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BASIC PLOT OUTLINE

24 Chapter Outline for any Commercial Fiction.

50,000 – 70,000-word manuscripts have roughly

2,000 – 3,000 words per chapter. Adapt as necessary.

A NOVEL ONE-PAGE PLOT OUTLINE (BY CHAPTER)

ACT I	ACT II	ACT III
<p>Hero & Ordinary World</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Really Bad Day 2 Something Peculiar 3 Grasping at Straws 4 Call to Adventure 5 Head in Sand 6 Pull out Rug <p>A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INCITING INCIDENT <p>B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FIRST PLOT POINT 	<p>Exploring New World</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Enemies & Allies 8 Games & Trials 9 Earning Respect 10 Forces of Evil 11 Problem Revealed 12 Truth & Ultimatum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FIRST BATTLE • MIDPOINT 	<p>Bad Guys Close In</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13 Mirror Stage 14 Plan of Attack 15 Crucial Role 16 Direct Conflict 17 Surprise Failure 18 Shocking Revelation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SECOND BATTLE • SECOND PLOT POINT
		<p>Defeat and Victory</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 19 Giving Up 20 Pep Talk 21 Seizing the Sword 22 Ultimate Defeat 23 Unexpected Victory 24 Bittersweet Reflection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FINAL BATTLE • RESOLUTION

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(CITING RESOURCES BY DEREK MURPHY)

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ACT I: HERO & ORDINARY WORLD

1 Really Bad Day

Ordinary world, empathy, conflict, show flaw and lack. Establishes the character's flaws and desires through a conflict or problem they face.

2 Something Peculiar

Something unique or strange happens, but they dismiss it. Foreshadows future challenges.

3 Grasping at Straws

Protagonist trying to maintain or regain control of the ordinary world but setbacks mount. Feeling pulled towards a different world.

- **INCITING INCIDENT** (call to adventure)

4 Call to Adventure

Something extraordinarily different happens, they can't ignore. Major setback.

5 Head in Sand

The new interrupts the old and causes conflict. Reveals dissatisfaction with ordinary.

6 Pull out Rug

Trying to fix ordinary world problems while resisting the lure of the supernatural world.

ACT II: 1ST PLOT POINT (point of no return)

7 Enemies & Allies

Explore a new world; meet characters, find their place and role. Introduce all main characters.

8 Games & Trials

Struggle to belong. Frustration and doubt. Trials and challenges.

9 Earning Respect

Small victory as lead proves capable. Fun and games. Begrudging acceptance.

- **1ST PINCH POINT** (first battle)

10 Forces of Evil

Stakes are raised, antagonists revealed.

11 Problem Revealed

Surprise problem or situation.

12 Discovery & Ultimatum

New information, vulnerable share. In or out?

- **MIDPOINT** (victim to warrior)

13 Mirror Stage

Self-realization or a discovery. Victim to Warrior.

14 Plan of Attack

Plan of action to thwart antagonist's forces or overcome main problem.

15 Crucial Rold

Trusted with an important task.

- **2nd PINCH POINT** (second battle)

16 Second Battle

They execute the plan, and come in direct conflict with antagonist's forces

17 Surprise Failure

The plan goes horribly wrong, faulty information or assumption.

18 Shocking Revelation

The antagonist's full plan/true identity is revealed. Stakes are raised. Guilt and anger.

ACT III: 2ND PLOT POINT (dark night of the soul)

19 Giving Up

Lead loses confidence; the forces are too great. What they want is unattainable.

20 Pep Talk

Encouragement from ally. Vulnerable share, inclusion. What's at stake; choice.

21 Seizing the Sword

Deliberate choice to continue, even if slim chance of success.

- **FINAL BATTLE** (triumph-knowledge)

22 Ultimate Defeat

Triumph of Villain. All hope is lost.

23 Unexpected Victory

Brink of defeat, protagonist reveals hidden weapon or ally. Undergoes final transformation in character arc, leading to victory.

24 Bittersweet Return

Protagonist emerges victorious, returns to Ordinary World transformed, ties up loose ends

- **RESOLUTION** (rebirth)

Act 1: Hero & Ordinary World

In Act 1: Hero & Ordinary World, the protagonist is introduced within their mundane daily life, highlighting their relationships, environment, and personal struggles. The character should have room for growth and may face emotional challenges or dissatisfaction with their current situation.

The protagonist's desires and aspirations should be revealed, as well as their internal flaws, which should be mirrored by their environment. Introducing sources of conflict and the character's favorite object can provide further insight into the protagonist's life and motivations.

