

Myriad Methods of Outlining Fiction

Presentation by Valerie Valdes





Valerie Valdes

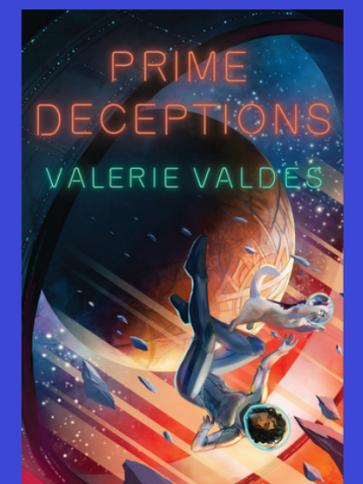
Oh snap, it's me!

Find me online

www.candleinsunshine.com

Twitter: @valerievaldes

Stuff I wrote



Different Types of Outlines

BEAT SHEET

Organized list of scenes with purposes

MIND MAP

Hubs connected to spokes

AS YOU GO

Summarize the scene you're about to write

CHARACTER ARCS

Start, middle and end, high and low points

Beat sheet

- Grab a beat template or make your own
- Summarize your scenes as they relate to the specific beats and fill in the blanks in the template
- You can write them down out of order

<https://jessicabrody.com/2020/11/how-to-write-your-novel-using-the-save-the-cat-beat-sheet/>

**For each
beat, ask
yourself:**

- What kinds of scenes would incorporate these criteria?
- What scenes would naturally lead up to and follow from each situation?
- What relevant tropes or archetypes can be used or subverted?



Common Beats

Opening Image

A visual/scene that establishes the status quo, tone, mood; sets reader expectations

Midpoint

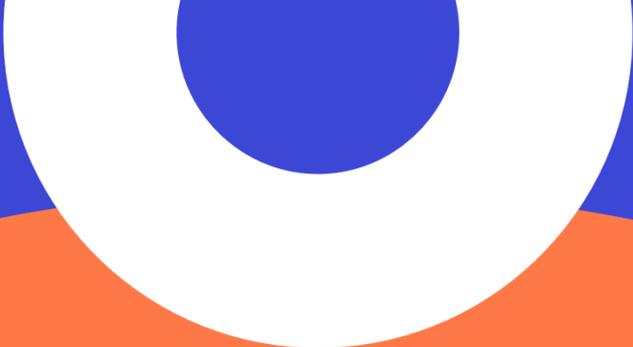
A "false" victory or defeat happens to raise the stakes and start the arc slide

Catalyst/Inciting Incident

Life-changing event that disrupts the status quo

All Is Lost

The lowest point, where things go so wrong that success seems impossible



There's no One Right Way

**Different sheets have
different beats. Use what
works for you, mix and
match, tweak as needed.**

Consider your genre and its specific beats, too.



Many beat sheets want you to talk about...

THEME

Don't panic!

You can have a little panic, as a treat.



Ways to think about theme

CENTRAL MESSAGE

The big-picture meaning behind everything that happens

LIFE LESSON

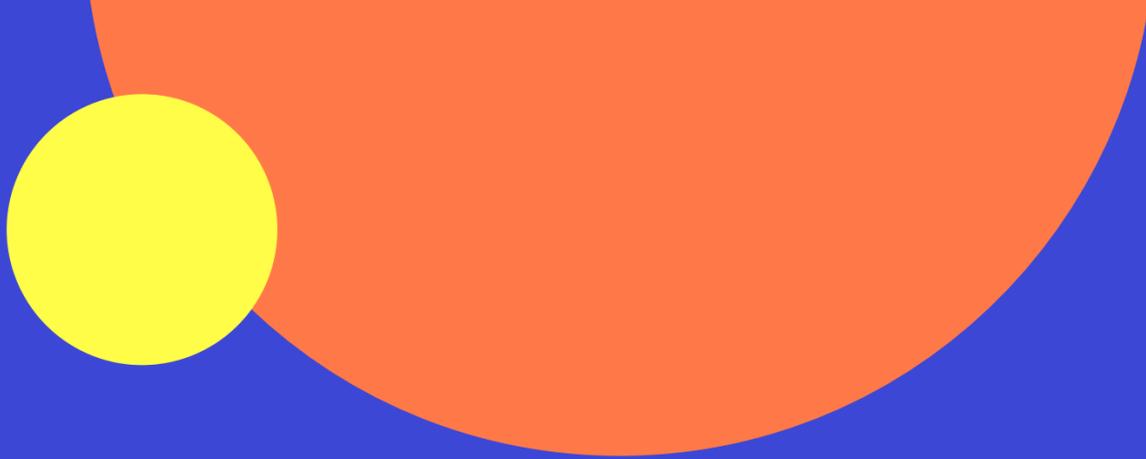
What the reader is supposed to learn about the human condition

