

# The Plot (Thickens)

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**W**e always hear that a story has a beginning, middle, and an end. The plot of a story, which is also called the narrative, is everything between the beginning and the end. Really it is that simple and oh, so complex.

“Once upon a time...” is a beginning. “Happily ever after...” is an ending. What is between those two sets of words is as many stories as might be told by as many storytellers who might tell them. All different, all specific to the teller’s choice of plot, which is the sum of the words, images, and emotions they use to get from start to finish even if they are telling the “same” story.

Plots are chosen. Always. Whether you do it consciously or not. When you go to tell a story, you have to choose where to begin and in many cases, that beginning is connected to, or is determined by, the choice of plot. That beginning is an invitation to the listener to enter a world. “Once upon a time...” does that but suppose you started a story, “There is an oven at

the edge of the forest. Round, brick, the fire hot and waiting to bake what will come....” Or maybe you start off with, “She has to decide, right here and right now, whom to save. The new mother who had been so kind to her or the irritating brother, lately absent, but her brother still...” Both of those will take us into the world of “Hansel & Gretel,” but each of them represents a different path from the beginning of the story to the end.

Plots are chosen. So choose a plot that makes the story you want to share all the better for you in the telling and for the audience in the hearing. Those choices may be a traditional “hero’s journey” where something happens to start the hero or heroine on their way (a) followed by something else where they meet someone who provides help or advice (b); followed by adventures (c); followed by a triumph or success (d); and finally a reward or return (e). This is the most common plot we have — the stuff of fairy tales and *Star Wars*.

The choice may be to pose a question or mystery (who done it?) or begin with a flashback (starting at a particular moment, then going back to an earlier point in time, before returning through the story to the starting point) or a parallel plot (two story lines happening at the same time, giving two views of the world or an event). There are many choices and as the teller, you must choose which is the right one for this time and this audience.

How are these choices learned? Listen to and read many stories. Always ask yourself, how do we get from the start to the finish? Make a simple outline of the progression of images with an eye towards who does what and when. Whose point of view is the story told from? What is the time frame (past or present) of the story?

Don’t think that if you read or hear a particular story, that’s how you should tell it. Don’t get stuck thinking that there is only one plot for a story. Any story worth the telling can be funny, serious, scary, or some combination of forms based on your decision to shape the content with — say it with me — your plot choices.

After all, the plot is not the story, it is the path the story moves on. To get to that satisfying end, it is good to know how many paths there are through the woods and which will serve the needs of the time and audience you are sharing the story with. Any story worth the telling can and should be crafted well enough so that you know not only how you are getting from the beginning to the end, but why you might choose one path rather than another.

As they say in the old story, “Be bold, be bold....”



**Loren Niemi** is an innovative storyteller, published poet, and the author of *The New Book of Plots* on the uses of narrative to make better stories.

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