

Elements of Fiction

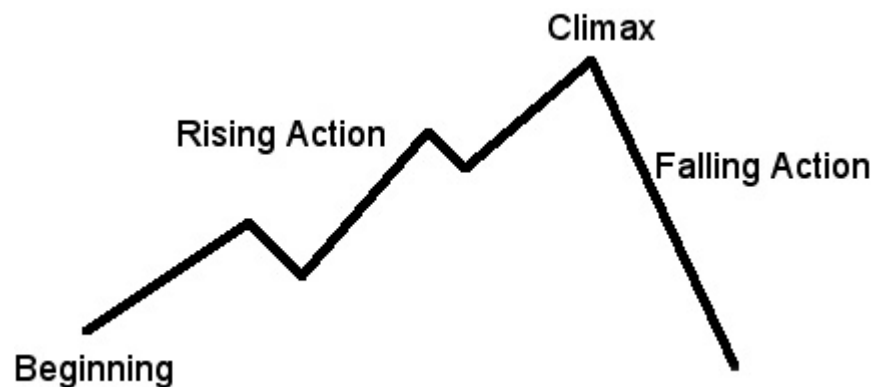
Plot
The Author's Role
Conflict
Setting
Mood
Plot Techniques
 e.g. suspense, flashback, telescoping & foreshadowing

Theme
Symbolism
Point of View
Characters
Irony
Other Issues
 e.g. style, tone, voice and philosophical doctrine

A. Plot

Definition of Plot: Events that form a significant pattern of action with a beginning, a middle and an end. They move from one place or event to another in order to form a pattern. The plot is also called a **narrative**.

Elements of Plot:



Beginning

1. **Plot Line:** a graph plotting the ups and downs of the central character's fortunes. A very conventional plot might look like the one above.

2. Initial Situation

- i. **Characters:** Who they are? What they aspire to?
- ii. **Setting:** Where/when do the characters live?
- iii. **Conflicts:** What are the challenges facing the characters (s)? What are the conflict(s) that the characters will have to overcome?

The beginning is often called the **introduction** or **exposition**. By establishing the characters, setting and initial conflicts, the beginning "sets the scene" for the rest of the narrative. Dickens' famous opening line in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," is a classic piece of exposition that helps establish the social and political background of the novel.

Rising Action

3. Incentive Movement:

- i. Which events thrust themselves into the tension of the characters' situation and triggers the action of the story?
- ii. A new event frequently jostles the smoothness of things and changes the course of action.
- iii. Each significant event turns the action into a new, more intense situation.
- iv. Other lesser events either reveal character or theme or build plot slowly and more realistically from one major event to another.

4. **Episodes:** After the introduction, a story usually presents a series of separate events in the plot, building from one situation to the next. A new episode (or scene) begins when the place and time change, or when something really important interrupts what has been happening. With each successive episode, the conflict becomes more and more intense, demanding some sort of resolution.

The Climax

5. **Climax:** the critical point at which the central character is about to win or lose all. When the probable outcome of the main conflict is finally revealed (i.e. the turning point), the story has reached its climax. In a Shakespearian tragedy, the climax occurs when the main character's "momentum" switches from success to failure. Beyond that point, the ending is inevitable. However, the climax does not mark the end of conflict; it only determines how the conflict will be decided. The climax

usually occurs anywhere from 50% to 90% of the completed story.

Falling Action

6. **Falling Action (or Resolution or Denouement):** the events that occur after the climax that tie up "loose ends"; they perform the necessary plot actions to fulfill the protagonist's fortunes that are now clear after the climax. It is a tricky part of a narrative to write as the author has to decide which parts of the plot to tie up and which to leave as questions for the reader to think about. Part of the decision regarding what to tie up and what to leave open often depends on the extent to which the author wants to satisfy the reader's need for a sense of justice or closure.

7. **Epilogue:** the part that tells the reader what happens to the characters **after** the story is finished. It's seen in longer narratives (like novels and movies) rather than short fiction, but even then it is only used occasionally.

B. Author's Role in Plot

1. Plot grows out of the characters.
2. The author is always in control of what happens; fiction manipulates events; it is created.
3. Central focus of the story has to be intriguing, and the author has to arrange events in such a way as to:
 - i. Eliminate all events that are not significant.
 - ii. Make each succeeding event more and more intriguing until he reaches the climax. The purpose of fiction is to entertain; how well are you entertained?

