engaged.

At the beginning of the story you have a character that is likable, but... there is something they lack. More freedom? More assertiveness? Set up scenes that show the lack within the main character. Your reader will long for the first plot point that happens: The Inciting Event.

Every story is a collision between the main character who needs to change and the thing that offers to change them. The Inciting Event is the moment that will change your main character. It's the catalyst for change, the force that's crossing their inner path. Once they encounter the Inciting Event, the main character can never go back to who they were. The suggestion has been made in their consciousness and they are about to set out on a quest. They may succeed or they may fail, but either way, they will forge ahead. You, the writer, has established the story.



## THE HANDS OF TIME

### Story Beats Around the Plot Clock

**Starting Point:** the chronological beginning of your character's story

**Ordinary World:** their status quo and life as your main character knows it

**Inciting Event:** the day something happens that changes their status quo forever

**Binding Point:** the main character's full entrance into the Special World of the story

**Tests & Challenges Failed:** the situations your character meets in the Story World but that they face using their Ordinary World strategies

**Low Point:** the bottom of a series of unfortunate events and a point where

the character realizes their old way of doing things won't work for them any longer

**The Change:** True or false, the character makes a shift to get out of the Low Point so they can move forward

**Tests & Challenges Won:** the situations your character faces while learning new skills and gaining strength they didn't have before

**Turning Point:** a turning away from the character's old life and a renewed push toward facing the antagonist in the coming Climax

**Climax:** the battle to end all battles!

**Denouement:** the ending of the story as your character re-enters their Ordinary World as a changed person

### **Start at the Chronological Beginning**

JOYCE:

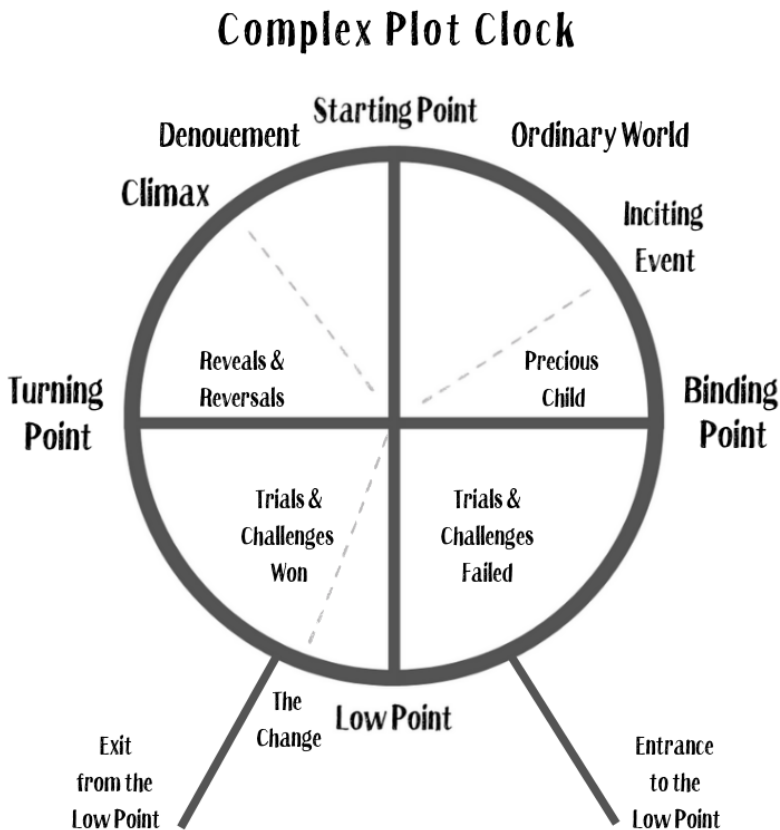
These are the main story beats on the Plot Clock. Notice that the Ordinary World is meant to be "Interesting, not static." Don't show a world that's too ordinary; you need an interesting character who does interesting things. My favorite example is Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*—Kansas until the tornado—her Inciting Event came along, but she was running from home, fighting off someone trying to kill her beloved Toto, active in her Ordinary World.

The Ordinary World doesn't mean you create boring events; the interesting events show the reader the world your main character's stuck in, and that they need to be freed from their world. You, the writer, will pull the reader into the story through the beginning of that conflict.

Remember, the plot of a story is made up from the external sequence of events. The changes your character makes, and the progression of emotions they feel, are internal responses to those external events. Those events should

move in an arc all around the Plot Clock.

An arc means the movement is, by measurable degrees, always progressive. Sometimes a beginning writer's main character will go from zero to sixty, or from one thing to another, or go back and forth. There will be a frustrating oscillation. The reader can't see how these events are changing the character, which is what they want to see.



JAMIE:

The Starting Point in your story is chronological. What is life like for the

character when you first encounter him or her in your imagination? Get down the chronological events the character goes through. As the storyteller, you need to know what happens in the character's Act One, even though the majority of those events never make it to the published page. Your storytelling will develop more strength if you thoroughly understand what happened to your character before they encountered the Inciting Event.

Make a list of the main character's goals and the strategies they use to accomplish those goals. What does the character most need? As you approach the Binding Point, be aware—a reluctant hero will need to be pushed into their story and this need to be pushed will be their downfall. An active hero will leap before they look. That headlong enthusiasm will be their downfall.

After you know the chronology of events and your Plot Clock is fully fleshed out, you can begin to consider structure.

For example: your Point of Attack—where the story starts for the reader—may not begin at the chronological beginning. The Point of Attack might be in the middle of the action. Maybe you show it by implementing flashbacks. Maybe time travel is involved. The story structure you use is different than the chronological sequence of events as they happened in your character's life.

TIA:

My freewrite regarding Lila resulted in nearly three-thousand words of her life. By the end of that session I'd gained enough information to pull out a blank Plot Clock template and a favorite Blackwing pencil—its ferrule eraser providing the power I needed to move my thoughts around. I knew Lila's story world from her Ordinary World and what Inciting Event had occurred. I knew Lila lived in the modern-day Appalachian Mountains on a croplless farm.

Lila and her idealistic husband, Smith, had snatched up an opportunity for cheap land at an auction they'd randomly attended. Smith declares that it's always been his dream to farm, he's become discontent with city-dwelling, and he's fallen in love with a vision. Lila, wanting to please her husband, joins in, somewhat reluctantly on the inside. Lila's need is to discover her own desires and to pursue them, but story I write has to drive her to that change.

The freewrite revealed the story would drive Lila through some tragic territory. Her dissonance ran deeply through her being, and I could see she would resist change. As I considered Lila's internal conditions, the Plot Clock on the page began to question what external events were occurring to force Lila forward.

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**Coach's Tip:**

Even the experienced developers of the Plot Clock are still discovering the potential nuances of it—this writing time device is an organic, evolving thing. Work your Plot Clocks in pencil with an eraser. Ask yourself freely—where's the harmony? The tension? The symmetry? Let the Plot Clock help you discover timing that makes sense. It sounds like a map but it's actually not—Plot Clocks are fluid. You might rough things in only to later find another layer of important events, emotions, or dynamics essential to your hero's journey.

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The Plot Clock helps you create a steady stream of tension for your character all the way from beginning to end. The template will help you make sense of your story. Make it your own. Know the questions to ask but don't obsess over the answers. Just keep asking questions until it feels right.

This is not overnight magic. You may have to make sacrifices along the way, “kill your darlings,” as Stephen King so famously advised. Your story may take a different way. Get out of its way.

When I work with a client on their Plot Clock, I don't know the answers, I don't know how the act will go. We're working and discovering together. It's like a Rube Goldberg machine: you plop the marble into the mechanism, and it's set into play.

JAMIE:

In the Ordinary World the character wakes up and does what they've been doing—they are maintaining their status quo. It's the story's job to make the character change, and the story becomes an actual cauldron for the character to make a change. How does the story push the main character into the special world of the story? Something has to drastically change their world around them.

An event occurs, and the stakes rise. Once this event happens, your character will never again be the same and must enter the story world to pursue what they need. This event isn't always a physical change like Dorothy landing in Oz—it can be psychological, like when Harry Potter gains the knowledge from Hagrid that he's a wizard. Once Harry realizes this truth about himself, life as he knows it will never be the same and he's immediately driven into his story.

JOYCE:

The internal character arc follows the Plot Clock. External events always trigger an internal adjustment. Each adjustment moves the character forward every time.

However, a caveat to this is that some of the external plot points are, or can be, internal. The Inciting Event must be external. It's a new thing that's come into the Main Character's life. It's out of their control and crosses their path unexpectedly. The Binding Point can be internal or external, voluntary or involuntary. For example, a recalcitrant, reluctant main character can resist joining forces and you can show that.

