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LEY TAYLOR JOHNSON

HOW TO  
WRITE A  
*Compelling*  
ACT TWO

A GUIDE FOR NOVELISTS

# How to Write a Compelling Act Two

*A Guide for Novelists*

Ley Taylor Johnson

Authors Publish

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# Foreword

Over the years, I've had the pleasure of working with authors of all different genres, target demographics, and experience levels.

As we commiserate about the many pleasures and pitfalls of writing, I often hear the same sentiment echoed over and over again: "The beginning is giving me a little trouble, but things should go more smoothly when I hit Act Two. I basically have it all plotted out in my head, so things should start falling into place pretty easily—I just need to get there!" only to witness these same authors hit a wall when they realize it's called the *murky middle* for a reason.

This wall can happen at any stage in the process—during outlining, when they realize they have too many or too few plot beats; during drafting, when the plot and/or characters take an unexpected turn; or during self-editing and revising, when they notice the pacing is off and are unsure of how to fix it. It's frustrating, I won't lie, but it's also pretty par for the course.

While it's true that Act 2 is home to most of the fun, shiny scenes we imagine when planning our stories and the exciting twists we can't wait to share with readers, it's also the place where those scenes and twists have to interact (and

interact smoothly!) with the slower, more methodical parts of the story. Authors need to set up conflicts with a series of small, mounting complications, weave subplots in and out of the main story, balance action and dialogue scenes, and do all of this while maintaining consistent pacing, stakes, tone, and more.

It's a lot to manage, and it's easy to get lost in the weeds and face rewrite after rewrite as you struggle to get your plot bunnies in a row.

I say this not to discourage you, but to let you know you're not alone. Nobody has a perfect first draft, especially when it comes to Act 2. Plotting, drafting, and revising your second act takes time, practice, and a lot of trial and error. Having the shape of the story in your mind is just the start—from here, you need to wrestle it into a clean, clear, and concise structure, then tidy it up to make it polished and publish-worthy. That's where this book comes in!

*How to Write a Compelling Act 2* covers all the ins and outs of Act 2 from both a story and craft perspective, offering guidance not just on *what* to write, but *how* to write it. We'll go over the role Act 2 plays in your story, the key elements that make a strong second act, and how to tackle the common problem points you'll encounter while writing. These tips are based on conventions and trends that have been successful in the publishing industry, but are still general enough that you can stay true to your personal writing and storytelling style—there's no cookie-cutter solutions here!

With all of this in mind, I hope that this book provides the instruction and inspiration you need to craft an Act 2 that you and your readers will be pleased with. Let's get started!



# **Part 1: The Purpose of Act 2**

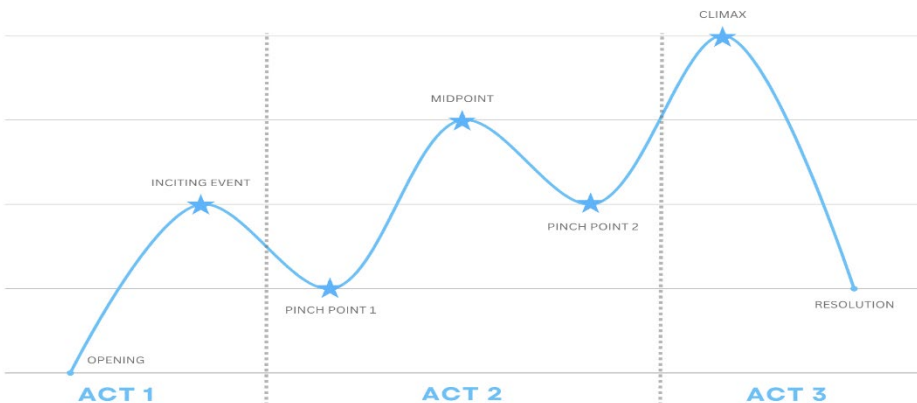
# What is Act 2?

Let's kick things off by going over what exactly Act 2 is. In the simplest terms, Act 2 is the middle of your book—the place where all the meat and potatoes of your plot happens, telling your story and guiding your protagonist through their character arc. In other words, it's where your actual story happens.

Now, it's important to note that Act 2 can look slightly different depending on the structure you're using for your story. It may take up less space or contain different key plot beats, but give or take these few details, the universal constant of Act 2 is that it's home to the *rising action*—the growing conflicts and complications that lead to your story's climax. For the purposes of this book, we'll be using the Three Act structure as illustrated below:

## THREE ACT STRUCTURE

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As you can see, Act 2 spans the majority of your book, starting shortly after the Inciting Event and ending shortly before the climax. If Act 1 is your setup and Act 3 is your resolution, Act 2 is *everything* that happens in between. It's the meat and potatoes of your story, containing all of the major plot beats, subplots, world-building, character development, and other details that make your story what it is.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Act 2 is also very long—in fact, it takes up about half the total word count of your book! In an average manuscript of 90,000 words, you should plan to dedicate about 45–50,000 words to Act 2 alone. These numbers aren't a hard cutoff, but can be a helpful guideline as you're working through your draft and expanding or trimming down your scenes.

That may seem like an ambitious number, but keep in mind that you're fitting more or less your entire plot into that word count. Those scenes and chapters will start to add up, and you'll likely find yourself with a much longer Act 2 than expected. That's where your essential scenes come in—the key plot beats that guide your story forward and answer important questions about your plot and character. Sticking to your essential scenes will help keep your second act in check and ensure that your story is progressing at a consistent rate, hitting all the necessary plot points, and navigating deftly around superfluous scenes and details.

We'll cover these essential scenes more in Part 2. For now, let's further explore the role your second act plays in your story by introducing the three must-haves that make Act 2 function.

# Complications, Subplots, and Stakes: The Must-Haves of Act 2

As we've just established, Act 2 makes up a sizable chunk of your story. Because it's home to so much of your story's plot and development, it's important that your scenes focus on interesting forward movement and connections that allow readers to navigate the various twists and turns of your plot. This is achieved through the three must-haves of Act 2: complications, subplots, and stakes.

These must-haves add depth, conflict, and intrigue that keep your story from sagging in the middle and keep readers interested. Let's get into what exactly these elements look like, why they matter to your story, and how you can begin incorporating them as you start writing Act 2.

## Complications

Complications are the first on our list, and they're more or less exactly what they sound like—*complications* to your plot. Complications drive your story forward by providing a series of small, escalating conflicts that carry your plot from one beat to the next. Each complication builds on the last, creating a chain of cause

and effect that helps each new plot point feel like a natural progression of the story and ensures that your protagonist has a tangible and consistent impact on the plot.

The main purpose of these complications is to build tension by adding challenges your protagonist must overcome on their journey to the climax. As such, they should be relatively minor in scale—you don't want to distract from your main story or raise the stakes too high before your next major plot point! Think of them less as roadblocks, and more as potholes and detours. They should throw a wrench in your protagonist's plans without completely derailing things or making the upcoming challenges insurmountable. By adding the right amount of complications, you can keep your story moving during the downtime between key beats while maintaining a growing sense of tension and a steady pace.

