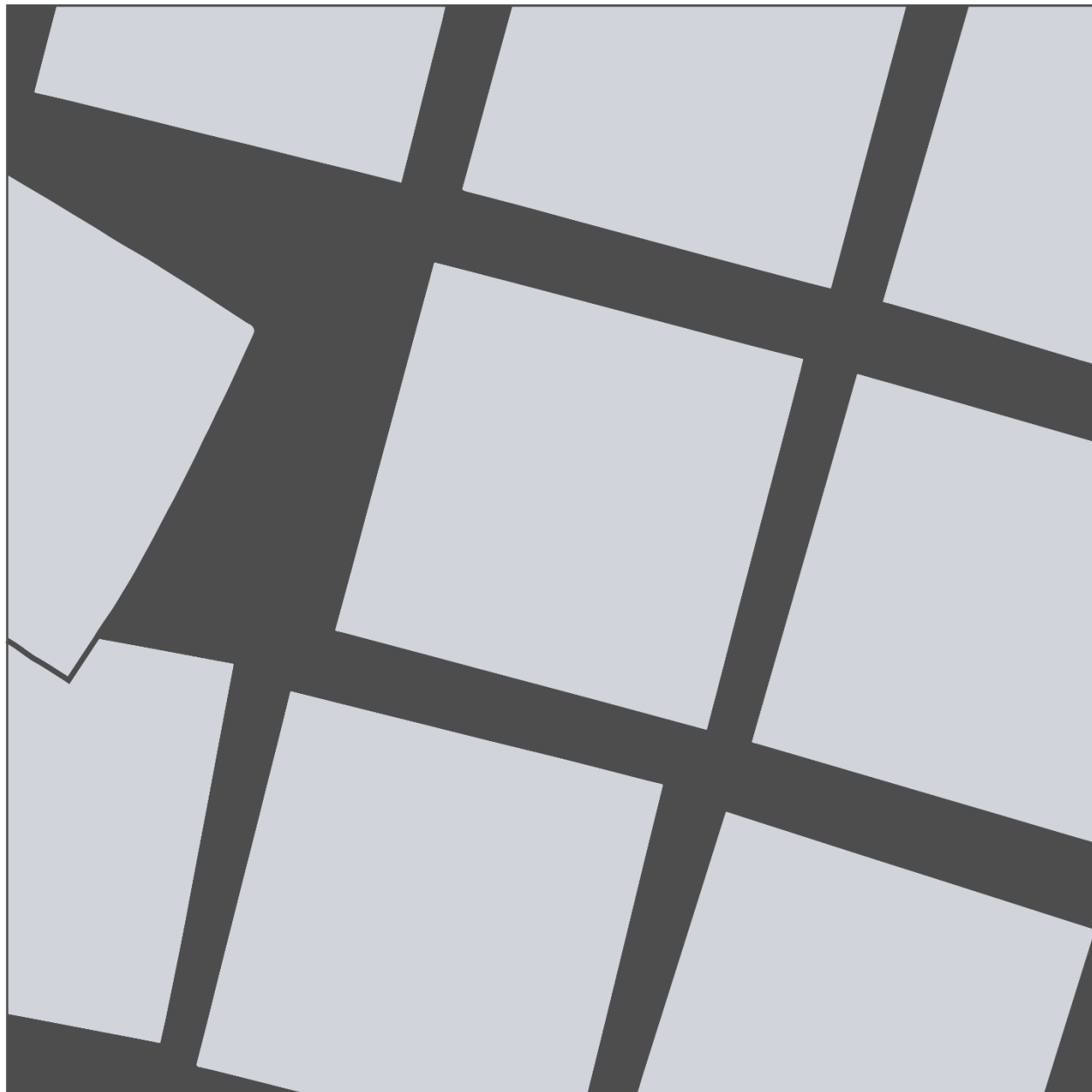# Puzzle Plots

— Jenai May

PUZZLE PLOTS
a flexible gridded story plotting method

What does it do?
Puzzle Plotting breaks down a story's components into bite-sized pieces and scatters them across an eight-phase cycle.

This system may help if you...
- are a **Planner**: someone who plans all the story details before writing.
- are a **Plantser**: someone who plans somewhat, but also enjoys "pantsing it" along the way, leaving room for surprises while writing.
- write in chronological order.
- write out of chronological order.
- need a system that helps you when you're stuck.
- want a system that you can implement in a single evening.
- haven't started planning yet and aren't sure where to begin.
- have already planned most of your story and want to organize the information a little differently.

