

**Emerald City Writers Conference Presents:**

**Plotstorming!**

*By Ann Charles and Wendy Delaney*

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### **Plotstorming!—Make Your Own Thunder and Lightning**

A plotter and a pantser provide tips and techniques to help writers work to their strengths as they plot their novels.

### **Hail from the Left or Right?**

Determine if you are a writer who fleshes out her story from a pre-developed plot (plotter) or prefers freedom to fly into the creative mist (pantser).

### **Gusts and Squalls from Both Sides**

The pros and cons for plotters and pantsers.

### **Storm Tracking—Forecasting Your Plot**

Some plotter and pantser plotting tools to help you plan your book.

### **Meteorology of the Mummy**

Plotter and pantser plotting examples using *The Mummy* movie.

### **Languishing in the Doldrums**

Help for plotters and pantsers who are stranded, languishing in the doldrums.

### **In the Maelstrom**

How to keep the word storm from dissipating.

### **The Calm After the Storm**

Now that you have a few more tools in your belt, get busy writing!

### **Appendix A—Plot Tools**

Listing of plot tool websites.

### **Appendix B—Plot and Character Development Websites**

Listing of websites where articles on plot and character development can be found.

## **Plotstorming!—Make Your Own Thunder and Lightning**

It was the best of plots, it was the worst of plots...or maybe it's been more like "What plot?"

Does your plot have more holes than Swiss cheese? Have you been receiving feedback that is less than stellar? Maybe it's time to rethink your plotting process.

Today, Wendy and Ann—one a left-brained plotter, the other a right-brained pantsier—are going to share some of their own plotting techniques (along with a few tips they have learned along the way) to help you develop a strong story and well-paced plot.

### **A Storm is Brewing**

A story is forming in your mind. In the basic elements of this story, a character will pursue some compelling desire (goal) but will meet opposition (conflict) and "stuff" will happen (plot) en route to achieving that goal. That "stuff" needs to answer the question that your reader should be asking—"Will the character achieve her important goal despite all the opposition she's going to encounter? Your story has a serious problem if your readers (including editors and agents) are asking "What's the point of this story?"

So, step one to plot brainstorming is to answer the questions,

- What does my character want?
- Why can't she have what she wants? What opposition will she face?
- What does the antagonist want? What opposition will he/she face?

Once you've answered those questions and you have characters who are motivated to achieving their goals, we move on to step two—developing that story.

How you approach story development isn't just a matter of personal preference. It may have everything to do with how you are hard-wired.

## **Hail from the Left or Right?**

So, are you more of a leftie or a rightie—a writer who fleshes out her story from a pre-developed plot or do you need your freedom to fly into the creative mist?

Our brains are divided into two hemispheres. One of those hemispheres tends to be dominant. The more left-brained among us are typically logical, linear thinkers. They tend to work best when they have a good idea of what they need to do and when they need to do it. Our right-brained friends don't want to be boxed in to linear thinking. They are typically more intuitive and abstract in the way they form their stories.

There are lots of shades of gray when it comes to plotting styles. You may be a plotting pantsier, or a pantsing plotter, or an equal mixture of plotter and pantsier. Don't get caught up in the details here. There is no right or wrong way to plot a book. What's important is to recognize where your comfort lies when it comes to pre-writing and move forward knowing and accepting how you prefer to go about telling a story.

### **Plotters/Left-Brainers**

If you're a left-brained plotter you probably already know it, plus you've had several of your writer-friends call you anal. You're not anal (well, maybe you are, but that's okay!), you like organization. You're analytical. You're a planner. Your left-brain helps you connect the creative dots to design a logically flowing story with a beginning, middle, and end. Your basic story is pretty darn solid before you write the first scene, and because of the way your brain processes information and draws logical conclusions, you not only need it that way, you're proud of it!

Does this sound a bit like you? Okay, here's a little quiz:

- Are you a list maker (to-do lists, grocery lists)?
- Do you look before you leap? Do you gather up facts before you commit to doing something you haven't done before?

When developing your story –

- Do you like to fill out character development charts (to identify the character's height, hair color, eye color, etc.)?
- Do you chart your story's major plot points on a structural diagram or a spreadsheet?
- As you plan a book do you need a binder to keep your many pages of notes, charts, character interviews and research material organized?
- Have you tried the seat of the pants approach only to come to a mental roadblock in Chapter Three and the stark realization that you won't be able to move forward until you have a plot outline?

