

The 10 Types of Plot Twists

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<http://greatstorybook.com/10-types-plot-twists/>

This entry is part 7 of 7 in the series [PLOT writing](#)

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This is about the 10 types of plot twists and how to use them. A comment left on one of my other articles is the inspiration for this one. A fellow writer wanted to know what the opposite of Eucatastrophe might be. The short answer: Peripeteia. Both of these are types of plot twists – but they aren't the only types you might use. So I thought the best thing to do here would be to list the kinds of plot twists along with their pros and cons – and examples.

There are 10 different types of plot twists. Some you should use, some – maybe not. Here's the lowdown on plot twist options and when you might use them.

How many plot twists make a story? That's entirely up to you.

If you know exactly what makes a scene strong and how those writing techniques have managed to make you either laugh out loud or break into tears, you will be able to write really strong material. Not only that, you'll know what made it strong.

What I bet no one ever told you that there are exactly ten types of plot twists. So let's just bang those out.

10 Types of Plot Twisting

Chances are good that you've at least toyed with the idea of using a plot twist somewhere in the manuscript you're writing right now. The different kinds affect the characters in your story in different ways.

There are ten plot twist techniques.

- Red Herring
- Chekhov's Gun
- Flashback
 - *In media res*
 - Reverse Chronology
 - Non-linear Narrative
- Eucatastrophe
- *Peripeteia* (a.k.a. Peripety)
- *Deus ex machina*
- *Anagnorisis*
- Poetic Justice
- Unreliable Narrator
- False Protagonist

Red Herring

In mysteries, this is probably the most common plot twist. It's when all the clues seem to point to one character as the guilty party, when in fact they're innocent – or at least innocent of the crime being investigated.

The twist comes when the truth is revealed and the red herring is shown to be not guilty.

Chekhov's Gun

Make use of *every* detail. That's what this is about, the whole premise behind Chekhov's Gun. ([For details on Chekhov's Gun, go HERE.](#)) The reason this is a type of plot twist is because the significance of small details is unexpectedly revealed to us later in the story.

You can use this in any kind of story. It will often lend a sense of poignancy.

Flashback

We're so accustomed to flashbacks today, we hardly think of them as particularly twisty anymore. But they absolutely are. When we are shown something of the past, it should show us something about the character *that surprises us*.

If that doesn't happen, you need to either scrap or rewrite your flashback. Because a Flashback is a type of plot twist, any kind of narrative structure that uses flashbacks then *also* falls into this technique.

That's why these narrative forms are considered a way of using plot twist:

- **Reverse Chronology** – this is most often written as a series of flashbacks. Regardless, the ending is always a surprising reveal (it's the start of what caused everything).
- **Non-linear Narrative** – the twist comes when a flashback reveals important information that was kept from the reader.
- **In media res** – while this means the story starts in the thick of things, all sorts of important information is then later revealed in flashbacks.

Eucatastrophe

Tolkien invented this one. ([You can read about Eucatastrophe in detail HERE.](#)) This is a special sort of twist when everything seems to be going terribly, terribly bad – and then, quite unexpectedly, it's great.

We flip from impending doom to salvation.

You can use this technique in comedies as well as dramas, though it was intended (by Tolkien) for dramatic effect and meant quite seriously. It is the complete turn-about of a catastrophe.

The trick here is making sure that the protagonist must believe their doom is coming - and even if the event is relatively small, it must be hugely important to the protagonist.

Peripeteia

Sometimes called a **Peripety** (stress on the “rip,” puh-RIP-e-tee), this idea dates to the age of Aristotle. The Greek term *Peripeteia* literally means, “falling round.” So this is when a story takes a major turn in the opposite direction.

Some say that this technique is only used in dramas and tragedies, but that really isn't the case. Aristotle felt *Peripeteia* was used *best* in drama (as in *Oedipus*, poor schmuck), but not exclusively. So we're allowed to use this in any kind of story.

The key to *Peripeteia* is that it's a complete flip of a character's situation – for good or bad. If a nun is given a winning lottery ticket and becomes a millionaire, that is *Peripeteia*.