Complications are simple enough to introduce, as all you really need is a list of potential obstacles to get in the way of your plot. The chain of cause and effect doesn't need to be an elaborate, Rube Goldberg-esque contraption—all you really need is to understand how one obstacle may affect others down the line. A training accident could result in the protagonist spraining their ankle, which might lead to them staying home from an outing, which in turn may lead to them overhearing an argument not meant for their ears. This argument upsets them, which means they're distracted and hurt during an important event at the

midpoint. Each of these individual complications don't dramatically raise the stakes on their own, but their combined impact has a notable effect on the protagonist that will have consequences in the future.

We'll talk more about complications in relation to your story's overall stakes and tension later, exploring how you can best escalate each minor conflict in service to your overall plot.

## **Subplots**

Subplots consist of any part of your story that isn't directly connected to your main plot, which means they can be pretty much anything—character arcs, side adventures, romances, you name it. If your protagonist deals with any conflicts or intrigue outside of your major plot beats, congrats! You've got yourself a subplot.

Subplots are an essential part of any novel, as they allow you to flesh out your characters and world in the spaces between your key plot points. They're great for pacing in that they give you material to fill the space between major plot beats (meaning new sources for potential complications!), for making your world feel more alive and lived in, and for giving you space to explore your protagonist's feelings and flaws outside of the pressing stakes of the main plot. As an added bonus, they give readers more opportunities to connect with your

protagonist and feel immersed in the story you're telling, leaving them with a more memorable experience after they close your book.

Since subplots can be so incredibly varied, there's a good chance you already have some at work in your story. Thankfully, you don't have to do too much to develop them—a few touch points and some related complications throughout Act 2 are all you really need to build a solid subplot. In Part 3, we'll go over how to write effective subplots and offer tips on how to connect them back to your main plot in a way that grounds your protagonist and gives your story more depth.

## **Stakes**

Stakes are important to your book on multiple levels. From a story perspective, they're whatever is on the line for your protagonist—the risk they're taking, the promise of what they stand to gain, and the threat of what they stand to lose.

From a craft perspective, they're the intrigue that keeps the reader hooked.

Without a set of stakes, your story doesn't have a point, and there's no source of tension pushing it forward.

Creating a strong set of stakes may seem straightforward enough, but many authors start to lose their footing here due to the unexpected interactions stakes have with so many other elements of the story. Things like tension, pacing, and



even character arcs rely on having balanced stakes, so an imbalance can result in negative ripple effects throughout the manuscript that aren't always apparent at first glance.

It's important, therefore, to work on making your stakes imposing but realistic. Your protagonist should feel challenged without seeming like they're going up against impossible odds that would require *deus ex machina* shenanigans to overcome. It helps to begin with the choice you presented to them during the inciting event in Act 1—identify what their personal stakes are, then consider how to expand them to a greater scale. In Part 3, we'll go into how to establish a strong set of stakes and adapt them as your story progresses.

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Of course, juggling these three must-haves throughout the entirety of Act 2 is easier said than done. The challenge of tracking your compounding complications and various subplots while you work to balance your tension, pacing, and stakes is part of what makes your second act such a beast! You're more capable than you give yourself credit for, though—be prepared for the struggles drafting will throw at you, but trust yourself to navigate them and you'll have a functional draft before you know it.



## **Part 2: The Anatomy of Act 2**

# The Essential Scenes of Act 2

Now it's time to take a look at the actual shape of Act 2, starting with the essential scenes. These are scenes that, regardless of your preferred genre or word count, are necessary to uphold the structure of your overall story. Things get a little tricky in Act 2, though. Because there's so much variability at play across plots, subplots, genre conventions, age demographics, and various other considerations, you may end up needing more than one scene to fulfill the requirements of each beat. That's totally okay; you can't expect to house all your major complications within a single scene, after all! It may be more helpful, therefore, to think of some of these as essential *sequences*—collections of scenes that work together to bridge the gap between major beats and answer your key questions (more on that shortly).

With that in mind, let's take a look at the essential scenes and sequences of Act 2. We'll cover each in detail, discussing their purpose in the story, the major facets and developments they focus on, and how you can get a head start on drafting them.

## The New World

This sequence introduces the protagonist to the new setting and status quo of Act

2. The goal of this sequence is to steadily build tension while keeping things relatively low-key, allowing the protagonist to become accustomed to their new environment and help readers get settled into the story before things get too complicated. There are no significant risks or conflicts at play, and tension is largely driven by complications, subplots, and a looming (but not overbearing) set of stakes heading into the midpoint.

Because the overall vibe of this sequence is introductory, you'll want to keep things pretty plot-focused and spend most of your time on external conflicts. The New World is home to your story's first *pinch point*—the plot beat that gets the second act moving and paves the way for your first few complications. This is where you can start bringing in some minor obstacles and setting up the first touch points for your subplots, as you have plenty of time to play in that space before tensions get too high. That's not to say you should ignore your internal conflicts, though—your protagonist isn't yet on their path of self-improvement, so this is a good opportunity to show them mishandling low-stakes situations before their flaw is exposed during the Midpoint.

A good place to start is compiling a list of the various obstacles, conflicts, complications, and subplots you want to bring into the story. Consider the all-important chain of cause and effect, and think about how you might order these items in a way that flows smoothly and helps the tension rise naturally. We'll

cover more tips in "Kickstarting Your Plot" and "Writing Effective Subplots," so keep that list handy!

## Midpoint

The Midpoint is where the stakes peak in Act 2, marking a tonal shift for your story. Your protagonist experiences a success or failure that's major enough to impact their circumstances, goal, and/or perspective heading into the latter half of Act 2. It's also the first point at which your protagonist's fatal flaw is revealed, setting up future complications and the next stretch of their arc.

This scene functions as a sort of mini-climax, which means it's heavily focused on your main plot. In most cases, this will be an action scene of some kind—a physical event that your protagonist is experiencing in pursuit of their overall goal. This is the biggest source of conflict in Act 2 and a necessary point of catharsis for the characters and readers, so be prepared to deal with high tension and fast pacing.

As you prepare to write your Midpoint, keep in mind that you're mostly looking for payoff to the complications you set up during The New World—you don't need to make things too intense here! Think about the overall goal your protagonist is trying to achieve, as well as additional steps and challenges that may help or hinder them in the pursuit of that goal. Also consider the obstacles

you've placed in their way so far, and how those additional steps and challenges can relate back to them. Finally, keep in mind your protagonist's emotional arc—this is their first shot at actualization, and the structure of the story means they're doomed to fail in the face of it. As you plan your Midpoint, think about how your protagonist's fatal flaw serves as a complication in its own right. We'll come back to this idea in "Tightening Your Midpoint Twist" to help you better set up your new stakes, status quo, and character development.

## **The New World, Twisted**

This sequence is a bit self-explanatory—you're basically back in The New World, but something is a little different and a little worse as a result of the Midpoint. There's a new status quo at play, and your protagonist struggles to adjust as they continue to ignore and/or deny their fatal flaw. This sequence offers a brief break in tension before you start gearing up for Act 3, so it's a good time to let your readers process the events of the Midpoint and regroup before the stakes start rising again.