1. Really Bad Day

In the "Really Bad Day" chapter, the protagonist is introduced in their ordinary world, facing a conflict or problem that prevents them from achieving a desired goal.

This chapter establishes a three-dimensional character with flaws, desires, and unique personality traits, allowing readers to connect with the protagonist.

It also hints at the protagonist's underlying needs and character flaws, which may be unrecognized but still causing harm.

2. Something Peculiar

In the "Something Peculiar" chapter, an unusual event occurs that doesn't align with the protagonist's worldview, leading them to dismiss or ignore it.

The protagonist's focus on their own goals and problems prevents them from recognizing the full implications of this peculiar event.

To build tension, the reader may be more aware of the event's consequences while the protagonist remains oblivious, foreshadowing future challenges in the story.

3. Grasping at Straws

In the “Grasping at Straws” chapter, the protagonist struggles to regain control over their ordinary world as setbacks mount and problems worsen.

They catch a glimpse of a different world and feel a pull towards it, leading them to question their choices and become critical of their current situation.

Despite these feelings, the protagonist still desires to maintain control and stay within the ordinary world, grappling with internal conflict and an evolving perspective.

Section Break: Inciting Incident

The Inciting Incident section break marks a significant shift in the story, as an event intrudes upon the protagonist’s ordinary world.

This change can be a new arrival, a loss, or an unexpected invitation, initiating the plot and disrupting the protagonist’s status quo. Often met with denial or refusal, the protagonist is hesitant to accept the call to adventure, preferring to focus on their previous goals and returning to normalcy.

This turning point should be carefully considered, as it deeply impacts the protagonist’s journey. Consider symbolic objects, setting, and unique character traits to enrich the narrative during this pivotal moment.

4. Call to Adventure

The “Call to Adventure” chapter presents the protagonist with an extraordinary event, invitation, or mission that cannot be ignored or resolved easily.

This significant occurrence forces the protagonist to abandon their previous goals and confront the new challenges arising.

The protagonist's reaction and emotional state, influenced by their unique flaws and circumstances, are vital to understanding how they begin to push back against this new development, setting the stage for their journey into the unknown.

5. Head in Sand

In the "Head in Sand" chapter, the protagonist refuses to accept the reality of the Call to Adventure, attempting to ignore the growing intrigue, tension, and mystery. They resist facing the new challenges and entering the New World, longing for their previous ordinary life.

As regret and doubt build, events continue to conflict with their Ordinary World, illustrating the protagonist's emotional response and their inability to maintain their previous existence.

6. Pull out Rug

In the "Pull out Rug" chapter, the protagonist continues to address ordinary world issues while resisting the Call to Adventure, until an event forces them into the Point of No Return.

This personal and significant event, such as a theft, kidnapping, or loss, compels the protagonist to take action, despite their reluctance.

The stakes and tensions rise, creating a hook for the reader and establishing the protagonist's uncomfortable and involuntary entry into the new world.

Act 2, Part 1: Exploring New World

Section Break: First Plot Point

The First Plot Point section break signifies a major turning point in the story, with events becoming increasingly strange and intriguing.

The protagonist, initially attempting to ignore these problems, is eventually forced into action, leaving the ordinary world behind.

A significant event, such as a revelation, death, or disaster, shatters their previous understanding and leaves them feeling vulnerable. This unforgettable scene may be a metaphorical leap rather than a physical change of location.

The transition can be symbolized by an object or reflected in the environment, with a flash of color conveying the mood. By the end of Act One, all major characters should be introduced, marking a critical moment in the story that impacts the protagonist's journey.

7. Enemies & Allies

In the "Enemies & Allies" chapter, the protagonist enters the New World, navigating new surroundings and adapting to their altered daily life.

As they fumble through their new role, they encounter main characters, including potential allies, enemies, mentors, or love interests. The protagonist may face skepticism, bullying, or support from their new peers, while the antagonist is introduced or hinted at.

This chapter establishes expectations for upcoming challenges, as well as the protagonist's guide to help them traverse the unfamiliar territory.

8. Games & Trials

In the "Games & Trials" chapter, the protagonist faces the challenges and excitement of the New World, encountering new characters and learning to navigate their new environment.

This stage may also introduce conflicts with a love interest, as well as require the protagonist to undergo training or learning to harness newfound abilities. The protagonist's frustration, self-doubt, and feelings of not belonging create a connection with the reader, while the unique aspects of the New World are showcased through the protagonist's actions and training.

