Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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*What do we talk about when we talk about plot?*

I think a lot of us flash back to those worksheets we filled out in High School English – pyramids and triangles and diagrams so abstract they're hardly useful. In other words, we think of plot *structure* as divorced from *plot*: that is, as separate from the actual string of events presented in the narrative. To many writers, even the term *structure* evokes the idea of a creative cage: the transformation of writing from the ecstatic act of creative energy it is to a mechanical process that takes the life and soul out of writing.

I understand where that idea comes from. As creative individuals, we want to forge our own path, make our own rules, and break the mold with our stories. We are *artists* and auteurs in our own minds, and we think we know everything we need to know to tell a good story. After all, storytelling is something that children do that all the time – how hard can it be?

That was my arrogance when I began writing, and I think I'm not alone in that. I started as an unintentional pantser, writing and publishing chapters of my first web-serial as soon as they were written. And it worked… sort of. I was blessed with a disproportionate amount of beginner's luck and an atmosphere of good ideas in my final semester of college. Even so, when I began reworking *The Gräzland Tales* as a full novel, it ended up requiring a page one rewrite and a ground-up reworking of the structure before it was ready for "real" publication.

I'm grateful for that process – but I would've been better off if I'd taken more time before I began to acknowledge and work at the *craft* of story, not just the *art*. As an art form, fiction is highly figurative, representative, and complex. It can be more or less abstract and metaphorical depending on the story or the author, but on the face of it, 99% of popular fiction represents consistent, actualized characters and events. Poetry, while beautiful, is distinct from prose for this reason. Beauty exists for its own sake in poetry. In narrative, beauty is used to reinforce a narrative effect created through character, plot, and story – an effect that can be made more or less effective by the level of narrative craft present.

This has been a hard lesson for me to learn, but as I've practiced and grown as a writer, I've learned to lean less on my moment-by-moment intuition and start to plan ahead: to think through the effect of each plot point and how to maximize it in the narrative. I'm still learning, but I know enough now to say that putting up a bit of framework before you begin putting words on the page doesn't make you a bad artist: it simply makes you a good craftsperson.

With all that in mind, let's take a look at the structural elements of plot, and how to effectively plan out your stories.

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As a kid, I spent a lot of time building things with my dad. Whether it was a little woodworking craft or a huge home improvement project, he had one cardinal rule: measure twice, cut once. Otherwise, you were almost guaranteed to measure wrong and have to cut twice, or worse, buy new lumber. I think the same rule applies to storytelling. Writing the first draft of any long-form narrative project, whether it's a book, screenplay, or script, can take months or even years, depending on your pace. Having a solid plan that you've really thought through before you begin can cut that time in half by removing a lot of the "well, what now" moments while writing.

But how do you even begin to plan out a narrative? We, as audience members and readers, experience stories as a constant flow of information and change, not as discrete elements or moments held in a structure. We can remember the big twists, sure, but how the author took us from the beginning of the story to that point is largely lost on us. This is good: the best storytellers, like the best magicians, hide the mechanisms of their craft and make us believe in the experience rather than their own ability. But as fellow craftspeople, we need to start noticing the wires, so we can see how to hide them from others. We need to study the way the great storytellers who came before us crafted their works. And to begin to do that, we need a vocabulary and a set of concepts that allow us to break narratives down into their component parts.

So let's start there: with names for the major elements of plot. As we discuss these, try to think of examples from your favorite books, movies, and podcasts that demonstrate the elements in action, both in isolation and combination. It's best to think of a narrative you've experienced multiple times and are very familiar with, to make sure you can remember it clearly.

First off is the smallest unit of storytelling: the humble Beat. **A beat is any shift in audience perception of narrative – a new event, revelation, or reversal of circumstances.** When people are asked to describe what happened in a particular story, they usually default to listing the beats: "This happened, and then he said this, and then she heard about it, so she did…" and so on. While beats are constructed of action, dialogue, and narration (and those in turn are constructed of words and letters or sounds and visuals), beats are the smallest structural elements of story – or more simply, the smallest element of narrative that could be called *plot*. They are as small as you can go while still communicating meaningful narrative information to the audience.

