

## The Plotting Game

Theory and explanations only go so far. Everyone needs a way to exercise their brain in some basic story patterns, so we created “The Plotting Game.” It can be done as a solo exercise, but is designed to be played against an opponent or (most fun of all) in team play where players can argue for the points they feel their side deserves. And what do you win? A well-crafted story plot!

There are 9 distinct elements in this game:

1. Orientation – 3 minutes
2. Character Flaw – 3 minutes
3. Threshold Event – 3 minutes
4. Narrative Hook – 3 minutes
5. Obstacle One – 4 minutes
6. Obstacle Two – 4 minutes
7. Obstacle Three – 5 minutes
8. Climax – 5 minutes
9. Denouement – 3 minutes

When played as a game, each element is worth 10 points, with the exception of the Climax, which is worth 20. Each player or team has opportunities to deduct points from their opponent’s story for specific reasons. Each element has a time limit adding up to a 30-minute game, with scoring after that can take up to another 30 or so minutes – of course, there’s no time limit on fun.

Scoring is done at the end, when story plots are complete.

(Each player or team works out their own, completely different story.)

Players or teams go back and forth, element by element, with scores and winners determined at the end.

The exercise proceeds a little like Improv, in which there are no ideas at the beginning. You are not thinking of a story and how it will work out; you are working

through elements, with each one contributing to the next in a way which is not predetermined beforehand.

This is not a model for all stories. It is an exercise to strengthen creative thinking and replace some of the mystery of plotting with the fun of spontaneous imaginative performance.

Let's go. You can learn as you go and improve as you play more often. And this is only the first version of the game. We hope to make improvements and versions for different exercises – like flash fiction, vignettes, character driven stories, and more.

## Orientation – 3 minutes

Orientation sets the scene. Think of it as if the curtain is being drawn back to reveal a stage before the play begins.

Try to include in your scene the Who, What, When, and Where of the scene. Whether it is breakfast on a space station, a treasure hunt in the magic mountains, or a square dance in 1950s South Carolina, make it a relatively ordinary, banal moment in the current day of your protagonist.

**Maximum Points:** 10

### Challenges:

For challenges, your opponent or the opposing team calls the challenge and explains their reasoning. Writers never get to argue with readers, so accept the point deduction, even if you don't agree with it. Next time, find a friendlier audience!

- A. **Incomplete W's.** Subtract 2 points for each missing W (Who, What, When, Where, or Why)
- B. **In Medias Res.** Subtract 2 points for setting the scene in the middle of the main dramatic action. (In Medias Res can be a good thing, but not for this template.)

- C. **World Building.** Subtract 5 points for describing (in more detail than a few words) the history, politics, weather, flora, fauna, magic, or technology of the world.

Negative scores are possible. Make it up as you go.

## Character – 3 Minutes

Give the main character of your story, the Protagonist, a flaw. One of the seven deadly sins will do: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, or sloth. Or go for an obsession, a fear, or perhaps a physical or mental disability/limitation. They could have anger management issues, be reckless, lack self-control, be overly caring, or not empathetic at all.

They may be your hero, but don't make them perfect.

**Maximum Points: 10**

### Challenges:

- A. **Lame Flaw.** Subtract 5 points if the Character Flaw is the no more than the equivalent of a bad hair day.
- B. **Evil Dude.** Subtract 5 points if you've gone so far as to make your protagonist a villain.
- C. **Weakness is Strength.** Subtract 5 points if it is obvious (at this point) that your protagonist will solve the story by turning their flaw into their greatest asset.

Negative scores are possible. Make it up as you go.

## Threshold Event (Inciting Incident) – 3 Minutes

Something happens that is out of the ordinary for the scene you've set. Examples: the characters receive bad news; something crashes nearby, a dimensional portal opens, a superior arrives with an urgent mission, something important is stolen, lost, or found.

**Maximum Points: 10**

### Challenges:

- A. **The Door is Closed.** Subtract 5 points if the event described is lame and no more than what might be expected in the scene. i.e., if the scene is set in a diner, being served cold eggs for breakfast is a weak event.
- B. **Genre Violation.** Subtract 5 points if the threshold event belongs in a different genre. i.e., when a dragon flies past your spaceship.
- C. **Wild Card.** Subtract 5 points if the Threshold Event is so fabulous as to outshine any possible climax. i.e. a space whale knocks the moon out of orbit, sending it crashing into Earth and destroying all civilization.

Negative scores are possible. Make it up as you go.

