



# Creative Writing Course

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## Lesson 5

**Please use this workbook to write down your ideas  
as you create your plot outline.**

## Course Notes

### Part 5 - Writing Your Plot Outline

**Now we have the basic elements of your novel done. The next step in this process is to bring it all together and outline your story.**

There are many different schools of thought on whether an outline is beneficial to a writer, or even necessary. Personally, I think if I'm writing short fiction, I don't need an outline, but if I'm working on a novel, I definitely need one. My outline acts as a road map of my story, so I know where I'm going, and the series of events that have to happen so that I get there, and my characters also achieve their own goals. Often, I have to refer to my outline to guide me whenever I'm feeling stuck, so I always recommend having a basic structure to aspiring writers.

Different methods work for different writers, but I recommend a six-step method that helps me look at the plot and create a flow for how the story unfolds, and how it comes to a resolution.

**These six steps are:**

**1) Define the Story Goal** – The story goal is, generally speaking, what your protagonist wants to achieve or the problem he/she wants to resolve. It is also the goal/problem that involves or affects most, if not all the other characters in the story. It is “what the story is all about.”

For instance, let's say we want to write a story about a 38-year-old female executive who has always put off having a family for the sake of her career and now finds herself lonely and regretting her choices. In this case, we might choose to make the Story Goal for her to find true love before it's too late. When you're starting to write the outline for this story, the things that might come to your mind are: what obstacles are in her path? who are the people in the story that will help or hinder her to achieve this goal? Did she make wrong choices in her past regarding choosing a suitable mate? What qualities is she now looking for in a man? How much is she willing to sacrifice and compromise for the sake of true love? Will she recognise true love when she finds it? And so on.

In other words, after we have chosen a Story Goal, we will build a world around our protagonist that includes many perspectives on the problem and makes the goal important to everyone in that world. That's why choosing the Story Goal is the most important first step in building a plot outline.

**2) Consequence** - Once you have decided on a Story Goal, your next step is to ask yourself, “What disaster will happen if the goal is not achieved? What is my protagonist afraid will happen if he/she doesn't achieve the goal or solve the problem?”

The answer to these questions is the Consequence of the story. The Consequence is the negative situation or event that will result if the Goal is not achieved. Avoiding the Consequence justifies the effort required in pursuing the Story Goal, both to the characters in your novel and the reader, and that makes it an important part of your plot outline. The combination of goal and consequence creates the main dramatic tension in your plot.

In some stories, the protagonist may begin by deciding to resolve a problem or pursue a goal. Later, that goal becomes more meaningful when he discovers that a terrible consequence will occur if he fails. Other times, the protagonist may start off threatened by a terrible event, which thus motivates him/her to find way to avoid it.

In our earlier example, the Consequence could be that the female executive fails to find true love and she lives a lonely and miserable life, full of regrets. It is this consequence that she is trying to avoid throughout the story.

Write a list of possible Consequences you could have in your plot outline. Then choose one to be the counterpoint to your chosen Story Goal.

**3) Requirements** - The third element of your plot outline, Requirements, describes what must happen in order to achieve the Story Goal. You can think of this as a checklist of one or more events. As the Requirements are met in the course of the novel, the reader will feel the characters are getting closer to the attainment of the goal. Requirements create a state of excited anticipation in the reader's mind, so that he looks forward to the protagonist's success.

In our example of the female executive, what would be the Requirements? If the Story Goal is for our protagonist to find true love, perhaps she will need to join a singles club or dating service so she can meet single men. Perhaps she will need to cut down her hours at work, so that she has some time to socialise outside of business engagements.

When you're outlining your novel, list out some events that need to happen for the goal in your novel to be achieved.

**4) Forewarnings** - While requirements show that the story is progressing towards the achievement of the goal, forewarnings are events that show the consequence is getting closer. Forewarnings make the reader anxious that the consequence will occur before the protagonist can succeed. In the plot outline for our story, events that could constitute Forewarnings might be: the protagonist has a series of bad dates that make it seem like she will never find the right guy, or the protagonist meets a woman at a singles club who tells her that at their age all the good men are already married.

