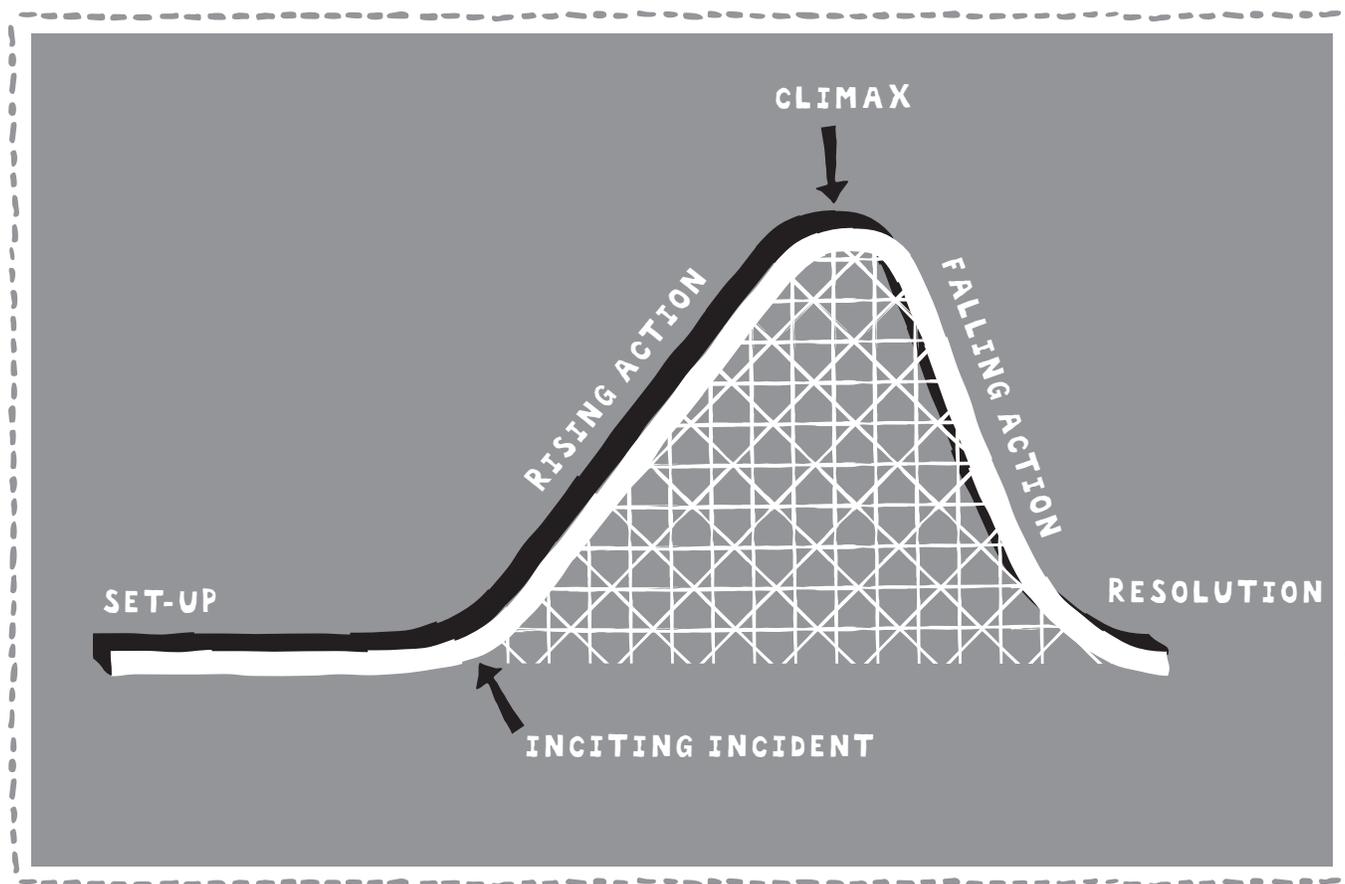


Outlining Your Plot

Now that you've created some exciting conflict for your novel, you probably have an idea of *what* is going to happen in your book this November. You may know what kind of journey your protagonist will undertake, and you know what will stand in his or her way. Now it's time to take the next step and map out *how* everything is going to happen.

