

Holly Lisle

INTRODUCTION to PLOTTING



Professional Plot Outline Mini-Course

Have FUN While
You Build A Story
That WORKS

Contents

[The Professional Plot Outline Mini-Course](#)

[My Students Say:](#)

[STOP! You Get Worksheets, Too!](#)

[INTRODUCTION: What We're Doing Here](#)

[SECTION I: Creating A Plot Outline](#)

[STEP 1: Figure Out Your Character](#)

[STEP 2: Decide On Your Central Idea](#)

[STEP 3: Write Your Opener](#)

[STEP 4: Create Your Ending](#)

[STEP 5: Rough In Your Middle](#)

[STEP 6: Make Everything Add Up](#)

[SECTION II](#)

[LESSON 1: What Is NOT A Plot](#)

[LESSON 2: Mix 'N Match Conflict](#)

[LESSON 3: Questions and Answers](#)

[Scene](#)

[LESSON 4: Candy Bar Scenes](#)

[LESSON 5: Ordering Scenes for Conflict](#)

[LESSON 6: Filling In the Blanks](#)

[LESSON 7: Plotting As You Go](#)

[About The Author](#)

[My Writing Courses](#)

[My Novels](#)

[Publication & Copyright](#)

HOLLY LISLE

**The Professional
Plot Outline**

Mini-Course

My Students Say:

“I JUST SIGNED up for your 'Create Your Professional Plot Outline' mini-course. Wow! Just utter WOW! From the get-go, you've helped me figure out what's been holding me up in the story I've been trying to write for two years now! After several other courses, books and suggestions, I'd begun to think maybe I'd just ditch the story. Maybe there wasn't really enough substance to hold a reader (or this writer) past the first few chapters. Or maybe, much as it hurt to say it, maybe I just didn't have it in me.

“Exercise One gave me some reflection on my main character, but Exercise Two? Simply reading that exercise gave me that elusive "A-HA! That's the problem" moment I've been needing ever since I stalled in chapter six (more than a year ago). You've helped me see where and how I was sabotaging the story (overcomplication of plot and too many main protagonists), and you did so in an easy, practical way.

“I can't wait to actually DO the exercise... so I'm off to do that right now, but I had to say thanks first. I'm so excited, I plan to work late into the night, restructuring the story to go where it really wanted to be heading in the first place.

“Thank you so much for offering this course, and for your support of would-be novelists like myself.

“Looking forward to your other classes as well!”

Best regards,

Alice*“A YEAR AGO I decided to become a writer. Since then I have purchased books and taken online courses. I recently completed one book, have 2 in process, and a series in the works.*

“After reading and taking copious notes on 15-20 books about writing, I came across Holly Lisle while doing internet searches. I have found her course material to be very direct and useful. Most other courses tend to be vague and preachy. Holly has led me to using Scrivener, to step-by-step approaches, and a nitty-gritty, focused approach to working through revisions. I haven't had to leave my home to develop quickly as an author.

*“The **Create A Plot Clinic** and **Plot-Outline Mini-Course** are especially helpful. The plot is at the center of the novel. It is the backbone where the meat can hang off of as your novel takes shape.*

“Holly is wacky and fun, but underneath, she teaches a direct approach that can cut years off of the time it takes to become a serious, production-oriented novelist.”

Joe Carlin—Cary, NC

“HOLLY LISLE is one of the rare writers who can not only write, but also teach others how to write. She is able to take the mystery out of plotting, giving step-by-step instruction that will enable you to plot your novels with the confidence of a master.

“In her own inimitable style, Holly tells you like it is, and she should know—she's authored more than thirty published novels. Regardless of your skill level, you will most definitely come away from Holly's course knowing exactly what to do and how to do it.”

Laurel—Wilmington, Delaware

*“I TOOK the **Plot Mini-Course** a few years ago. It was my first experience of Holly's method, and I immediately fell in love with her no-nonsense, hands-on teaching style.*

“And it worked like magic, too: I had never even imagined plotting like this, and was blown away with the wonderful, fun, and devilishly effective technique taught in the course.

“Now, several clinics, quite a few workshops, two big courses, a revision, and a novel and a half later, I'm ever so grateful for that one mini-course that introduced me to a whole new writing world.”

Ivy—Italy

STOP! You Get Worksheets, Too!

This course includes downloadable, printable worksheets that support Section II lessons.

Before you start, create your free account on my site and get your PDF worksheets.

