

What Makes a Good Story?




Can the hero save the city from danger? Will the lost hikers reach home? Good stories capture our attention and make us curious about what will happen next. Although stories are different in many ways, all good stories share certain parts.

Part 1: Parts of a Story

Consider two very different stories. One is about a city detective struggling to solve a case. The other is about space aliens invading Earth. Even these stories have parts in common—the setting, characters, and conflicts—which are described in the chart below.

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:
RL 3 Describe how a story's plot unfolds as well as how the characters respond as the plot moves toward a resolution.
RL 5 Analyze how a particular sentence fits into the structure of a text and contributes to the development of the setting or plot.

BASIC PARTS	EXAMPLES
<p>SETTING Setting is the time and place of the action. The time can be the past, present, or future. It can also be a season or a time of day. The place can be a room, a country, or any place you imagine. Often, the setting affects the story's problem and how it is solved.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a rainy day on the planet Venus • a tropical island in the present day • a city park in the year 2086 • a palace in England in 1547
<p>CHARACTERS Characters are the people, animals, or creatures who take part in the story's action. The most important characters are main characters. Less important ones are minor characters. The characters' qualities, such as courage, affect the story's events and conflict.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a 12-year-old girl • a wizard with mysterious powers • a baseball coach • a family's pet dog
<p>CONFLICT A conflict is the problem or struggle that a character faces in a story. The struggle can be between characters or between a character and the setting or a force of nature, such as a storm. A conflict can also be within a character, as he or she struggles with difficult problems.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A girl is made fun of by her friends. (girl vs. friends) • A family seeks shelter from a storm. (family vs. storm) • A boy must decide between telling the truth and lying to protect his friend's feelings. (telling the truth vs. lying)

MODEL 1: SETTING AND CHARACTERS

In this excerpt, a woman panics when her grandson Dewey disappears. Notice the details that describe the time and place of the action.

from *Trouble River*

Novel by Betsy Byars

She rose and moved to the open doorway where she looked out over the golden prairie.

“Dewey!” she called, her voice breaking with anxiety. “Deweeeeeee.”

When there was no answer, she went back to her rocking chair.

5 “Dewey Martin,” she called from her chair. “Oh, Deweeee.”

After a moment she went to stand in the doorway again. For as far as she could see there was only the prairie, the long waving line of grass on the horizon with not one single cabin or chimney in sight.

10 The sun was dropping behind the horizon, and she knew how quickly darkness would cover the land, how quickly the colorful prairie would become desolate and cold.

Close Read

1. In what way does the setting add to the woman’s anxiety? Find two details that describe her surroundings. One detail has been boxed.
2. What do you learn about the woman from the way she reacts to her grandson’s absence? Support your answer.

MODEL 2: CONFLICT

A boy named Aaron has just left his village to sell his family’s goat. What unexpected conflict will he face on his journey?

from *Zlateh the Goat*

Short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer

The sun was shining when Aaron left the village. Suddenly the weather changed. A large black cloud with a bluish center appeared in the east and spread itself rapidly over the sky. A cold wind blew in with it. The crows flew low, croaking. At first it looked as if it would rain, but instead it began to hail as in summer. It was early in the day, but it became dark as dusk. After a while the hail turned to snow.

10 In his twelve years Aaron had seen all kinds of weather, but he had never experienced a snow like this one. It was so dense it shut out the light of the day. In a short time their path was completely covered. The wind became as cold as ice. The road to town was narrow and winding. Aaron no longer knew where he was.