While the Story Goal and Consequences create dramatic tension, Requirements and Forewarnings take the reader through an emotional roller coaster that oscillates between

hope and fear. There will be places in the plot where it seems the protagonist is making progress, and others where it seems that everything is going wrong. Structure these well, and you will keep your reader turning pages non-stop.

**5) Costs** - Good plots are about problems that mean a lot to the characters. If a problem is trivial, then neither the protagonist nor the reader has a reason to get worked up about it. You want your readers to get worked up about your novel. So you must give your protagonist a goal that matters. One sign that a problem or goal matters to the protagonist is that he/she is willing to make sacrifices or suffer pain in order to achieve it. Such sacrifices are called Costs.

Costs can come in many ways. Protagonists can be asked to give up their pride, self-respect, money, security, an attitude, an idealized memory, the life of a friend, or anything else they hold dear. If you make the costs steep and illustrate how hard the sacrifice is for the protagonist, the reader will feel that the protagonist deserves to achieve the goal.

In the case of our female executive, perhaps she must give up a promotion she has worked hard for because it would require her to travel so much that she would have no chance of settling down and raising a family.

**6) Climax and Resolution** – Now that you have the basic requirement for creating an interesting plot, you have to bring everything together so that your story ending makes emotional and logical sense to the reader. At the climax of your story, the main character, in pursuit of the Story Goal, arrives at a tough situation. He or she then makes a decision or does something that determines decisively whether or not the Story Goal will be achieved. More precisely, he decides whether or not to change himself or his behaviour. Your main character should have a particular way of trying to solve problems that is key to the plot development. With some characters, it is a type of behaviour. With others, it is a personality trait that either helps or hinders them. In our example, perhaps the female executive decides to take a chance on a man she met even though he was not her usual ‘type’ and he seemed like a risk.

**The Resolution is how your story ends.** Generally, stories can end happily (the protagonist achieved the Story Goal), the story ends unhappily (the protagonist failed to achieve the story goal), or somewhere in-between.

Throughout the process of choosing your story, choosing your protagonist and outlining the novel, you may already have in mind how you want the story to end. If you’re aiming for the story to end happily, then you’ll make sure that at the climax, your main character makes a decision that leads them towards the happy ending. In our example of the female executive, it may mean that she accepted the proposal of the man that she had been dating and fallen in love with, after he proved himself to be trustworthy.

