

# Troubleshooting the Saggy Middle

Rachel Bailey



Troubleshooting  
Problem 1:

## It's the boring part



**Problem:** Can't get motivated because it's the boring stuff.

**Temptation:**

- Give up and start a new project
- Skip to the end & come back close to deadline.

**But... this is the FUN section to write!**

How fun  
is that?

See? Fun!

Act 2.1

### Explore

**Your idea in  
all its glory**

Events & situations implied by your  
glorious idea, plus exploring your  
theme / trope / set up

*Very likely all the reasons you wanted  
to write this story in the first place!*



**Roll around in  
your catnip!**

### Midpoint

Everything  
changes, can't  
go back to  
how it was

**Flip it!**

Possibly the  
thing that will  
make you  
cackle with  
glee!



Act 2.2

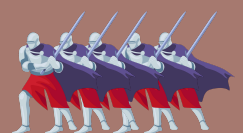
### Escalate

**Stuff gets real**

Delicious consequences of their choices  
&/or ways to forge them into  
the character you wanted to write

*You get to be an evil genius  
or a benevolent overlord!*

**All the juicy stuff!**



**So.  
Much.  
Fun.**

**ALL the fun!**

## Try this:

- Act 2.1: List all the fun things implied by your glorious idea (likely the reasons you wanted to write this story). Write them!
- Act 2.2: List all the juicy consequences your character will have to face & things that will make them grow into your vision. Write them!



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Troubleshooting  
Problem 2:



## The conflict ran out of steam



### Problem:

The middle lacks tension.

### Temptation:

- Just keep repeating the threat.
- Drag a fixable conflict oooooout.
- Jump the shark by throwing more things at the characters.

### Try this:

- **Pinch Points:** the villain/conflict stops lurking in the background and does something to get them closer to their goal. Screenplays: 2 pinch points, halfway through each of the middle sections.
- **Reinforcing:** provide more evidence of the conflict. If you've reinforced well, the character believes the conflict/villain is more of an obstacle than ever.
- **Deepening:** existing conflicts. Not just reinforcing, something new happening that makes the conflict stronger than it was before. Make it worse!



Troubleshooting  
Problem 3:



## The pace is sluggish



### Problem:

You want narrative drive, but the wheels are spinning.

### Temptation:

The Siren of the Manuscript Middle:

- "Quick! Fill it! Fill it with anything!"
- "There's soooo much room. Of course you can include \*\*\*."

### Try this:

- **Check each scene** for its **purpose**. Every scene needs to be there for a reason (preferably 2 or more!) otherwise they're padding, and you lose narrative drive. If a scene can be cut without affecting your story, then cut it.
- **Combine two scenes** from the sluggish section to get one solid, layered scene (especially sittin' & thinkin' scenes).
- Experiment with **snag lines**: little hooks that raise questions, promise a payoff, tease & build anticipation.





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## Troubleshooting Problem 4:



### The only twist is how predictable it is



#### Problem:

You can't come up with a twist when you need one.

#### Temptation:

- Just write the next obvious scene.
- Throw in a random twist even though it makes your protagonist act out of character.

#### Try this:

Trick your brain into leaving its nice, paved pathway.

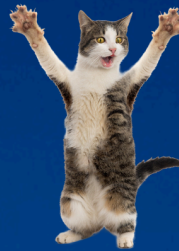
- **Brainstorm 15:** come up with ideas that are completely over the top, then pull it back.
- **Brainstorm with a friend:** fun & laughter encourages your brain to reach further, plus, your friend's suggestions can send your brain in more new directions.
- **Start with a prompt:** (the prompt is already off the path, then adapt it). Think of your favourite plot twists, adapt the underlying idea to fit your plot, see if you like it or if it sparks other ideas.



## Troubleshooting Problem 5:



### What's this subplot even doing?



#### Problem:

The subplot is missing, random or ineffective.

#### Temptation:

- Come up with 75 subplots.
- Write what's interesting, even if not connected to the main plot.

#### Try this:

- Create subplots by **teasing out** layers of core idea to **explore & reveal**, e.g., reinforce main plot's theme, reveal character, or demonstrate the stakes.
- **Add value** through subplots that **propel plot**, e.g., a subplot pushes the protagonist into character growth that they'll need for the main plot.
- Use subplots to **balance the rising tension** of the main plot: if you resolve some of the tension in one plotline, ramp up the tension in another.

