Power of the Pen
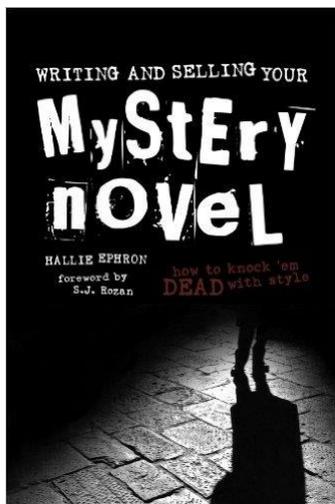
April 2016

Selected plotting and planning techniques from

Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel: How to Knock 'Em Dead with Style

By Hallie Ephron

Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel: How to Knock 'Em Dead with Style

by Hallie Ephron

- Features comprehensive instruction, exercises, and worksheets for mystery writers of all levels, including a format for a novel blueprint
- Addresses all subgenres of mystery from hardboiled crimes and cozies to romantic thrillers and medical mysteries
- Covers how to grab readers from the first chapter, how to construct effective plots, and how to revise and submit mysteries to publishers

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Selected plotting & planning techniques

1. The shape of a mystery plot (chart)
2. A blueprint for planning a mystery novel
3. Scenes, chapters, acts
   - Example overall plot structure
4. Scene-by-scene outline
   - Pacing check
   - Continuity check

1. The shape of a mystery plot
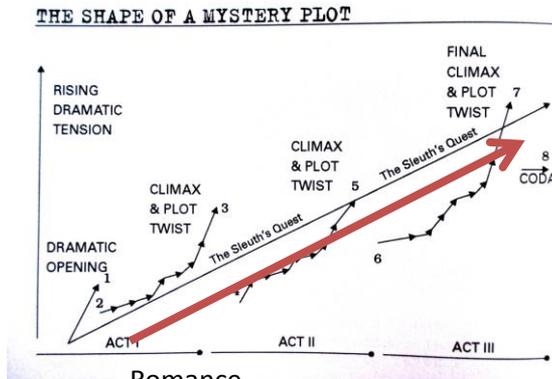

THE SHAPE OF A MYSTERY PLOT
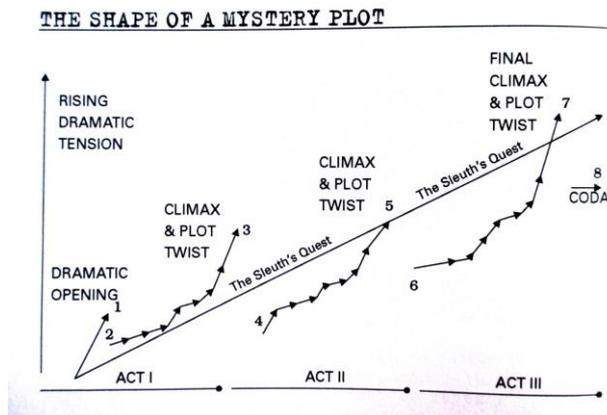
The Sleuth's Quest

Drama works in direct proportion to how miserable you make your protagonist.

- Roadblocks, setbacks and mishaps
- Discomfort, inner demons
- Modulate the misery
- Keep raising the stakes

Subplots

THE SHAPE OF A MYSTERY PLOT

Secondary plot(s)

Makes novel complex, interesting

Gives reader a breather from ongoing, increasing tension of the main plot

- – Romance
- – Trials & tribulations of main character's friends & family
- – Health issues
- – Challenges of the protagonist's "day job"
- – Investigation of another, apparently unrelated crime
- – Unresolved event in character's past

