

# How to Outline a Novel (Even If You Have No Idea)

Original Post: <https://www.ridethepen.com/how-to-outline-a-novel/>

1. **BUILD:** Put together all the elements of an exciting, fully-functioning plot
2. **ORGANIZE:** Structure that plot into a table or list to support you with your writing process

## 1. BUILD: Putting Together Your Story Elements

### **A. Your Plot in a Nutshell**

Answer these questions:

1. *Who is your main character?*
2. *What do they want?*
3. *What's the problem?*

Let's look at these questions one by one:

#### **1. Who is your main character?**

To give your story focus and direction, you need one (or in rare cases several) main character(s). This is your starting point.

***My main character is:*** \_\_\_\_\_

Spend a bit of time on describing the personality of your main character.

#### **2. What do they want?**

What your main character wants will create your entire story. His motive is what sends him on the journey and kicks off the plot.

You can choose between many different types of goals for your character. Here are some examples:

- Materialistic goals: A million dollars; a new car
- Achievement goals: Win the race; pass the exam
- Life goals: Marry that girl; build that business
- Emotional goals: Feeling better about yourself after taking revenge; impressing your friends with your connections
- Goals of avoiding something: Avoiding being captured by the police; avoiding losing power over the kingdom
- Goals of getting rid of something: Escaping a miserable living situation; poisoning the mother-in-law
- Mission goals: Landing on Mars; finding the Holy Grail
- Survival goals: Escaping the burning building; finding the antidote
- Can you think of any more types of goals?

*If you have no idea what your main character's goal could be, then ask her!*

Treat your characters as real people, asking them for their desires. If they don't want to tell you, then maybe you need to spend more time with them to get to know them better.

***This is my main character's goal:*** \_\_\_\_\_

### **3. What's the problem?**

If your character immediately got whatever he wanted, then we wouldn't have much of a story, would we? So his problem creates our plot. Pick one that will lead your story to scenes you will enjoy!

**Here are some types of story problems:**

- The antagonist(s) is/are the problem: Supervillain; greedy corporate boss
- Major catastrophe is the problem: Flood; miners trapped under ground
- Personal problem: Character contracts HIV; character loses his job
- Internal problems: Character mourning for her husband; character lost all self-confidence
- Riddle problem: Who is the murderer? (riddle to guess for the main character; or for the audience; or for both)
- Decision problem: Which suitor will she like better?

- Social problem: Intrigue on the royal court; agent playing off other agent against his foes
- Hostile environment problem: War; jungle expedition
- Step-by-step challenge: A series of smaller problems

**It's often fun to combine several of these problems:** For example, try a thriller in which we have a powerful secret service for an antagonist, but our main character also has to wonder how that secret service is able to conduct its operations so effortlessly (riddle).

At this point, it's fun to go into details about your character's obstacles:

- What/Who creates these problems?
- What's an unexpected way of resolving them?
- Which detours are necessary to resolve them?
- And which smaller parts could the problem be split up into?

These details will *make* your plot, so think about them carefully... Allow yourself to get crazy! You can always scratch ideas later, if you don't like them.

***Details about my main character's problems:***

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You now have your plot-in-a-nutshell ready.

## **B. Adding More Elements to Your Plot**

Your character solving one single problem will usually not be enough to fill an entire novel. Bring in more elements, the sky is the limit!

Consider these elements:

- **Bringing in other characters:** Which lovely or odd folks can you think of?
- **Bringing in more problems:** Look at the list above or create your own problems. That's right, if you want to have problems, go get your own!  
\*pissed look\*
- **Bringing in fun locations:** Camping ground or castle – choose unconventional sites
- **Bringing in** odd situations, accidents, incidents, bad weather, whatever...

These are the additional elements you will bring in:

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### C. Make Sure You Have a New Twist Every 25% of the Outline

**Rule of thumb:** *A new twist or turn has to happen every 25% along the way.*

- Look at your plot so far: Does it show some major change of direction every quarter of the plot or so? If not, you now have to come up with something and insert it into your outline. Big moments are what a good story is all about, so don't be stingy!
- Also, make sure to bring in the first one of these problems very early on, within the first couple of pages. Otherwise your readers might close your book right away because you never really hooked them.