C. Plot Techniques

1. **Suspense:** Frequently involves dilemma. e.g. Caught in a bad situation with a choice in a boating accident, you can save either your mother or your husband from drowning.
2. **Flashback:** The author waits until the story is moving and then flashes back to reveal biographical data or deep psychological reasons why a character acts as s/he does. It focuses more on why things happen, rather than on what happens.
3. **Telescoping:** It's a matter of economy. The author can't describe every

motion of the character or event during the time the story covers. S/he has to choose the significant and merely suggest the others by saying they happened, without much description. Art attempts verisimilitude, not "reality."

4. **Foreshadowing**: The outcome of a conflict is often hinted at or "foreshadowed" before the climax and resolution. These clues are usually very subtle; you don't realize they are foreshadowing clues until you've finished the story. Early on in the novel *Lord of the Flies*, the boys roll a rock down from the light of the hill into the murky jungle below. The destruction of the foliage is a symbolic hint at what's to come: the boys' descent into savagery and destruction. Open School describes foreshadowing as "a technique that writers use to make the events in their stories more believable. In foreshadowing, the reader is given little hints about an important future event. Something like providing clues in a mystery novel, foreshadowing ensures that when an important event occurs, the reader thinks: "Oh, I should have seen that coming" rather than, "This doesn't fit anywhere in this piece!" Foreshadowing can be a small series of events leading up to a big event, or an event that is similar in a thematic way to something that happens later." Another example of foreshadowing in *Lord of the Flies* occurs just after the plane crash. The author, William Golding, describes the band of choirboys as dressed all in black and moving as if one creature. The black creature is led by Jack, which is a foreshadowing of the evil that will soon overtake him and his followers.

D. Conflict in Plot

Plot usually involves one or more conflicts, which are problems that need to be solved. The "movement" towards a solution is what drives the narrative forward, and is what occupies most of the protagonist's time. The more rewarding plots are often built around mental, emotional and moral conflicts. Plots involving physical conflict, war, exploration, escapes often contain the most excitement and suspense. Here are the major types of conflict:

1. Man's struggle against nature
2. Man against man
3. Man against society
4. Man against himself (i.e. a portrayal of an inner struggle)

The first three types are said to be "external conflicts", while the last is "internal conflict".

Identifying Conflict:

- Who or what is the protagonist?
- Who or what is the antagonist?
- Why is this person or thing the antagonist?
- Why are the antagonist and the protagonist in conflict?

- Which events contribute to the developing conflict?
- Which event or episode is the climax?
- What does the outcome of the conflict reveal to you about the protagonist?
- Did you feel sympathetic toward the protagonist or the antagonist? Explain why.

For more information, check out the Open School's discussion of [conflict](#).

I also recommend Susan Vaughan's article on [conflict](#). It discusses the importance of conflict in narrative fiction, and offers a good distinction between **internal** and **external conflict**.

E. Setting: Aspects of Setting

Setting is defined as the physical **location** and the **time** of a story. In short stories, one or both of these elements are often not defined.

a. Physical World in which Characters Live

1. Geographical location, topography, scenery, even the arrangement of objects in a room can carry special significance. Note detail.
2. Spot words that ask you to hear, see and feel elements that make up and strengthen awareness of physical setting.

b. Characters Revealed by Setting.

1. Physical objects surround characters in different ways and these differences reveal traits and changes in characters.
 - a. Psychologically, spiritually, economically and physically.
 - b. Observe feelings and actions of characters with respect to their surroundings; as setting changes, often so does character.
 - c. Listen for any remarks characters make about their setting.
 - d. Look for clues to characters in objects they have placed in their physical world.

c. Setting Revealed by Characters

1. Characters contribute clues about setting.
2. When time isn't made obvious, the reader can often make

inferences from objects a character has placed in the setting

3. Dress and dialect contain clues as to historical period in which events take place, as well as to regional setting and social levels within a region.

d. Plot Assisted by Setting

1. Some stories or plots can take place only in certain settings. Actions governed by particular customs and mores.
2. Traditions established over many generations exert great influence on what characters do.
3. Physical nature also creates conditions that affect plot: setting can confine action as, for example, on the sea, or on a mountaintop.