## **Reluctantly Entering Act Two: The Story World**

JAMIE:

Reluctant heroes often have concrete goals—they just lack the motivation to fully act on those goals. Create scenes where they demonstrate this reluctance and then justify their reasons for it. One of the ways to kick them into action is through the use of the Precious Child.

Even the most reluctant of heroes is likely to jump into action if something they value—something helpless that can't fight back—is threatened. The literary term for that “something” is the Precious Child. In a story, this might be an actual child, or it might be an adult whose spiritual or political beliefs make them vulnerable. It could also be a family home under risk of foreclosure, an imperiled natural environment, or a member of an endangered species. The possibilities are endless.

As writers, we manipulate our characters however we must to get them fully committed to their story—even if that means putting out a bowl of fictional poison or dropping a lit cigarette in the dry brush of a fictional old-growth forest. But once they're committed? We can only hope our heroes outgrow their reluctance and learn to meet the challenges of their story head on!

In some plot models, there is Act 1, 2a, 2b, and 3. The Plot Clock breaks down 2a and 2b and calls them Two and Three. That's because so many different things are happening during these two distinct acts, especially if the character has experienced a true change at the exit from their Low Point. Breaking such a large portion of the story in half makes it significantly easier to deal with the huge swath of events, to name what's going on and when those things are happening.

In Act Two, your character is facing Trials & Challenges within their story world, but they haven't changed yet. They are still using all of their old strategies, internal and external, to meet the needs of their special world of the story. These challenges require something different from them, but they aren't really bringing anything different to the table—so they are failing their tests.

Imagine the party girl who unexpectedly gets pregnant and ultimately decides she wants to keep the baby. The stakes are high and the Binding Point flowing into Act Two is when the party girl, for example, decides what she wants. But a decision alone hasn't really changed who she is or how she faces the challenges in this new life. She keeps having partying slips and as readers we're worried—we can see she is in jeopardy of not meeting her goal.

In Act Two it's as if the character is trying to serve two masters: the old way

that they're used to and the new way they've committed to. The stakes are high and rising rapidly. Later in the story, at the Turning Point into Act Four, they will turn away from their old way of living and it will require a sacrifice. But in Act Two, they're blissfully unaware of what's coming.

We have to see the character taking one step at a time. They aren't handling things well. We'll see the character stepping up to the challenge but without having changed their strategies. They're up to bat with the wrong bat. They are using everything they know, and that knowledge doesn't work.

Remember, it's the story's job to make the character change. All those failures are going to pile up, hurting the character bit by bit. The character may not even realize the unmet need the story is trying to bring to their attention. But the story will keep pushing, pushing forward. It will raise the stakes. Importance will escalate. The weight of the story increases until the character is pushed into the Low Point.

TIA:

At first, Lila throws herself into her husband's decision to buy the farm. Her internal character is practiced at people-pleasing and she works hard to make sure Smith sees the evidence of her help to make his dreams come true. Lila's Binding Point is enthusiastic—she wants to be a good team player so badly that she thinks she's convinced herself this move is what she wanted, even though it differs wildly from the life she once imagined for herself.

Smith assumes Lila is wholly on board and she gives him no external indication otherwise. The Trials & Challenges line up immediately. A list of difficult situations compound, creating a struggle for Lila and, I hope, evoking sympathy from the reader.

I wrote down the external events in a list:

- Almost immediately, Smith's behavior changes for the worse.
- Smith orders Lila to quit her job in the city, which slashes their financial income.
- The house needs to be painted but it's covered in lead dust and Smith hasn't budgeted for remediation services.

- Lila hears sounds in the house, and she begins seeing things.
- They both begin getting sick.
- And then, oddly, *Smith* tells *Lila* she's pregnant.

I knew Lila most longed for motherhood, but I also knew her strategy of people-pleasing to the point where she'd silenced her own thoughts had interfered with knowing, and listening to, her body. What should have been happy news is tainted by Smith realizing it first, long after conception, when her uterus has begun to swell and harden.

Lila is hallucinating, isolated, and sick—and now on top of it all she's pregnant. I penciled into the Plot Clock that I thought this might be the entry to her Low Point.

A whole bunch of stuff seemed to be piling up and going wrong. Lila knew she was pregnant long enough along to have needed prenatal care and to have felt the baby move, but she had neither. That knowledge weighs on her heavily, the feeling of failing at being a mother already.

In a moment of clarity, Lila gets a glimpse of her emaciated, pale body and realizes her health is in serious jeopardy. But, using her old reliable strategy of deliberate dissonance, she pushes her intuitions away and goes to bed. Then, a tornado comes. It wipes out their entire first crop and causes severe damage to their barn and other buildings.

The next day, as Lila and Smith survey the damage, a neighbor suggests Smith take a job at the mine to cover expenses until the insurance check comes. Working at the mine would be, for Smith, the ultimate betrayal of his dream and environmental convictions. Sick Lila tries to soothe him by demonstrating what a strong team player she is—but she over-extends herself.

### **What Do You Do When You Hit Rock Bottom?**

JOYCE:

The Low Point is external. It's something terrible that happens to the main character. The Change they make is the internal reaction to that external

situation. This difference shows what you want to have happening around the Plot Clock—external changes triggering internal responses.

The biggest internal adjustment in the book is The Change after the Low Point. This is also true in real life. If your biggest problem in life is spending, when you go bankrupt and become homeless you will have to change in order to survive. That's the reality of life.

You push your main character because, like most human beings, they don't like change. We procrastinate and fool around, trying not to change until something external comes along and forces us. This goes back to our secret belief system about stories: if you push the main character, they will inevitably get better because they must rise to the occasion.

JAMIE:

Your main character is in a dark, dark place. Let's consider Mary Karr in her memoir, *Lit*, which focuses on her journey with alcoholism. Her illusion has been that since she's never been in a drunk driving accident, she's not an alcoholic. She's made a half-hearted decision for recovery and it continues to not go very well. Then, she's in a crash, which is the entrance to her Low Point. She can no longer hold onto her illusion. It's the death of what she's been trying to hold onto and it's heartbreaking. Her hope is gone. At this Low Point, the character has a choice: they have the opportunity to sacrifice the attitude or strategy they've been clinging to.

If they make a genuine change as they leave the Low Point, then Act Three will show them facing Trials & Challenges, this time having learned a valuable lesson. Their new skills with strengthen and they'll gain ground. But that's not always the choice the character makes.

Characters don't stay in the Low Point forever—they have to move on. Let this take a little time, knowing the story is going to keep pushing them forward no matter what. But sometimes, they don't really change here; they instead make a deal with the Devil just to get out of the low place and move on.

TIA:

What could be the lowest of the lows for Lila? She loses her baby that night, as well as part of her sanity. The weight of her choices drains the life from her blood. I could see the Plot Clock suggesting I let Lila hang out here for a little while. She's in despair. Utterly wrecked. No one gets out of a Low Point quickly or easily.

Some time passes. During my initial brainstorming I was mulling over how the condition of sad farmers who take jobs in the city in order to pay their bills. I thought about the chain of events leading up to the ultimate decision. Farming requires a vast store of optimism. When that optimism runs out—when agrobusiness wipes out the small farmer's market, when natural disasters wipe out years of hard work, and when ordinary life crises are happening—farmers begin looking for a “real” job. Rural towns are full of farmers in need of a paycheck and as mining and manufacturing shuts down, whole towns are suffering.

I could see how this story felt relevant, relatable, and timely. I didn't want Lila to become an old woman on that farm, with nothing to show for it but a dead garden and a broken heart.

But Lila, ever reluctant to speak up and be her own agent for change, now entrenched in her loss and ill health, had a really hard time of it in her extended Low Point. She and Smith experiences loss through years of crops and also through losing multiple early pregnancies. I wondered if I was writing a tragedy. It seemed certain at this point in my Plot Clock, that Lila was at least making a false change.

## **A Change is Coming**

JAMIE:

I build on Act Three with dotted lines, similar to the dotted lines of the Inciting Event and the Climax, with the Entrance to the Low Point and the Exit, which occurs just after The Change.

During this period of time on the clock, the character is progressively brought

to their knees. It rarely happens with one large event; this is a progression of events that have churned out repeated failures. And now, as the character enters an acceleration of terrible events, in response, they lean out of their story.

While Acts Two and Three through the Climax in Act Four all contain the Special World of the story, there's still this window of despair where the character leans out. Mentally, their head and heart are tugging toward the Ordinary World—but they are out of luck unless they change.

In the past they've had strategies that worked for them, but they've been changed through Act Two and they have experienced the Special World. Their old strategies can no longer save them. The Change is hooked to the need, not the goal. Remember: what the character wants, and what the character needs, are two different things. In order to get what they need, they must change, and they change through the events. The story is relentless. It keeps coming at them and coming at them. They get lower and lower. The story keeps trying to make them change.

How much will it take? The timing is key here. And then, the character at last accepts the needs of the story and decides to change.