If most of your answers were "Yes," you have a dominant left-brain and you're more of a plotter than someone who prefers to let the story develop organically as she writes. Fly into the mist like a pantsers? And crash and burn? We plotters say, "No, thank you!"

### **Pantsers/Right-Brainers**

Have you ever driven in the dark without headlights? A friend and I were once on a back road in Arizona in the middle of the night (road trip, anyone?), and at the junction of Booney-ville and Nowhere-land, the fuse for our headlights blew. The moon was just a crescent that night, so it wasn't much help in lighting up our surroundings. I grabbed a flashlight out of the glove box and we drove the next thirty miles to the next town with the help of two Duracells. While we could only see as far as the flashlight beam reached, we made it the whole way without incident (or coming across another car, luckily).

My point here is that being a pantsers is a lot like using a flashlight to drive in the dark. Your story foresight is limited and you have to slow down a bit, but you can still make it to your destination, and often the trip is a lot more exciting. Although a plotter might use a different adjective than "exciting"—like "frustrating" or "daunting" or even "disastrous."

Anyway, there are several ways to tell if you are a right-brained/write-by-the-seat-of-your-pants type of author. If you answer "Yes" to any of the following, the indicator hand is hovering somewhere on the Pantsers side of the Plot-Style barometer.

- Do you form a whole story around a title that strikes you out of the blue one day?
- Do you find writing detailed character descriptions as tedious as grocery lists?
- Does the idea of outlining your story give you hives?
- Can you fit all of your plot notes on four squares (or less) of two-ply toilet paper?
- Does your plot line contain vague descriptions at key turning points like, "something big happens here," "somebody dies," or "heroine somehow kicks the villain's butt"?
- When someone asks you if you know how your story is going to end, do you answer with a shrug and a "Sure" but really mean *maybe*?
- Do you run far and fast from workshops or discussions involving such topics as alpha/beta heroes and character/world building?

So, are you a little bit or a lot of a pantsers? If your style falls in the pantsers range, don't despair. The highs and lows of being a pantsers make for one heck of a fun roller coaster ride.

## Gusts and Squalls from Both Sides

We all have the same goal—to create a compelling page-turner of a book. What’s the best way to achieve this goal? Choose whichever way works best for you and the story you have to tell.

### ***Sunshine and Rain: The Pros and Cons of Being a Plotter***

**Pros**—*Sunny positives for the logic-minded plotter*

- Confidence—You know you have a plot that will get you to “the end” of your story.
- Mental preparation—You know your characters and the structural components of your story. With most of the story puzzle pieces in place prior to writing scene 1, this can help reduce time spent staring at a blinking cursor.
- A clear sense of direction—This helps avoid meandering scenes and woolgathering. The plotter knows where she is going. Turn off the internal editor and write!
- Less rewriting—Because your story is already fairly well-structured and logical in its flow, the editing process will typically not require a lot of structural change.

**Cons**—*It’s Seattle. You know there’s going to be rain but don’t let it dampen your spirits.*

- Ripple effects—You’ve planned most of the twists and turns your plot will take, but since writing is more of a whole brain activity, an unplanned event takes your plot another direction. Plan on factoring “change” into your story.
- Pantser-envy—When the plotter skimps on the pre-writing work and leaps into Chapter One prior to having all her plot structure ducks in a row, her story may fall off the creative cliff well before hitting a sagging middle. If you are a plotter who needs a road map to get to where you want to go, take the time and give yourself one.
- Analysis paralysis—Left-brained plotters tend to be overly analytical. Keep your internal editor in check when you are in first draft mode.
- Haven’t I written this already?—You’ve written a very detailed outline (or synopsis). When the time comes to write the book, you’re no longer very interested in this story. Why? Mentally, the plotter may feel like this book has already been written.

### ***Sunshine and Rain: The Pros and Cons of Being a Pantser***

**Pros**—*Let’s start with the upside of being a pantser when it comes to plotting.*

- Spontaneity at the helm—There is lots of room for exploration and new ideas for the plot.
- Exciting times—The story unfolds for you almost as much as for the reader. This can make the story exhilarating for the author and energize him or her into creating a more exciting story for the reader.
- Flexibility—A free flowing plot allows you to easily shift gears and direction when you come upon any kind of road block. Because your story is fluid, you can bend and shape it without worrying about it breaking in half and ending up in the trash can.
- Sprint out of the gate—You can start writing the story immediately, because you don’t need to spend a month doing a bunch of prep work.
- Revolving door—You can pull in new characters and discard unnecessary ones without a lot of changes to your plot. Since you didn’t do much prep work, this allows more freedom for characters to come and go as necessary.

