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## The Art Of Plotting By Linda Cowgill

For many people plot is the same thing as structure. Both deal with designing the story, creating relationships between its elements and developing how action builds to a climax. When you structure a film story, you're working out the plot to discover the best way of telling it.

### ~ The Principles of Organization - Story Structure

Real structure gives you the organizing principles for your material. It is far more than plot points, turning points, act breaks or whatever you choose to call them. Structure gives you a framework to manage and make sense of all your material - the action, conflict, characters, exposition, theme, subtext, etc. It creates the context for this complex interplay of elements. Yet in the finest films there is an underlying simplicity to their structures that is as elegant and graceful as quantum physics.

### ~ The Scene-By-Scene Relationships - Plotting

Plotting, on the other hand, is the nuts and bolts of putting your material together. You move from being the neat and tidy architect to contractor and craftsman breaking your nails, and **find** along the way, all the ensuing problems of turning the plan into the project.

When you "plot" you turn the structural story considerations that have to do with conflict and meaning into moments that convey exposition, build suspense, reveal character and expose emotion to deepen the audience's involvement in the work. You look for specific actions that tell us how a character acts and reacts - intellectually and emotionally - and then construct specific scenes to advance the



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action, reveal character or convey exposition. You want to find the clear line that shows how one action leads to the next and so on, so that you build a chain of events that flows intelligently and coherently. But you want the most interesting, surprising and moving ways to connect your scenes from one to the rest. Plotting is really the art of creating the relationships between your scenes to make your story points more powerful and meaningful. (By "story points" I mean more than just "turning" or "plot" points and act breaks; I mean the important information, emotion, action and exposition of a story.)

Of course, you can call all this structure and story design, too, and you wouldn't be wrong. What I'm really saying here is writing a screenplay is a multi-faceted process. First you need an overall plan that gives shape and meaning to the material. The next step is the actual outlining or plotting of the scenes to create the path of action and reaction that builds tension, meaning and emotion.

### ~ Emotional Plotting

The best plots build to emotional payoffs that feel real and important. Yet this is one of the hardest things to see when working on the overall design of a screenplay: where emotion fits into the story. Often in first structuring a story, writers focus on the characters' actions and goals. Writers want to keep their stories moving forward to ensure momentum builds and skip over characters' responses to the action that might be emotional for fear they slow the story down.

But emotion is frequently a key motivating factor in a character's action. Because the writers jump over the reactions, their stories lose emotional dimension or reality. As a result the emotions aren't incorporated effectively into the plot action of the story - and the characters feel less 3-dimensional and the stories feel flat.

If we look at great films we see emotion plays an integral part in the plot action. Scenes exist to dramatize the emotion a character feels so the audience can feel it and empathize with the character, too. These scenes can be some of the most



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memorable in a film. Look at the moment when Lester (Kevin Spacey) in *American Beauty* registers that his daughter Janey (Thora Birch) is in love. The joy and happiness that spread across his face makes us feel good, too. Or when Will (Joseph Fiennes) in *Shakespeare in Love* discovers that his friend and rival Kit Marlowe (Rupert Everett) has been killed and he thinks he's responsible. We feel his pain. Remember in *Jaws* when the mother of the boy killed by the shark slaps and blames Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) and how the Chief accepts the responsibility, and we feel for him.

But the emotion does even more. It serves to motivate characters and expand the audience's understanding of story events. Let's look at *Erin Brockovich*. In the middle of the story, Erin (Julia Roberts) is trying to get more families to commit to the lawsuit. She meets Rita and Ted Daniel (Cordelia Richards and Wade Williams) whose daughter Annabelle (Kristina Malota) has cancer. Her head wrapped, presumably because of the chemotherapy, Annabelle snuggles in a nightgown between her parents while Erin talks to them. But instead of talking about the lawsuit, Erin focuses on the girl and keeps the conversation light, complimenting the girl and smiling at her, though in Erin's eyes we see how affected she is.

The following short scene shows Erin driving home, emotionally wrought, her eyes fixed on the highway, clearly moved and upset by what she has experienced.

The next scene shows her dogging Ed Masry (Albert Finney) to convince him to widen the scope of the case. We understand her motivation; we've seen how deeply affected she's been, and now we see it in her actions. He refuses, but she just doesn't give up. She dogs him outside the office building, through the hallways, all the way to his office where, still refusing, he closes the door on her. But she doesn't quit. Erin waits, possibly just pausing, unsure but unwilling to give up. Ed opens the door, not expecting to find her there, and relents just a little. He learns there are a lot more families involved and finally yields to Erin.

This short sequence develops how Erin moves this case forward to the class- action suit. It does so not by flatly recounting each step along the way, but by showing



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emotional moments that tell us as much about Erin as they do about the story. They allow us to connect with Erin and care about her because we see how she connects and cares about these people.

Effective plotting incorporates action and reaction, cause and effect, to build momentum and deepen meaning. Audiences then become more intensely involved in the story. We use action to propel the forward motion of the story; reaction to show the consequences the actions have on the characters. When we show what characters have to deal with as a result of their actions, and how that leads to new actions, we often understand the characters better and empathize with them as well.

### ~ **Suspense**

When working on the overall design of a screenplay, another difficulty writers face is knowing when to play sequences for suspense. Writers tend to indicate continuous rising action in their structural outlines usually in one or two scenes. They then go on to plot out a full story of 65 or 75 scenes. The trouble is when they come to those suspense scenes in their screenplays, they don't have room to do them right. They've misjudged how something that can be summarized so quickly in outline form will translate into script pages and end up writing a quick scene or two to cover the action, but it's not very interesting or exciting.

Plotting a great suspense sequence can take up as much as five or fifteen minutes of screen time (and as many pages), and increase tension and excitement in a script. But if you haven't left room in the overall design of the story, the action will be rushed and unsuccessful. A writer who knows how to plot identifies these sections of the story so she can develop them into effective segments of action that contribute to the success of the screenplay.

### ~ **Structure Supports Plot**

Plotting and structure are two sides of the same coin in screenwriting. They go hand-



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in-hand in creating a successful screenplay. Coming up with the overall design is the first step. Understanding that the story must be plotted in terms of action, emotion and suspense is the second.

If you've seen those maps of the Rockies or Himalayan Mountain Ranges with elevation points outlined for the highest peaks, then you have a good idea what a plot should look like. Think of those peaks as the main story points in your outline, the major turning points you want to build to.

What those maps don't show you are the harsh and windy, snow- and ice-covered paths that carry you up to the precipice and down into the next valley of complications. Those paths are the plot of your story. They are the routes you must cover step-by-step to get to your goals. Negotiating those paths is the only way you're getting to the summit and back down again. The goal is making the trip, not just looking down from the top - you can do that from an airplane.

Plotting your story is really "plodding" your story ("to work slowly and steadily"). Story structure is a map, plotting is taking the trip. Nightfall, avalanches, weather, and animals real and fanciful will try to distract you, so set out well prepared. You can use a guru for story; for plot, find a Gurkha.

**Linda Cowgill is a screen and television writer who teaches at Loyola Marymount University and the Los Angeles Film School. Her feature film, "Opposing Force," was released by Orion Pictures in 1986. She has written for such shows as "Quincy," "The Young Riders" and "Life Goes On," for which she won a Genesis Award. Most recently, she optioned her script "Honor Student" to World International Network. She received her MFA from UCLA where she won a Jim Morrison Award for best short film. Ms. Cowgill is the author of the popular film school textbook *Writing Short Films, Secrets of Screenplay Structure* and *The Art of Plotting*. She can be contacted through her website at: <http://www.plotsinc.com/>**

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