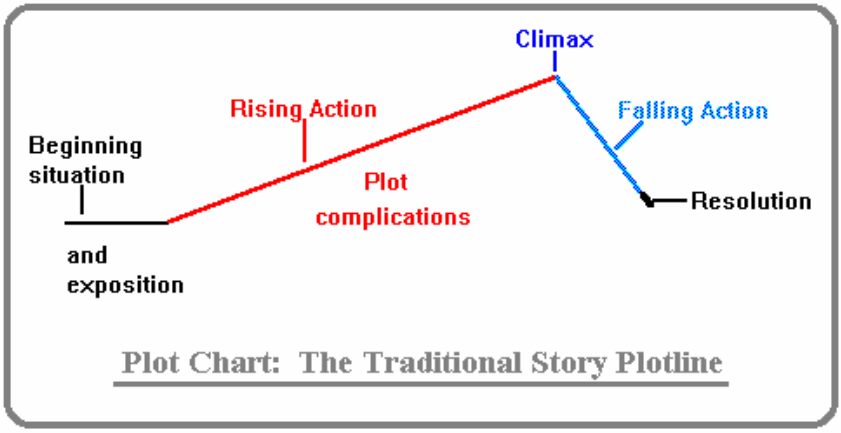
Plot

Stories recount incidents and events, telling us what happens to a character or characters. Plot refers to the sequence of events which give focus to a story and which shape the action. It is a plan which gives direction to the story. Plot is sometimes referred to as the story line or the plotline or the narrative structure.

The plotline in a story can take a number of forms ranging from the traditional straightline plot which moves chronologically from beginning to end as things happen one after another (i.e., in a straight line), all to way to modern plot techniques which may move forward and back through the storyline as the story progresses instead of strictly from beginning to end. The straightline plot, with its structure of antecedent action - initial incident - rising action - climax | falling action | resolution, may be diagrammed in a **Plot Chart** with a pyramidal pattern, like this:
In actuality, very few writers relate their stories in strictly chronological or straightline plot



format. Many times a writer will begin in the middle of things - termed *in medias res - and* then move forward and backward as needed, through flashbacks, rather than recounting events in the order of their happening. One reason for this back-and-forth format is that it helps establish or build suspense in a story, by revealing information only gradually to the reader. Suspense builds tension and is what keeps a story going, as the reader asks "what will happen next?" or "how will this turn out?". Suspense is also achieved when a writer uses foreshadowing to clue the alert reader in to something that will happen later.

An important part of plot is the beginning situation or exposition. How and where a story begins is often significant, and you should pay careful attention to this. What is the initial situation and setting? Who are the main characters, and what are their relationship? Does a character have some goal she wants to reach or does he encounter a conflict with someone or something else? Once a story has begun, the plotline may move forward by means of physical, external actions which occur as the characters do things or act in certain ways to reach the goal or resolve the conflict. Or, the plotline may consist of mostly internal, psychological actions as a character struggles within himself. The story will end when the character either succeeds or fails in achieving the goal, or resolves or is destroyed by the conflict. In between, as the character strives to achieve the goal or solve

the conflict, he/she encounters obstacles or complications, which may arise from natural, supernatural, human, emotional, or mental events, or from some combination of all five. This results in the rising action, building suspense and continuing until the climax or turning point, when success or failure occurs. From the climax, the story continues quickly (falling action) to the final resolution and we see how the character responds to this success or failure.

Conceivably a plot might consist merely of a sequence of related actions. Ordinarily, however, the excitement craved by the beginning reader and the meaningfulness demanded by the mature reader arise out of some sort of **conflict -** a clash of actions, ideas, desires, or wills. The main character may he pitted against some other person or groups of persons (***man-against-man***); he may be in conflict with some external force - physical nature, society, or fate, (***man-against-environment***); or he may be in conflict with some element in his own nature (***man-against-himself***). The conflict may be physical, mental, emotional, or moral. There is conflict in a chess game, where the competitors sit quite still for hours, as surely as in a wrestling match; emotional conflict may be raging within a person sitting quietly in an empty room. The central character in the conflict, whether he be a sympathetic or an unsympathetic person, is referred to as the **protagonist**; the forces arrayed against him, whether persons, things, conventions of society, or traits of his own character, are the **antagonists**. In some stories, the conflict is single, clear-cut, and easily identifiable. In others it is multiple, various, and subtle. A person may be in conflict with other persons, with society or nature, and with himself all at the same time, and sometimes he may be involved in conflict without being aware of it.

