



PLOT + CHARACTER = STORY

**HOW TO WRITE A BOOK
THAT WILL KEEP READERS
UP ALL NIGHT**

(IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY)

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“Fiction is the
lie that tells
the truth.”

—Neil Gaiman





WHY DO WE READ?

- To escape our reality & feel like we're not alone
- To expand our minds & discover new experiences
- To imagine different ways of existing in the world
- To immerse ourselves in familiar settings & connect with characters we love
- To learn from others & envision change
- For the love of stories

WHY DO WE PICK UP A BOOK?

- A genre that appeals to us (mystery, romance, fantasy)
- A compelling cover that fits our expectations
- Blurbs from authors we respect or like
- A strong “hook”
- To return to a familiar world/characters (series)
- An original concept
- Tropes that appeal to us (enemies to lovers)
- An author whose style we know we love
- Something resonates with our personal experience

WHY DO WE KEEP READING?

- To find out what's going to happen, **because we care deeply about the characters**
- To unravel a plot twist or solve a mystery
- To be enveloped in a world full of tension and surprises
- To find out if a damaged character becomes healed—or if an underdog triumphs
- To see if a character reaches their goal
- In search of a happy ending, especially in romances
- To see how a conflict is resolved or a villain is vanquished
- Because a story makes us laugh or cry (evokes emotion)



PLOT + CHARACTER...SO HAPPY TOGETHER

- By itself, plot is no more than a meaningless series of events. Characters are the engine that drive the plot (their choices, failures, history, and motivations)
- Without plot, characters simply wander around, having feelings and conversations in a vacuum
- Plot + character=story

PLOT STRUCTURE – A ROAD MAP

- Book typically has 3 acts, though Gwen Hayes of *Romancing the Beat* suggests thinking of romances as having 4
- Act I=25%, Act II=50%, Act III=25%
- Many excellent books delve deeply into plot structure
- One of my personal favorites is Jessica Brody's *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*
- As readers, we look for familiar patterns in a story (e.g., catalyst/inciting incident, All is Lost, Dark Night of the Soul)
- Familiarize yourself with story structure. Then superimpose this structure on one of your favorite books and see how it plays out.

“The events by themselves mean nothing; it’s what those events mean to someone that has us compulsively turning pages.”

— Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story*





If we don't care about a character, the most brilliant plot in the world and the most gorgeous, lyrical writing will be meaningless.

What happens—or how beautifully an author describes it—won't matter, because we don't care about the people it's happening to.

You must make your readers care.

WHAT MAKES US CARE?



- A character in a vulnerable position/underdog
- A kind character
- A funny character
- A character who makes a compassionate or morally “right” choice in a difficult situation
- A character who rescues someone/a creature in need (*Save the Cat*)
- A character who wants/needs something
- A character who stands up to a clear antagonist

START WITH A WHAT-IF QUESTION...

Every great story can be reduced to a 'what-if' question. For instance, what if...

- ...a neglected orphan boy suddenly discovered he was a wizard? (Harry Potter)
- ...a World War II Army nurse found herself sucked back to 1700s Scotland? (Outlander)
- ...the Old Gods walked among us, warring with the New Gods of technology? (American Gods)
- ...the letters a girl wrote in secret to her old crushes were mailed to them without her knowledge or consent? (To All the Boys I've Loved Before)
- ...a girl who witnessed the shooting of her best friend by a police officer had to choose between keeping the secret or risking everything to tell the truth? (The Hate U Give)

BEFORE YOU DELVE DEEPLY INTO YOUR STORY...



Find your what-if question, the question your story will ultimately answer.



Your entire story will be an exploration of this question, in one way or another.



How you answer the question will be determined by your plot...



And the twists and turns your plot takes will be intimately connected to your characters/ goals, motivations, obstacles, and needs.

THINK ABOUT THE MAIN POINT YOU WANT YOUR STORY TO MAKE

- This can evolve and change as you work out the details of your plot
- But before you sit down to write, it's very helpful to know what it is
- The point=sometimes known as theme
- The whole story will be in service to this “point” or “theme”
- Examples: It's important to stand up for what you know is right, even when you may face dire consequences (*The Hate U Give*); true love stands the test of time (*Outlander*)
- Take some time to think about the point/theme of your story before you start writing



GET TO KNOW YOUR
CHARACTERS

What do your main characters want? (GOAL)

Why do they want it? (MOTIVATION)

Why can't they have it—what's in the way? (OBSTACLE)

What will happen if they don't get it? (STAKES)

What do they NEED & how will they change? (FLAW/ARC)

INTERVIEW YOUR CHARACTERS

WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY WANT?

