

Structuring and Outlining Your Novel, with K.M. Weiland Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading. You can find the audio version and worksheet at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/feb2015.

Ali: Hi, I'm Ali Luke and this is the February seminar for Writers' Huddle: Structuring and Outlining your Novel. I'm here with this month's guest speaker, K. M. Weiland, whose blog Helping Writers Become Authors is one that I've been following for, I think, about three years now. And it was in fact Bill Polm from the Huddle who introduced me to her, so thank you Bill for that.

Katie and I have been in touch, I think, a few times since then. And it's just really great to get to chat to her, and I'm looking forward to bringing you her insights on structuring and outlining.

So Katie writes historical and speculative fiction, and she's written novels and short stories, and there's tons of great advice about writing on her blog, and also in her non-fiction books. Her most recent book is an annotated edition of Jane Eyre which I've got a copy of on my desk here. I'm really looking forward to digging into it, because it honestly looks like I'm going to learn much more than I did in a whole undergraduate degree on literature when it comes to actually applying things to my writing.

A couple of Katie's books that you might be familiar with are *Outlining your Novel* and *Structuring your Novel* – we actually studied *Structuring your Novel* in Writers' Huddle a few months ago.

We've also looked at Katie's free ebook, *Crafting Unforgettable Characters*, and her Most Common Mistakes blog series. So if you want to dig back into those discussions, you can find them [in the Book Group forum](#).

Katie has a ton of great advice to share with us on structuring and outlining, and that's what we're going to focus on today. So welcome, Katie.

Katie: And thanks for having me. I keep hearing so many great things about the Writers' Huddle, so it's fun to be able to participate today.

Ali: Oh, thank you. Well, we're really thrilled to have you here.

Why Story Structure Matters

So I thought we'd just start with the “why”, because without covering this I guess people might think, why bother with structuring?

So why does structure matter so much when you're writing a novel? Can't you just be a kind of “pantser” writer and jump in and see where you end up?

Katie: Well, you definitely can be a pantser, and jump right in, and obviously that is what works for a lot of people. But eventually what we always have to come back to is making sure that whatever we've pantsed aligns with standard story structure.

An Instinctive Understanding of Structure

It's really interesting, because a lot of people come back to that and they discover that actually this story that they totally didn't structure is not structured so badly. It actually adheres pretty well to standard story structure.

And that's because structure is so instinctive to humans. It's just how we tell stories. And I think particularly for people in our age, after watching thousands of movies and reading thousands of novels, it just becomes more and more ingrained.

So most of us already have a pretty good sense of how the structure's supposed to come together. But we always need to come back and double-check that, because it is the foundation for creating a story that is then going to resonate with readers. Because readers have the same instinctive understanding of structure as we do.

And the really important things to understand about structure are primarily about pacing.

Structure is about creating these major plot-point moments in your story that are pretty much evenly spaced throughout the story, and they then allow readers to fall into this pacing, this timing of the story, so that they can relate to the emotional rhythms of the story.

It's really an emotional pacing more than anything, because it falls into this familiar pattern and alerts readers of the rise and the fall, and the foreshadowing that's going to come into play as the plot develops.

Structure as a Checklist for Your Story

And I think probably the coolest thing about structuring for me, and I think for a lot of writers, is that **it makes writing so much easier, because it's this checklist of important pieces of your story.**

So if you sense something's wrong, something's not working, your instinctive story sense is telling you something's wrong here, the structure's off, and then if you're consciously aware of story structure you can go and look at this checklist of story structure parts, and go through it and match it to your story and see, well, how am I matching up here?

And you can identify the weak areas and know how to fix them, so it's really a safety net for when you're not sure what's wrong with the story. And that works whether you're checking your structure and your outline, or if you've pantsed your first draft and are then going back to check.

So structure is equally applicable no matter what type of technique you're applying to writing, whether you're a plotter or a pantsier. You don't have to feel that just because you're a pantsier, that structuring is going to inhibit your writing, because it really isn't that way at all. It's a freeing thing, because like I say, it's this safety net that allows you to be creative and then come back and double check that you've got all the pieces where they need to be.