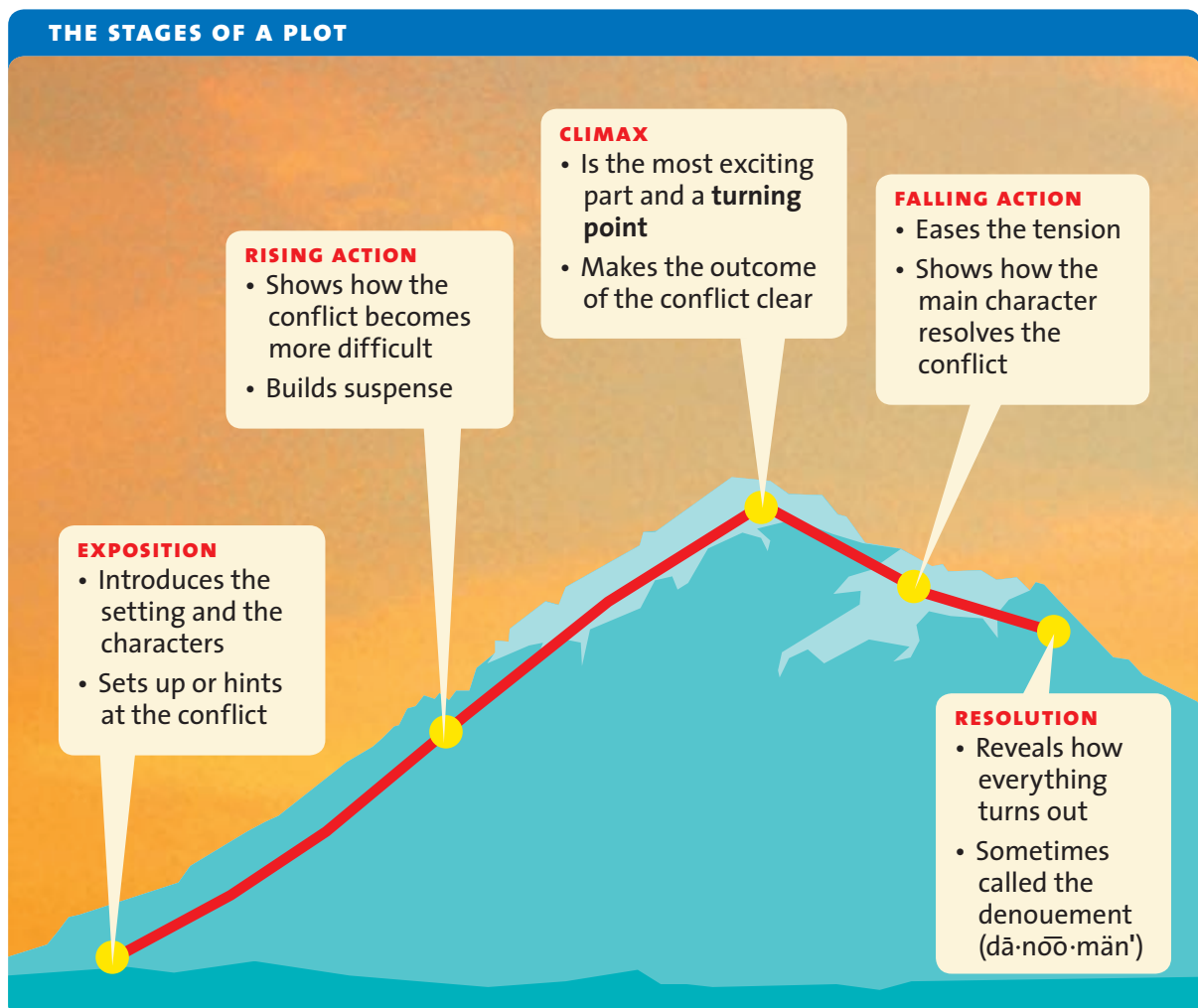
Close Read

1. Find three details that convey the dangers of the weather. One detail has been boxed.
2. In your own words, describe the conflict that Aaron is facing. Whom or what is the conflict with?

Part 2: What Happens in a Story?

The power of a story comes from the action—what happens as the story develops. While the action varies from story to story, most stories follow a pattern called a plot. A **plot** is the series of events in a story. A typical plot begins by introducing a character who has a conflict. Suspense builds as the character tries to resolve, or work out, the conflict. Shortly after the conflict is resolved, the story comes to a close. Some plots will seem like real-life events to you, while others will seem contrived, or completely invented. A contrived plot is more fantastic than it is realistic. It can even be unbelievable.

Most plots have five stages. Learning about these stages can help you keep track of a story's events and answer the question "What happened?" when someone asks you about a story. Thinking about what happened and why will also help you judge if a plot is realistic or contrived.



**MODEL 1: EXPOSITION**

This story is about a young Japanese-American girl. What do you learn about the setting and the conflict in the exposition of the story?

from **THE BRACELET**

Short story by **Yoshiko Uchida**

It was April 21, 1942. The United States and Japan were at war, and every Japanese person on the West Coast was being evacuated by the government to a concentration camp. Mama, my sister Keiko, and I were being sent from our home, and out of Berkeley, and eventually out of California.

The doorbell rang, and I ran to answer it before my sister could. I thought maybe by some miracle, a messenger from the government might be standing there, tall and proper and buttoned into a uniform, come to tell us it was all a terrible mistake; that we wouldn't have to leave after all.

Close Read

1. Where and when does this story take place?
2. Reread the boxed details. Explain the conflict that the girl's family has. How does the setting influence their situation?

**MODEL 2: RISING ACTION**

Billy is overjoyed when his mother buys him a bike for his birthday. What happens when Billy rides his prized possession to school? Find out by reading this excerpt from the rising action of the story.

from **You're Not a WINNER Unless Your Picture's in the Paper**

Short story by **Avi**

The racks were not sufficient for all the bikes, so lots of them were just dumped on the ground. Billy wouldn't do that to his bike. He leaned it carefully against a tree. The tree being in leaf, it shaded the bike from a too-hot sun.