Exercise

- • Think of selected scenes or paragraphs in a novel or story (yours or someone else's)
- • Find approximate location of when the scene falls in the story (Act I, II or III)
- • Rank the dramatic tension in the scene on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
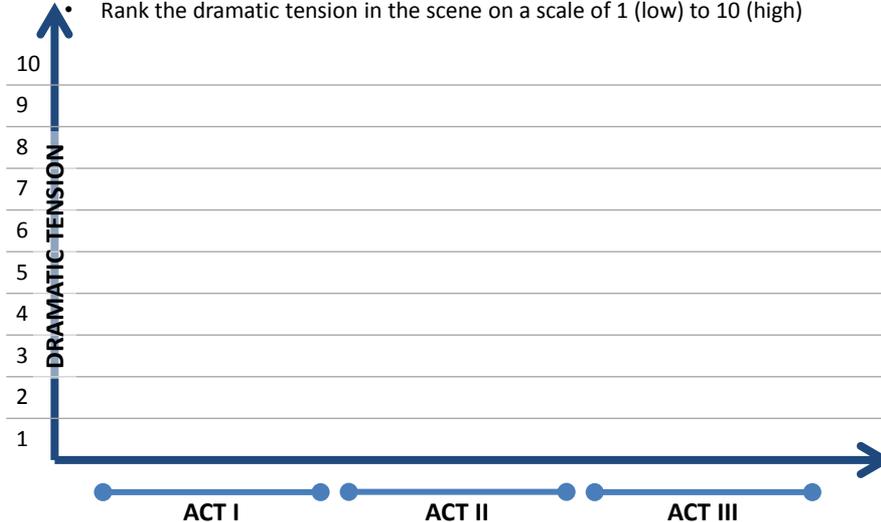
2. A blueprint for a mystery novel

Premise: Suppose....and what if....			
The Protagonist: the mystery sleuth			
Name:		Reason for getting mixed up in investigating crimes:	
Physical appearance:		Present status and ambitions:	
Background:		Talents and skills:	
Personality:		Tastes and preferences:	
The Crimes	**Crime 1**	**Crime 2**	**Crime 3**
Crime scenario: victim, MO, scene of the crime			
What appears to have happened			
What really happened			
Why this crime matters to this sleuth			
What this crime means to the villain			
The Villain			
Name:		Thumbnail sketch:	

3. Scenes, chapters, acts
Exercise: Plot structure

Analyze the plot of a standard, one-hour television crime show

TV Show	**Description**	**Most likely suspect at the commercial break**
Opening scene – short scene at the very beginning (before the first commercial)		
Plot twist before next commercial break		
Plot twist before next commercial break		
Plot twist before next commercial break		
Final climactic scene; final plot twist and resolution		

3. Scenes, chapters, acts

- Scene: building block. Dramatic telling of an event at a single time in a single place. Payoff at end
- Chapter: several scenes grouped together (or 1 long scene)
- Act: dramatic structure.
  - Tension racheted down at the start
  - A major plot twist
  - Tension has risen to a crescendo by the end

Dramatic Opening		
ACT I	Chapter 1	Scene 1
		Scene 2
	Chapter 2	Scene 1
		Scene 2
		Scene 3
ACT II	Chapter 1	Scene 1
		Scene 2
ACT III	Chapter 1	Scene 1
		Scene 2
		Scene 3
Coda	Chapter 2	Scene 1
		Scene 2
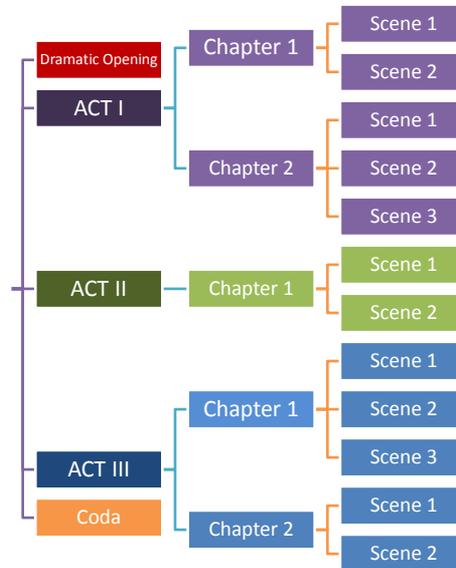
Example overall plot structure

- "30,000 foot view" – high-level overview, "big picture"
- 10 to 30 scenes per act in a typical mystery novel
- 40 to 90 scenes total

