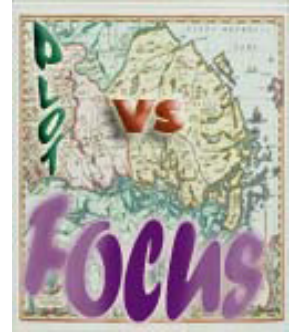




Plot Versus Focus



by
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If I were to ask, “What is the single most important thing to have in any piece of fiction writing,” what would your answer be?

Strong characters, tight plotting, gut-wrenching action? How about strong scenes that evoke reader emotion or a good puzzle for the protagonist to solve?

While all these are good and important, what would you say if I told you none of them are the single most important element? Nope, not even plot. Think about it. There are many tales out there that have weak plots, cardboard characters or minimal action. Yet, they still get published, bought and read. Yeah, complained about probably too. I’ve done my share of it, but I still buy, or at least, read these same books. So what do they have over yours? One word.

Focus.

That’s it. All books that are picked up for publication (self-publishing doesn’t count in this case) have one thing in common. They all have good focus. No, plot and focus are not the same thing. You can have a great plot, but if there is no focus, your writing isn’t going anywhere. On the other side, if you have great focus, but a weak plot, well, your writing has a better chance of being in print. Some writers view plot and focus as the same thing. I don’t.

So, what is focus, and how does it differ from plot?

First, let’s define plot. Think of “plot” as a map -- it is the answer to, “What happens in my story?” Plot is the idea you have which can be written, finished, polished and hopefully sold. Plot is the solution to the problem. Plot is relatively simple.

Focus, however, is a little harder. It can be the plot, the setting, the characters, even the action. Focus is what keeps you on the “map.” Many a story has been ruined because secondary elements have taken over, blurred the focus so to speak. After all, you’re only going to get lost if you’re using a map that’s gotten wet and the ink’s run, for example. Well, that’s what happens when you lose focus in your writing. Things get blurry and run together, becoming a muddy picture that doesn’t convey the image you’re trying so hard to create. So, how do you get and keep focus? First, let’s see why having focus is so important, then we’ll discuss getting and keeping it.

Focus is what you center your work on, what holds your writing together. Focus is what keeps your story on track when your hard drive is bulging with all sorts of tasty informational tidbits, usually about the setting or background procedural information. Without having focus, chances are you’ll become distracted by all those

tantalizing details and end up trying to cram them all in, regardless of relevance. This only leads to plot holes and dissatisfied readers who probably won't come back.

Once you have focus, you have your narrative spine, the center of your web, and can now build on it, spinning the little threads that create a story. Sounds similar to plot, doesn't it? Yep, hence the confusion, in my opinion. But they are different -- you can have an implausible plot, you cannot have implausible focus. Now, what should be your focus? The characters, the setting, the theme? Maybe it's the plot, the action or the puzzle. Don't think you have to include only one -- all of these elements and a few more need to be included to have a successful piece of work. I'm only asking you to pick the most important one -- the thread that makes you want to write the story. You have to know the core of your story and stick with it through the end. If you don't, your reader is going to think you've pulled the old bait-and-switch routine and will feel cheated. Readers cheated once by an author usually won't give a second chance.

So, how do you find your focus? Here are some tips and questions that may help you. First, sum up your writing, in one sentence preferably. If you can't sum up your story in one to two sentences, then chances are even you don't know what you're writing about. You lack focus. So, ask yourself these questions. "What is the most important aspect of this story? What inspires me to write it? What do I want for my readers? Should they laugh or cry, shudder in terror or contemplate humanity?" Remember, you can only pick one element to be the focus. All the others are threads spun around it to create your web of prose.

Once you have your focus, don't pull it. "Pulling focus" is a theater term, but applies to prose writing as well. Simply put, "pulling focus" means drawing attention away from the characters, the setting, whatever your focus is. "Pulling focus" is not a good thing. Be aware though, that this is different from "reader distraction." Pulling focus happens because you, as the author, have lost sight of what's important; you've gotten more interested in the setting than the characters, for example. "Reader distractions" are better known as "red herrings" and can be quite useful. They are devices designed to keep the reader from noticing the real "villain" so the reader does not solve the puzzle before the protagonist. "Red herrings" are good. "Pulling focus" is bad.