Ali: I think that really helps me reconcile some of the different ways I've approached novels over the years. I've tended to be a bit of a pantsier – I get a first draft down, but then I seem to spend an awful lot of time fixing it. The pacing is off, and things don't quite happen when they should be happening,

and I have worked towards the kind of structure you go through in *Structuring Your Novel*, but it's always been a bit of a slog.

Katie: Yeah.

Ali: So I'm coming round more to the idea of “actually, if I'd plotted this stuff out ahead I'd probably save myself months and months of rewriting.”

Structuring versus Outlining

Just before we dig in too far into structure, I just wanted to clarify what you would say the difference between structuring and outlining is.

Katie: I get this question a lot. You know, I just got an email about it this morning. It's usually people asking what's the difference between my books, *Outlining your Novel* and *Structuring your Novel*.

The short answer is that they are very similar, because structure is an outline. If you plot out the structure of your book, what you've got is an outline.

Outlines in themselves are more general, whereas, like I say, structure is more specific because structure deals with the specifics of the foundational principles of your story.

Outlines are about more than just structure. They're about brainstorming ideas, they're about figuring out your characters, they're about theme. You can explore all of that stuff in planning your story – really an outline is just a plan. It doesn't have to incorporate structure. It's just an idea of what you want to happen in your story. So outlining is a methodology. It's a process of creation.

Whereas structuring is an actual storytelling technique. **Whether or not you outline, eventually you have to come back to structure to make sure that that's the way you want it.**

So when people ask me which of my books to read first, I generally tell them that if they're going to read both, start with *Outlining*. Because it's more of the creative, general stuff. It covers much more than just structure. It's about, like I say, figuring out your characters, and just organising your story notes before you write the story. But if you're only going to read one of the books, I'd

definitely recommend *Structuring*, because ultimately story structure is by far the more important story principle, and like I say, if you structure your story ahead of time, basically, you've outlined your story ahead of time.

Ali: I think that makes good sense. And I guess my feeling is that if you've got really good structure, and you've got plot points and the pinch points for things in the right places, then probably things like your characterisation and your character arcs will fall in alongside the structure.

Katie: Yeah, definitely.

First Steps When Structuring a Novel

Ali: I mentioned in the introduction that in the Writers' Huddle some of us have read *Structuring your Novel* as a book group, reading together. But not everyone's read it, and we kind of get new people in all the time.

I'm going to proceed on the assumption that people haven't read *Structuring your Novel*, and with that in mind, if I sat down to plan a novel from scratch – which is actually pretty much the position I'm in because I'm working on book three of a trilogy right now, so I'm really at the very early planning stages – what would the first steps that I should take be in terms of structure? You know, I'm looking at a blank page here.

Katie: I like to break story structure down into about ten parts. They kind of blend together sometimes, but ten is generally the nice round number that I like.

First thing I always do is I go through and look at all of those structural points.

#1: The Hook

You've got the hook, which of course is your beginning, this is the opening question of your story, it's your first chapter.

What is happening, what is the incident, the concept, the premise that is going to hook readers in and make them want to read on, to even discover what the rest of your story structure is?

#2 and #3: The Inciting Incident and Key Event

And then you've got the inciting event, and the key event. And I see a lot of confusion about these. I was confused about them for a long time. But basically, the important thing to understand is that the inciting event starts your plot. The key event, which is what a lot of people overlook, the key event is what then engages your character, your protagonist, in the plot.

The example I like to use is, let's say you're going to tell a story about World War II. If your character's American, then the inciting event is Pearl Harbour getting bombed. But that's not necessarily going to be the moment when your protagonist is pulled into the story.

The key event would be when he is either drafted into the army, or decides to join the army - because that is the moment when he becomes inextricably involved in the plot.

And as for timing, generally the inciting event doesn't usually occur until sometimes as late as an eighth of the way into the story, which is halfway into your first act. And the key event very often, almost always, will happen at your first plot point, at the 25% mark, which is the end of your first act.

So that's the end of your intro and the beginning of the main story. So the first plot point is your first big moment in your story. And like I say, that ends the first act, which is the first 25% of your book.

It's kind of a portal. I like to think of it as a doorway where your character was in the normal world in the first act, and then he's going to pass through the doorway of the first plot point into the adventure world of the second act.