This system can also help if you...
- are a **Pantser!** — someone who prefers to "pants it" and dives into writing a story without a speck of planning. You may use Puzzle Plots *after* writing your first draft to view your story from a bird's eye view and help detect plot holes, lost characters, and missing threads.

Before you begin.
It's common to begin plotting when you're equipped with little more than a cool idea and heaps of uncertainty. And you must start somewhere, right?

However, Puzzle Plots are character driven, so you need at least a vague idea of who your main character(s) might be. You can begin by naming characters and places generically — Protagonist, Antagonist, Best Friend, Important Ancillary #2, The House, Then, you can bounce back and forth between building your puzzle and filling out character and setting notes.

Let's dive in!
Puzzle Plots work alongside an Eight-Phase Story Cycle, which is Inspired by the 8-Point Story Arc from the book "Writing a Novel" by Nigel Watts. However, you may use this Puzzle Plots with other story structures too; you'll just need to rename and/or renumber the eight phases accordingly.

My version is customized to play better with my neurodivergence, which often trips me up and paralyzes me while I'm writing. For instance, the terms "resolution" and "stasis" sometimes conceal possibilities beneath their overly strong connotations.

The 8-Phase Story Cycle

Wrap-Up

Life as usual...

Power Boost

Trigger

Defeat

Quest

Shift

Bolt
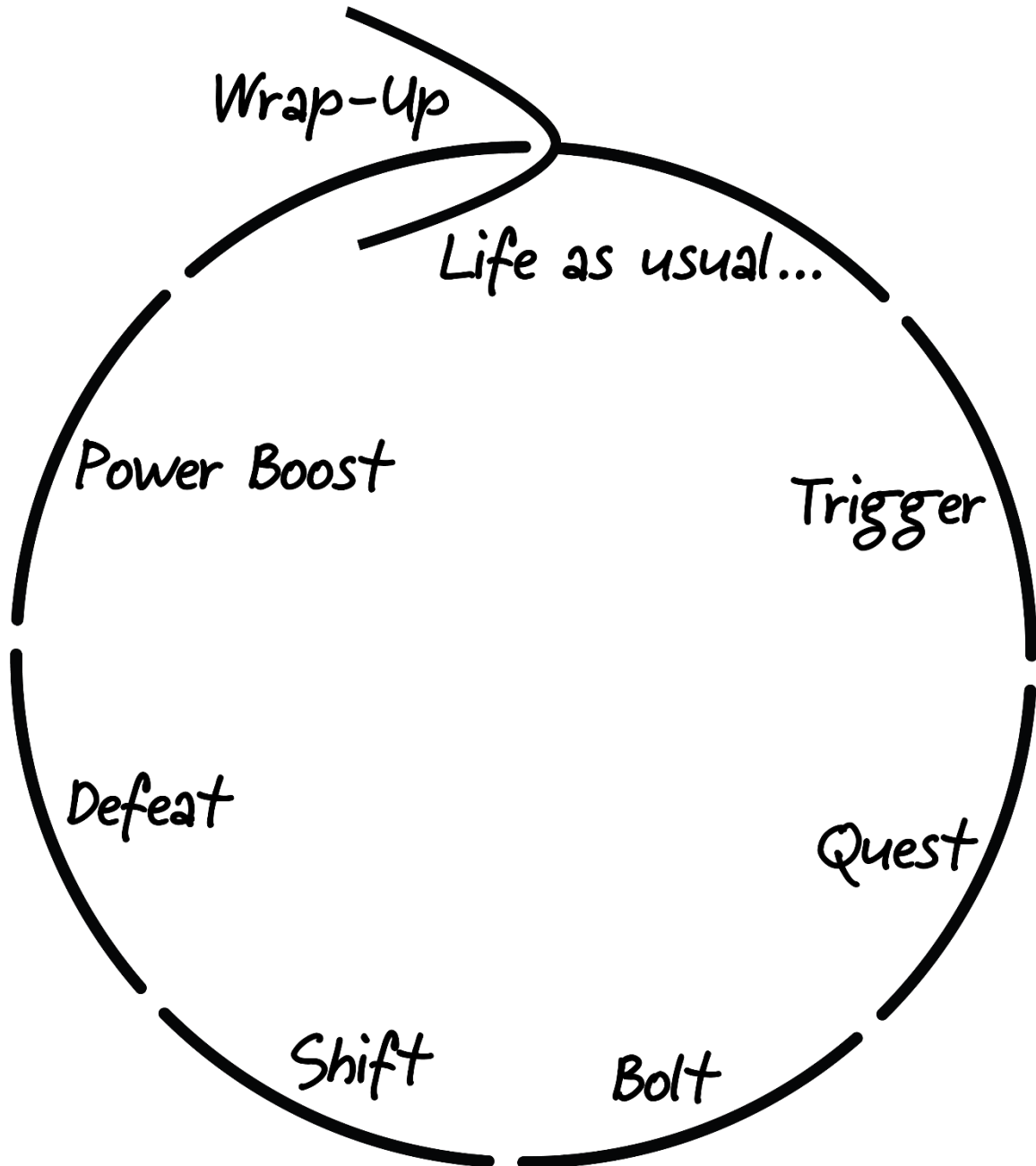
THE 8-PHASE STORY CYCLE

1. **LIFE AS USUAL —** Your main character is living their normal life, surrounded by familiarity. However, your character's version of "life as usual" might not be a state of peace, and it might include significant conflict; for instance, they could live in a war zone or in extreme poverty. Rather than presenting this phase outright, you may choose to imply it or present it gradually through snippets of backstory. The story's hook (that which grabs the reader) might be found in this phase, or in the next.

2. **TRIGGER —** In this phase, an inciting event, situation, or revelation launches the character in a position for action, even if they don't realize it yet. The Trigger may be a number of things, including an accident, a request, an assignment, or finding a magical item. Your story may open in this phase. The Trigger may also serve as your story's hook, sparking interest and dedicating the reader to read your story.