Pulling back the camera, the next smallest element of plot is the **Scene: A narrative unit constructed of one or more beats, taking place in one time and place, and communicated through dialogue, narration, and action.** For instance, "Bob walks out

on his job" is a beat, while a scene would not just show Bob walking out of his job, but the relevant conversations and actions Bob takes to show both how and why Bob left. There can be other beats in the scene, connected to the big final beat: for instance, Bob is mocked by his coworker, cussed out by a customer, and threatened by his boss. However, each beat has a direct connection to the final beat in the scene, and all of them occur in the same time and place.

In the same way that a series of connected beats creates a scene, **a Sequence is a series of scenes that add to the others in order to produce a larger effect through contrast, reversal, and causal connection.** For instance, the heist genre almost invariably includes a heist sequence: a series of connected scenes that show the various stages of the robbery from beginning to end. Because the different members of the team have to accomplish different tasks at different places and times, those steps are shown in separate scenes. However, they all flow into one another, and are typically intercut to emphasize the effect of each through irony or suspense: for instance, while several characters are trying to crack the vault, their lookout is caught by security and seems to be about to give up the game. Down in the vault, the safe crackers hear someone coming, and we, the audience, assume it's a guard. If it's instead another member of the team, expectations are subverted, and we can't wait to learn what happened with the lookout.

Finally, we have the **Act: A series of sequences and scenes that creates a miniature story with its own beginning, middle, and end, but is still part of a larger plot.** The idea of act structure originated in theatre, where act breaks were necessary for the live production, but also needed to occur at natural break points in the plot. Over the centuries, our expectation for all forms of narrative were shaped by these act structures, and the terms used in theatre began to be applied to wider literary theory. Each act requires its own setup, action, climax, and resolution that builds on the last act, though the middle acts typically lack the emphasis on setup and resolution that the first and final acts do. In any case, it's best to think of your acts as small, interconnected stories telling one larger story, with major turns between each. Readers and audiences, conditioned by their experience with stories, will recognize and appreciate both strong act structure and intentional subversion.

**Beat, Scene, Sequence, and Act – all adding up to Plot with a capital "P."** With these definitions in place, you can begin analyzing your favorite stories to see how their writers used the interplay of elements to shape your experience of the story. Take note of your responses to well-constructed plots, and try to understand why they affected you that way. This way, you can begin consciously breaking down your own stories and rebuilding them to be more effective.

One personal note of caution: when structuring your plot, it's best to work at the larger level – in other words, on the scene, sequence, and act structure. Focusing too small, at

least in your first draft, can make your writing seem mechanical and artificial as you simply write by numbers (or in this case, by beats). If you know the major beats of your scenes and the big turns for each act, however, the smaller, scene-by-scene beat structure should come naturally and organically from the interplay of character and story. In your later drafts, you may need to break your existing scenes down into beats in order to figure out what's not working, in the same way you might disassemble an engine in order to repair it. If this is the case, the solution could be anything from reversing the order of two beats to completely rethinking the scene or sequence to more effectively communicate the necessary information. An understanding of effective structure is a huge help in finding the solution to the plot question.

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To begin applying these ideas, let's look at the first major scene in *Blindsights* following the prologue. As the inciting incident of the entire plot, this scene has several things it needs to do: introduce the two main characters, Sam and Cyrus; fulfill the promise of the previous scene by showing Jacob's scheme in action; establish Sam's blindness and his skill with a pistol; and set the stakes for the rest of the episode. It also has to do all this while holding audience interest through a *lot* of exposition. So let's look at the beats of the scene, and see how they accomplish these goals:

- Jacob enters the bar and immediately begins scoping it out
- Sam sneaks up on Jacob and distracts him by playing the part of the harmless blind piano player
- Cyrus enters and offers his visitor his best drink, immediately trusting him
- Jacob convinces Cyrus to let him stay at the bar, momentarily achieving his goal
- Sam pulls his pistol, intimidating Jacob with a display of skills
- Jacob promises to return and burn the bar down with his gang

As you can see, each of the beats in this scene has a purpose, and either reveals new information to the audience or shifts the direction of the story through action. However, without the previous scene of Jacob and Eckart conspiring in the woods, the audience would miss most of the tension since they wouldn't know Jacob is planning to rob the bar. This means that the prologue and the bar scene form a small sequence; two separate scenes that can stand alone, but produce an overall effect by working together. This first sequence is then added to the next scene (Sam's dream and the conversation between Sam and Cyrus) to form the first act of the story, where stakes, tension, and character wants and needs are initially established.