And that terminology is obviously geared towards action-adventure stories. But it holds just as true even if you're just writing a quiet village mystery or something like that. The point is that the story completely changes at the first plot point. **The character completely engages with the plot, and he can never quite go back to whoever he was at the beginning of the story, in the first act.**

#4: The First Half of the Second Act

So throughout the first half of the second act, which is going to span from the 25% mark to the 50% mark, so the second quarter of your book, that's going to be the period in which your character's kind of scrambling. He's reacting to whatever happened in the first plot point, trying to get his bearings. He's really off balance.

This does not mean that he's not active. A lot of people confuse a reactive character with a passive character. He'll still be trying to get things done, and figure things out, and defeat the antagonistic force, but he's not being very effective at it. He's reactive in the sense that he's off-balance, and he doesn't completely understand the nature of the conflict.

#5: The First Pinch Point

And halfway through the first half of the second act, you're going to come across the first pinch point. And this can either be a really big scene, or just a really small scene. **The point of it is that you're going to be reminding readers of the power and the threat of the antagonistic force.**

It doesn't necessarily have to be something that reminds the protagonist. The protagonist may not even be aware of whatever the antagonist is doing at this point. So it could be a scene from your antagonist's point of view, that lets readers in on his evil plan, and just reminds them that all is not going along swimmingly and that something is coming up. So it's going to foreshadow both the midpoint and the climax later on.

#6: The Midpoint

And then, halfway through the second act and the book, at the 50% mark, we get to the midpoint, which is the second major plot point. **And all the major plot points are moments of no return, because they completely change the story – they're reversals in the plot.**

The midpoint is particularly important because this is the moment of truth. This is where the character finally figures out what the conflict is really about, he learns important truths about himself, about the antagonist, and he's able

to then use those truths to figure out how to be more effective in his pursuit of his story goal and his fight against the antagonistic force.

So from that point on, for the second half of the story, he's then able to shift into a much less reactive role, into a more active and more effective role.

#7: The Second Pinch Point

And then, halfway through the second half of the second act, we have the second pinch point. Just like the first pinch point, that is going to be a reminder of the antagonist's strength. **And particularly, this is going to set up the third plot point, and foreshadow the climactic battle.**

#8: The Third Plot Point

So then the third plot point will end the second act and begin the third act, and that will take place around the 75% mark in your story. And this is going to come after what appears to be a victory for your character.

Thanks to his actions, and the fact that he's been able to be more effective against the antagonist, it's going to seem like he's got everything going his way and something good's going to happen. But it's going to be a false victory.

And come the third plot point, it's all going to be reversed. This is going to be the point that your protagonist is going to consider giving up, everything seems lost. It's also a moment of truth in the sense that this is where he has to pick himself back up and really get his game on and become totally committed to reaching his goal and defeating the antagonistic force.

#9: The Climax

So about halfway through the third act, the climax officially starts, and this is where the protagonist and the antagonist come together in their final conflict.

It will end with the climactic moment, which will be the character reaching his story goal in whatever form, whether that's, you know, getting the girl, or killing the bad guy, or whatever.

#10: The Resolution

And then the book ends with the resolution, which is usually going to be best if it's just a short chapter, just tying off loose ends and giving readers a last glimpse of the story.

Getting Your Structure in Place

So really, what you're going to do is just start out by examining what you know about your story. You know, I usually can say, OK, well, that'll probably be the first plot point and that'll be the climax. And particularly try to identify the beginning and the ending. Because if you know where you're going, it's much easier to know how you're going to get there.

Find the major plot points. And then it's just a matter of filling in the blanks – figuring out, OK, well, what do we have to do to get from the inciting event, to the first plot point, to the first pinch point, etc.

Ali: I think it's a really reassuring way of looking at a novel, to be honest. Because I know certainly the first time I attempted a novel, as opposed to short stories, it just seemed like -- how do you write 70,000 or so words, you know, what do you do?

Usually with my novels I've known the beginning and the ending, like you say it's good to know where you're going, but there was just a huge gap in the middle that I needed to bridge.

And it's really helpful to think about the key plot points, and the key pinch points, and where things need to be placed along a line, just to get the pace right.

Katie: A lot of people talk about the saggy middle. And how they don't know how to deal with it. But to me, a structure completely answers that. Because there's all kinds of stuff going on in the middle, and the midpoint is arguably the most important moment in the story. So if you can figure all that out, then you're not going to have any problems with your middle.