	Chapters	Scenes	Pages	Ending plot twist
Dramatic opening	1	1	10	Julia realizes she's being stalked
End of Act I	7	13	60	Likely stalker is murdered
End of Act II	10	24	100	Julia arrested for running next likely suspect down
End of Act III	10	26	100	Sleuth confronts, injures villain
Coda	1	2	10	Villain's secrets revealed
		66	280	

4. Scene-by-scene outline

- More detail about each building block
- Brief descriptions of major plot points in each scene, plus basic chronology of the story
- Keep it spare

Chapter	Scene	Elapsed time	Season / day / time	Main plot points
1	1	Week 1 Day 1	Sunday early (late summer)	Annie & Peter at home; Chip calls asking for Peter's help
1	2		Continued	Peter drives to Weston, meets Nick, finds Lisa murdered, calls police
1	3		Continued	Police arrive; Det. Boley questions Nick
1	4		3:00 pm	Anne & Peter leave Nick's house; newspaper photo taken
2	1	Week 1 Day 3	Tuesday late morning	Jail – interview w/Nick; Peter thinks he sees his wife's murderer

Pacing check

Pacing: Controlling and modulating the speed and intensity of the story.

- Begin with a scene-by-scene outline
- Get a pink, yellow, and blue highlighting marker
- Highlight scenes in the outline by intensity:
  - Blue for narrative, basic investigation, and reflection
  - Yellow for rising suspense
  - Pink for action and plot twists
- Check for:
  - Rising and falling tension
  - Scenes with high suspense and action and modulated by scenes of investigation and suspense
  - Plot twists are spaced out

Chronology check

- Begin with a scene-by-scene outline
- Check for:
  - Continuity errors
    Are the clock & calendar logical and consistent?
  - Cluttered days
    Is time overfilled with 20 hours of events between sunrise and sunset?
  - Snowing in summer
    Is the weather right for the location and time of year?
  - Sunrise / sunset
    When do they occur? Is it light / dark outside?
  - The domino effect
    A chronology fix in one scene may mean fixes to the chronology in surrounding scenes.

Appendix

Example scene-by-scene outline

Label	Title	Time_of_Day	Elapsed time	Type	Tension	POV	Synopsis
Chapter	Monday, May 2						
Scene	NYC - morning	6:30 AM	3 hours	Suspense	1	Narrator	In which a mysterious agent is dispatched to the West.
Scene	Denver - midday	1:00 PM	45 min	Suspense	3	Rancher	In which a rancher experiences an odd feeling.
Scene	NYC - evening	8:00 PM	15 min	Narrative	3	Narrator	In which a confidential phone call is placed to two cities.
Chapter	Tuesday, May 3						
Scene	Denver - morning	4:30 AM	1 hour	Action/Plot	5	Rancher	In which two mysterious happenings at the ranch occur at the same time.
Scene	NYC - midday	11:45 AM	45 min	Narrative	2	Dr. Nick	In which Dr. Nick X-rays the mysterious artifact.
Scene	Denver - midday	12:20 PM	1.5 hours	Action/Plot	4	Det. Roley	In which the police investigate the ranch events and Det. Roley forms a hypothesis.
Scene	Cheyenne - late afternoon	4:45 PM	20 min	Suspense	4	Det. Roley	In which police find a connection between the current event and an event in Denver.

Generate a Scene-by-Scene from Scrivener

1. Set up the new meta-data fields you want to use (Project > Meta-Data settings)
2. Adjust Outliner view to see the new meta-data fields (dropdown arrow at top of Outliner scroll bar > check off columns to show)
3. Enter scene meta-data either way,
   - Double-click on field within Outliner to add data
   - Open Custom Meta-Data Section within Inspector and enter data there

Method 1: Outliner CSV export

4. File > Export > Outliner contents as CSV
5. Convert or work with CSV file

Method 2: Compile custom w/metadata

4. In Compile screen, choose Format as… Synopsis Outline
5. Choose Formatting from left bar and check boxes in the Meta-Data column
6. Select "Synopsis Outline" from the Compile for… dropdown then click Compile