Since this sequence is all about processing, it focuses more or less equally on external and internal conflicts. You'll want to take some time to establish your protagonist's new circumstances while also letting them reflect on their actions during the Midpoint, considering what went wrong or how it could have gone better. This is also a good time to add another touch point for your subplots, since

the climax will be increasingly prioritized the closer you get to Act 3.

A lot of the same tips for writing *The New World* apply here, but we'll talk more about how to handle the shift in tone and tension in "Managing Stakes and Tension"!

## Mistakes & Consequences

Mistakes & Consequences is where all the setup of your protagonist's fatal flaw pays off. Their refusal to confront their issues finally catches up with them, and they hit rock bottom following a major misstep on their part. They become estranged from other characters, either as a direct result of their actions or through self-imposed isolation, and take the time to reflect on what went wrong. This introspection gives them the perspective they need to resolve their lingering issues and get their affairs (read as: their character arc) in order, and gives you time to wrap up their personal subplot and internal conflicts just in time for Act 3.

This scene serves as your second pinch point, so you'll want to use this opportunity to set up your next string of complications and start rebuilding tension heading into the climax. The main thing to focus on here is the *mistakes* component—whatever it is that goes wrong, it should be your protagonist's fault and directly related to their fatal flaw. The *consequences* portion is relatively



low-stakes at this stage, since you'll be saving all the real conflict for the climax, but should still be substantial enough that your protagonist pays some sort of price.

Achieving all of this should be pretty straightforward once you reach this stage in the draft—at this point, you've done a lot of setup for the protagonist's flaw and simply need to bring it to the forefront as it gets the better of them. We'll cover this more in "Navigating Your Protagonist's Emotional Journey," so start considering how you can draw attention to this flaw in a way that has consequences to the plot and other characters!

## **Act 3 Transition**

This scene lies at the boundary between Acts 2 and 3 and prepares both your protagonist and the readers for the final confrontation to come. It provides you with an opportunity to organize any errant characters and plot threads, ensuring that everything is in place and ready to go as you shift your focus entirely to the events and climax of Act 3.

Following the upset of Mistakes & Consequences, your protagonist should now be ready to make amends for their actions. They'll reconnect with other characters and attempt to resolve any lingering conflicts resulting from their outburst. You want them to be focused on the climax when the time comes, so

now is the time to take care of any concerns that would be overly distracting in a crucial moment.

As you approach your Act 3 Transition, consider how the protagonist's new perspective ensures that things will turn out differently in the climax than they did at the Midpoint. You'll want to start setting up that change during the Transition to help the evolution feel more natural. We'll talk about this more in "Preparing for the Climax."

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These essential scenes should provide you with a basic outline of Act 2, charting all the major beats you'll need to hit and setting up the shape of the scenes that take place in between. Keep in mind that you don't need a lot of detail as you're planning these scenes out—a lot will change between planning, drafting, and revising, so it's best to keep things relatively loose. Having a few bullet points in mind is still pretty helpful, though, so let's get into the key questions these essential scenes should answer.

# Questions to Answer in Act 2

Back in Part 1, we talked about how complications keep your story moving throughout Act 2. These questions are designed to help you uncover those complications—to drive your plot forward by continually setting up and addressing the minor conflicts that lead from one beat to the next. The nature of these questions change as Act 2 progresses, focusing variably on your main plot, subplots, and character arcs depending on their importance to the overall flow of the story.

Keep in mind that there's no set order to these questions (outside of the essential scene/sequence they're connected to). Depending on the breadth of your plot, the number of POV protagonists you're writing for, the number of subplots you're juggling, etc., you may find yourself answering several questions in a single scene, or spending several scenes tackling one question from different angles. That's totally okay! As long as you're making progress toward *at least one question per scene*, you're good for now—we'll talk about streamlining things later.

In the meantime, let's take a look at the questions Act 2 should answer.

## **The New World**

Since *The New World* is all about establishing your protagonist's new circumstances and introducing new plot points, the questions for this sequence are largely focused on plot. Readers need to ground themselves in your new setting, so work on addressing external complications and conflicts.

- What new task or goal is the protagonist presented with?
- What challenges do they initially encounter when taking on this task?
- How does their approach to these challenges resemble their approach to the bridging conflict in Act 1?
- What sort of complications arise as a result of this approach?
- What else is happening in their life that distracts from and/or complicates this task?

## **Midpoint**

The Midpoint is short, so there aren't many questions to answer here. Your stakes and tension drive most of this scene, so focus simply on what happens and how your protagonist is involved.

- What major event occurs that alters the current status quo?
- What action or inaction on the protagonist's part led or contributed to this event?

## **The New World, Twisted**

Since The New World, Twisted marks another change in your overall status quo, the questions are once again mostly focused on plot. Things are about to get character-heavy soon, so spend some time dealing with the fallout of your Midpoint and introducing more external complications.

- What has changed about the status quo following the event(s) of the midpoint?
- How has the protagonist's task/goal been affected?
- How does their approach change as a result of this event?
- How is this new approach still misguided and/or doomed to fail?
- What continued distractions/complications arise as a result of other things happening in the protagonist's life?

## Mistakes & Consequences

Mistakes & Consequences prepares for Act 3 by focusing equally on plot and character, so the questions are equally focused on external and internal conflicts. Work on developing a strong pinch point that will lead to your final conflict, but keep your protagonist's thoughts and behavior on the forefront as well.

- What major event occurs to completely disrupt the status quo in a way that's bad for the protagonist?
- How is the protagonist's fatal flaw directly responsible for creating and/or worsening this event?
- How does this event relate to the distractions/complications presented by the subplot?
- What is the protagonist's reaction to their implication and/or involvement in this event?
- How do they feel about the discovery of their fatal flaw?
- How are other characters reacting to them as a result of this event?
- What new realization do they make about themselves?

- What new perspective do they develop as a result of this realization?

## Act 3 Transition

The Act 3 Transition marks the official divide between Acts 2 and 3, so with your protagonist's arc (mostly) handled, we're back to questions about plot and preparation. Establish your protagonist's new resolve and set up their plan of action for Act 3.

- How does your protagonist's new perspective lead to a new approach to their task?
- How is this approach better than their previous one?
- How does the protagonist begin to make amends for their mistakes?

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The benefit to answering these questions (even loosely!) prior to drafting is that you can get a pretty decent outline of your second act in the process. Each question gives you a chance to introduce a new complication or build out a new subplot. As I mentioned above, you can group as many of these answers together as you'd like, or spread your answers across several scenes—just organize your plot beats in such a way that your complications make sense, and you've got

**yourself a functional roadmap.**

**With this in mind, let's get to drafting!**



## **Part 3: Writing Act 2**

# Kickstarting Your Plot

First things first—it's time to get the first few scenes of your plot out of the way. As we discussed when covering the essential scenes of Act 2, these early scenes are home to your story's first pinch point. This is where the meat of your plot really begins, so it's important to get off on the right foot and get things moving in a dynamic and engaging way.

As is the case with all setup scenes, efficiency is key. You want your readers to settle into the new reality of Act 2 sooner rather than later so that you can get around to telling your story and building tension, so it's best not to dawdle too much. You'll have plenty of time to play with the setting and characters later on in the story! For now, let's jump into how to make the most of the first few scenes of your plot.