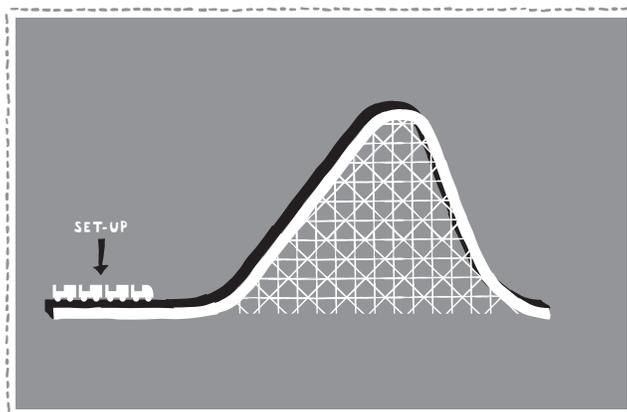
Writing an entire novel from beginning to end may seem impossible, but it is not as hard as you think once you have a plan. Trust us. Most stories have the same structure, and they break down into the same six sections that make up a **plot**. See the diagram below.



This diagram may look familiar to you. It is most commonly in the shape of an **inverted checkmark**, but we think a **plot rollercoaster** is much more fun than a checkmark, so we're going with that.

Even if this is stuff you already know from English class, read all the sections below carefully before you move on to map out your own plot.

The Set-Up



What kind of rollercoaster are we getting on?

Though some novels begin with an “inciting incident”—which you will read about in just a second—many of them start by telling the reader a little bit about the characters, the setting, and the conflict before jumping into the action. Just like you'd want to know what kind of rollercoaster you're getting on before waiting in line, a reader wants to know what kind of novel he or she is about to read before committing time to it.

Here is an example of a story's set-up:

Boris is in his bedroom playing guitar. His unruly hair bobs up and down as he plays and jumps from side to side. He knocks over his Coke can by mistake, adding to the litter on the floor. The walls within his room are covered with posters, and his floor is covered in guitar magazines and how-to books, pedals, and various cords and connectors.



His mom, Wilma, walks in with a plate of uncooked Pop Tarts, a childhood favorite of his that he hasn't quite grown out of yet. She dodges him as he swings his guitar behind his back, and continues to play.

“Showoff,” Wilma says playfully.

“Mom, I'm so over it!” Boris shouts over his amp.

Wilma turns his amp off. “Over what?” she says. “What does that even mean?”

“I am bored with everything.” Boris pushes some dirty clothes off his bed and sits down.

“I don't understand you at all, little man,” Wilma says, handing Boris the plate of pastries. “You have every guitar and guitar gadget in the world. What else do you need?”

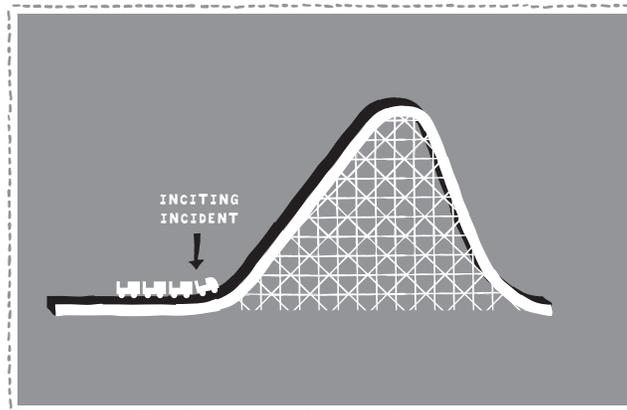
“How many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me ‘little man’? I’m 18. I’m way too old to be sitting in my bedroom like a loser.” Boris shoves a Pop Tart in his mouth. “I want to be in a band. I want to travel the world . . .”

“I’ve been telling you, you should check out that new reality TV show, *So You Think You Can Rock?*! I hear auditions are coming to Detroit next weekend, and the grand prize is a \$2,000,000 contract with Capitol Records.”

“Yeah right!” Boris says. “I’d pass out cold in front of an audience that big. And that judge, Billy Van Carnage, is a total jerk. I get nervous even thinking about him.”