<http://HowToThinkSideways.com/join-us>

You'll receive an email with your login information, so make sure before you submit your information that you do not have any typos or errors in your e-mail address.

Some free email providers, among them AOL, Hotmail, and Yahoo mail, frequently delete autogenerated emails rather than delivering them.

If you use one of these addresses to create your account, be aware that you may not receive your log email, and the only solution is to use a different email provider and create a new account with a different user name.

If you require free email, my students have had good delivery results with Gmail.

You may also want to explore other free email alternatives:

<http://www.fepg.net/emailtypes.html>

Once you've registered and logged in, click the link below to go to your Plot Outline download page:

<http://howtothinksideways.com/plot-outline-course>

This page will not work unless you are logged in.

When you register and login, you will find your worksheets download page along with an invitation to join my private Writers' Bootcamps. Classroom membership is not a course requirement, and the course stands complete on its own.

“May I print out the worksheets so everyone in my writer's group can do the exercises together?”

Yes, you may.

If you'd rather not foot the whole bill for paper and printer toner every week, though, you can suggest each member get their own copy of the ebook and the free worksheets, and bring their worksheets with them to the meeting.

INTRODUCTION: What We're Doing Here

No one ever says, "You cannot teach someone to be a surgeon. He has to be *born* a surgeon."

How many surgeons are you willing to go to who haven't been *taught* the science of surgery? None. Me, either.

But I've heard countless people, including writers who damn well ought to know better, saying, "You can't teach someone to be a writer. He has to be *born* a writer."

What these writers mean is that *they* can't teach someone to be a writer. Which is what they ought to say, only I guess it's more fun to pretend that writing is some mysterious gift of the gods, sprinkled down on the heads of the exalted few.

It's not. Writing is not magic, it's not some ephemeral gift of an invisible muse, and it's not something people are just born with.

Writing is a skill. Like surgery.

If a surgeon who understands what he's doing and why he does it can teach a fellow human being to repair a man's shredded arteries, replace his heart or his kidney, or remove a tumor from his brain in time to save his life, a writer who understands what she's doing and why she does it can teach a fellow human being how to tell a story in a coherent, interesting fashion.

So that's what you and I are doing here. I know something cool, which is how to put a story together in a way that makes people want to read it all the way to the end, and I'm going to teach you how to do that.

While I'm doing that, you're going to discover that you can learn this skill idiots claim cannot be taught.

And if you like doing it enough, I have other courses available that offer *in-depth* training on everything from creating interesting characters, cultures, languages and worlds, to plotting and writing page-turning scenes, to writing and revising novels and building your career as a full-time writer.

And that's my Evil Plan. I'm going to cleverly show you that I can teach you to do something wonderful that you'll love to do...

...So you'll buy my other courses and learn the rest of the skills required to make a career writing fiction...

...So you'll become a full-time novelist yourself, writing fiction joyfully through the rest of your life and creating a steady flow of great books other people will love to read.

Including me, because I gotta tell you, I can't stand most of the inept, sloppy storytelling on the shelves right now. I want something good to read. I'd be thrilled to buy it from you.

If, of course, that's your dream.

Maybe while I'm at it I can convince you that if you like this course, you'll like my novels. Because they're good, and the same brain, and the same offbeat sense of humor, created both.

Or maybe I can do both. You're neck deep in Evil Plans now, Sparky.

So. Wanna learn something really cool?

SECTION I

Creating A Professional Plot Outline

In this workshop you'll develop the basics of a working plot outline, starting with a character-based idea and finishing with a first outline draft that you can use to write your story or book.

Work your way through the initial five mini-chapters in **Section I**, then go to the techniques and processes in the seven lessons in **Section II**. The lessons were designed to be done at a one-per-week pace for folks who work full-time jobs and need to do just a little writing at a time. You may of course work through them at any pace you like.

You can develop an idea from any of a number of directions. Start with:

- a structure
- questions
- a twist
- a character
- worldbuilding,
- or more than a dozen other entry points into your story

For this workshop, I'll demonstrate plot development techniques using an idea drawn from character development.

