It is never too late to add complexity to the story you’re weaving—or to fix problems that find their way in. The best authors know that much of a novel’s success depends on the interplay of plot and subplot. If your plot seems to be falling flat, or if your story starts to resonate as too one-note, it could be that a well-woven subplot is just what you need to add the kind of complexity and tension that readers crave.

Think of subplots as simply strands of stories that support or drive the main plot. With subplots—and the secondary characters who populate them—you can:

* Advance your story in satisfying increments.
* Unleash transformative forces on your main characters: growth or corruption, gain or loss.
* Reveal information to your main characters or to the reader.
* Pivot your action, provide twists.
* Speed up or slow down your story’s pace.
* Induce mood: menace, comedy, pathos, triumph.
* Patch holes in (or solve other problems with) your main plot.
* Insert—or, even better, challenge!—a moral lesson.

Subplots bring realism to your main plot simply by existing—by interrupting the flow. Why is this? Because *life* doesn’t move forward all at once. Interruptions happen, change rushes in, we juggle three or 10 balls at once. Readers don’t expect continuous narratives. They don’t expect monofilament, so to speak.

When we begin to view subplots as material to weave into our main action, it becomes easier to see the strands individually—and to feel confident handling them. Here’s how to do it.

**Spinning Subplots**

Although you can begin the weaving itself at any stage of writing, it’s helpful to work out your subplots as fully as you can before starting to integrate them into your main plot. In other words, before we weave, we must spin our threads.

Begin by asking yourself: *What do I want to accomplish with this subplot? What do I need? What do I want? What would be fun to work with?* For most of us, subplots serve to make life difficult for our characters. And since most fiction starts with characters, so will your subplots.

Try these seven techniques that reveal themselves in the fabric of the most memorably woven stories.

**1. The Isolated Chunk**

**How to Do It:** Forget transitions and just start a new section or chapter. Tell your story-within-a-story, and then return to your main narrative.

If your narrative is solely first person, you’ll find this technique especially useful, as your main character can experience only one thing at a time.

**2. The Parallel Line**

You can also write a subplot that never touches the main plot, or that begins separately before they converge.

A prime example of parallel plotting is Frederick Forsyth’s cat-and-mouse classic, *The Day of the Jackal.* Early in the novel we meet a nameless professional—later known as Jackal—negotiating an assassination. Soon we’re shown the police becoming aware of a conspiracy. From then on, Forsyth cuts back and forth between the Jackal doing his work and the police inspector Lebel doing his, and the result is electrifying. The two plots converge only at the very end, when Lebel and the Jackal meet.

**How to Do It:** Start your story with your main plot and get going with your chief cast of characters, especially your hero. Then insert the beginning of your second plot. Switch back and forth between the stories as evenly as you can; this will emphasize their symmetrical/diametric natures.

You can make your parallel plot any size and significance that suits you. In the above example, the two plots are very nearly equal—though we know the score by the title, which is not *The Day of the Police Inspector*. This is especially useful for a protagonist-antagonist story, like many thrillers, mysteries and young adult tales. If your parallel plot is a minor subplot, simply give it less real estate relative to your main plot.

**3. The Swallowtail**

When you want to create suspense that pays off big, try launching two parallel plots, then weaving them together firmly at a certain point.

The difference between parallel construction and swallowtail is that the two paths of the swallowtail always converge and interact with each other for a fairly lengthy part of the story. Parallel plots may never converge; if they do, it is usually briefly, at the story’s end.

Swallowtail stories start with one main plot and then, after it’s off and running, launch into a completely different tale. The reader naturally wonders what, if anything, *this* guy and his situation will have to do with *that* guy and his. Which introduces suspense, just like that. For a while, it seems as if the two lines of action are completely separate, but eventually they move closer to each other, which heightens the reader’s anticipation. Then they mesh, producing extra reader satisfaction, and both plots gain complexity going forward.

Here, in stripped-down form, is an example of a swallowtail plot:

**Plot 1:** It’s the big day of the nursery school picnic. The kids arrive at the park, and the teacher and moms unpack the coolers.

**Plot 2:** A man angrily drives to a bar for a drink.

**Plot 1:** The kids play tag while the hot dogs cook.

**Plot 2:** The man downs five whiskeys in a row.

**Plot 1:** The moms run after a kid who’s strayed into the street.

**Plot 2:** The man gets into his pickup truck.

**Plot 1:** The kids start in on the potato chips and hot dogs.

**Plot 2:** The man decides to take a shortcut on the park’s service road.

Is your pulse quickening just a little? Going forward, we know that the drunk driver and the picnic will soon converge. When it happens, that man and one of the children, let’s say (or parent or teacher or all three), will be bonded in some way forever, and a more fully integrated Plot 3 begins as the story becomes the story of their relationships.

How to Do It: Alternating between two or more parallel plots (though more than three risks confusing the reader) makes your separate characters and their stories converge on a joint point, that is, a piece of business they have in common.

