

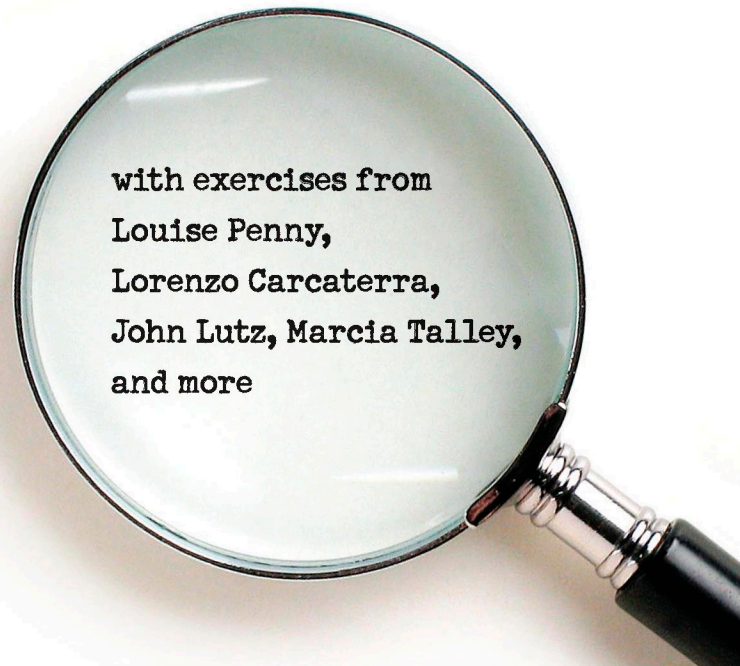


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REECE HIRSCH

The Most Common Mistakes in Plotting a Thriller (from Someone Who Has Made Them All)

REECE HIRSCH's debut legal thriller, *The Insider*, was published by Berkley Books in May 2010 and was a finalist for the International Thriller Writers Award for Best First Novel. He is a partner in the San Francisco office of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, specializing in privacy, security, and health care law.

When you start to write your novel, you may, with the hubris of the beginner, imagine that you are going to create something that the world has never seen before, a sui generis masterwork that changes the way mysteries and thrillers are read and written forevermore. And then you learn that there are rules.

Well, maybe rules is a bit strong; expectations may be more accurate. While writing and revising my first book, *The Insider*, I gradually learned that I had transgressed a few of those rules through feedback from beta readers and the agents who were consistently rejecting me. It was only after I learned to color within the lines that I landed an agent and a publisher.

A thriller is like a rock-and-roll song. Immediacy is one of the most highly valued virtues of both forms and, while the basic elements are well established, there is nearly infinite room for variation and expression within that framework. You can take a few basic chord progressions and a time limit of three minutes or so and get everything from "I Wanna Be Sedated" to "Strawberry Fields Forever." But if you stray too far from the rules, like, say, the Beatles' "Revolution 9," then it may be interesting, but it ceases to be something that will ever get played on the radio.

Here are six common mistakes in plotting a thriller, most of which I learned the hard way.

1. *Starting with a whimper.* In order to grab the attention of an agent and later an editor, your book needs to start quickly. Very quickly, with a bang. The first chapter will usually determine whether an agent reads further into your manuscript. If your book doesn't have a killer opening, it may not matter how good the ending is. And, of course, it's always nice to kill someone off early on.

2. *The passive protagonist.* A protagonist is most interesting when he or she is attempting to solve the conflict of the story through action, and least interesting when bobbing like a cork in the sea of events. Literary fiction is filled with characters that are paralyzed by indecision and ennui—thrillers, not so much.

3. *The unlikable protagonist.* If a reader is going to follow a character through the length of a novel, it helps if they like that character. As an author, you can help that bonding process along by actively thinking about ways that you can show the reader (preferably early on in the story) why they should care about your protagonist the way you do. Show your character doing something noble, brave, funny, or maybe just vulnerable. Sure, it's manipulative, but writing thrillers (and most fiction) is inherently manipulative.

4. *Writing only what you know (or only what you don't know).* Thrillers are somewhat hyperbolic by nature, relying upon velocity and pumped-up action. If you can ground your story in a milieu or a character that you know inside and out, then that aura of verisimilitude may rub off on other aspects of your story that are more invented.

For example, my protagonist is a corporate attorney in a big San Francisco law firm, a world I know very well. However, if I had stuck to the reality of that world, my thriller would have been about as thrilling as a Due Diligence summary. But hopefully, my portrayal of law firm life was credible enough that I earned a little suspension of disbelief from the reader when I ventured into the world of the Russian mob, which, I'm happy to say, I do not know so well.

5. *Front-loading the backstory.* When you introduce your protagonist in the first chapter, there is a tendency to want to tell the reader all of the many things you know about the character. Resist that impulse.

Nothing brings a first chapter to a screeching halt (see rule 1) faster than an extended character history. This information is more effectively shown than told and, if it must be told, it should be doled out gradually and not dumped on the reader all at once.

6. *Writing plot points, not scenes.* Thrillers tend to be plot-driven. Things happen, violently and often. Some thrillers can become overly mechanical if the author focuses primarily on moving the story from Point A to Point B to Point C and stops paying attention to the little details of setting and character that give a story life.

Although maintaining a brisk pace is paramount, it's just as important to make sure that Points A, B, and C are all entertaining places for the reader to be. When working out the plot of your book, it's helpful to think in terms of scenes. Make sure that every chapter stands on its own merits as much as possible as a freestanding scene. If you've created a scene that is interesting in terms of setting and character interaction *and* you advance the plot, then it's highly likely that the reader will keep turning the pages, which, after all, is what thrillers are all about.

EXERCISE

Outline the first five chapters of your book. These are the chapters that will have to do most of the selling for you when you're submitting your manuscript to agents and publishers. Ask yourself the following questions after you've completed the outline.

1. Will your first chapter grab your readers by the lapels and command their attention? And I know this sounds a little formulaic, but I have to ask, is there a dead body in the first chapter?
2. Is your protagonist acting or being acted upon?
3. By the end of the first five chapters, do we like the protagonist?
4. Have you convinced readers that they've entered an interesting world that you know and understand?

5. How much backstory have you conveyed about your protagonist? Hopefully, enough for readers to understand what's happening, but not so much that they feel they know everything there is to know about the character.
6. Does each of the first chapters stand on its own as a scene, with distinctive settings and character interactions?