- You know what question your novel is trying to answer
- Now, it's time to figure out who you're going to be spending a lot of time with...and how you're going to go about answering that question.
- Begin with your main character's goal
- What do they want more than anything else? What are they out to get, at the beginning of the novel?
- This should be something BIG—and they should have a reason that they want it

CHARACTER + PLOT ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED

- Whatever your character wants the most at the beginning of the novel needs to drive the story
- It's ideal if whatever they want the most is *also* what the antagonist wants, so they're competing for the same goal
- Take the movie, *You've Got Mail*, where Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks are competing to operate a local bookshop (she owns an indie bookstore and he's opening a Goliath)
- From the very beginning of the story, their goals are clear



WHY DO THEY WANT IT?

- Once you've figured out what your character wants, make sure you understand why it's so important to them
- If they're desperate to keep an indie bookstore going, is it because they're carrying on their mother's legacy (You've Got Mail), which gives it great sentimental value?
- We need to care about your characters from the beginning—and everyone loves an underdog! We can all relate to being up against a more powerful entity—and to wanting to carry on the legacy of someone we've lost. Boom—connection. We care, so we'll keep reading (or watching).



WHY CAN'T THEY HAVE WHAT THEY WANT?

- If your characters could have what they wanted right away, there would be no story
- Conflict drives story!
- What's stopping your characters from getting what they want?
- This is your obstacle, and it should be a big one.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THEM, ANYWAY?

It's time to figure out your character's major flaw.

- This, again, must be something BIG
- It should prevent them from becoming the person they need to be (their best self)
- Your plot will act in concert with your character's need to overcome this flaw
- They will be faced with this flaw again and again as the book proceeds & the conflict intensifies
- By the end of the book, they will have succeeded in overcoming it, learning an important lesson. That's their character arc.



WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF THEY DON'T GET IT? (STAKES)

- These consequences must be dire
- If Harry Potter doesn't defeat Voldemort, the world as we know it will end
- If Katniss Everdeen doesn't defeat the other tributes, she will die
- If Claire Fraser doesn't succeed in stopping the rebellion, the clans will be slaughtered

THE STAKES MUST HAVE PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Sometimes high stakes are obvious to everyone (life and death)

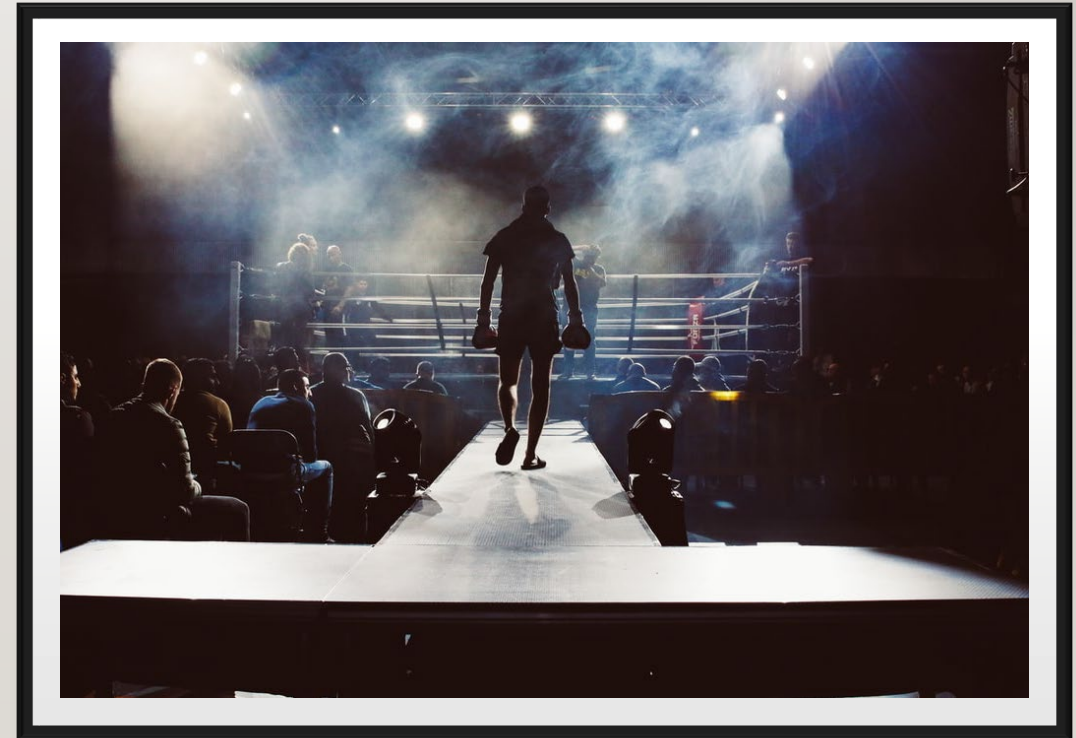
Other times, the stakes are extremely personal (if a girl doesn't make a successful short film, she won't get into her ideal college and her dreams will be crushed)