- **I'll explain the process.**
- **I'll give you a demonstration.**
- **And then you'll do an exercise that will build a part of your plot.**

STEP I: Figure Out Your Character

- **First, sum up what you know about your character in one short paragraph**

HERE'S MY EXAMPLE:

I like my character Cadence Drake, so I'll use her as the main character in this workshop. From her previous book, **Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**, I know that:

Cadence Drake is a finder of lost things, primarily hired by corporations who can afford her high fees. She lost her best friend in a fire, that she has a really cool experimental prototype spacesuit for which she does not have legal paperwork, and, though this may or may not be relevant for this book, she has injected herself with a serum that is toxic to the recombinantly-created vampires who have developed a powerful cabal in her universe.

Just rehashing this abbreviated biography has given me some clues to the story I want to write next. And some things I don't want to write, as well.

EXERCISE ONE:

Write your own single paragraph in your writing notebook describing what you know about your main character. Keep it short and focus on the most important things—what he **values**, what he **does**, what he **needs**, what he **wants**, what he **fears**.

[Do the EXERCISE ONE worksheet, then continue.]

STEP 2: Decide On Your Central Idea

- **Determine what you like and don't like about your original summary**

HERE'S MY EXAMPLE:

I don't want to follow up on the vampire thread in this second story; I developed a huge universe for Cady, and I don't want to get bogged down in that one tiny facet of it and have the book stereotyped as vampire books.

I do want to follow up on the death of Badger, Cady's long-time best friend and sometimes love who was killed in a fire.

And I have discovered a device to get me into the story, as well. Cadence doesn't have legal papers for her ship, the Corrigan's Blood, which she acquired when one of her employers tried to kill her in lieu of paying her. The employer ended up dead instead, and Cadence helped herself to his ship. I set the entry point to this story being the fact that if Cady is going to keep this ship - and she IS going to keep this ship - she has to acquire some good fake papers for it. And fast.

EXERCISE TWO:

Select and list below the points you want to pursue, the ideas that you find fascinating and compelling. Three or four items will be enough.

[Do the EXERCISE TWO worksheet, then continue.]

STEP 3: Write Your Opener

HERE'S MY EXAMPLE:

So from the following tiny bit of background,

- best friend & partner dead
- piloting stolen spaceship
- profession is finder of lost things for well-heeled clients

...I have my opening set-up. Cadence is going to go looking for a place to get quality fake papers, and because the rightful owner of the ship is dead under suspicious, even dreadful, circumstances, she has to get the papers from someone not inclined to ask questions. This suggests moving into a risky situation, and I think she'll meet a dangerous but interesting character—one who is willing to give her the papers she wants in exchange for the barter of her services. He'll give her time-limited interim papers, and in exchange she'll find something important of his that has gone missing.

We'll worry about what that is later. For now, I have a solid opening for this new novel that accomplishes the following essential tasks:

- Introduces my main character
- Gives her a motive for moving from a situation of danger into a situation of more danger
- Brings in a second character of less than sterling reputation for the hero to play off

EXERCISE THREE:

Time for you to do the same. Using any ideas you have about your character, put together in the space provided a single paragraph that focuses on the critical parts of your character—what he does, what he needs, and what he fears—that answers the following questions:

- **What is the most difficult thing my character is struggling with right now?**
- **How does that struggle give him one problem he must solve?**
- **Who or what will stand in the way of the solution he seeks?**

[Do the EXERCISE THREE worksheet, then continue.]

Got your opener now? Good. Let's move on to your ending.

STEP 4: Create Your Ending

If your first reaction is, "What am I going to do with an ending when I have only the foggiest idea of my beginning, and none whatsoever of my middle?" don't worry. You aren't going to do a completely written-out chapter. All you're going to do is figure out a basic landing pad for your story.

HERE'S MY EXAMPLE:

In my case, I'll make the following decisions:

- Cadence will live (the survival of the main character is not always a given in my books, and eventually Cadence may make an irreversibly fatal mistake - but not this book)
- She will find what she's been sent to find
- It will not be what she was led to expect, and this surprise will nearly cost her her life, and will prove fatal to at least one person the reader has come to know (though not necessarily to like)
- She will have her reckoning with the man who used her
- Maybe she will get her papers - that I'll decide later.

EXERCISE FOUR:

Go back to your opener and figure out in general terms how you want the story to end.

[Write in your notebook, then continue.]

When you have your list, answer the following questions in your notebook:

- **Does your protagonist succeed or fail in gaining the objective you gave him in your opener?**
- **Does your story come to an emotionally satisfying conclusion?**
- **Can you see yourself writing through anywhere from ten pages to seven hundred and being happy to see the story end this way?**

[Do the EXERCISE FOUR worksheet, then continue.]

