

Plotter or Pantser – Who Says You Have to Choose?

By Herb Williams-Dalgart

A common question asked between writers, particularly those who use conversation as a means of procrastination, is whether you are a “plotter” or a “pantser.” For the uninitiated, a plotter is a writer who likes to outline their story, creating a skeletal plot structure ahead of the actual writing. A pantser is someone who sits down to the proverbial blank page and writes without a tangible structure worked out, acquiescing to the muse, writing from a place of inspiration by the seat of his or her pants.

Neither method is right or wrong but writers often make the mistake of thinking each is exclusive.

Taking the privilege of the tenured writer, I will invent a word to describe my own style. I’m neither an exclusive plotter nor pantser. I’d say I’m more of a paraglider. Ok, not an invented word as much as an invented application of an existing word, but stay with me.

Like a paraglider, I have a plan, a set of tools, a path, and a process. Nevertheless, I also enjoy the fun of the unexpected turbulence and changes in the wind. I like to surprise myself.

Seasoned paragliders would never venture out without training, or equipment, or a general sense of their route—too treacherous. Yet these fun-lovers would never shy away from the adventure offered by the unexpected shifts in the air, either. So it is with my writing.

Like a plotter, I prefer to have a map before setting out on the journey, lest I find myself lost. I like to know where I’m headed when I write. To me, this means having a good sense of my theme, a solid idea of my plot points (including some scene details of the major ones), a strong grasp of the tone I’m seeking, and a sense of the characters I wish to follow.

However, like a pantser, I may not always know the linkages between my plot points, the precise decisions my characters may make. I never know what feats of strength or boneheaded maneuvers my characters may attempt, and I ALWAYS give myself permission to change my mind about...well, everything. It’s a writer’s prerogative. Like a pantser, I too heed the call of my muse.

Paragliders set out on an anticipated journey, but enjoy the free air. They take comfort in having a plan and reliable equipment, but they like to ride the breeze and let it take them wherever it takes them. Still, they remain in control. Writers should never use their outlines or character profiles or plot points or scene setup charts to stifle their creativity. They should use these things to quiet their nerves, to free their spirits, to offer assurance, to provide a light at the end of the tunnel so that they can follow the path wherever it goes, comforted that they’ll end up in the right place: the place that tells the story they intend to tell in a way that serves the narrative best.

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Readers will only tolerate written meanderings for so long. Clever or poetic language is pleasing, but won't carry the story or the plot very far before the reader gets restless. Likewise, overly structured, regimented plotting without a soul is predictable and uninteresting. Some advice, since I'm apparently inclined to offer it:

- **To Plotters**—ask yourselves, where is the surprise? Is that scene you intend to write totally predictable? Is your protagonist boring? Does your story rely on cliché? Is your dialogue fresh and interesting? How should your reader feel now? And now? Have you appealed to more than one of their senses (how does this place smell, feel, sound, look)? Some creative decisions defy an outline. Live on the edge. Sometimes it's perspiration, but sometimes it's inspiration.
- **To Pantsers**—ask yourselves, was that scene necessary? Why? Did that scene you just wrote further the plot, enhance the character, plant a seed? Everything you write is not precious (I don't mean to hurt your feelings. I'm just keeping it real). Kill your darlings if they don't get the job done. Was it a distraction you found more interesting than the point you were trying to make? What is your story about (not what happens, but what is the theme)? Does your story or your protagonist have an arc? Will your audience be reading eagerly or enduring this part until they get to the part you really want to write? Have you attended to your tone and has it changed from the last time you wrote? Live dangerously. Sometimes it's inspiration, but sometimes it's perspiration.

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Readers seek a balance just as writers do. They want a story to go somewhere, to challenge them, to facilitate an escape, but to have purpose and clarity as much as it has heart. They want to get to know your characters, live in their world, hear their thoughts but get the story from you in an original way. They're very demanding people, and serving their needs takes effort and intent as much as it takes a creative mind. That's how you serve your own needs—through creative expression.

So, if you're a writer struggling to refine or more firmly establish your creative method, don't be prodded by plotters or seduced by pantsers—at least not entirely. Consider jumping on with the paragliders and rise above it all. The sky is your canvas. Fly!

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