Avoid pulling focus by either rewriting the story if a different element has become more important, say the action over the characters, or by making your chosen focus stronger. For example, if your story is about a charioteer in Rome and you find yourself distracted by the chariot races, you have two choices. One, re-spin your web. That is, rewrite the story with the setting, the chariot race, at the core. Two, make your web more powerful by making the charioteer stronger and more interesting to you so that nothing can steal his spotlight. Which is easier? That depends on which is more attractive to you.

So, how do you know if you have the right focus? Well, hopefully, the above tips and questions will have already answered that, but in case they haven't, here are some different examples of focus.

Action: In action-focused stories, the heart is the sequence of events that keep the readers turning pages. Think Dean Kootnz's "Tick Tock." Sure, the characters are colorful and the settings very believable, but the action-focused story always comes down to the reader asking, "And then what happened?" Pages turn.

Emotional: In emotion-focused stories, you are trying to evoke a response in your reader. Think Shirley Jackson's, "The Lottery." The characters may not be strong or complex and the plots may not be plausible, but the reader still shudders in terror or laughs out loud. Pages turn.

Character: In character-focused stories, the writer must focus upon the heart and mind of the protagonist. Even if the protagonist isn't human. Jack London's "Call of the Wild" isn't about the action of the sled race, it's

about Buck, his trials and tribulations. Pages turn.

Setting: Setting-focused stories are the ones you hear about that “reveal the world of . . .” fill in the blank. The world could be anything from the daily life of Neanderthal man to inside a medical examiner’s office. Think Jean Auel’s, “Clan of the Cave Bear.” There usually isn’t much in the way of character growth or action, unless it pertains to the world being revealed. Pages turn.

Puzzle: Puzzled-focused stories are mysteries. They focus on watching the protagonist solve the who, why or how. Think Dashiell Hammett’s, “The Maltese Falcon.” Hopefully, the protagonist is a well-rounded, complex character, but readers of puzzle-focused stories will forgive a writer for giving them a cardboard cut-out as long as the mystery is a good one. Pages turn.

Theme: In theme-focused tales, the author only cares about getting a message across. Think “Brave New World” or “1984.” Big Brother is watching you. Money corrupts. War is hell. You can buy happiness. Whatever the author decides is important to spread the word about. Pages turn.

Take any one of these focuses and switch it any where within the writing and pages won’t turn. Pick one and stick with it. This list of examples is by no means complete, but will give you good guidelines that apply to all genres and lengths of writing. Just remember, if you’re focusing on action over character, your reader will expect the climax to come with the war, not the hero’s personal trials and tribulations. That is, unless the hero overcomes his personal demons while smearing alien blood from one end of the galaxy to the other. If you’re focusing on a theme, remember the resolution has to come when the theme is proved true to the characters, if not your reader.

Having focus can also help you if you get stuck while writing. It will help you remember what is the important center of the story. And don’t think that once you pick your focus, you’re committed forever. You can change your focus at any time, as long as you go back and rewrite, re-spin, so there’s no shift. If the characters suddenly overshadow the theme and you like the story better, hey, go back and take the spotlight away from the theme. Setting getting boring in relation the puzzle? Change the story, rewrite it. The work will probably be the stronger for it. After all, if you’re not interested in writing the story as it stands any more, the reader probably isn’t going to be interested in reading it.

So, now you know why focus is the key to successful writing. It keeps your writing on track, helps you determine when it’s time to go back and rewrite instead of fighting a losing battle and gives you and your readers a sense of satisfaction at the end. Just remember, good focus works best when surrounded by all the other elements of writing as well. Strong characters, a believable plot, good action, scenes to evoke an emotional response will all help to further your writing, but remember, your tale is only as good as your focus. After all, you don’t look at blurry pictures, do you?



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