TRUE CHANGE is when we don't want to change, but we understand that we have to. It's hard, but we are willing.

FALSE CHANGE is essentially a deal with the Devil. The character wiggles out—they don't really change and don't really stop the behavior. It's a lie of a change. It pisses the reader off, and yet the reader can understand it.

Characters who exit their Low Point having made an honest change gallop ahead with gusto into Act Three. They are winning the Trials & Challenges that come their way through using their new skills and strategies. Sure, the antagonist is getting stronger—but so are they. Their momentum builds and builds as they go through Act Three.

If it's a false change, then Act Three becomes a sort of repeat of Act Two. The character is still evading and avoiding. They still have to do the thing they

were charged with doing. Their dishonesty and reluctance nearly turn them into the villain.

Wherever the protagonist is in Act Three, the opposition is there as well, strengthening and spoiling for a fight. In Act Two, the antagonist doesn't care that the protagonist is floundering toward the Low Point. But when they change—well, that becomes a threat. By Act Three, the antagonist is keenly aware of the development the protagonist has gone through.

In Mary Karr's memoir, this is what she did: she made another false change. Her uncommitted sobriety got her out of the Low Point, but the relief was temporary. In this case, Act Three is a lot like Act Two. Instead of strengthening their skills, they are repeatedly hitting walls and not quite making it. It might look like they've learned a little or want something good, but the reader can see the truth and is getting a little ticked off as the story unfolds. Meanwhile, in Act Three, the antagonist is also strengthening. There will be a reckoning.

TIA:

Just as Lila and her jar of trinkets had come to my mind, so did the element that would trigger Lila's change—a child in the woods. I remembered Lila's supernatural experiences in the house: hearing phantom wind chimes and laughter. Her frequent perception that the house was a living being. I decided to explore the questioning of her sanity with the Plot Clock and how that might impact her exit from the Low Point.

Lila developed a dissociative ability to go on walks in her mind while her body is engaged in something else. I'd already decided that I liked one of these walks for the Point of Attack—where the story begins for the reader—even though the chronological walk would have happened here, at the exit from the Low Point.

The mental walks mirror the ones Lila actually takes across her fallow, neglected fields, and it is on one of these walks that she meets a lone child in the wild. Immediately, Lila is back in her story.

She befriends the child, who has captured her curiosity. This triggers her to

make positive changes in her life. Trials & Challenges continue, but Lila is consistently winning in the following ways:

- She takes a job in a nursing home in town
- She makes friends with a cranky patient and co-worker
- She begins to take photographs again and markets the romanticized farm images on Instagram
- She sews and she raises chickens

But—she still takes these walks in her mind when she’s with Smith. Her husband has become menacing by now. He works full time in the mine and is excited about the Trump presidency—this is a far cry from the man Lila met at an Obama rally before his re-election.

As the writer, I could see Smith as an antagonist getting stronger. His will continues to deafen Lila’s own thoughts and desires, because so many of her actions were designed just to support his dream and vision—never her own.

I also was aware that Lila’s relationship with this lone child was bizarre. Even though it resulted in external changes for her that looked like success, I knew she wasn’t fully sane. I didn’t think this wild child was real, and I wondered how this would all come to a head. It looked like Lila was trying to live three lives, and that would never work for long. Even as the author, I couldn’t tell which life would win.

### **The Bad Guys are Getting Stronger**

JAMIE:

The strengthening antagonist is unbeknownst to the main character, who is feeling like it’s going okay. They’re out of the Low Point and keeping up appearances. But something external is coming—the Turning Point—and it will force them into Act Four where they’ll face the battle to end all battles. There’s no avoiding it. This time they have to change in order to hold their own against the antagonist. This is also where subplots begin wrapping up and Reveals & Reversals occur, such as, “Luke, I am your father.”

If the main character made a false change out of the Low Point, and a deal with the Devil to cover their ass and move on, they may start looking like the bad guy in Act Three. They are being avoidant. They don't see the toll it's taking on them and they don't want to acknowledge it. They haven't truly sacrificed at the exit from the Low Point. So, at the Turning Point, they must.

### **The Shock of the Turning Point**

JOYCE:

The Turning Point has to be external because it's a shock to the main character—the boyfriend shows up with a rifle... he's *here*. It's the thing we didn't expect to happen because it looked like the main character seemed on track with their strong, free life. The best Turning Point ever is, "Luke, I am your father." It changes the game right in the midst of things going so well, when Luke is fighting his big antagonist, and he's winning. Luke has the battle figured out, and then BOOM. Jaw dropping moment. Things just got real.

It's called the Turning Point because it's right when the main character wants to turn away and run away from the story, because they had no idea it was going to escalate this far.

(*The Woman & The Wolf* is included as a Plot Clock Case Study.)

JAMIE:

The Turning Point is approaching with all its twisted shock value. The honestly-changed protagonist has spent Act Three preparing for the inevitable showdown. They've adjusted to what they knew was coming, even if they only seemed to know it deep down in their trusted intuition. They may hate the reality of the Turning Point, but they are more prepared than they realized. They are ready.

The false-changed protagonist has used Act Three inefficiently. They don't have as many new skills under their belt—they aren't as equipped. Additionally, the antagonist will use the false change against the main character—against their need getting met. The main character may not seem to mind, the way those in denial often are. In Act Three the character thinks they've won, or they feel like they've been successful in evading it—there's an

unfortunate smugness.

Along comes the wham of the Turning Point and the main character is at the wall of truth: change, and change fast, because you are about to go head-to-head with the antagonist. They get a hot minute to take it in and face it—it's a reality check right before the battle.

TIA:

My penciled-in notes made their way around the Plot Clock, nearly to the nine. Lila would soon encounter an external change agent: an opportunity to show if she has been changed by the story yet or not. I got excited when I realized this agent would be symmetrical with how she got into the story in the first place: Smith's desire. In he walks from work one day, ready to sell Lila on his new dream: working out west on the pipeline. He's his charming, convincing best as he describes how badly he wants this change. Once again, he's pleading for her enthusiasm. The Plot Clock indicated this needed to be her Turning Point and I was relieved to see that Lila was ready.

She refused to swallow her own desire this time, although her victory wasn't complete because the Turning Point is not the Climax. Her Turning Point was marked by sticking up for what she wanted and hesitating on blindly following Smith in order to retain his approval. She's seen where that lands her, and she doesn't want it any longer. She's strengthened her spine and her voice enough to assert herself—she has changed.

Of course, the antagonist won't like this, and a showdown is coming, but Lila is willing to follow through because she knows what she wants. Her stakes are high: if she leaves, she'll lose everything, which for her, in her condition, is the wild child in the woods.

## Subplots

JAMIE:

Reveals & Reversals are things that show up along the way. They can be lesser subplots and pay-offs and they bring a deeper layer of complexity to the story.

You might drop these in between the Inciting Event and the Binding Point as the start of a thread—and then the pay-off pops into the events between the Turning Point and the Climax.

For example: Dorothy is granted the interview with the Great and Powerful Oz. The reveal comes when her little dog Toto pulls back the curtain and Oz is just an ordinary man.

JOYCE:

A subplot is another thing your main character is doing that has very little to do with these main Plot Clock events. Or, it's something that happens to a minor character who is important to the main character. The primary purpose of a subplot is to reflect what is happening in the main plot.

Your subplot should not be unrelated, with nothing to do with the main story. Look for characters around the main character who reflect what is happening in the main action—and it will either go the wrong way or encourage the win. Our main character will envy her friend and realize, “I could be like that too—if I could just break free.”

Sometimes a strong subplot will look like a completely unrelated plot until it later intersects with the main plot. For example, in *Shadon*, the ghost of a cat comes back to town to warn her mistress that something bad was going to happen. As a subplot, her brothers are in an escalating conflict with each other that's getting more and more violent. Eventually, the plots will intersect because that's what the cat was there for—to prevent the fight from becoming deadly. The cat leaves the ghost world, jumps on someone's back, and stops a fight so that someone isn't killed.

I call that subplot the train wreck. It looks like the subplot is on a different track but all of a sudden, the two plots come together and crash. At the Climax they will boom into one. You'll see this in multi-perspective books—it will look like person A has nothing to do with person B—then you'll see them meeting at the Climax—and that's why they were together.

TIA:

Subplots began to show how they could Reveal & Reverse. I looked back to the four on the clock, just after Lila and Smith moved to the farm, and I saw that painting over the lead dust had been a big challenge. Lila's cranky patient roused her curiosity in having her water tested and I wondered if this was an idea I could develop upon. When the wild child asks Lila where she came from, Lila sets out on a reminiscent trip back to her old apartment in the city. It's the day after Trump's been sworn in, and she encounters the Women's March. Lila hears her own thoughts loudly. She's strengthening quickly. Taking this old matter into her own hands, she buys a water testing kit and sends in the samples she gathers.

