

Reverse Outlining

Developed by Lois Peterson, www.loispetersonwriter.ca

Process

1. Make enough copies of the chart to allow one row for each chapter/scene of your draft.
2. Review the MS chapter by chapter, and make notes under each element.
3. Review the completed chart vertically to see how each element is handled throughout the story, and review the info horizontally to see how each chapter or scene unfolds.
4. Use the Notes column to record additional observations, work still required.
5. Repeat the process with subsequent drafts, adding additional element headings that reflect specific craft concerns.

The Elements

Action – *When you define each chapter or scene by what the main characters do (rather than what happens to them) you see the arc of the plot and determine how active the story is.* Note the main action of the scene or chapter using active verbs rather than cerebral ones. As you review the column vertically as the story develops, you will get a sense of the rising and falling story arc, and can make adjustments in subsequent drafts.

Background – *Background and backstory needs to be introduced adroitly to add texture and layers to the narrative, while avoiding ‘telling’ rather than ‘showing’.* Note the details of the story/character background as they are revealed and implied. Note: 90% of background needs to be introduced in the early first third of the story (by the end of Act One if you’re using the 3-Act structure)

Character – *Each character is on his/her own journey and reveals themselves gradually through their actions, reactions, rather than all at once.* Identify characters as they are introduced, and specific character traits that arise/occur/are revealed through each character’s behavior.

Details – *Character objects, thematic details etc. are seeded through a story to add depth. It might be useful to ID specific elements that repeat, change or transform through the story. Eg. in my novel Cuckoo’s Nest, birds are one of the throughlines. But other than the MC’s nickname Cuckoo, in the first draft they did not show up until the 8th chapter. So I seeded them in a couple of earlier chapters... In Ch. 1 a bird appears on an outside windowsill pecking at the glass, and in a later one the mother remarks on bird droppings on the laundry hung outside.* Note significant details on the chart as they occur in this draft. Once you see how and where they occur in the MS. you can adjust and pace them for greatest impact and effect.

Ending – *Chapter and scene endings motivate the reader to continue and provide a sense of closure and meaning.* Describe how each chapter or scene ends to ensure you have used a variety of cliff-hangers, unanswered questions, reversals, resolutions... Review the overall story to determine how endings contribute to pacing and dramatic tension.

Notes – *Use this column to note other specific details and elements that emerge through the MS.* These can then be transferred to a column of their own in subsequent reverse outline spreadsheets.

Contact me at loispeterson@hotmail.com if you have questions or comments about this process. But feel free to adapt and enhance this template for your own use, and share it with others.