

# Five Elements of Fiction: Plot, Setting, Character, Point of View, Theme

I. **Plot** – How the author arranges events to develop the basic idea; it is the sequence of events in a story or play. The plot is a planned, logical series of events having a beginning, middle, and end. The short story usually has one plot so it can be read in one sitting. There are five essential parts of plot:

- 1) **Exposition (introduction)** – Beginning of the story; characters, background, and setting revealed.
- 2) **Rising Action** – Events in the story become complicated; the conflict is revealed. These are events between the introduction and climax.
  - **Conflict** – Essential to plot, opposition ties incidents together and moves the plot. Not merely limited to arguments, conflict can be any form of struggle the main character faces. Within a short story, there may be only one central struggle, or there may be many minor obstacles within a dominant struggle. There are two **types** of conflict:
    - **Internal** – Struggle within one's self.
      - **Character vs. Self** – Struggles with own soul, physical limitations, choices, etc.
    - **External** – Struggle with a force outside one's self.
      - **Character vs. Character** – Struggles against other people.
      - **Character vs. Nature** – Struggles against animals, weather, environment, etc.
      - **Character vs. Society** – Struggles against ideas, practices, or customs of others
- 3) **Climax** – Turning point of the story. Readers wonders what will happen next; will the conflict be resolved or not? Consider the climax as a three-fold phenomenon:
  - Main character receives new information.
  - Main character accepts this information (realizes it but does not necessarily agree with it).
  - Main character acts on this information (makes a choice that will determine whether or not objective is met).
- 4) **Falling action** – Resolution begins; events and complications start to fall into place. These are the events between climax and denouement.
- 5) **Resolution (Conclusion)** – Final outcome of events in the story.

II. **Setting** – Time and location that a story takes place. For some stories, the setting is very important; while for others, it is not. When examining how setting contributes to a story, there are multiple aspects to consider:

- 1) **Place** - Geographical location; where is the action of the story taking place?
- 2) **Time** - Historical period, time of day, year, etc; when is the story taking place?
- 3) **Weather conditions** - Is it rainy, sunny, stormy, etc?
- 4) **Social conditions** - What is the daily life of the character's like? Does the story contain local colour (writing that focuses on the speech, dress, mannerisms, customs, etc. of a particular place)?
- 5) **Mood or atmosphere** - What feeling is created at the beginning of the story? Cheerful or eerie?

III. **Character** – There are *two* meanings for “**character**”: 1) a person in a fictional story; or 2) qualities of a person.

- 1) People in a work of fiction can be a(n):
  - **Protagonist** – Clear center of story; all major events are important to this character.
  - **Antagonist** – Opposition or “enemy” of main character.
- 2) Characteristics of a character can be revealed through:
  - his/her physical appearance
  - what he/she says, thinks, feels, dreams and what he/she does or does not do
  - what others say about him/her and how others react to him/her

### 3) Characters can be...

- **Round** – Fully developed personalities that are affected by the story's events; they can learn, grow, or deteriorate by the end of the story. Characters are most convincing when they resemble real people by being consistent, motivated, and life-like.
- **Flat** - One-dimensional character
- **Dynamic** – Character who does go through change and “grows” during a story
- **Static** – Character does not go through a change.

## IV. Point of View – The angle from which the story is told. There are several variations of POV:

- 1) **First Person** – Story told by the protagonist or a character who interacts closely with the protagonist or other characters; speaker uses the pronouns “I”, “me”, “we”. Readers experiences the story through this person's eyes and only knows what he/she knows and feels.
- 2) **Second Person** – Story told by a narrator who addresses the reader or some other assumed “you”; speaker uses pronouns “you”, “your”, and “yours”. Ex: *You wake up to discover that you have been robbed of all of your worldly possessions.*
- 3) **Third Person** – Story told by a narrator who sees all of the action; speaker uses the pronouns “he”, “she”, “it”, “they”, “his”, “hers”, “its”, and “theirs”. This person may be a character in the story. There are several types of third person POV:
  - **Limited** – Probably the easiest POV for a beginning writer to use, “limited” POV funnels all action through the eyes of a single character; readers only see what the narrator sees.
  - **Omniscient**- God-like, the narrator knows and sees everything, and can move from one character's mind to another. Authors can be omniscient narrators by moving from character to character, event to event, and introducing information at their discretion. There are *two* main types of omniscient POV:
- 4) **Innocent Eye/Naïve Narrator** – Story told through child's eyes; narrator's judgment is different from that of an adult.
- 5) **Stream of Consciousness** – Story told so readers solely experience a character's thoughts and reactions.