Okay, that was a good set up. We have been introduced to the protagonist and story’s main conflicts: Boris wants to join a rock band and travel the world, but he has crippling stage fright (**internal conflict**). Plus, it has been hinted that Mr. Van Carnage is also going to pose a problem for Boris (**external conflict**).

The Inciting Incident



Getting on the rollercoaster

The inciting incident launches your protagonist into the adventure whether he or she is ready or not. It can be a pretty scary moment for your main character. Once it happens, there's no turning back.

Here is the inciting incident that happens in this story:

Boris is looking at a deep-red Stratocaster when he sees Abigail at the counter. Afraid of saying something stupid to her, he ducks behind a drum set, but it's too late. He's been spotted.

Abigail walks over and picks up the guitar Boris was just looking at. “Look—it matches your shirt perfectly. You have to get it.”

“Yeah. Sounds like a plan.” Boris face is slowly turning a color that also matches his shirt.

Abigail doesn’t seem to notice. “So guess what?” she asks.

“Nothing,” Boris stammers. “I mean, I’m great!...I mean, what?”

Abigail laughs. “My band is trying out for *So You Think You Can Rock?* this weekend.”

“Wow, you’re so cool.” Boris says by mistake. “I mean, that is so cool. What is your band called?”

“Crude Medicine,” Abigail says, looking a little nervous herself. “I’m glad I ran into you. I’ve heard you’re a pretty awesome lead guitarist and our guy is M.I.A. We’re starting to freak out.”

She pauses, looks around the store, and then her eyes lock on Boris’. “If he doesn’t show, would you fill in for the tryout?”

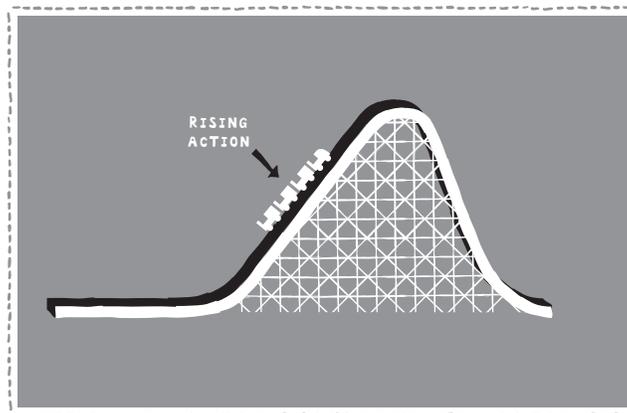
“Wow. . .” A bead of sweat runs down Boris’ forehead.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes!’” Abigail hugs Boris, catching him totally off guard.

“I’ll be at your place at 8 AM sharp Saturday morning. Make sure you know the guitar solo in this song by then.” Abigail hands Boris a burned CD and runs out the door.

If an inciting incident never happened, Boris would more than likely continue to eat outdated breakfast pastries and play guitar alone in his bedroom. This might sound like a pretty fun life to live, but it's not a very fun life to read about.

Rising Action



Climbing the big hill

This will be the longest section of your novel. You will develop your characters, deepen their relationships with one another, and carefully pace all the important things that happen to them before the **climax**. Think of the rising action as the biggest hill on the rollercoaster—the higher you go, the more suspenseful it gets. The rising action is made up of many events, each of them building to the most exciting part of your story: the climax.

Here is a summary of some of the rising action in this story:

1. Abigail pulls up outside in her beat-up Volkswagen Jetta and Boris—trying not to look back to his room where his guitars, amps, and pedals are looking sad and deserted—says goodbye to his mom.

Abigail honks until Boris finally hugs his mom, grabs his vintage Fender Jaguar and runs out the door.

2. As soon as they get to the auditions, Boris starts to get nervous. He can barely talk to people, but Abigail and the other two band members, Zach (the drummer) and Megan (the bassist), do all the talking. Though Boris is nervous about getting on stage, he finds himself becoming more and more comfortable around Abigail. She is unlike any other girl he has ever met. And she seems to like him.

3. When it's time for Crude Medicine to get up in front of the judges to play, Boris can hardly see straight. Boris knows the song like the back of his hand, so all he has to worry about is not throwing up or passing out.

