THE TWO-TIER OUTLINE

n order to get a deep sense of the whole story, you need a way to outline it – and "outline" is a word that many writers have strong feelings about.

Some writers – often referred to as "plotters" – love to outline their entire book, because they believe they have to map out every twist and turn in order to write a coherent whole.

Other writers hate outlining, because they believe it robs them of their creativity and they would rather write their way to an understanding of their story. These writers are often referred to as "pantsters" (because they write by the seat of their pants).

The Two-Tier Outline is an outlining method that writers from both camps can love. It's a simple and easy-to-use tool with a very clear goal: In a short space, tie the external, plot-based events of your story to the internal, emotion-based truths that inform it.

The Two-Tier Outline works if you are starting a new story, rescuing one where you are stuck, or revising. Think of it as a container to hold your story in a way where you can see the whole thing, and measure what is really on the page.

Before we go into detail about the Two-Tier Outline, let's take a moment to explain the weaknesses in the two processes we just described: plotting and pantsing. The goal here is not to talk you out of a method that works for you; it's to help you understand why you may have been frustrated by it, and to give you a reason to add the Two-Tier Outline to your process, no matter what your process is.

The Problem with Plotting

There are a lot of methods that teach writers how to plot out their books, based on the classic three-act structure, the Hero's Journey, or other external systems. These methods often work better for screenplays than novels, because screenplays are all about plot, or what happens when.

The screenwriter doesn't have to describe body language or intonation or facial expression or what the characters are thinking or sometimes even what happened in the characters' past or where people are standing in a room. Those things are left to the director and the actors to interpret, which is why we can have 3 million different and equally effective versions of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Relying solely on plot doesn't work for a novel because it is the most interior of all art forms. A novel invites us into someone else's mind, and lets us follow along as they make meaning of what is happening to them. As the character makes sense of events, so does the reader. A

novelist must convey body language, intonation, facial expression, what the characters are thinking, what happened in that character's past or where people are standing in a room.

A novel that simply describes *what happened when* is most likely going to fall flat. It doesn't matter how dramatic the events that are being described; without a sense of the why, or the meaning, we won't have a reason to keep turning pages.

When novelists talk about outlining, they almost always mean outlining the plot. The result tends to be densely intricate grids that lay out the details of what happens when. We know how much time they take to make, and how much effort, and we also know how infrequently they guide the writer to where they need to go. The reason? Plot grids always leave out the most important part of story, which is the why and the meaning behind anything that happens.

The Two-Tier Outline lets you marry the two together.

It also gives you a bit of the control that many plotters crave. You can map out the whole story. You can wrap your hands around the beginning, middle and end. You can see exactly where things are going. But you do all that while at the same time keeping the key elements of your story at the front of your mind.

The Problem with Pantsing

Writers who eschew outlining believe that stopping to think through the details of a story ruins their writing mojo. They prefer to simply write forward. Maybe they have some notes on their story, or a rough sketch of the overall arc, or a vision of where they want things to go, but they believe that writing forward is the only way to figure out the story.

Jennie Nash has written several novels by this method, and she can say from experience that it is wildly inefficient. It can work – but it often means putting off until the end the deep thinking you should have done at the start. And it almost always means throwing out a lot of pages, which eats up a lot of time.

We get it: You want to create and to spin scenes and stories. You don't want to slow down to think through the logic of your story, or dig for the deep-level why. That kind of thinking reminds you too much of the kind of work you have to do at the office every day as you manage systems, processes, and people.

The Two-Tier Outline gives you an easy way to get down the key elements of your story and your plot without wringing the life out of either.

How It Works

The Two-Tier Outline is a list, where each bullet point describes a major action of the story (what happens), and is paired with a second bullet point that describes why it matters to the protagonist. The first bullet point is the scene and the second bullet point is the point of the scene.

- **Scene:** [WHAT HAPPENS].
- **Point:** [WHY IT MATTERS].

For your outline, aim to write no more than three pages total. We are very strict about this! You do not want exhaustive scene lists. You just want the major points of the novel. You want to be able to see the whole thing unfold, to picture the whole of your story, to feel the shape of it. There is a danger if you write much more than that: You are likely to let the plot run away without the why. The goal of this exercise is to track both what it's about and the emotional meaning of the whole book in a way that you can envision the whole thing.

Take Action

Write a Two-Tier Outline for your story.

Once you have a draft, you can use the Two-Tier Outline to capture any changes to the story as you revise. For example, let's say you are working on a scene in the middle of the novel and realize you need to weave something into Chapter 3 to have it all make sense. You can note the need for the change in Chapter 3 on the Two-Tier Outline, and that will serve as a reminder to make the change in the actual chapter.

Test

Once you have your Outline, look over everything you have written with an eye toward the logic of it. Ask yourself:

- Does it make sense? Is it logical?
- Would the characters really behave that way?
- Is there a problem that we get to watch being solved? (Is there desire, is there conflict?)
- Does something change?
- Does one thing drive to the next?
- Does every single scene have a point?

Revise

Revise your Two-Tier Outline as many times as you need until it is as solid as possible. Ask a trusted writer friend or your book coach to read it over and find any holes in it.

Put It to Work

As you write forward, the Two-Tier Outline will become a roadmap for the whole story. You can use it in the following ways:

- As a guide for each scene – You know where it falls in the story progression, and what it needs to accomplish. Use this as your framework for the scene.

- As a touchstone to keep the story driving forward – Pay attention to the cause-and-effect that connects one scene to each other.

- As a container for the changes you make as you write – You will be surprised by your story and your characters, and things will pop up you didn't expect. Write them, then return to the Two-Tier Outline to make sure they fit in with the overall story flow. If you have to change anything earlier or later in the story as a result of the new material, make the changes on the Two-Tier Outline. In this way, it can be a holding place for changes you still need to make. If used in this way, the outline will grow beyond the prescribed 2-3 pages, but that's fine!

- As the basis of your synopsis – Writing a synopsis, which many agents require during the pitch process, is a piece of cake when you work from a Two-Tier Outline. Everything you need is on the page – you just combine it into a narrative, smooth out the language, and make sure it sings, and you've got it.

- To solve a problem when you get stuck – Return to the Two-Tier Outline when you get stuck at any point in the writing. Remind yourself of your intention and where you are in the progression. Dig back in.

NOTE: You can make a new Two-Tier Outline to solve a problem with an individual chapter, a character, or even an object or concept like a crime. Take two pages and hammer out the key events in the chapter, the character's life, or the life of the object or concept. Attach a bullet point with what each of those events means.