When deciding how to construct your scenes, look at all the characters involved and what you need to accomplish narratively. Every character should enter the scene with a goal: for instance, in the *Blindsights* scene, Jacob wants to earn the trust of the bar owners so he can rob them, Cyrus wants to be a good host, and Sam wants to protect

Cyrus from Jacob. Be sure to keep in mind what the characters know moment by moment, how much of that the audience knows, and how the competing wants of each character will generate conflict and tension within the scene. This will give you a fairly clear picture of the scene scenario, which will allow you to effectively write your beats.

One of the best practices in scene writing is to construct them around the most important beat: the one that will most influence the plot going forward or the one that will propel the transition to the next scene. By placing this beat at the conclusion of the scene, you provide motivation to move on to the next scene and generate a stronger sense of narrative momentum. If a major revelation or reversal occurs in the middle of a scene and that scene just keeps going, the effect of the beat will be lost by the time it ends. For instance, one of the most famous plot twists in modern history – Darth Vader's revelation that "No, I am your father" – comes at the very end of the climactic fight scene. Before the audience can fully process it, Luke has thrown himself into the abyss rather than joining the dark side.

If there's not a shift in the direction of the story in the scene you're writing, then make sure there's at least a revelation of new and pertinent information (whether it's new to the characters, the reader, or both) that will engage the reader's attention and make them reevaluate what has come before. Otherwise, the plot will begin to drag and eventually grind to a halt. While a slow pace and effective tension are strong storytelling tools, they are not sufficient excuse to write scenes in which nothing happens and no new information is communicated to the reader. Tension and suspense come from knowing part of what's going on, but not enough to form a full picture. A series of small, gradual revelations about the danger facing characters, or scenes that give the audience greater reason to empathize with those characters, are very good. Scenes that simply reiterate what we already know are not, and they should be excised. If doing so speeds up the pace too much, closely examine and reevaluate the flow of information in your plot. Space out your revelations over a wider period, construct more compelling scene scenarios to reveal that information, and utilize the sense of pacing in your scenes to ensure an emotionally effective flow of plot information.

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**Act changes within effective stories are often marked by the resolution of one set of narrative questions and the introduction of new ones.** For instance, the first act of *Star Wars* ends when Luke Skywalker tells Obi-Wan "I want to learn the ways of the force and become a jedi like my father." The major question of the first act is whether or not Luke will be able to leave home. This scene, at the end of a sequence that began with Luke racing off to find R2-D2, resolves that question. The major question now becomes whether Luke will succeed in learning to use the force or not. Throughout the second act, Luke trains with Obi-Wan, shows his capacity for heroism and courage, and eventually loses his mentor to Darth Vader. Forced to go on alone, Luke joins the rebel

assault on the Death Star. After watching dozens of his fellow pilots fail and fall, he finally listens to the voice of Obi-Wan and uses the force to destroy the Death Star. The question hasn't been resolved entirely, but we know that Luke has indeed begun to "learn the wars of the force." The third act is short and sweet, dealing with the question of *what now?* In the case of this story, the heroes celebrate their victory and are recognized as heroes. The hanging plot threads of Darth Vader's survival and the impending Imperial revenge are left for the sequel.

Three act structure, made popular by *Star Wars* and the direct influence of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is the most commonly used structure in modern film and narrative fiction, largely because it directly reflects the idea of beginning, middle, and end. The second most common is five act structure, which you'll probably remember if you've spent any time with Shakespeare. This structure, or at least the current form of it, essentially uses two midpoints in the second act to give the middle of the narrative more structure, which, as anyone who's written a long form story can tell you, is much needed. In classical plot structure, the construction of each act generally follows the pattern of inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

Your climax, wherever it falls in the plot, should be the point of highest stakes and tension: a situation where the choices of the characters will either achieve their goal or prevent them from achieving it forever. In other words, **the climax is the do or die moment.** For instance, in the film *Into the Spider-verse,* the Kingpin's particle collider represents not only the way for the various characters to return home (which they all need to do in order to survive), but an existential threat to the entire multiverse. As such, the climactic action of the film is a battle between the various spider-people and the Kingpin's gang of supervillains, where the heroes need to take control of the accelerator, get back to their own dimensions, and disable it permanently. As the various heroes escape, Miles Morales, a newly-minted superhero who's only just learned how to use his powers, is left alone to face the Kingpin: the monster of a man who killed both this universe's Spider-Man and Miles' uncle, the Prowler. Using his uncle's trademark "shoulder touch," Miles distracts Kingpin just long enough to deliver an electric shock that gives him the edge he needs. The accelerator is shut down, the multiversal disruptions across New York disappear, and reality is finally safe.

