How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON SIX

by

Scott Thornton

You do not need any previous writing experience!

Use these professional techniques and insider secrets and tips to easily write page-turning stories with the WOW factor, and join the growing legion of millionaire authors.

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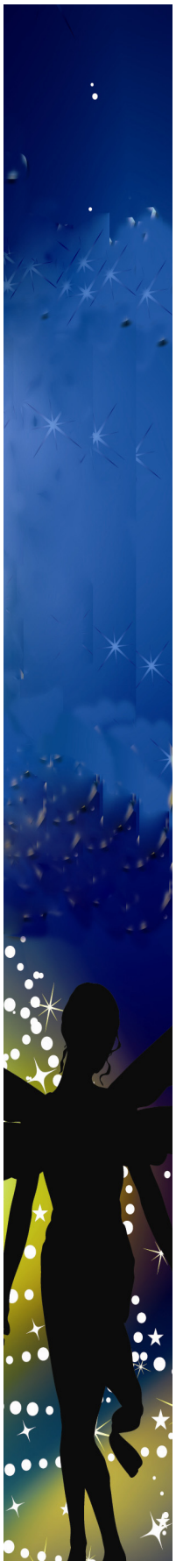


Welcome and a huge ‘Thank You’ for purchasing ‘Lesson Six’ of the twelve part course, ‘How to Become a Millionaire Children’s Author’.

Let’s continue with the hottest and latest insider tips and techniques you can use to build your own personal wealth from writing for children.

Plotting

Plotting, with setting, characterisation, viewpoint and planning, is one of the five major elements of story-telling. It is the most important of these elements, for **without a plot you wouldn't have a story to tell**.

The plot first draws you into the story and then keeps you turning the pages. A weak or implausible plot will make the reader give up in disgust.

It is also the element of story-telling that often worries the beginner writer, as plot sometimes appears to be a term which is interchangeable with 'theme' and 'storyline'. Plot, theme and storyline are three different things, and they should not be confused.

Storyline

A storyline is a **brief description** of the situation in which your main characters find themselves, and a very broad indication of what they do about it. It is the way you would describe your story to a lay person if they asked you what you were writing.

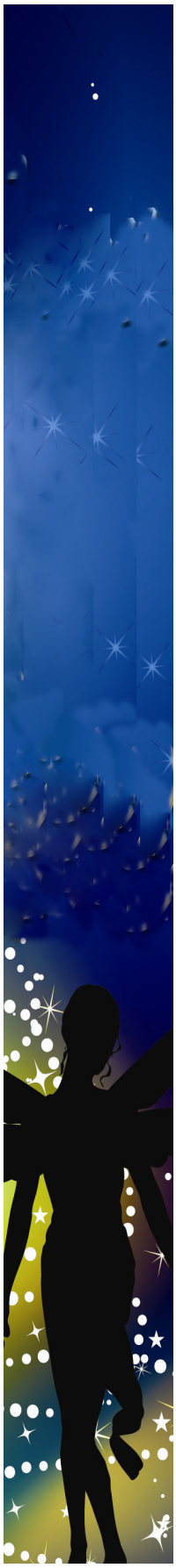
Look back to the three storylines I introduced in Lesson One, they are:

- The first is about a boy who finds difficulty in being accepted by his new school-mates after moving home.
- The second is about a talented girl who can only go to the music college if she wins a scholarship.
- The third is about a Roman boy who sets out to rescue his brother from the Iceni.

Each storyline indicates what will happen in the story, but certainly is not enough to explain how each of the main characters sets about sorting out their problems.

Theme

Theme is quite different. It describes the **moral significance** of your story, and in other circumstances you might call it a maxim. It might surprise you to know that almost all stories have a moral significance, even if this is disguised.



More complex adult fiction will have many different moral themes running through the plot simultaneously. The old-fashioned cowboy films had a simple theme: good always triumphs over bad.

For our three stories the themes are:

- An individual can gain recognition from a hostile group if he/she perseveres.
- Hard work and talent will earn a just reward.
- Resourcefulness and courage will win the day.

If you look for the themes in our most popular folk-stories you will find they are equally simple.

Examples of a few simple themes:

- 'Through wit and courage, the small and weak can triumph over the big and bad' (Jack and the Beanstalk).
- 'Despite the jealousy and meanness of others, a kind and gentle nature will gain its heart's desire' (Cinderella).
- 'Girls must be careful not to fall prey to cunning males' (Little Red Riding Hood), and many more.

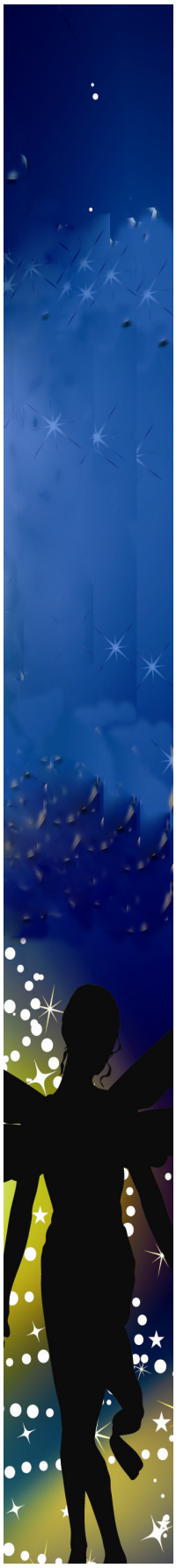
See how many you can think of, and then apply the same theme-finding exercise to your favourite children's books.

Editors will want to know the moral significance of your story, and you can often describe it in a single sentence. This is because they have to 'sell' your story to their colleagues and sales staff, and they usually have limited time in which to do it.

So you should explain that your story is about: a boy who perseveres until he wins acceptance and recognition from the hostile pupils at his new school; a girl whose talent and hard work win her the chance she deserves to go to music college; or a Roman boy who uses his resourcefulness and courage to rescue his brother from hostile tribesmen.

These **themes** and all the others that make successful stories for both children and adults **are like a distillation of human experience**. They are what every right-thinking person believes to be true, and you need to believe in them yourself, otherwise your writing will be unconvincing and your rejection slips will say 'thin story'.

You may, at this point, be saying to yourself: "But it isn't true. Might *does* triumph over right, God *is* on the side of the big battalions and it is the *winners* who write history; you've only got to look at the rise of the South American drug barons to see that the bad do win." Well, yes, this may be true, but you've missed the point.



It isn't what *does* happen that is at issue here, it's what people believe *should* happen.

People often read fiction to support their inherent sense of moral order.

If we want to know how beastly the real world is, we can read newspapers or watch television - there is plenty of doom and gloom to last you a lifetime in the media.

But humans are hopeful creatures. We all hope that the beastliness is only a temporary aberration, and we want to be reassured that our inner convictions are correct. Few people want to read doom and gloom books with down-beat endings in which evil triumphs and the good are slain and trampled. **We all want the good to be rewarded and the bad to be punished.**

This is also the pervading theme of all religions. **Be good and get rewarded in heaven, be bad and get punished in hell.** It doesn't matter what the religion is, or what the culture is, or what words are used for 'heaven' and 'hell', there is a consensus of opinion about what constitutes good and evil and what consequences will follow if you choose the wrong path – either here or in the next world (if you believe in such a thing)..

It is this universal concept of moral rightness that accounts for the popularity of fiction.

The plots of the majority of books in any given genre are virtually the same, and they reassert the same moral principles.

As an author, you have the power to direct the hand of providence, to ensure that your heroes win through and your villains get their come-uppance. In any sort of fiction writing you need to be aware of this. In writing for children it is essential that it remains in the forefront of your mind.