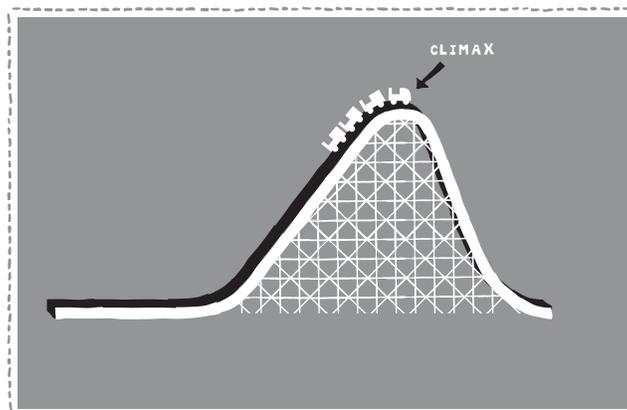
Boris makes it all the way through the song just fine, and Abigail sings lead and nails it. All the judges are blown away, except one.

“Girl lead singers are cliché,” Billy Van Carnage says, and then points at Boris. “And I’m pretty sure that this guy will lose his lunch on stage opening night, and that would not be pretty.”

But the rest of the judges outvote him. Crude Medicine is on its way to stardom.

4. Each performance gets easier for Boris, and Crude Medicine make it all the way to the final episode. Boris figures they are going to win, and spends less time worrying about impressing the judges and more time daydreaming about all the ways to spend his part of the prize money—a six-month tropical vacation with Abigail, a new house for his mom, or maybe a large donation to a local music school for urban kids. Losing, at this point, is not an option.

The Climax



The top of the rollercoaster

This is the moment at the very top of the rollercoaster, right before your high-speed drop. This moment doesn't last long, and neither does the climax in your novel. It can be as short as a couple paragraphs—just enough to make your readers hold their breath in suspense and ask, “What’s going to happen next?!”

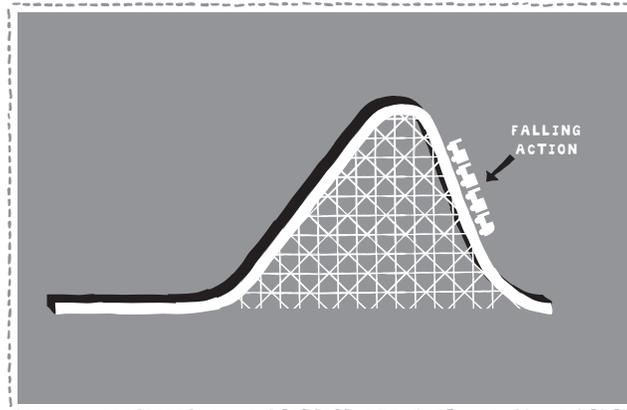
Here is an example of a climax:

The members of Crude Medicine take the stage in their new bright orange jumpsuits and white sunglasses. The audience cheers. Boris and Abigail wave to the crowd, and then Zach counts them in with a few clicks of his drumsticks.

As soon as Boris hits the first note on his guitar, they know that something is terribly wrong. His guitar sounds like a sick cat crying, and the bass doesn't sound much better.

Abigail begins to sing, but her voice sounds horrible. The band members all look around with expressions of total disbelief. An empty can of Rockstar energy drink is thrown at Abigail, and the audience starts booing until the show cuts to commercial break.

The Falling Action



The high-speed drop

The falling action is what happens next. It is the fast-paced, action-packed part of your novel. You're finally speeding down the tracks of the rollercoaster with your hands in the air! Does the antagonist get defeated? Do the protagonist's dreams finally come true? If so, how?

Keep in mind however that just because the falling action is fast-paced, it doesn't have to be over quickly. In some novels, the falling action actually takes place over whole chapters. What's important is that the action is paced to feel exciting whether it spans mere minutes or whole years of your characters' lives.

Here is an example of falling action:

Crude Medicine, humiliated, exits stage right. None of them speak, but they all shoot suspicious glances at one another while the judges make their final decision.

"It's just so strange," Gill says. "They were doing so well."

"I told you chicks can't rock," Billy says. But before he can say another word, the stage manager runs out to the judges' table with a tape. Kendra pops it in the instant re-player and, lo and behold, it shows Billy messing with the band's equipment before the show.