Once the climax is finished, **the final act, or resolution, should be just long enough to resolve any hanging plot points necessary to the overall effect of the story and leave the audience or reader satisfied.** The films of Christopher Nolan follow this rule very well; firstly by having tightly constructed plots that don't leave unnecessarily hanging questions in their structure, and secondly by using film's unique ability to quickly cross-cut and create meaning through editing. *The Dark Knight* and its sequel, *Inception, Dunkirk,* and to a lesser extent *Interstellar* wrap up their second act with an emotional climax, then use montage and voice over to show several weeks of the fallout and

resolution from the events of the narrative. While the narration can sometimes be a little on the nose, these sequences are highly effective, efficient storytelling that takes advantage of the narrative tools of filmmaking. Compare this to the ending of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy: one of the few black marks on an otherwise immaculate adaptation. The end of every scene and sequence in the third act is treated like the resolution, while the very last scene, while poignant and faithful to the book, lacks much of the emotional weight given to the others.

That being said, there still needs to be sufficient resolution and wrap-up to the narrative after the climax. Ending immediately after a major twist, reversal, or character choice leaves the audience feeling short-changed. **When we start a film, book, or audio drama, we expect to be taken on an emotional ride – a ride that includes both time and opportunity to emotionally process what we just witnessed.** This is what the denouement, the final structural portion of the plot, is for: to slow down the momentum that has been building since the beginning of the story and allow the specific emotional impact of the story to wash over the audience in a way that brings pleasure instead of confusion and frustration. This is something to keep in mind throughout your entire story; even the most breathless action films have quiet, emotive, human moments between the major beats to prevent the audience from being overwhelmed by information overload and just going numb.

While the tools available to communicate plot differ from medium to medium, the core principles remain the same: maintain narrative momentum throughout, provide sufficient time for the reader to process major plot points, and keep a sense of rising and falling action in scenes, sequences, and acts as well as in the overall plot.

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With the bigger elements of plot out of the way, here are a few last words on plot before this three-part series comes to an end:

A large part of effective plot construction is **objectively evaluating the effect your plot will have on the reader or audience.** It's easy for authors to overload their works with twists and revelations, largely because they already know everything there is to know about it. The difference between you and your reader is that you've spent months contemplating and constructing the narrative before reading it. They have not. Evaluate the major turns of your story for the kind of impact they'll have on a new reader, then consider how your favorite books, movies, and other media make room for the reader to process.

It's also important to remember that **all characters should take the most conservative path that they believe will achieve their goals.** What that means is different for different characters, and is defined by their usual mode of action. What would be a conservative path for Batman would be insanity for most other characters. Keep the

laws of probability and necessity as applied to your characters in mind while you construct your plot.

Remember that the structure of the plot and the pace of change should not be so fast or intense that it breaks suspension of disbelief. Soap operas are famous for ending every episode with a bombshell revelation… and for being comically unrealistic. The passage of time and the steps taken between major events should be as clear as possible without slowing the plot down unnecessarily. Time jumps and the reordering of events are powerful tools in the storytelling toolkit, but presenting the plot as though characters are simply jumping from major confrontation to major confrontation without taking the time to regroup, learn, and gain the necessary knowledge or skills makes them seem superhuman and your plot seem unnecessarily rushed. **Challenge, struggle, and eventual victory are some of the most enjoyable elements of storytelling, and effective plotting is one of the best ways to create them.** Don't squander the opportunity.

And, as always – measure twice, cut once.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's plot framing finale was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from the extraordinary Lauren Baker.

Want to see huge revelations drop with a frequency that will shatter your suspension of disbelief in reality? Then jump on social media, where you can find me on twitter and Instagram at trevor_vw. If you enjoyed this show, please share it out, and be sure to check out homesteadonthecorner.com for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show. If you enjoyed this lesson and want to help us keep the lights on, consider supporting Homestead on the Corner on Patreon as a monthly donor.

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Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.