Strong novels need strong plots. Yet every structure's got its flaws--that opening page, a muddled middle, an ending that fizzles fast. Don't panic, just plot. Whether you're starting out, drafting, or revising, you can build your novel's structure from the ground up. We'll begin with a firm foundation: What's the promise of your premise? How do classic plot blueprints strengthen your plot while inspiring new twists? You'll sketch out a floor plan (a strong central problem), erect sturdy scaffolding (complications), and fortify the framework's hinges (major turning points). Then wire for electricity--building character relationships, plot layers and subplots. All the while reinforcing connections that support the weight of your themes. You'll end the week with a solid outline for a novel that's structurally sound and uniquely yours.

Sessions will include group critique of participants' work, analysis of novel excerpts, discussion, and plot exercises. **Advance submission of your logline and the first 3 pages of your novel is welcome, but not required.** Throughout the week you'll read each other's pages, workshop them in class, and comment on overall structure. You'll complete daily plot exercises in class and out for group or instructor critique. **E-mail your logline and first 3 pages by May 23rd to ajrydell@wisc.edu.** Paste your logline in the email or attach it in its own separate document. Submit your 3 pages as a Word attachment, Times New Roman 12 point font, double spaced, 1 inch margins. Include name, title and page number on each page.

**(Monday) Sketching Your Novel's Blueprint: The Promise of Your Premise**

Discover how to build plot from the ground up whether you're starting out, drafting or working on deep structure. We'll begin with the premise. Use it like a miniature of an architect's blueprint: a compact design sketch to reference while the bigger structure is under construction.
Come prepared for a power critique of your novel’s logline—a quick-as-a-heartbeat plot summary, captured in a single sentence (submitted May 23rd, see intro above). Boil your plot down to what gets the story going, who matters most, what that character wants, what gets in the way and what achieves a happy ending—or at least resolution. Get it down to fewer than three sentences. Now, can you get it even shorter? Spin it like a movie trailer. Use language that grabs readers, makes them want more—much more.

Plotting at the level of the premise can turn a good idea into a great one—and reduce revision time. Analysis of a logline’s anatomy helps you identify problems inherent in your plot immediately. On-the-spot exercises explore Donald Maass’s four essential elements for a good premise: inherent conflict, plausibility, originality and gut emotional appeal. How does your stack up? Can you make it even better?

We’ll start small, then build on your premise using the Snowflake Method’s principle of expansion. You’ll branch your single sentence into a paragraph with clearly defined points: the story setup and “three disasters plus an ending.” (Randy Ingermanson)

Both sentence and paragraph plot summaries prepare you think big while writing tight. Sound like a lot to expect from so little? Trust the process. Your premise, logline and one-paragraph summary might be works-in-progress for a long time. You’re going to get support and suggestions. That’s what this week is for!

Homework
• Work on your one-paragraph plot summary to hand in and discuss tomorrow.
• Consult the critique schedule (a preliminary schedule will be emailed before class starts) for in-class critiques.
• Begin revising your logline (to revisit in class Friday).

(Tuesday) Laying a Firm Foundation: Seven Structure Steps

What paves the foundation for all great plots, from Shakespeare to Harry Potter to the best TV commercials? John Truby’s identified seven tried-and-true structure steps underlying good stories. Even yours. Today you’ll use these seven steps to outline your protagonist’s central problem from inception to resolution.

Step one is the protagonist’s weakness and need. This isn’t the time to fill out character sheets. We’re going deeper than that. Identify her fatal flaw, and a problem that shines a glaring light on it. Make her grapple with it. That’s your opening page. Right there you show how your beginning foreshadows your
behind: your protagonist needs to overcome this weakness in step six (self-
revelation) and resolve it (step seven: new equilibrium).

Next, you’ll make your novel’s conflict tangible: step two’s the external desire that
provokes your protagonist to do something about his problem (anything from find
the wizard, kill the whale, win the case to catch the criminal). Step three
embodies the protagonist’s opposition in a person—a central antagonist. We’ll
take time to build character relationships here, too. Protagonists aren’t developed
in isolation. Every character must help or hinder a protagonist’s progress—or do
a bit of both.