Mistakes Writers Often Make with Structure

Ali: I wish I'd known that four years ago! So I guess with the saggy middle in mind, are there things that you often see people getting wrong? And I know you do manuscript editing, and I'm sure you've read plenty of books that perhaps didn't quite get structure right. Are there any problems that just crop up again and again for writers?

Katie: I will say just right now, people do often ask me if I edit. And I actually don't any more - I did in the past, but my schedule does not allow me to do that any more. However, I can definitely recommend some good editors if anyone's interested.

Missing or Very Weak Plot Points

But as for problems that I've often seen – and I've actually been seeing this a lot lately in even published books – one is missing or really weak plot points.

Obviously as a structure nut I'm always watching, trying to figure out the structure in each story, just because it helps me better refine and understand what I'm doing in mine, and I'm just amazed sometimes by how weak some of the plot points are, to the point where I'm not even sure sometimes, did the author intend to have a plot point here?

That hurts your story tremendously, just because what it ends up feeling like to the reader is that nothing's happening, and of course that ends up with a bored reader, and the last thing any of us wants is a bored reader.

But also from just the writer's standpoint, I think that's just a waste, because plot points are so much fun, so if you're not taking full advantage of your plot points, then not only are you weakening your story but you're also really missing out on some great opportunities.

Poor Timing of Major Plot Points

Another thing I see a lot is poor timing, particularly of the major plot points. This isn't the worst mistake ever, because the fact that novels are so long, particularly compared to movies, gives us a lot more flexibility in our timing. Now in movies, pretty much, you can time the plot points down to the minute.

And in books we don't have to be that precise. But still, the tighter your timing, the tighter your book is going to be.

So if your first plot point is way out there at the 37% mark, that's going to end up with a really long first act that probably isn't necessary and is probably just stretching things out and taking too much of readers' time before you actually get to the interesting stuff.

I would encourage people to pay attention to timing. Don't freak out about it if you're, you know, 1% off on a plot point or something – but the tighter you are, the tighter your story is going to be.

Misunderstanding the Major Plot Points' Functions

I also see quite a few people who don't quite understand the function of each plot point. They know something big is supposed to happen at each major plot point, but they don't necessarily understand that that something big is specific.

The first plot point is where the character's world completely changes, he leaves the normal world and enters the adventure world; the midpoint is a moment of truth, where the character understands enough to switch from his reactive mode to active mode; and the third plot point, and this is where I see people messing up the most, the third plot point is a low moment.

This needs to be where your character is at his last straw. He doesn't have anything left. And somehow he still has to scrape it together and rise from that. All of those functions are important.

Structure is about more than just big moments. It's about these very specific turning points that allow you to get the most emotional resonance out of your plot.

Over-Long Resolutions

Oh, and the other thing I see a lot is resolutions that are too long. And this to some extent is really subjective, and to some extent it's not even really a structural problem, but a lot of writers feel like they've got to tie off all their loose ends, or they just don't want to let go of their characters.

But once the climax has happened, readers – I liken it to the audience at the end of a movie, you know, they start getting their purse and their popcorn, and they're ready to go. You're already losing their attention, and you don't want to strain that too much. **You want to tie off the important loose ends, and you want to give readers a sense of where the characters are going. But don't drag that out too long.** A chapter is usually plenty.

Ali: I think that makes a lot of sense to me. I know I've read books where they weren't bad books but in some ways they just disappointed, or books where, for instance, I've said to people “This is a great book, once you get past the first hundred pages...”

Katie: Yes!

Ali: Nothing really happens. And it's difficult then to get into a book. Or books where, as you say, the resolution has just dragged on for so long -- just stop already!

Different Types of Outline

I want to just change tack very slightly and talk a little bit about outlines. Because there may be people who feel they've got the structure in place, or they've read *Structuring your Novel* and they've just about got to grips with that.

I've always found outlining quite a tricky thing to do. And I feel there's a difference between the sort of outline that you might write for yourself, the sort of outline that keeps you on track as you're writing, and the sort of outline that I certainly really struggle with, which is the kind you write to give to an editor or an agent.

Do you think that there's a difference between those two types? And how would you distinguish between them?