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

How to figure out what matters to the story and what is tangential

FOCAL QUESTION

May or may not be answered by the end, but it's omnipresent



Exercise: Thinking Thematically

We do what we must, because we can

What is it *really* about?

Peel back the layers of plot and character and world; what is the beating heart of your idea?

What haunts you?

What question do you keep asking yourself that you try to answer with stories?

What enrages you?

Injustice surrounds us; what compels you to speak because silence is inconceivable?

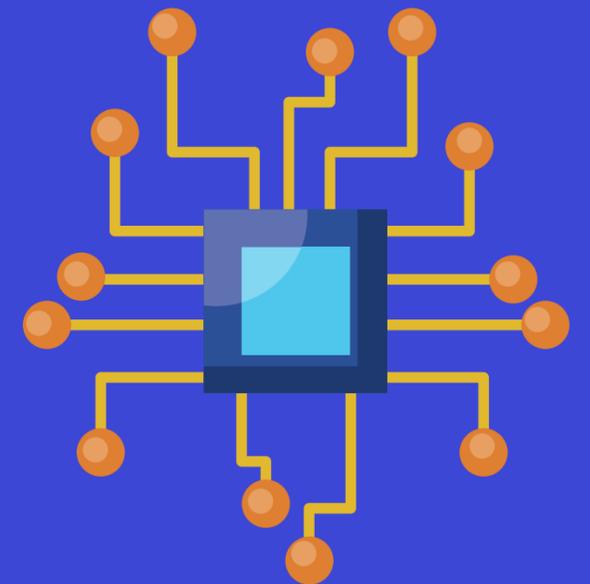
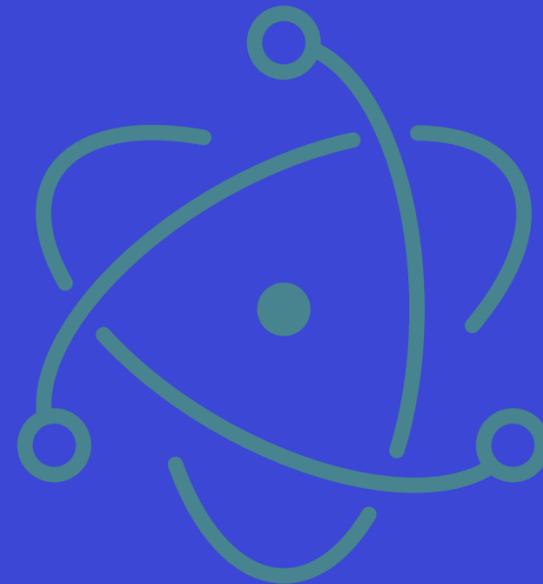
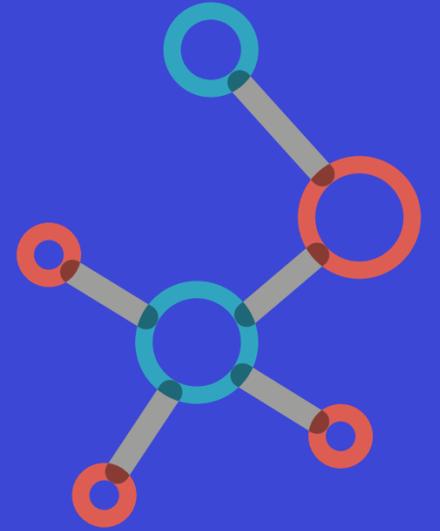
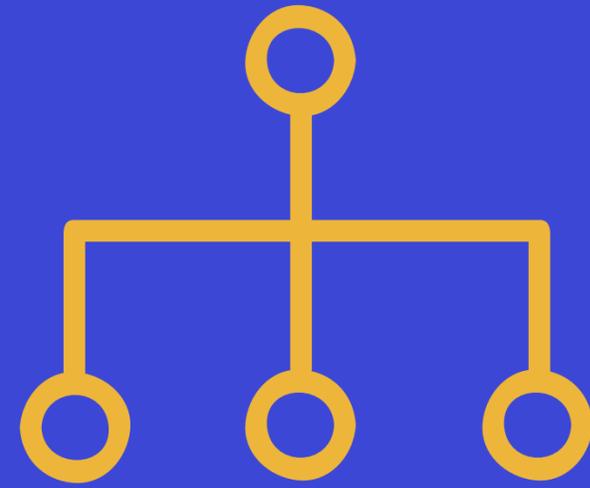
Mind map