Step four gets your protagonist even more active. He’ll come up with a plan
(follow the yellow brick road, take a crew out to sea to find the white whale), one
that’s sure to run up against hardship. And step five is the climactic battle.
Protagonist and antagonist face each other in a conflict of violence or words to
resolve the dramatic tension.

You’ll get specific with each step, but some responses will come easier than
others. You can return later. Leave room for growth. Outlines shouldn’t lock you
into one plan. We’ll discuss how to use them to spur creativity rather than stifle it.

**Homework**

- Continue your character web worksheets (begun in the third structure
  step).
- Continue your Steven Structure Step Outline to discuss and share
tomorrow.
- Consult the critique schedule and prepare for tomorrow’s in-class
critiques.

**Wednesday** Constructing a Sturdy Framework: Five Major Turning Points

Major turning points create the framework for a sturdy plot. They include
challenges, surprising twists, profound events, even newly realized perspectives.
In class you’ll list every significant change, then narrow down to five major
turning points. How do you know which matter most? The best turning points
pressure your protagonist to let go of the familiar and move forward into the
unknown.

While there’s no required pattern, Dara Marks sets out a causal progression to
help maintain maximum momentum while capturing internal transformation. We’ll
follow her suggested trajectory and apply her techniques to your novel on-the-
spot:

The first turning point, the inciting incident, should instigate your protagonist’s
goal and ignite your protagonist’s inner need. It’s followed by turning point two, a
mini-crisis, forcing a change of plans. Between turning points two and three, things keep getting worse. “Imagine a rubber band being stretched to the point of snapping apart.” (Dara Marks) This helps make way for turning point three, your novel’s midpoint. A profound external event triggers an inner shift. The protagonist no longer resists, is all in. There’s no turning back. But your protagonist’s likely to get desperate, make immoral choices. Leading to major turning point four—a setback. The “black moment” when everything seems lost. As a result, the hero enters the final push towards the fifth major turning point, the climax. The moment of decision has arrived.

We’ll compare and contrast Marks’s structural framework with Truby’s. Neither offer rigid rules. There’s always a give and take between familiar structure and invention. You’ll experiment with these boundaries and push towards new discoveries.

**Homework**
- Option 1: Continue your Major Turing Point Outline to hand in tomorrow.
- Option 2: Write a two page scene that illustrates a major turning point.
- Consult the critique schedule and prepare for in-class critiques.

**(Thursday) Building Up Your Novel’s Structure: Plot Layers and Subplots**

You’ve developed plot essentials and characters. Now make things harder on your protagonist to make your novel better. Building plot layers and subplots adds complications, solidifies connections, and makes your plot meaningful and more true.

Layers are multiple plot lines given to one character, often simultaneously. She’s got a rapist to catch, and at the same time her husband’s dying of cancer. What small mysteries, dangling threads or nagging questions propel your story forward? We’ll explore how to add threads without tangling storylines and losing momentum.

We’ll also explore how subplots help you get more mileage out of your cast of characters. Subplots are different plot lines given to characters other than the protagonist. They develop your protagonist through comparison, contrasting how your hero and another character deal with a similar problem. Good subplots develop secondary characters without letting them steal the show. Analysis of established writers’ work will help you identify when storylines cross, and use thematic connections to strengthen structure. On-the-spot exercises help you weave plot layers and subplots together so they don’t unravel.

Worried about a sprawling novel? Wonder how many layers and subplots you need? There’s no magic number. But adding complexity gives novels the rich texture of real life. It requires extra effort, but the reward is depth and resonance.
Donald Maass says, “A tightly woven novel is one that your readers will be able to wrap round themselves around luxuriously.”

**Homework**
- Continue filling out plot layer and subplot worksheets from today’s exercises.
- Option 1: Write/revise a two page scene that develops a plot layer or subplot.
- Option 2: Write/revise a two page scene that dramatizes theme in some way.
- Prepare your logline for a 2nd in-class critique tomorrow.

