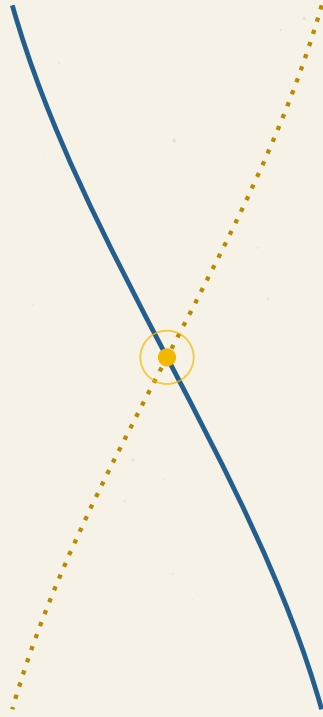




Plotting and Planning Your Novel

Your pre-writing manual

You'll see the plot grow as you answer each question.

DANIEL DAVID WALLACE

CHARACTER FIRST WRITING

START HERE

Welcome!

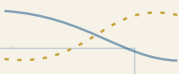
I'm so happy you joined this course.

This is the pre-writing manual for Plotting and Planning Your Novel. From the start, this has been one of the most popular parts of the course. People feel inspired and enriched by many parts of this course. However, they seem to feel the most affection and warmth towards this manual, if that makes sense.

This manual is meant to prepare you to sketch out or work out your story in detail. Rather than explain a bunch of ideas to you, it guides you to think of your story according to the principles and philosophies of the course. It's the first half of the major course manuals that you receive as an owner of PPN. In the second manual, the plotting manual, you can actually plan out your story in some detail. This manual is just meant to get you (re) started.

You can get comfortable and work through the entire manual in one go, or you can do bits and pieces as you have time. You can also print what you've written, or save it as a PDF, whenever you like.

One note before we begin: this manual is a reliable approach, not a law. Answer as many of these questions as you like, skip the ones that don't fit, and trust your own instincts when they pull against mine.



PART ONE

Scope out and imagine your novel



IMAGINE

What kind of book should you be writing?

Imagine this: you are travelling alone in an unfamiliar part of the country, but someone else is paying for it — work, perhaps, or a rich uncle. You have eaten well, and you are able to travel at a decent pace, and you feel safe and not too lonely. However, you do feel tired.

When you check into your hotel room, you are already tempted to just stay in and sleep early. And then you notice a paperback book on the nightstand. It's one you haven't read before, but you have the sense you might like it. You start to read, and you immediately feel comforted.

After one chapter you want to keep reading. "This is my kind of book!" you think.

Here's the question: what type or genre of book are you imagining?

- use this exercise to ask yourself: what kind of books do I actually like?
- could you write the sort of book you like to read?
- don't take this too seriously, but don't ignore it, either.

IMAGINE

Or let your dreams guide you...

You're having a dream. In this dream, you are meeting a good friend, someone who you haven't seen in a year. You have coffee or tea or a beer — or whatever would be natural. It's raining outside as you talk, but the place where you're meeting is warm and busy.

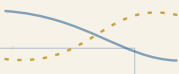
You can tell your friend is a little worried about you. In this dream reality, this dream-world, you haven't been writing for a while, and your friend has assumed that you still aren't writing.

But you realise you can set your friend straight, because you ARE writing again. In fact it's going really well. And when you think about this, this period of good, satisfying writing, you feel really happy, and proud.

You say some of this to your friend.

They respond, "What's the book about?"

You tell them:



IMAGINE

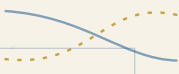
What could your novel focus on?

A topic you could hold with authority.

- What's a topic, idea, experience, or historical moment you find interesting and think you might speak on it with authority?

- What's something you love to talk about and research?

- What's an issue or political dilemma that you find impossible to stop thinking about?



IMAGINE

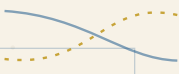
The setting

What are you thinking about the book's setting?

- Name four locations within the setting where you could place a dramatic scene (the kitchen, the maps section of the local bookshop, the muddy bank below the bridge).

- Describe one place outside the setting the characters could escape to for a day-trip / weekend away.