## V. Theme – Central message, “moral of the story,” and underlying meaning of a fictional piece; may be the author's thoughts on the topic or view of human nature.

- 1) Story's title usually emphasizes what the author is saying.
- 2) Various figures of speech (symbolism, allusion, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, or irony) may be utilized to highlight the theme.
- 3) Examples of common themes occurring in literature, on television, and in film are:
  - Things are not always as they appear to be.
  - Love is blind.
  - Believe in yourself.
  - People are afraid of change.
  - Don't judge a book by its cover.



# Short Stories: Characteristics

- **Short** - Can usually be read in one sitting.
- **Concise**: Information offered in the story is relevant to the tale being told. This is unlike a novel, where the story can diverge from the main plot
- Usually tries to leave behind a **single impression** or effect. Usually, though not always built around one character, place, idea, or act.
- Because they are concise, writers depend on the reader bringing **personal experiences** and **prior knowledge** to the story.

## Four Major components of the Short Story

- PLOT
- SETTING
- CHARACTERS
- THEME

### #1 PLOT

• The action that takes place in the story. It is a series of connected happenings and their result. In order to have a result, we must have an initial event, or **conflict**.

#### Stages of a Plot

- Introduction of characters
- The situation: Initial conflict
- The generating circumstances, which create a
- Rising action – heightened anticipation for the reader
- Climax - highest point of anticipation - "make or break" for the main character.
- Falling action and Conclusion. These two are also known as a **denouement**.

Short stories usually have properties like the following:

- **Dramatic conflict**. Usually the basis of the story. Source of the problems which may or may not be overcome in the climax.
- **Foreshadowing**. May be used to leave clues in the story to lure readers to try to predict the ending.
- **Repetition**. At the least, it helps drive home a point. It can also be used to create other literary devices.
- **Suspense**. Draws readers to the work.

### #2 SETTING

The background against which the incidents of the story take place. Not merely a place, it includes the place where, the time when, and social conditions under which the story moves along.

This can include **atmosphere**, the tone and feeling of a story, i.e. gloomy, cheery, etc.



In one form or another, setting is essential to the story. Often, the relevance of the story is lost in another setting.

### #3 CHARACTERS

There must be living beings in the story that think or act in order to keep the story going. They must seem like living and feeling individuals in order for us to feel strongly about them

The worst thing that could happen for a writer is that you feel indifferent toward the characters. If we don't care for the characters, we are not inclined to keep reading.

#### FOUR METHODS OF PRESENTING A CHARACTER:

- Actions or thoughts of the character.
- Conversations the character engages in.
- conversations of other characters about a third character.
- Author's own opinion. This might be overt, or may be implied.

#### Points of View: Presentation of a Story

- Author Omniscient (all knowing, all seeing). This is a third person point of view. The omniscient author, writing in third person, sees whatever he wants to see, inside or outside his character, in privacy or public, and interprets as he chooses.
- Author participant (first person). The author may be the main character, or could be a secondary character.
- Author as an observer (3rd, person). Involves objective treatment, as though the story teller had no inner sight into the character's thinking or behaviour.
- Multiple story tellers (3rd. Person).

### #4 Theme

The total meaning of the story. **IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE TIED UP IN A SIMPLE MORAL.** In many cases, stories are packages that allow readers to see the outcomes of certain behaviours. Without a theme, the story lacks meaning or purpose.

Sometimes the theme is stated, sometimes it is only implied. In other stories, the theme may be a direct refutation of a traditional theme.



## What is plot?

1. What happens.
2. How it happens.

## What are the parts of a plot?

1. Exposition - introduces the reader to the setting and characters.
2. Inciting incident - this event creates the central conflict or struggle.
3. The development - part of the story where the struggle takes place.
4. The climax - the high point of interest and suspense in the story.
5. The resolution - point at which the conflict is ended, or resolved.

## What is conflict?

1. Conflict is the struggle between opposing forces.
2. Central Conflict - main character must fight against some force or make an important decision.
  - a. Internal conflict - take place inside a person's mind. Example - a character is torn between risking his life to save someone else.
  - b. External conflict - takes place when a person or group struggles against another person or group or against a non-human force such as a storm or a car that won't start.