## **Introduce a specific, actionable goal at the first pinch point.**

To start, you'll want to nail down your first pinch point. This is the most crucial part of the New World sequence, as it's the event that spawns your series of escalating complications heading into the Midpoint. You need something that will realistically and effectively start that domino effect, so it's best to introduce

a clear goal that can be easily acted upon at this stage in the story.

Say that you're writing an epic fantasy wherein the protagonist and their friends have to stop an evil wizard from casting a curse over the kingdom. This is a fairly nebulous goal, so consider what can be done to make it more actionable in the moment. Perhaps they learn that the wizard is drawing power from an ancient magic relic—if they were to steal the relic, the wizard wouldn't have the strength needed to curse the entire kingdom. While this isn't a permanent solution to the wizard themselves, it does give your protagonist a starting point and a plan of action that they can build on in future scenes.

Now, not every story will have an ancient magic relic as a handy MacGuffin, but identifying an actionable goal like this can be as simple as asking *how* in relation to your protagonist's ultimate goal. If the answer is still too vague, just continue asking *how* until you land on a solution that your protagonist is capable of tackling at the time of the first pinch point.

## **Break down your protagonist's goal into smaller steps.**

From here, it's time to start building the framework for your upcoming scenes by dividing that goal into several incremental steps. Even the goal you landed on for the pinch point should require a bit of work—if it were easy, there would be nothing stopping your protagonist from just solving their problem immediately.

Take a look at what is currently holding them back and consider how you can shape your early scenes around tackling those issues.

Let's return to our epic fantasy example. The protagonist won't be ready to pull off a heist on the antagonist's lair immediately after the inciting event—they must first determine where the relic is kept, figure out entry and exit points, assemble a team to help with the heist, and learn how to use their newfound powers to contend with any guards or traps they may encounter on the way. This already provides you with a few potential scenes, including some training sequences, a meeting with a shadowy rogue in the local mercenary tavern, an interrogation with a captured member of the antagonist's staff, and that's not even including any subplot-focused scenes you want to throw in!

Note that these concepts are still just the framework for the scenes—within the scenes themselves, you'll still need to include relevant characterization and world-building details, as well as challenges and points of conflict to start building tension as you go.

## **Pay attention to the chain of cause and effect.**

That brings us to our next tip. We've talked about the chain of cause and effect a few times now, and this is the point where it first becomes relevant in Act 2. This chain connects all of your plot points throughout the story, and it's what your

readers will use to track the narrative from start to finish. Identifying challenges and points of conflict in each step of your protagonist's journey provides you with complications that you can use in the next scene to steadily add depth and build tension as the story progresses.

Keep in mind that these complications don't need to be particularly striking, so long as they're impactful enough to affect the next link in the chain. Say your protagonist is still getting used to using their powers—magic bursts uncontrollably from them no matter how careful they're being. When they're looking to hire mercenaries for their mission, an unexpected magic surge results in a bar fight. Their performance during the bar fight impresses the shadowy rogue figure, who joins their cause and slowly becomes friends with the protagonist as they work to better control their powers. During the infiltration, however, the rogue gets hurt. Fear for their friend causes another outburst from the protagonist, which gives away their position and causes the heist to go sideways.

Each of these individual complications don't accomplish much on their own, but they pave the way for future details and developments that are more important to the story. When you're planning each new point of conflict, you can keep your chain intact by considering the ramifications that the conflict may have in the future, as well as how previous conflicts may have contributed to the

circumstances you're currently writing.

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By following these tips, you can put together a handful of strong scenes that will start your story off with a bang and start setting up for your midpoint. Now, only including the most plot-significant scenes will speed up your pacing quite a bit and leave less room for your protagonist's development, so you'll want to consider how other facets of your story may play into these scenes and fit into your goals and complications. That's where subplots come in.

# Writing Effective Subplots

Now that your main plot is underway, it's time to turn your attention to your subplots. Back in Part 1, we discussed the importance of subplots in building out your character and world, as well as the ways in which they can lend new perspective and nuance to your main plot. It's important, therefore, that any subplots you include in your book be succinct, compelling, and clear in the role they play in your overall story.

With that being said, writing subplots can be tricky. Drafting is hard enough without adding more stories into the mix, let alone weaving those stories into your main plot. You don't want to lose your balance and end up either rushing through your main plot, spending far too much time on an arc that doesn't need half so much detail, or both. Mastering subplots is the key to maintaining consistent pacing and ensuring that your story doesn't feel flat in places and overstuffed in others.

Thankfully, this is all a simple matter of choosing the right subplots and touching on them at the right times—with careful planning, your different ideas and themes will start to flow together naturally. At the end of the process, you'll end up with a more robust draft that *enhances* your main story, rather than distracting

from it.

With all of this in mind, here are a few tips on writing effective subplots.

## **Choose subplots that connect to your main story.**

Good subplots inform and complicate your core story. You want subplots that feel interconnected to the point that events and/or information from your subplot affect events from your main plot, and vice versa. From a craft perspective, this results in a more nuanced, multi-layered story with stronger characters and a more focused central message. From a drafting perspective, this makes for a much easier time braiding your storylines together and keeping your pacing in check.

Start by looking for the loose ends that already exist in your story. There's a good chance that these little details pop up more than once over the course of your plot (or could easily be written in, since it's information you've already set up). This gives you a few touch points where you can start connecting your subplot to your main plot without having to add something new from scratch.

Not every loose end has to become a subplot, but they're a good place to begin when you're searching for options. Maybe your protagonist mentions offhandedly that they have a poor relationship with their family—a subplot



where they mend their broken bridges could grant them the self-reflection skills they need to complete their apotheosis. Maybe they find an unimportant side character attractive—a romance subplot could develop both characters and add some tension to slower-paced scenes. Even something as basic as wanting to learn a new language could eventually result in them learning some information that's crucial to the main plot! Finding creative ways to incorporate throwaway details can both tighten up and bolster your story in a way that makes it seem like you were doing it on purpose all along.

## **Introduce your subplots early on.**

Because subplots aren't meant to be the major focus of your story, it's important to introduce them at a point that won't distract from your main plot. Even if the payoff doesn't come until closer to the end of the story, introducing new concepts and plot lines too late in the game risks throwing off your pacing and overwhelming readers with information while they're still trying to process your major story beats.

It's best to lay the groundwork for your subplots in Act 1, then begin to incorporate them at the start of Act 2. This gives you a chance to ease readers into your various story threads and ensure things flow naturally from start to finish. Let's go with the above example in which the protagonist has a poor relationship with their family. You could introduce this complication in Act 1 by

having the protagonist mention that they don't speak to their parents outside of cursory holiday calls or emergencies, or start a scene with them storming out of an argument in favor of doing more plot-related activities. Then, near the beginning of Act 2, you could kick off the subplot by having a sibling reach out with an invitation to family dinner in the hopes of patching things up. This gives readers the background they need to understand that family is a source of tension for the protagonist, and that any scenes that feature their family moving forward are going to be significant to the protagonist's development in some way, even if it's not immediately connected to the main plot.