Whatever your character's flaw is, it should be intimately connected to their goal and their stakes

Their goal should give them the opportunity to confront their flaw (and ultimately defeat it, after several attempts)

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE ANTAGONIST!

- Your antagonist should be as fully developed as your protagonist
- They shouldn't be a 'cartoon-character' villain
- We should understand their motivations and why, in their own minds, they are a hero
- Remember, they want the same thing your protagonist wants. This conflict lies at the heart of the story.



REMEMBER THE ALLY!

- Sometimes called the helper character, the ally is there to make your main character see the choice they *should* be making—what they need to learn in order to become their best self
- They will usually present your main character with this lesson early in the story
- Your MC will deny the importance of the lesson vehemently, but ultimately will come around
- Peeta is an excellent example of this in *The Hunger Games*



EXAMPLE OF CONNECTION BETWEEN FLAW, GOAL, STAKES, AND LESSON

Woman has a dream of becoming the first person to walk on Mars

She's fiercely independent and refuses to depend on anyone else, believing they'll only screw things up

She doesn't trust her fellow officers and things go wrong again and again on their spaceflight because of it

Finally, they're about to land on Mars and disaster ensues. Things spiral out of control & she is forced into a situation where she must trust her co-pilot's judgment...or die

She trusts their judgment, the mission is saved, and the two of them set foot on Mars together