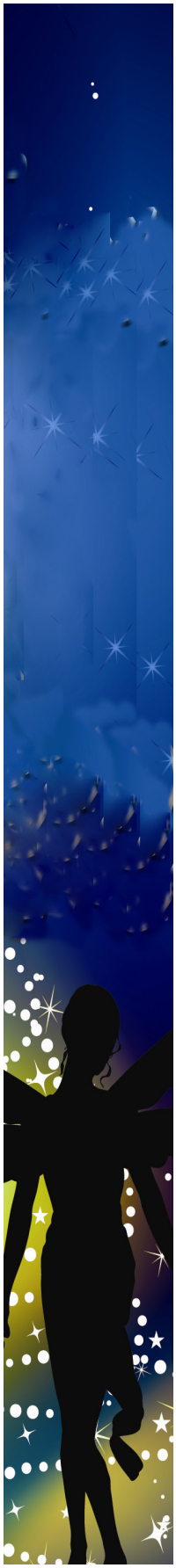
Children place a very high importance on **fairness** (morality by another name), and they are offended by events that seem unfair. Villains who get away with their misdeeds and heroes who do not achieve their desires are, in the average child's mind, the most unfair situations of all.

So, if **storyline** and **theme** are two different ways of giving a broad description of what your story is about, what is the **plot** and how do you set about plotting?

What is a Plot?

The 'plot' is the series of events that push the story from its starting point to its logical end.

This simple description needs qualification if the result is not to be a mere



recitation of a string of events, whose only connection is that they occur in sequence to a single character or group of characters.

For example, let us consider the hero of our first story, John:

'John got up, had breakfast, went to his new school, had maths and geography lessons, tried to make some friends but couldn't, went home for lunch, went back to school, had cricket coaching, then later on played in a cricket match and finally made friends with the others.'

This certainly tells what happened to John, but because it doesn't do any more than that, it is **extremely boring.** Unfortunately, many beginners write in exactly this fashion. In other words, **their story is little more than a sequence of factual events strung together.**

A better description of plot is that it is a sequence of events determined by the **actions and reactions** of the characters, giving a chain of **cause and effect.**

Josh Logan, the American playwright, once said that the best formula for good drama was:

"To run the hero up a tree in the first act, throw rocks at him in the second act, and get him down from the tree in the third act."

Using this formula, we realise that John's **need** to 'climb a tree' is because of the hostility of his new peers, but we have to do something to make him reach for the lowest branch and start climbing.

Furthermore, we are concerned with how he feels about being run up a tree, what his **thoughts and feelings** are whilst he is up the tree, and what his **hopes dreams and ambitions** are for getting down from the tree!

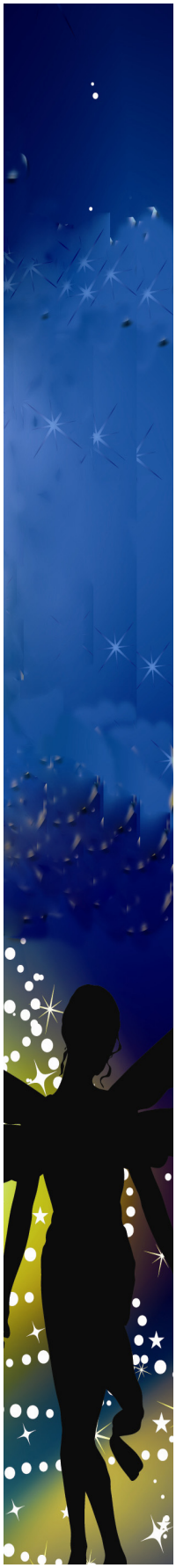
We, as readers, are far more interested in this, than in the bald statement:

'John was forced to climb a tree by his enemies. Whilst in the tree some nasty people threw stones at him, but he tricked them and was able to escape'.

Let's break it down.

First, how does he get 'up the tree'?

- If we make him a hard-working and conscientious boy, he could make the tactical error of being the first to put his hand up to answer questions in the maths and geography classes, thus making the rest of the class decide he is a teacher's toady.
- Someone could flick a rubber at him and whisper a rude comment about his trying to be a teacher's pet, and the realisation that he has got off to a bad start is what gets him 'up the tree'.



Now we need to throw some rocks at him:

- When they break for lunch, a group of boys could gang up on him. There is a scuffle, during which he gets a bang on the nose that makes his nose bleed. This makes a mess of his shirt, and his teacher, coming to see what's going on, tells him to go home and change, commenting: "I hope you're not going to be a trouble-maker!" Now we have the pupils *and* a teacher 'throwing rocks' at him.
- Let's make him late back, which means he misses the coach taking his class to the swimming baths, which launches another rock from an annoyed teacher. If this teacher sends him off to join another class at cricket practice, we have the germ of a way to get John down from the tree.

Now we need to give him a means of escape:

- The best way to gain acceptance and popularity from a group of hostile children is to do something which benefits the whole group. They will then see the **advantage** of adding a new member to the group on a permanent basis. So if we endow John with a talent for cricket that enables him to help his class team to win an important match, he can come down his tree and stand triumphantly on the ground.

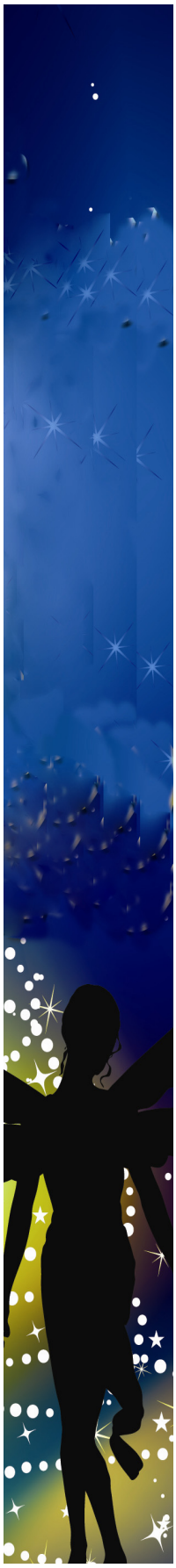
That’s the plot format in basic simplicity. However, we won't let it be that easy, of course. A few more rocks should be thrown and evaded, to keep the story going.

For example:

- The class bully would try to prevent him joining the team.
- Someone might spitefully hide his cricket gear to try and stop him playing in the match.
- The captain of the team could give him the worst fielding position, so he doesn't have much chance of shining - until, that is, a freak hit puts a ball into a position where he can catch it and throw it to get both batsmen out.

Now let's put that into a simple sequence of events in plot form:

John's father has a new job; the family have to move house and John has to change schools. He is a conscientious boy and tries hard in class but the other boys are suspicious of this newcomer. Their ring-leader is none too bright and he interprets John's actions as 'sucking up' to the teacher.



John wants to make friends and so he approaches the gang in the playground but they suspect his motives, attack him and make his nose bleed - because of this, he is sent home to change. This makes him late back and he misses the swimming and joins the cricket group instead.

He is good at cricket and the class teacher wants him on the team, but his class-mates still suspect him and they try to prevent him from playing. He has an exceptional talent, which he has worked hard to perfect, and this enables the team to win the match. Because he has helped them to win the match, the rest of the team decide he is 'alright' and gather round to make friends.

Now we have a plot sequence of cause and effect that leads inevitably from start to finish, instead of just a boring sequence of events. Actors are told when they make an entrance to imagine that they have come **from** somewhere (other than the wings!), as this gives the entrance more authority. It is the same with plot.

Each element of plot should come from something in an earlier part of the story.

Having seen what a plot is, you will now realise how to plot your story. If it is to work as a piece of fiction, your story should create sufficient **dramatic impetus** to carry its reader through to the end. It must be constructed so that it traverses a series of **mini-climaxes** as it builds to the big climax at the end.

In other words, **creating a plot is a deliberate act of planning by the writer**.