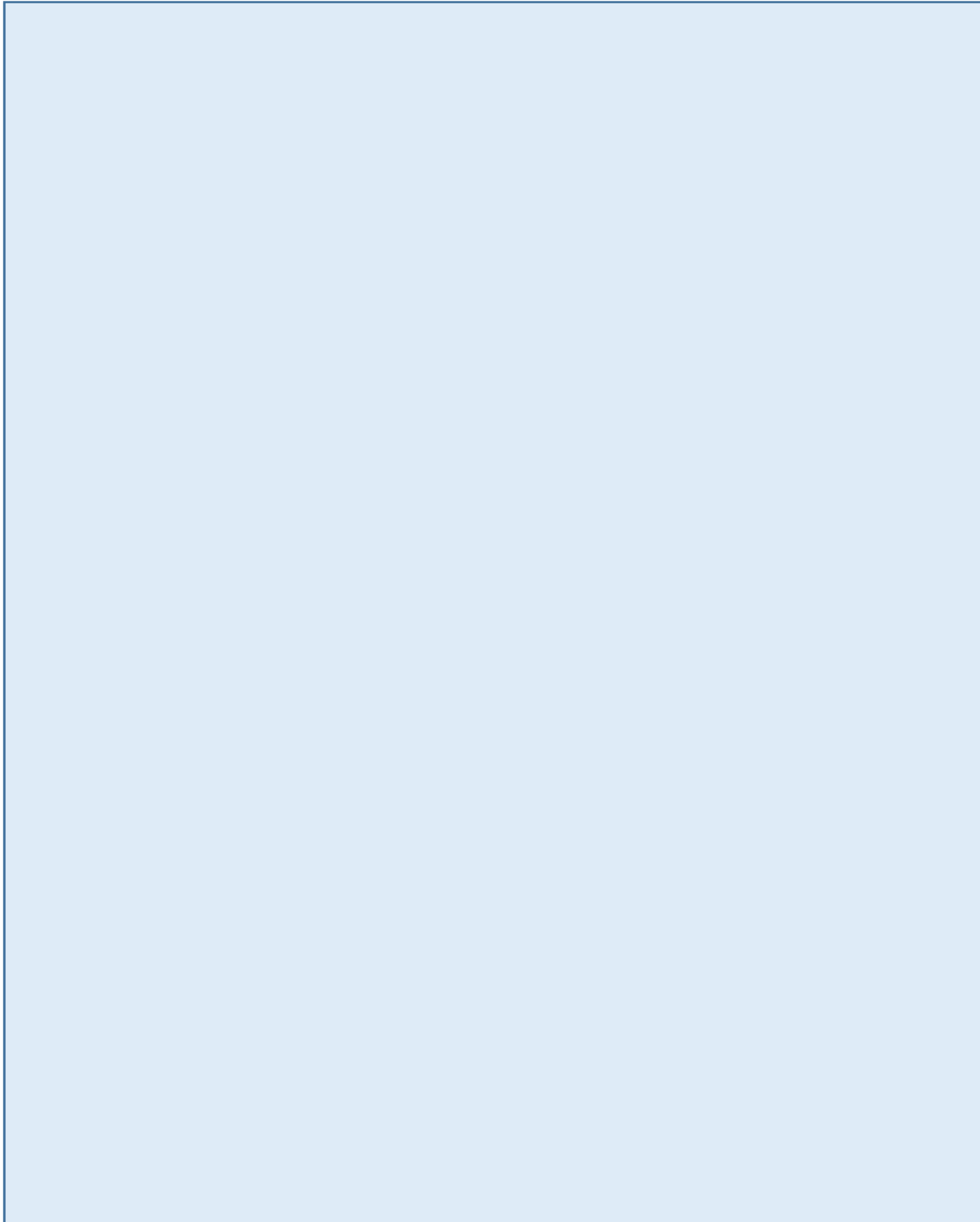
Of course, not all stories end so neatly. Sometimes the protagonist achieves the Story Goal, only to realise it wasn't worth it in the end. And sometimes, the protagonist fails to achieve the Story Goal, but this turns out to be a good thing.

Now you have your plot outline! You could decide to break the story down into a chapter by chapter outline, or even a scene by scene outline. The important thing is that you have a very good plan of what you're going to do with your idea, your characters, and your setting, so that when you start fleshing it out, the story flows without too many hiccups, and most importantly, you won't feel overwhelmed and tempted to quit.

Now let's move on to the workbook for this topic.


## Workbook 5 – Writing Your Plot Outline

Start by writing down the Story Goal – The story goal is, generally speaking, what your protagonist wants to achieve or the problem he/she wants to resolve. It is also the goal/problem that involves or affects most, if not all the other characters in the story. Put your story goal ideas in the box below:

