CHAPTER 9

PLOT – WHAT'S THE POINT?

Plotting stories through graphs, timelines and mindmaps

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Imagine standing outside a house, by the front door. The door is shut and you are looking away from the house. A street runs past the garden gate, and you can see this street stretch to another, older gate that leads into a field. At the far end the ground dips and you know at the bottom of the dip there is a river fringed by trees. The trees get thicker. You can't see everything from where you stand, but you've been told a path runs through the wood. Beyond this is Fire Mountain, which you can just see the tip of, rising hazily in the distance. It was once a volcano. A fire-breathing mountain. Why, as you gaze at it, do you feel its lure pull at you, like some deadly magnet? You know you should turn back to the safety of the house, but something has stirred in you. Something has called you. You need to find out what wants you, and why. A lizard scutters by, heading down the street towards the field. It moves quickly, almost urgently. You feel compelled to follow. You walk through the gate, and begin your journey.

The journey begins

A plot, quite simply, is a journey. It's a journey through the story.

In school, young children are generally taught that a story must have a beginning, middle and end. This is a viable starting point for struggling or inexperienced writers. The character starts their journey, moves to a point where something happens, then heads off happily towards their final destination.

However, in 'real' storytelling it's not always that simple. Plot is not static or rigid. It shifts and resists, sometimes moving steadily forward but sometimes tilting or even changing direction, like a ship on a wild sea.

Plot, in its wild sea environment, can seem almost impossible to teach (Newbery, in Cremin and Myhill, 2012), but there are approaches within plotting, and methodologies to explore, which draw from the complexities yet adapt the process for a less storm-battered creative session.

Just because

One reason why the 'beginning, middle and end' model can be so limiting is that plot is not about actuality: it is about cause and effect.

Consider 'actuality': a girl shows a boy her dragon puppet → the boy throws the puppet into a forbidden field → the girl climbs the fence and is bitten by ants in the process → she gets her puppet back.

Add in cause and effect: a girl shows a boy her dragon puppet *because* she wants the boy to like her, even though he never takes much notice of her. She hopes he'll be impressed by her

puppet → the girl has loads of toys and the boy has very few. *Because* the boy is jealous of the girl, he throws the puppet into a forbidden field that is full of dangerous snakes and lizards → the puppet was once owned by a much loved grandparent. *Because* the puppet symbolises so much and she knows she'll be in huge trouble if it gets lost, the girl climbs the fence to get it → she gets the puppet back, but *because* she climbed the fence she is bitten by giant red soldier ants that inhabit the fence → *because* she was bitten by giant red soldier ants the boy is horrified by the dangers he has exposed her to and knows he'll be in big trouble. He runs away. → *Because* the boy runs away, etc, etc.

Because…

Because…

Because…

Early introductions to the charting of plots through narratives can draw from the analysis of fiction by established authors. Pupils in school are more likely to be asked to write short stories rather than longer narratives with chapters, so a simple dissection of published short stories arguably has the most value, particularly compilations by established authors such as Susan Cooper et al. (2011), collections by a single author such as Joan Aiken (2007) or Maggie Pearson (2013). At secondary level some possibilities are Butler (2013) or Tony Bradman's (2009, 2011) collections (see reference list for all titles). The story choices should be linear, so that pupils can clearly identify beginnings, middles and ends. Discussion around the impact of cause and effect can be built in at these initial stages.

More competent writers can scrutinise chapters in longer works, particularly those taken from familiar and well-loved texts (Cremin et al., 2015: 56–7). Chapters are, in essence, short stories in their own right. They have beginnings, middles and ends. The shape of their journey can be followed in a microcosm of dramas and cliffhangers.

Beyond this, complete novels can be unravelled, with pupils considering the (possible) intentions and methodologies of their favourite author. How might Dahl (2016) have plotted *The BFG* within a five-point story arc (Corbett, 2009: 54)? Can a class collaboratively dissect *Private Peaceful* (Morpurgo, 2003)? What is the core plot and how does it journey through the narrative from the very beginning to the end? It can help to make a timeline running from the first chapter to the end. I sometimes describe it as a piece of string that is threaded all through the novel. There are markers on the string that identify key moments in the plot. Examining stories in this way is constructive in encouraging pupils to move from thinking like readers to thinking like writers (Chamberlain, 2016: 43, 126), and can broaden out into the discussion of themes, characters and settings (Cremin et al., 2015: 56).

All the above options can be interpreted as a linear story mountain (Corbett, 2009: 59) or broken down in graph form. This simplification of process is valuable in the early stages of understanding plots that already exist, but as a springboard to precede the development of original fiction it can result in writing that is 'stiff, and [stories] that try too hard' (King, 2000: 196).