Unplanned fiction, the 'I'll take these characters and put them in a situation and see where they go' sort of writing, just doesn't work. Because the characters don't know where they are meant to go, they just mill around aimlessly and the whole thing grinds to a halt, bogged down in pointless descriptions of uneventful days. Like our description of John's first day at his new school, they can only be an answer to the question 'What happened next?', when the question that really needs answering is **'*Why* did it happen?'**.

The broad answer to 'Why?' is 'Because the main character wanted something,' and this 'something' can only ever be **a variation on two possibilities:**

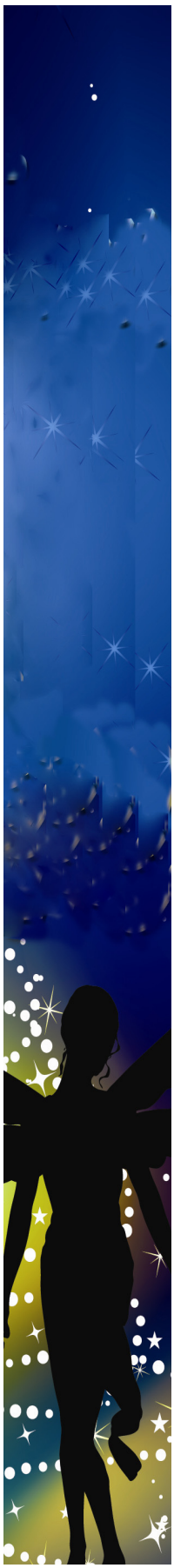
- Something they have not had before.
- Something they have lost and wish to regain.

Desire is a powerful element of drama, because it immediately sets up a **conflict - the conflict between:**

- Where the character is now.
- And where they want to be.

Examples:

- John's desire is to **return** to the familiar situation of having a group of



friends at school, which he has lost because his family had to move house.

- Marcus wants to **return** to the lost security of his brother's freedom from threat of death.

This 'want back what is lost' premise applies to:

- Mysteries.
- Stories of bullying.
- 'Character against nature' stories where, for instance, the hero is lost in the wilderness; or any story where the hero or heroine is unjustly accused of something they haven't done.

In other words, stories where the main characters were perfectly happy with their lives until events precipitated them into a situation where they had to **fight to regain the status quo.**

The 'want something new' premise applies to Mary (who wants to go to music college), and to any other story that involves winning a prize, or a place on a team. It also applies to most teenage girls' romances, where the characters want to find a boy-friend. (The other premise can also apply, where the boy-friend is temporarily attracted to someone else and the girl wants him back.)

For all these stories, the **desired thing** is something that is going to make **a major difference to life.** Whether it is a step onto the career ladder, social acceptance, or an emotional partner, it should not be trivial (for the age-group) or the story itself can only be trivial.

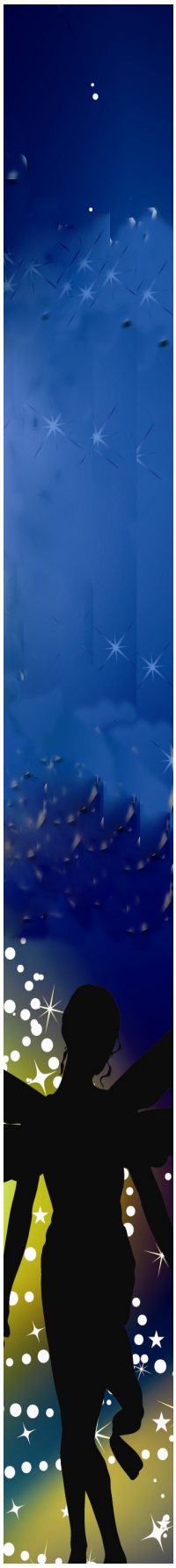
Stories for the Under Eight Year Olds

There are few real-life dramatic situations which a child under eight years old could realistically be expected to cope with, let alone resolve. Children of this age are prone to nightmares if presented with a frustrating and insoluble dilemma.

However, fantasy situations on this premise are acceptable. For example, **Ian Beck's** story **'The Teddy Robber'** (Doubleday) is about Tom, whose teddy is stolen by a giant. Tom refuses to let go of his teddy and is carried off to the giant's lair, where he manages to rescue not only his own teddy, but also to restore all the other lost teddies to their owners.

As well as **security,** most children want to **grow up and be independent**, so any small step in this direction is desirable to them. **Tony Bradman's** story, **'Gerbil Crazy'** comes into this category, as Sarah wants a pet that she can look after on her own, thereby gaining the responsibility of caring for another living being.

Whichever premise you are using for your story, never forget that both stem from one essential - desire. The characters **want something** and set



about getting it.

What turns this into a satisfactory piece of fiction is that they have to fight **(conflict)** to get what they want. There must be obstacles between them and their goal, and the main body of the story describes how they overcome these obstacles.

A story about a character who achieves his desire with no difficulties is unsatisfying, in the same way that possessions that come easily are never as satisfying as the things you have to save for. **It is CONFLICT that makes for tension, which in turn makes a good read.**

Sometimes the obstacle will be a competitor who desires the same goal (as in Mary's rival for the single place at the music college). Sometimes it will be an influential person who thinks the character should aim at a different goal. In children's fiction, and especially in fiction for teenagers, this influential person is most likely to be a parent.

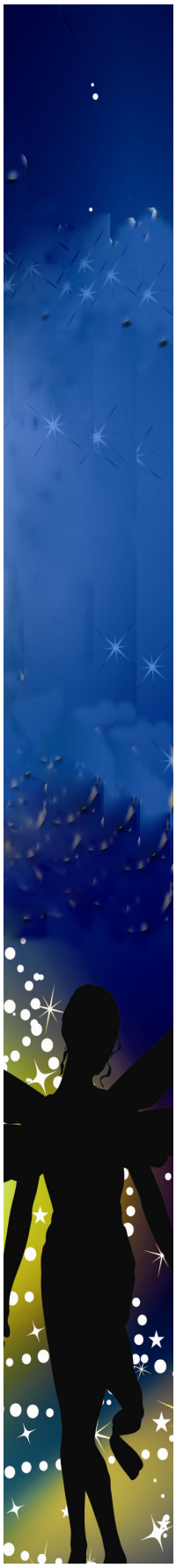
For example, your hero's father, who is a doctor and whose own father was a doctor, wants his son to be a doctor too, while the boy's burning ambition is to join the navy.

Whatever the conflict or obstacle, it must be relevant to the age of your target readership.

Ten-year old girls are more interested in getting a pony than a boy-friend, just as **ten-year old boys** will be more interested in getting a place on the football team than in deciding his future career (unless he wants to be a professional footballer!). And a vanishingly small number of 10 year old boys want a girlfriend!

While it is difficult to endow the desire to obtain a pony or a place on the football team with life and death importance, you have to know and express the consequences of failure. Almost all young girls desperately want a pony, but most will settle for weekly riding lessons, so why should your heroine be different? Most young boys want to be on the football team but will settle for a kick around the local park, so what is different about your hero? Why is he going to be that disappointed if he doesn't get picked? Hardly anyone is picked, so why should he be particularly affected?

Clearly the failure to obtain their desire must mean a **long-term loss of happiness,** and it is up to you as the writer to develop a plausible reason.



Putting this simply, the conflict you set up must be sufficiently different from the usual mild disappointments experienced by your reader. **There should be a burning and credible reason** why your hero must get on the team, or the heroine must buy a particular pony, otherwise the story will be mundane and mediocre.

Make Your Story Plausible

The issue of plausibility is vital, and it is something you must be ruthless about, early in the planning process. There is little point in going to all the trouble of writing a story to the best of your ability if **its central idea is so unlikely** that editors cry "Oh, come off it!" as they dump it on the reject pile.