## Special Plot techniques

1. Suspense - feeling of excitement or tension the reader experiences as the plot unfolds. Writers create suspense by raising questions in the reader's mind.
2. Foreshadowing - a hint or clue about an event that will occur later in the story.
3. Flashback - a section of the story that is interrupted to tell about an earlier event.
4. Surprise ending - an ending that catches the reader off guard with something unexpected.



# Parts of Plot Worksheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

*Read the plot summary and answer the questions*

Ellen Montgomery lives in Pullman, Washington. She wants an expensive racing bicycle, but does not have enough money to buy it. She works for eight months after school and weekends in a supermarket to earn the money to buy it. When she has just saved enough money to buy the bicycle, the money is stolen from her house. Ellen then works another six months in the bicycle shop. She is finally able to buy the bicycle, and she becomes a state champion bicycle racer.

1. What is the exposition of this plot summary?

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2. Describe the inciting incident.

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3. What is the development?

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4. What is the climax of this plot summary?

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5. What is the resolution?

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# CHARACTERS

World  
Lit 6

## ➤ Protagonist

- Central character
- Person on whom action centers
- Character who pushes the action forward
- Character who attempts to accomplish something
- Usually seen as a good person or hero/heroine
- Usually round and dynamic
- Examples of protagonists:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

## ➤ Antagonist

- Character or force that holds the action back
- Character who wants something in opposition to the protagonist
- Usually seen as a bad person/force or villain
- Examples of antagonists:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

## ➤ Foil

- Secondary or minor character
- Character who is a contrast or opposite to the protagonist
- Character who emphasizes or highlights the traits of the protagonist
- Examples of foils:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

## ➤ Stereotyped or stock character

- Character that is instantly recognizable because of the stereotype
- Examples of stereotyped or stock characters:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Character Traits

able	demanding	hopeless	restless
active	dependable	humorous	rich
adventurous	depressed	ignorant	rough
affectionate	determined	imaginative	rowdy
afraid	discouraged	impatient	rude
alert	dishonest	impolite	sad
ambitious	disrespectful	inconsiderate	safe
angry	doubtful	independent	satisfied
annoyed	dull	industrious	scared
anxious	dutiful	innocent	secretive
apologetic	eager	intelligent	selfish
arrogant	easygoing	jealous	serious
attentive	efficient	kindly	sharp
average	embarrassed	lazy	short
bad	encouraging	leader	shy
blue	energetic	lively	silly
bold	evil	lonely	skillful
bored	excited	loving	sly
bossy	expert	loyal	smart
brainy	fair	lucky	sneaky
brave	faithful	mature	sorry
bright	fearless	mean	spoiled
brilliant	fierce	messy	stingy
busy	foolish	miserable	strange
calm	fortunate	mysterious	strict
careful	foul	naughty	stubborn
careless	fresh	nervous	sweet
cautious	friendly	nice	talented
charming	frustrated	noisy	tall
cheerful	funny	obedient	thankful
childish	gentle	obnoxious	thoughtful
clever	giving	old	thoughtless
clumsy	glamorous	peaceful	tired
coarse	gloomy	picky	tolerant
concerned	good	pleasant	touchy
confident	graceful	polite	trusting
confused	grateful	poor	trustworthy
considerate	greedy	popular	unfriendly
cooperative	grouchy	positive	unhappy
courageous	grumpy	precise	upset
cowardly	guilty	proper	useful
cross	happy	proud	warm
cruel	harsh	quick	weak
curious	hateful	quiet	wicked
dangerous	healthy	rational	wise
daring	helpful	reliable	worried
dark	honest	religious	wrong
decisive	hopeful	responsible	young



# Round or Flat

Characters are described as being round or flat.

➤ **Round** character:

- Well-developed
- Has many traits, both good and bad
- Not easily defined because we know many details about the character
- Realistic and life-like
- Most major characters are round
- "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat." E. M. Forster

○ Examples of round characters:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

➤ **Flat** character:

- Not well-developed
- Does not have many traits
- Easily defined in a single sentence because we know little about the character
- Sometimes stereotyped
- Most minor characters are flat

○ Examples of round characters:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

# Dynamic or **Static**

Characters are described as being dynamic or static.

