ROSALIND DRAWS THE HOUSE AND HER BUTLER WALKS THROUGH A WALL

Floor plans for staging scenes, sightlines and secrets

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In chapter seven of Rosalind Hatch's country-house thriller, the butler left the library, crossed the hall, and arrived in the dining room in time to hear the gunshot.

In chapter fifteen, the detective reconstructed the evening and established that the dining room was on the floor above, at the far end of the east wing.

Rosalind, who taught piano and was accustomed to things arriving at the right place at the right time, found this deeply upsetting. Either the butler had climbed a staircase at remarkable speed, or he had walked through a wall.

She took out a sheet of squared paper, a ruler and a pencil, and began drawing Fallowmere House.

Why a floor plan helps

Readers rarely see a floor plan, but they feel its absence. When a character's movements don't quite add up, a scene can feel vague, or slightly wrong, even if nobody can say why.

A simple floor plan of an important location lets you check where everyone is, what they can see, what they can hear and how long it takes to get from one place to another. It is especially useful for mysteries, thrillers and any story built on secrets, where the question of who could have been where may be the whole plot.

It also helps with ordinary scenes. A family argument in a small kitchen feels different from the same argument in a large one, where someone can walk away and keep shouting from the doorway.

You don't need to be an architect

Rosalind's first drawing was not elegant. Her walls were wobbly and the staircase looked like a toast rack. It didn't matter.

A useful floor plan only needs a few things: the rooms in the right relationship to each other, the doors, windows and stairs, and anything important to the plot, such as a fireplace, a hidden cupboard or a window that doesn't quite close.

Squared paper makes it easier to keep proportions sensible. A free online floor plan tool will do the same job, though some writers find that a pencil invites more ideas and fewer menus.

Draw one floor per sheet if the building has more than one. Label everything.

Block the scene like a play

Theatre directors call it blocking: deciding where each actor stands and moves during a scene. Novelists can borrow the idea.

Rosalind made small paper counters, one for each character, and moved them around her floor plan while she reread chapter seven. Where is the butler when the lights go out? Where is the colonel? Who has a clear line of sight to the study door?

Within ten minutes she had found three problems. The butler could not have reached the dining room in time. The colonel, who claimed to have seen nothing, was standing directly opposite the study door. And the housemaid, whose evidence cleared the nephew, could not have seen him from the scullery, because there was a wall in the way.

The last one was a gift. Rosalind had been looking for a reason to make the housemaid's statement unreliable. Now the house had provided one.

Sightlines and sound

When you have a floor plan, ask two questions about every important moment.

Who can see what? A long corridor lets a character watch someone from a distance. A corner lets someone appear suddenly. A window lets a person outside see in, and the person inside may not know.

Who can hear what? Thin walls, open doors, a chimney that carries voices between rooms, a creaking stair that announces everyone who uses it. Sound is one of the most useful tools a mystery has, and a floor plan helps you use it deliberately rather than by accident.

Let the house create plot

Old houses are full of possibilities: back stairs for servants, rooms that connect through dressing rooms, cellars, attics, a door everyone forgets is there.

Once Rosalind had drawn Fallowmere House, she noticed that the library and the gun room shared a wall, and that both had fireplaces. In a house of that period, it seemed plausible that the two chimneys might run close together.

She didn't know yet if that would matter. She wrote "voices up the chimney?" in the margin and moved on.

Keep the plan beside you

A floor plan is only useful if you use it while drafting and revising. Keep it pinned above your desk or open in a second window. When a character walks from one room to another, glance at it. It takes a few seconds and saves a good deal of rewriting later.

If the plot needs the house to change, change the plan first, so that the house stays consistent for the rest of the book.

By the end of the week, Fallowmere House had two floors, a cellar and a toast-rack staircase that Rosalind had grown fond of. The butler took the back stairs in chapter seven, arrived out of breath and heard the shot through the floor rather than the wall.

It was a better scene. He was, for the first time, exactly where a butler should be.

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