

## **Incremental Perturbation: How to Know Whether You've Got a Plot or Not**

John Barth defines “plot” in this way: “the incremental perturbation of an unstable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified equilibrium.”

Say what? Let's unpack...

### **Beginning: Unstable Homeostatic System**

This is the ground situation or status quo: the “state of affairs preexisting in the story's present time; one that tends toward equilibrium but is essentially less than stable (otherwise there could be no story).”

In other words: what's happening when we enter into the story is a state that is ripe for change—it's relatively but not completely stable. Think: “it was a day like any other...but then...” That “day like any other” is the unstable homeostatic system—it was relatively normal, but if it were not at least a little unstable, the “but then” would have no effect.

### **Middle: Incremental Perturbation**

Dramatic action “[needs] to turn the screws on the ground situation, complicate the conflict, move us up the ramp.”

In other words, our status quo becomes more and more complicated as we move forward. We place more and more straws on the camel's back, we turn the temperature lower and lower, until...the back breaks, the water freezes: “The climax or turn, when it comes, happens relatively quickly...a comparatively sudden and consequential effect triggered by comparatively small incrementations.” Eventually, the small changes made along the way build up to have a significant consequence of some kind.

### **End: Catastrophic Restoration to a Complexified Equilibrium**

“If nothing of consequence about the ground situation has been altered, no story has been told... If the ground situation has unquestionably been changed...then a story may have been told.”

In other words, there has been a change to the system in which we started. The change, however, does need to be *meaningful*—this doesn't necessarily mean that this change is big and dramatic, though it certainly can be, but change can be just as meaningful when it is small, or when even the characters don't fully understand its consequences.

In order for there to be a story, we need to end in a different place than we began—we have a new “status quo.” Things may seem to be “back to normal,” but the situation and/or the characters have been meaningfully altered.