There are a number of ways you can proceed from there, but introducing these concepts early gives you plenty of time to build on the subplot and space out its significant beats without making it feel rushed or pulling too much attention from your story.

## **Remember the Rule of Three.**

Once you've introduced your subplots, it's time to start incorporating them into the greater fabric of your story. Although they can make small appearances throughout your story, there should be a few points at which the focus pulls away from the main plot and centers on a scene dedicated entirely to the subplot in question. A good rule of thumb is planning out three major beats per subplot and leaving any minor details to side mentions in your more plot-relevant scenes.

These beats include the initial Act 2 introduction described above, a second event that occurs later in Act 2 and contributes to the rising tension of the story, and a resolution that takes place near the climax of the story. This resolution can occur in either Act 2 or 3, depending on the progression of your main plot, but should serve as the final, necessary complication that ultimately connects the subplot to your protagonist's emotional or external arc. Between these beats are bridging details that happen in the background and set up context readers will need for the next touch point, with the subplot ultimately coming to a close with a final check-in during the closing scenes to let readers know how things have resolved for the protagonist.

Let's return one last time to the protagonist struggling with their family. The introductory beat involves a family dinner in which the sibling reveals that they're having a baby and hope to reconcile the family before it arrives. The protagonist spends a few scenes attempting to communicate with their parents to varying levels of success until later on in Act 2, when the family gets together again for the sibling's baby shower. Minor offenses cause tempers to rise and ultimately boil over in a fight, and the protagonist resolves to be there for their sibling, but never speak to their parents again. This resentment follows them through the last few scenes of Act 2 and ultimately contributes to a major mistake leading into Act 3. The protagonist is miserable and left blaming themselves until their sibling calls to inform them that the baby's coming. They spend some tense

hours at the hospital, but holding the new arrival restores their hope and optimism. They sit down for a serious and honest conversation with their parents, and return to the main plot with the peace of mind and resolve needed to solve their problem. The story ends with the whole family welcoming the baby home, and everyone dedicated to finding common ground.

By spacing out each of these beats and adding the bridging details between, the subplot has plenty of room to breathe and reach a natural and well-timed conclusion right when the protagonist needs it most.

## **Wrap everything up at the end.**

We're back to talking about loose ends—as in, you shouldn't leave any behind. Any threads that don't become subplots should be neatly clipped to avoid your story getting frayed or tangled, and any that you've decided to expand should come to a satisfying conclusion by the end of the story. Why do all that work just to trip at the finish line, right?

Now, this isn't to say that you can't have vague endings or cliffhangers—those can be extremely welcome, but you should make sure you're doing them properly and with intention. Subplots that are intentionally left unresolved should still come to a close at a point that makes sense. A character disappearing from the narrative raises all sorts of interesting questions, but only if their last known

appearance involved some kind of trigger, like an emotionally-charged fight or a near-death experience they managed to escape. Otherwise, it will seem as though they had no motivation to vanish, and readers will be left wondering if you simply forgot about them. Just make sure that even when your conclusions aren't *complete*, they're at least *understandable*.

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By following these tips, you should end up with a story that has much more room to breathe and holds enough space for both the plot and the protagonist's personal development. Readers are left with an emotionally compelling journey that feels neatly paced and comes together in a cohesive and well-timed conclusion. While there's a good chance you'll need to continue to tweak and trim details during revision and self-editing, writing effective subplots results in a stronger and more effective story as a whole.

# Managing Stakes and Tension

Once you have your plot and subplots accounted for, it's time to take a look at your stakes and corresponding sense of tension. When it comes to fiction, one cannot exist without the other—stakes provide the source of tension, and tension provides the value of stakes. An interesting and believable set of stakes engages the reader and makes them wonder *what happens next* (this is your tension); a lingering and persuasive sense of tension compels readers to see the story through to the end and hints at *why it all matters* (these are your stakes).

It's important that both elements are present and consistent in your story, and that any changes made to one affect the other accordingly. With this in mind, here are a few tips to establish and strengthen the relationship between your stakes and tension.

## **Build your stakes with a personal connection.**

When creating a set of stakes, it helps to start on a smaller scale and work your way up. A good place to begin is with your protagonist's personal stakes—establish what is at risk for them personally, then steadily increase the scope of what is at stake as the story progresses. This keeps your protagonist invested in

the story at hand; they may start out only caring about whatever is motivating them, but as they become more involved with the plot and the stakes get steadily higher, they become more likely to stick around even after their own personal goal has been achieved.

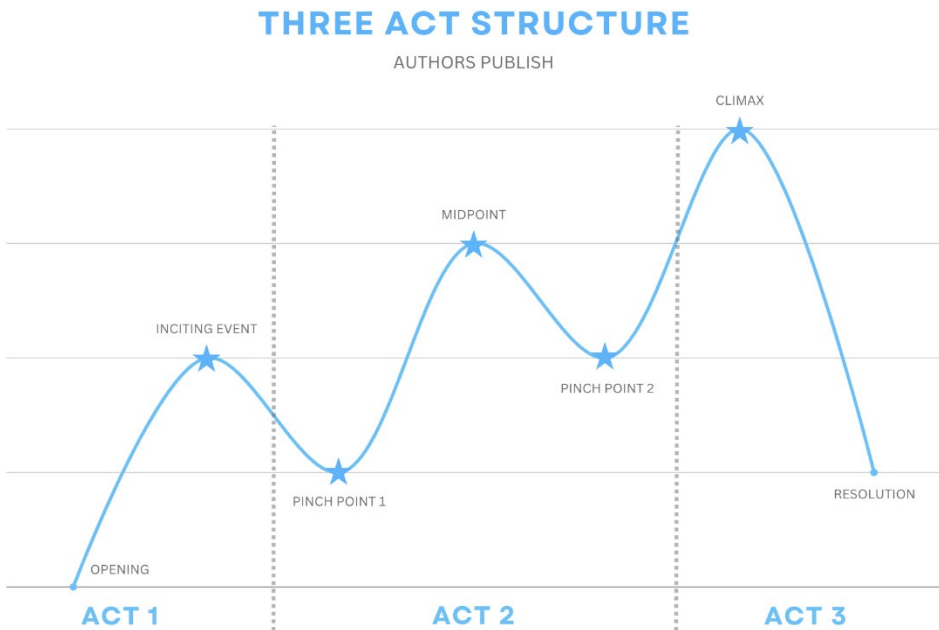
Starting with personal stakes not only provides a good foundation for future stakes, it also allows your stakes and tension to grow organically over the course of the story. As your protagonist attempts to deal with their personal problem in the early scenes of Act 2, you can start dropping hints as to the larger plot lurking in the background. Readers will pick up the foreshadowing and be held in suspense as they wait for the reveal, supplying a steady and increasing source of tension as you work through your beats. They payoff of the moment where the protagonist realizes the true scope of what's at stake feels more earned as a result, and your readers will feel just as sucked in as the protagonist.