What gets lost in too much planning is the voice of the imagination. Writers should work with 'zest, gusto, love and fun'. They need to be excited about their ideas; feverish with enthusiasms (Bradbury, 1996: 4).

The approaches for embedding imagination with plot in a classroom setting begs some combination of the more formulaic approaches used through the analyses of existing texts, married with King's organic explorations and woven through with Bradbury's explosive energies.

Getting started

In my own writing I generally start by pre-writing, exploring ideas around themes and subjects, with perhaps some sense of the mood of the ending, but not troubling myself with the detail. However, once some sort of clarity begins to emerge, I take a step back to plot. Without any idea of the journey of the story I would be likely to get lost, wander around in circles or simply never reach my destination.

Linda Newbery (Cremin and Myhill, 2012: 169) considers that the teaching of plot in a classroom scenario can inhibit creativity, and 'doom' good writing. This is a valid observation and I agree with the sentiment, but I also believe there are ways to inject magic into plotting so that it becomes exciting, organic and effective.

In teaching 'story-journeys' to young writers, I have evolved a technique drawn from the notion of there being seven basic plots (Booker, 2005). A simple quest narrative follows a predictable path, but still offers scope for imaginative and innovative detail.

1. The character starts in a relatively comfortable place. They are chosen for a task – this is sometimes referred to as a 'call to arms'.
2. Life will be difficult if they don't rise to the challenge, albeit reluctantly.
3. They set off across hostile terrain where they encounter wild weather, monsters and archetypal menaces.
4. They overcome each challenge, but only just. The next thing waiting is worse.
5. They survive everything, but still the greatest challenge awaits them.
6. A high drama ensues, but they overcome all. Everything is achieved.

A stripped-down starting point would be to draw a straight line, then write the six plot points. Add in basic detail. Who is the character? Where is this initial comfortable place? At this stage the process can seem dry and pupils may lack engagement, so elements of drama can raise motivation through kinaesthetic applications.

Kinaesthetic techniques, using practical 'hands-on' activities that involve the whole person, have demonstrated raised achievement in schools, particularly for reluctant learners (Warrington and Younger, 2006: 166–83). Even in the most basic plotting of stories, some elements of 'whole person' experiences (Fisher, 2015: 111) can stimulate reluctant writers. For instance, the six plot points can be physically walked along, and talked through. Try chalking a line in the playground, or in the hall, marking the place where each new action, twist or change comes. What happens here? Is it more exciting than the event that took place at the previous mark? Can the next key moment be more exciting still?

A timeline is also an effective aid in helping pupils to feel the scope of their story, to understand where the highs and lows might need to be and to consider what could be left out. If the character is spending three days in a murky swamp, the reader will probably get glugged inside their own soggy depths if the author insists on writing down every detail. Conversely, if the character experiences the swamp and then the next action doesn't happen for three days, could events be closed up? How quickly could we move our character though this timeline without compromising on plausibility, drama or descriptive detail?

This stage now expands out, as pupils create storymaps that chart the six points through mindmapping techniques.

Mindmaps and motives

Mindmapping (Buzan and Buzan, 2003) uses a combination of colour, symbols, pictures and words. It also offers scope for collaborative discussion and planning. Collaboration is considered key to individual creativity. In recognising that learning partners or groups of learners can support and foster new possibilities for stories, young writers not only gain confidence and validation for their own ideas, but also learn how to give and receive feedback: to be part of a creative team (Fisher, 2005: 6–20). The process of combining colour, words and images is perhaps even a metaphor for freeing the mind from school-size lined sheets and the familiar pen or pencil. The brain, on some level, thinks 'Oh, this is different' – and when the brain is in 'different' mode exciting things happen. The process achieves logical clarity whilst at the same time expanding ideas organically and deepening the concept.

A mindmap draws on a search-and-find premise. A central image or key word marks the starting point. This central point then branches out. Each new branch has a new pivotal focus, and these form their own branches (Buzan and Buzan, 2003: 136). Multiple ideas can, and should, be evolved from the same initial image or key word. Some of these will scurry off on journeys of their own, while others curl round and make new connections with each other. A successful mindmap is a busy place, and it can elicit ideas with extraordinary speed. I once plotted a series of four novels in less than an hour with this approach (Waite, 2017).

