

Never Use Coincidence

The Source

This derives from Aristotle's *Poetics* where he argued that plot events should arise from necessity or probability, not chance. The best plots, Aristotle said, make events seem inevitable in retrospect.

E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) reinforced this: "The king died, and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot - causation matters.

The principle was sound: **Major plot resolutions shouldn't depend on unlikely chance - they should arise from character choices and established circumstances.**

The Morphing

Workshop culture corrupted this into absolute prohibition:

1. **Original:** "Don't resolve major conflicts through coincidence"
2. **First corruption:** "Avoid coincidence in plotting"
3. **Second corruption:** "Any coincidence is bad writing"
4. **Third corruption:** "Characters can never meet by chance"
5. **Final form:** "Everything must be foreshadowed and causally linked"

The rule became: **No random events, no chance encounters, no luck - good or bad. Everything must be planned and connected.**

This led to over-determined plots where nothing happens by chance, characters are absurdly connected, and life's randomness disappears.

The Reality

Great fiction is full of coincidence:

Charles Dickens (all novels): Built on outrageous coincidences. *Great Expectations*: Pip's benefactor happens to be the convict, who happens to be Estella's father. *Oliver Twist*: Oliver just happens to pick the pocket of his father's friend. The coincidences are features, not bugs.

Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*): The entire tragedy turns on a letter sliding under a rug. Coincidence drives Hardy's plots - his point is that life is unfair and random.

Michael Chabon (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*): Joe and Sam happen to become business partners, happen to create a hit comic, happen to cross paths with the same people. The coincidences feel true to New York's compressed world.

Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*): Multiple "chance" encounters that feel earned because they happen in the limited social world of the characters.

Jennifer Egan (*A Visit from the Goon Squad*): Characters reappear in each other's stories through coincidence - but it

works because the world (music industry, San Francisco) is small.

Dickens again: In *Our Mutual Friend*, the Boffins just happen to inherit a fortune, Bella just happens to marry John Rokesmith who just happens to be... The novel is a symphony of coincidence.

When Coincidence Works

Coincidence succeeds when:

1. **It starts action, doesn't resolve it:** Meeting by chance is fine; solving problems by chance isn't
2. **The world is genuinely small:** Small towns, specific industries, interconnected social circles
3. **It serves thematic purpose:** Hardy's coincidences show fate's cruelty
4. **It feels true to life:** Real life is full of unlikely encounters
5. **It complicates rather than simplifies:** Coincidence creates problems, not solutions
6. **Character choices matter more:** How characters respond to chance matters more than the chance itself

Example: In *Casablanca*, Rick and Ilsa meeting by chance works because it STARTS the conflict. The resolution comes through character choices, not more coincidence.

When Coincidence Fails

Coincidence fails when:

1. **It resolves major conflicts:** "Just then, the cavalry arrived"
2. **It saves characters from consequences:** Lucky breaks that eliminate stakes
3. **It's too convenient:** The exact right person shows up at the exact right moment
4. **It replaces character agency:** Things happen TO characters rather than BECAUSE of characters
5. **It strains credulity:** Multiple coincidences pile up implausibly

Example of bad coincidence:

Sarah was trapped in the burning building with no way out. Just then, her long-lost brother, now a firefighter, happened to be the one who found her.

This is coincidence doing all the work - no character agency, too convenient.

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "never use coincidence" - it's:

Coincidence can start action and complicate situations, but shouldn't resolve major conflicts. Characters should earn their outcomes through choices and actions, not luck. Use chance when it serves theme or when it's true to your story's world.

Or more simply: Coincidence can get characters INTO trouble, but they must get themselves OUT through agency and choice.

The corollary: Bad luck can strike randomly (that's true to life), but good luck resolving crises feels cheap unless earned.

The Irony

The anti-coincidence rule became rigid precisely when prestige television and film embraced intricate plots where chance encounters drive stories (*Magnolia*, *Crash*, *Babel*). Audiences accepted coincidence when it served thematic purpose.

Life writing (memoir, creative nonfiction) is full of coincidence because real life is random - and readers accept it as true. Fiction is held to a higher standard than reality.

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule damages fiction by:

1. **Over-determining plots:** Everything must be foreshadowed and connected
2. **Creating false patterns:** Six-degrees-of-separation plots where everyone knows everyone
3. **Eliminating life's randomness:** Real experience includes chance
4. **Forcing false causation:** Writers torture plots to make everything connected

5. **Limiting thematic range:** Can't explore fate, chance, or life's unfairness

Most destructively, it teaches writers that **fiction should be tidier than life**, when actually fiction can embrace life's randomness as long as characters respond with agency.

Some of fiction's most powerful moments come from chance: Romeo happening to arrive just as Juliet wakes (but too late), Hardy's letter under the rug, the random bullet that kills a character. Chance is part of life - fiction can use it.

The actual challenge is distinguishing between **coincidence that serves story** and **coincidence that replaces story**.