Deus ex machina

You probably know exactly what this is (God out of the machine), but I'll just compare now how it's different from the other options. What makes *Deus ex machina* so taboo is that it's usually illogical – it has no connection to anything else we know or understand from the characters or the story.

With all the other forms of plot twists, there has to be a sense of logic - it's a rule. Sometimes, writers either foreshadow or even announce that the plot twist is coming. You don't ever do this with *Deus ex machina* (unless in jest).

Question: In **Captain America: Civil War**, when Ant Man suddenly becomes huge (instead of tiny), is that *Deus ex machina*?

Answer: No. Ant Man has traditionally had that ability, so for fans (like myself), this is a type of PeRIPety (the very, very modern *Peripeteia*). It's awesome and it's hilarious that this airport battle was the moment when that particular ability worked completely.

So what would be a *Deus ex machina*? When the reversal from terrible to wonderful makes zero sense at all, basically. But it's always a flip from bad to good. You cannot use this in a drama or tragedy, but you can use it easily in a comedy, especially if it's a raucous satire.

Anagnorisis

Anagnorisis (a mouthful of marbles, I know) means "knowing again," or discovery. What makes *Anagnorisis* so different from all the other types of plot twists, is that it's **entirely internal**. There is no physical or external change.

Anagnorisis is when the protagonist has a new understanding of their identity; their understanding of who they *really* are is what flips.

IF anything physical or external should also change for the character, then that is another, added plot twist. We're allowed. In fact, you could use all 10 types of plot twists in a single story – if you wanted.

Anagnorisis usually comes directly before *Peripeteia*, and in fact that's when these two types of twists are most powerful. Aristotle said so, and no one has ever disagreed with that.

Poetic Justice

You might not think of this as a type of plot twist, but it absolutely is. When the villain is killed by his own death ray, that is not just poetic justice – it's a type of plot twist. We might expect it and we might be rooting for it to happen, but that doesn't make it less twisty.

The drawback of Poetic Justice as a writing technique is that it's almost cliché. The draw though is that it's incredibly satisfying. We love it when the bad guy really gets it. If you're wondering if this works for kids, you bet it does. Kids cheer out loud for Poetic Justice.

You use this kind of twist when you want a happy ending, no question. Can you use it in a tragedy? Sure. It will probably make your tragedy bittersweet.

Unreliable Narrator

When a character tells us the story, they are an Unreliable Narrator because they cannot know everything ([read more about that HERE](#)). But if the Unreliable Narrator is especially devious and has been outright lying to us (the readers), then that is a type of plot twist device.

NOTE: The Unreliable Narrator does not have to be used as a plot twist, but it often is.

I'm always wary of unreliable narrators exactly because of this – I don't like distrusting the storyteller. I want to know they're being straight-up with me... or at least, not the type who might also poison my tea.

Sometimes in murder mysteries the narrator turns out to be the murderer. Agatha Christie was the first to try it, and many have followed her example.

This is unquestionably a plot twist. Most of the time though, I find it's very unsatisfactory. You could use this to reveal that the masked hero is in fact the narrator, but that could also be very awkward.

Use the Unreliable Narrator as a plot twist with great caution if you use it at all.

False Protagonist

I love the False Protagonist, but you have to be careful with this one. It's when a certain character is set-up as the protagonist, and then we realize – oops, they can't be the real protagonist - because the character is now dead and there's much more of the story yet to unfold.

I bet there's an example of this that LEAPS to mind for you, right now – and if it's Eddard Stark from **Game of Thrones**, you pegged it in one. It's hands down one of the best False Protagonist examples... perhaps EVER.

Why it's good to know this stuff

Stories are not just words, they're words put to use – the best use, to make people care about characters that you have made up. Done right, a story sticks with us and maybe even changes how we think about things.

Written sloppily or weakly, a lame story becomes something we wish we could just forget.

Now you've got the inside scoop on twists, what are you going to do with it? Have you used one of these twists and not realized it? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send me an email. You know I love getting those.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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