

# SUPERCHARGE YOUR STORY WITH COMPLICATIONS!



A WORKBOOK BY  
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Susanne Dunlap is the award-winning author of over a dozen historical novels, as well as an Author Accelerator Certified Book Coach in fiction, nonfiction, and memoir. Her love of history began in academia with a PhD in music history from Yale. Her novel *THE PORTRAITIST* won first prize in its category in the 2022 Eric Hoffer Book Awards, and was a finalist in the CIBA Goethe Awards and the Foreword Indies Awards. Today, she lives, coaches, and writes in beautiful Biddeford, Maine.

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# WHAT ARE COMPLICATIONS?

Complications are plot points on steroids that jolt your story in another direction, to a deeper level, or help it spring forward at an accelerated pace. You can introduce complications at any point in your manuscript.

Use this workbook as a guide to helping you add those memorable moments to your story—and take it to the next level!

START BY WRITING A 50-WORD  
SYNOPSIS OF YOUR PLOT

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# COMPLICATION STRATEGY

Have you ever read a book where you could see the progress of the plot a mile away, where—even if well written and clever—the twists and turns aren't striking enough to give you that "OMG!" reaction? There are many possible causes for that, but one of them is that the author didn't introduce a complicating plot point strategically to provide something that ratchets up the suspense, the tension, and the stakes.

While it isn't necessary to use dramatic complications in every manuscript, if you're writing a thriller, a mystery, a romance, or other fast-paced genre fiction, more often than not you need to introduce those surprising moments of revelation or reversal in order to keep the action accelerating.

Before you start, you should have a plot (at least in outline) that makes logical sense. That means that the action builds and scenes are linked by cause and effect. Your protagonist and other characters should behave in ways that are believable for who they are according to the characteristics and personalities you have given them.

Without a basic foundation of story logic, complications won't help you. So let's assume you have that.

Complications can be introduced at any point in your narrative, but you should use them strategically. They are like strong spices that can overwhelm the whole if you rely on them for all your plot and character movement. Part of the strategy is to have them build in intensity. For instance, your first complication (at, say, the 25% point) will be less dire than the final one that propels the story to its climax. But that's not a hard and fast rule.

# A FEW TYPES OF COMPLICATIONS

## CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

### 1

This is a favorite trick in soap operas, so the way you do it is important if you want to avoid melodrama. The character you introduce has to have the power to alter the course of the story in a meaningful way. They also cannot walk onto the page out of the blue.

Example: In Amor Towles's **A Gentleman in Moscow**, the character of Sophia enters to throw Count Rostov's world into chaos, but although we've never met her before, she's the child of another character who is important to Rostov. Sophia's life becomes the catalyst that drives the story to its dramatic conclusion.

## REVELATION OF HIDDEN PAST

### 2

Introducing backstory is one of the most challenging of craft techniques. But a well-prepared and logical flashback or memory can act as a revelation that spurs a protagonist to make an unexpected decision or take a dramatic action. This is also useful if you're working with multiple timelines, in which case it could be the moment that brings the timelines together in some way.

Example: Kate Morton's masterful multiple-timeline novel, **The Clockmaker's Daughter**, uses a brilliantly timed revelation of a seemingly peripheral character's past to tie together what has seemed, until that time, parallel rather than intersecting timelines.

## SUDDEN EXTERNAL FORCE

### 3

Be careful with this one. Don't introduce something supernatural or extraterrestrial into a narrative where it doesn't logically fit. On the other hand, if you've carefully laid your breadcrumbs for the appearance of a ghost, and it's in keeping with your genre, this could be effective.

A non-supernatural example would be a sudden weather phenomenon, or a terrorist attack. In both cases, you need to make sure they are not random, that your story has to do with climate change or international diplomacy, for instance.

Although I've recommended above saving a super-dramatic complication for late in your manuscript, this could rather be the inciting moment. After that, you are under pressure to continue introducing complications that keep raising the stakes.

## JUST ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE!

Your story likely has the ingredients for a powerful complication already embedded in the characters or the action. The examples above are just that—there's no absolute definition of a complication because its effectiveness ultimately depends on the context and intent of your story.



# NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

**First, complete the Pixar plot outline for your story:**

**Once upon a time, there was** \_\_\_\_\_

*Your protagonist in a particular place and time, who wants something they can't easily get, concrete or otherwise.*

**And every day,** \_\_\_\_\_ **Then one day,** \_\_\_\_\_

*Essentially, the inciting incident. It can be big and dramatic and external or small and subtle. But it has to make something happen within the protagonist as well. In other words, define the status quo of your protagonist and what happens that forces that to change, and raises a story question in the mind of the reader.*

**And because of that,** \_\_\_\_\_

*The thing that changed forces your protagonist to make a decision to do something in response, because everything in your story must have consequences. This would be the first consequence of the change that started your story.*

**And because of that,** \_\_\_\_\_

*With each new action/scene, the stakes have to be raised. Your protagonist needs to be tested, challenged, forced into situations that are worse and worse. Each step includes action>reaction>decision. Sometimes when your story pace lags, or something grinds to a halt, it's because the stakes are stagnant.*

**And because of that,** \_\_\_\_\_

*Every scene not only has to be caused by the previous scene, but also has to relate to what your character wants, why they want it, what's preventing them from getting it, what they fear. This can also help you spot where an important scene is missing, or in the wrong place.*

**Until finally,** \_\_\_\_\_

*The resolution of the story question, where the protagonist has either achieved or not achieved what they set out to get in the beginning. Here's where you tie things up in a way that they never become tied up in everyday life.*

**And ever since that day,** \_\_\_\_\_

*This should capture what changed from the original "Once upon a time."*

# ANALYZE

Look through the outline you created (you can have as many scenes as you want, the page before is a sort of minimum) and see if a place for a possible complication jumps out at you.

What kind of complication might work? Why?

To help you brainstorm further, the next few pages dig into your genre, what effect you're looking to achieve with a complication, and how you want your reader to respond.



### WHAT IS YOUR GENRE?

- Thriller
- Mystery
- Romance
- Domestic fiction
- Fantasy
- Sci Fi
- Historical fiction
- Other

IF OTHER, EXPLAIN

### WHAT STRUCTURAL OUTCOME DO YOU DESIRE?

- Move the plot along
- A sudden shift
- Mess up your protagonist's plans
- Surprise the reader
- Lead to the next step
- Key revelation

### AT WHAT POINT IN YOUR MANUSCRIPT DOES YOUR COMPLICATION ARISE?

- Near the beginning
- 25% through
- 50% through
- 75% through
- 90% through
- Other

WHAT READER EMOTION DO YOU WANT TO INSPIRE?

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Desire
- Love
- Other
- Mistrust
- Shock
- Empathy
- Sadness

WHY DO YOU WANT THE READER TO FEEL THIS EMOTION AT THIS POINT?  
(ANSWER BRIEFLY)

# BRAINSTORM

What happens just before the first complication you want to introduce?

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What would your reader expect to occur next, based on what they've read so far?

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Brainstorm three more unexpected events/outcomes/twists that could occur instead.

1. ....  
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2. ....  
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3. ....  
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# PREPARE

With each of your proposed complications, figure out what you would have to add (if anything) to prepare the reader to accept it

COMPLICATION:

NECESSARY EDITS:

1

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2

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3

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