

Elements of Literature

Plot by John Leggett TIME AND SEQUENCE

Hooking Your Curiosity

When we talk about stories, plot is the element to start with, for plot is story itself. **Plot** is a series of related events, like links in a chain. Each event hooks our curiosity and pulls us forward to the next event.

Conflict:

The Fuel of Narrative

In most stories, we care about what happens next because we're hooked by a **conflict**, or struggle. In an **external conflict**, the struggle takes place between two characters, between a character and a group, or between a character and something nonhuman—a typhoon or a computer virus, for example. An **internal conflict** takes place within a character's mind or heart: A desire to win someone's friendship might conflict with a fear of rejection.

Conflict is the fuel of narrative. The greater the conflict, the more we care about the outcome.

The Bare Bones of a Plot

Stories, like houses and human beings, need a structure, or framework, to hold them together. Plots are usually built on four major parts, which we might think of as their bare bones:

1 The first part of a plot is called the **basic situation**, or **exposition**. This is the opening of the story, when the characters and their conflict are introduced.

Young William didn't mind his hard work as the king's stableboy because he loved horses. The king, however, was miserable because his kingdom had been invaded by a large fire-breathing dragon who snarled to high heaven.

2 The second part of a plot is the **complication**. Now the main character takes some action to resolve the conflict but meets with more problems or complications: danger, hostility, fear, or even a new threatening situation.

William set out to kill the dragon in order to help the king. While he was riding into the woods, several robbers tried to hijack his horse. Poor William felt himself losing courage.

3 The third part of a story is the **climax**. This is the key scene in the story—that tense or exciting or terrifying moment when our emotional involvement is greatest. Now we learn what the outcome of the conflict is going to be.

When he had just about decided to give up the chase and return home, William found himself staring down the dragon's throat. Closing his eyes, he hurled his sword into the dragon's windpipe. The monster gagged and began to die.

4 The final part of the story is the **resolution**. Sometimes this is called the **denouement** (dē-noŭ-mānt'). The resolution occurs at the end of the story. Now all the struggles are over, and we know what is going to happen to the characters.

When he returned to the palace with the dragon's head, William became a hero, although he had to spend the next two weeks soaking himself to get rid of the smell of a very dead dragon.

It's All in the Timing

Events in real life can go on and on, but stories cannot. That's why the plot of a story is framed by time. A story may cover fifty happy years in a marriage or five nerve-racking moments in a submarine, but every work of fiction is defined by a time span, a period of time that suits the writer's purpose.

Most stories are told in **chronological order**, the order in which events unfold in real time. The writer starts at the beginning and tells about each event in the order in which it happens. Yet writers frequently use other techniques to manipulate time and control our emotions, especially our feelings of suspense. For example, they might slow down time to emphasize a moment of danger, or they might speed up time to skip over events that don't move the story along.

Playing with Time

You have also read stories in which writers interrupt the flow of events to present an episode from the past. Such a scene is called a **flashback**. For example, a story might begin with a description of a woman hiding in an abandoned house. The writer might then use a flashback to show why the woman is hiding. A flashback could also be used to strengthen our understanding of the character by revealing a powerful memory.

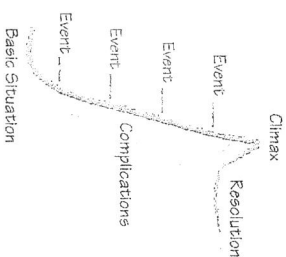
Writers can play with time in another way as well. Instead of going back to the

past, they can jump ahead days or years into the future by using a literary device called a **flash-forward**.

Finally, writers can bring the future into the present by using **foreshadowing**, hints or clues that suggest what is to come in the story. Foreshadowing can make a story more exciting by increasing suspense. For instance, a man is barely aware of wolves howling in the distance, but the reader wonders about them. Days later the man is pursued by those wolves. The reader realizes the howling foreshadowed the man's now-desperate situation. So, whether writers make us look back or think ahead, they hook us into a story by playing with time.

Practice

Choose a children's story or a fairy tale that is familiar to you. First, draw a **plot diagram** like the one shown here, and add labels describing the key parts of the story's plot. Then, use your imagination to write a **flashback** that could occur in one part of the story.



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