And if you have no idea how to continue, do this:

- Ask your characters what they feel like doing or what they want
- Bring in some new element

***New twists you are bringing in:***

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## D. Finally, Connect It All in a Way That Makes Sense

- You should have plenty of material to write about by now: Incidents, twists/problems and characters. However, it might still look more like a loose bunch of scenes than an actual story.

I want you to do these two things to tie it all up neatly:

### 1. Focus on your main story arc (= on your character's quest)

With all the elements you have brought in now, it would be easy to go astray. Don't do this!

**Most of your scenes and situations (let's say 70%-80%) have to be about the thing your main character wants, the thing that kicked off the entire plot.**

If that means you have to scratch scenes and elements, then please discharge your duties now.

### 2. Look for Missing Connections and Missing Logical Links between Scenes

**For each scene, ask yourself: Does it make sense for this scene to be in there? Is this scene motivated by the story?**

If it doesn't/isn't, then you have to insert a trigger for the scene and/or find an earlier scene or connection that could lead to this scene. Otherwise you have to scratch your scene entirely.

#### **Example:**

- *Say you are writing a thriller about a war between two mafia gangs.*
- *You have this idea about a shootout scene on top of a moving train, but the scene is not connected to your main plot in any way.*
- *What should you do?*
- *You have to focus on your main plot. So you need to find a way to connect your scene to your main plot, if you want to keep your scene in. You need to find a reason, a logical connection, for it to exist.*

- ***This is your idea:***

*The shooting happens on top of a moving train because it's about a briefcase on the train that's full of floorplans and information. That briefcase is on the train because our main character was travelling with it. He was travelling with it because he is a courier of one of the two gangs and had to bring that information to his boss. He had to bring that information to his boss because it was key to preparing a hit on their rival gang.*

- *There you have it: You find a first reason for your scene to exist, and then go back the chain of reasons until you land with your main plot. You have seamlessly incorporated an exciting scene into your story.*
- *Your other option, of course, is to scratch your scene altogether.*

You have now connected all the gaps in your plotline and scratched everything that doesn't fit in. Your story has become a smooth and compact unit.

## **2. ORGANIZE: How to Organize Your Outline**

### **A. Create a Full Scene List**

**Clearly split up your story into single scenes or chapters.**

Remember, a new scene starts whenever the characters involved, or the time or the place change – whichever one of these happens first.

Number your scenes for better overview, with clear marks where one scene ends and where the next one starts.

You might still discover holes or spots where your story moves too slowly or where something doesn't fit. No problem, just change this now! Having a full, accurately marked scene list often makes one see one's story much more clearly.

### **B. Create a Table or Timeline or Other Simple Graphic that Lets You Identify Scenes at One Glance**

You need to know at one glance what the scene you are writing is all about... That's what your tabled outline is for!

Some very useful columns you can include are:

- Scene number
- Scene title or chapter title (“Discussion in kitchen”)
- Scene location
- Short scene description (“Marta tries to persuade Henry to give her his car keys”)
- What the purpose of your scene is for the plotline and for the story in general (“set up Marta’s car accident + show readers that Marta is a bit jealous of Henry”)
- How your scene starts
- How your scene ends
- Characters involved
- Goals of the characters for the scene

*You can include whatever you think will help you during writing your first draft. These are just suggestions. Different authors handle this very differently.*

### **C. The Timeline (Print it!)**

On the timeline, mark each of your scenes in just a couple of words so you immediately know what the scene is about (“Robbery in forest”). Number them!

The timeline helps to keep the big picture in mind at all times and also where each scene fits in.

- **Print the timeline on the next page and fill it in! If you have a lot of scenes, just use two or three timeline sheets and stick them together.**

### **Congrats, You Have Just Created a Powerful Outline!**

And that’s it – you are now the proud owner of a brand-new, shiny, fully loaded outline with lifetime return guarantee. Well done!



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