## Narrative Hook – 3 Minutes

The incident of the Threshold Event develops in a way to directly engage the protagonist. If it were a fire, the protagonist decides to put it out. If an attack is underway, the protagonist decides to run or fight. If something has been stolen, the protagonist goes on a quest to find it.

**Maximum Points:** 10

### Challenges:

- A. **Broken Hook.** Subtract 5 points if the hook is illogical or ill-considered. A baker tries to solve an engineering problem; the princess bride weighs in on a math mystery.
- B. **Bent Hook.** Subtract 5 points if a character other than the protagonist takes the bait and starts the adventure.
- C. **Lost Bait.** Subtract 5 points if the protagonist's decision to engage seems unbelievable. i.e., joining an expedition to the underworld in search of a five-year old's lost toy.

Negative scores are possible. Make it up as you go.

## Obstacle / Problem One – 4 Minutes

Obstacle One is the first real challenge for the protagonist flowing out of the Threshold Event and the Narrative Hook. The protagonist must take physical action to overcome a physical challenge.

This obstacle/problem is relatively easy, but still takes a bit of work. When complete, the protagonist believes the day is won, the problem solved.

Obstacle One should stress the protagonist's Character Flaw as they take action to solve the problem.

**Maximum Points:** 10

### Challenges:

- A. **Exposition Exposed.** Subtract 5 points if there is too much background exposition, explanation, and/or world building.
- B. **Speed Bump.** Subtract 5 points if the protagonist takes no physical action, or if the obstacle is not physical in nature, or is so easy the protagonist could have phoned it in.
- C. **Flawless Action.** Subtract 5 points if the protagonist's Character Flaw was not emphasized in the action to solve Obstacle One.

Negative scores are possible. Make it up as you go.

## Obstacle / Problem Two – 4 Minutes

Obstacle Two flows out of the action to overcome Obstacle One. Ideally, the protagonist sets the events Obstacle Two in motion without realizing it.

The protagonist must take physical action to overcome a physical problem.

Obstacle Two is difficult. While not life-threatening, it is a real challenge to overcome. Things are getting serious.

Obstacle Two should stress the protagonist's Character Flaw as they take action to solve the problem.

**Maximum Points: 10**

**Challenges:**

- A. **Exposition Exposed.** Subtract 5 points if there is too much background exposition, explanation, and/or world building.
- B. **Speed Bump.** Subtract 5 points if the protagonist takes no physical action, or if the obstacle is not physical in nature, or is so easy the protagonist could have phoned it in.
- C. **Flawless Action.** Subtract 5 points if the protagonist's Character Flaw was not emphasized in the action to solve Obstacle One.
- D. **Broken Connection.** Subtract 5 points if Obstacle Two seems to have no relation to Obstacle One.

Negative scores are possible. Make it up as you go.

## **Obstacle / Problem Three – 5 Minutes**

Obstacle Three flows out of the action to overcome Obstacle Two. It should seem inevitable that it came to this.

The protagonist must take physical action to overcome a physical problem.

Obstacle Three is an existential threat. It's life or death and the protagonist must put it all on the line to succeed.

Obstacle Three should stress the Protagonist's Character Flaw to the breaking point. They must be ready to sacrifice, dare the impossible, and win (or lose).

Obstacle Three blends right into the Climax, which is the point where everything comes to a head and the Protagonist overcomes Obstacle Three.

**Maximum Points: 10**

**Challenges:**

- A. **Exposition Exposed.** Subtract 5 points if there is too much background exposition, explanation, and/or world building.

- B. **Reverse Gear.** Subtract 5 points if Obstacle Three is easier than Obstacle Two.
- C. **Flawless Action.** Subtract 5 points if the protagonist's Character Flaw was not emphasized in the action to solve Obstacle One.
- D. **Broken Connection.** Subtract 5 points if Obstacle Three seems to have no relation to Obstacles One and Two.

Negative scores are possible. Make it up as you go.

## Climax – 5 Minutes

The Climax is the highest point of tension of Obstacle Three, and of all the story that has come before it.

In the Climax, the Protagonist's actions resolve the main conflict of the story. They achieve their goal and succeed, or fail and lose everything, perhaps even their life.

The Climax should show the protagonist overcoming their Character Flaw or ultimately falling victim to it. They must sacrifice, dare the impossible, and win (or lose).