Excellent interpretive fiction has been made from all three of the major kinds of conflict. The varieties of commercial fiction on which the pulp magazines rely usually emphasize conflict between man and man and depend for their main excitement on physical conflict. It is hard to conceive of a Western story without a fist fight or a gun fight. Even in the crudest kinds of fiction, however, something more will be found than mere physical combat. Good men will be arrayed against bad men, and thus the conflict will also be between moral values. In cheap fiction this conflict is usually clearly defined in terms of white vs. black, hero vs. villain. In interpretive fiction the contrasts are likely to be less marked. Good may be opposed to good, or half-truth against half-truth. There may be difficulty in determining what is the good, and internal conflict tends therefore to be more frequent than physical conflict. In the world in which we live, significant moral issues are seldom sharply defined, judgments are difficult, and choices are complex rather than simple. The interpretive writer is aware of this complexity and is more concerned with catching its endless shadings of gray than with presenting glaring contrasts of black and white.

Suspense is that quality in a story which makes the reader ask, ‘What is going to happen next?” or How will this turn out?” and impels him to read on to find the answers to these questions. Suspense is greatest when the reader’s curiosity is combined with anxiety about the fate of some sympathetic character. Thus in the old serial movies - often appropriately called “cliffhangers” - a strong element of suspense was created at the end

of each episode by leaving the hero hanging from the edge of a cliff or the heroine tied to the railroad tracks with the express train rapidly approaching. In murder mysteries - often called "who-dun-its" - suspense is created by the question of who committed the murder. In love stories it is created by the question, “Will the boy win the girl?” or “Will the lovers be re-united, and how?” In more sophisticated forms of fiction the suspense often involves not so much the question "what" as the question "why" and not "What will happen next?" but “How is the protagonist’s behavior to be explained in terms of human personality and character?” The forms of suspense range from crude to subtle and may concern not only actions but psychological considerations and moral issues. Two common devices for achieving suspense are to introduce an element of **mystery** - an unusual set of circumstances for which the reader craves an explanation or to place the hero or heroine in a **dilemma** - a position in which he must choose between two courses of action, both undesirable. But suspense can be readily created for most readers by placing anybody on a seventeenth-story window ledge, or simply by bringing together a physically attractive young woman and a man.

In some stories, however, the build-up of suspense is more subtle. Suspense is usually the first quality mentioned by a young reader when asked what makes a good story - and, indeed, unless a story makes us eager to keep on reading it, it can have little merit at all. Nevertheless, the importance of suspense is often over-rated. After all, we don’t listen to a Beethoven symphony to discover how it will turn out. A good story, like a good dinner, should furnish its pleasure as it goes, because it is amusing or well-written or morally penetrating or because the characters are interesting to live with. One test of a story is whether it creates a desire to read it again. Like the Beethoven symphony, a good story should be as good or better on a second or third encounter - when we already know what is going to happen - as on the first. The discriminating reader, therefore, while he does not disvalue suspense, may be suspicious of stories in which suspense is artificially created - by the simple withholding of vital information, for instance - or in which suspense is all there is. He will ask whether the author’s purpose has been merely to keep him guessing what happens next or whether it has been to reveal something about experience. He will be less interested in whether the man on the seventeenth-story window ledge will jump than in the reasons impelling him to jump. When a reader’s primary interest is shifted from “What happens next?” to "Why do things happen as they do?” or "What is the significance of this series of events?" he has taken his most important step forward.