JOYCE:

The Climax is a complicated, long plot point of external events that rapidly fire one right after another. It rarely happens in a single explosion. It could, but it tends to be something that is played out over time.

Under extremely heightened circumstances something happens and the main character deals with it. Something else happens, and again, the main character deals with it. Then the next big thing happens, and there's a reaction, creating an external-internal dance going on at the Climax.

The Denouement is mostly internal because it's the main character working out the rest of their life.

JAMIE:

The Turning Point is the third agent of change. Now the sacrifice is going to be more painful. For Mary Karr, it was her son's well-being, which was now being compromised at this point in her story. This last-minute change is like ripping the Band-Aid off. The sudden change will mean the character has cost themselves the opportunity to strengthen their new skills during the third act. They have to scramble, and they must do it quickly—it's time to face the antagonist. There's a sudden rush to get on board.

This is often how we do it in our everyday lives. Denial and procrastination are real temptations. We're sometimes a reluctant hero when it comes to facing the antagonist. But the stakes rise, and the story moves forward, even if

we lag. It's let go or be dragged.

At the Climax it doesn't matter if the character hits the home run or triumphs externally. The victory is meeting the antagonist with force. In *Breaking Away*, the cyclist doesn't win the race, but he triumphs in his story because the need was met. The external outcome isn't what matters most. What matters most is the courage to face the fight.

TIA:

The story keeps moving Lila forward. Even if she asserts herself with Smith, the story doesn't want Lila on this farm. I could see it wouldn't be a satisfying story to have Lila live there by herself, or to live there and work in that little town, or to let her follow Smith. None of those options were Lila facing her demons. Lila had to be free.

At this point in the story Smith is attending Trump's political rallies. He's rabid in his enthusiasm to go work on the pipeline. He's listed the farm for sale and assumes Lila will begin packing and preparing for the move. Smith and Lila's wills diverge and the tension between them rises. Lila's not going along willy-nilly. She's biding her time, digging in her heels, uncovering information.

The wild child probes and asks questions that get Lila pondering the futility of the farm, as well as the old dreams she had for her own life.

The test results for her water samples arrive.

The levels of toxins account for her suffering health—and her miscarriages. Lila searches Smith's things for the water tests he claimed had come back clear when they first moved to the farm. She realizes her husband knew the water was toxic all along—he'd willfully kept it from her and dismissed the harm it could do and had indeed already done.

All those incidents that built up to the Climax were Reveals & Reversals of what happened after the Binding Point, when they first arrived at the farm. At the Climax, I could see (and feel) Lila's rage. She was no longer reluctant. No longer disassociated. No longer people-pleasing. This became the pivotal moment when Lila screams ENOUGH. I was thrilled to realize this was not a

tragedy after all—Lila’s filled with power.

I liked how dark and twisted this story flirted at being. Since this was all in pencil anyway, I decided not to censor the brainstorm. I wanted to see where the Plot Clock would take me.

Lila had been changed by the story and in some ways, this irrevocable imprint would not necessarily seem sane. She sits in the attic, the room where she heard the wind chimes and laughter and felt the house breathe, with the two water reports before her. A fire smolders within her in angry grief until she cracks herself open to howl—releasing what she’s kept contained for so long.

She lights the test results on fire and sets the papers on the wood floor. Lila watches as the room catches fire, then goes down to the bathroom with its old tub. Several key scenes have happened in the bathroom before, and this time, she draws a bath to wait for the house to consume her.

JOYCE:

The Denouement is mostly internal because it’s the main character working out the rest of their life. You don’t need to spend a lot of time on it—the monster is dead. Show the villagers returning to their lives and wrap the rest of the story.

TIA:

Jamie often reminds me to consider empowered protagonists. I’ve read you should leave your characters better off than they were before—that the bad things you write into their stories are for their ultimate positive change, not just a macabre outlet for abuse. I recalled that advice as I looked at my Plot Clock and realized that I didn’t want Lila to die in the house. Being consumed by the fiery blaze didn’t feel like a satisfying outcome for my character. As Jamie and Joyce coach—keep asking questions until it feels right.

Lila heard the wind chimes again, and the laughter. The wild child appears, confirming her supernatural presence. Lila makes a decision and chooses herself. She stops filling the tub, leaves the bathroom, and flees the burning house—in strength and in control—taking charge of her own agency.

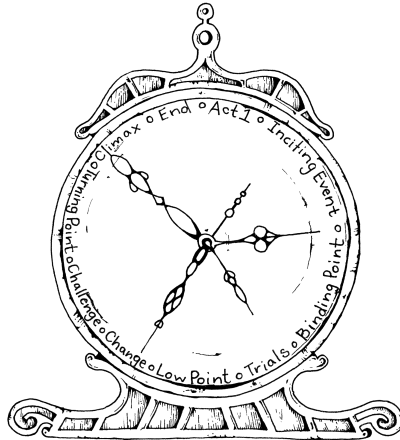
As a rough draft and as penciled in the Plot Clock, I had a complete story. I could see the holes—was Smith just going to disappear? No way, that has to be fixed. When I wrote the story and submitted it for beta reading, a consistent hang up was how long Lila stayed in her Low Point. Too long? Probably. When I realized my Denouement was too brief, I envisioned both a longer ending and a radical new story opening (Point of Attack).

That's the way the Plot Clock communicates. It demonstrates the areas that are too sparse or the ones that evoke a wonky emotion out of place given the external events that are occurring. Holes are vivid.

JOYCE:

When you get critiques and letters that say you need stronger internal plot it means you aren't showing a good internal arc of how the plot moved and changed them as people. Critique of the external plot means more action needs to happen.

You have to make the story more dramatic than how life would be. Without being gratuitous, you want an exciting plot with things happening, evolving. Many would-be authors resist that. But you want to let conflicts explode, let bad things happen to your main character, and take them as far as you can possibly take them. The reader wants a big roller coaster ride, with a lot of twists and turns in the process.



## THE DEPTHS OF STORY TIME

### Minutes Around the Clock

JOYCE:

Let's talk a little bit about emotions around the Plot Clock. These are the emotions you want the reader to feel, which are not necessarily what the main character is feeling. The emotional journey is why this story is satisfying. At the Inciting Event there should be tremendous excitement. Something good, something bad, and some tremendous shake-up is happening. You want the

reader saying, “Do it! Write it! This is exciting!”

It would be exciting to see a wolf, or to see someone ordinary crossing someone else’s path in an extraordinary way. I like that in *The Accidental Tourist*, you have a very organized man. He alphabetizes everything in his house and lives such a carefully managed life. Then this crazy girl comes into his life—a dog walker—crazy and wild and fun. And as they get together, even though it seems ridiculous that he would choose her, we get excited and fired up and we say go, go, go—we want to get into that story.

At the Binding Point we start to feel some reluctance, and there should be some reluctance from the reader—they wanted the character to make a move but now what’s ahead? Dangerous waters must be ahead, and you want some trepidation as you come through the Binding Point. Can the main character handle this? Are they equipped and ready for what the reader guesses they’ll face? Oh no.

At the Low Point, if you’ve done your job and readers care about this character, they’re very sad to see their losses. Readers understand why those losses are happening and often the main character has brought it upon themselves. But readers are still sad. They like this character and don’t want to see them going through so many bad things (except they really do, because it makes a compelling story). Often at this point, the reader is saying, “Please think. Don’t do this next thing. Please change before something else bad happens.” In the best stories, the reader is compulsively turning the pages and talking back to the character!

At The Change we feel a tidal wave of triumph. We’ve been waiting for this the whole book. Whew! Our character is going to grow! They’re going to improve! And then we feel the excitement mixed with fear—the third act is complicated. We feel the excitement as they get stronger, but we know the forces against them are also getting stronger. We can see it happening as readers, sometimes when the main character cannot. A lot of times when the main character gets stronger, someone in their world doesn’t like it and we see retaliation. That’s what’s going to come at the Turning Point.

The Turning Point should always surprise the reader. Very little should

actually surprise the reader in a book—they like to be guessing correctly and to feel smart for the majority of the story. After all, they’ve read so many stories and they know how it’s going to go. But at the Turning Point you want to shock them. Rip the rug out. It’s something they didn’t see happening. It should be pretty unpredictable—shocking, startling, and a game changer.

At the Climax, you want the reader at a high place of physical excitement. It doesn’t mean you have to have car crashes or sword fights. If you’ve had a quiet character who has been under her mother’s thumb and at the Climax she says, “I will not tolerate this anymore,” in a quiet voice, you can make that as powerful as a sword fight or a car crash—if it’s built correctly.