**Maximum Points: 20**

### Challenges:

- A. **Exposition Exposed.** Subtract 10 points if there is too much background exposition, explanation, and/or world building.
- B. **That Was a Dud.** Subtract 10 points if the Climax was anti-climactic.
- C. **Flawless Action.** Subtract 10 points if the protagonist's Character Flaw was not emphasized in the Climax
- D. **Broken Connection.** Subtract 10 points if the Climax seems to have no connection to the Obstacles.
- E. **Deus Ex Machina.** Subtract 20 points if a third party or outside force comes in from nowhere to save the day!

Negative scores are possible. But if you have a low score at this point, you probably can't make it up. Sorry!



## Denouement – 3 Minutes

The Denouement is the conclusion after the Climax. Any final plot threads are tied up, the tensions of the climax subside, and it becomes obvious that the story has concluded.

A nice touch is often to circle around to the Orientation and show, at the end of the story, a connection or an echo back to the beginning.

**Maximum Points:** 10

### Challenges:

- A. **Yada Yada.** Subtract 5 points if the denouement requires a lot of exposition or explanatory text to bring the story to its close.
- B. **No Echo.** Subtract 5 points if the ending fails to echo elements of the beginning.
- C. **The End?** Subtract 10 points if it is not obvious that the story has concluded, or if the player or team failed to complete all elements and reach the denouement in the time allotted.

## Scoring

To play, players or teams separate and create their story plots based on the rules. At 33 minutes, they come back together for scoring.

One player from each team is chosen to read their elements. Opponents or teams go back and forth, scoring one element at a time.

When the opposing player or team decides to subtract points according to a challenge, it is permissible to try to convince them otherwise, and for each challenge you can negotiate the subtracted points down from the initial penalty.

However, ultimately, the opposing player or team makes the decision, and you must take your losses with dignity and grace. Learn from the critique and hope to do better next time.



## Actual Game Example

The first time this game was tried, with no previous practice, the following story plot resulted.

### Orientation...

A man named Cratus is doing dishes in a diner in the bustling medieval fantasy town of Hespersia. It's mid-week, and there's a busy lunch crowd. Cratus's current ambition is to become a cook.

### Character Flaw...

Cratus is addicted to magic, which he absorbs from other people who are performing magic. To him it is like taking a drug; he gets high and the magic being performed fails as he drains it for its use.

### Threshold Event...

A local official shows up at the diner and declares that there has been a major theft and possible kidnapping. The Mayor's fortune has been stolen and his daughter is missing.

### Narrative Hook...

Cratus is new in town, a down and out wanderer. Suspicion quickly turns his way, and he is led away to interrogation by the authorities.

### Obstacle One...

Cratus is in custody and wants to be free. The interrogator uses a form of magic lie detection. Cratus absorbs the magic and gets high, the magic fails and there is no evidence to hold him. He succeeds in being released, but they have determined that he is a form of minor demon and he is told not to try to leave town.

### Obstacle Two...

Unfortunately, more evidence turns up pointing to Cratus's guilt. (The actual thieves are framing him.) Once again Cratus needs to escape. Taking what little gold he has,

Cratus goes to people who can disguise him and get him out of town, but unknown to Cratus these are the true thieves. Where Cratus thinks he's found a way out, he's actually in great danger of being turned over as a scapegoat so that the thieves get away with their plot.

### Obstacle Three...

Nervous and needing a hit, Cratus finds his way to a source of magic in the home of his guests and drains some of it for his pleasure. As the magic weakens, it reveals that the daughter is confined within and being magically bound and cloaked. Cratus now knows that he is trapped and doomed to be turned over. His only way forward is to help the girl.

### Climax...

Cratus offers himself as a cook to his supposed hosts. It's a job he's failed at spectacularly before, but he has a plan. He sneaks out long enough to gather some plants that he knows, when mixed with demon saliva, are poisonous. He is quickly captured after leaving the house but makes his excuses and breakfast.

In their weakened state from the poison, Cratus is able to fight off the bad guys with his kitchen knife and rescue the captive girl.

### Denouement...

Cratus freed the Mayor's daughter by absorbing all the magic holding her, getting so high he passes out. When he returns to consciousness, he is surrounded by the interrogators from the town, the Mayor, and the girl.

At first, he thinks he has failed and is in trouble, but the girl reveals him to be the hero, and all is well. She vows to help him with his addiction, and the Mayor gives Cratus a reward sufficient perhaps for him to open his own diner.

###

How would you score this story? It's far from perfect, but it came together quickly without any prior thought or consideration, and it could be written out as an exciting adventure that might catch the eye of an editor and possibly their readers.