Closely connected with the element of suspense in a short story is the element of **surprise**. If we know ahead of time exactly what is going to happen in a story, and why, there can be no suspense; as long as don’t know, whatever happens comes with an element of surprise. The surprise is proportional to the unexpectedness of what happens; it becomes pronounced when the story departs radically from expectation. In the short story such radical departure is most often found in a surprise ending: one which reveals a sudden new turn twist.

As with physical action and suspense, the inexperienced reader makes a heavier demand for surprise than does the experienced reader. The escape story more frequently supplies a surprise ending than does the interpretive. There are two ways by which the legitimacy and value of a surprise ending may be judged: (1) by the fairness with which it is achieved; (2) by the purpose which it serves. If the surprise is brought about as the result of an improbable coincidence or an unlikely series of small coincidences, or by the planting of false clues - details whose only purpose is to mislead the reader, or through the withholding of information which the reader ought to have been given earlier in the story, or by manipulation of the point of view, then we may well dismiss it as a cheap trick. If, on the other hand, the ending which comes at first as a surprise seems perfectly logical and natural as we look back over the story, we may grant it as fairly achieved. Again, a surprise ending may be judged as trivial if it exists simply for its own sake - to shock or to titillate the reader. We may judge it as a fraud if it serves, as it does in much routine commercial fiction, to conceal earlier weaknesses in the story by giving the reader a shiny bauble at the end to absorb and concentrate his attention. Its justification comes when it serves to open up or to reinforce the meaning of the story. The worthwhile surprise is one which furnishes illumination, not just a reversal of expectation.

Whether or not a story has a surprise ending, the beginning reader usually demands that it have a **happy ending**: the protagonist must solve his problems, defeat the villain, win the girl, "live happily ever after." A common obstacle confronting the reader who is making his first attempts to enjoy interpretive stories is that they often - though by no means always - end unhappily. He is likely to label such stories as "depressing" and to complain that "real life has troubles enough of its own" or, conversely, that "real life is seldom as unhappy as all that."

Two justifications may be made for the **unhappy ending**. First, many situations in real life have unhappy endings; therefore, if fiction is to illuminate life, it must present defeat as well as triumph. The commercial sports-story writer usually writes of how an individual or a team achieves victory against odds. Yet if one team wins the pennant, nine others must lose it, and if a golfer wins a tournament, fifty or a hundred others must fail to win it. In situations like these, at least, success is much less frequent than failure. Sometimes the sports writer, for a variant, will tell how an individual lost the game but learned some important moral lesson - good sportsmanship, perhaps, or the importance of fair play. But here again, in real life, such compensations are only occasionally gained. Defeat, in fact, sometimes embitters a person and makes him less able to cope with life than before. Thus we need to understand and perhaps expect defeat as well as victory.

Secondly, the unhappy ending has a peculiar value for the writer who wishes us to ponder life. The story with a happy ending has been "wrapped up" for us: the reader is sent away feeling pleasantly if vaguely satisfied with the world, and ceases to think about the story searchingly. The unhappy ending, on the other hand, may cause him to brood over the results, to go over the story in his mind, and thus by searching out its implications to get more from it. Just as we can judge men better when we see how they behave in trouble,

so we can see deepest into life when it is pried open for inspection. The unhappy endings are more likely to raise significant issues ....Shakespeare's tragedies reverberate longer and more resonantly than his comedies.

The discriminating reader evaluates an ending, not by whether it is happy or unhappy, but by whether it is logical in terms of what precedes it (The movies frequently make a book with an unhappy ending into a film with a happy ending. Such an operation, if the book was artistically successful, sets aside the laws of logic and the expectations we naturally build on them.) and by the fullness of revelation it affords. He has learned that an ending which meets these tests can be profoundly satisfying whether happy or unhappy. He has learned also that a story, to be artistically satisfying, need have no ending at all in the sense that its central conflict is resolved in favour of protagonist or antagonist. In real life, some problems are never solved and some contests never permanently won. A story, therefore, may have an **indeterminate ending** - one in which no definitive conclusion is arrived at. Conclusion of some kind there must of course be: the story, if it is to be an artistic unit cannot simply stop. But the conclusion need not be in terms of resolved conflict.