3. **QUEST —** The trigger nudges your character towards the next phase, where they embark on a Quest. This is a core element of your story that guides and motivates your character. This phase introduces the reader to your story's primary conflict. The Quest is often complex and evolves throughout the story, building and transforming your character(s) bit by bit. Your character leaps into the unknown, tackling the conflict with a sense of purpose. Most of the story plays out here.

4. **BOLT —** The character is blindsided by a surprise or discovery. This unforeseen moment may shake the character's confidence or increase their resolve. The bolt may also provide guiding insight, clues, and direction. The surprise is usually negative, but it can also be positive.

5. **SHIFT —** The Bolt leads to a Shift that alters the overall quest, mood, and direction of your story. For character development, the Shift shakes and transforms your character by forcing them to make serious, difficult choices. They might have to compromise their values or make a sacrifice. Risks gain additional cost. Tension and uncertainty build as your story's climax nears.

6. **DEFEAT —** The conflict reaches its max and the character suffers a major defeat and/or loss. They reach their lowest point ("the dark night of the soul") and struggle with lack of confidence and the loss of hope. This is the moment when your discouraged character is most likely to give up or surrender. Uncertainty reigns and solutions, if there are any, appear scarce.

7. **POWER BOOST —** Your character musters or discovers enough renewed power and confidence to resume fighting and move forward. Challenges begin showing their cracks, spilling light into places where there had been none. The final battle builds, the enemy wavers, and the character believes they might win. **The Defeat and Power Boost phases mark your story's climax**.

8. **WRAP-UP —** A new "life as usual" is established, thus bringing the 8-Phase Story Cycle full circle. Your story's world and character(s) have evolved and transformed, and their bearings are adjusting to the new foundations. By now, most loose ends have been tidied. The final battle concludes, and victors are revealed (if there are any). Your story's primary conflict may have reached its conclusion here, or it may have evolved along with everything else. If the story belongs to a series, the Wrap-Up may include a cliffhanger or suggest a sequel.
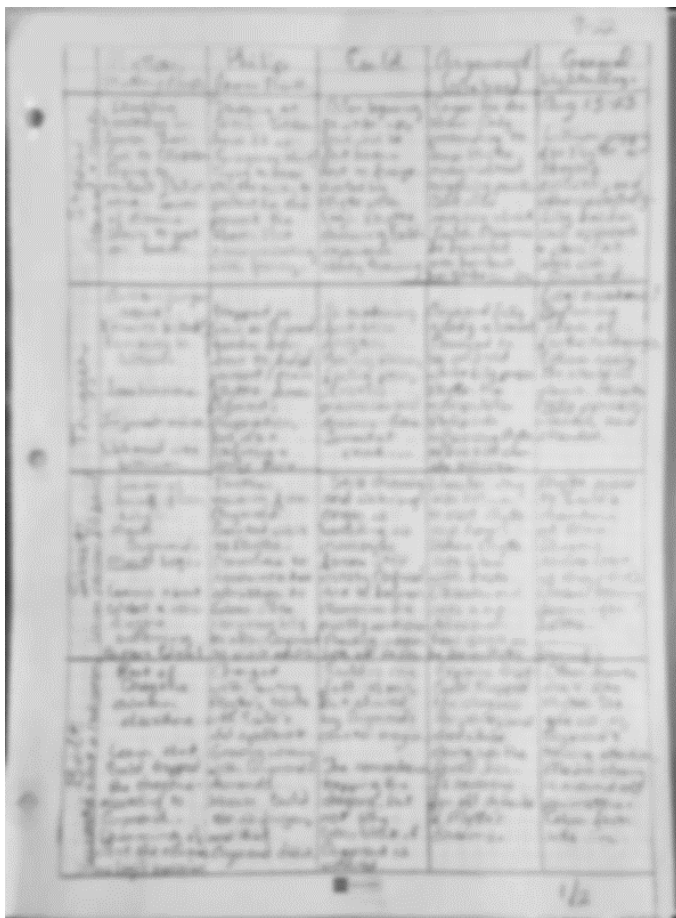
THE PUZZLE