- Imagine a situation where this setting could be frightening. Imagine another where it could be inspiring. ("At night, however, as the mist rises off the lake, and the local church rings a hollow, tinny bell...")



IMAGINE

The setting, continued

The background, and a challenge.

- Invent four acts or events happening in the background of your setting — actual actions taken by people in the setting — that the narrator could mention casually as the main character goes about her day. ("The kayakers were heading out on the shimmering river...")

- Write two or three sentences of scenic description from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, a storyteller who is presenting the setting from "above." How does she present this city or region?

- Try out this challenge: write a single sentence of exposition that mentions two aspects of your setting, but which are somehow, in a non-obvious way, opposites or contradictory...

YOUR PROTAGONIST

Your protagonist

Answer as many of these questions as you like.

1. Who are they?

- Who is your character?
- Where do they live?
- Who in their life do they care about / listen to?
- How do they afford to live / what job do they do?
- What do they want from life?
- If every obstacle — personal and financial — was removed, what would they do?

2. What do they want?

- What would their ideal life look like?
- What about their current life frustrates them?
- What are one or two things — x and y — they badly want but do not have?
- What is a small practical version of x they could be focused on right now?

YOUR PROTAGONIST

What do they want? (continued)

Keep going — the plot is already growing in these answers.

- What has stopped them getting x?
- How do they make peace with not achieving x?
- What stories do they tell themselves about why they haven't got it?
- Do they have any strange beliefs about how to achieve x?
- Have they developed any bad or counterproductive habits related to x?

3. What are they like to be around?

- What kind of food do they eat when they don't feel good?
- If they were given \$100, what would they spend it on?
- What do they never spend money on?
- When do they feel good looking?

YOUR PROTAGONIST

What are they like to be around? (continued)

The small stuff is where characters come alive.

- What do they hope people think about them?
- What do they fear people think about them?
- What do they not grasp people often think about them?
- What attitude or belief do they find impossible to forgive in others?
- What is one thing they should know better about, but...
- When did they last speak to their parent(s)?
- What is the part of their current job they wish they didn't have to do?
- How clean is their bathroom sink?
- In what area do they feel unshakeable confidence?
- What is one thing they love explaining to other people?
- Under what circumstance should you be careful around them?

PLOT THREAD ONE

The first commitment — C1

When we meet your protagonist, she should already be in motion, with some sort of goal or project. And it really should be a practical, relatable, external, easily explained goal. It should be something that a person can either get or not get, like "make it to the end of the month without going overdrawn in his bank account." It shouldn't be abstract like "feel at peace." It shouldn't be complicated like "save the planet from space robots." Why? Before we get to the space robots, we want to first get our reader empathising with our protagonist's struggle. Only then, after this reader "buy in" has been achieved, do we start raising the stakes and widening the scope.

In this course, we call this goal the first commitment — C1 for short. It's "the project": the thing she is already doing when the book opens. And the first commitment (usually) comes from the world. Someone hands it to her, or demands she follow it. C1 tends to be public, easy to explain, the kind of goal you could describe at a dinner party.

Pick a simple, narrowly focused objective for your protagonist:

- to get married to someone everyone approves of
- to keep her job during a reshuffle
- to stay in touch with his childhood crush while he goes off to college
- to survive a brutal caravan journey
- to make one new friend at a new senior living centre

Scenes you might sketch out relating to C1:

- **THE HANDOFF**
Who gives her this goal, or makes it official?
- **THE PROMISE**
When does she declare that she means to do this?
- **THE CHECK-IN**
Who will ask her, later in the book, how it's going?

THE INNER DEMON

The burden

Your protagonist should also be carrying some kind of "demon" — a regret, a fear, a trait that fills them with self-disgust, a secret they are hiding, or a weight on their soul. In this course we call it the burden or the "B plot."

Why give the character a B plot? Sometimes the character's burden explains why they can't resolve their two commitments. Sometimes the burden is the source material for the second commitment.