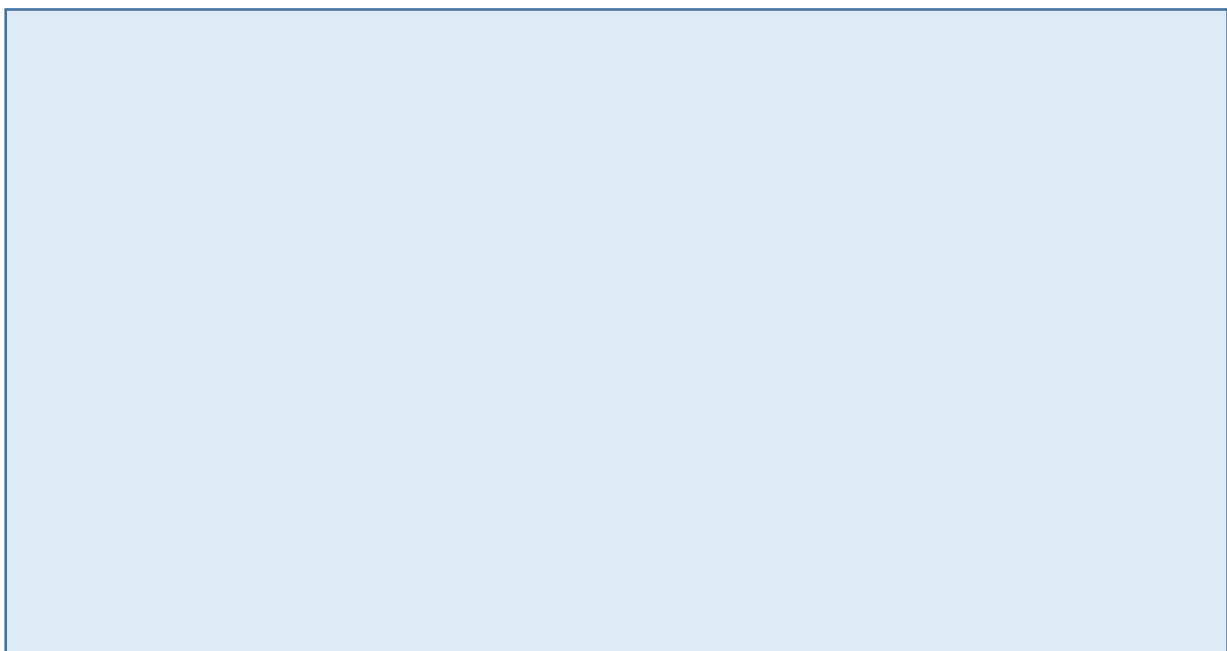


**The Consequence is the negative situation or event that will result if the Story Goal is not achieved. Avoiding the Consequence justifies the effort required in pursuing the Story Goal, both to the characters in your novel and the reader, and that makes it an important part of your plot outline. The combination of goal and consequence creates the main dramatic tension in your plot.**

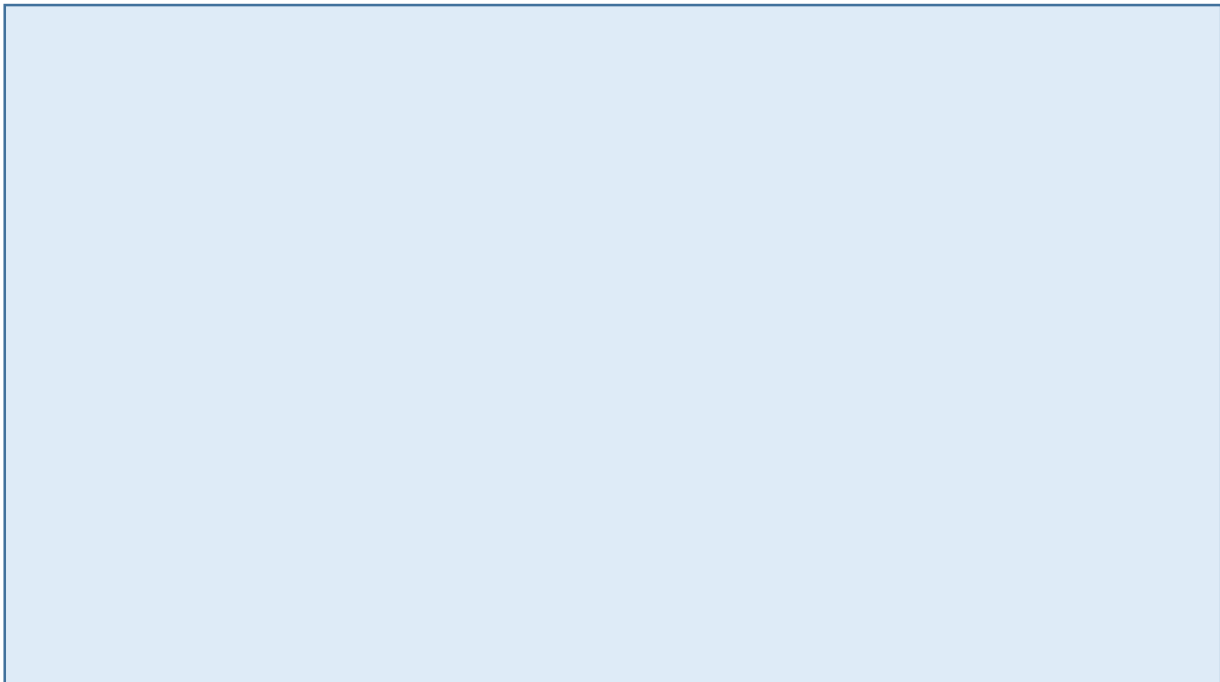
**Write down two or more consequences for your protagonist if he or she fails to achieve the story goal:**