STEP 5: Rough In Your Middle

You have your beginning and your ending. Now we need to add some middle, throw in some new twists and turns, and give you something so great to work on that you'll be excited about sitting down to work on your book every day.

So we're going to build some candy-bar scenes to move you from first word in your story to last.

I've mentioned candy-bar scenes in other articles and workshops. They're my analogy for scenes you can't resist writing—your big set piece scenes. In these scenes, your characters will fight battles, save lives or take them, fall into or out of love, meet their enemies in unexpected places, chase or be chased.

You don't need to work these out in any great detail. A line or two to give you something to show for is all you need. Even order doesn't matter at this point - that will come as you start fleshing your story out.

HERE'S MY EXAMPLE:

For example, I know in this story that I'm starting to tell now, I want the following things:

- a great spaceship dogfight
- Cadence meets a potential new partner
- meeting up with Tangerine (a character from **HTCB**)
- run-in with a one of the minions of the stellar-regional underground that ends in a gunfight
- Cadence sides with the underworld against area law enforcement, which is holding whatever she wants after
- A recent acquaintance is murdered in terrible circumstances, and law enforcement arrests Cady
- The person she suspects of the murder breaks her out of the jail at great personal risk

And so on . . .

Every scene I jot down spurs ideas for more scenes. As I run with this, I'll put together enough material to peg into my novel, and then start creating transitions and connections to move me from one "candy-bar scene" to the next.

How many is enough? Depends on what you want to write. There's no set number for any project, but you need at least three scenes for all but the shortest short stories, and at least one big scene per chapter for novels. A 125,000 word novel can have thirty or forty chapters (or more) with two or three scenes in each. I use ten pages as my scene-length estimate, and either twenty or thirty pages as my chapter-length estimate, and 230 words as my words-per-page estimate, and work from there.

EXERCISE FIVE

Your turn. With your beginning and your ending in front of you, sketch in between three and six one-line scene ideas. (You'll find twenty tools for making this process much, much easier in **Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic**, generally available where you purchased this book.)

I suggest coming up with more than you think you're going to need, because from my own experience over the years, about 20% of your ideas will turn out to be unusably bad.

[For this exercise, use index cards, or print out the EXERCISE FIVE plot cards.]

STEP 6: Make Everything Add Up

This is the bare bones of the process I use for developing novels. The outline that I get the first time through is subject to revision, cutting, rearranging, and midcourse correction. It's a working document—a tool—and as such it is never really finished.

It is a reflection of where the novel is, and where I think it is going, and I usually abandon it completely three-quarters of the way through my book. But it's always there when I need to rethink something.

It will be there for you, too. A good plot outline can be any dedicated writer's best friend.

So, with the basics out of the way, it's time for Section II, and the lessons.

SECTION II

LESSON 1: What Is NOT A Plot

In Holly Lisle's *Create A Plot Clinic*...

<http://howtothinksideways.com/create-a-plot-clinic>

I point out that the **7 Basic Plots in Literature**, (or the 1, or 3, or 20, or 36, depending on who you ask) are a myth of Mermaid-like proportions.

You need to see this myth live, so go to this link at the Internet Public Library:

www.ipl.org/div/farq/plotFARQ.html

Beginners look "7 basic plots" up thinking they'll be able to memorize these puppies and then they always know what to write.

When you look at the lists, though, your teeth start to itch.

"[wo]man vs. nature" is not a plot.

"**Type A, happy ending**" is not a plot. (That's not even a helpful conflict. Foster-Harris manages the four paragraphs listing his theories to turn writing into a black hole of tedium, sucking the life out of writers looking for help. Read "1 Plot" and "3 Plots" on the **ipl.org** site with your tedium-blocking glasses taped to your face.)

"**Escape**" is not a plot.

Gimme a break. You sit down at a writers' conference and field questions about your next book, and someone asks "What's your book about?" and you say, "Escape," and then sit back like you said something useful, and every eye in the room is going to glaze over.

Not a single one of these things is a plot.

Excluding Foster-Harris, however, these lists do offer something both wonderful and useful.

They offer conflicts. Conflicts are spectacularly handy in writing a novel. But don't mistake them for plots.

What is a plot?

DEFINITION: *PLOT is the series of events that move the characters and story forward.*

Memorize that definition. It will save you a world of pain when you're trying to put a plot together.