Your protagonist might be:

- always getting into unhealthy romances
- a recovering alcoholic
- bored by his successful society life
- still in love with her ex
- haunted by her terrible temper
- the son of a demon father and vampire mother
- afraid of being alone

Two notes, before we move on. First, not every story needs a burden — in *The Age of Innocence*, nothing distinct in Newland Archer's past is obviously generating his trouble. If your story hasn't got one, that's okay. Second, don't lead with it. Opening chapters that process the wound directly — flashbacks, grief, preamble — delay the story. In the course, we call this "leading with B." Start her in motion on C1, and let the burden emerge as the story unfolds. Usually, the ideal is not to *explain* the burden, but to show its impact on the character's current life.

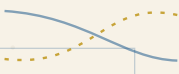
PLOT THREAD TWO

The second commitment — C2

Now the biggest idea in this manual. At about the quarter mark of your novel, your protagonist makes a second commitment.

Sometimes the second commitment arrives from the world: a young trader has to save his collective, and his two mentors urge two different courses on him — one principled, one wicked — and he tries to walk both roads. Sometimes it seems to be summoned by something within the protagonist (the "wrong" love interests who speaks to the protagonist's dream of a different life). The key is that it opposes the first: she cannot advance one without damaging the other.

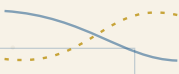
This tension is what gives your story a middle. Without it, you tend to just have a premise, and as a result your novel may well run out of steam around page 75. What people often call a "messy" middle is really a "missing" middle: there is not enough for the character to do in the middle.



PLOT THREAD TWO

Some second commitments

- the detective, told to close the case quickly, realises the victim was investigating the chemicals that may have killed his own wife — and begins to really investigate
- Newland Archer's fiancée is an ideal young woman — and her cousin, the scandalous cosmopolitan Ellen, has just returned to the city
- she is finally ready for promotion — and falls for the man her new assignment requires her to deceive
- to defend his star ship from the aliens, a young woman must accept the help of the ship's dangerous AI — and every time she uses its power, she becomes less human
- Sketch your second commitment — even a rough guess helps



CHECK YOUR BEARINGS

Can you already write a synopsis?

Don't worry if you can't complete this yet. However, now that we have mused about the setting, the protagonist, and some of the concerns of the story, perhaps you are ready to sketch something out.

PS When someone asks, "What's your book about?" they are asking to hear about a dilemma or a cliffhanger. They are NOT asking about the "themes" or ideas of the novel.

I suggest you write your "synopsis" in this form:

"My character in my setting is trying to do something. When she learns about something else, and tries to do something about it... she discovers she has to choose between x and y..."

That x and that y? Those are your two commitments.

- Your synopsis

LIMITS ARE YOUR FRIEND

Limits are really your friend

If you want to tell a good story, it's important that things move forward because the plot is developing. It's surprisingly easy to write a book where you're just moving the camera around from place to place, or view to view, or time to time, and the plot isn't actually changing.

Focus is useful with novels. When you are imagining your story, it's really good to look out for ways to reduce the moving parts that divide your strength, distract you, and sap your reader's attention.

This isn't about writing a basic or trivial novel. It's very important not to confuse the depth and surprise of great art with just more stuff, more elements, more moving parts. You can have a profound main character, a mystery that shifts and develops, flashbacks, digressions, and all kinds of supporting characters. But writers tend to underestimate the cost of complexity.

When you look at your story, take care of these three elements.

1. Location

Often, travel in a story can be a substitute for plot and character development. How many major locations do you have in your story? A major location might be the city of London, or the stretch of countryside in Vermont where the story is happening. I'm not saying the characters can't take a trip away for one chapter. But if we're moving back and forth between London and Vermont, that's a level of orchestration that may prove tricky.

2. Duration

How much fictional time does your story take place in? Is the flow of events basically continuous, or would you have to write "two weeks later", "a month later", "later that summer"? If the duration is longer than a season, or discontinuous, you'll have to marshal the passing of time. And when you show the reader that something is important in chapter one, they expect it to still be important in chapter two. If the girl's gone missing in chapter one, we want to see the detectives looking for her in chapter two. If instead someone says "a year later", the reader thinks: wait, what? I thought this was important.