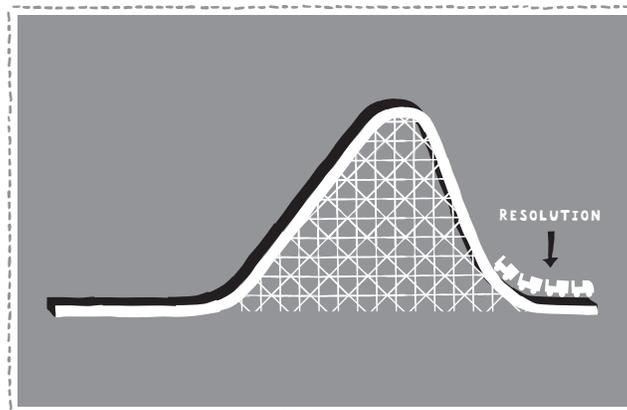
"I never . . ." Billy begins, but it is too late. Two beefy security guards carry him away.

Gill gets up on stage and the show goes live again.

"Sorry about that everyone, looks like Billy Van Carnage messed with Crude Medicine's equipment before they went on, so I would like to invite them back up for an encore."

The band plays, and there is no doubt in anyone's mind that they are the winners of *So You Think You Can Rock?* 2008.

The Resolution (Also Sometimes Known as the "Conclusion")



Getting off the rollercoaster

The resolution, which is also sometimes known as the "conclusion" since it comes at the very end of your novel, is how things work out in the very end after your protagonist gets (or doesn't get) what he or she wants. It has been said by creative writing sages that your characters—especially your protagonist—must change over the course of the book. This change happens gradually as your character battles his or her fears, defeats villains, and forges friendships and relationships with a cast of amazing characters. All of these adventures will end up changing the way your main character sees the world and his or her place in it. Try to use the final scenes to highlight those changes.

An example of a resolution:

Crude Medicine is playing an arena full of rabid fans. "Hello Detroit!" Boris yells. "It's good to be home!" He walks over to Abigail, and they high five, then kiss, and the crowd screams. "Let's rock!" Abigail says. The band plays, the crowd sings, and Boris looks just as comfortable on stage now as he did less than one year ago rocking out alone in his bedroom.



Now it's your turn to create your plot. Believe us, if you fill out this worksheet, noveling will be ten times easier in November. You don't have to describe everything that will happen in your novel here. This is just to help you get an idea about what'll happen in the beginning, middle, and end of your book.

1. Describe Your Set-Up

In one to two paragraphs, describe a scene that introduces your characters, your setting, and the main conflicts in your story. You may want to review your Conflict Worksheet before you do this.

2. Describe Your Inciting Incident

In one paragraph, describe the event that causes your protagonist to begin his or her adventure.

3. Describe Some of Your Rising Action:

Write a list of five events that build up to the climax of your novel. Don't forget to include all of your supporting characters!

4. Describe Your Climax:

In one paragraph, describe what will happen in the climax of your novel.

5. Describe Your Falling Action:

In one to two paragraphs, describe what happens after the climax. Does your protagonist get what he or she wants? Does the antagonist get defeated? How?

6. Describe Your Resolution:

In one to two paragraphs, describe how everything works out in the very end. Is it a happy ending? Sad? Remember to show how your characters changed because of their journey.

After you've finished your plot outline, you can take it one step further and fill out the blank "Plot Rollercoaster" on Page 26. To get an idea of how to use the blank rollercoaster, check out the example we've created on the next page.

Example Plot Rollercoaster

Boris and Abigail leave for tryouts. Boris starts to fall for Abigail. crude Medicine make it onto the show. crude Medicine makes it to the final episode.