The reader should be able to figure it out, then feel shocked at the Turning Point and worked up at the Climax—Oh my gosh! By that point you want them lathered up in the highest place of excitement possible, and then, after the Climax, the excitement starts draining down—move away fast so they don’t get too preoccupied or too bored while you’re still wrapping things up. Choose the amount of wrapping up that you need. Once the monster is killed off, we don’t care how every other character worked out. Monster dead, village okay, run credits.

## **Feelings, Not Formula**

JAMIE:

Even the experienced developers of the Plot Clock are still discovering its potential nuances.

Your tendency will be to try to make whatever story you have fit the template. That’s not terrible—seeing your story comply with a well-timed clock can offer insight. However, some sophistication is needed. The Plot Clock is not a boiler plate formula to churn out versions of the same story.

Ask yourself—is my Binding Point a good binding point? Is it the strongest binding point that I could possibly have? If it’s not, you have to make up a new one. You have to be open enough to say, “I don’t have this.” A good Low Point, for example, is essential, but many writers don’t pack that punch

hard enough. Many more don't have a Turning Point because they've never heard of it, or The Change, because they didn't realize their character would emotionally respond to hitting rock bottom at the Low Point.

So, if you're filling this out as a blank sheet, don't try to put a round peg in a square hole. If you see something that's not there, fitting, or that's wrong—you know you have the wrong event there and you need to change it. If everyone is super happy at the Low Point (unless this is a tragedy, and we'll get into that next), then you have some work to do.

The purpose of the Plot Clock is to help you do your plotting at a higher level. You don't have to just plug in what you have and fudge your way around. Remember, the Plot Clock is not a checklist—it's a map to explore the events of your story. Dig in and ask yourself questions. Work multiple Plot Clocks to sort out your subplots and each character. Even minor characters should have an arc.

### **Timing, Pace, and Length of Each Act**

JOYCE:

One thing to bear in mind is that to have a good novel we've pretty much discovered these need to be even acts. That doesn't mean the page count has to be perfect. But you shouldn't see a ten-page Act One with three fifty-page groups for Two, Three, and Four. It should be symmetrical. It's a helpful additional gauge, because the visual provided by the size or word count of each act is a clue as to where you may have a missing or small act that can be rewritten. If you only have a little bit of story between the Starting Point to the Binding Point, you haven't really explored what a struggle it is for your character to embrace something new.

A lot of writers will have a weak second act—because who wants bad things to happen? So, they hurry to get to the fun part. But again, the reader will suffer for that. If the main character doesn't repeatedly struggle, there's no pay off when they change and then start to strengthen as they head towards the Climax.

Going too fast at the Climax is another frequent mistake. You have to spend the time to make this a true battle. You might have multiple battles. Small battle number one, medium battle number two, medium battle number three—before the main character is all the way through. You find this a lot in a fantasy adventure story. First you kill this monster, then the next monster, then the final monster. There's a lot of big things happening together in the Climax.

Count your number of scenes, your word count, and your page count. Spend enough time in each act so that every achievement is earned properly. Clearly identify your plot points.

### **Met and Unmet Character Needs**

JAMIE:

The Major Dramatic Question (MDQ) is the single driving force of the story. It's the question pumping like a heart and is what the reader ultimately wants to answer.

Will Dorothy go home again?

Will Clarice silence the lambs that haunt her nightmares?

Will Scarlett win Ashley?

Will Indy find the Lost Ark?

The MDQ will have an external aspect and the internal, hidden MDQ will develop over the course of the story. For example, the external MDQ in *The Wizard of Oz* is answered during the Climax, when Dorothy kills the witch. But the internal Climax is the real end of the Special World of the story, when Dorothy goes home. That's when we realize the real MDQ—did Dorothy have that power within her all along?

My favorite MDQ example is *Pride and Prejudice*. The initial dilemma seems obvious: will these girls ever get married? Will Lizzie get a husband? Will Lizzie find a husband who is worthy of her? We're sympathetic to Lizzie's plight. We understand her goal and her need.

The story will resolve the need and the MDQ is hooked to it. Lizzie needs to get married but the MDQ shifts as the story progresses. She needs more than just any husband—she needs to marry someone who is worthy of her wit and intelligence. And if such a man were not to appear, such as when she was very nearly betrothed to Mr. Collins, can Lizzie maintain her independence? Will the story offer her that? The MDQ morphs as you go.

The MDQ will feel agonizing at the Climax of a tragedy. Frodo, in *The Lord of the Rings*, is charged with the job of carrying the ring and throwing it into the fire. We're enthralled—will he make it? Gollum gets the ring and it falls into the fire in their struggle. This keeps Frodo out of the Shire. The story rules: he can't have it just because he's worn out and did his best. He failed. The heartbreak is that he can't have the ring he fought for. He can't go back to the shire. It's tragic.

JOYCE:

Convention says if you fight your fights and do everything correctly, the world will reward you. If you make a wrong choice, the world will punish you. That's often how life is, but not always. But it's predominantly how we want our stories to be. Once in a while you might write a bleak story—if that's how you believe—that bad things happen to good people and we have to tell the truth of it and no matter what. You will attract the audience who like these kinds of books and they will agree with you. But the majority of readers really want the reward for a good act and the tragedy for a bad act.

A tragedy is the story of someone who gets the call to do something good but doesn't take it. As we go through the acts in the Plot Clock, Act One for a tragedy is pretty much the same. They have an Ordinary World and an Inciting Event, and they enter a new world.

To illustrate this with a movie I'll use the original *Ocean's 11* starring Frank Sinatra. The Inciting Event is the planning of the crime. Right away, we want them to be punished. But these are cool guys! We want to spend time in the movie with them. They have all these skills they learned in the war—weapons and communications—and they use these skills to rob five casinos in Las Vegas.

The Inciting Event is their idea to do that. The Binding Point is when they put their hands on the table—I'm in, I'm in, I'm in—it even looks like a Binding Point as their arms form a bond! As you go through this, watch movies and you'll see—these words start to be reflected in the thing you're seeing. In Act Two—where ordinarily they'd go bad—they'll do good in a tragedy. Because for a while, you get rewarded for being a perfect criminal.

For a while, it looks like the criminals will get away with it—the viewer is wondering, “Will they actually get away with this?” These guys seemingly have pulled off the perfect crime. They turn off the power to these five casinos, safes burst open, they get the money. It looks like it will all be ok. But then things start to turn. In a tragedy, Act Two is a strengthening act, a reversal. Act Two looks good, and in Act Three, it will all go downhill.

At the Low Point, it starts to turn bad. At the Low Point of *Ocean's 11*, one of the guys has a heart attack in the middle of the street and attracts police cars. So, the perfect crime almost paid off until one guy, who we knew had a bad heart, because you plant everything you pay off, chooses to have his heart attack in the middle of the street, and now there's a scramble to change the plan. They have to abandon their friend, and we know from the Ordinary World of war buddies, this is a big deal. Then they start doing a bunch of bad things to get the money out of town, like using his coffin, doing more and more terrible things, and we start to detach. More and more we don't want them to get away with it. We're thinking, “I liked you in the beginning but now I don't, and I don't want you to win.” It's gotten complicated.

The Turning Point is when they are found out by a crime boss and they face exposure. That's when they decide to use their dead friend's coffin to get the money out of Las Vegas.

At the Climax it doesn't work. He's cremated and the money is burned up. They are robbed of what they were trying to get. There are often times to turn around and do the right thing, but the characters say no. They keep choosing the wrong thing.

Like in *The Devil Wears Prada*—it's almost a tragedy. All the way toward the end she's losing things, losing her boyfriend, losing self-respect, she keeps

clinging to this dream job. It's not until the eleventh hour—what Jamie and I call the 3rd plot—it's almost a tragedy, but at the very last minute someone snatches it back. At the very last minute she quits her job and things clear up for her. It's not a tragedy after all, it's a delayed change.

## **Worldbuilding**

JAMIE:

Don't overlook the potential of your setting to generate external plot events or complicate the emotional responses of your characters. Creating a fictional world with rules, people, environments, and a past is known as world building. A well-constructed fictional world includes, among other things, a distinctive landscape, a logical infrastructure, and consistent laws—natural, magical (where needed), and legislative.

Questions like these might help you think through the details:

What is the best thing about your setting? The worst?  
What do the folks of your fair setting do to earn a wage?  
Do they live well? Or are they living on the edge?  
Are they divided into tribes? Factions? Castes?  
What type of government lays down the law?  
Has there ever been an insurrection? Should there be?

Got it? Good! Now, get up close and personal with one of your citizens. Establish a goal for him—one your setting impedes. For instance: Are ramps obsolete? Put your character in a wheelchair and give him a life-or-death mission (on the other side of town, of course). Is artistic expression illegal? Provide him with an unstoppable creative gift. Is education taboo? Let his hunger for knowledge entice him into a fictional world's worth of trouble.

