Module 5 Exercise – Plot and Structure

In this exercise, the goal is to strengthen and clarify your plot, story structure, and narrative drive. Grab your editorial map and look at the novel as a whole and ask the following questions:

Determine if the story structure is working

Are all the pieces in the right place?

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Does the opening scene present an intriguing problem or mystery to draw readers in?

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Is there an inciting event within the first thirty pages (or fifty for longer manuscripts) that puts the protagonist on the path to the rest of the novel?

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Is there a moment in the beginning where the protagonist makes the choice to pursue the story problem?

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Do the stakes escalate at this time?

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Does something happen in the middle of the book that changes how the story problem is viewed or approached?

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Are the stakes raised again around this time?

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Is there a dark moment or setback right before the ending starts that raises the stakes again?

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Are the stakes raised yet again?

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Does the protagonist make the decision to continue the fight despite the risks or scarifies?

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Is there a clear win for the protagonist at the climax? Something that must be done in order to succeed?

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Does the ending resolve itself in a way that satisfies the story questions posed in the beginning of the novel?

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Is the ending satisfying?

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Determine if the plot working

Does the plot make sense?

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Is there a clear core conflict driving the plot?

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Are the characters' actions believable?

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_____
_____

Was the plot predictable?

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How often does the protagonist have to make a choice?

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_____
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_____

Are those choices difficult?

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_____

Does the protagonist have approaches different from the other characters' toward solving problems or looking at situations?

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Are any leaps in logic or the decision-making process plausible?

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Do coincidences work to aid the protagonist instead of hindering her?

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_____
_____
_____

Are the protagonist's motivations plausible?

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_____

Is someone or something opposing the protagonist?

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_____

_____

Does the antagonist have a plan, or does he cause random trouble when the plot needs it?

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_____

Is the antagonist trying to win, or does he sometimes act stupidly so the protagonist can win?

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_____

Do the choices create conflict between the protagonist's internal and external goals?

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Is the protagonist asked or forced to do something that goes against her beliefs?

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_____

Are there strong stakes?

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Do the stakes escalate as the novel unfolds?

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Will the protagonist's life change if she fails to achieve her goal?

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_____

Do the stakes affect the protagonist personally?

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_____

Is it impossible for the protagonist to walk away from this problem?

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_____
_____
_____

Are the stakes clear from the beginning of the novel?

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_____
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_____

Are the stakes big enough to be worth the reader's time?

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_____
_____
_____

Analyse the Scenes

Determine if the scenes are working

How does this scene serve the story?

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_____
_____

How does this scene serve the protagonist's character arc?

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_____
_____
_____

How does this scene serve the other characters' arcs?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Where does this scene take place?

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_____
_____
_____

What is the point-of-view character trying to do?

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_____

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_____

What goes wrong? What's the problem or challenge?

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_____

Why is this important and how does it potentially hurt the point-of-view character?

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Who else is in the scene?

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_____

What happens right before this scene?

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_____

What does the point-of-view character do next?

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If you took any scenes out, would the plot change?

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Analyse the Narrative Drive

Determine if the narrative drive is working

Are the character and story goals clear so there's narrative drive in the story?

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Is the protagonist doing something in every scene?

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Is there a story point (author's perspective) to every scene?

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_____
_____
_____

Is there a story question (reader's perspective) in every scene?

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_____

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Are these points and questions clear from the start of the scene?

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Is the protagonist moving toward something?

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Do the scenes and chapters build on one another or are events happening one after another?

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Where is the critical information revealed?

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_____
_____

Is the protagonist feeling too much?

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_____
_____

Is the protagonist debating too much?

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_____

Analyse the Tension and Hooks

Determine if the tension and hooks are working

Is there a sense of something about to happen in every scene?

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_____

Are there unanswered questions in every scene?

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Is there tension on every page?

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_____
_____
_____

Is there tension between characters?

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_____

Is there tension in the setting?

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Are there moments when the protagonist is relaxed?

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Are there big reveals and discoveries throughout the novel?

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How many reveals are plot-related?

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How many reveals are character-related?

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_____
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How many reveals are backstory or world-building related?

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If you want to adjust the story structure

Create a structure outline template using your preferred outline

The Three Act Structure uses the following major turning points:

Act One: The Beginning (the first 25% of the novel)

Opening scene: How the protagonist and world are introduced

Inciting Event: When the protagonist is first pulled onto the plot path

Act One Problem: When the protagonist first realises there's a problem and must make a choice to move forward

Act Two: The Middle (the middle 50% of the novel)

Act Two Choice: When the protagonist makes a choice and decides to act

Midpoint Reversal: When the situation unexpectedly changes

Act Two Disaster: When the worst happens and the protagonist wants to give up

Act Three: The Ending (the last 25% of the novel)

Act Three Plan: When the protagonist decides to risk it all to fix the problem

Climax: When the protagonist faces the antagonist and resolves the problem

Wrap Up: Where the protagonist goes from here (final scene of the novel)

Move scenes and turning points as needed

Major plot events that fall way outside the general structure format usually indicate problems with the overall structure of the novel. Be concerned if:

- A turning point falls more than 20% outside the general range
- A turning point is missing altogether
- A turning point occurs in a different section
- Multiple turning points occur close together

Fix problems with the beginning

Common beginning problems include:

- Starting in the wrong place
- Too much (or not enough) setup
- Lack of story questions

- An unclear or reactive protagonist

Fix problems with the middle

Common middle problems include:

- Boggy middle syndrome
- Repetitive scenes
- Unnecessary subplots
- No payoffs
- No surprises
- Dumping on readers
- Stagnant stakes
- No character arc movement

Fix problems with the ending

Common ending problems include:

- The ending is too short
- The ending is too long
- It doesn't resolve the core conflict
- The ending doesn't fulfil the story promise
- It doesn't involve the protagonist
- There's no end for the character arc
- Too many loose ends
- Not enough loose ends
- It's not satisfying to readers
- The stakes don't go up
- It comes out of the blue
- It just stops