Guideline – Planning a story

When I write a story, I generally plan it out in advance, before I write it. Over the years, I have developed a methodology to help me do so. It consists of five steps.

1. World building

Describe in what kind of world the story takes place. Books have been written about this concept alone, so I won't go into depth on it. For initial story planning, it's enough to note two things:

1. Location: in what place does the story take place?
2. Main character: who is the protagonist?

Example – Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone

1. Location: a school for wizards, in England.
2. Main character: a young boy who doesn't know he's a wizard.

2. Storylines

Think of three different dilemmas/storylines for the story, one for each of the following categories.

1. Wanted Personal (W) – This is what the main character really wants/desires and actively strives towards.
2. Unwanted Personal (UP) – This is what the world "throws" at the main character. It's undesired, but is definitely connected to the main character.
3. Unwanted Unpersonal (UU) – This is what happens in the world around the main character, but has no connection to the main character.

The more concrete you make these dilemmas, the more powerful your story will become.

You may wonder, "Isn't there a fourth storyline *Unpersonal Wanted*?" The answer here is no. When the protagonist really wants something, it per definition is personal, so "Unpersonal Wanted" is a contradiction in itself.

Example – Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone

1. Personal Wanted – The main thing Harry wants is to have a regular childhood, doing stuff that normal kids do. So make friends, have fun at school, have a family; stuff like that.
2. Personal Unwanted – Someone is trying to kill Harry. This is definitely personal (they're trying to kill him) and he doesn't want it to happen (obviously).
3. Unpersonal Unwanted – There is a thing called the *Philosopher's stone* and someone is trying to steal it. It has nothing to do with Harry, and initially he doesn't really care about it.

3. Events

For each of the separate dilemmas, think of events that would turn it into a good storyline. These events can be very vague, "Find a clue!" or very specific "Find the key that was hidden under the flower pot." You may already have a specific order in mind, or they can be randomly connected events that you'd like to see happen. The details don't matter much. You'll fill in the details as you go anyway.

Example – Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone

1. Harry's regular childhood
   a. Befriend a teacher: Hagrid
   b. Befriend a student: Ron
   c. Make an enemy: Malfoy
   d. Attend classes
   e. Make a female friend: Hermione
   f. Play quidditch
   g. Miss family
   h. Do detention
2. Someone wants to kill Harry
   a. Find out someone killed his parents
   b. Find someone that hates him
   c. Someone tries to kill him, on orders of a boss
   d. The boss himself tries to kill him
   e. There is a final battle, in which Harry emerges victorious
3. Someone wants to steal the Philosopher's stone
   a. Clue 1: Harry sees a mysterious package
   b. Clue 2: Harry finds something guarding something
   c. Clue 3: Someone causes a distraction to study above guardian
   d. Clue 4: Harry finds something else guarding the stone
   e. Resolution: Harry finds the stone

4. Scenes

Combine events from at least two different storylines to form scenes. These scenes could constitute chapters in your final storyline. It is important to connect the three separate storylines as much as possible here. Once you have an idea of the scenes, fill them in as much as possible.

If there is an event which you cannot merge together with another event from a different storyline into a scene, then you should seriously consider cutting that event. A scene that only concerns one storyline is generally considered boring. It's a weak spot of the story.

Example – Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone

A. [1a,3a]: Harry meets Hagrid, who takes him to school. On the way there, Hagrid has to pick up a mysterious package.
B. [1b,2a]: Harry meets a friendly student in the train. This student (Ron) tells him more about his history, and who killed his parents.
C. [1c,3b]: Harry makes an enemy (Malfoy) and they agree to fight a duel. In the confusion around it, Harry accidentally stumbles into the wrong room and finds an enormous dog guarding something.
D. [1d,2b]: Harry attends classes and finds out that there is one teacher that really hates him. There's a history there with his parents.
E. [3c,1e]: Someone causes a distraction by letting a troll enter the dungeon. This troll goes after Hermione, and Harry then saves her, making another friend.

F. [1f,2c]: Harry plays quidditch. During a match, someone (Snape, he believes) tries to kill him.
G. [1g,3d]: Harry misses his family. When sneaking around the castle, he accidentally finds a mirror who actually shows him his family. This mirror turns out to (later) protect the Philosopher's stone.
H. [1h,2d]: Harry gets detention and has to enter the forbidden forest. In there, Voldemort tries to kill him.
I. [2e,3e]: Harry decides to go after the stone himself, to prevent Voldemort from getting it. When doing so, he has to fight Voldemort and eventually beats him.

In this example, most of the events happen to be connected to the W-storyline. In general, the guideline here is that more variation is better. All storylines should be mixed up and connected as much as possible.

5. Chronology

Now that we have events, we should find the order in which they take place.

1. Are there hard constraints? Scenes that really have to take place before others?
2. Are there preferred orders, where it's better that a scene takes place prior to another?

Once you have an overview of the above, you can try to put the scenes in an appropriate order. I find that using post-its (analog) or a Trello board (digital) can be really helpful with this step.

Example – Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone

For the example, I "accidentally" already put the scenes in a good order. We can note that some scenes can be easily switched. For example, C and D can change position if needed. There are no chronological constraints preventing this.

In this case it's better not to do so though. If we would switch C and D, then there would be a long time in which storyline UU (3) does not participate, followed by a long time where storyline UP (2) does not come into play. This would also be a weak point of the story. It's better to have every storyline come around as much as possible.

Conclusion

While following the above process, you slowly write the script of your story. You see it take place before your eyes! And once you have the plan, then all you need to do is write it.

We should note that the process is iterative.

- It may happen during step 4 that you realize you need another event, and you go back to step 3.
- It may happen during step 5 that you realize your scenes cannot be ordered chronologically, and you go back to step 4 or even 3.
- It may happen after planning the whole story, while writing it, that you actually missed a chronological constraint. You then may have to go back to step 4 and reshuffle scenes again.

That's all part of the process called writing. But once you do finish your properly planned story, it will usually be more succinct, captivating and engrossing than a story that is not planned ahead of time. Don't believe me? Feel free to read my stories and see if you like the way they are written.

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