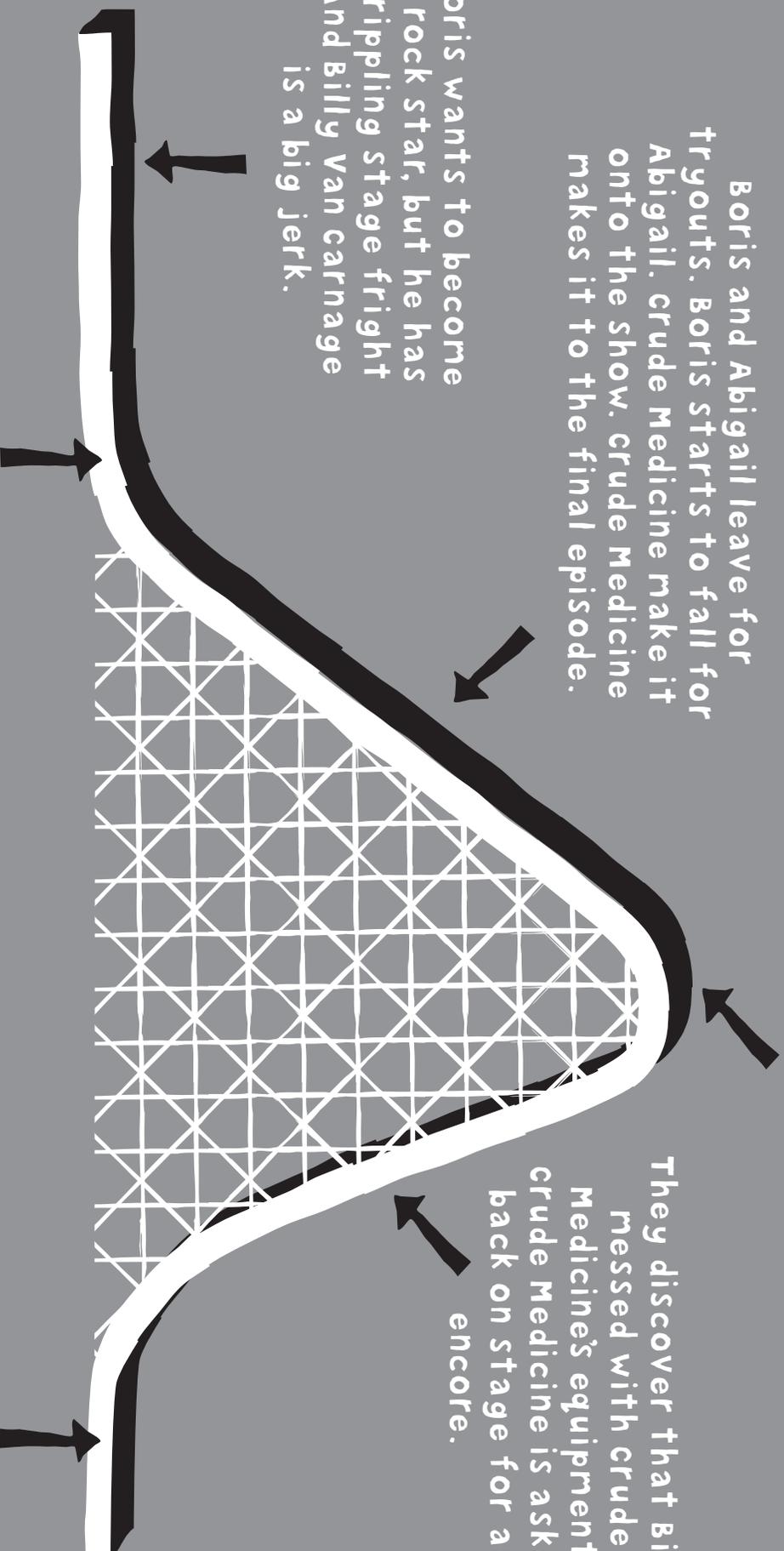
Boris wants to become a rock star, but he has crippling stage fright And Billy Van carnage is a big jerk.

crude Medicine goes on stage for their final performance. Their instruments are out of tune. They get forced off stage.