9. Earning Respect

In the “Earning Respect” chapter, the protagonist achieves a small victory, demonstrating their capabilities to both allies and enemies. This accomplishment helps to garner begrudging respect and fosters a sense of belonging, leading to a boost in the protagonist’s self-confidence.

This stage explores the nature of the small victory, the reactions of allies, and the growth of the protagonist’s newfound self-assurance.

Section Break: 1st Pinch Point (first battle)

The First Pinch Point marks a significant section break in the story, where the protagonist encounters their first major interaction with the antagonist or the forces of evil. This confrontation does not have to be a literal battle, but it serves to raise the stakes and increase tension.

The protagonist may not fully comprehend the situation but finds themselves at the heart of the conflict. The scene should be intense and dire, pushing the protagonist’s self-identity to its limits. Consider using the setting and characters to reflect the mood, making the scene memorable and epic.

This crucial turning point requires a pause to understand its impact on the protagonist before continuing with the next chapter.

10. Forces of Evil

The stakes are raised as the forces of evil become more apparent, and the antagonist is revealed. After gaining some confidence, the protagonist now faces the true dangers and implications of their involvement.

This conflict, whether direct or remote, provides a clearer understanding of the antagonist’s ultimate goal, humbling the protagonist.

The chapter should depict small successes for the protagonist and their allies, increasing tension as the antagonist's forces work toward the same goal. By highlighting the protagonist's newfound understanding of the antagonist and the resulting humility, the story's intensity is further heightened.

11. Problem Revealed

The protagonist feels overwhelmed and left in the dark after confronting the challenges in the previous chapter. Realizing their allies withheld information about the danger and true threat level, they experience feelings of exclusion and alienation.

They confront the allies, demanding answers, and are initially dismissed, being told they are not ready or need to further develop their powers.

The scene should capture the protagonist's shaken confidence in both the allies and themselves, while also showcasing their newfound determination to stand up for what they deserve.

12. Truth & Ultimatum

The protagonist discovers critical information that alters their worldview, revealing the full extent of the antagonist's forces, the problem's backstory, and what they're up against. They may also see their allies in a new light or develop empathy for the antagonist's viewpoint.

With this comprehensive understanding, the protagonist must consciously choose whether to commit to the journey ahead or not.

This new information and the protagonist's decision to move forward or not create a compelling and intriguing turning point in the story, further engaging the reader.

Act 2, Part 2: Bad Guys Close In

Section Break: Midpoint (victim to warrior)

At the midpoint of the novel, the protagonist transitions from a defensive, reactive role to a proactive one, determined to fight back and do whatever it takes to win. This turning point may be fueled by anger towards the antagonist, a new perspective, or increased self-confidence.

No longer playing the victim, the protagonist questions their identity and experiences a shift in perspective, often symbolized by an object or a flash of color in a remarkable setting. This significant change in the protagonist's attitude marks a crucial turning point in the story, compelling the reader to eagerly anticipate the protagonist's next steps.

13. Mirror Stage

At this stage, the protagonist transitions from a passive, reactive role to a deliberate, active one, moving from victim to warrior. Armed with new information, backstory, and an understanding of the risks, they make a conscious decision to continue.

This point may include a significant revelation or twist, causing the protagonist to second-guess their decision and confront their weaknesses.

Through deep self-reflection, the protagonist defines who they want to be, but they are not yet prepared to face their fatal flaw fully.

14. Plan of Attack

The protagonist, now fully committed, devises a plan of attack with their allies to tackle the problem from Chapter 11 and confront the antagonist. The planning session covers the antagonist's intentions, the actions required to stop them, and whether the protagonist and allies will face the antagonist's forces directly or address a central issue.

Additionally, the planning stage considers potential obstacles the antagonist may present to hinder the protagonist's progress, keeping the antagonist one step ahead for now.

15. Crucial Role

The protagonist, now entrusted with a critical task as part of the overall strategy, is given a chance to prove themselves in a real-world situation. As the team begins to trust the protagonist more, they take on a role that bears significant responsibility for the outcome of the conflict.

The emotional stakes are heightened as the protagonist must decide whether to embrace this responsibility fully or maintain a certain distance from the conflict.

Section Break: 2nd Pinch Point (second battle)

In the upcoming second battle, the protagonist faces forces representing the antagonist's interests, rather than the antagonist themselves. Despite slim chances of success, the protagonist feels responsible for the outcome and is determined to see it through.

This confrontation reveals that they have underestimated the antagonist's power, leading to a defeat or foreshadowing of higher stakes in the next major encounter.

This section break marks a significant turning point in the story, with changes that will impact the protagonist as they continue their journey.