What lies beneath

In a typical plotting workshop, after establishing the task and discussing the six-point quest narrative, I put pupils into groups. Each group shares a big sheet of paper, and individuals have different colour felt-pens. I find it useful to provide images that can inspire the development of a main character. Pupils create a character (see character p. 97 and template p. 183). The character, and the task, form the central point and the drawing of the mindmap establishes both the setting and the journey of the story. As pupils chart the hostile terrain collaboratively, they draw branches that explore the potential within each encounter and further consider how 'cause and effect' will move their character to the next place.

They then write a descriptive scene from *one* of the encounters, and this works particularly well if each member of the group takes responsibility for a different point on their mindmap.

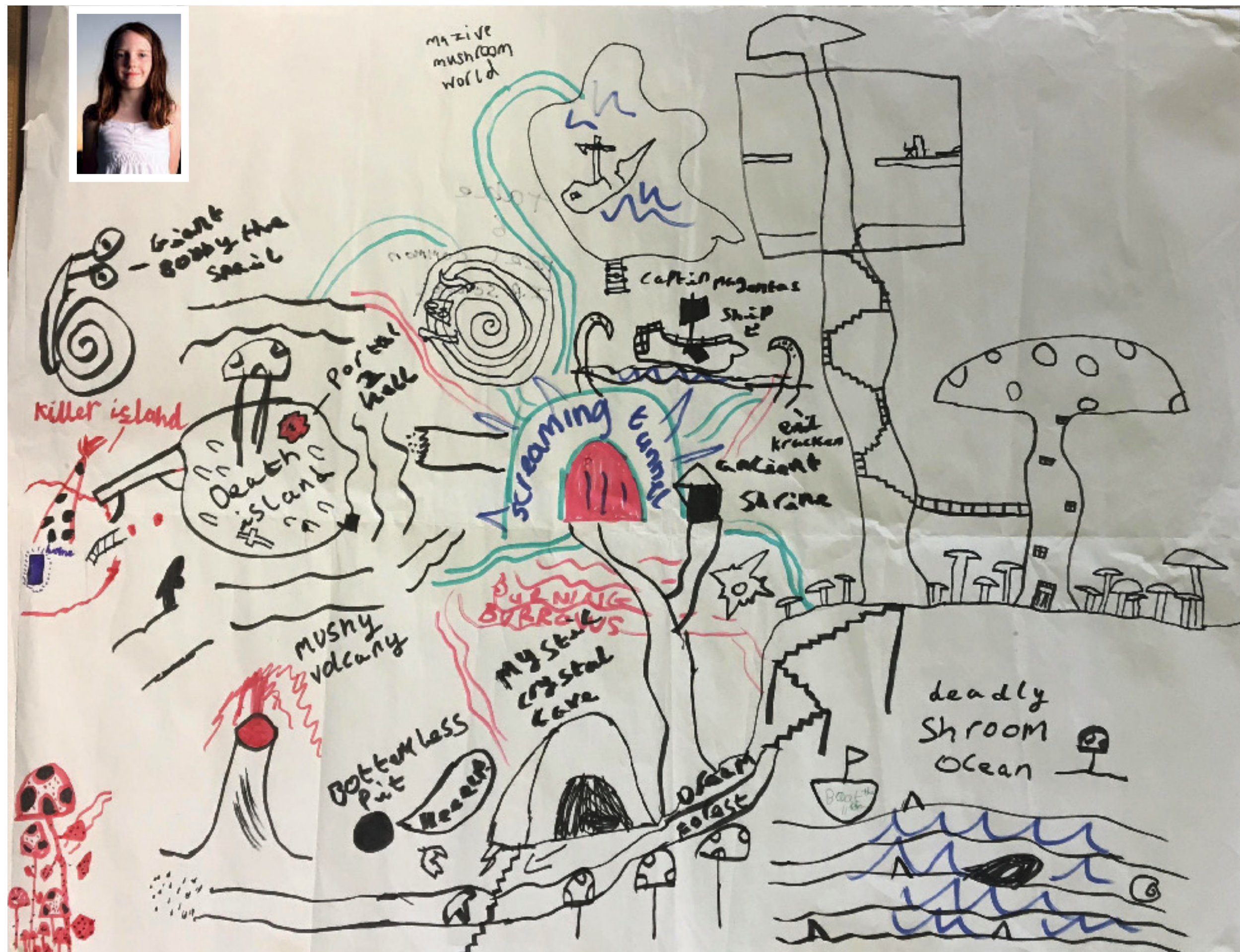
The plot has evolved from a single character so the scenes can be joined together. The pupils have, effectively, produced a quest narrative told in chapters, but with each chapter captured as if it were a short story.