Unless you are writing fantasy or horror stories, where motivations can be rather different, the progress of your plot must be both possible and likely. It is easy enough to make the motivations of your heroes and heroines believable, as they will be fairly ordinary, likeable people. **But why are your villains villainous, and why have they chosen your hero as a victim?**

Here are some of the questions you need to answer:

- Is the fact that he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time an adequate explanation?
- Or was he singled out for some other reason, and if so, what reason?
- And if all that stacks up, and the villain is convincing, how is your hero going to get away and arrange for the villain to get his come-uppance?

So often, what seems like a brilliant idea for a story just won't stand up to this sort of scrutiny, and you must be ruthless and dump it.

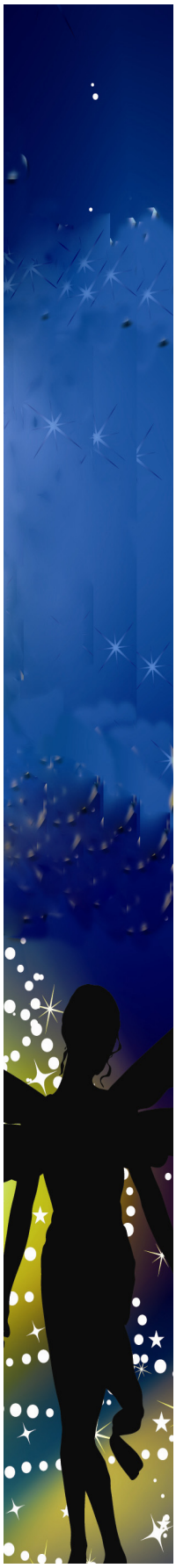
Hot Insider Tip…

Beware of what I call, ‘Fools Gold’ – ideas which come to you suddenly and which seem totally brilliant. One of the sources of ideas that often provides this sort of 'fools gold' is dreams.

You can usually work out what triggered a dream, and it may be better to **go back to those sources for a plot** rather than try to make something of the images that remain with you on waking, no matter how vivid they were.

Here is a typical example, which probably came from a combination of newspaper reports of skiing prospects in the French Alps and a bedtime reading choice of a book about Napoleon's exile on St Helena:

The dream started with an elaborate outdoor dinner party at a large house in a remote area in the mountains. In the morning everyone gathered at the front of the house to hear the plans for the day, only to be greeted by the sight of their hostess in her car.



She announced that she was leaving, before the snow started. "You won't be able to follow me," she says, "it will be a heavy fall of snow, and you will have to wait until I return in the spring. You have been chosen for my revenge this year, just as the others have been in previous years," and she drives off. A series of large vans arrive from the back of the house and follow her up the drive and out of the gates.

As a heavy band of cloud appears, the guests rush to their cars, only to find that they have been immobilised. Back in the house, they find the house has been stripped of all its furnishings, and their luggage is gone. There is no food, nothing to keep them warm, and no transport.

On the face of it, this dream seems like a good start to a combination adventure/horror story. Put a group of teenagers among the other guests and you would have a great piece of teen fiction. **Or would you?**

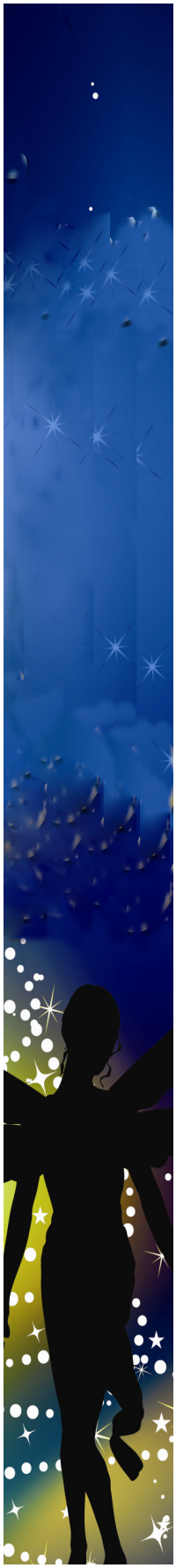
On closer examination, this 'plot' falls down. Many questions cannot be answered, which renders the plot thin and implausible.

- *Why* have the guests come to this remote location, when they obviously know nothing about their hostess?
- *Why* does she want revenge?
- *Why* choose this group of people for this year's victims?
- This year's? How long has this been going on and why?
- *What happened* to previous batches of victims? If any of them escaped, why hasn't the hostess been apprehended? If none of them escaped, what has been happening to the bodies? How come nobody has made a fuss about all these people disappearing in the past? Why won't anyone come looking for the latest batch of guests as they slowly starve to death?
- **And *what's the point* of the whole thing anyway?**

Some of the previous victims would have tried to escape, so surely the local people must have an idea of what is going on. Nowhere in Europe is *that* remote. So what hold does the hostess have over these people that ensures their silence? And what about her servants? There would be a new batch of bodies, luggage, and cars to dispose of every spring, and she wouldn't be able to do that on her own.

Once you start asking all these questions, you realise that the **basic concept,** the reason for these characters being in this life or death situation, is so implausible that it just won't stand up.

Perhaps you could change it enough to make it more possible by dropping all the stuff about it being an annual occurrence and make it a one-off - **but you are still stuck with the difficulties of stripping the house without the guests noticing and many other problems besides** (e.g. no guest has a mobile phone? No guest has told a loved one where he/she is going? It gets worse and worse the more you look at it.).



If you can make *that* work, and arrive at the scene where the guests are alone and realise the desperate situation they are in, then what are you going to do with them to keep the story going? You're still at the beginning of the story, and it has already reached a big dramatic peak. How can you keep it going for the requisite number of words, and get at least some of the guests to safety without the whole thing fading into an anti-climax of a trek through the snow?

The answer is that you probably can't. **Even the likelihood of a successful escape is implausible, if you give some thought to the physical conditions involved.** Remote location, heavy snow, no food, no equipment other than the clothes they stand up in, all add up to the total implausibility of inexperienced amateurs surviving for several days - and why should *they* survive, when previous batches of victims (going back over many years) have all failed?

Unless of course, some lucky happenstance occurs to rescue them all at the last minute. But you can't do that. It comes under the heading of 'One Mighty Bound' (Deus ex machina), and it is the **most implausible device of all.**

If you can't think of a believable way to get your characters out of the situation you have put them in, you shouldn't have put them there in the first place!

Look Closely at your Ideas

This process of **examining your ideas in depth** to find out whether you have a viable plot is something that you have to do for every project, whether it is a full-length book or a short story.

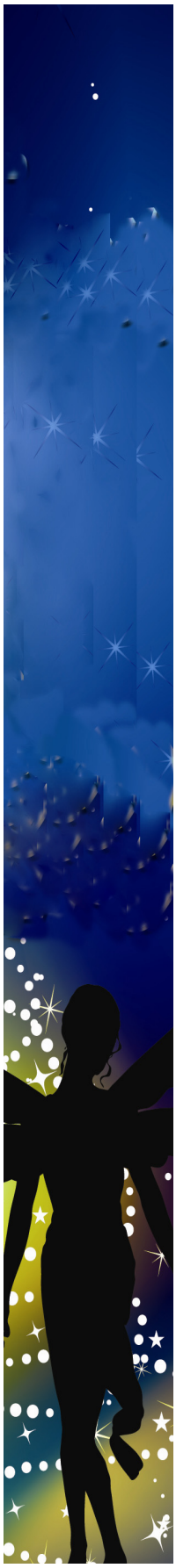
When you are more experienced, a few minutes thought will tell you if the idea is fatally flawed. But when you are beginning you may have to go through the whole plotting/planning process before you can see whether the idea will work or not. As a beginner, it is easy to become 'starry eyed' about your 'wonderful' plot idea.

Don't be discouraged if your first few ideas turn out to be duds. This is all part of the learning process and you will find that you soon develop the analytical ability you need to weed out the poor ideas from the good ones.