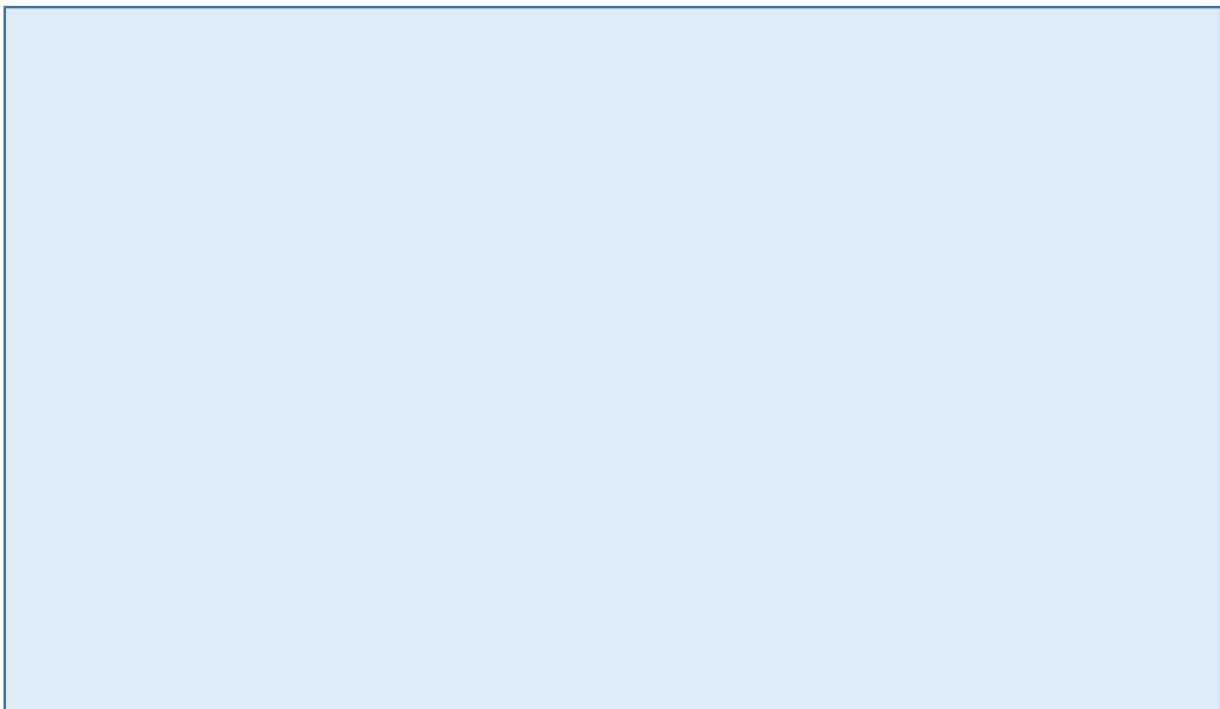
**Requirements describes what must happen in order to achieve the Story Goal. Write down two or more Requirements for your story in the box below:**