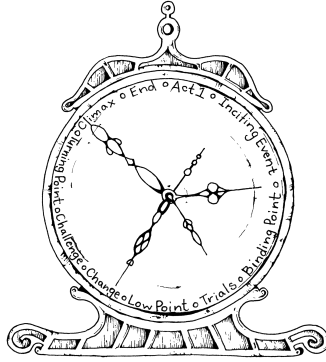
Whatever the issue, use it to pit your character's will against your setting's structure. And write until you discover what happens next.

TIA:

I worked the Plot Clock and rewrote my draft multiple times. When I

submitted my story to the contest it scored well, especially on plot, and placed in the quarter-finals. While I didn't feel like it was my strongest writing, and I'd rushed to meet the deadline, I felt proud of the plot practice I knew kept the motion moving forward.

*Ourwhere* is a piece of writing I continue to polish and rework. Each pass through the Plot Clock reveals new layers I didn't see before. One of my writing goals is to take my entire inventory of short fiction through the Plot Clock, to strengthen the body of work I have available, and eventually to present those works to an agent. I also have a memoir, a novel, and a screenplay underway, and all were plotted according to the Plot Clock. No two of them look the same.



## CASE STUDY: THE WOMAN & THE WOLF

JOYCE:

Since it's truly more effective to show, rather than to merely tell, I'm going to make up a story and walk you through the steps of how to build a story.

Let's begin with a woman. She's appearing with a boyfriend who is a sportsman and a hunter who pushes her around. He tells her what to think and what to feel, but she doesn't really agree with him, internally. Externally, she's under his control.

I'll begin Act One showing scenes of them together in their Ordinary World. He's not very nice to her but she's in a relationship with him. They have a house together and she has a lifestyle she's grown accustomed to. She needs to change but she doesn't really want to go through the upheaval of a break up. He loves guns and she doesn't—and she's also afraid of his violence. So if I show these scenes, with her and him, hopefully the reader will say, "Boy I wish she would get rid of him!"

The Inciting Event has to be something that is going to cause a splinter in that relationship. The splinter is what the reader wants to see. Something has to cross her path that is will make her go away from this gun-happy guy, an external event that she'll react to by leaving him, at least for a little bit.

I'm going to have them go camping. And at some point, during the campout,

she'll go off in the woods by herself. A wolf is going to cross her path.

## **Inciting Event**

The wolf is the woman's Inciting Event. He represents the special world of the story and after she encounters him, she will never again be the same. The Inciting Event should be disturbing to the main character because it's bringing the seed of how they have to change. Nobody likes that. Nobody wants to see the thing that's going to change them. It's in our nature to avoid disruption and destabilizing change, even if it's what we most need in order to grow.

At first, that wolf might be very frightening. But for whatever reason, in my story the wolf is going to be tame with this woman. He's going to be calm and act like her dog. She's going to pet him and have a weird relationship with this wild animal. That immediately puts her in a schism with the boyfriend because she's friends with a wild animal—and he's there to hunt. That's what the Inciting Event does—it sets the main character up to go on a path that's different than the path they were on.

On the Plot Clock, the Inciting Event is a dotted line because all the acts—the solid lines—come at very precise places in the story. The Inciting Event can be moved. It can come very early in the first act, even in the first chapter, or it can come at the end of the first act, which would be the first quarter of the story. There's lots of reasons for moving it around and will depend on what you want to come before or after it.

For example, if you want to show a lot of her bad relationship to build that up, so that we're just begging for something (anything!) to please come and break up the situation because as a reader I can't stand watching it continue—you move the Inciting Event really far in the first act, close to the Binding Point, which sits at three o'clock on the face of the Plot Clock.

If, however, you want to her to have more grappling with the wolf—and the first act is all about grappling—you move the Inciting Event up. She might meet the wolf very early in the story and spend a lot of time perturbed about the wolf. She might go home and then return to the woods by herself, trying to find the wolf again (and of course she will). She's drawn to him but also afraid of him. She curious but struggling. Her indecisive habits are showing themselves and she's not quite sure what she wants. But she can't leave it alone, that's for sure. And you might want all that before the Binding Point.

Sometimes, if it's a very literary story, you might have the Inciting Event to

come later, and if it's a very commercial story, like *Robots from Mars*, you might have the change event come very quickly, because these readers aren't interested in character development as much—they do want some, you can't skip it, but you can do it quickly—what they want is, “When are the robots coming?” So while you'd need to do the robots very quickly, the wolf might come late so you can spend time on the relationship.

### **The First Solid Plot Point—The Binding Point**

The Binding Point is when you are inexorably putting the main character into the special world of the story. She's in it now, through the gate, through the point of no return. The only way out is through.

In our sample story, this is where the woman and the wolf join forces. Now, for some reason, she is connected to the wolf for sure. She was just visiting the wolf, seeing it from a distance, and it was seeing her from a distance, but now they're together.

Something external has to happen in my story where she is connected to the wolf. So, I'm going to say... as she starts to leave the forest one day, the wolf follows her as if he's going to follow her home, like a dog, and she lets it happen. She lets it follow her to her suburban home and he has become her pet wolf.

The Binding Point is her decision to let the wolf come home with her. Now she and the wolf live together, which causes huge conflict, because she is going to hide that from her hunter boyfriend. He's not going to have a pet wolf—and having a pet wolf will bring its own problems, I would imagine.

Now you have a woman with a wolf *and* a dangerous boyfriend. She has to deal with the wolf for the whole rest of the story. Her journey with the wolf is the Special World of the story and because of the wolf, she will change. The Binding Point brings us into Act Two.

### **Act Two: Trials & Challenges Failed**

The events in Act Two are not based on arbitrariness—these are based on what the reader wants to see. This cannot be easy. The reader doesn't want anything to be easy for the main character—they want an engaging story of demonstrated struggle. They want to see the main character trying to do something with their old skill set because they don't have the right tools yet.

What does our woman know about caring for a wild animal? Obviously, there's going to be some adjustment and a few disasters. He may get out and do something in a neighbor's yard. The boyfriend could come home, and the wolf could try to bite him. You can arrange these scenes in an escalating fashion so it goes from a little mishap to a bigger mishap, and then to disaster, and something terrible.

Oh, how your main character struggles! And at the same time—she's losing things. Things are being taken from her. So, in this case, because she has an oppressive boyfriend, the relationship is getting more and more strained. He senses something is off about her. She's already a little different—and he doesn't like it.

All through Act Two Jack and Jill are rolling and wrestling their way down the hill, but it's for a reason—she wants to live the way of the wolf. And it's possible, because he's been the one in control, that he's the one that realizes it first and is threatened by it.

As you near the end of Act Two, you approach the Low Point. Sometimes, people who are trying to guess where this is going to go would put the Low Point at the end, but it's not the end—it's the middle, because there are numerous things to come that are more interesting than the Low Point.

The Low Point means the main character has lost something big. Something very definitive has happened at this point in the story and the reader may think all is lost. At this point in the story she can either lose the wolf, like if he ran away for instance, or she could lose her boyfriend. Something important is going to schism at this point.

I'm going to lose the boyfriend. He leaves her over this wolf thing. He discovers there's a wolf and to be cruel, he calls animal control because it would serve her right to lose both him and the wolf. She is in the Low Point—she's going to lose this wolf that was so valuable to her and the wolf could come to harm. Obviously, it breaks them up and puts her in a place of despair. This beautiful animal she's come to love is going to be taken from her. She has to make a decision in Act Three to stop that from happening.

At first though, she's low. Take your time. Let your main character feel defeated. Let her worry and despair at having really made a mess of things. Your readers want that. It's not a satisfying story unless we go through the deepest feelings we can feel. Don't rush through it and don't fix it. Don't fix everything that happens.

Get to the Low Point—her boyfriend is gone, and animal control is on the way. There's tension because they will be here soon. If she doesn't do something quick, all truly will seem lost. But there's still time! She's headed toward what we call The Change.

The Change is an internal shift within the main character that drives them to take action. They are committed to the story world and would rather remain in the story no matter what happens. This is a risk moment but it's worth it to your main character. They're ready to go. In this case, she takes the wolf and decides to run away so they can live in the woods together.

### **Act Three: Trials and Challenges Won**

Act Three is the part that is often left out. The Low Point is so awful that it can feel like the Climax. The character changes because of it—and that rise can look like victory. So, it's easy to see why many writers tidy up the ending from there and call it a day.

But our main character still has so far to go. Her story is far from over. She's gone through a big change, a mind shift, but as readers, we don't know if this change was right or not. We want to know it was good for the main character—if it's better to live in the woods with a wolf than under someone's thumb. Anything out in the woods would be better than life with the bad boyfriend. We're happy for her. She changed and has grown, and this is the purpose of the story. But now what?

She's run out to the woods without anything to survive. Of course, she's going to get stronger. There will be scenes where we see her strengthening. She's lost her mani-pedi lifestyle and her habit of letting others do things for her. She's cutting down the tree herself. She's building shelter for herself and the wolf. She's going to do whatever it takes to protect her wolf.