Katie: Yes, I definitely think there's a difference. It's almost a cliché how we talk about the Roman numeral outline that we had to do in school, and how that's definitely not the best kind of outline for writing a novel. And really, the kind of outline that you would do for an editor is basically the same thing.

They are functional outlines that are designed to just give someone an overview of the story – they are not a good way to brainstorm your story.

I divide my outlining process into two parts – the extended outline and the abbreviated outline. And really, the extended outline is where it all happens. This is a rambling, thinking out loud, brainstorming session. I do mine longhand in a notebook. My handwriting is terrible, so I can't even read half of what I write sometimes. But it's not about creating something cohesive that someone else is going to make any sense out of. **It's about letting me unwind the ideas in my head and figure things out, take ideas, well, if I do this where's it going to end up?**

I can do this in a couple of pages in an outline where it would take me chapters in a book. So if I run into a dead end, it's very little time and effort wasted.

I like to think of extended outlines as kind of like a first draft. My outlines are extremely extensive. A lot of people don't like to go to this length, and a lot of people do not have to go to this length, but I end up with three or four notebooks, generally, of notes before I'm finished.

In essence, my outlines are my first draft. They're where I'm figuring out the story, and by the time I get to actually write the real first draft, then it's almost like I'm then polishing that story, as a lot of people would in a second draft.

So the outlining process needs to be about optimising creativity. It's not about planning your story, in the sense that, you know, here it is all lined out perfectly neatly, it's about being really sloppy and messy and creative and just dumping all your ideas on the page and seeing what happens. A lot of people ask me what my outlines look like. And because they're all unreadable, handwritten notes, I'm not able to share them.

But I'm actually planning to type up the outline for *Storming*, which will be my next novel which should be coming out next year. So I can share that with people, and they can see how my thought process works out in an outline, just to give them a better idea of maybe how they can do it in theirs.

But then once I'm done with the extended outline and all that creative fun stuff, then I do transcribe the notes into what I call an abbreviated outline. And

this is much more streamlined, much closer to what you'd see in something you were sending to an editor or an agent, or the old Roman Numeral outline even. It's just so I can make quick sense out of my notes when I'm writing, so I don't have to go back through old notebooks, I can just look at the pertinent notes – the story that ended up coming out.

So it's much easier to take that abbreviated outline and turn that into an outline that you're going to send, or a synopsis that's more useful to someone else, but isn't necessarily what you're going to want to use when you are in the creative stage.

Ali: I like the sound of doing that brainstorming like that, and then pulling that into an actual working document. I think the trouble I've sometimes had is I'll fill up notebooks with random notes, and then half the time I forget stuff I planned, or I go off in some other direction, or I lose things.

Your method that sounds a very sensible way to just keep it all in front of you, so that when you're in the heat of writing you can really easily check that you're actually on the track that you meant to be on.

Katie: Yeah. And one thing, actually, that I do that helps me a lot is that after I'm done writing my outline for the day, I'll go back through my notes while they're still fresh in my mind and I will highlight anything I think I'm going to want to transcribe. So that later on, when I am ready to transcribe, I don't have to read everything. I can just look for the highlighted stuff and type it up.

Ali: I like that too. That sounds good, that saves me time.

Katie: It's all about making it easy for ourselves.

Ali: Yeah, definitely.

If Your First Draft Needs a Lot of Work

So I guess slightly with that in mind, I've found myself in the situation, probably rather too often, of making my way either part-way or the whole way through a draft of a novel and then realising that I just need to do a ton of rewriting to make it all work.

Sometimes I've cut out characters, sometimes I've gone off in some direction in the plot that I realise is actually not right, sometimes the whole thing is a complete mess.

I think Lycopolis, which is the novel I brought out three years ago now, was about 135,000 words and my editor advised cutting it to 85,000, which was what I ended up with.

So I've done an awful lot of rewriting in stages. If you've got a draft and it's going to need an awful lot of work to make it read well, what would you do?

Katie: I've definitely done this too – outlining and understanding structure is not a cure-all. You're still going to end up sometimes with drafts that just don't work for whatever reason, because you thought something was a great idea in the beginning and then once it's actually on paper you're like, eh, no.

But the first thing is always, if you know what's wrong, then you know what to do. The path is easy. You can just go ahead and fix it. When it gets tricky is when you don't know what to fix, or you're just exhausted by the whole idea of having to do it.