### **Cons—*Now for that rain.***

- **Writer's block**—Pantsing your way through a plot often may require the help of another brain to lug you out of a corner.
- **Dead ends**—You might end up taking a side road that is actually a dead end, then you've lost valuable time and pages.
- **Doubting Thomas**—Not having a detailed map may lead to insecurities regarding your conflict, plot, etc.
- **Trips and Falls**—Writing without much planning could cause big stumbles, especially for certain genres. These stumbles could cause a show stopper, or just require second draft changes and clean up.
- **Pacing Potholes**—Your pacing could suffer because you are creating the pace as you write. There is no pre-planning here to instruct you when you need to make a scene fly off the page or when you need to allow the reader to slow down and take a breath. You're feeling your way along, and you could easily become confused in the storm and head in the wrong direction.

### **The Straddler**

While we're discussing pros and cons of pantsing, I have to mention one sticky item that could fall on the pro or con side, depending on the pantser—the Synopsis.

I've written synopses both before and after writing a book. To be honest, I didn't enjoy doing it either way. The whole idea of a synopsis goes against my pantsing nature. Given the choice, I'd wait until after I finish the story to struggle through a synopsis. However, published authors often sell books on a synopsis alone, so it is important to perfect writing the synopsis prior to starting your manuscript.

My advice to pantsers is to practice writing a synopsis about a story idea you have and find a way to make it fall on the "Pro" side of your list.

## **Storm Tracking—Forecasting Your Plot**

So, you have a story idea and want to start building it into a book. Where do you start? What devices could you use if you're a plotter? A pantser? An in-betweener?

### **A Plotter's Instruments and Graphs**

It's essential that your plot be about interesting characters who have opposing goals (and conflict!). Whose story is this? What does he/she want? What is the story goal? To help develop strong and clearly defined GMCs, we recommend Debra Dixon's book, *GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict*.

After I define the GMC for all my main, stake-holder characters, I complete character charts for each. Then, it's time to plot—first at a high level. Then, once I have the basic structure defined, I flesh it out with scene ideas.

Plot structure tools I use:

- Three-Act Structure
- The W plot (a three-act visual on which I "hang" my scene ideas with Post-it notes)
- The Hero's Journey

Many charts and forms (a plotter's best friends) are freely available via the Internet. Plus, many workshop presenters make them available via their websites.

Appendix B lists several plot and character-development related articles worth checking out. Many include forms you can download.

## **A Pantser's Instruments and Graphs**

Hmmm. Tools? Define tools. You mean some kind of document you would actually have to fill out instead of just sitting down and typing "Chapter One"?

Ha! Just kidding.

Lots of pantsers use tools, they just tend to use the short version of charts and plotlines. They don't go into a lot of detail when performing these pre-writing tasks. For example, a character chart may consist of four crucial details—eye color, hair color, talisman, and story goals.

Personally, I just use a brief GMC table, defining internal and external goals for each character, then add very minor physical and personality details like eye and hair color, nicknames, vehicle and house details, and other character traits (for example, "always wears bright red lipstick" or "looks at himself in a mirror in every scene"). Mainly, I use this character information to make sure I don't change eye color or the kind of car they scoot around in mid-way through the story.

A list of possible pantser tools:

- GMC Chart—Make this as detailed or sparse as you need.
- Plot Outline—This can be from a source of your choosing: the W plot, three-act structure, Hero's journey, or a Frankenstein version of all of these and more.
- Story Goals Table—A table listing all of your characters and each of their respective story goals.
- Theme and Premise Worksheet—A listing of the story's theme and premise and how these will affect each character.
- Character Interviews—From a brief paragraph to several pages, you might want to interview one or more of your characters to get a feel for them prior to beginning the story (since you haven't done a lot of pre-planning otherwise).

Through it all, remember, your main focus has to stay on the characters and story goals. These tools are just that, tools. You can pick them up and use them or toss them aside.

## **Meteorology of the Mummy**

The same techniques are often referred to in terms of genre fiction and screenplay plot structure. So, how might a plotter and pantser approach plotting a movie most all of us are familiar with?—*The Mummy*

### **From a Plotter's Point-of-View**

As a plotter, I start by mapping out the story at its highest level, breaking the story into three-act structure elements. I like this Six-Stage approach since it has a bit more "meat" to it. Then, I create a W plot (plot points noted below with W1, W2, etc.) to make the rising and falling action visual.