Artistic unity is essential to a good plot. There must be nothing in the story which is irrelevant, which does not contribute to the total meaning, nothing which is there only for its own sake or its own excitement. A good writer exercises a rigorous selection: he includes nothing that does not advance the central intention of the story. But he must not only select; he must also arrange. The incidents and episodes should be placed in the most effective order, which is not necessarily chronological order, and, when rearranged in chronological order should make a logical progression. In a highly unified story each event grows out of the preceding one in time and leads logically to the next. The various stages of the story are linked together in a chain of cause-and-effect. With such a story one seldom feels that events might as easily have taken one turn as another. One does not feel that the author is managing the plot, but rather that the plot has a quality of inevitability given a certain set of characters and an initial situation.

When an author gives his story a turn unjustified by the situation or the characters involved, he is guilty of **plot manipulation**. Any unmotivated action furnishes an instance of plot manipulation. We suspect the author of plot manipulation also if he relies too heavily upon chance or upon coincidence to bring about a solution to his story. (This kind of coincidental resolution is sometimes referred to as ***deus ex machina*** - "god from a machine" - after the practice of some ancient Greek dramatists in having a god descend from heaven - in the theater by means of a stage-machine - to rescue their protagonist at the last minute form some impossible situation.)

Chance cannot be barred from fiction, of course, any more than it can be barred from life. (**Chance** is the occurrence of an event which has no apparent cause in antecedent events or in predisposition of character. In an automobile accident in which a drunk, coming home from a party, crashes in to a sober driver from behind, we say that the accident was a chance event in the life of the sober driver, but that it was a logical consequence in the

life of the drunk. **Coincidence** is the chance concurrence of ***two*** events which have a peculiar correspondence. If the two drivers involved in the above accident had been brothers, and were coming from different places, it would be coincidence.) But if an author uses an improbable chance to effect a resolution to his story, the story loses its sense of conviction and inevitability. The objections to such a use of coincidence are even more forcible, for coincidence is chance compounded. Coincidence may be justifiably used to initiate a story, and occasionally to complicate it, but not to resolve it. It is objectionable in proportion to its improbability, its importance to the story, and its nearness to the end. If two characters in a story both start talking of the same topic at once, it may be a coincidence but hardly an objectionable one. If they both decide suddenly to kill their mothers at the same time, we may find the coincidence less acceptable. But the use of even a highly improbable coincidence may be perfectly appropriate at the start of a story. Just as a chemist may wonder what will happen if certain chemical elements are placed together in a test tube, an author may wonder what will happen if two former lovers accidentally meet long after they have married and in Majorca where they longed as young lovers to go. The improbable initial situation is justified because it offers a chance to observe human nature in conditions that may be particularly revealing, and the good reader demands only that the author develop his story logically from that initial situation. But if the writer uses a similar coincidence to resolve his story, then we feel that he has been avoiding the logic of life rather than revealing it. It is often said that fact is stranger than fiction: it *should* be stranger than fiction. In life almost any concatenation of events is possible; in a story the sequence of events should be probable.

There are various approaches to the analysis of plot. We may, if we wish, draw diagrams of different kinds of plots or trace the development of rising action, climax, and falling action. Such procedures, however, if they are concerned with the examination of plot per se, are not likely to take us far into the story. Better questions will concern themselves with the function of plot - with the relationship of each incident to the total meaning of the story. Plot is important, in interpretive fiction, for what it reveals. The analysis of a story through its central conflict is likely to be especially fruitful, for it rapidly takes us to what is truly at issue in the story. In testing a story for quality, it is useful to examine how the incidents and episodes are connected, for such an examination is a test of the story's probability and unity. ***We can never get very far, however, by analysis of plot alone. In any good story plot is inextricable from character and total meaning. Plot by itself gives little more indication of the total story than a map gives of the quality of a journey.***

(Source - *Story and Structure*)