

Notecarding: Plotting Under Pressure

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Here's the scenario. You find yourself in a situation where you have to do a book in a hurry. Could be you got a letter back from an editor or agent telling you that, while they can't use the book you submitted, they would like to see your next project. Could be you took on more contracts than you have time to complete. Could be you forgot about a pending deadline, or put it off because Real Life intruded in a big way.

In any case, now you're faced with a book that must be done to a professional level in a severely limited amount of time, and, for real fun, let's say that you don't even have any idea yet what the book is going to be about. Maybe you know most of the characters, if it's a book in a continuing series. Maybe the whole thing is just a vague, nebulous blur in your mind – you sort of know what you'd like it to be about, but beyond that, you're in the dark.

Maybe you haven't a clue. You are as blank as the page in front of you. Maybe you simply have never been able to plot out a novel in advance and would like to try it.

No matter what your situation, don't panic. This workshop will teach you how to create plots out of thin air, with nothing but work, and more work, and maybe a bit of work after that. Sound fun? Well, actually, it is.

Preliminaries

In order to create this plot out of thin air, you're going to have to do a bit of book dissection. You're going to have to guess about following things in advance:

- Who are the primary viewpoint characters in the book?
- How long do you want the book to be?
- How long do you want each scene to be?

If you've never written a book before, I'll help you out with this.

A viewpoint character is the one through whose eyes you see some or all of the action in a novel. In books told in the first person – **The dragon was coming after me – flying close and tight behind me, with the flames of its breath heating up my heels as I ran** – you usually have only one viewpoint character, the narrator. In books told in the third person – **The dragon shot around the corner after Erin, flapping hard and breathing fire at his heels** – you can have any number of viewpoint characters, but for the best flow of the book, you should spend most of your time with just a few. One to six viewpoint characters is pretty manageable. The hero, the sidekick, the villain, the love interest, the villain's sidekick, and even the hero's cat are all potential viewpoint characters.

To come up with characters, you can take a look at [How to Create a Character](#), and the [Character Creation Workshop](#), as well as all sorts of books and other articles on the subject. Remember – while you're at this stage in the process, nothing is written in stone. Create more characters than you think you'll need, pick out the ones that really sing to you, and move on to the next step.

How long should the book be? Barring guidelines or contract clauses that state otherwise, figure on something between 90,000 and 125,000 words. You may end up going higher, but don't plan on going lower – novels shorter than 90,000 words are hard as hell to sell.

How long do you want each scene to be? Depends on your writing style and a lot of other things, but to get all the goodies

that you need into a scene, you generally have to give yourself a bit of elbow room. Figure on more than a thousand words and less than five thousand. If you aren't sure how to create scenes, or what you need to have in one, do the [Scene Creation Workshop](#), or read any number of excellent books or articles by other authors on the subject.

The Mathematics of Magic

I'm going to start a demo book for you, just so you can see how this goes.

I'm going to create four characters who will be my viewpoint characters. My heroine, named Elsie, is a twenty-something house-painter who recently lost her best friend. The hero is Mike, a sturdy, intelligent businessman bored out of his skull by the mundane nature of his existence. Mike's best friend is a free spirit with a tendency toward trouble named Frisco. And the villain is... hmhhh. Let's go weird with this, and make the book a paranormal. Let's say the villain is Elsie's dead best friend, who has been involved in wickedness that Elsie never knew about, and who ended up dead because of Elsie making an error – if things had gone the way this best friend planned, Elsie would have been dead, and the friend would have been... something else. Let it rest. The friend needs a name. Let's call her Annabelle.

Knowing nothing more about that, I'm ready to do a little math. Let's say that I want my book to be 100,000 words long, and I want each scene to run an average of two thousand words.

BOOK MATH FORMULA ONE:

Number of words Scene length in words = Number of Scenes

I'll need fifty scenes to complete the book. I have four characters through whose eyes we'll be discovering the story. I don't want to give each of them equal time, though – I want

to spend most of the time with my hero and my heroine, only seeing the action through the eyes of the sidekick and the villain from time to time.

So say that I give my hero one third of the scenes, and my heroine one third of the scenes, and split the remaining third equally between sidekick and villain.

To do that, I'll divide my fifty scenes into thirds.

50 3 = 16 with a remainder of 2

For the moment, ignore the remainder and concentrate on sixteen. That's how many scenes Mike and Elsie will have. Annabelle and Frisco divide the final third between them. $16 \div 2 = 8$, so they'll each get eight scenes. And you have that remainder of two – you can pass out the final two scenes to whomever you'd like to have them. I'm going to give an extra one to Annabelle, and one to Frisco.