This doesn't mean Act Three is necessarily happy. There's probably a lot of trials and challenging things happening to her. But she's working through them and we see her getting stronger and stronger.

Now, at the same time in Act Three, the forces against her are also getting stronger. Her antagonist is rising. This is partly because we don't want to know yet, in Act Three, if she's going to be ok, because then we'd be done with the book. So, in Act Three, maybe she's becoming a strong woodsman, and becoming one with the wolf, but at the same time, her adversaries are

getting stronger too. There's a boyfriend back home who sees she's run away—and he's probably going to take his shotgun and go after her—that's what I'm thinking.

She may have inklings about that possibility in Act Three. She may be preparing for it. He may try to get her back. He might try to warn her, try to talk to her, to make some smaller overtures at reestablishing their status quo, but eventually this guy is going to get his rifle and say, "If I shot the wolf she'd come home and stop all this ridiculousness." She's had a chance to return to her world and she's refused. Now he's here in her space with a gun. That's called the Turning Point—the end of Act Three—and there are consequential waters ahead.

## **The Climax**

It's a real reversal of the situation—a real escalation. All the forces have been in conflict throughout this entire story. From moment number one, the wild side of this woman and the cowed side of this woman have been in conflict.

Now, at the Turning Point, she's made her choice. She's drawn her line in the sand. He's coming to shoot her or the wolf—she can't tell. The Turning Point is always a shock and it raises the stakes for the reader—because she's been living off the land, but not fighting for her life.

But now she's completely like a wild animal. Now she has to fight for her life in full-on survival mode, and she and the wolf have to get away from the guy with the gun. This propels you like rocket fuel to the climax. At this point, we know that he's out in the woods with a gun and she's unarmed. We know she's headed for something very scary. We know we're going into a very dramatic climax of some kind.

The Climax is the highest action, the biggest battle, the thing that would settle something and change it forever. The kind of climax I would choose for this book: unarmed person, wolf, gun—these are going to all come together and something is going to happen.

Take a look at the first half of the story to see where the second half should go. Because she is a person who rescued and cared for a wolf at the beginning, just before the guy shoots her, the wolf jumps off the tree and saves her. The wolf kills the boyfriend.

At the Climax you have all the antagonism and fear converging into a tight

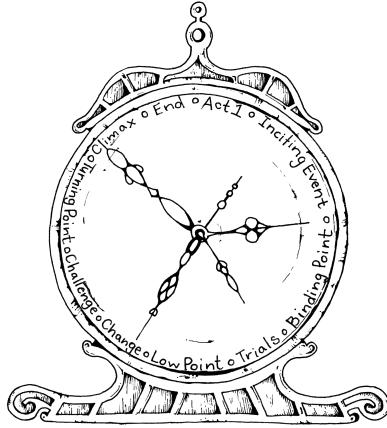
space—and then there's resolution. Someone wins. And from then on, you know the world has changed. This guy is dead. She's free to live the way she wants, and her world has changed.

### **One Final Point: The Denouement**

The Denouement is the working out of whatever is left. How will she live with the wolf, where will they live? That's the piece that happens after the Climax.

Always remember that once the reader has been through a powerful, emotional Climax, they don't have a lot of patience for much more. They are tired and ready to go home. Just cover what you have to in order to wrap things up.

You can just promise it. Once you know her intentions, you don't have to see it all played out. What will she decide to do with her life now that it's given back to her? How does she think she's going to live with a wolf?



## Q & A FROM A WORKSHOP

JOYCE:

The only disclaimer I want to put on this is that you don't have to do any of it. I've read wonderful books, occasionally, that don't follow the Plot Clock. It's rare. But you can really plot any way you want to and if you get stuck, the Plot Clock is a tool to discover what areas need to be fixed.

It can be so freeing. I discovered this in the middle of my writing career. And once Jamie and I started working on the Plot Clock, my books became better and performed better. They sold more and the readers were more satisfied.

**Q-** Are Internal and External Plot Clocks both present at the Climax?

**A-** Yes. If you delay them, it becomes anti-climactic.

**Q-** How do you make a shy, quiet character interesting in their ordinary world?

**A-** Use external events around them that frustrate the reader. Maybe the girl

of his dreams makes overtures at him and he just can't bring himself to speak or take advantage of the situation. You get good reader tension because the reader is wondering, what's wrong with you? It's active/interactive. He's out and showing why this shyness is a problem.

**Q-** Denouement—how much is too much?

**A-** It's intuitive. Submit your draft to a readers group. Feel what the reader is feeling. Include only what is essential. What does the reader need in order to be happy?

**Q-** Is it okay to surprise the reader about who is actually the nemesis of the story? I want the reader to be unsure of an important character—is he good or is he evil? And when we think it's him, it's not.

**A-** You can definitely have a character that starts as a supposed ally but becomes a betrayer. We might have thought they were actually a spy, for example, which is a fairly common Turning Point. Someone we are counting on for the battle actually turns the other way. Characters can change their roles. People who were enemies can become allies.

If your Act Two is too small, you can have more trials, but make sure you are willing to linger in the emotion.

**Q-** How do we discover where the subplot gets tied into the main character's Climax and Denouement?

**A-** Multiple Plot Clocks. It's a clock within a clock, they won't perfectly match up for most to the plot points. Use a clock to make sure they have an arc. For example—a mentor—they tend to go away by the midpoint, maybe show up at the ending, but not the Climax. At the Climax it all becomes the main event.

**Q-** For a ten-page review—if the Inciting Event comes too soon, there's not enough build up. But if there's a build-up are the early pages interesting?

**A-** It's important to build the book correctly, don't rush the IC for a review. Look at Dorothy. A full quarter of *The Wizard of Oz* is the Ordinary World but it's not boring. The first two minutes are interesting. Her life is horrible and she's going through it with the woman who has her dog and she runs away—meanwhile the tornado is on the horizon.

**Q-** My book has three Inciting Events—is that too much?

**A-** There is only one. It's the first appearance of the thing that pulls them into the world. There might be things leading up to it, but there will be only one.

**Q-** Can you give some more examples of visual plot points?

**A-** Watching movies at the Binding Point—people shake hands, embrace, toast each other, cross swords. At the Low Point—someone falls or comes down the stairs. At the Turning Point—the character will actually turn away from someone or something.

**Q-** Most critiques I get say I don't have enough to show in the first act.

**A-** You need to show, don't tell. You don't tell us how the world works; you have action events that show how it works. Make the Ordinary World more exciting before you move things around. World building has things going on in the world.

**Q-** What are some ways to avoid on-the-nose writing at each point? I want subtlety and subtext.

**A-** I think when we are talking about plotting, we aren't being subtle. I'm not talking about delivery—usually we go too small with events and not big enough. So, I say, if you want the main character to fall down the stairs at the Low Point, that's great. Be as on-the-nose as you want. Make these events big and strong. When you try to be original by moving away from something that must be obvious, you disappoint the reader by pulling a punch. This is where we kind of go commercial, even in a literary world. Being on-the-nose is okay with main plotting.

**Q-** Can you talk more about a Plot Clock for adversaries and how we can make our adversaries more three dimensional?

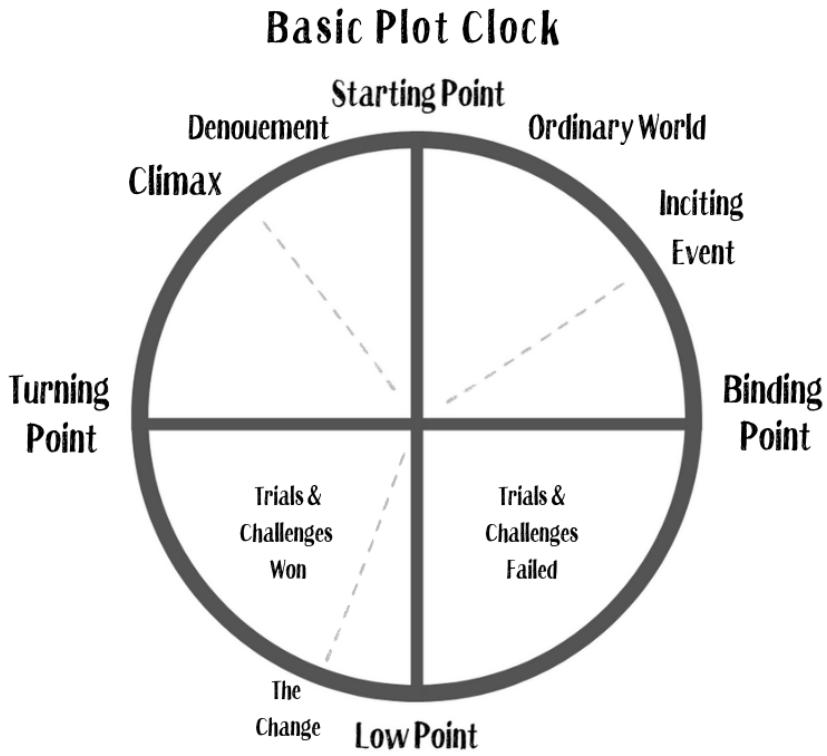
**A-** Make a Plot Clock for the antagonist. You have to recognize their Inciting Event, too. If an antagonist has a strong story, the protagonist and antagonist will be together at the Climax. Another technique that's useful is to check the other characters, make sure they are well rounded through thread pulling.