> Dynamic character:

- Undergoes an important change in personality in the story
- Comes to some sort of realization that permanently changes the character
- A change occurs within the character because of the events of the story
- The protagonist is usually dynamic, but not always
- Examples of dynamic characters:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

> **Static** character:

- Remains the same throughout the story
- Although something may happen to the character, it does not cause the character to change
- Minor characters are usually static
- Examples of static characters:



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_



## Three Elements of Characterization

- **Physical appearance**  
What does the character look like?
- **Actions, speech, and behavior**  
What does the character do? How does the character behave? What does the character say?
- **Interactions with others**  
How other characters in the story react to this character

**Story Mapping**  
Character Development

**Character Map**

The diagram features a central illustration of three cartoon characters. Lines connect this illustration to three rectangular boxes. The left box is labeled 'What does the character look like?'. The bottom box is labeled 'How does the character act?'. The right box is labeled 'How do other characters in the story react to this character?'. The 'read-write-think' logo is in the bottom right corner.

What does the character look like?

How does the character act?

How do other characters in the story react to this character?

read·write·think  
NCTE

Other vocabulary terms useful in developing characters:

**Protagonist-** The main character in a story. The protagonist experiences the conflict in the story. The protagonist does not have to be "good."

**Antagonist-** The cause of the conflict. The antagonist doesn't have to be a person.

**Dialogue-** The words a character uses in conversation and how they are used gives the reader insight into the character.

**Stereotype-** A character that is over simplified. Lacks originality or individuality.

read·write·think

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NCTE  
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Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