If you can quickly accept that some ideas just won't work it will save you months of wasted time and work!

The only way to find out if you have a viable plot is to produce a **rough outline.** We have already looked at the outlining process in Lesson One, but it bears saying again. **A writer is:**

- A person who plans.
- A person who outlines.



Beginner writers are often reluctant to consider outlining, possibly from some misguided idea that it will 'stifle their creativity'.

The 'Creative' Process of Writing

Creativity is not something that can be stifled by such disciplines. **Creativity is an attitude of mind that develops with practice.** Do not make the negative mistake of thinking that you are not creative.

Everyone is creative; it is just that their faculties have remained dormant for such a long time.

Creativity is **hard work** - every writer (or artist) will tell you that. Like genius in the old saying, it is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration - in other words, the emphasis is on the sweat and not the swanning around having 'arty' ideas!

In the irreverent joke, a vicar admires the beautiful cottage garden of the local rustic. "My son, I see that you and God have done a splendid job on your garden," beams the vicar. To which the rustic replies: "Arr, you should 'ave seen it when God 'ad it orl to 'imself!"

In other words, the creative beauty of that garden was due (99%) to the sweat of the gardener's brow, and not to 'divine' intervention!

Artists don't paint a picture by starting at the top left-hand corner of the canvas and then painting each little section perfectly before moving on to the next section. They start with a crude sketch, then block in the main areas with a big brush and continue to work over the picture as a whole until they finish with fine strokes of a small brush. Writing needs the same process.

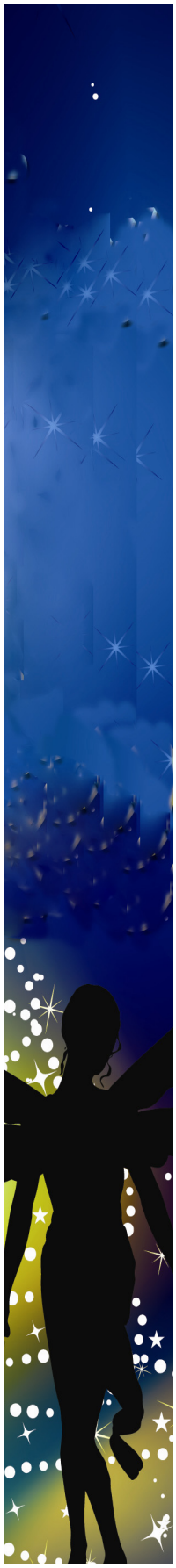
Here's the process:

- You sketch in a broad indication of the plot in your rough outline, which will show you whether your idea is viable.
- Then you go through it again, producing a more detailed outline as you clarify your thinking on the various aspects of your story. You will already have a good idea of who your main characters will be, but now is the best time to work out what you need in the way of secondary characters and 'walk-ons', and what motivates them.

Spider Diagrams

A good way of organising your characters is to use a spider diagram (also known as a mind map).

Take a fresh piece of paper and write the name of your hero or heroine in the middle, with 'Hero/ine' underneath. Under it, write the name of the chief villain, with 'Villain' underneath. Draw a 'bubble' round each of these, and connect them with a line.



Then draw two or three bubbles above the hero and label them 'Helpers', 'Family' and 'Walk-ons', as appropriate. Connect each bubble to the hero with a line, then add more bubbles connected to each of these three with the names and designations of the relevant characters. Do the same thing below the villain.

Here is a spider diagram for John's story:

Peggy Mum Tom Dad Chris Uncle Lucille Friend Tim Friend Mr Dickenson Sports Master Mr Patel Tuck-shop Mr Bennett Teacher

Family Helpers Walk-ons

John (Hero)

Mike Villain Winston (Demon Bowler)

Class Gang

Wayne Sean Veejay Kevin Mark Chas Colin Ronnie Cameron

When you are doing your detailed outlines, it helps if you get into the habit of thinking the story through as a series of scenes. This will prevent you from getting bogged down in irrelevancies, like the minutiae of the main character's day.

For example, it would be easy to write three or four pages detailing John's journey to and from school when he goes to change his soiled shirt, **but there is no point in doing it. It doesn't move the story on**, and so you can cut it to a few lines without affecting the plot.

This is the true test, and you should apply these two questions to each scene:

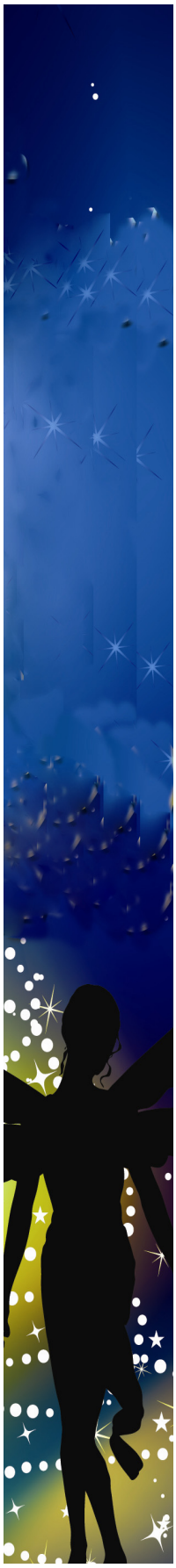
- Will it damage the plot if I cut this scene out?
- Does this scene really contribute to the forward momentum of the plot?

If the answer to these two questions is 'no', then **cut the scene out,** as it will certainly detract from the plot if you leave it in.

This doesn't mean that you should never describe such journeys. Mostly you will not need to, and you certainly should not let such a scene carry the same weight as, for instance, the fight in the play-ground.

Change of Pace

However sometimes, and especially when you have just finished a particularly exciting passage, it is wise to introduce **a change of pace** to let your readers get their breath back before the next piece of excitement.



So in John's case, you would end a chapter with the teacher snarling at him: "Oh, for heaven's sake, boy, go home and change that shirt. If you think I want you in my class-room looking like something out of a slaughter-house you can think again. I just hope you're not going to be a trouble-maker. Go on, go on; and don't be late back!"

Then, **to relax the tension and slow the pace**, you would describe John walking home, dragging his feet in misery and slinking past the people he encounters with his face turned away so they won't see the mess he's in. You would include a little 'think piece', with him wondering if he'll ever be able to make friends, and wishing he was back at his old school.

One page of this will be enough, then **you can bring the pace up again** with his mother's alarm at seeing him covered in blood and her fussing over him and quickly ironing another shirt, followed by John looking at his watch and rushing off. Cut out the journey back to school, except for the last bit where he dashes into the school-yard just in time to see the coach disappearing out of the other side, and his class teacher standing in exasperation waiting for him on the steps.

He's in trouble again, just nicely in time for the end of another chapter!

Using 'Think Pieces'

The use of 'think pieces', along with detailed descriptions of surroundings, is an excellent way of slowing down the pace. Thinking tends to be a slow process, compared with dramatic action, and you can slow it down even more by using **longer sentences** and **longer words** than you use for action.

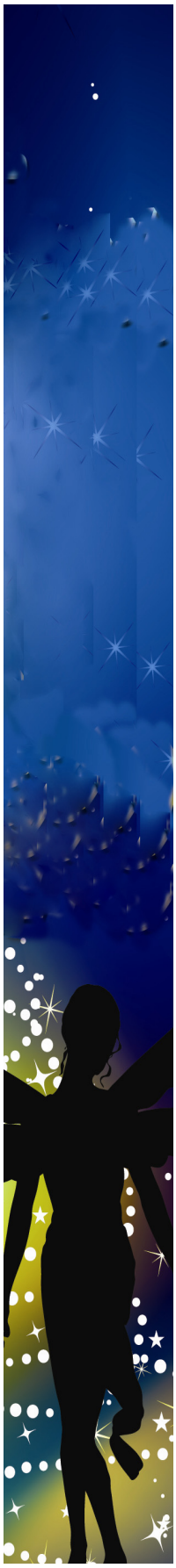
Describing your characters' thoughts is also an excellent way of examining their motivation. In the scene above, John's thoughts show he has **three of the five fundamental needs** that apply to all of us; adult or child.