16. Direct Conflict

In the second battle, the protagonist and their allies directly confront the antagonist's higher-level forces, after having been underestimated in the first conflict. They execute their plan, which may involve infiltrating the antagonist's lair or attempting to steal a crucial item.

The goal and level of forces they encounter heighten the tension and leave the protagonist in a precarious situation, further emphasizing the stakes and challenges they face.

17. Surprise Failure

The protagonist's plan unravels disastrously, leading to serious consequences such as the death of an ally, permanent injuries, or the loss of vital resources. The failure could stem from various factors, resulting in exposed identities and shattered strategies.

This dramatic scene intensifies the challenges faced by the protagonist and their allies, leaving them in a state of uncertainty and heightening the stakes for both the characters and the reader.

18. Shocking Revelation

The protagonist uncovers crucial information about the antagonist's true identity or their full plan, exacerbating their predicament. Overwhelmed by guilt and anger for their failure and the antagonist's cunning, the protagonist feels responsible for letting everyone down.

This revelation raises the stakes, intensifies tension, and plants seeds of doubt, shaping future plans and decisions while profoundly impacting the protagonist's emotional state, desires, and needs.

Section Break: 2nd Plot Point (dark night of the soul)

The second plot point plunges the protagonist into their darkest hour, where they suffer a crushing defeat, often due to their own character flaw or lack of knowledge. As their worst fears materialize, they lose all hope and resign themselves to failure.

The catastrophic loss prompts a change in mindset, forcing the protagonist to abandon their initial desires and pursue a new direction. When they recognize and confront what's been holding them back, they ultimately transform into the hero needed to defeat the villain.

The heart-wrenching scene involves significant and irreversible consequences for the protagonist or their allies, serving as a poignant reminder of the stakes involved in their journey.

Act 3: Defeat and Victory

19. Giving Up

The protagonist, facing the Dark Night of the Soul, loses confidence and gives up after a disastrous defeat. They underestimated the antagonist, and their failed plan leaves them feeling powerless, hopeless, and ridden with self-doubt.

As they grapple with the consequences of their failure, they may experience guilt and a sense of responsibility for the dire outcome.

This chapter emphasizes the protagonist's deteriorating mental state, whether it's anger, depression, or guilt, and amplifies the stakes, making victory seem unattainable.

20. Pep Talk

In the depths of despair, the protagonist receives encouragement and a pep talk from an ally, pulling them out of their depressive cycle. This may include a vulnerable revelation about the protagonist's past, identity, or fatal flaw, offering insight into their struggles.

While the fatal flaw may not be entirely resolved, the protagonist starts to confront it. The ally's words help rebuild the protagonist's confidence and highlight the stakes, inspiring them to choose a new path forward.

This chapter not only rekindles the protagonist's courage but also reminds the reader why resolving the problem matters.

21. Seizing the Sword

The protagonist, having addressed their fatal flaw, seizes the sword, making a deliberate choice to continue despite slim chances of success. A hidden piece of critical information is revealed to provide them with a much-needed boost.

As the protagonist and allies gear up for the final battle, they prepare by obtaining essential items, gathering forces, or formulating a plan. This chapter highlights their determination to confront the antagonist, engaging the reader in their decision to move forward against all odds.

Section Break: Final Battle

In the final battle section break, the protagonist, having received a pep talk from a close friend, finds the resolve to confront the antagonist despite seemingly hopeless odds. Initially, they fail and are captured, but in a sudden twist, they dig deep within themselves, finding the motivation and tenacity to persevere.

They unlock access to a secret weapon or newfound knowledge, which enables them to defeat the antagonist.

This major turning point in the story dramatically impacts the protagonist, forcing them to grow, change, or make a critical realization. The narrative then continues to explore the consequences of this climactic event.

22. Ultimate Defeat

In the pivotal "All is Lost" moment, the protagonist, still not fully understanding their fatal flaw, confidently enters the final battle only to face ultimate defeat at the hands of the antagonist. As the protagonist is humiliated and forced to confront their true flaw, they are brought to their lowest point, seemingly without hope of victory or redemption.

The narrative emphasizes the protagonist's mental and emotional turmoil as they grapple with the dire situation, the loss of allies, and the reality of their flaws. It is in this darkest hour that the protagonist finally realizes the nature of their flaw and what must be done to overcome it.

23. Unexpected Victory

At the brink of defeat, the protagonist gains a newfound understanding of their unhealed wound and decides to let go of their desires to achieve victory. Embracing their needs and willing to make sacrifices, they reveal a secret weapon, ability, or unexpected ally that has been overlooked throughout the story.