PHASE	GENERAL	CHARACTER 1	CHARACTER 2	CHARACTER 3	CHARACTER, OR?
1 **LIFE AS USUAL**	Where and when is the story's setting? What are the locals up to? What is the state of the primary conflict? This box also serves as a brief summary of the overall content for this phase.	The main character is going about usual their life. Something about the character and their world makes readers want to learn more.	Are there minor characters who impact your story in a vital way? Track their details to deepen their influence.	Does this character show up in phase 7? Describe their lives in the preceding phases. If they're important, then so is their back story!	No character to track in this box? Track other details instead, such as events, illness, or even a curse! May also expand other boxes' info here.
2 **TRIGGER**		Your story might begin here. If that's the case, still fill in backstory details for Phase 1!			
3 **QUEST**			Fill in every box, even if you think that the contents won't make the final cut.		
4 **BOLT**	Did your setting change during this phase? Have you gained additional characters to juggle? You may track these extras in this column.				This phase's effects may influence all characters who encounter your main character(s). Explain how.

THE PUZZLE, CONT.

PHASE	GENERAL	CHARACTER 1	CHARACTER 2	CHARACTER 3	CHARACTER, OR?
5 **SHIFT**			Hunt for plot holes! Scanning the puzzle grid regularly will help you to spot them.		
6 **DEFEAT**		If this story is part of a series, consider creating puzzle pieces for the next book now.			Does this column have a fun detail that hasn't landed in your story yet? If you're stuck, use that tidbit as a writing prompt!
7 **POWER BOOST**				Has this character been forgotten? Regularly review your story's threads to prevent leaving someone behind.	
8 **WRAP-UP**	Are you stuck? You can write out-of-order by picking a box/card that excites you and writing that scene.				

PUZZLE PLOTS
in the wild

Because handwritten puzzles are rarely as tidy as the examples shown here.
And what would be the fun in that anyway?

These photos are intentionally blurry, because they're from a work-in-progress!

ASSEMBLING THE PUZZLE

*"It's Phase o'clock and someone or something owns this box.
What are they doing right now?"*

PHASES
The boxes in the phase column signify the eight phases of the story cycle. Even if your story doesn't journey through each phase on the page, I encourage you to pretend that it does and fill in every box. You may even make up fake events that will never appear in the final draft. There are reasons for doing this that you'll discover shortly.

GENERAL
The boxes in this column follow the main highlights of your story, the setting(s) during each phase, and other key information. These boxes also serve as mini summaries, helping the writer to easily see where the character(s) are in relation to the quest.

This column is a breeze to fill out, if you don't overthink it. Extra characters or settings to track? You can include those here too! Sequel notes, questions, and any other details your story needs can be jotted down in this column. If you have writing prompts you'd like to use, you can sprinkle those here too.

CHARACTERS
A character column appears straightforward; however, it quickly becomes more complex when a character arrives later in the story, or if the character exits earlier. A single empty square leaves you with an incomplete puzzle. You'll need to fill every square, even if you think nothing belongs there.

When a character lives outside the written pages, they're busy building experiences that influence their future dialogue, decisions, mannerism, and everything else that you will eventually write. Fill those boxes with all those experiences and information as backstory. If a character hasn't been born yet, they still have a pre-story — fill those boxes with their ancestral story. If a character exits the story early, fill their remaining boxes with the lingering effects of their absence.

You may be wondering what counts as a character that's important enough to track. Perhaps you have only a couple important characters, so you're not sure what to put in those other boxes. In my current novel, there are numerous characters who aren't very prominent, yet they are still very important. I sometimes choose one or two of these characters to follow, preferably ones that don't often appear in the same scenes as my main characters. This also helps me to keep an eye on other settings and plotlines in my story.

