

Potholes

Sometimes you don't see a pothole in the road until you've smashed into it. The same is true of plot holes in books. Authors can inadvertently leave them on the road. And if a reader runs into one that the author failed to find and fix, the reader may hit it and never resume his trip. Best to find the plot hole and repair it before your reader crashes.

It seems obvious that a writer should not put the cart before the horse. An action should follow logically from a prior cause. But I did create such an illogical plot hole. It's easy to do. In the example that follows, from my novel *Empty Luck*, I wrote about a character trying to pay back a loan before he had the money to do so.

My character, Jared, seeks to repay \$5,000 borrowed from his father. Unfortunately, he is virtually broke, living in the home of a generous friend and working a menial job. He really has no money to pay anyone. But I wanted him to visit his father and he needed a reason for the visit. So I wrote a long chapter in which he gave his father a meager sum, nothing close to the actual debt. It was a tepid, watered-down scene, and lacked real emotion or impact. In short, it was a plot hole, and one I did not see at the time. Only later, in the editing process, did I realize something was wrong, but how would I fix it?

Well, here is what helped: After finishing my first draft, I outlined the book. I thought that would give me a clear picture of the events and their sequence. I noted that Jared did come into some money later, after the visit, but I hadn't related that to the opportunity to pay back his father. It felt like a separate story. Only in examining the outline did I connect the two. It was an "Aha" moment. I moved the scene with the father so it came after my character had money. That was far more logical and it helped the book in many ways.

First, it brought the stories together. When you have multiple plot lines, it is important to join them when possible. It makes a more coherent and engaging experience for the reader. Second, it changed the dynamic of the father-son relationship. Where before the father had demeaned his son for his "failures," as he often had, now he wrestled with a new issue, how his son acquired the money? And third, it raised the question of the son Jared's own motives and conscience. Was it right to use money he had not earned to settle a family debt? Did that make him morally flawed? Could he be honest with his father about where the money had come from? None of that would have come up had Jared just delivered a pittance to his father and left. Of course, the pittance would have raised other issues, but not as important ones, and they would have been less relevant to the overall plot.

The point here is that sometimes, in the latter stages of finishing a book, the self-editing stage, the author comes across a plot hole large enough to crash the reader. An author can miss that in the day-to-day writing, the nose-to-the-grindstone work of churning out chapters. Outlining and editing the finished draft, reviewing the high points of each chapter, helped me discover and correct this mistake.