- Start with a central circle or box for a scene or character
- Draw spokes moving out from that and add more circles or boxes with more ideas
- You can have multiple hubs that connect to each other

<https://thinkwritten.com/mind-map-your-novel/>

Mind map

Every mind is different, so
maps can be, too!



What can I map?

- **Characters**

Who is connected to each other and how? What are their relationships and histories?

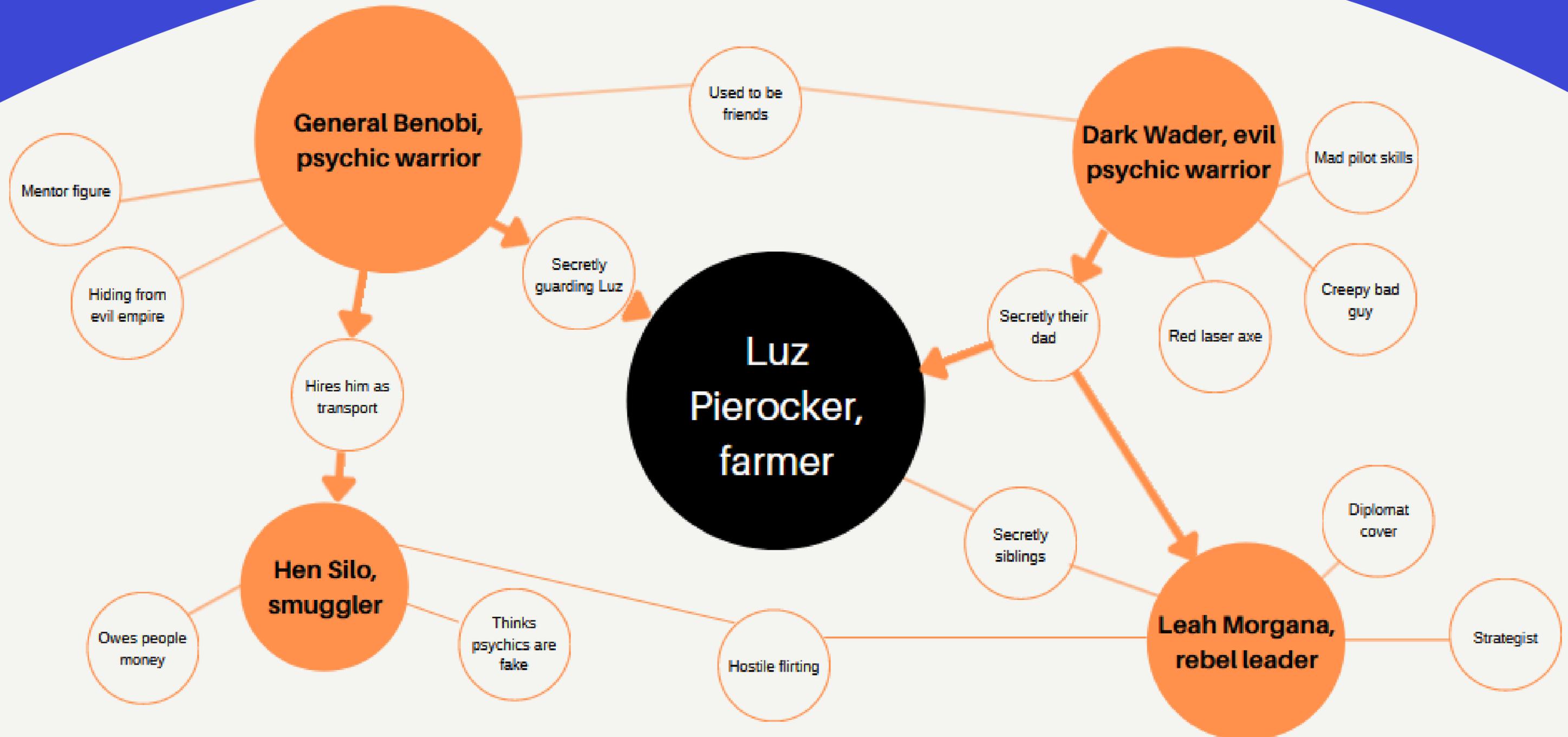
- **Plot points**

What major events happen and what links them? What ripple effects occur?

- **Freeform**

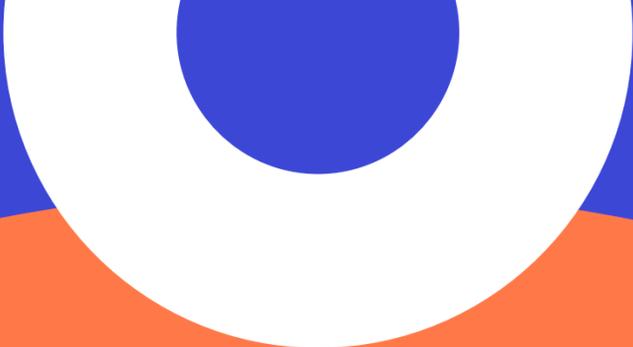
Start with any idea and branch out with whatever elements emanate from it.

Sample character mind map



As you go

- Summarize the first scene in your novel
- Write the scene
- Repeat until you're finished!
- Do this out of order if you prefer, just summarize each scene before you write it



The Headlight Method

"Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

— E.L. Doctorow, *Writers At Work: The Paris Review Interviews*



The secret benefit of this method is you'll have a complete outline of what you've written by the time you finish it!





Options

Goal

Conflict

Outcome

Funnel your scenes

State, then eliminate

Talking through what could happen helps you address obvious reader questions (why didn't they just??) and show characters making choices. The outcome should ideally feel inevitable in retrospect while still being surprising.

Motivation Reaction Units

- **Motivation**

An external, objective thing that happens, an action or sensory experience, and leads to...

- **Reaction**

An internal, subjective response to the motivation that happens immediately, instinctively.

- **Reaction components**

1. Feeling-instantaneous
2. Reflex-unconscious
3. Rational action-conscious

Character arcs

- Describe your character at the beginning: who they are, what they want
- Summarize how they change throughout the book
- Can include summaries of the pivotal scenes where changes or revelations occur

<https://www.well-storied.com/blog/craft-strong-character-arcs>

Transformative

Character overcomes or succumbs to a significant mental, emotional or spiritual internal obstacle

Static

Character struggles to maintain their core self and values as outside factors try to force them to change

**A change
will do you
good**

Internally

Characters observe, identify and accept their own flaws and work to overcome them in order to unlock their full potential and stop making poor choices that undermine their own success

Externally

Characters use their newfound self-awareness and abilities to accomplish their goals, assist their allies, defeat the antagonist and reshape the world around them to their own ends