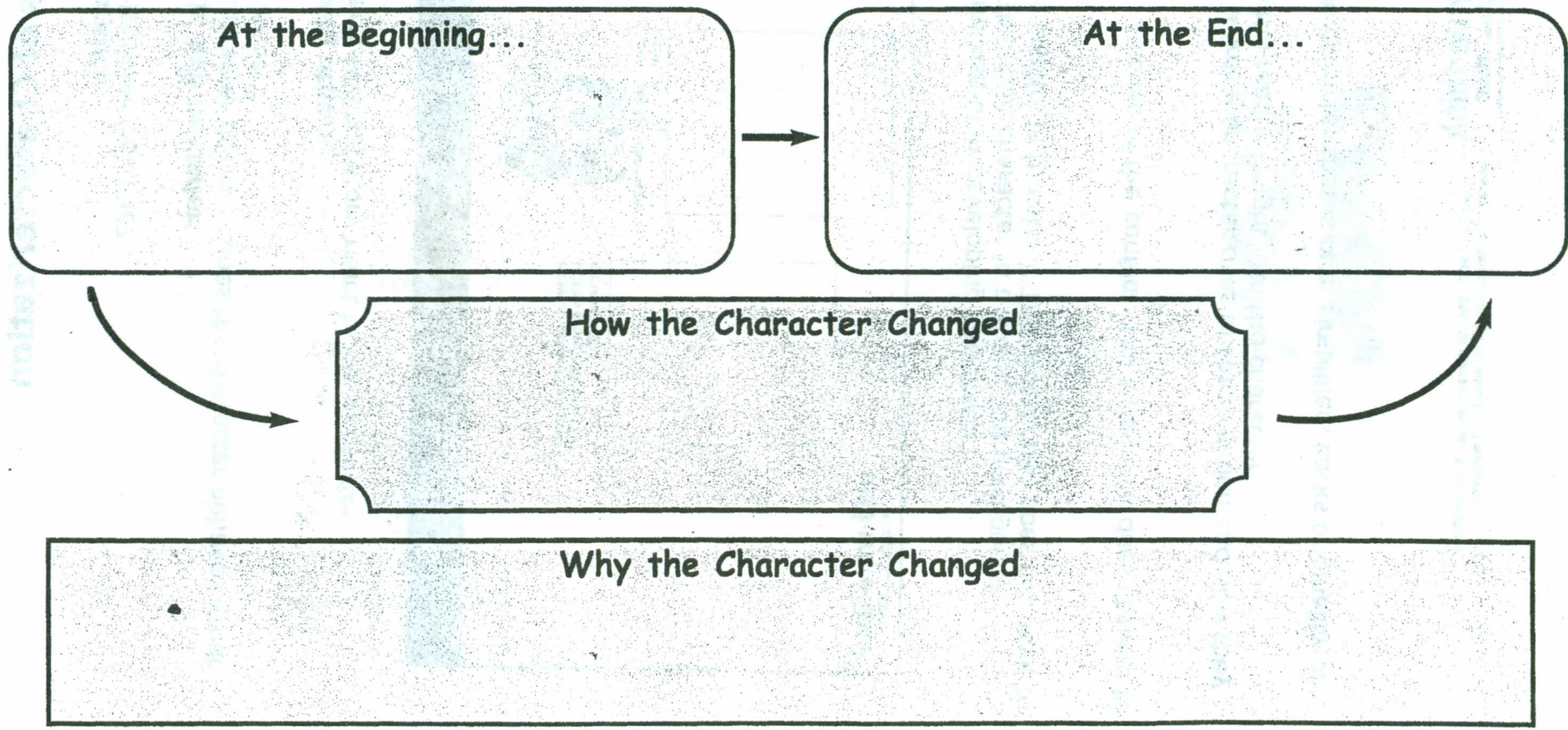
## HOW AND WHY CHARACTERS CHANGE

Title of Text: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Character's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Provide evidence from the story to support your conclusions.





# Defining Characterization

**Characterization** is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character. Characterization is revealed through **direct characterization** and **indirect characterization**.

**Direct Characterization** *tells* the audience what the personality of the character is.

Example: "The patient boy and quiet girl were both well mannered and did not disobey their mother."

Explanation: The author is directly telling the audience the personality of these two children. The boy is "patient" and the girl is "quiet."

**Indirect Characterization** *shows* things that reveal the personality of a character. There are five different methods of indirect characterization:

<b>S</b> peech	What does the character say? How does the character speak?
<b>T</b> houghts	What is revealed through the character's private thoughts and feelings?
<b>E</b> ffect on others toward the character.	What is revealed through the character's effect on other people? How do other characters feel or behave in reaction to the character?
<b>A</b> ctions	What does the character do? How does the character behave?
<b>L</b> ooks	What does the character look like? How does the character dress?

**TIP #1:** Use the mnemonic device of STEAL to remember the five types of indirect characterization.

**TIP #2:** Use indirect characterization to analyze visual media:

**Film:** Look at how the character dresses and moves. Note the facial expressions when the director moves in for a close-up shot.

**Drama:** Pay attention to the way that the characters reveal their thoughts during a soliloquy.

Handwritten notes on a blue sticky note, including the letters 'S', 'T', 'E', 'A', 'L' and a large infinity symbol.



## Examples of Indirect Characterization from *The Cat in the Hat*

Type of Indirect Characterization	Examples	Explanation
<b>S</b> peech	Many of the words spoken by the cat at the beginning of the story have an upbeat connotative meaning. For instance, the cat says to the children, "But we can have / Lots of fun that is funny!" (7).	This reveals that the cat's character is an upbeat character that likes to have fun.
<b>T</b> houghts	So all we could do was to Sit! Sit! Sit! And we did not like it. Not one little bit (3).	These are the thoughts of the narrator as he stares out the window on a rainy day. These thoughts reveal that this character is not happy about his current situation.
<b>E</b> ffect on others	Throughout the first three quarters of the story, three different illustrations portray the fish scowling at the cat (11, 25, and 37) immediately after each of the cat's activities. When the cat returns to clean up his mess at the end of the story the fish is shown with a smile on his face (57).	The scowls on the fish's face support the argument that the cat's behavior at the beginning of the story is not acceptable to the fish. The fish's smile at the end of the story reveals that the cat is engaging in behavior that is now acceptable to the fish.
<b>A</b> ctions	On page 18, the cat engages in "UP-UP-UP with a fish" an activity that involves the cat standing on a ball while balancing seven objects. Later in the story, the cat releases two "things" that fly kites inside the house.	These activities are outrageous, dangerous and should not be conducted in the house. They reveal that the cat's character is not concerned about rules related to safety and appropriateness.
<b>L</b> ooks	Throughout the first three-quarters of the story, the cat is shown with a smile on his face. Towards the end of the story, however, when the cat is told to leave, he is shown leaving the house with slumped shoulders and a sad face.	The smiles reveal that the cat is enjoying himself and is not apologetic for his outrageous behavior. The frown and slumped shoulders at the end of the story show that he is not enjoying himself anymore.