It can be really powerful to look again at your premise and ask if it's at all possible to shrink the duration of the story, to one summer or a couple of weeks. You can always have flashbacks. Characters can read letters from the past, tell stories about the past, and make predictions about the future, and you can always have a prologue and an epilogue. It is often extremely valuable if the main events can all take place in a fairly compressed amount of time.

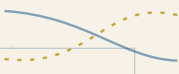
3. Point of view

It is usually easier to tell a story from a relatively small number of point-of-view characters. In many cases, unless you are telling a story with a lot of world-building and scope, where we are depicting the march of armies and so on, one POV character is more than enough. Two POV characters are often useful for certain kinds of stories (romance or a pair of detectives), but it's always worth asking: do I really need more than one central point of view? Two very different POV characters both need a best friend, a job, a house. You're taking on more writing than you realise.

As you will see in the plotting manual later in this course, there is more than enough to do to develop a brilliant character arc for one POV character. Three hundred pages will soon seem not that long when you think about how many components there are in a really appealing story that resolves well with one POV character.

If you have two, can you go down to one? If you have three, can you go down to two? Or if you're telling the kind of story that must have two POV protagonists, like a romance where you want to depict both sides of the relationship, look out for ways later in the course to streamline the storytelling.

- How many major locations does your story have? Could you lose one?



- How much fictional time does your story cover? Could it shrink, to one summer or a couple of weeks?

- How many point-of-view characters do you have? Could you go down by one?

RESEARCH TRIAGE

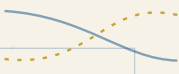
Big-level research

What big-level research have you done? Or need to do? One rule: once you start drafting, you should probably keep going. So we have to focus **ONLY** on concerns and complications that will block you from writing a first draft.

Big-level research includes: when is your story set? What season was it? What does the place look like? And — are there any major plot points that rely on detailed, specific knowledge? For instance, if your character is going to spend the entire book building a school, you should probably work out beforehand roughly how long this type of school takes to build, and how much it costs.

But I suggest that there are fewer of these "big" elements than you think. Anything that could be fixed in a line edit **DOES NOT** count as a big-level research concern. If you could retype the price of the shoes your protagonist buys or the time it takes to drive to Glasgow — and not much else in the story would change — do not spend time researching it now.

- Just the big-level, crucial research, such as:



RESEARCH TRIAGE

Mid-level research: leave this empty for now

Every single "fact" or "plausible detail" that you worry about should not be researched until the first draft is done. Yes, you need to figure this stuff out before readers or critics see the book. But right now we are writing the first draft. Just write "tk" or "add later" and keep going.

As you write the complete draft, and come across facts that you are unsure about, note them down here (How to recover from arsenic poisoning? What cases does the FBI take on?). And when the draft is done, work through and research, making changes where necessary. (E.g. you discover that arsenic has no treatment, so you change the poison to something else to allow the rest of your recovery scene to work.)

- Facts to check after the draft is done

THE SUPPORTING CAST

Create your secondary characters

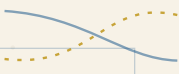
Answer these about each supporting character you create in the pages ahead.

One way to make your story feel coherent to the reader is to draw your cast of characters from your main character's plot threads. You don't need to relate every character to these threads, but it's a useful model for keeping the story on track.

To recap: your protagonist has three: C1, a first commitment — the practical objective she's pursuing when the book opens. The burden — the wound or weight she carries. And C2, a second commitment, forged from the burden, arriving at the quarter mark as good news. We need secondary characters for each thread — at least one or two for each.

Possible questions for the secondary characters:

- What kind of food do they eat when they don't feel good?
- If they were given \$100, what would they spend it on?
- Why did they skip going to the gym yesterday?
- What do they hope people think about them?
- What do they fear people think about them?
- What attitude or belief do they find impossible to forgive in others?
- What is one thing they should know better about, but...
- When did they last speak to their parent(s)?
- What is the part of their current job they wish they didn't have to do?
- How clean is their bathroom sink?
- In what area do they feel unshakeable confidence?
- What is one thing they love explaining to other people?
- Under what circumstance should you be careful around them?