In the previous example, the joint point is literally a place. But you could also choose a person as a joint point, or a family, or an event, such as a political rally or a natural disaster—you get the idea.

**4. The In-and-Out**

In the first-person narrative of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the narrator, Scout Finch, interacts with separate sets of characters, all of whom have their own agendas. While the main plot focuses on her father and his revolutionary courtroom journey, Scout’s life is informed by subplots involving: her brother Jem and their friend Dill; the neighborhood gorgon Mrs. Dubose; the living ghost Boo Radley; the family busybody Aunt Alexandra; and Scout’s troubles at school.

The characters who populate those subplots dip in and out of Scout’s life in a satisfying progression, each incident a complete little story in itself: Scout and Jem’s discovery of the trinkets in the tree, for instance, or the creepy event of Scout finding herself wrapped in an unknown blanket while sleepily watching Miss Maudie’s house burn down. Both of those moments, separated by others, are parts of the Boo Radley subplot and serve to humanize Boo before we (with Scout) meet him.

**How to Do It:** Let your subplots shuttle in and out as needed. For example, you can bring a mentor into the first or second chapter, have him dispense some advice, then send him off on a journey that may have nothing to do with your story. He comes back in the seventh chapter and is once again available for consultation with your hero. He might have encountered trouble while away, even trouble he brings back with him (in the form, say, of a sketchy sidekick).

I might add that if you’re using a first-person narrator and want to show a subplot out of his range, so to speak, you can drop in chapters written in third person, then return to your first-person narrator. Many contemporary writers do this.

**5. The Bookend**

Readers love recursion. If you introduce a subplot early, then leave it more or less alone until you resolve it near the end, readers will be delighted. They’ve almost forgotten about that rich drama queen who beat her maid with her tennis racket, but now here she is, set upon by the maid’s two aunts from Colombia, both lawyers, who engineer a hostile takeover of the queen’s retail cosmetics empire.

Ahh, sweet payback!

I usually save a subplot to wrap up last (after the main plot), because it gives readers a place to collect themselves after the emotional high of the climax and savor the fact that order has been restored. Then they get an extra, unexpected treat.

**How to Do It:** This one’s easy, really a variation of the Isolated Chunk (No. 1): Simply write and insert two chunks, separated by most of the book.

It’s nice if you give a bit of foreshadowing somewhere in the middle. In the above example, I might insert a scene where there’s a welcome party for the maid who’s gone home to Colombia, and she and her aunts sit apart for a few minutes, discussing—oh, mergers and acquisitions.

**6. The Bridge Character**

Bridge characters are extremely useful for weaving any kind of subplot into your fiction. Example: You have a respected doctor who’s in debt to her bookie, and you have a hydrocodone addict who doctor-shops for his drugs. This character becomes a bridge between the tidy world of the troubled doctor, and the dangerous world of the streets.

**How to Do It:** Invent a character who is as different from your current crop as possible—someone who occupies a separate world. Or start with the two worlds you want to bridge, and think up a character who can do it.

Doctors, lawyers, counselors and clergy in particular all have great potential as bridge characters. Why? Because people end up telling them their secrets.

**7. The Clue**

For writers of mystery, suspense or thrillers, weaving in clues is a major—and particularly strategic—subplot challenge. Clues propel the unraveling of a puzzle, and they serve to entertain your audience. They’re optional inclusions in most genres, but if you’re writing crime, you’ve gotta have ’em.

**How to Do It:** Plant clues early and often, noting an important distinction: A clue for your fictional sleuth is a different thing than a clue for your reader. Some of the most intriguing clues have sprung from the minds of authors who had a great idea for a clue but not the slightest notion how it would work out—but put it in anyway, hoping for the best. I happen to know a prominent author who’s gotten away with this more than once. So I say, go ahead and let your imagination loose.

On the other hand, if you want to plant a clue for your *readers* to sink their suspicious little teeth into, start by considering your ending. Let’s say you’ve got a dead body in the beginning and Percy Perpetrator begging for mercy at the end. If he did it with the lead pipe in the library, you might permit a minor character, early on, to remark that Percy is writing his dissertation on cellulose-destroying organisms. And an astute reader might realize that most paper is made of wood fibers, which are composed of cellulose. Hmm. Where’s a lot of paper? The library!

You might later insert the lord of the manor apologizing for a bit of remodeling affecting the plumbing in the old north wing. And a perceptive reader might remember what plumbing in old houses was made of. This is what makes [mystery writing](http://www.writersonlineworkshops.com/workshops/course-descriptions/essentials-of-mystery-writing/) fun.

**Finishing the Fabric**

Give yourself permission to expand your fictional world. An unwieldy subplot that interrupts your narrative for too long? Break it into pieces and disperse them more broadly. Or invent two characters instead of one to carry it out. Do a jump cut between plot and subplot, and let it sit for a day. Then read it and see how it looks. You’ll be weaving like a master in no time!

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