He needs:

- To be liked (or, in stronger terms, loved).
- To have some friends whom he can like in return.
- To feel secure.
- To belong.

This need to belong is particularly strong in children and teenagers.

It is why they all want to wear the same clothes, to own the same toys, to have the latest trainers and mobile phone and to play the same games. It is the reason for fads or crazes; and for the vast popularity of pop groups. It is also the reason youngsters join gangs.



It is also why other children in John's class are so ready to follow their chief's lead and gang up on a vulnerable newcomer; so strangely enough, **both John and his tormentors are looking for the same thing** (the need to belong).

The fourth of the fundamental needs is the need to know. This is partly connected to the need for security, for if you do not know how things work and how to act, you may make mistakes that put you in danger. As the story progresses, this need will assume more importance with John, as the fifth need comes into play.

The fifth need is the need to achieve, to do something well, for both the personal satisfaction it brings and for the respect it brings from other people. Quite often this need is sparked by peer-group rejection, just as happens with John.

John's achievement will come through his ability to become a superlative cricketer. To conform with the need for characters to develop and mature, which we discussed in Lesson Four, John is going to start off by **wanting to achieve** (desire) in order to win the respect of his peers, but **continue striving** to perfect the ability for the sheer delight of being good at it.

Incidentally, did you notice John's uncle in the spider diagram and wonder what part he was to play? He's there as an informal cricket partner and coach, having considerable cricketing ability himself. No, not as a professional cricketer - that would be too convenient and trite. But he's the mainstay of the village team, and very happy to encourage his nephew.

The fact that *John* has all five of the fundamental needs doesn't mean that you must use all of them in every story you write. A good-looking, popular, youngster with a loving family isn't going to be over-concerned about needing love or 'belonging' - and some people just don't have any ambition, or any desire to be desperately knowledgeable.

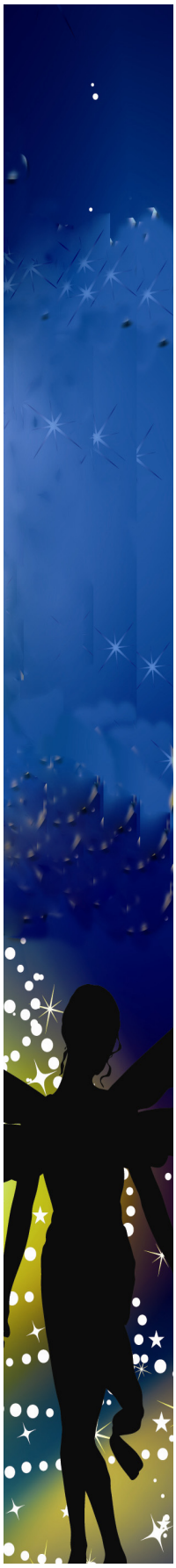
Security

But everyone wants to feel secure, and will strive to regain security if they are deprived of it. **This is why so many successful stories start from a change of circumstances:**

- A house move
- A new school
- The loss of a friend or loved one, or a holiday trip.

These things immediately set up a tension.

Hopefully you are now aware that to be a good writer you need to have some general knowledge of psychology and child psychology. This doesn't mean you have to take an Open University course, but you should browse through popular books on the subject and be alert for programmes on the radio or television which can help you understand **why people behave as they do.**



Fiction is all about *people*. We are obsessed with *ourselves*, and there is hardly a story written which is not about people and their complex interaction with each other and their environment. Animal stories are included, as often the 'animals' are little more than humans in furry skins! Even science fiction is included.

Most Sci-Fi books are about humans, and those which exclude humans (as such) are merely putting their human characters in strange, alien costumes. If a Sci-Fi writer were to write a true alien story in which the characters have **absolutely no human-like thoughts or feelings**, then the story would arguably be unreadable.

Knowing how people react to various situations, and what makes them tick, is a tremendous help when you come to write the emotive scenes.

The older your target readers, the more important it is that they should share your characters' emotions as the amusing, affectionate, frightening, exhilarating, or sad incidents unfold.

This could be an alternative definition of 'reading age'. The 'reading age' of a piece is that age group which is able to identify with, and be interested in reading about your characters' predicaments. It is also notoriously hard to write about these things convincingly if you haven't been there yourself and experienced them first hand.

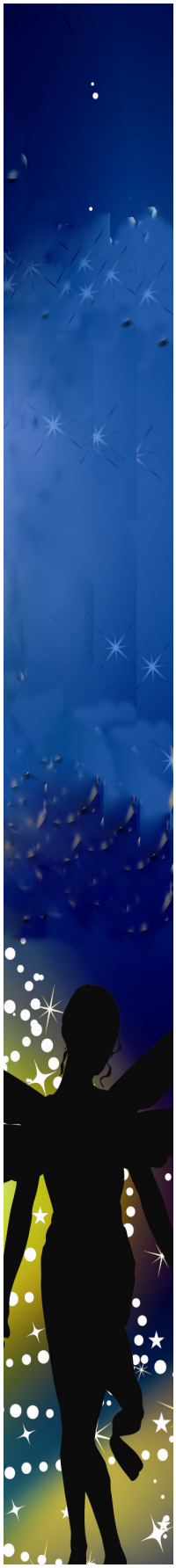
You have to 'become the character' as you write, and tell of your own feelings as you experience them.

Some beginner writers say they find this extremely difficult to do as it makes them embarrassed; others say that they don't like to write sad scenes because they feel it isn't right to distress their young readers. Unfortunately you protect their sensibilities at your own cost, for **books with bland plots will soon find their way on to the reject pile.**

Reality in Fiction

You just cannot protect children from life and if sad things are to happen to them, as they inevitably will, it is better for them to be forearmed by having vicariously experienced the emotion in a book. An excellent example is how **JK Rowling** handles the subject of death in her **Harry Potter** series!

Writers who are good at these emotional scenes say that you just have to 'let it all hang out' and get it down on paper through your tears or your laughter. **If it doesn't affect you while you are writing it, it won't affect your readers.** The writing may be traumatic, but it is worth the agony if it brings you devoted readership followers who pounce on your next book as soon as it is published



A writer who is particularly good at these emotive scenes is **Caroline Ackrill.** Her **'Flying Changes'** (J A Allen) is very powerful, although you don't realise it until you reach the end. You pick it up, if you are interested in horses, because it is about dressage riders; and you stay with it because it is full of fascinating detail about the horse world. It chugs along and you don't notice that the tension is building until the climax hits you.

If you want to know what happens, you'll have to read it for yourself, but Caroline receives many letters from young readers who are obsessed with the main character, so powerful is her writing.

Study **'Flying Changes'** and any other books that had a powerful emotional impact on you, to learn the **mechanics** of the writer's technique.

Often you will find there is an element of 'if only' to the sad scenes, or an 'against the clock' element in the exciting ones.

What you will find with all of them is that the writer takes you right in amongst the action (emotionally) for maximum impact. You cannot get involved in any sort of incident if you are kept at a distance from it.

Building Climaxes

Your climaxes are a very important part of the story and you must give them due weight. For example, the climax of John's story has to be the cricket match. It is his best chance to break through the barrier of antagonism that surrounds him, and everything we have planned so far is leading up to the match.