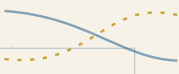


THE SUPPORTING CAST

Supportive C1 characters

What are some characters that are helping the character get C1? For instance:

- an ambitious friend: "Go for it!"
- a mentor or influential contact: "I believe in you."
- an authority figure who is willing to give out C1, under certain conditions
- a sidekick, like a partner or a helpful, expert ghost or computer
- Describe them here

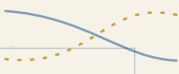


THE SUPPORTING CAST

Hindering C1 characters

What are some characters that are blocking the character from getting C1?

- a rival for C1
- an official who doesn't want the character to get C1
- a bad person who wants to keep C1 for themselves
- Describe them here

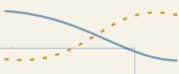


THE SUPPORTING CAST

Burden characters

What is one character who knows about the protagonist's burden? This character might be helpful — they might want to soothe the wound — or damaging — a manipulative ex-boyfriend who knows exactly the wrong buttons to push.

- a love interest
- an accusing memory from the past
- a family ghost who warns them about the dangers of the old wound
- a supportive friend
- Describe them here

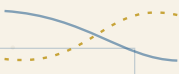


THE SUPPORTING CAST

Helpful C2 characters

You should have at least one character who wants the protagonist to succeed at, or understand, C2. Otherwise the protagonist will have to spend way too long just figuring things out by themselves.

- an industry expert on C2 ("You want to build a school? Here's how...")
- an Obi-Wan who teaches lessons in C2 ("This kung fu is not easy to learn.")
- a corrupt accountant way over his head ("Keep me alive and I'll talk.")
- Describe them here



THE SUPPORTING CAST

Hindering C2 characters

You should have at least one character who doesn't want the protagonist to succeed at, or understand, C2. This is the force that is going to make the second and third quarters so difficult.

- the villain ultimately behind C2
- the cruel henchman who does the dirty work
- an enforcer of conformity who rises up once our protagonist leaves the safe path
- Describe them here

THE SUPPORTING CAST

The villain / antagonist

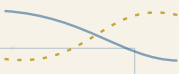
Not all novels have a villain. Someone who blocks a plot thread is not a villain, nor really an antagonist. Such a character, like a hindering C1 character or a malevolent burden character, just makes things harder.

A villain, on the other hand, takes active steps to oppose the protagonist, and seems to embody the very thing the protagonist is fighting against. Additionally, the villain usually gains additional resources and allies as the third quarter progresses.

A romance novel might lack a villain — it's just a struggle for the two lovers to get together. An urban fantasy, on the other hand, usually shows us someone who is behind it all, who needs to be defeated.

If you have a villain — the true force opposing the second commitment — great. Describe her here. PS there is no need to make her relatable or sympathetic. If you don't have a villain, you can list instead all the problems that will or could emerge as the protagonist pursues C2 (environmental, financial, social etc).

- Your villain, or your list of problems



A REWARD

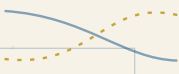
Cool stuff

Wow! You have completed part one of this pre-writing manual. Awesome!

Always remember this: you are doing the right thing. You are doing something important when you focus on the book you want to write.

Here's one final prompt for part one. Is there any "cool stuff" that you definitely want to include in your novel? An amazing feast, a boating trip, a journey into the underworld, a rough and tumble betting arena, a super-powered battle, a thoughtful moment among the dunes and the rocky coast?

- Your cool stuff



PART TWO

A first glimpse of your plot



The first quarter

This course suggest that you look at your story as having four quarters: four parts, each about a quarter of the length. You don't need to plan them yet. That comes later in the course, in the plotting manual. For now, let yourself imagine what might happen in each one. Rough guesses are perfect.

- What do you imagine happening in the first quarter of your book? Where do we meet her, and what is she working towards? How does the second commitment start to pop up?

The second quarter

The third quarter

The fourth quarter

THE SEND-OFF

Wow. How does that feel?

I'm so excited for you.

Send me an email at info@danieldavidwallace.com and let me know how it feels to have planned out this far.

Alright. Refill your drink of choice, stand up, stretch.

Ready for the next stage of the course?

Because now comes the best part of the course.

Daniel