So here's what we have:

CHARACTER	# OF SCENES
Elsie	16
Mike	16
Frisco	9
Annabelle	9

Break Out the Index Cards

This next bit is pure fun.

Get out a pack of index cards, write the name of each character on the correct number of cards, and if you'd like, on a few extras – I'll make eighteen for Elsie and Mike, ten or eleven for Frisco and Annabelle.

Once the names are on the cards, pull out a card set – I start

with the secondary viewpoint characters, because this lets me let the main story float for a while, building up momentum.

With one set of character cards in hand, start writing down one-sentence scene ideas, one per card. Be a little crazy – just write down all the fun things that you can think of that could happen to the character you have in hand, keeping in mind that all scenes require conflict and change.

Here's a demo:

- **Frisco** – playing with the Ouija board alone, runs into the ghost of Annabelle, who tries to seduce him to her cause.
- **Frisco** – running with Mike, confesses that he's been using the Ouija board and has had some cool experiences; invites Mike to try the thing out.
- **Frisco** – meets Elsie and both likes her and has a bad feeling about her, as if he's seeing her through two pairs of eyes – he decides to see if he can get to know her better.
- **Frisco** – and Mike take Elsie snowboarding, and Frisco makes a careless mistake that almost gets Elsie killed; afterward, he cannot figure out how he made that error.

And so on. These are not written in any particular order, though you'll find that as you're throwing down ideas, some will fall into a clear linear order. Some won't. Don't worry about it. Never deny yourself a scene just because you can't figure out how it will fit.

Do cards for each of your characters. Don't worry about referring to the other cards as you put these scenes down – just let yourself have fun with them, coming up with one-line descriptions of exciting scenes that you want to write. As you get a few things on paper, you'll find that you start having ideas for other characters. And a rough idea for the story itself will start forming, too – what it's about, where it

could start, how it could finish.

By the time you have all of your scene ideas on cards, you may have a clear idea of how the story will go. Or you may not. Doesn't matter. Find yourself a bit of floor spare, and put the cards on the floor, laying them out in the following fashion:

Elsie	Mike	Annabelle	Frisco
Elsie	Mike	Annabelle	Frisco
Cont.	Cont.	Cont.	Cont.

Don't worry when you're putting the cards out about placing them in any particular order – you'll get to that. Just keep them in character columns.

Now. There is probably one scene that stands out as the perfect scene to open the book – it might be from any of the characters' points of view, but when you think about what you want to read on the first page, one or two of the scenes will really stand out.

Put the scene that you prefer as your opener at the top of your row for that character.

Look through your other scenes for all the characters, and see which scenes, if any, are dependent on it, and which scenes for the other characters should be first for them.

Start putting things in order, leaving your scene cards in their character rows for the time being. You'll find that some of the scenes that you imagined being toward the end do remarkable things when moved to the beginning, and that your subconscious has given you some terrific correspondences – one character will be doing something that meshes beautifully but strangely with what another character is doing, giving the story depth that you did not anticipate.

You'll discover surprises – scenes that play off of each other

to create humor or tragedy that you had not foreseen. You'll find a great deal of magic waiting as you shuffle your little squares of paper around.

You'll also find scenes that don't seem to fit, as well as some that strike you as dull or pointless. Scrap the dull or pointless ones, but don't give up on the ones that don't fit. By working in backstory, changing some of your plot around, and devising some deceptions and surprises, you can often create a place for the out-of-place scene that will add layers, depth, and power to your story.

Once you have your notecards in order by character, it's time to put them into one long, single line. Start with a strong scene, end with a strong scene, and in the middle make sure all your events could happen in the order in which you've placed them (though as you start typing this in, you can change things that don't quite work.)

Once the cards are in order and you've read through them once or twice to make sure you have them the way you want them, sit down at the computer, type them in using either outline or bullet format.

Copy and paste them into the bottom of your novel document. Now just look at each sentence-scene, write the scene that it describes, and delete it when you're done with it.

Working in this fashion, you eliminate all those get out of bed have a cup of coffee drive to work answer the e-mail and FINALLY something happens scenes that you can get otherwise. You're writing from exciting bit to exciting bit, trusting your brain and talent to tie everything in and to give you some great surprises along the way. You don't have an outline so much as you have a rather sparse roadmap, one that leaves plenty of room for adventure and that won't take the fun out of your story before you've even written it.

And you have something that can be completed on deadline, and

that should be fresh and coherent and good when it's done.

Good luck with your project – and I hope you have as much fun with this technique as I have.

NOTE: Plotting fiction is the art of telling a story readers step into and live inside and need to see reach a strong ending. Plot is conflict creation... and conflict resolution. [If you need help with it, take a look at my Create A Plot Clinic, and learn how to make the story you're writing matter to YOUR readers.](#)

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