How to Complicate Your Plot and Keep Readers Interested

by

Creative Writing Now

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Plot complications keep your reader’s attention and interest as your character attempts to resolve the story’s central conflict.

Let’s say we’re writing a story about a love triangle. Our main character, Martha, is in love with Steve, a married man. Martha’s goal is to make Steve leave his wife for her. One night, she gives Steve an ultimatum. “It’s her or me,” Martha says. Steve chooses Martha or his wife, and the story ends.

This might be enough for a very short story, especially if the confrontation between Martha and Steve plays out in an interesting way. But for a longer manuscript, we need the conflict to last longer. We need to add some complications and twists to build suspense and excitement and reveal different aspects of the characters.

In a longer manuscript, we might start the story earlier in the affair and build up to the night when Martha delivers the ultimatum.

How can we keep the reader interested through all of this? Putting it another way -- how can we make Martha’s life more complicated?

- She could unintentionally say something that makes Steve angry. Now she has to get him to forgive her before she can push the relationship forward.

- Martha’s ex-boyfriend could show up in town, making her question if she’s chosen the right man.

- Steve’s wife could attempt suicide, making Steve anxious about the consequences if she learns of his affair.

The central conflict of the story stays the same: Martha is after a married man. As Martha struggles to resolve this conflict, the plot complications put obstacles in her way.

Think about adding new plot complications to your story if:

- Your conflict is developing in an overly predictable way

- Your conflict feels two-dimensional

- Things seem too easy for your main character
• You're having trouble keeping your conflict from peaking too quickly

• Your story lacks suspense or tension

**Don’t overdo it**

Plot complications are useful, but be careful not to overdo them. In general, the shorter your manuscript, the fewer plot complications it can probably support.

Signs that you may have too many plot complications:

• It starts to feel melodramatic or like a soap opera

• It starts to seem as if your character is cursed -- how can anyone attract so much trouble?

• Instead of building tension, all the problems start to tire out the reader

• The plot complications become hard to keep track of

• The plot complications are competing for attention with your central story conflict instead of adding to it

• The plot complications are taking over your story, causing it to lose focus

**The most dramatic order**

In what order should the plot complications appear in your story? When you have a choice, think about putting them in order of smaller to larger. This will build drama in your story as the main character confronts bigger and bigger obstacles.

**Making your conflict build**

For most kinds of fiction, the central conflict should build to a high point, or climax, just before the end of the story.

Does your conflict build as the story goes? Of course, there will be little dips along the way -- you have to give your character, and your reader, a chance to breathe. But your story will be more dramatic if the general trend is toward:
• rising tension

• rising suspense

• rising emotional intensity

• rising stakes for the main character

• bigger and bigger obstacles

• bigger and bigger confrontations

• increasingly dramatic scenes

Does your story feel a bit flat or monotonous? Does the tension drop off? Does the conflict seem to run out of steam for a while? You may be able to fix this by reordering scenes and events for a stronger upward trend.

Write down a list of the scenes in your story, listing them in the same order that they appear in your manuscript. Name each scene with just a few words that will identify it for you. For example:

1. 1st meeting: Martha and Dave

2. Martha's friend tells her Dave is married

3. Dave calls Martha and asks her out.

Etc.

The words you use here don't matter -- this list is just for you.

Not everything that happens in your story is a scene. Scenes are the parts that you show, the parts that happen "on stage." If something happens "behind the scenes," or if you summarize it to the reader as background information, then don't include that in your scene list.

After you've finished your list of scenes, read through it. Are your scenes in the most dramatic order?
Experiment, in your imagination or on paper, with rearranging some of the scenes. How would this restructuring change the reader’s experience? Do you see any possibilities that might improve the story?

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This article has been taken from our upcoming e-book, *Fiction Boot Camp: Whip Your Manuscript into Shape and Give it the Best Chance at Success*. Watch [http://www.creative-writing-now.com](http://www.creative-writing-now.com) for the announcement when the book becomes available!

What they’re saying about the book:

“*Fiction Boot Camp* is a remarkable 140-page crash course in creative writing that contains more priceless and practical information than can be found at any other one-stop destination—whether it be a book or a website. Its thoughtful and meticulous organization and super-focused approach make it an indispensable resource for all aspiring writers. “

— Joslyn Pine, former Managing Editor of Dover Publications