**BRIEF INTERMISSION
TO NOTE...**

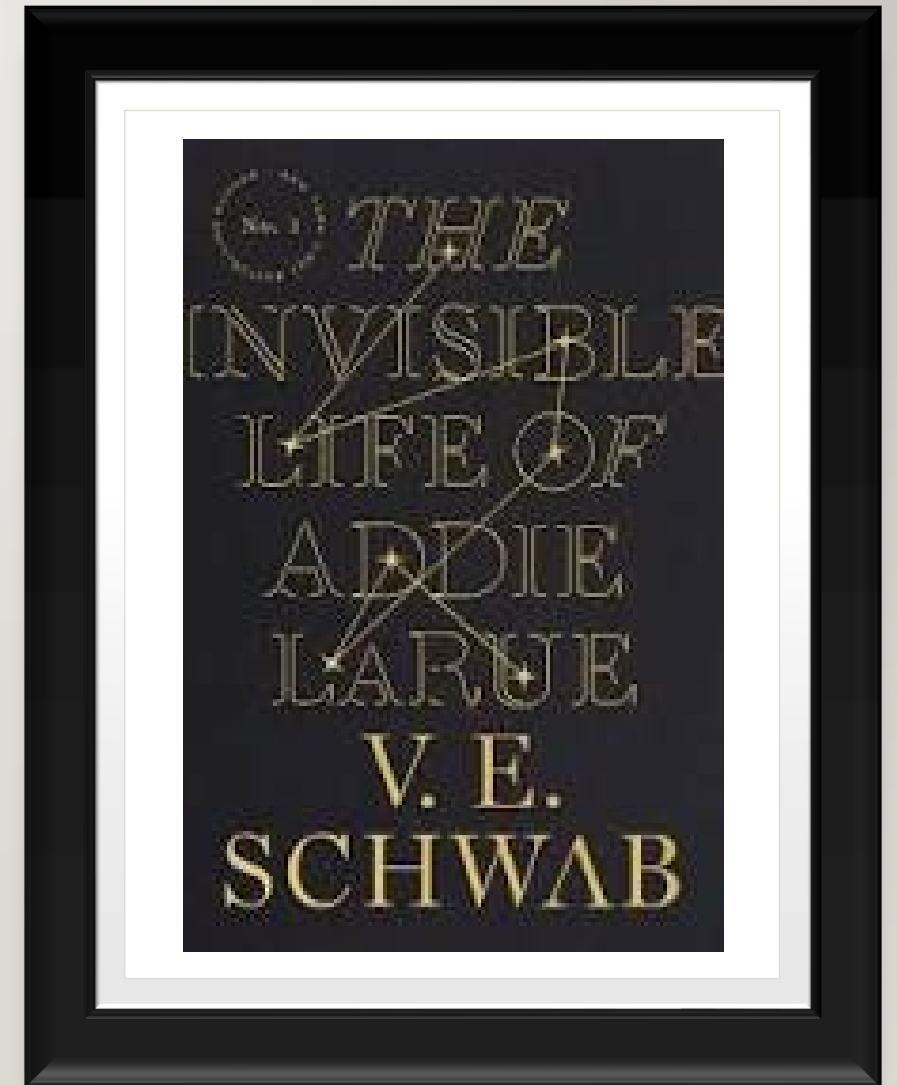


YOU'RE ALREADY WORKING ON YOUR PLOT!

As you work through filling in the blanks of your characters' goals, wants, obstacles, and needs, you're creating the all-important bones of what Victoria Schwab calls "The Story Corpse."

THE STORY CORPSE: YALLWRITE MASTERCLASS

- [Victoria Schwab's presentation](#) at YALLWrite 2020
- Plot=bones, Character=muscle, Prose=flesh
- Highly visual way of considering story structure
- Important takeaway here—don't worry about getting the perfect words down on the page until you build the bones and muscle!



CHARACTER INFORMS PLOT INFORMS CHARACTER

- When you know your characters well, they make choices that gel perfectly with their flaws, motivations, history, and goals
- Those choices will drive the plot, which will in turn inform the people your characters become
- When you know the “point” of your story and your “what-if” question, and have figured out the core goals, wants, etc. of your character, the plot will flow naturally
- Everything should be linked—and should relate naturally to your point/theme



“The story creates beautiful writing...not the other way around.”

—Lisa Cron

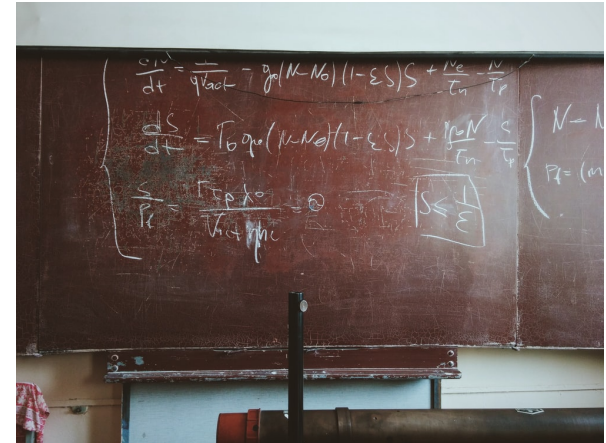


GOOD WRITING + STORY: AN EQUATION

- Good writing + story = the ideal combination

BUT

- Story (minus) good writing wins over good writing (minus) story every time
- We read because we care about characters
- We read to find out what happens
- We'll forgive a lot if we're invested in the characters and the plot is compelling





TAKE YOUR TIME

- There's no single way to write
- Some people write quickly. Others slowly. Honor your process.
- Take time to figure out what you need to before you start writing
- Writing and publishing are a marathon, not a sprint
- Figure out your story's heart before you worry about getting words on the page
- Be kind to yourself—and expect to revise. No one gets it perfect the first time.
- Figure out what you love about this story — what matters to you. Why do you want to tell this particular story, at this particular time? Stay true to your vision.