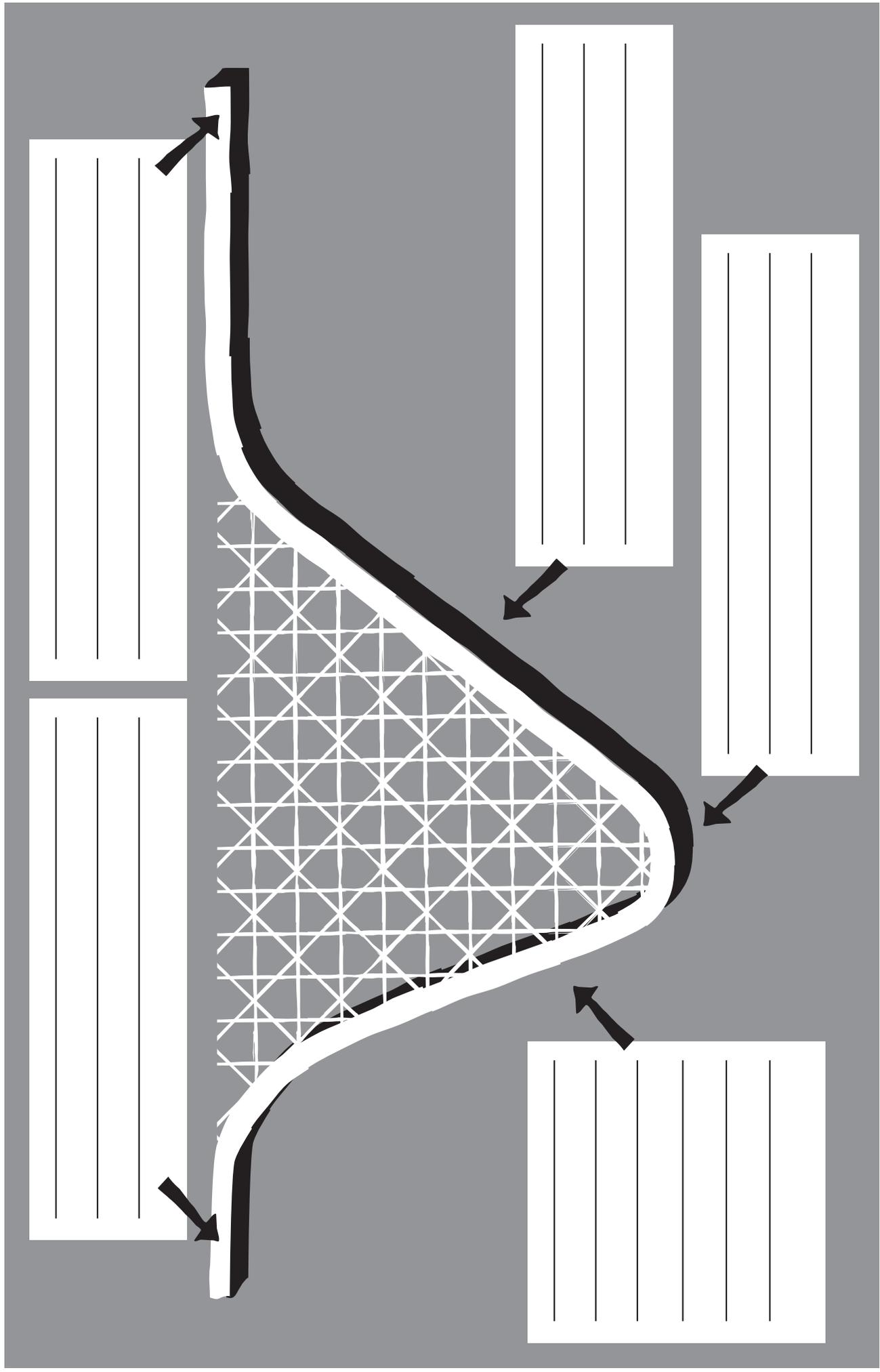
They discover that Billy messed with crude medicine's equipment. crude Medicine is asked back on stage for an encore.

Abigail invites Boris to stand in as crude Medicine's guitarist for the *So You Think You can Rock?* tryouts.

crude Medicine becomes a hugely popular rock band. Boris and Abigail get together. Boris has gotten over his stage fright.



Plot Rollercoaster



FINAL NOTE ON PLOT!

As you probably know, not all rollercoasters have the same track. They all have different hills and drops, twists and turns, and loops and tunnels. The same goes for novels. That is what makes them different and exciting. Sometimes they begin with the inciting incident or work backwards from the resolution to the beginning. Novels are filled with flashbacks, flash-forwards, and unexpected plot twists. And novels don't have to have happy endings either. Just like life, sometimes things don't work out exactly the way you planned them to. In November, experiment with the plot you create by thinking beyond the "typical one-hill rollercoaster" formula. Rearrange events, add some twists, and flip that resolution on its head. You'll be surprised at how much this can energize your story.