### **Make your stakes high, but not *too* high.**

The key to growing your stakes is to avoid going too hard too fast. While it can be tempting to pit your protagonist against impossible odds straight away to show the strength of their determination, it can quickly detract from the story you're trying to tell by overwhelming elements that are otherwise needed to keep your readers engaged. It quickly overrides the personal investment we just discussed, for example, as the things your protagonist stands to lose outweigh the things

they stand to gain. It also hyper-inflates your tension by making the risk of failure far more prominent, which may cause your story to be more intense and fast-paced than you intend it to be.

Let’s quickly revisit our Three Act Structure graphic from Part 1:



There are three points at which your story’s tension should reach a natural peak—the inciting event, the midpoint, and the climax. The events of Acts 1 and 2 should build toward their respective tension points, with each serving as a stepping stone to the finale. Starting with a lower set of stakes and steadily climbing allows those peaks to happen naturally and allows your tension to



escalate heading into the climax without leaving readers on edge at every moment. With that in mind...

## **Give your characters (and readers) a break.**

Good stories have a natural ebb and flow of tension, with stakes rising as they approach a major plot beat and falling after that beat is over. This gives your characters some breathing room—time to process recent events, celebrate a victory or mourn a defeat, and regroup in preparation of the next plot beat. This breathing room also gives you essential space to focus on details that aren't directly related to your main, external plot—you can revisit information that may have been lost during an action scene, or take some time to advance character arcs and subplots. All of this improves the overall reader experience by providing a moment of catharsis following a period of high tension, as well as a chance to reconnect with the characters and get any remaining questions answered before the next plot point takes place. Without that breathing room, they can end up feeling rushed through the story and untethered from the emotional elements that make it resonate.

Take another look at the graphic above. The blue line follows the story's path as it relates to the overall stakes and tension. As you can see, the tension rises slowly approaching each point where the stakes peak, then declines to allow for that aforementioned breathing room until the next pinch point introduces a new

set of stakes to build upon. This ensures your plot isn't simply racing toward the climax, and your readers have more time to sit and enjoy each development without feeling pushed to the end.

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Ensuring you have a steady, natural flow of tension and a strong corresponding set of stakes goes a long way toward making your story both compelling and believable. Since both of these things are so strongly related to other craft elements like pacing and tone, it also helps you keep these elements under control and always in service of your overall story.

# Tightening Your Midpoint Twist

As you approach the middle of your story, it's time to kick up the tension with a good old-fashioned plot twist. The midpoint is a great place to up the stakes of your story, giving your protagonist new paths to explore and new challenges to overcome, all while building up to the final, climactic showdown in Act 3.

The problem is that it's not always easy to up the stakes. You have to walk a careful line between doing too much and too little—overloading your midpoint can slow down your pacing at a crucial time, but a weak twist makes your hard-earned tension fizzle out and can leave readers feeling unsatisfied.

To help you out, here are some tips on how to cinch your midpoint twist and ensure it's serving your story on all levels.

## **Introduce a complication to your current stakes.**

The midpoint twist is intended to raise the stakes of your story, introducing new information and obstacles that grow into your final conflict. As I mentioned above, the key is raising the stakes the right amount—you don't want your twist to feel inconsequential, but you also don't want it to completely upend your story

and potentially overshadow your actual climax.

Try thinking of your midpoint twist as more of a complication than a conflict.

Whatever you introduce at the midpoint should shift or decontextualize your stakes, rather than completely changing them. Your protagonist should be able to carry on with business as usual, just under slightly different circumstances. The *Save the Cat!* method refers to this stage as a false victory or defeat—the protagonist hasn't truly succeeded or failed at their ultimate goal at this point; they've simply experienced a change in their pursuit of that goal.

Say you're writing a murder mystery. At the midpoint, your protagonist should not yet have caught or lost their culprit, but they should experience some kind of event that ups the ante of their investigation. Maybe there's a second murder that completely eliminates their prime suspect as a candidate. Your protagonist is still trying to track down the murderer, but they now have to go back to the drawing board for new suspects, and are doing so with the knowledge that even more lives are at stake than before. Nothing has changed significantly, but they've encountered a *complication* that makes their investigation more difficult.

## **Shift the focus to your final conflict.**

Think back to our discussion about stakes for a moment. As you'll remember, your story's tension reaches a natural peak at the midpoint, meaning that the first

half of Act 2 should be focused on building this tension. Once you reach the twist, however, it's time to shift gears and start prepping for the climax. This ensures the story is constantly moving forward, even if the events of the midpoint feel like a step backward for the protagonist.

Your midpoint twist should be an end to one source of tension and the beginning of another, the latter of which will escalate into the climax. As you close up your loose threads and any misinformation that the protagonist may have been working with, be sure you take the time to set up new leads and start hinting toward the next conflict. This gives the readers that necessary catharsis for the tension you've built so far, and gives them a new story hook to latch onto going into the second half of the story.

In our murder mystery example, the second murder at the midpoint twist likely feels like a step back because the protagonist was unable to prevent another death and now has to start investigating a brand-new suspect. At the same time, however, it moves the story forward by resolving things with the first suspect and introducing the threat of an angry killer who's now motivated to further hamper the investigation and potentially take even more lives. It may also introduce a clue that sheds new light on old evidence, ultimately putting the protagonist on the right track instead of wasting their time on a red herring.

**Expose the protagonist's fatal flaw.**

Finally, it's important to remember that the midpoint twist happens not only in the middle of your plot, but also in the middle of your protagonist's character arc. This makes it a great time to check in and show readers exactly where they are in terms of their development.

By the midpoint, it should be clear to readers what the protagonist's fatal flaw is—in other words, what's holding them back from their apotheosis and what they need to overcome in order to conquer the climax. The best way to do this is to ensure that the complication introduced in the midpoint twist is either the direct result of the protagonist's flaw, or that it puts your protagonist in a position where they can no longer easily hide their flaw. This has the added benefit of making sure your protagonist has a measurable effect on the world around them and vice versa—they can either see the results of their actions, or *feel* the results of their inaction.

Let's take one more look at our murder mystery example. Perhaps the second murder could have been prevented if it weren't for the protagonist's stubbornness. Maybe they were presented with an opportunity to catch the real killer, but were so focused on proving they were right about their first suspect that they didn't take an action that could have saved the victim's life. The protagonist may not understand their role in the outcome and may instead simply be frustrated that they were wrong, but readers (and even other characters) can

tell that their choice resulted in a worse outcome than if they'd been more open-minded and willing to admit they were wrong.

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With these tips in mind, you can fine-tune and tighten your midpoint twist to maintain the perfect amount of tension moving from the first half of your story into the next. Readers will be left with a satisfying conclusion to the story they've read so far and will be prepared and excited for the story yet to come. While you may need to come back and add some additional setup and foreshadowing once you've actually written the climax, this should give you a good launching point for the rest of your rising action.

# Navigating Your Protagonist's Emotional Journey

Character arcs are tough. There's no way around it—your protagonist's emotions are one of the primary drivers of your story, but they can be difficult to weave neatly into the plot. You don't want their feelings overwhelming the narrative and making it seem melodramatic, but you also don't want them to be so subtle that they're hardly present at all. You don't want them to come across as immature and unlikable, but you also don't want to leave no room for growth as the story progresses. On top of all this, you also need to incorporate all of your emotional scenes naturally and seamlessly so as to avoid the dreaded “show, don't tell” feedback from you beta readers and editors.

