

Holly Lisle's

Create Your Professional Plot Outline

Mini-Course



NONFICTION

About the Author



Holly Lisle is the author of more than thirty pro-published novels (and counting), including recent novels **The Ruby Key** (Orchard Books, Scholastic), **Hawkspar** (Tor), **Talyn** (Tor), **Midnight Rain** (Onyx, NAL, and is published internationally in many countries and languages. She's been writing professionally since 1991, and has been making a full-time living at it since 1992.

For most of that time, Holly has been paying forward to other writers by writing about writing on her website, <http://hollylisle.com>, putting together and for quite a few years running a writers' community, doing a weblog, and more.

You can receive her writing information, inspiration, and encouragement via her newsletter, available here:

<http://hollylisle.com/newsletter.html>

Her current writing courses:

THE CLINICS

- **Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic** <http://hollylisle.com/cap.html>
- **Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic** <http://hollylisle.com/cc.html>
- **Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic** <http://hollylisle.com/cal.html>
- **Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic** <http://hollylisle.com/cac.html>

CRITICAL SKILLS SERIES

- **Holly Lisle's How To Write Through And Use Life's Disasters** <http://hollylisle.com/cs1.html>
- **Holly Lisle's How To Find Your Writing Discipline** <http://hollylisle.com/cs2.html>

CAREER NOVELIST SERIES

- **Holly Lisle's How To Beat Writer's Block (audio course)** <http://hollylisle.com/bwb.html>

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Creating A Professional Plot Outline

In this workshop you'll develop the basics of a working plot outline, starting with a character-based idea and finishing with a first draft that you can use to write your story or book.

You can develop an idea from any of a number of directions. Start with:

- a structure
- questions
- a twist
- a character
- worldbuilding,
- or more than a dozen other entry points into your story

For this workshop, I'll demonstrate plot development techniques using an idea drawn from character development.

- **I'll explain the process.**
- **I'll give you a demonstration.**
- **And then you'll do an exercise that will build a part of your plot.**

Ready?

Figure Out Your Character

- **Sum up what you know about your character to begin with in one short paragraph**

I like my character Cadence Drake, so I'll use her as the main character in this workshop. From her previous book (**Hunting the Corrigan's Blood** <http://hollylisle.com/htcb.html>) I know that she is a finder of lost things primarily hired by corporations who can afford her high fees, that she lost her best friend in a fire, that she has a really cool experimental prototype spaceship for which she does not have legal paperwork, and, though this may or may not be relevant for this book, she has injected herself with a serum that is toxic to the recombinantly-created vampires who have developed a powerful cabal in her universe.

Just rehashing this abbreviated biography has given me some clues to the story I want to write next. And some things I don't want to write, as well.

EXERCISE ONE:

Write your own single paragraph describing what you know about your main character. Keep it short and focus on the most important things—what he does, what he needs, what he fears.

Decide On Your Central Idea

- **Determine what you like and don't like about your original summary**

I don't want to follow up on the vampire thread in this second story; I developed a huge universe for Cady, and I don't want to get bogged down in that one tiny facet of it and have the books stereotyped as vampire books.

I do want to follow up on the death of Badger, Cady's long-time best friend and sometime lover, who was killed in a firefight.

And I have discovered a device to get me into the story, as well. Cadence doesn't have legal papers for her ship, the Corrigan's Blood, which she acquired when one of her employers tried to kill her in lieu of paying her. The employer ended up dead instead, and Cadence helped herself to his ship. I see the entry point to this story being the fact that if Cady is going to keep this ship - and she IS going to keep this ship - she has to acquire some good fake papers for it. And fast.

EXERCISE TWO:

Select and list the points you want to pursue, the ideas that you find fascinating and compelling. Three or four items will be enough.

Write Your Opener

So from the following tiny bit of background,

- best friend & partner dead
- piloting stolen spaceship
- profession is finder of lost things for well-heeled clients

...I have my opening set-up. Cadence is going to go looking for a place to get quality fake papers, and because the rightful owner of the ship is dead under suspicious, even dreadful, circumstances, she has to get the papers from someone not inclined to ask questions. This suggests moving into a dangerous situation, and I think she'll meet a dangerous but interesting character—one who is willing to give her the papers she wants in exchange for the barter of her services. He'll give her time-limited interim papers, and in exchange she'll find something important of his that has gone missing.

We'll worry about what that is later. For now, I have a solid opening for this new novel that accomplishes the following essential tasks:

- Introduces my main character
- Gives her a motive for moving from a situation of danger into a situation of more danger
- Brings in a second character of less than sterling reputation for the hero to play off

EXERCISE THREE:

Time for you to do the same. Using any ideas you have about your character, put together a single paragraph that focuses on the critical

parts of your character—what he does, what he needs, and what he fears—that answers the following questions:

- **What is the most difficult thing my character is struggling with right now?**
- **How does that struggle give him one problem he must solve?**
- **Who or what will stand in the way of the solution he seeks?**

If you need help developing deep, fully-fleshed out characters, get **Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic** <http://hollylisle.com/cc.html>

Got your opener now? Good. Let's move on to your ending.