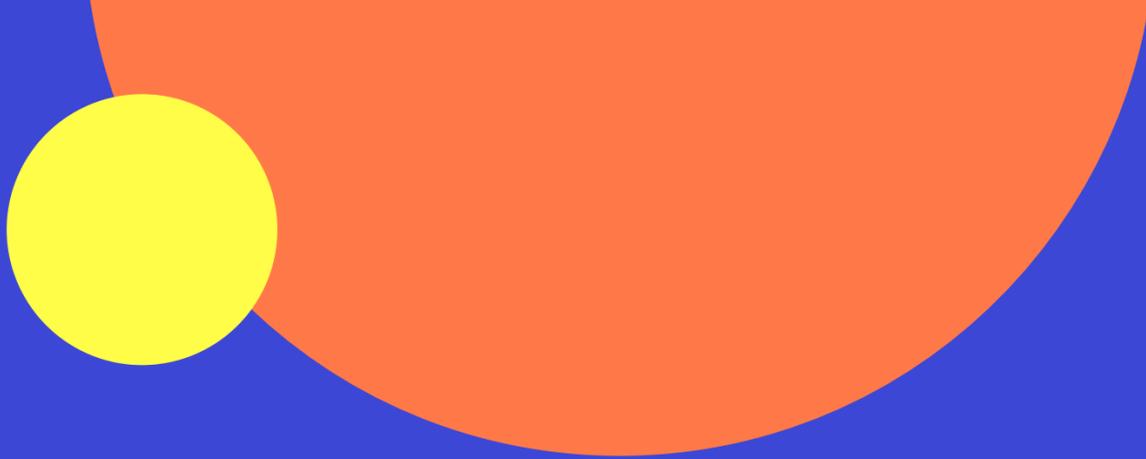
Identity vs. Essence: Which Will Win?

Identity

Who the character thinks they are when the story begins, the self they show to others and the one that motivates their choices, often based on a lie

Essence

Who the character really is deep down, or who they wish they were but have been avoiding or denying because of internal or external factors



Exercise: Character Lies

The arc is long, but it bends toward truth

Establish the lie

What false thing does your character believe about themselves, and how can you show it in action?

Challenge the lie

What happens to put a crack in the wall around this lie, and/or to introduce the truth that starts to shine through?

Handle the truth

What happens to make your character cling to the lie, and how will they gradually come to accept or reject the truth?

**Any
questions?
If not, have
a bun!**



Bunnies are excellent

Long ears, big feet, tiny noses, soft fur... Look at this little bun just sniffing a flower, it's perfect

Different Types of Outlines

SYNOPSIS

One page summary

INDEX CARDS

One card per scene, chapter, plot point, etc.

WHITEBOARD

However you want, in your face

NOTEBOOK

Notes, scraps, pictures, etc.

Synopsis

- Write a one- or two-page summary of the whole book
- Include major events and give a feel for the style and characters
- It's good to practice doing this regardless because you'll have to do it if you want to query agents later

<http://www.publishingcrawl.com/2012/04/17/how-to-write-a-1-page-synopsis/>

Key Components

From a particular plotty perspective

- Status Quo: the "normal" world with all its flaws
- Inciting Incident: what changes everything
- Developments: characters try to deal, but can they even
- Crisis: where it all falls apart
- Resolution: where it all comes together

Synopsis Example

Status Quo

Luz Pierocker is a moisture farmer who lives on an isolated planet with her aunt and uncle. She dreams of escaping her boring life to become a fighter pilot.

Inciting Incident

Luz receives a message meant for someone else, from a rebel leader begging for help against an evil empire. She finds the message's true recipient, a former general who asks her to join him in a quest to deliver plans for a planet-killing superweapon to the rebels. Luz refuses to go, but when her relatives are murdered by the empire's goons, her ties to home are severed and she decides to leave.

Developments

The general hires a mercenary smuggler to take them to the rebel's home planet. Along the way, he instructs Luz in using her previously unknown psychic powers. When they reach their destination, to their horror, they find the superweapon has destroyed it.

Their new plan: infiltrate the moon-sized space station where the rebel leader is imprisoned and save her. While Luz and the smuggler disguise themselves as enemy soldiers, the general distracts the empire's own powerful psychic warrior. The leader is rescued, but the general sacrifices himself to let them escape.

Synopsis Example

Crisis

Luz and the smuggler escort the rebel leader to her hidden base, where she and her allies plan a daring assault on the space station. Luz is given her own ship to pilot, fulfilling her dream despite the dire circumstances.

She joins the squad attempting to exploit a weakness in the station to blow it up in a single, impossible shot. The first attack fails, and the enemy seems poised to crush the rebellion completely. But Luz hears the voice of the general encourage her to use her psychic powers to try again, and this time, she succeeds.

