**Lecture 5: Plot**

**Managing time, pacing, crisis, and ending**

**Time & Pacing**

Where do you start the story?

Not at the beginning (birth), not for a story.

In short fiction it’s conventional to start in medias res—in the middle of things, story already moving forward, a tense situation already set up, without a lengthy introduction to the people and situation.

At the very least, you want to have a character doing something physically, even it’s sitting at a desk or folding laundry. Slip in necessary background information as once we are involved in the action, once we want to know.

**Write 1 min**: where is your character and what is he/she doing physically in the first 2 sentences of the story?

**Narrative Summary**:

Most short stories need a few spots of summary to move us quickly through the backstory or through a period of waiting or things not changing a lot.

You’ll use phrases like “for the first six months of her job . . .” or “he never imagined life would turn out like this. He was raised to be . . . but all that changed . . .” and then describe the pattern or the events quickly, not in real time, but as a sketch. Again, you don’t usually start with this kind of material because it’s not the most engaging—it’s summary and readers are naturally more distant.

**Scene**:

A story also needs about 2-5 segments told in “scene” rather than summary, places where you get as close as possible to real time. A scene continues as long as we stay in that moment. Here you’ll show us everything the character notices—details of the environment to reflect his/her emotional state, thoughts and judgments of the characters, dialogue, etc.

When you sketch out your story, identify the points of change or intense character conflict and make those the places where you drop into scene.

**Jumping across time:**

You can skip forward or back ward any time you like, even in the middle of battle or with a knife to your character’s throat. You are in control. Jumping to another place or time in the middle of a crisis (cliffhanger) is one way to create suspense, but be careful not to do that too much or readers can get frustrated or annoyed about the contrivance and repetitive device.

The convention for publishers is to use three asterisks centered to indicate a space break. Like this:

\* \* \*

When you go back and forth, you might use a time-indicator phrase or some anchoring object to indicate where we are.

“They first met in high school . . . (a scene when they meet).” Then when you come back, use another space break and a phrase to show you’re back: “She looked different at twenty four, harder but also more nervous. Maybe it was the spiked hair.” But don’t be too clunky about it, like: “Now, five years later; back at the ranch; that was six months ago.” Readers are smarter than you think. It’s better to just leave a break and let us figure it out than to make your devices call attention to themselves and break the immersion in the fictional world.

**Crisis**

Almost every story has a crisis point, or a series of escalating conflicts that finally lead to some new status quo.

“We Didn’t”

“Sea Fairies”

“Mule Killers”

“A Small Good Thing”

Write: what new status quo will end your story? What kind of conflicts could push your character enough so that he/she must step away from the set of beliefs that ran the show in the beginning?

**The Ending**

In real life, very few important things really end. Even a divorce or a death requires years of mopping up and recovery.

In fiction, we may not have everything tied up neatly (not necessary), but we get to a place where we can reasonably take a pause, look around and realize we are in a different place with these characters than where we started.

It’s possible to write a “slice of life” story in which we realize that change is impossible, but that’s still a different place for the reader than what we knew and expected in the beginning.

Most short stories begin much closer to the end point than we might think of when we sit down for the first draft. The character is already hovering on the precipice and needs just a push. You need that shorter time frame for a story.