Create Your Ending

If your first reaction is, "What am I going to do with an ending when I have only the foggiest idea of my beginning, and none whatsoever of my middle?" don't worry. You aren't going to do a completely written-out chapter. All you're going to do is figure out a basic landing pad for your story.

In my case, I'll make the following decisions:

- Cadence will live (the survival of the main character is not always a given in my books, and eventually Cadence will make an irreversibly fatal mistake - but not this book)
- She will find what she's been sent to find
- It will not be what she was led to expect, and this surprise will nearly cost her her life, and will prove fatal to at least one person the reader has come to know (though not necessarily to like)
- She will have her reckoning with the man who used her
- Maybe she will get her papers - that I'll decide later.

EXERCISE FOUR:

Go back to your opener and figure out in general terms how you want the story to end. Try to answer the following questions:

- **Does your protagonist succeed or fail in gaining the objective you gave him in your opener?**
- **Does your story come to an emotionally satisfying conclusion?**

- **Can you see yourself going through anywhere from ten pages to seven hundred and being happy to see the story end this way?**

Rough In Your Middle

You have your beginning and your ending. Now we need to add some middle, throw in some neat twists and turns, and give you something so great to work on that you'll be excited about sitting down to work on your book every day.

So we're going to build some candy-bar scenes to move you from first word in your story to last.

I've mentioned candy-bar scenes in other articles and workshops. They're my analogy for scenes you can't resist writing—your big set piece scenes. In these scenes, your characters will fight battles, save lives or take them, fall into or out of love, meet their enemies in unexpected places, chase or be chased.

You don't need to work these out in any great detail. A line or two to give you something to shoot for is all you need. Even order doesn't matter at this point - that will come as you start fleshing your story out.

For example, I know in this story that I'm starting to tell now, I want the following things:

- a great spaceship dogfight
- Cadence meets a potential new partner
- meeting up with Tangerine (a character from HTCB)
- run-in with a one of the minions of the stellar-regional underground that ends in a gunfight
- Cadence sides with the underworld against area law enforcement, which is holding whatever she's after

- A recent acquaintance is murdered in terrible circumstances, and law enforcement arrests Cady
- The person she suspects of the murder breaks her out of the jail at great personal risk

And so on . . .

Every scene I jot down spurs ideas for more scenes. As I run with this, I'll put together enough main scenes to peg into my novel, and then start creating transitional scenes to move me from one "candy-bar scene" to the next.

How many is enough? Depends on what you want to write. There's no set number for any project, but you need at least three scenes for all but the shortest short stories, and at least one big scene per chapter for novels. A 125,000 word novel can have thirty or forty chapters (or more) with two or three scenes in each. I use ten pages as my scene-length estimate, and either twenty or thirty pages as my chapter-length estimate, and work from there.

EXERCISE FIVE

Your turn. With your beginning and your ending in front of you, sketch in between three and sixty one-line scene ideas. (You'll find twenty tools for making this process much, much easier in my **Create A Plot Clinic** <http://hollylisle.com/cap.html>!) I suggest coming up with more than you think you're going to need, because if my experience doing this is any guide, about 20% of your ideas will be unusably bad.

Make Everything Add Up

This is the bare bones of the process I use for developing novels. The outline that I get the first time through is subject to revision, cutting, rearranging, and midcourse correction. It's a working document—a tool—and as such it is never really finished.

It is a reflection of where the novel is, and where I think it is going, and I usually abandon it completely three-quarters of the way through my book. But it's always there when I need to rethink something.

It will be there for you, too. A good plot outline can be any dedicated writer's best friend.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This short workshop will get you started.

It's given you a handful of useful tools, an in-progress demonstration of a plot outline in development, and some exercises that you'll find essential in building plot outlines. Please realize, though, that I cannot give you in a dozen pages everything I've learned about plotting. I can't even scratch the surface.

For my full course on plotting your novel—from the vague glimmer of your original idea to final editor's revision—pick up your copy of **Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic** <http://hollylisle.com/cap.html>

In the course, you'll learn:

- **How to build your plot around structure**, saving you a lot of false starts and pointless meandering
- **Twenty powerful plotting tools** (to keep you writing when things are going well, and to get you back on track when they're not)
- **How to revise and rework your plot outline** while writing your first draft, without trashing your story

- **How to make changes in your plot during initial and final revision** that will, in most cases, still let you hit your deadlines

You'll have fun, you'll make progress, and you'll avoid sandtraps and pitfalls that swallow beginning and pro writers alike.

You can do this.

Never give up on your dreams,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly". The signature is stylized with a large, looped 'H' and a cursive 'olly'.

Holly Lisle