Your plot will consist of characters struggling with conflicts toward a goal, whether known or unknown to them. Plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Plot Does Things.

Your Turn

- **Memorize the definition of PLOT.**
- Walk around the house (or work) repeating the words, **“Plot is not conflict,”** until you either can do this in your sleep, or until someone threatens to haul you away and lock you in a padded room.
- **Familiarize yourself with the various *conflicts*** that are listed as plots, at:

www.ipl.org/div/farq/plotFARQ.html

In **Lesson Two**, you'll start building your own plot outline using the Mix 'N Match Conflicts technique.

~~This second lesson picks up where the first one left off. You'll be choosing conflicts and beginning to develop them into the seeds for your plot.~~

LESSON 2: Mix 'N Match Conflict

In your first lesson, you determined that the mythical **7 Basic Plots** and their ilk do not meet the test for plots.

That is, **they are not a series of events that move the characters and story forward.**

But they're not useless.

You're going to use these lists to start building a plot, coming up with ideas to create a story from scratch.

Here's how it'll work. I'll do a demo, giving you such tools as you need do the exercise. Then you do the exercise.

For these lessons, start out fresh, with no idea and no preconceptions of where you're going or where you'll get. You need to discover how simple this process really is.

Ready?

You don't know your characters, you don't know your world, you don't, in fact, know anything but that you want to write a story.

So let's scroll down the list of conflicts on the **Internet Public Library** page:

www.ipl.org/div/farq/plotFARQ.html

and randomly pick three conflicts (avoiding anything that says Foster-Harris on it for fear of your story catching something nasty).

I'll Start

I've closed my eyes and pointed, and come up with:

- [wo]man vs. the supernatural
- Rivalry

- Adultery
-

Yuck. I hate adultery stories, but there has to be some way to make this cool.

I'll choose the **Cliffhanger** structure (**Plot Clinic**, p.31) because I love potboilers. They're fun to write.

And I'll use **Tool 1: Question** (**Plot Clinic** p.41) to throw four questions at this mess.

- What is the supernatural challenge the main character faces?
- Who is the main character's rival, and why?
- Who committed adultery, and why?
- How does adultery tie into the supernatural element?

With question four, I just realized that I already did one book with exactly these elements in **Night Echoes**, so I'm going to have to fight to keep from going down the same road. I could just change the conflicts I picked at random to new ones, but where would the challenge be with that?

Your Turn

Get out your EXERCISE SIX (Lesson 2) worksheet.

- Sit down with the Internet Public Library's list of conflicts, and **pick any three conflicts.**
- **Choose a story structure**, so that you'll know how the book is going to go together and what elements you need. (Use the **Create A Plot Clinic** for help, or pick cliffhanger if you aren't familiar with other structures. I'll walk you through the cliffhanger structure as we go.)
- Ask four questions about the three conflicts you've chosen that will help tie them together. Good questions include the words who, what, when, where, why, and how, and cannot be answered with a Yes or a No.

In **Lesson Three**, you'll go answer those questions, and start building your plot.

~~You'll dip briefly into character before answering your plotting questions in this lesson.~~

LESSON 3: Questions and Answers

To quickly recap from Lesson Two, my conflicts were:

- [wo]man vs. the supernatural
- Rivalry
- Adultery

My structure was **Cliffhanger**.

And my questions were:

- What is the supernatural challenge the main character faces?
- Who is the main character's rival, and why?
- Who committed adultery, and why?
- How does adultery tie into the supernatural element?

At this point, I'm going to have to commit a bit of effort to my character, about whom I still know nothing.

- [**Talk Sweetly to Me \(Brothers Sinister, Book 4.5\) here**](#)
- [**download The Big Book for Toddlers**](#)
- [Deforming American Political Thought: Ethnicity, Facticity, and Genre pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [Early Chinese Religion, Part 2: The Period of Division \(220-589 AD\) online](#)

- <http://flog.co.id/library/Real-Fast-Indian-Food--More-Than-100-Simple--Delicious-Recipes-You-Can-Cook-in-Minutes.pdf>
- <http://wind-in-herleshausen.de/?freebooks/Color-and-Design.pdf>
- <http://patrickvincitore.com/?ebooks/North-America-s-Lost-Decade---The-Munk-Debate-on-the-North-American-Economy.pdf>
- <http://cavalldecartro.highlandagency.es/library/Early-Chinese-Religion--Part-2--The-Period-of-Division--220-589-AD-.pdf>