The essential scenes and key questions we introduced in Part 2 focus mostly on your external plot, so here are a few tips on how you can develop and emphasize your protagonist's emotional arc throughout Act 2.

## **Set up your protagonist's arc in Act 1.**

Much like with subplots, you'll want to lay the groundwork for your



protagonist's emotional arc in Act 1. This is where all of your setup takes place, so giving yourself a strong starting point will make things easier as you get deeper into the story and the arc itself. Thankfully, there's not too much work involved here, as you don't need more than a wink or two to clue readers in. All you need to do is establish your protagonist's emotional status quo—the point from which they'll learn and grow as they gain more experience and encounter more conflicts.

You can do this by giving them four things: a *want*, an *obstacle*, a *need*, and a *flaw*. The *want* and the *obstacle* give your protagonist motive to engage with the plot—they'll set off on whatever adventure you're giving them because they believe it will help them overcome their current challenge and meet their goal. The *need* and the *flaw* give them a lesson to learn along the way—they'll discover that their goal and/or their reasoning behind that goal is faulty and will need to address their inner issues in order to succeed.

(The last two should be largely subconscious in order to avoid making your protagonist *too* self-aware. What's the fun of an arc that's already halfway over?)

## **Build their negative emotions slowly and subtly.**

Now that you've established the foundations for your protagonist's arc, it's time to put it on the back burner for a little while. The beginning of Act 2 is for setting

up the external stakes, so you'll want to hold off on any major character development beats while you focus on your main plot. Your protagonist's want, obstacle, need, and flaw should still be present in the story, but it's okay for them to be less of a priority for the time being.

In most cases, you can strike a good balance simply by incorporating some of your protagonist's internal monologue into your scenes. They're bound to have opinions about the other characters and how the plot is evolving, and showing those opinions helps readers see the protagonist's biases and how their personal needs are affecting their behavior. As you build toward your midpoint twist, give your protagonist opportunities to reflect on how they feel and what their goals are. Take special care to highlight the moments when they're wrong, as these are the feelings that will lead them to make mistakes that they eventually have to learn and grow from.

## **Underline their flaw at the midpoint.**

Once you hit the midpoint, it's time to bring your emotional arc back to the forefront. This is the part of the story where the stakes change and things get more complicated for the protagonist, which means it's a great time for the external and internal plots to intersect. You don't want them to clash *too* much (you still have half a book left to write, after all), but letting your protagonist's emotional state affect the larger plot—and vice versa—gives you a great

opportunity to advance their character arc and make it clear to the reader how far they still have to go before reaching actualization.

Remember when I said to highlight the moments that can lead to the protagonist making a mistake? This is the time to make that mistake! The midpoint twist is where your false victory/defeat takes place, so consider the ways in which your protagonist's flaw could have impacted that. Perhaps there was an opportunity for things to turn out better, which your protagonist ignored or didn't see as a result of their flaw. Letting their emotional struggles hold them back and bar them from success neatly weaves these two plot threads together and makes it clear that they'll need to overcome their flaw if they want things to turn out in their favor.

Another important thing to note is that your protagonist should not be consciously aware of their flaw at this point in the story. They may know that whatever happened was their fault, but not *why* or how to fix it. This doesn't come until the climax of their arc, which we'll cover in a moment.

## **Raise the stakes into an emotional outburst.**

From this point forward, the plot and your protagonist's emotional arc should have near-equal billing. Things get more complicated as you approach the climax, which means your protagonist will have a host of new stressors to deal

with. The exposure of their flaw during the midpoint makes their circumstances more difficult to adjust to and leaves them with an increasing inability to deal with the rising stakes. This all comes to a head during the emotional climax, which occurs right around your Act 2 transition (shortly before your main plot climax). This is where all the negative feelings your protagonist has been bottling up burst free and they lash out, distancing themselves from other characters and (perhaps unintentionally) making their circumstances worse.

To avoid this outburst seemingly coming out of nowhere, allow yourself a few scenes after the midpoint in which the protagonist feels out of sorts without knowing why or how to fix it. It's okay if this comes across as a bit dramatic at first—the emotional arc should escalate faster than the plot, so giving them a shorter fuse or a lingering bad mood may be exactly what you need. This makes them more likely to snap when things go from bad to worse, adding fuel to the fire for their eventual breakdown. Making this process feel natural and realistic is important, as this breakdown is what gives them the time and space to process their feelings, acknowledge their flaw and how it's been affecting them, and recommit themselves to their cause.

## **Bring it all home during the climax.**

Now that your protagonist has learned their lesson, it's time to put their character growth to the test. The conclusion of the emotional climax means that the heavy

lifting of their emotional arc is finished just in time to shift focus back to the main plot, but that doesn't mean we're through with it just yet. Now that they've reckoned with their flaw, it's time for your protagonist to use their new perspective (or powers, in some cases!) to overcome their final obstacle and win the day.

The best way to show how far your protagonist has come is to create a moment in the climax where their newfound resolve is challenged. This moment forces them to choose between falling back on old habits or pushing harder and trying something new (the "Dig Down Deep" moment, for my fellow *Save the Cat!* writers). The choice they make proves to the reader that they've well and truly overcome their flaw and are capable of success.

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By following these tips, you should emerge from your draft with a realistic and well-paced emotional arc for your protagonist. While you may have to revisit your draft and refine scenes to make them blend more naturally, building your major emotional beats alongside your main plot will give you a good starting point for a compelling and organic arc.

# Preparing for the Climax

The last thing to discuss when it comes to drafting your second act is the Act 3 Transition. Much like the Act 2 Transition back in your first act, the goal is to shift the tone and focus of the story in order to prepare readers for the next stage—in this case, the climax and eventual denouement of your book. While most of the actual setup of the climax will take place in Act 3, you'll still want to lay the necessary groundwork for the resolution to come.

Let's get into the main things you'll want to establish in this last stretch of Act 2 to pave the way for your thrilling finale!

## **Introduce your protagonist's new perspective.**

At this point in the story, your protagonist has experienced most of the highs and lows of their character arc. They've repeatedly succumbed to their flaw until finally hitting their lowest point during the Mistakes & Consequences beat, and have gone through the necessary soul-searching to leave them better equipped to deal with their problems without falling victim to their flaw a final time. With all of this in mind, it's important to establish how and why things will be different for them heading into the climax.

This is the point in the story at which you can express to readers exactly how the protagonist's perspective has changed following that period of introspection.

While they have yet to actually *show* how they've changed—that won't come until the climax itself—this is your opportunity to show readers that their mindset has changed enough that they'll make the right decision when push comes to shove.

In most cases, this is as simple as starting to make amends for their previous actions. Showing the protagonist feeling contrite for their mistakes is an easy indicator that they're less likely to repeat them in the future, so you can take care of this part of the transition without too much trouble.

## **Reiterate the stakes.**

Closing out Act 2 is a great opportunity to make sure your characters and readers are all on the same page regarding the stakes at hand. Events will unfold pretty quickly once you reach your final act, so this is your last chance to answer any pressing questions and reaffirm the risks that are being taken before things start to escalate and you need to put your focus entirely on the climax.