Resolution

Thanks to Luz, the empire's superweapon is destroyed, though their psychic warrior lives to fight another day. The rebels hold a ceremony to celebrate their victory, their leader awarding Luz and the smuggler medals in front of a jubilant crowd. The galaxy is saved--for now--and Luz has not only grown stronger and more confident, she's found allies with an important cause to support with her new powers.

Tips and Tricks

- **Keep it simple**

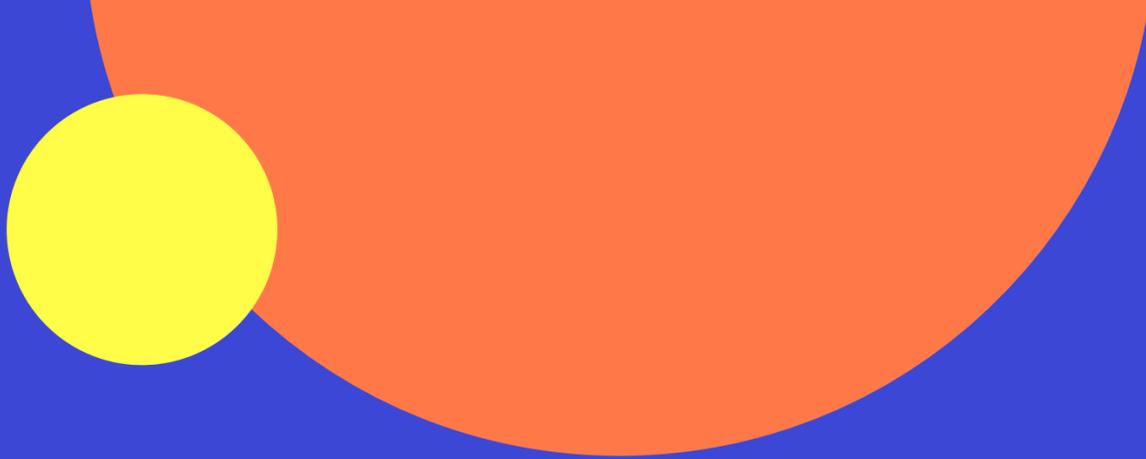
Stick to the central plot and arc, no sub-plots or side quests--summarize and elide liberally

- **Don't name names**

Focus on the few most important characters or locations, use short descriptions as needed

- **Promises, promises**

Set clear expectations and stakes in the beginning and show how you meet them by the end



Exercise: Raising Stakes

Stakes... Why'd it have to be stakes?

Start big

What tangible, undesirable thing will happen to your characters or the world if they fail in their goal?

Go bigger

How could the undesirable thing get even worse, and/or what additional bad things get added to the pile?

Galaxy brain

What are the absolute worst case scenarios, the catastrophes and apocalypses, the loss of anything gained?

Index cards

- Summarize a scene on each card
- Can be color coded by character, theme, etc.
- Can include extra notes in addition to the scene summary
- Can be arranged on a board or wall in order, moved around

<https://margaretdilloway.com/2010/09/06/how-to-outline-a-novel-60-index-cards-method/>

How many cards do you need?

- **60 card method**

- Acts I and III will have about 15 cards each
- Act II will have about 30 cards

- **Book math method**

Number of words / average scene length in words = number of scenes
(ex. 100,000 / 2,000 = 50 scenes)

- **An bigge stack?!**

Don't overthink it, go with the flow, write down anything scene-shaped that comes to mind

Sample index card

ACT 1
SCENE 4

LUZ NEEDS HER NEW ROBOT TO START WORKING THE FARM, BUT IT HAS A JAMMED DATA DISC SUPPOSEDLY IMPAIRING ITS FUNCTION. SHE MANAGES TO FIX IT, WHICH TRIGGERS THE ROBOT TO START PLAYING A MYSTERIOUS HOLOGRAPHIC MESSAGE FRAGMENT. THE LOVELY WOMAN IN THE MESSAGE ASKS FOR HELP FROM SOMEONE LUZ THINKS MIGHT BE HER STRANGE RECLUSIVE NEIGHBOR. SHE DECIDES TO GO ASK HIM ABOUT IT.