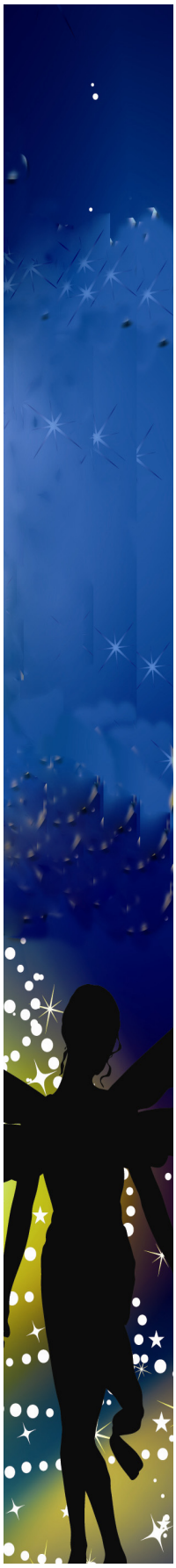
The climax is built through:

- John's practicing.
- His place on the team despite opposition.
- The attempts to prevent him from getting to the game and then to stop him playing.
- Finally to prevent him from shining by putting him in to bat last and placing him in a bad fielding position.

All these incidents build up the tension that should explode with his brilliant catch.

Always Deliver

It is important that the catch itself be described in full: how John watches the team's demon bowler rub the ball on his trousers. How he grins an evil grin before accelerating his run to give impetus to his delivery; how the ball flies down the pitch with an end curve that makes it hard to hit; how the batsman reaches for it off-balance; how John watches its trajectory and realises he can



catch it.

Editors say that there are many beginner writers who, **having built up the tension, then throw it all away by ignoring the climax scene and only mentioning it in passing later on.**

In John's case, this would take the form of someone saying to him:

"Gosh, John, that was a super catch of yours. We wouldn't have won the match without you." To do this would be to provide a mere anti-climax instead of the rousing drama that it should be.

Character Identification

You should **describe the climax from the viewpoint of the main character**. We have already discussed the necessity of maintaining a single viewpoint throughout any piece of writing for children.

If you are the sort of writer who finds it embarrassing to describe emotive scenes at first hand, you might be tempted to tackle them at one remove by describing their effect on another character. In John's case, this could be the batsman who watches the dreadful ball come at him, hits it and then watches in horror as it curves towards John's waiting hands.

You might say that the batsman is having a dramatic moment too, as he is caught 'out', but your readers are **not really concerned** about what happens to such subsidiary characters.

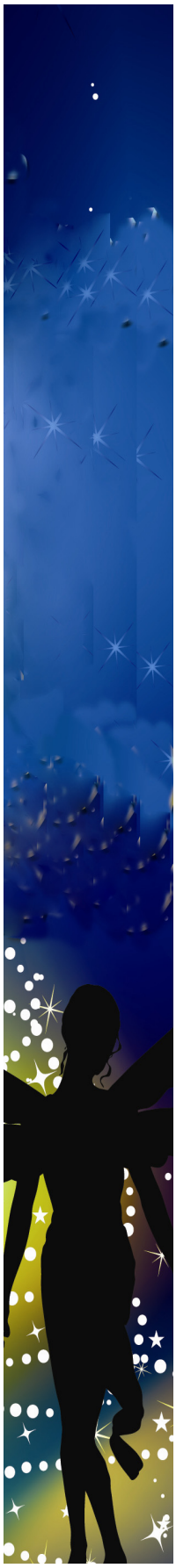
The story is about **John's** problem and **John** is the person with whom the readers will identify, therefore it should be obvious that John is the main character who must solve the problem. The spotlight must remain on this **main character** at all the dramatic moments. He **must take 'centre stage'**.

It must be a true climax, too, even if the story is not one that involves dramatic action scenes. Many stories for younger readers achieve their climax by the main character making a mental discovery about their own self or about the situation they are in, a sort of 'come to realise' climax.

Endings

Finally we come to endings. **The most important thing about endings is that they must be brief.**

So avoid the urge to re-hash the whole thing, like the old-fashioned crime stories where the detective takes three chapters to tell everybody how he interpreted each clue. Say how the one vital clue made everything else fall into place, if you must and if you can do it in less than a page, but no more. **Take longer and you risk making the whole thing flat by dragging it out for too long after the main climax.**



So let's finish John's story. The match ends, his team has won, and they all go back to the pavilion. John is the last one to get there and his uncle is waiting for him outside. They have a brief exchange of comments, and then his uncle asks if he wants a lift home. A voice from behind interrupts. It is the team captain Mike, who says "Oh no, sir. He's coming back in the coach with the rest of us. Come on John, the team want to congratulate you."

And that's it. **The others want to talk to him and so his problem is solved**. What else is there to say? Nothing. So stop.

Prospecting For Ideas

New writers often wonder where professional writers get their ideas from, and if they ask, are puzzled by the reply: "There's never any shortage of ideas".

But it's true - there are plenty of ideas that you can turn into plots. You just have to develop the knack of recognising them. Once you have trained yourself to do this, you will never be short of material to write about.

I've already suggested that you get into the habit of observing people, to see what they do. Now you must add the habit of **wondering why they are doing it,** and guessing at the answer.

Examples:

Main question: Why isn't that boy at school, at mid morning on a term-time weekday?

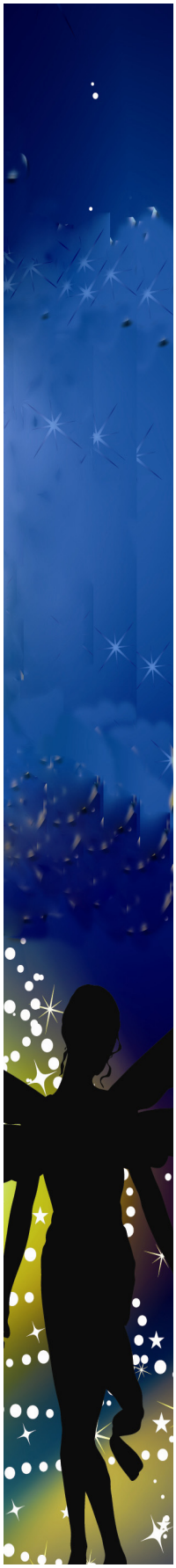
- Is it something innocent, like a visit to the doctor, or is he playing truant?
- And if so, what is he going to do with his day?

Main question: What are those two girls giggling about?

- Are they planning a trick to play on a school-mate?
- Will the victim think it's funny, or are you seeing part of a bullying campaign?

Main question: Why does that woman with loads of shopping look so harassed?

- Has she got a big family?
- Are they short of money?
- If she is, what effect does this have on the children?



Think about events in your own family. Did you have an 'in' joke; for example a child's mispronunciation that became standard usage, such as 'feary' for 'fiery'? Does that turn someone with fiery hair into someone with frightening hair, like snakes?

What about the hero of that American song, the Lonesome Pine? (In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.) Why might a pine tree be lonely? What would he (she?) do about finding some company? That would be a good title for a children's book - The Lonesome Pine!

Using Your Notes

Often a plot will grow from available characters. Remember that prissy bureaucrat in Lesson Four? He enjoys getting people into trouble and being obstructionist. How many different stories can you think of where he would be the villain, deliberately blocking the progress of the main characters? Maybe they want to hold a sponsored bicycle ride through the park and he works for the local council. Maybe they need to use the computers in the library for a research project, and he is the senior librarian? The possibilities are endless.

Sometimes new ideas can come when you are researching facts for your current idea. You might be looking for details on earthquakes, and find there is a connection with volcanoes, then discover that two prominent volcanologists were killed recently when an erupting volcano they were studying caught them with a surge of lava. How many plots can you weave round a family where one or both of the members were involved with an earthquake?

