

Plotting a Story

with Goals, Stakes and Obstacles

Back in primary school, I learnt this about narrative writing:

There's an **orientation** (setting the scene), a **complication** and a **resolution** (where the complication is solved).

Sound familiar?

Then, in high school, I learnt the same thing, before moving on to maxims like "show, don't tell" and techniques like dialogue and metaphor. I learnt how to write good sentences, maybe even good paragraphs. The thing that was missing - and it's a crucial thing - was how to create a good plot. We moved straight from structure to technique, without much consideration of content. We know how to write a story, sure. Do we know how to write an *interesting* story?

Take, for example, this little tale:

It was a warm Sunday morning and I was on my way to the shops (*orientation*). I got there and found that I'd left my wallet at home (*complication*) so I had to walk all the way back to get it. Then I was able to buy my Mars Bar (*conclusion*).

Why would anybody waste their time reading that?

I believe a good plot can be broken down into these three simple elements

Goal	Stakes	Obstacles
What does the main character want?	Why do they need it? What will happen if the goal is not achieved?	What's in their way?

Note that in my story above, there were no stakes. If I was a diabetic who *needed* that Mars Bar to prevent hypoglycaemia, and walking home was going to take too long/use up too much energy, it might be more interesting.

Fill in the table below with the goals, stakes and obstacles from some stories you are familiar with. With a longer work like a novel, the obstacles are many and varied, but you can identify the final obstacle in the climax of the story.

Story	Goal	Stakes	Obstacles
The Lord of the Rings	To destroy the "one ring".	If the ring is <i>not</i> destroyed, Sauron can take over the world.	Frodo's own imperfect willpower and greed for the ring.
Harry Potter	To defeat Lord Voldemort and kill him permanently.	"Neither can live while the other survives"	Horcruxes

It's best to use concrete examples to begin with, but this does also apply to more abstract, literary works. For example, I have a short story where the protagonist's *goal* is to understand her mother's experiences, the *stakes* are the sense of peace that is lacking in her life, and the primary obstacle is that the ghetto where her mother grew up is now a museum.

Without a goal, your story has no direction. Without stakes, the reader has no reason to care. Without obstacles to overcome, it's boring and likely very short.

Now that you understand the concept of goals, stakes and obstacles, try writing them down for your own short story plan. Often, I find that I am missing one - usually the stakes - and this exercise is the impetus for me to turn an *idea* ("I'm going to write about a guy with anorexia who enters a cooking competition" or "I'm going to write about a green blob taking over the world") into a plot.

