MABEL DISCOVERS THE DREADED MIDDLE

Article Series 6 of 10

Published 31 October 2026 · 4 min read

Read online: fogbottom.com/learn/mabel-discovers-the-dreaded-middle/

At thirty-two thousand words, A Crumb of Suspicion began to feel like walking uphill through custard.

Nothing was wrong, exactly. Every chapter did what the outline said it should. Iris questioned Gerald Finch about leaving the marquee unattended. Then she questioned Sam Okafor about why he had been seen near the marquee at lunchtime. Then she questioned Dot again, who still wouldn't explain the glaring.

Each conversation began with tea, continued with polite evasion and ended with Iris walking home thoughtfully.

By the third thoughtful walk home, Mabel found herself thinking thoughtfully about whether the spice rack needed alphabetising.

It did. She spent the afternoon on it. That was usually a sign.

Why middles sag

The beginning of a novel has the energy of the setup. The end has the energy of the resolution. The middle has to generate its own, and it is the longest stretch of the book.

A sagging middle usually has one of a few causes. The same kind of scene repeats. The situation stops changing. The character is busy but nothing is at risk. Or the writer knows the ending and is simply walking the reader towards it, one polite step at a time.

Mabel's problem was the first. Three interviews in a row had the same shape, and each revealed roughly the same amount. A reader would feel that pattern long before they could name it.

Things should get worse

The middle of a story is where the character's plan meets resistance. That resistance should grow.

A useful question for any middle chapter is: how is the situation harder at the end of this scene than at the start? Not busier. Harder.

Mabel made a list of things that could make Iris's life more difficult, and then, more cheerfully than seemed decent, she used several of them.

A note appeared in Iris's letterbox, written on the back of a show entry card in capital letters: LEAVE IT, IRIS. Somebody now knew she was asking questions and didn't like it.

Gerald's prize marrow vanished from the vegetable table at the village hall, where the produce was being kept for the photographs. Two thefts made the village nervous. Nervous people say unwise things.

Dot stopped speaking to Iris altogether, after forty years of speaking to her nearly every day.

Raise the stakes that matter

Stakes don't have to be enormous. They have to be personal.

The most powerful complications in a cosy mystery are often social. A friendship cracking matters more to most readers than a vague threat, because they can feel it. Dot's silence cost Iris more than the anonymous note did, and that was the point. Her investigation was now costing her the very thing she had hoped it would win back: her place among people who knew her.

Mabel added one more pressure. The show committee would meet on Friday to decide whether next year's show should go ahead at all. A clock gives the middle a shape. Readers start counting.

Turn the story halfway through

Many novels have a turning point somewhere near the middle: a revelation, a reversal or a moment where the character's approach has to change.

Mabel's came when PC Mott, finally taking an interest, pointed out that one person had certainly been inside the marquee that morning without an entry to deliver: the woman who had been fiddling with the delphiniums by the door.

Iris, the detective, became for one chapter a suspect.

The reversal did several jobs. It raised the personal stakes, made the village look at Iris differently and turned her flaw, her inability to leave things alone, into evidence against her. It also meant she could no longer investigate politely. She now needed answers more than she needed to be liked.

Pace is about variety, not speed

Pacing isn't simply a matter of making things happen faster. It comes from contrast.

A tense scene lands harder after a quiet one. A short chapter feels brisk after a long one. A scene of action followed by a scene in which the character reacts and decides what to do next gives the reader time to absorb what has happened, and makes the next move feel chosen rather than arbitrary.

Mabel looked at her middle chapters and saw that every one was the same length, the same mood and very nearly the same scene. She cut one of the three interviews completely, folded its single useful clue into another, and added a short, sharp chapter in which Iris comes home to find the note.

Tension is the reader's anticipation

Tension doesn't mean constant drama. It means the reader is waiting for something they care about.

The committee meeting on Friday. The marrow. The question of who wrote the note. Whether Dot will ever speak to Iris again. Each was a small unanswered question running underneath the scenes, and together they did more for the middle than any number of thoughtful walks home.

By the end of July, the custard had thinned considerably. Mabel was still not entirely sure who had taken the marrow. She was fairly sure, however, that it was no longer the spice rack's turn.

From Fogbottom: practical writing guidance and free creative software for independent authors. The original article, with any updates, is at fogbottom.com/learn/mabel-discovers-the-dreaded-middle/.