Luz, Preepio, Artee

Show Luz is techy, gay and eager for adventure

**Any
questions?
If not,
enjoy this
good fox**



Check out this fox

The tongue slip is amazing, I can't believe how cute it is, this fox looks so chill and happy

Whiteboard

- Do whatever you want, on a board!
- Make notes, draw pictures, tape up cards or art, use different color markers, get creative (or don't!)
- Add, move or take away elements as you work

<https://lyndaryoung.blogspot.com/2011/03/writers-tools-whiteboard.html>

I don't have a whiteboard?!

Okay, how about...

- A mirror (bathroom? closet?)
- Any bare wall space
- One of those folding science fair boards
- A door (bedroom? closet? refrigerator?)
- The wall of your shower
- A digital canvas

Pros

- Big space to spread out in
- Can be organized or messy
- Can see everything at a glance

Cons

- Stuck in one place
- Gets harder to change easily
- Visual clutter can overwhelm

Notebook

- Do whatever you want, in a notebook!
- Make notes, draw pictures, tape or glue in cards or art, use stickers or different color markers, get creative
- Add, move or take away elements as you work

<https://susandennard.com/2013/10/14/how-i-plan-a-book-part-2/>

Do you even BuJo, bro?

**Bullet Journaling methods work
great for writer notebooks!**

No pressure to make them fancy unless you want to.



Writer BuJo

What can you put in it?



Character

Lists of names, descriptions, background information, motivations, dialogue tests



Setting

More lists of names, descriptions, history, physical and economic characteristics



Plot

Scene summaries, tentpole moments, timelines, what happens behind the scenes



Random Ideas

Write every bolt of inspiration down as soon as it comes to you so you won't forget it

Index!

The best part of the bullet journal

- In the front of your notebook, label the first few pages Index.
- Number all the pages in your journal when you start or as you go.
- When you add things to the book, give them tags (Topics).
- Add each new Topic to the Index with the relevant page number.
- Like any book index, a Topic can have multiple page numbers; update as needed!

Links? Links!

- <https://jamigold.com/for-writers/worksheets-for-writers/>
- <https://savethecat.com/beat-sheets/the-hitchhikers-guide-to-the-galaxy-novel-beat-sheet>
- <http://thenovelfactory.blogspot.com/2016/02/mystery-plot-template-story-beats.html>
- <https://www.eadeverell.com/forwriters/mindmaps/>
- <https://www.mindmeister.com/blog/guide-storytelling-with-mind-maps/>

Links? Links!

- <https://medium.com/swlh/why-writing-outlines-may-not-be-working-for-you-23fb91ad81c8>
- <https://www.janefriedman.com/how-to-write-a-novel-synopsis/>
- <https://jerichowriters.com/how-to-write-a-novel-synopsis-with-an-example/>
- <https://hollylisle.com/notecarding-plotting-under-pressure/>
- <https://mythcreants.com/blog/three-excuses-to-use-office-supplies/>
- <https://www.writersdigest.com/there-are-no-rules/create-structure-in-your-fiction-using-index-cards>

Links? Links!

- <http://squidinky.com/whiteboarding-ideas-for-a-fiction-novel>
- <https://shauntagrimes.medium.com/how-to-make-a-plot-board-for-your-novel-a14cd87c909f>
- <https://she-who-fights-and-writes.tumblr.com/post/162369001086/making-your-murder-board-or-creating-fiction>
- <https://prowritingaid.com/art/916/how-to-use-a-notebook-for-your-novel.aspx>
- <https://thenovelsmithy.com/how-to-create-a-writers-notebook/>



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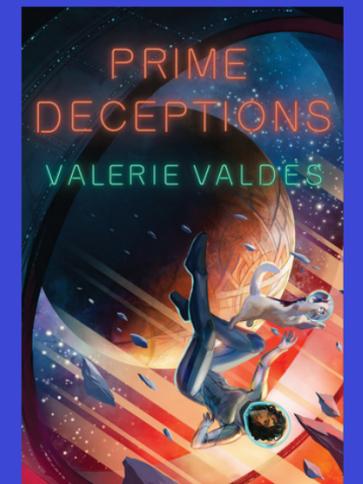
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Any last questions?

Ask them now!

If you're shy, you can email me instead:
valerievaldes@gmail.com

Class Google Drive folder:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WnYg_h57-upQl1mKOuKhT3Hs_9CxzRo27?usp=sharing