Sometimes I'll track a character who never appears in the story which provides me with glimpses of what's happening in the world beyond my main characters and plot. When I'm stuck, these tidbits can serve as writing prompts to spark creativity. They may even develop into future spinoff stories. When a character column seems truly unhelpful, I use it as a catch-all for all minor characters or rededicate it exclusively for Setting or Sequel Notes.

HACKING THE PUZZLE

Shaking it up to make it your own

The Other Side: Print or draw the graph one-sided so that you can flip the paper over and continue taking notes if you run out of space. Charts, name lists, and timelines can go on the back sides.

It's OK to Leave Some Boxes Blank... For a While: It's fine to begin writing when there are still a few blank boxes scattered throughout the puzzle. If writer's block pays you a visit, filling in those blanks will help to grease your creative gears.

Do Fill Every Box... Eventually: If you're using Puzzle Plots to plan your story, try to complete the entire grid before you reach your story's Bolt Stage. This equips you with as many ideas as possible and prevents you from landing in the notorious "sagging middle."

Follow the Threads: The gridded format makes it easy to track details and characters at a glance. You can easily identify plot holes, forgotten characters, and details that you've dropped, and weave every thread throughout your story while monitoring your pacing.

Change it Up: Puzzle Plots can easily accommodate different story structures such as The Hero's Journey, Three-Act Structure, Save the Cat, or even your own system. Just label the stages to match your storytelling method, then fill in the boxes accordingly.

Do it Backwards and in Reverse: If you already have an outline, or are a devout Pantser, you can still use Puzzle Plots! Write your first draft then make the puzzle. Or write parts of your story and pause to fill out the puzzle as you go along. This can also help if you are feeling stuck. Playing with Puzzle Plots can serve as a satisfyingly productive form of procrastination.

Cycles go cycling: Subplots and side quests are smaller story cycles. You can plan these mini story cycles with their own Puzzle Plots. If a story exists as part of a series, the story's primary story cycle may conclude by laying the foundation for the sequel's first story phase and presenting the "new normal" from which the next story will launch. With series, you may find that a larger, more general Puzzle Plot is helpful for tracking larger cycles that play out across multiple books.

There is always something: If a box, or entire column, really doesn't fit with your story and needs to be repurposed, those spaces work well for extra notes, reminders, alternate ideas, and overflow content from other columns.

Built-In Writing Prompts: Every box in your puzzle offers a writing prompt for you to use whenever you're stuck or bewildered by your plot.

PUZZLING OPTIONS

Graph Paper:

I build a story's first Puzzle Plot by hand, so I usually draw the grid on graph paper with a pen. Why pen? That way, I can safely erase my notes later without erasing the grid. There are printable templates at the end of this document, both with graph paper and without it.

I usually draft half of the stages each on separate pages. Both pages are one- sided to allow for spillover space on their back sides (though it can be fun to make it two-sided and brag that you've just written your entire novel on one sheet of paper).

This hands-on approach fosters an especially intimate relationship between me and my story. However, you can easily skip this step and go straight to filling out the grid digitally.

Index Cards:

Shuffling through your story as a giant stack of cards is satisfying. I love oversized index cards (5" x 7") because they give me plentiful scribbling space. However, you can use any size you prefer, including the smaller square ones. When you're not confined to the actual grid, you can create alternate cards, extensions, and anything else you need to jot down. A word of caution: without the limited space of graph paper, you may find yourself spending excessive time and space on notetaking. Extensive notetaking can obscure the simpler view of your story that Puzzle Plots has to offer. It may also become more overwhelming and distracting than helpful.

Sticky Notes:

These have the same benefits as index cards, one big extra one — your wall. You may prefer standing back and examining your story. Also, if you're able to dedicate a wall to this, it will always be available to view whenever you walk by it. Thus, your Puzzle Wall serves as a constant reminder and source of inspiration.

Spreadsheets and Digital Index Cards:

After I commit my Puzzle Plot to paper or card, I transfer it to a digital format. This is usually digital index cards in my favorite word processing program, but I do have a spreadsheet for this too. You may, of course, skip straight to piecing together your Puzzle Plot digitally. A Puzzle Plots Google Sheet is available here:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1MDTmxs_nex9Y9tLGSSfbUjYkX5E_eoy4bwftlgqOlzc/edit?usp=sharing

Note: This is a view-only Google Sheet – you cannot edit this copy. If you save a copy, you will be able to edit that. It has additional columns and options, and you can delete the ones you do not need. Don't hesitate to ask me for help!

TITLE:

PHASE					
1 **LIFE AS USUAL**					
2 **TRIGGER**					
3 **QUEST**					
4 **BOLT**					

TITLE:

PHASE					
5 **SHIFT**					
6 **DEFEAT**					
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