<b><i>The Mummy</i> (using Michael Hauge's Six Stage Three-Act Plot Structure)</b>	
Stage I/Setup	Introduce major characters—Imhotep's goal: Resurrect his lover. Evie's goal: Prove she's worthy to be a Bembridge scholar.
Inciting Incident/Call to Adventure (W1)	Discovery of a map to Hamunaptra and a mysterious key. Evie & brother need help to get there—get Rick out of jail.
Turning Point 1	Despite opposition, they arrive at Hamunaptra. Medjai warns them to leave or die.
Stage II/New Situation	Discovery—they find the mummy's sarcophagus. The curse starts playing out; men are dying.
Turning Point 2 (W2)	Evie unknowingly awakens the mummy.
Stage III/Progress	Mummy finds ally in fortune hunter/traitorous Benny.
Turning Point 3/ Midpoint (W3)	The mummy starts regenerating—may become invincible. Evie's new goal: Uncover secret text to stop mummy/save world.
Stage IV/Raise Stakes	Mummy needs to sacrifice Evie to resurrect woman he loves. Rick fights for woman he loves.
Turning Point 4/Major Setback (W4)	Mummy fully regenerated. Evie sacrifices herself to save loved ones.
Stage V/Final Push	Return to Hamunaptra for final battle/to save Evie.
Climax (W5)	Anck-su-namun is resurrected; Rick & Evie fight for their lives. Evie deciphers text to destroy mummy, saves their lives.
Stage VI / Aftermath	Evil was defeated and the world saved. All goals were achieved. Each character gets what he/she deserves.

I write scene and sequel ideas (all the "what ifs" that feel to me like they have potential to further the plot) on Post-it notes and stick them to my W plot wall chart so that I can see my plot at a glance.

For example, the bits of detail that I might write for the scenes in Stage II:

- Evie, Rick, and Jonathan discover a hidden sarcophagus while the Americans dig elsewhere. "He must have done something very naughty."
- The prison warden, driven by his greed, looks for treasure and is attacked by a scarab and dies.
- The Americans open a chest they discover—it's booby-trapped and workers die.
- Evie, Rick, and Jonathan open the sarcophagus. This Mummy looks too fresh, and there's evidence that he was alive when he was interred.



- How can this map and its discovery foreshadow the conflict each character is going to face?
- How and where can I sprinkle bits of foreshadowing into this early part of the story and hook my reader without giving away too much? In bits of dialogue? In an action sequence?
- What all do I need to accomplish in the story now that the map has been discovered before hitting the first turning point?

These are just a handful of things to think and write about. You could fill pages with these kinds of questions and answers, but then you wouldn't be a pantsner anymore—you'd be plotting way too much. Instead, you let these questions percolate and sit back and wait for the story to unfold before your eyes so you can document it for your readers. After all, as a pantsner, all you really are is a mediator between your characters' lives and your readers.

## Languishing in the Doldrums

How many of you plotters and pantsners have made it partway through your story and all of a sudden the wind that has been filling your sails and pushing you along peters out? There you are, left stranded, languishing in the doldrums, stagnating and despondent under the hot sun. Now what?

Don't fear, there are several things you could try to encourage that wind to return.

- List 20 things that could happen next (no fair using the first 15!).
- Maybe you need a plot twist to reenergize your story. If so, go for it. Just keep in mind that plot twists work best when they're unexpected but not outlandish.
- Analyze the scene to see if it's compelling enough. Is there sufficient conflict in the scene? In the story itself? What could be done to raise the stakes? What might be even funnier? What could be more dire?
- Try writing a scene (or two or three) out of order—skip to the middle, the black moment, even the end. You don't have to keep what you write, but at least you're moving somewhere instead of just sitting still.
- If trying to come up with forward motion is feeling like wading through quicksand, try plotting backwards from the end.
- Host a plotstorming party to get an injection of fresh ideas.

If those don't work, maybe you need to determine if you're not stagnating so much as being overcritical. Go for a walk to get some fresh perspective and recharge your muse, then put a muzzle on your internal editor and finish the scene or chapter. Remember, it doesn't have to be perfect. Get your second wind and keep pushing forward.

Even better fixes—Chocolate! Cookies! Tequila! Or not. Here are some non-fattening suggestions: Take a long, hot shower or bath, watch one of your favorite movies, do some yoga or meditate, read a good book—in other words, relax and let those great scene ideas come to you. Then, get your butt in a chair and write!

