

# How to Create Unexpected—but Believable—Plot Twists

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<https://nybookeditors.com/2018/02/all-about-plot-twists> and <https://jerryjenkins.com/plot-twists>)

Almost all novels and short stories rely on plot twists to keep the readers engaged. The problem is, plot twists need to be both unexpected *and* believable. At first thought, it would seem these two things are mutually exclusive—you can have one or the other but not both. However, as you know, many skilled authors manage to do it. It just takes some planning.

## Famous Plot Twist Examples:

### *Planet of the Apes*

The main character comes upon the Statue of Liberty, half buried in the sand on a beach.

### *The Sixth Sense*

The audience does not know, until the end of the story, that the main character is actually dead.

### *The Life of Pi*

After a ship sinks, a young boy named Pi is adrift on a small raft in the Pacific Ocean for almost a year. Also on the raft is a Bengal tiger and a variety of other zoo animals. The animals eat each other, one by one, until only Pi and the tiger remain. At the end, the author reveals that the animals on Pi's raft were not animals at all, but humans, and the tiger represents Pi.

**IMPORTANT!** These examples are extreme plot twists that occur at the *end* of the story. However, plot twists can occur anywhere in your story. They do not have to be so extreme.

Of course, it is necessary to establish certain aspects of your story before you can have a plot twist. *You need to lay the ground rules before you twist them.*

## The *most important* (and most difficult) key to a good plot twist:

Plot twists need to be totally unexpected. The reader should not be able to guess the twist is about to happen. However, when they think back to what they have already read, they should remember seeing signs that the twist *could* happen.

## Three guidelines for creating a plot twist:

### 1. The twist needs to carry the story forward.

In other words, don't throw in a plot twist just to surprise the reader. Make sure your twist increases the stakes for your story.

### 2. Your story must stand on its own without the twist.

Would your story still be interesting and entertaining without the twist? If not, then you are relying too much on gratuitous surprises. Story comes first, plot twists are just a bonus.

### 3. Your twist should not trick your reader.

Don't use gimmicks. In other words, your plot twist will not be believable, and your readers will feel cheated.

#### 4. Use plot twists sparingly!

If you use them too often, it becomes impossible to surprise your readers because they expect the unexpected.

### Steps for creating a good plot twist:

#### Step 1: Identify a very important event or goal in your story

For example, Bobby (from my Fused novella *Training Day*) needs to figure out how to control and use his extraordinary powers. He recruits Ashley to help train him, but he is skeptical that artificial training scenarios will be anything like real, dangerous situations.

#### Step 2: Come up with several believable scenarios for this

Ashley could create a difficult obstacle course. Ashley could talk some friends into pretending that they are breaking into their house. Ashley could actually create a truly dangerous situation (this is the one I chose, because it is unexpected).

#### Step 3: Come up with several ways you could misdirect the reader, to make them believe this is not actually what is going to happen.

Bobby and Ashley are simply sitting on the dock by the river behind their home (they are not going to a place where they might encounter a dangerous situation where Bobby could learn to control his powers). Ashley simply states that she has another task for Bobby (indicating no expectation of something exceptional).

#### Step 4: Create a believable surprise that drives the story closer to the goal.

Ashley tells Bobby to learn to use the nano particles of his body to make another person become unconscious within a few seconds by throwing the particles at them (instead of killing them). Then she tells him to throw them at her, to prove it works. He still thinks this isn't challenging because it isn't a real life-or-death situation. Skeptical, he throws the particles at her. Surprising him (and the reader), she then throws herself into the deep, murky water of the river. Unconscious, she sinks out of sight.

This is a simple example of a plot twist, but it abruptly gives Bobby a real, life-or-death training scenario he needs, in a surprising (and terrifying) way.

#### IMPORTANT:

The plot twist must not only be a surprise, it must also be believable. That can only be accomplished if you plant subtle elements (clues) throughout the earlier parts of the story that show the reader this surprise twist isn't so surprising after all.

In this example, there is a risk that the reader will not believe that Ashley would do something so brazenly irresponsible and dangerous. However, I have already (in numerous places) shown that Ashley is indeed capable of such things. She is temperamental and often volatile. After reading this surprise, the reader should think, *Oh my gosh! I should have seen that coming! Ashley is crazy enough to do that!*

#### Step 5: Go back through your story and add elements that prepare the reader for the twist, but no so obvious as to give it away.

Obviously, this can be the tricky part... making the twist a surprise but still believable.

**Remember:** Coincidences may happen in real life, but coincidences in fiction will make your readers feel like you are cheating. You must foreshadow your plot twist!

## **A few examples of how you can use plot twists:**

### **To push your characters into action**

Particularly if your story is slowing down, becoming stagnant. A twist can force the characters to respond. This changes how they will achieve their goal.

### **To reveal character**

Something from the character's past is revealed, surprising the reader. Maybe they killed someone long ago. Maybe she turns out to be the daughter of the antagonist. It could even be that the *character* is even surprised to find out something about their past they didn't know.

### **To create a false protagonist**

This one is risky and could turn off the reader if not done well. You introduce character, treating them as if they are the protagonist. Then the character abruptly dies (or otherwise is taken from the story). Think of Ned Stark in Game of Thrones. This is a shock to the reader, so you need to have another protagonist ready (already established) to take over immediately after this twist.

### **To deliver poetic justice**

This one is perhaps overused, but it can still be effective if done carefully. The idea is, someone bad get their comeuppance, their just reward. The trick to make it completely unexpected (all is lost, then boom... poetic justice), while ALSO making it believable (you planted plenty of subtle hints that it could happen). You have to be careful to avoid cliché, but poetic justice is known to provide emotional satisfaction to readers.

### **To show deception and betrayal**

You reveal that your protagonist has been misled, lied to, or double-crossed. By a character the reader thought was your protagonist's ally. Now your protagonist doesn't know what to believe, or what is real.

### **Making use of *in medias res***

This just means beginning your story in the midst of the action and events (as common strategy used by current authors). The reader simply jumps into the midst of unfolding events, without any back story or narrative. Many readers like this because the author is trusting them to catch on as the important information is provided bit by bit later (usually in flashbacks or through dialogue). This way the reader is surprised by various things that would normally already be known earlier in the story. Many James Bond movies are done this way. Think of the war movie *The Thin Red Line*, which starts in the middle of battle, and you learn about the characters (and what they are capable of) later (often in a surprising way).

*And there are many others.*

**IMPORTANT:** Some types of plot twists are gimmicky and should be avoided (unless used for comedic effect):

### ***Deus ex machina***

This is where an unexpected power or event saves a seemingly hopeless situation. It literally means "god from the machine." Named after the crane-like machines play producers used to fly an angel or other ethereal being into a scene to save the day.

Example: In the 1966 *Batman* movie (which was a parody), Batman is attacked by a shark. He conveniently asks Robin to hand him the shark repellent, which was never mentioned previously.

Example: In *The Emperor's New Groove*, the protagonists are being chased across the mountains. Just when they are about to get caught, the bad guys are struck by lightning and fall to their deaths.

**REMEMBER:** Your plot twist has to be believable. You must plant clues previously in the story