*(Friday) Wiring for Electricity: Theme and Inspiration*

Powerful plots culminate in more than an entertaining climax. They show how and why your characters grow through struggle, and what it means not just to them, but to you. Laurel Yourke says, “Plot is only a vehicle for delivering vision, and you can’t reduce any theme worth its weight in plot to a platitude. Do your themes embody a vision that’s yours alone?”

Today you’ll plot your theme. In class exercises expose themes already wired into key plot points: Does your inciting incident show characters struggling—and failing—to live out your themes? How do the weakness and need set up theme? The self-revelation at the end? We’ll analyze how turning points and climax dramatize theme—and vice versa. Then look closely at thematic connections between your subplots, main plot and plot layers.

But beware of caring more about theme than plot. You risk creating cardboard characters who act as mouthpieces for your ideas. Yet character and theme are intrinsically connected. The antidote to a theme-heavy approach? Make actions, not explanations, a priority. Analysis of work by established writers reveals how symbol, imagery and setting enhance meaning without imposing it. We’ll also explore how characters embody theme rather than espouse it.

When theme emerges from your protagonist’s problems it doesn’t become a problem for your readers. That means you’ve constructed a powerful plot. Your ideas are built into the novel’s foundation, fortified by framework, and emerge through well-crafted events, actions and reactions that electrify the meanings embedded in deep structure.

**Homework** (choose one of the following to submit to your instructor by June 27th for post-workshop critique):
- Write/revise a two page scene that dramatizes theme in some way. OR
- Revise your 1st three pages to strengthen inciting incident. OR
Submit a two page scene developing a subplot, plot layer, turning point or one of the seven structure steps.

You'll leave with a polished logline, a one paragraph plot summary, two outlines, a character web, plot layer and subplot worksheets, and at least one new or revised scene from your novel inspired by these exercises. Plus a deeper and clearer understanding of how to construct plot like an architect, with an eye on overall design that’s structurally sound and uniquely yours.

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others’ work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.

Angela Rydell, MFA, has taught for the UW-Madison Division of Continuing Studies since 2006, including Writers’ Institute, Weekend with Your Novel, Write-by-the-Lake, School of the Arts, and online writing courses. Her ongoing novel critique group and “Powerful Plots” weekend workshops have helped dozens of novelists structure their novels over the years. Angela’s a novelist, short fiction writer, poet and critique coach. Her work has appeared in *The Sun*, *Indiana Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Beloit Poetry Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review* and other journals. She is a recipient of Poets & Writers’ Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award, winner of the *Portland Review*’s inaugural Flash Fiction Friday contest, a Pushcart Prize nominee, a finalist in the *American Short(er) Fiction Prize*, and has received honorable mention in the *New Millennium Writings Awards*. She lives in Madison, WI, and is at work on *True North*, a novel about an unemployed Wisconsin weatherman trying to make life more predictable. She’s on Facebook posting writerly tips here: https://www.facebook.com/AngelaRydellInstructorPage

What previous students have said about Angela’s novel workshops:

“Focused intensity on concrete steps for driving a story. Especially forced me to recognize several flaws in my storyline. Thank you!” ~John Keefe, Sauk City, WI (So You Want to Write a Novel)
“Very tangible lessons combined with just enough time to practice them. Really great for beginners or more practiced writers.” ~Rochelle Isaacson, Appleton WI (Enticing Openings)

"It was highly useful, without fluff." ~Elijah Meeker, Madison, WI (So You Want to Write a Novel)

“I really benefited from Angela’s Critiques… An excellent class. Very helpful.”
~John Walsh, Madison, WI (Saturday Novel Critique Group)

“I’d give the class a ‘10’!” ~Sandy Mahony, Mukwonago, WI (Enticing Openings)

“I liked that the course put a very clear structure to much of what I thought I needed to do in beginning a novel.” ~Larry Lasee, DePere, WI (So You Want to Write a Novel)

“Practical information and exercises on organizing ideas and bringing out your story.” ~Carol Larson, Brooklyn WI (Powerful Plots)

“Very well organized and through-provoking. It gave me a lot of insight in my own work. Angela was an excellent speaker. Clear. To the point.” ~Elena Bender, Verona WI (Powerful Plots)