World-building

Building a world can take years – a lifetime. Tolkein (2005) arguably took nearly forty years to create Middle-Earth – most literacy writing sessions will have a maximum of an afternoon! True world-building means understanding terrain, geography, history and politics. For experienced writers who are embarking on some great voyage through a fantasy or sci-fi trilogy, this pre-planning can be a vital element that gives visual detail, character motivation and triggers plot ideas, but trying to delve too deeply in a short time undermines the value or relevance of the experience.

However, some key elements can be evolved by drawing physical maps (as opposed to the mindmaps in the previous activity). The identification of terrain, key landmarks and points

where the most action will take place can have immense value within an emerging piece of writing.



Pupils can draw maps in groups, plotting the journey the protagonist will make through their landscape, considering various elements, dangers and additional characters. This can then be evolved into individual writing and later compared. The whole group will have started with the same premise based on their map. Hearing how peers evolved these group backgrounds is inclusive and develops confidence: everyone has had a different approach. Every idea has had value. The following three samples came from a story planning, world-building exercise where pupils (in groups of four) drew a map and worked out setting and plot points together. In the consequent independent writing samples pupils have used descriptive language to paint the landscape because they could ‘see’ it themselves, but they are also using this landscape to identify plot-points as they move the main character (Lucy) through the journey of their first draft interpretations.

[A] rushing river of mystreys flowed by … In the distance a lush tree of magic stood firm. Vibrent orange flowers bursted to life as she takes a couple of steps. Lucy looked in the rivr to see her face. Suddenly, a bright golden ball of light shines in her eyes, she reaches in and grabs it. Suddenly her hand starts to shake.

Lacey, Peel Common

Lucy was apon a very high hill as she heard a sparkle noise she looked behind her and trees of magic stood their. Lucy smelled a burning or cooking smell As she walked towards the smell it began to fade like it was some sort of trap. She wouldent give up… The next thing that happened was she came across the rivers of mysteries as she went up to it She had a picchure of her going on to a adventure a great adventure… Then she walks towards darkness…

Angel-May, Peel Common

Laying on the green bright grass Lucy listens to the rushing water. She gets up looking at a glistening river of water. Lucy dipps her hand into the water and grabs a flowing green paternd ston. The grass faces the stone. She wispers wow and wonders into the forest. She touches a birch tree. The tree moves back SNAP! the wood turns to arms. Lucy throws the bright green stone at the tree. The grass covers the tree. The tree shreaks.

Ethan, Peel Common

Back to front

An advanced approach for more confident young writers might be to work backwards. Terry Pratchett (Marcus, 2006: 164), on being questioned about whether he always knew from the start how a book would end, replied 'No, but I do know that it is going to end, and that is a vitally important thing.' We can subvert Pratchett's response. What if we know where the story ends, but don't know how it starts?

Exercise

As a class, discuss the following separate endings.

1. Seb stared at Fire Mountain for one last time. It was hard to believe he'd been to the burning centre of it. Even harder to carry the secrets of what had happened. But it was over now. Seb turned away, and walked back along the edge of the river, across the field, to home.
2. The wolf cub disappeared into the swirling mist. "He's gone," said Tola. "He's gone from us." Kabir nodded. "But he's back where he should be. We did what we needed to do."
3. Ethan smiled as a small yellow bird settled on the roof of the crumbling house. "Welcome home," he whispered. "Welcome home."
4. A small brown duck swam by. It was splashing happily. Far below, in the darkest depths of the murky water, something stirred.

Working in groups, choose one ending, or write a new original one, and discuss ideas in the light of what the story *might* be about, using mindmap techniques that consider cause and effect.

Discuss the emerging storyline, then chart the 'cause and effect' plot points, working backwards.

Working independently, write the beginning of the story.

The mindmap approach can be applied in the same way as the earlier example, but this time pupils work backwards, moving the story through the six points to find the beginning.

The use of mindmaps draws from simple storylines pupils already recognise, but enables their more subconscious responses to come into play. Although a mindmap is drawn on a two-dimensional sheet of paper, the infinite chains of branching patterns embody a multi-dimensional reality that draws from personal associations, rather than a replication of the thoughts of others (Buzan and Buzan, 2003). Because the associations are unique to each pupil, each young writer now has something to say that is partly drawn from collaboration and group discussion, but also means something to them individually. This ownership of original ideas enhances motivation.

End of the road

If the story is a journey, then the plot could be described as footprints in the mud that mark the route (Bradbury, 1996). Yet, however deep these tracks, the story only comes alive when the wind screams through the trees. The characters slip and slither. The mud they squelch through seeks to suck them down. The beginning may lead us through the middle to the end, but the end may open up a whole new beginning. Plot, whichever form it takes, is simply a device to help us know where we are going.

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