So in that instance, if at all possible, if you're not on a deadline, I would give it time. Throw it into the closet, just forget about it for a couple months. And then you can come back to it with a more objective mindset.

And the first thing I'd do in a situation like that is, I would make what I call a rewrite outline. And I just list the problems. I list everything I know or think might be wrong with the story, start brainstorming answers the same way I do when I'm doing my extended outline. I just write longhand, just throw my creativity on the page and see what comes out.

I do a lot of what I call what-if-ing, where I just ask questions on the page. What if I did this? What if that happened? What if this character did this? And I just carry that out to its logical progression, by filling in the blanks.

Once I've got a battle plan that I think is going to work and fix all the holes, I'll go through my Word document or my Scrivener document and in Word, use Track Changes, and just make a note wherever I know I'm going to need to change something.

And then I'm going to start at the top of the document and go through so that I maintain the organic flow – in my head I read the whole thing through, and just make the changes wherever they're necessary.

Ali: Yeah. With each draft I try and start at the beginning and work my way through, because I worry that if I just start cherry-picking scenes to rewrite, that the pace is going to go a bit funny, the character arcs are going to get knocked off course, and so on.

Structuring a Trilogy or Series

Ali (cont): I have just one more question – this is about structure across not just a novel, but maybe a trilogy or a series. With self-publishing, I know a lot of authors, including me, are working with multiple books with the same characters in the same world – either a trilogy of novels, say, or a whole series of five, or seven, or ten or something.

And obviously that presents some slightly different issues when it comes to structuring and outlining, because you've got to think not just about the one novel that you're working on, where I think all of your advice for structure still applies, but also of the trilogy or series as a whole. Do you have any advice that is specific to that?

Katie: I'm actually contemplating my first series here, so this has been on my mind a little bit. Basically your first decision is going to be, are the books in the series going to be standalone books, such as what we see in a lot of mystery series, basically they're episodes complete unto themselves, episodes within a larger framework – or are they going to be connected episodes, like we find in many trilogies, where it's really just one giant story arc over the course of three books?

If you're going to have connected episodes, if it's going to be one story, no matter how many books it's spanning, then the first thing you're going to want to look at is structuring the whole thing.

And that's pretty easy, really, when it comes to either trilogies or four-book series. Because the structure transfers really neatly. I mean, trilogies, you

know, it's essentially three acts, it's not perfect because the second act is twice as long as the first and third acts, which does not mean that the second book has to be twice as long, but generally speaking, in the overall structure, the first act is going to end three-quarters of the way into the first book in a trilogy, and the third act is going to begin one-quarter into the third book.

Whereas if you have a four-book series, that's even easier because the structure, the three-act structure, divides neatly into four parts. You've got the first act, the first half of the second act, the second half of the second act, and the third act.

And of course, if you're writing a series with more than four books, then it does get a little trickier because the timing is weird. But it also offers a lot of flexibility, because you are dealing with such a mammoth amount of pages, of words. Readers probably aren't going to notice if you're a whole book off, with some of your structural points.

But also, like you said, you still have to structure each book individually. Each book needs to be a complete story unto itself within this larger story. And it needs to be and contain all of the structural moments that we talked about earlier.

So as I'm thinking, well, how would I outline something like this if I decide to go ahead with this, I would recommend: outline plot points for each of the books in the beginning before you write any of them, so you know where the story is progressing and you can set that up in the early books for the later books – because then you have the structural arc for the entire series in your mind.

And then personally I would just go ahead and outline one full book at a time. **Outline the first book, write the first book, publish the first book, and then you can move on.** Because I think it would just be crazy overwhelming to try to outline - completely outline all of them at first. Or at least as in-depth as my outlines would be. Anyway, so that's the approach I'm contemplating as I'm looking into that myself.

Ali: I think that makes good sense, thank you.

Yeah, thank you so much for joining us. I've got a lot out of this – I'm definitely going to be scribbling down some notes and using this to help me with the next

book. I have *Structuring your Novel*, but this is just a really easy way to get the key points from that, so I'll be re-reading that but I'll be going through this as well.

Katie: Awesome. Thank you so much for having me, it's been an absolute pleasure.