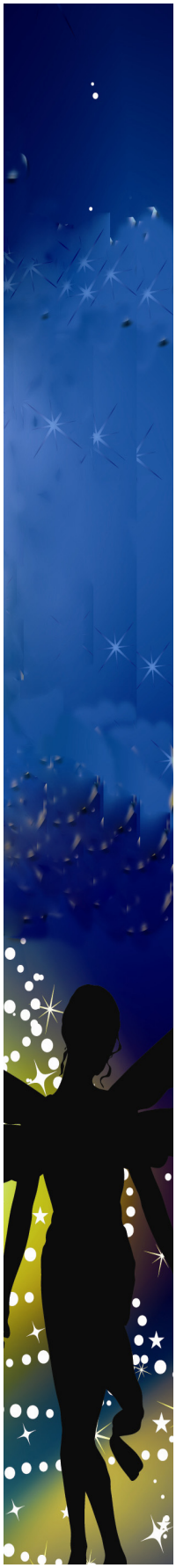
Get into the habit of using your creative imagination on everything you read, non-fiction as well as fiction. Quite apart from the usual books and newspapers you read, you should have seen many possibilities for plots from the various topics and examples on this course.

Inspiration from Other Writers' Work

Also, if you read enough children's fiction, then you will create various 'spin-off' plots from other people's stories. Obviously you will not blatantly copy another author's plot, although a surprising number of beginner writers do (to the irritation of editors). Can you just imagine the sheer number of Harry Potter look-alikes in the publishers in-tray? It doesn't bear thinking about!

But there is no reason why you should not adapt an existing plot for your own purposes. There are few brand-new stories written, almost all are re-workings of old (often ancient) ideas.

There is no copyright in ideas. **All fiction is derivative.** There are various theories on how many possible plots there are, but the highest number is 36, and most people can't even work out what all of those are. Some say there are only 6 basic plots. Try it for yourself, on the simplified basis of a romance



novel 'boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl'.

Once an idea has come to you, and a quick examination of its possibilities has shown you that you could work it into a credible plot, make a note of it in your 'ideas' file. You don't have to do anything with it straight away, and it is probably best to let it incubate for a while.

You will find that once a good idea has come to your attention, you will continue to stumble across related and useful information. Add all this to your file until the day when you find the idea is demanding your full attention, which tells you that the incubation period is over and your plot is ready to hatch.

Common Mistakes

Using Clichés

If there is any single offence that editors hate above all others, it is writers who use clichés. This applies to clichés in all of their forms, and not just the hackneyed sayings that constitute common clichés.

Clichés are common or hackneyed words, statements, metaphors and so forth.

They tend to appear in dialogue or thoughts.

Here are some examples of clichés:

- "Don't look now, but we've got company."
- "It was as though I had known him all my life."
- "It's your funeral."
- "Over my dead body!"

Other clichés occur in descriptions or images, such as:

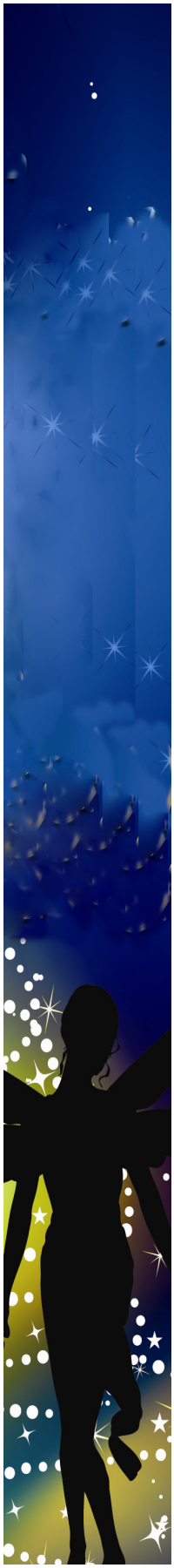
- ‘Fluffy clouds like bits of cotton wool.'
- 'Running like the wind.'
- 'Heart of steel/stone/gold.'
- 'She was held by his steely gaze.'

Characters can also be clichés, although they tend to be referred to as stereotypes. For example:

- The grey-haired, rosy-cheeked grandmother who bakes cakes.
- The sinister tall man who watches in silence.
- The hard-bitten detective.

Then there are cliché settings. For example:

- The lonely dark house where dreadful deeds are done in thunderstorms.



- The beach at sunset where young lovers walk.
- The thatched cottage with roses round the door.
- The deserted school cloakroom where the bullies lie in wait.

And finally there are the plots themselves. While it is inevitable, as we have discussed above, that the **basic themes** of plots will be repeated again and again, there are certain story-lines that get done to death because beginner writers think they are topical. Often it is an already published story that sets them off with a 'me too' copy, often forgetting just how long it takes from having the first germ of an idea to actual publication (often years rather than months).

It usually takes a professional writer three to six months to write and polish a book-length story. The publishers, assuming they accept it straight away, will take about a year to get it into the book-shops. The 'me too' writer then takes another six months to re-hash the story, by which time two years have gone by and the original concept has long since moved on from being 'fresh as a daisy' to being 'old hat' (to use two more clichés).

There is also a limit to the number of stories based on such 'topical' story-lines that any given publisher will accept. Given a strong enough set of characters, it might be possible to write a series of books about, for instance, a group of youngsters living rough on the streets of a big city. But a one-off about how dreadful such a life-style is? No, it's been done far too many times. So have gloomy stories about AIDS and suspense stories about fund-raising for a good cause.

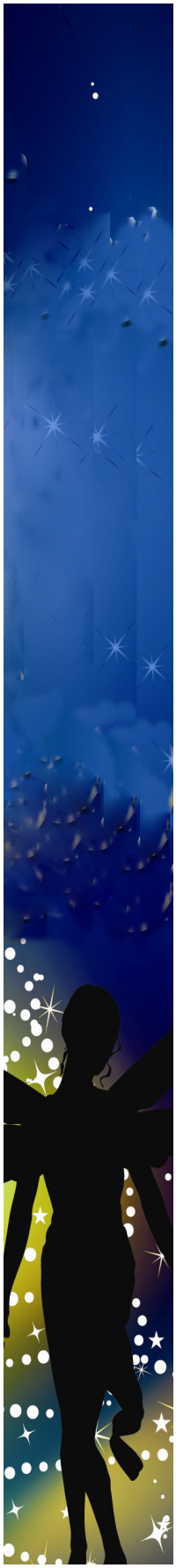
Editors Demand Professionalism

The reason editors hate all these manifestations of the cliché is that they see them as **laziness** (which they are). A professional writer is one who takes trouble over all aspects of their work, from finding an original story-line (or rather an original angle on an old story-line) to crafting their own original images and dialogue.

When looking for **similes** ('eyes like steel', 'hair like spun gold'), don't write the first and most obvious one which comes to mind, as it will almost certainly be a cliché. Also, many clichés are not really very accurate at describing the object. For example, what exactly does 'eyes like steel' mean? or 'eyes like hardened diamonds'? The latter is ridiculous anyway, as it is impossible to 'harden' a diamond.

The same is true of **metaphors**. Do not say things like: "This gave Jane food for thought", "John's father was a tower of strength", or "workers thrown on the scrap-heap". It makes the educated reader wince. **For educated reader, substitute editor!**

If you submit work with clichés to a publisher, it will get rejected. Clichés



truly are a sign of laziness or amateurishness – the writer does not even realise they are clichés. They are a clear indication that you have written the very first thing that came into your head, with no thought or care.

Furthermore, it implies that you care so little about your output that you didn't bother to read your own material (before submitting it) otherwise you would surely have spotted the clichés.

Alternatively (and worse), it implies that you **did** read your material, but are so uncritical that you didn't even notice them! Neither 'sin' will endear you to a busy editor. She will groan once or twice, and then throw your work onto the reject file. The pages will 'flutter like falling leaves' before being 'crushed by the dead weight' of other failed manuscripts which are 'tossed carelessly onto the scrap-heap'.

That's all for this month! Good luck and enjoy your writing until next month when I have more information on how to become a millionaire children's author.

Scott Thornton