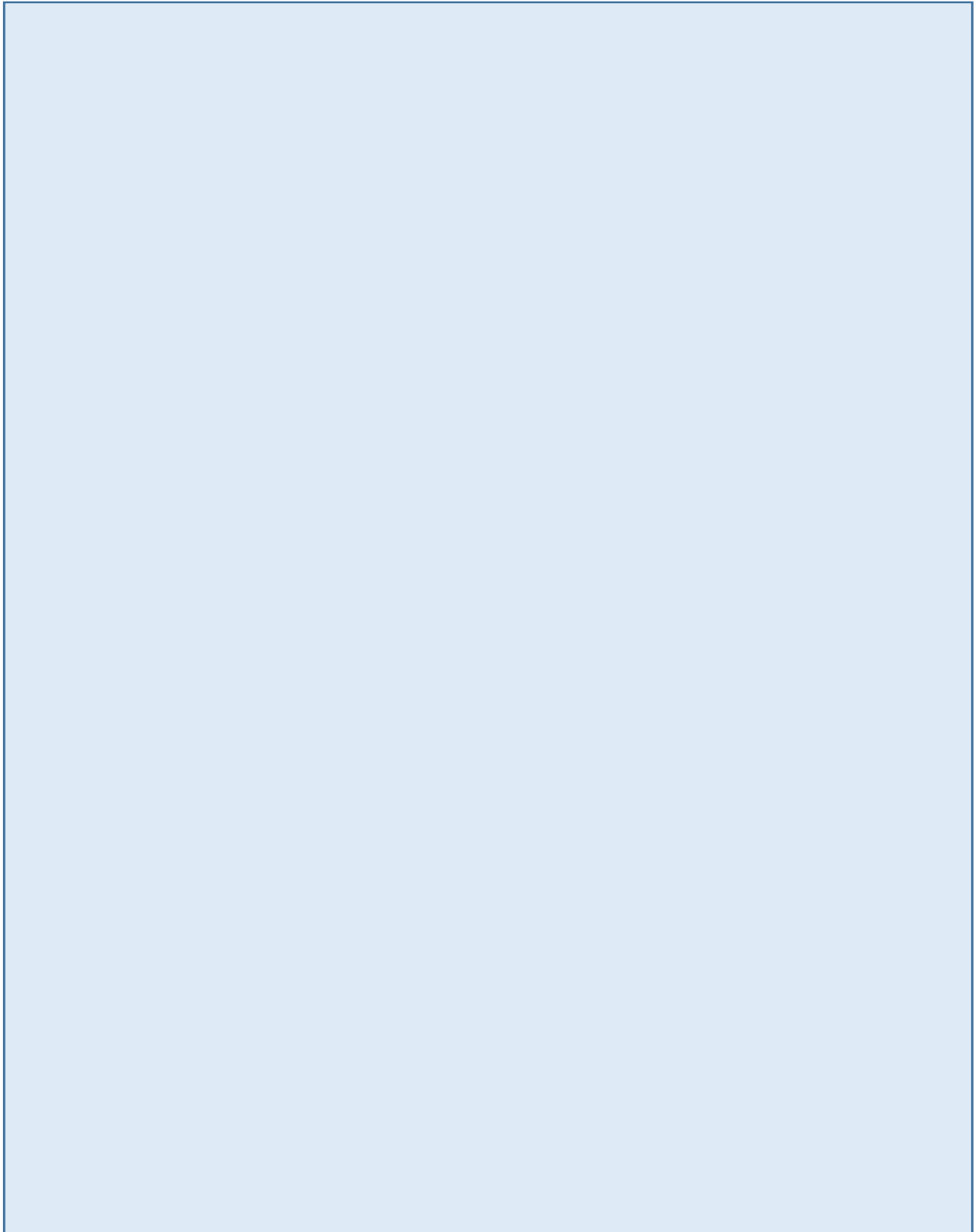
**Forewarnings - While requirements show that the story is progressing towards the achievement of the goal, forewarnings are events that show the consequence is getting closer. Write down one or more Forewarnings for your protagonist in the box below:**



**Costs are the sacrifices that your protagonist has to make to achieve the Story Goal. Write down two or more costs in the box below:**



**Climax and Resolution – Now you have to bring all the features you’ve written together so that your story ending makes emotional and logical sense to the reader. Write down your climax and resolution. Has your protagonist achieved the Story Goal? Will your story end happily or unhappily?**



**If you're happy with your plot elements, you can now write a good summary, or synopsis of your novel.**

