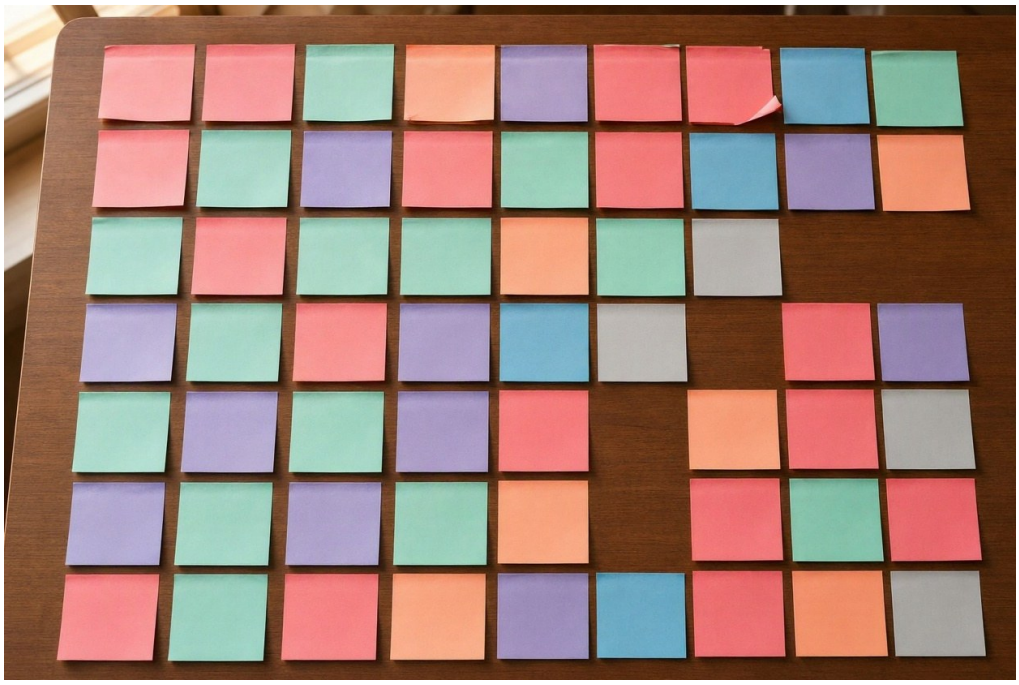
IMOGEN'S YELLOW SUBPLOT GOES MISSING

Colour-coded plot grids for multiple viewpoints and storylines

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Imogen Tull had planned her crime novel with great care. It had three viewpoint characters, a central murder investigation and four subplots, each of which she had outlined in a separate notebook.

What she didn't have was any way of seeing all of them at once.

So one Saturday she cleared the dining-room wall, bought four packs of sticky notes in different colours and drew a grid in masking tape: chapters down the side, storylines across the top.

By teatime the wall was covered. And in the yellow column, which belonged to the detective's troubled relationship with her teenage son, there was a large empty space stretching from chapter nine to chapter twenty-two.

The son had gone missing for thirteen chapters. Nobody in the book had noticed. Neither had Imogen.

What a plot grid shows

A plot grid is a table. Each row is a chapter or scene. Each column is a storyline, character or element you want to track. In each square, you note what happens in that storyline at that point in the book.

It's a simple idea, and it shows something no other method shows quite as clearly: how your storylines weave together across the whole book. Where each one rises, where it pauses, where it disappears, and where two of them collide.

For novels with several viewpoints, subplots or timelines, it can be the difference between controlling the structure and hoping for the best.

Setting it up

You can build a grid on a wall with tape and sticky notes, on a large sheet of paper or in a spreadsheet. Each has its advantages. Sticky notes are easy to move. Paper is cheap and portable. A spreadsheet can be as large as you like and easily updated.

Choose your columns carefully. Imogen's included:

The main investigation.

Each of her four subplots.

Whose point of view each chapter used.

The clues revealed.

Some writers add columns for setting, timeline date or themes. Start with fewer columns than you think you need. A grid that tries to track everything becomes as hard to read as the manuscript.

Colour does the work

The real power of a grid comes from colour. When each storyline has its own colour, patterns that would take hours to find in the text appear at a glance.

Imogen's wall told her several things within minutes of stepping back.

The yellow subplot vanished for most of the middle, then returned in chapter twenty-two with a crisis the reader had no reason to care about.

The blue subplot, about a corrupt councillor, crowded into chapters three to seven and then barely appeared again until the climax.

The green viewpoint, belonging to the murderer, appeared regularly every third chapter, which was good, but always at the end of a section, which was becoming predictable.

Weaving the threads

A storyline that disappears for a long time loses its grip on the reader. When it returns, they may have forgotten what was at stake. A useful general aim is to keep each important thread visible often enough that the reader remembers it, even if some appearances are brief.

That doesn't mean every subplot needs a full scene in every chapter. A line of dialogue, a text message or a passing thought can keep a thread alive. Imogen added three small moments in the middle chapters where the detective's son texts her, and she ignores him. Each one was only a few lines long. Together, they made his crisis in chapter twenty-two feel like something that had been building all along.

Let the storylines collide

The most satisfying moments in a novel with several storylines often come when two of them meet.

On her grid, Imogen could see that the councillor subplot and the main investigation ran side by side for most of the book without touching. She looked for the row where they might cross, and found one: chapter seventeen, where the detective needs a planning document that the councillor has buried.

One sticky note, moved two inches, turned two separate stories into one complicated one. The middle of the book improved immediately.

Watch the rhythm

A grid also shows rhythm: how often you switch viewpoints, how long each storyline runs before the reader leaves it, which chapters are crowded with events and which are quiet.

There's no single correct pattern. But when the same pattern repeats too regularly, readers begin to sense it, and when a pattern breaks for no reason, they may feel jolted. The grid lets you make those choices deliberately.

Keep it current

A plot grid is most useful when it reflects the book as it really is, not as it was planned. When you revise a chapter, update its row. When you add or remove a scene, change the grid.

Some writers build their grid only after the first draft, as a way of seeing what they've actually written. That works well too, and can be a revealing exercise.

Imogen's wall stayed up until the second draft was finished. By then, the yellow column had notes in it all the way down, and the son had become her first readers' favourite character.

One of them asked her where she'd got the idea of having him text his mother all the way through the middle of the book.

Imogen said it had come to her quite naturally. Which was true, if you counted a dining-room wall.

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