Crud, we're down to the worst case scenario, when nothing you've tried is working. Fear is creeping in that something is seriously wrong. It's time for a reality check. You may have hit the doldrums because your story lacks sufficient conflict for forward momentum. Review your protagonist's and antagonist's GMC. Do they have opposing goals and the motivation necessary to achieve those goals? If the answer is "No," or "Maybe," keep refining their GMC until your story conflict is rock-solid.

Remember, there is always a better solution than climbing up on that ledge and threatening to go airborne. Allow your friends, critique group partners, and fellow chapter

members to assist you in figuring out why you're stuck and help you find your prevailing wind again.

## **In the Maelstrom**

Yes! Finally! With a downpour of words raining down, you are glued to your computer, the story gushing faster than your fingers can type it. Pantsers and plotters are hard to tell apart in the midst of the deluge, both drumming away on keys. But how can you keep this word-storm from being more than just a quick cloudburst and turn it into a steady shower?

Here are some tips for both plotters and pantsers:

- Shut your office door and ignore your family for awhile. Unless they are howling in pain or screaming "Fire! Fire!", keep the door locked and barricaded. You need and deserve a little time to yourself. The rest of the world can wait.
- Send your internal editor out for some coffee—as in to Costa Rica to hand-pick the beans.
- Try playing some background music that fits the scene you're writing, like they do on the big screen. For example, if you are in the midst of an action scene, try *The Mummy* movie soundtrack. If a steamy love scene is on stage, pull out some of your favorite romantic songs, stick on your headphones, and crank it up.

## **The Calm after the Storm**

Don't get hung up about the process of writing or what "tool" to use. There is no right or wrong way, no matter how much someone else insists there is. Just because Ms. Rich-and-Famous-Author tells you the only way she can plot and write a book is lounging poolside on the Lido deck of the Love Boat while Captain Stubing massages her feet doesn't mean you have to run off to book passage on the next ship out of port.

Do whatever works for you. Experiment and see if some plotting methods stimulate your creativity more than others. Spend hours, days, weeks (however long it takes!) working out the basic details of your plot. Make sure your protagonist and antagonist have opposing goals, your story has sufficient conflict, and your plot outline (even if it's just the "what if" that you envision in your head) is full of compelling turning points. Then put a muzzle on your internal editor and WRITE!

## **Your Meteorologists' Information**

Feel free to contact either of us with any questions or thoughts or comments.

- Ann Charles: [ann@anncharles.com](mailto:ann@anncharles.com)
- Wendy Delaney: [wendy@wendydelaney.com](mailto:wendy@wendydelaney.com)

## Appendix A—Plot Tools

Here are the details (and websites) for some of the plot tools and devices that we mentioned in this workshop.

- Debra Dixon's *GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict* (<http://www.debradixon.com/gmc.html>)
- Three-Act Structure (<http://www.sydfield.com/paradigm.pdf>), (<http://www.screenplaymastery.com/structure.htm>)
- The Hero's Journey (<http://www.thewritersjourney.com/>)

## Appendix B—Plot and Character Development Websites

Following are the websites where you can find more articles (and forms) on plot and character development.

- <http://www.nanofimo.org/resources.html>
- [http://www.creativeoptions.com/Write/character\\_development.htm](http://www.creativeoptions.com/Write/character_development.htm)
- <http://www.beverlybrandt.com/spreadsheet.htm>
- <http://www.dramatica.com/theory/articles/article05.htm>
- <http://www.blakesnyder.com/tools/>
- [http://www.absolutewrite.com/novels/thickening\\_plot.htm](http://www.absolutewrite.com/novels/thickening_plot.htm)
- <http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/art/snowflake.php>
- <http://www.emilymckay.com/mummy1.htm>

## Bibliography

### *Ann Charles*

Ann Charles writes romantic mysteries that are sprinkled with romance and humor. She is currently toiling away on her next book while her agent works on selling her manuscripts. When she is not dabbling in fiction, she is penning writing-related articles or standing on her workshop soapbox, sharing what she has learned over the years about the craft and self-promotion.

You can also find her at <http://www.1stturningpoint.com>, where she and over two dozen other authors, reviewers, and PR consultants have joined together to teach and share (and learn from each other) all sorts of great information about promotion for both unpublished and published authors.

### *Wendy Delaney*

Former Golden Heart finalist and Emerald City Opener winner, Wendy Delaney (aka Wendy Linstad) writes fun-filled romantic mysteries. A long-time member of Romance Writers of America and Sisters in Crime, and this year's Emerald City Opener Contest Co-Coordinator, she has authored several newsletter articles, and regularly partners with Ann Charles to present writing workshops and sessions to help other authors develop their plots. Wendy makes her home in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and has two grown sons.