e. Atmospheric Setting

1. The mood is reliant on the words and tone of description; a jingle can be light, full of life, and exciting, or, dark, foreboding, and full of evil.
2. The setting of a Victorian drawing room elicits an atmosphere of restraint and decorum.
3. Atmosphere can be overdrawn (as in many Harlequin romances) and become gooey with manufactured emotion.

f. Theme Revealed by Setting

1. Some authors skillfully use atmosphere to introduce and reinforce the theme of the novel; what happens in setting (flood) happens to characters (changed course of action).
2. Setting may reveal how man sees nature, they may show hate, agony, courage, etc. or men's struggle for insignificant things.

For more information, check out the Open School's discussion of [setting](#).

F. Mood or Atmosphere: The mood is the feeling the reader gets while reading the story. The author helps to create the mood by using carefully chosen **descriptive or evocative words**. It can be compared to the use of music in films. Examples of mood are: hostile, optimistic, threatening, ominous, bitter, defiant, etc..

For more information, check out the Open School's discussion of [mood](#).

G. Theme: The theme is a recurring social or psychological issue, like aging, violence, alienation or maturity. The author or poet weaves the theme into the plot, which is used as a vehicle to convey it. The title of the story or poem is often of

significance in recognizing the theme.

What is theme?

- It's the unifying or central concept of a story.
- It's a theory of life which acts as the unifying force in a story, or the universal truth which the story illustrates.
- The simplest way of defining theme is this: it is the description of the basic **challenges of mankind** (e.g. "[the human condition](#)").
- In most stories it's not just a simple **moral**, which is usually what an author thinks *about the theme*.

Identifying a story's theme:

- Start with a clear idea of the character's situation and the plot. Why did the characters act as they did?
- Examine closely the central **conflict**. Overcoming a conflict is often the basis of the recurrent human challenge in the theme.
- Look closely at the events and/or characters that seem relevant to the main line of action. Why are they included?
- Does the author offer an explicit view point about the theme, or does s/he merely describe the many points of view?
- Look for literary devices such as **symbolism** or **irony**. They often reveal key elements of the theme.

For more information, check out the Open School's discussion of [theme](#).

H. Symbolism:

In literature, a symbol is an object, event or a character that's used to represent an abstract idea; it is something which stands for something else. Symbols are clues to what's going on in the story and often stand for key parts of the **theme**. A symbol is related to metaphor and simile insofar as it's a type of figurative (indirect/dual) language. The key thing to remember is that readers aren't told that something is a symbol, unlike a metaphor (*the flower of my love*) or a simile (*my love is like a flower*). A symbol just sits there inside the story... readers are simply expected to understand its symbolic existence.

- White Dove - Peace
- Santa/Mistletoe - Christmas
- Red Roses - Love
- Wedding Ring - Marriage/Eternal Love
- The mockingbird in *To Kill A Mockingbird* - a symbol of innocent people being unjustly persecuted
- Napoleon in *Animal Farm* - Joseph Stalin, dictator of the USSR

I. Point of View:

What is the story's [point of view](#)? Different points of view allow for different ways of understanding the characters' motives and events.

For more information, check out the Open School's discussion of [point of view](#).

J. Characters: Which sorts of [characters](#) inhabit the story? How do these characters add or detract from the story?

For more information, check out the Open School's discussion of [characterization](#).

K. Irony: Does the author employ [irony](#)? Is it used in specific instances, or is it revealed at the end of the narrative? What is the effect on the theme and you, the reader?

L. Other points to consider

1. Does the author write from any particular **doctrine** such as Christianity, socialism, or nationalism?
2. Do **events occur logically and naturally**, on the basis of cause and effect, or does the author contrive the events artificially in order to achieve an effect of purpose?
3. Does the story provide a sense of **totality**? Do all the events contribute to a single effect, impression, illusion or theme? Or is the structure intentionally loose and sprawling?
4. For information about **style** in fiction, check out the Open School's discussion of [style](#). You should also download the [FVDES Summary of Style](#).
5. For information about **tone** in fiction, check out the Open School's discussion of [tone](#).
6. For information about **voice** in fiction, check out the Open School's discussion of [voice](#).