The antagonist's gloating is cut short as the protagonist undergoes the final transformation in their character arc, leading to a triumphant and satisfying victory. This climactic scene may also involve further sacrifices, including the loss of allies or even the protagonist themselves, heightening the emotional impact of their ultimate triumph.

24. Bittersweet Return

The protagonist emerges victorious from the battle, leading to a period of either joyful celebration or bittersweet reflection. They may have only driven off the antagonist or defeated a lesser henchman, but they have undoubtedly changed as a person.

As they return to their transformed Ordinary World, they may let go of a symbolic object they've held onto, signifying their growth.

In this denouement, loose ends in the protagonist's and other characters' storylines are tied up, and the narrative concludes with a sense of resolution, unless the story continues in a subsequent chapter.

Section Break: Rebirth (return to ordinary world)

Upon returning to the Ordinary World, the protagonist is transformed, having achieved victory, albeit possibly temporary in the case of a series. Their newfound confidence, friendships, and hope for the future allow them to face earlier challenges or bullies, which now seem trivial.

The antagonist's defeat marks a significant change in the protagonist's life, as they reflect on their losses and gains, symbolized by specific objects, highlighting their growth and the impact of their journey.

25. Death of Self (optional)

In this optional, yet powerful chapter, the protagonist comes full circle, experiencing a rebirth as they shift from ambition to service.

After sacrificing their desires to save others and defeat the antagonist, they undergo an emotional recovery and adapt to the changed Ordinary World.

This significant transformation may be acknowledged through a ceremony or public celebration, highlighting the completion of their character arc. Loose ends are tied up, and if part of a series, hints of future challenges or unresolved issues are introduced.

Using AI to Build a 24 Chapter Novel Outline

One of my favorite things about the 24 Chapter Novel Outline is that it works perfectly with AI.

An AI tool like ChatGPT is great at developing outlines with standard, known methods such as the Hero's Journey. But when it comes to getting that broad outline to a chapter-by-chapter level, it's not as great.

So, I purposely use this outline instead, as it gives ChatGPT the exact parameters for each chapter, and I can easily add an existing synopsis to the AI to then transform into the 24 Chapter Novel Outline format.

But there's one slight problem: ChatGPT doesn't know the 24 Chapter Novel Outline.

No worries! All that means is that we must feed it the right information first.

That's why I included the "Quick Summary" above because that will help you feed the outline info into your AI tool first, then its memory should be enough to take your story synopsis and apply the outlining method.

I usually start with a prompt like this:

We're going to be outlining a [GENRE] novel using the 24-chapter novel outline below. Once you have read this, please says "READ" to indicate you understand:

[PASTE QUICK SUMMARY OF OUTLINE]

Then, once I've done that, and I have confirmation that ChatGPT has stored the outline in its memory, I will add a prompt like this:

Now using the 24-chapter novel outline above, take the following synopsis and outline it in the same format. Feel free to add additional details as needed to fill in any gaps in the story.

[PASTE SYNOPSIS]

Next, we will edit our outline one chapter at a time. Copy and paste it into this document and then assess if you think you like each point.

You will have a great bulletized order of events for the main structure of your story.

Next, we want to take each of those chapter parts and paste them into ChatGPT and get a short summary of what that chapter will be about. I would do a prompt like this:

Now looking at this chapter, tell me more about what will happen. [PASTE CHAPTER NAME AND BULLETS]

Go through each chapter again and revise anything you don't like or want to add. This may take some time, but remember, you're taking FAR less time than you would've if starting from a blank piece of paper. So don't skip this step. It's what will put the HUMAN into your AI work. Always keep in mind that you do not want solely ChatGPT to be writing your novel.

Add in where the protagonist meets the antagonist. Introduce most characters before the end of Act I.

Your final outline output will now be a 24–25-chapter outline with detailed chapter summary of each chapter for your entire novel!

Next, we'll ask ChatGPT to further breakdown each chapter into a series of scenes. I would do this prompt repeatedly for each chapter:

Please further breakdown chapter 1 in the outline into a series of scenes that, by cause and effect, lead from scene to scene, and build toward chapter 2.

Place each result into your OneNote in a section called "Chapters" and each page titled with the chapter number. Edit these until they have the story just right.

FROM HERE YOU WILL BEGIN WRITING EACH SCENE INTO MICROSOFT WORD!
YAY! TIME TO CELEBRATE HOW MUCH WORK YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED
ALREADY!

FURTHER RESEARCH:

- [How to Easily Outline your Novel | Plotting Template to Improve Fiction| Derek Murphy \(youtube.com\)](#)