## Examples of Indirect Characterization from *The Cat in the Hat*

### Character: The Fish

Type of Indirect Characterization	Examples	Explanation
<b>S</b> peech		
<b>T</b> houghts		
<b>E</b> ffect on others		
<b>A</b> ctions		
<b>L</b> ooks		

# PLOT

TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

AUTHOR: \_\_\_\_\_

## RISING ACTION

(List examples that create complications or suspense)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

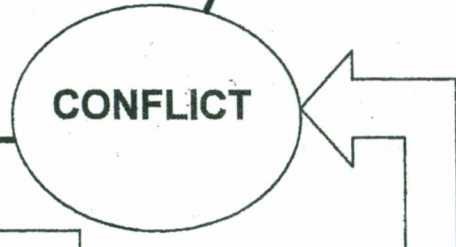
## CLIMAX

\_\_\_\_\_

## FALLING ACTION

\_\_\_\_\_

## CONFLICT



## EXPOSITION

Setting:

Situation/climate:

Characters:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## PROTAGONIST vs. ANTAGONIST

\_\_\_\_\_ vs. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## RESOLUTION

\_\_\_\_\_

## THEME:

\_\_\_\_\_



# Plot Structure Diagram

## TURNING POINT

(The main event between the protagonist and the antagonist or the moment for which the reader has been waiting.)

5

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

### RISING ACTION 6

(The major events that lead to the turning point.)

### FALLING ACTION 7

(The major events that lead to the resolution.)

<b>CHARACTERS*</b>	
Protagonist and Main Character(s)	
Antagonist	
<b>SETTING*</b>	
Time	
Place	

1

2

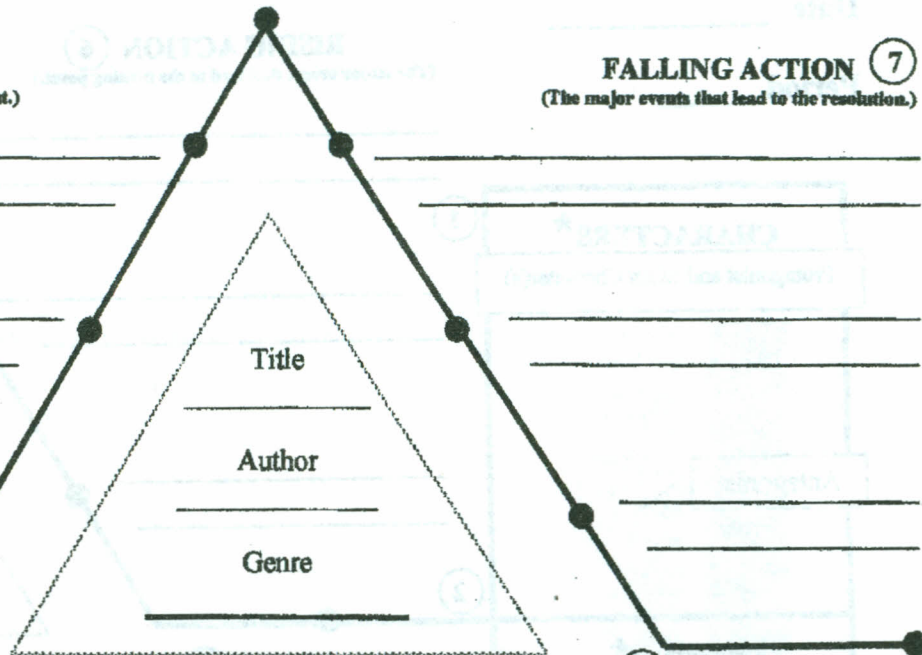
### CONFLICT\* 3

(What's the problem between the protagonist and the antagonist?)

4

### RESOLUTION

(How was the conflict solved?)



### THEME

(The lesson or message the author is trying to help us understand.)

8

\*Characters, Setting, Conflict and Mood (how the story makes you feel) combine to create the EXPOSITION which helps you "get into" the story, novel or movie from the very beginning.

- How To Figure Out the Theme**
1. Actively read the text.
  2. Fill out the Plot Structure Diagram (follow the circled numbers)
  3. Examine the conflict, resolution and turning points.
  4. Ask yourself, "What is the lesson the protagonist learned?"
  5. Reword #4 so that it can apply to anyone who reads the story.