For example: take someone's name and pull every reference to that character from the book. Write it as its own story. If it makes a ridiculous story, you haven't built them properly. You haven't given them a strong arc and all the things they need. The thread of your minor character should make a complete story. Test every character to make sure they are strong.

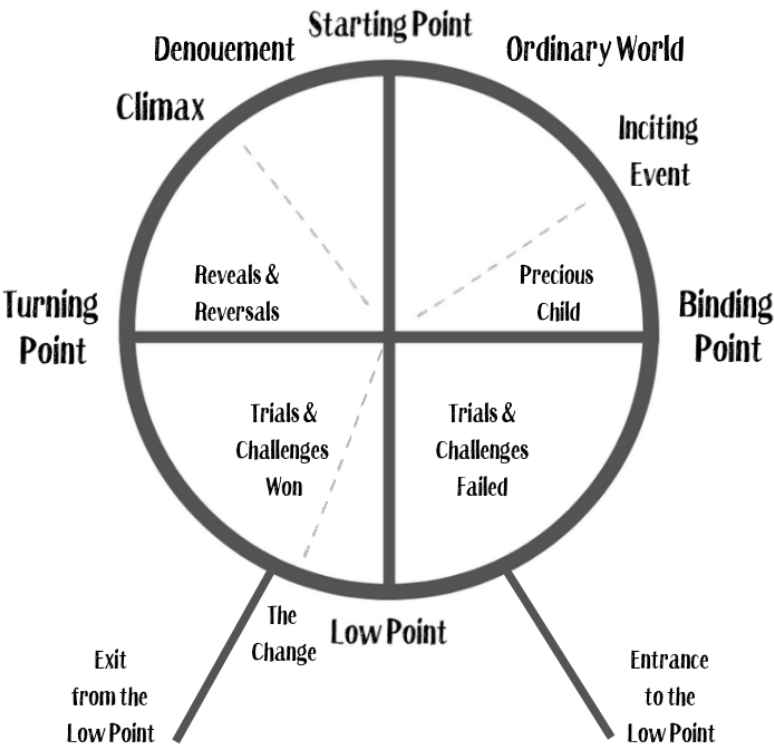
**Q-** The oscillation mentioned—The Binding Point—is that something the main character doesn't want to do?

**A-** The reader wants to track progress. Manipulate the external events to force them to do it.

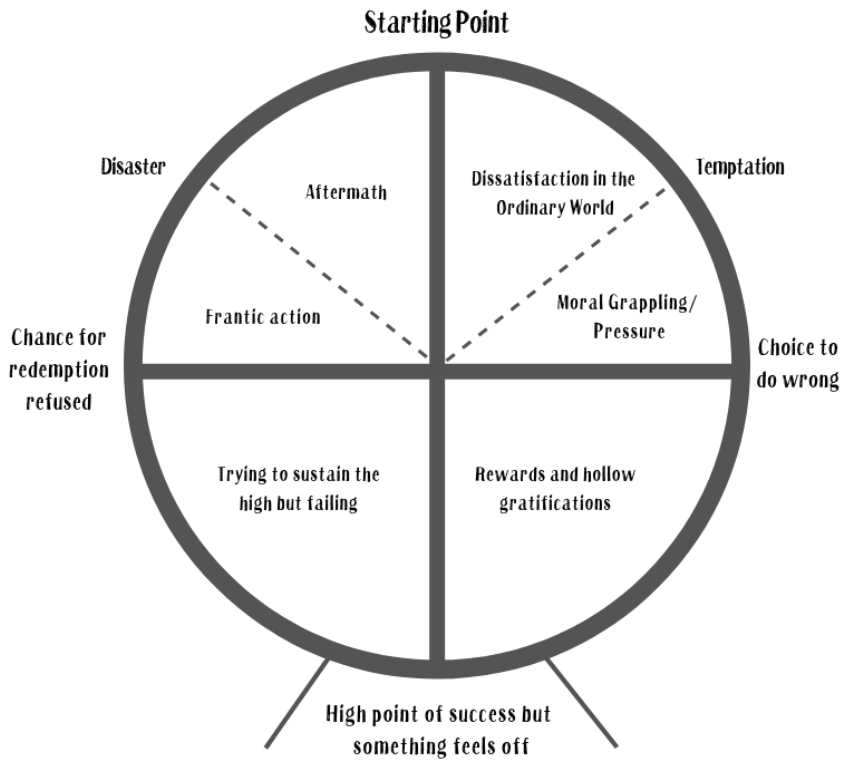
## PLOT CLOCK TEMPLATES

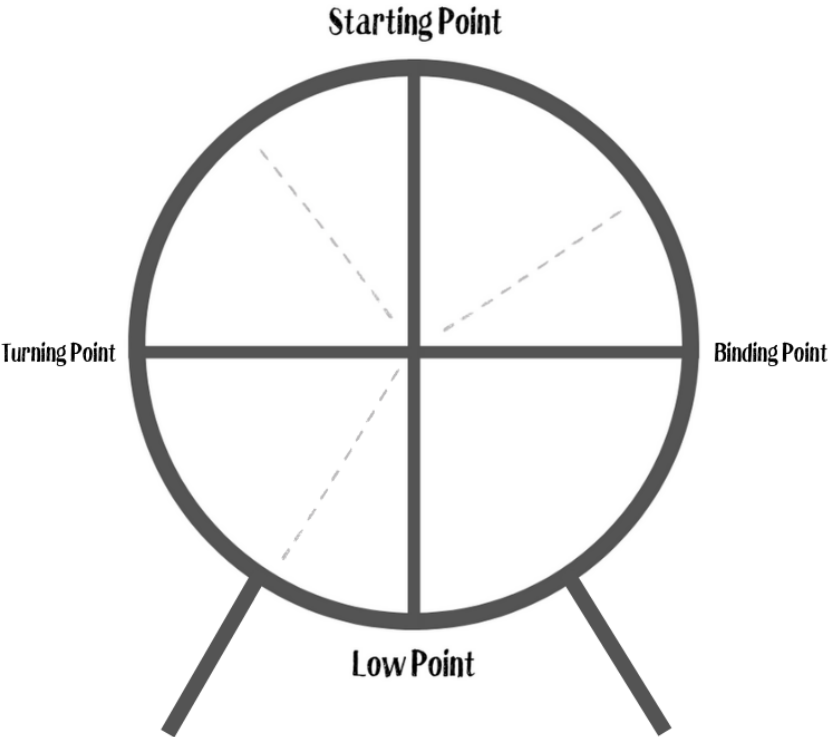


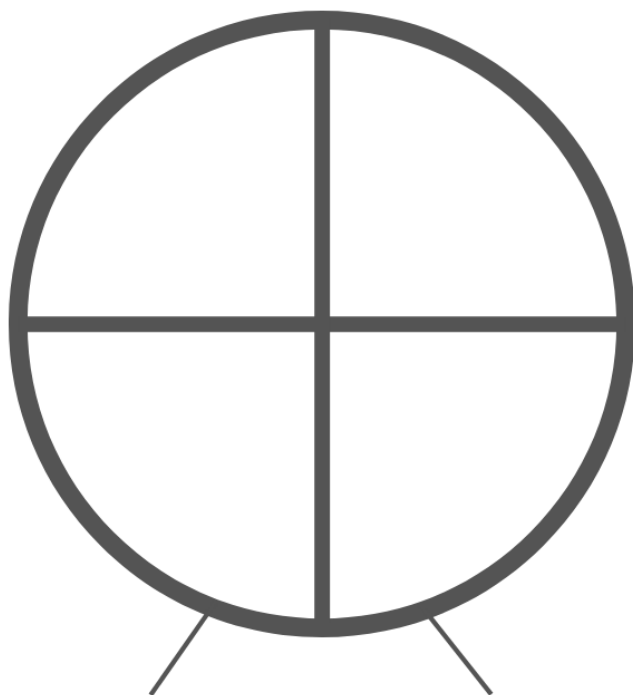
# Complex Plot Clock



## Tragedy on The Plot Clock







## RESOURCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

*The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, by Christopher Vogler

*Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, by Syd Field

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## CREDITS

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