RESOURCES

TAKE YOUR PANTS OFF, Libby Hawker

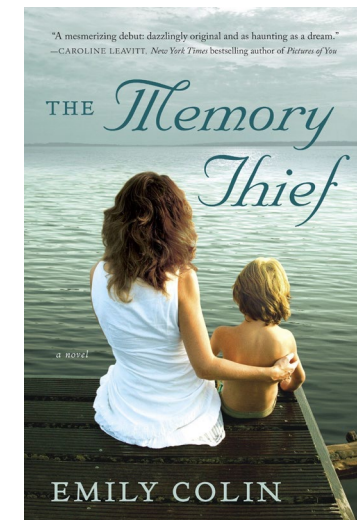
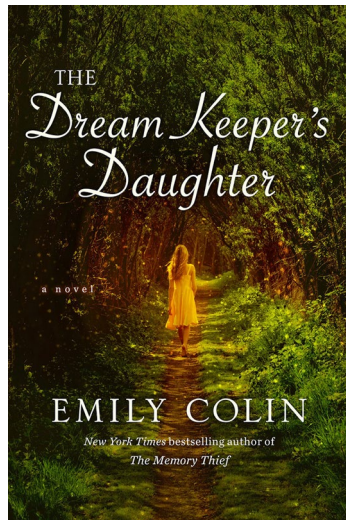
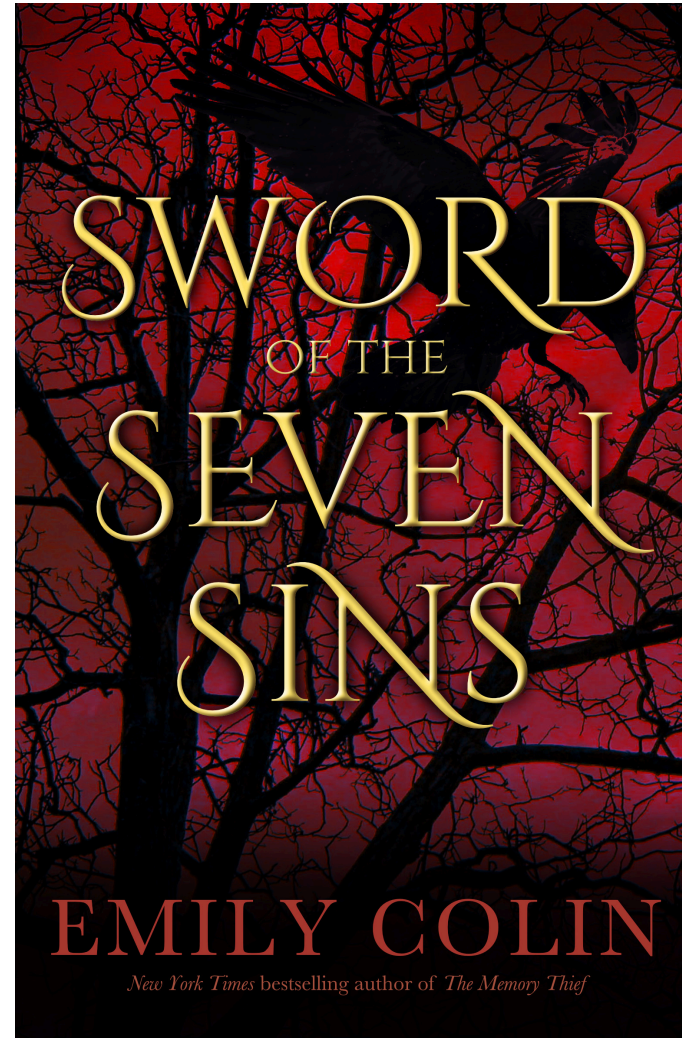
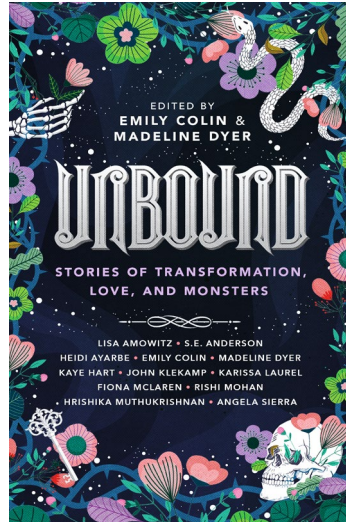
SAVE THE CAT WRITES A NOVEL, Jessica Brody

WIRED FOR STORY and STORY GENIUS, Lisa Cron

One Stop for Writers (Character, Emotion, Setting, etc. Thesaurus)

THE ANATOMY OF STORY, John Truby

Emily Colin, www.emilycolin.com



The End.