There are a few good ways of doing this, depending on the genre of your story. In our epic fantasy example, this could be a glimpse of what the kingdom would look like under the effects of the wizard's curse—perhaps a walk through a town

that's already been desolated by his magic. In the murder mystery, this could be a look at the ticking clock—a look at the room full of people relying on the detective to save them before the killer strikes again. Any small reminder can serve your purposes, so long as it's clear what stakes await the protagonist as they cross the threshold into Act 3.

## **Establish the plan heading into the climax.**

The Act 3 Transition is also your chance to establish what your protagonist's plan is as they approach their final obstacle. This provides you with a good opportunity to introduce the new perspective as mentioned above, as the plan gives them a chance to change up their approach. Don't worry if nothing changes just yet—your protagonist will have the chance to prove themselves and complete their character arc when the time comes.

This is largely because this plan will not survive first contact—something *will* inevitably go wrong, and your protagonist will be relied upon to adapt accordingly and get things back under control. The plan itself isn't the important part outside of simply being another complication on the road to the climax—rather, it's more about giving your characters clear direction heading into the final act, giving readers an idea of what to expect in the last stretch of the book, and setting up some early tension with the promise that this plan will somehow fail.



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With this, you've finished drafting Act 2. Congratulations! Your readers are prepared for the intrigue and tension to come, and all that remains is the final hurdle—self-editing and revision.

# **Part 4: Self-Editing Act 2**

# The Importance of Outlines in Self-Editing

When it comes to self-editing Act 2, it's important to have three separate images of your story's structure—how it started, how it currently looks, and how you want it to look in the future. Because of this, I strongly recommend incorporating outlining into your writing process, even if you don't typically consider yourself a plotter.

If you read my last eBook, *How to Write a Dynamic Act One*, you'll know that I'm a staunch advocate of outlining from the get-go, but I argue that it's especially important during self-editing/revision, and especially when it comes to Act 2. Your story is subject to a lot of change during drafting, and the second act is where most of those changes are likely to occur. Discovery writing—the seat-of-your-pants type of writing that occurs when you actually sit down to draft a scene—tends to uncover themes, plot lines, character arcs and dynamics, and much more that wasn't part of the story's original conception, and you'll want an efficient way to incorporate these discoveries with intention when it comes time to clean up your draft.

Because of this, I encourage you to develop at least a rough outline before you start drafting. The list of essential scenes and questions provided in Part 2 will work perfectly for our purposes, as it tracks all of your key beats, your protagonist's arc, and the major touch points of any subplots you planned from the beginning. (If you prefer to make something more detailed, more power to you!)

Use this outline as a roadmap as you're writing, but don't feel obligated to follow it too strictly—humans are storytellers at heart, and you should trust where your instincts take you during discovery writing. Set it aside until you get stuck and need a quick reminder of what comes next, but try to avoid it as much as possible until it comes time for self-edits.

Once you're at this stage, you can pull that rough outline out again and compare it to what your story looks like after drafting. Looking at the two side-by-side can give you a better understanding of the *actual* shape of your story and help you determine what adds to your vision and what distracts from it. You can identify which ideas to cut, expand on, rebuild, or even combine with existing ideas to better represent the story you want to tell when it comes time to tackle revisions. From here, you can create a new outline of what you want the story to look like in the next draft—the original outline comes in handy again here, as it's much easier to make changes to an existing outline than it is to create one from scratch.

Refining the new outline can be challenging on its own, however, so let's talk about how to assess your scenes and determine what makes the cut and what gets cut when it's time to revise Act 2.

# Killing Your Darlings

*Kill your darlings* is one of the more common pieces of writing advice out there, but it's often misunderstood. Contrary to popular belief, killing your darlings doesn't mean simply killing off your beloved characters for the plot and intrigue. Rather, it means being willing to make necessary cuts to your writing, even when that involves scenes you're particularly attached to or proud of.

Your first draft will more than likely include a lot of extra content that over-inflates your word count and slows down the pacing of your story. This is a natural part of the process and a common side effect of discovery writing—sooner or later, you'll end up with a conversation that's too long, a set of descriptions that isn't necessary, or a scene that simply doesn't need to be there. It's hard to recognize what does and does not contribute to your overall story in the moment, which is where judicious self-edits come in.

Inevitably, you're going to have to cut pieces of the story that you like, and you need to be ready to do an honest assessment of your scenes to determine if they truly add value to your story. To help you out, here is a list of questions you can use to evaluate your scenes and determine how they contribute to your book.

- How does this scene relate to the main plot, subplots, and/or the protagonist's character arc?
- What new information does this scene reveal? Alternatively, how does it contextualize information that's already been revealed?
- Is this scene important enough to be a standalone, or can it be combined with an existing scene?
- Does this scene follow the protagonist's POV? If not, can the information be revealed (within reason) through the protagonist's POV?
- What type of scene is this (action, dialogue, introspective, etc.)? Is it immediately followed or preceded by another scene of the same type?
- How is the pacing of this scene compared to the rest of Act 2? If there is a change in pacing, is it intentional?
  - If not, can the pacing be adjusted without changing the tone or purpose of the scene?
- How is the tone of this scene compared to the rest of Act 2? If there is a change in tone, is it intentional?
  - If not, can the tone be adjusted without changing the pacing or

purpose of the scene?

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After answering these questions, you should have an inkling as to the efficacy of a given scene and whether or not it adds to or detracts from your story as a whole. Ideally, you'll feel confident about all the answers provided and see no room for improvement outside of the natural changes that come during revision. If you don't feel so confident, consider it a sign that the scene in question needs cutting or reworking.

Should it come down to cuts, I leave you with one final piece of advice—*delete nothing permanently*. As I said before, you should trust your instincts; if there's something you like about the content you're cutting, that means there's something to like about it, even if it doesn't fit in your story right now. Always keep your old drafts, as you never know when that scene, line, plot thread, character, or whatever it is will come in handy. Should you end up re-reworking your draft, you'll be glad you had it saved.



# Conclusion

And there you have it! With these tips under your belt, you now have the tools and guidance you need to craft a strong, engaging Act 2. You're well on your way to a completed manuscript—all that's left is the final stretch!

For more information and strategies on writing your second act, I recommend checking out the resources listed below.

Good luck, and happy writing!

- [\*Plot Perfect: Build Unforgettable Stories\*](#) — Paula Munier
- [\*Plot versus Character\*](#) — Jeff Gerke
- [\*Save the Cat! Writes a Novel\*](#) — Jessica Brody
- [\*The Secrets of Character\*](#) — Matt Bird
- [\*Story Genius\*](#) — Lisa Cron
- [\*Story Physics: Harnessing the Underlying Forces of Storytelling\*](#) — Larry Brooks

- *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* — Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, Ned Stuckey-French
  
- *90 Days to Your Novel* — Sarah Domet

# About the Author

[Ley Taylor Johnson](#) is a freelance fiction editor and writing coach. Having spent all their life in the rainy PNW, they know the value of spending time inside with a good book, and have channeled their passion for storytelling into a career helping indie authors bring their stories to life.