On Wednesday, right after three o'clock dismissal, when Billy came to collect his bike, it was gone.

At first Billy thought he had just forgotten where he had left it, and went searching. But as more and more kids claimed their bikes and took off, it became obvious that his bike wasn't just gone, it had been *stolen*.

Close Read

1. Describe what you learn about Billy's conflict in the boxed lines. What is Billy's initial reaction?
2. In lines 8–9, Billy concludes that his problem is worse than he first realized. How does the conflict become more complicated?

Part 3: Analyze the Text

Jenny has heard stories about a ferocious boar—a wild pig—that roams the woods near her home. Will she be the first person to come face-to-face with the dreaded creature? Use what you’ve learned in this workshop to analyze the elements of plot development in this suspenseful story.



BOAR OUT THERE

Short story by **Cynthia Rylant**

Everyone in Glen Morgan knew there was a wild boar in the woods over by the Miller farm. The boar was out beyond the splintery rail fence and past the old black Dodge that somehow had ended up in the woods and was missing most of its parts.

5 Jenny would hook her chin over the top rail of the fence, twirl a long green blade of grass in her teeth and whisper, “Boar out there.”

And there were times she was sure she heard him. She imagined him running heavily through the trees, ignoring the sharp thorns and briars that raked his back and sprang away trembling.

10 She thought he might have a golden horn on his terrible head. The boar would run deep into the woods, then rise up on his rear hooves, throw his head toward the stars and cry a long, clear, sure note into the air. The note would glide through the night and spear the heart of the moon. The boar had no fear of the moon, Jenny knew, as she lay in bed,
15 listening.

One hot summer day she went to find the boar. No one in Glen Morgan had ever gone past the old black Dodge and beyond, as far as she knew. But the boar was there somewhere, between those awful trees, and his dark green eyes waited for someone.

20 Jenny felt it was she.

Close Read Exposition (lines 1–15)



1. Where and when does this story take place? Find three details in lines 1–16 that help you to visualize the setting. One detail has been boxed.

Close Read Rising Action (lines 16–46)



2. Explain what Jenny decides to do in lines 16–20. What conflict do you think might result from her plan of action?

Moving slowly over damp brown leaves, Jenny could sense her ears tingle and fan out as she listened for thick breathing from the trees. She stopped to pick a teaberry leaf to chew, stood a minute, then went on.

Deep in the woods she kept her eyes to the sky. She needed to be reminded that there was a world above and apart from the trees—a world of space and air, air that didn't linger all about her, didn't press deep into her skin, as forest air did.

Finally, leaning against a tree to rest, she heard him for the first time. She forgot to breathe, standing there listening to the stamping of hooves, and she choked and coughed.

Coughed!

And now the pounding was horrible, too loud and confusing for Jenny. Horrible. She stood stiff with wet eyes and knew she could always pray, but for some reason didn't.

He came through the trees so fast that she had no time to scream or run. And he was there before her.

His large gray-black body shivered as he waited just beyond the shadow of the tree she held for support. His nostrils glistened, and his eyes; but astonishingly, he was silent. He shivered and glistened and was absolutely silent.

Jenny matched his silence, and her body was rigid, but not her eyes. They traveled along his scarred, bristling back to his thick hind legs. Tears spilling and flooding her face, Jenny stared at the boar's ragged ears, caked with blood. Her tears dropped to the leaves, and the only sound between them was his slow breathing.

Then the boar snorted and jerked. But Jenny did not move.

High in the trees a bluejay yelled, and, suddenly, it was over. Jenny stood like a rock as the boar wildly flung his head and in terror bolted past her.

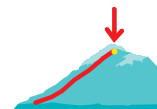
Past her. . . .

And now, since that summer, Jenny still hooks her chin over the old rail fence, and she still whispers, "Boar out there." But when she leans on the fence, looking into the trees, her eyes are full and she leaves wet patches on the splintery wood. She is sorry for the torn ears of the boar and sorry that he has no golden horn.

But mostly she is sorry that he lives in fear of bluejays and little girls, when everyone in Glen Morgan lives in fear of him.

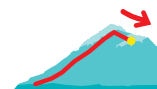
- Reread lines 21–34. What details help to build suspense about what might happen next?
- The conflict becomes clear in line 36. How do Jenny and the boar react to each other when they finally meet?
- Would the story be different if Jenny met the boar in a different setting? Explain how the setting in the woods influences the story.

Close Read Climax (lines 47–50)



- What is surprising about what happens at the climax, or the turning point in the story?

Close Read Falling Action and Resolution, or Denouement (lines 51–57)



- The tension eases after Jenny's encounter with the boar. How has her impression of the boar changed?