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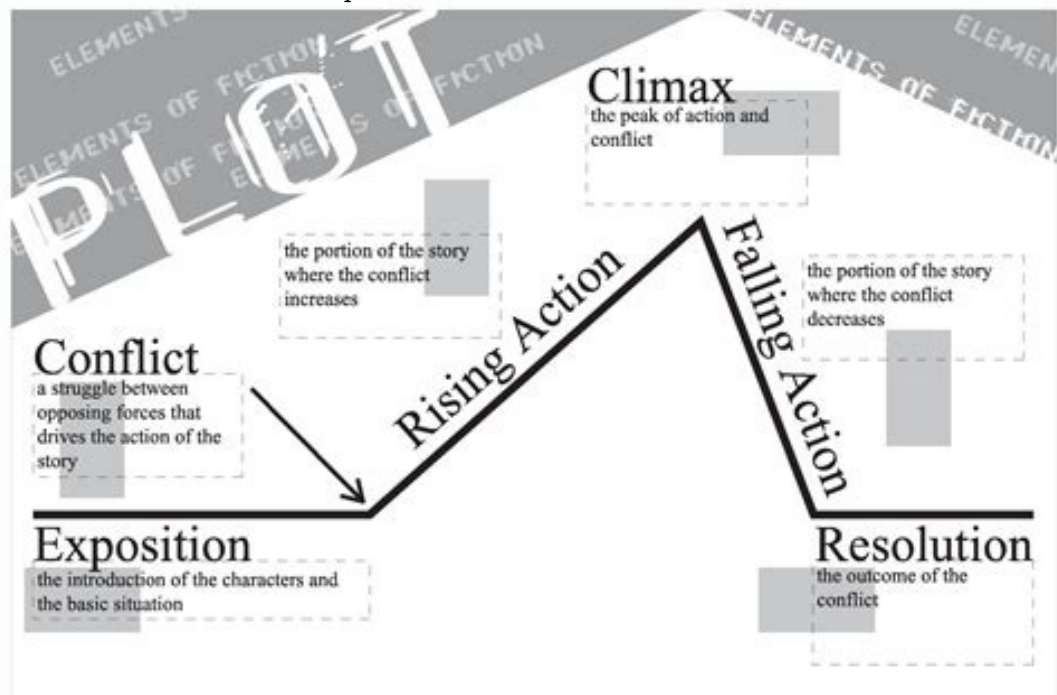
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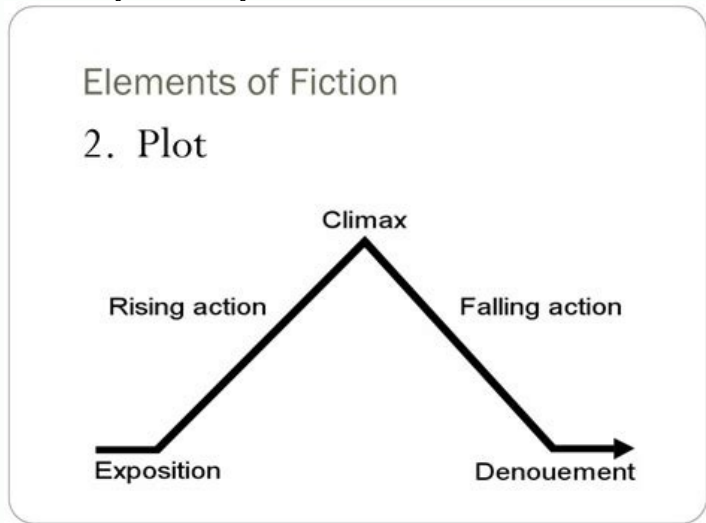
## Short story plot diagram

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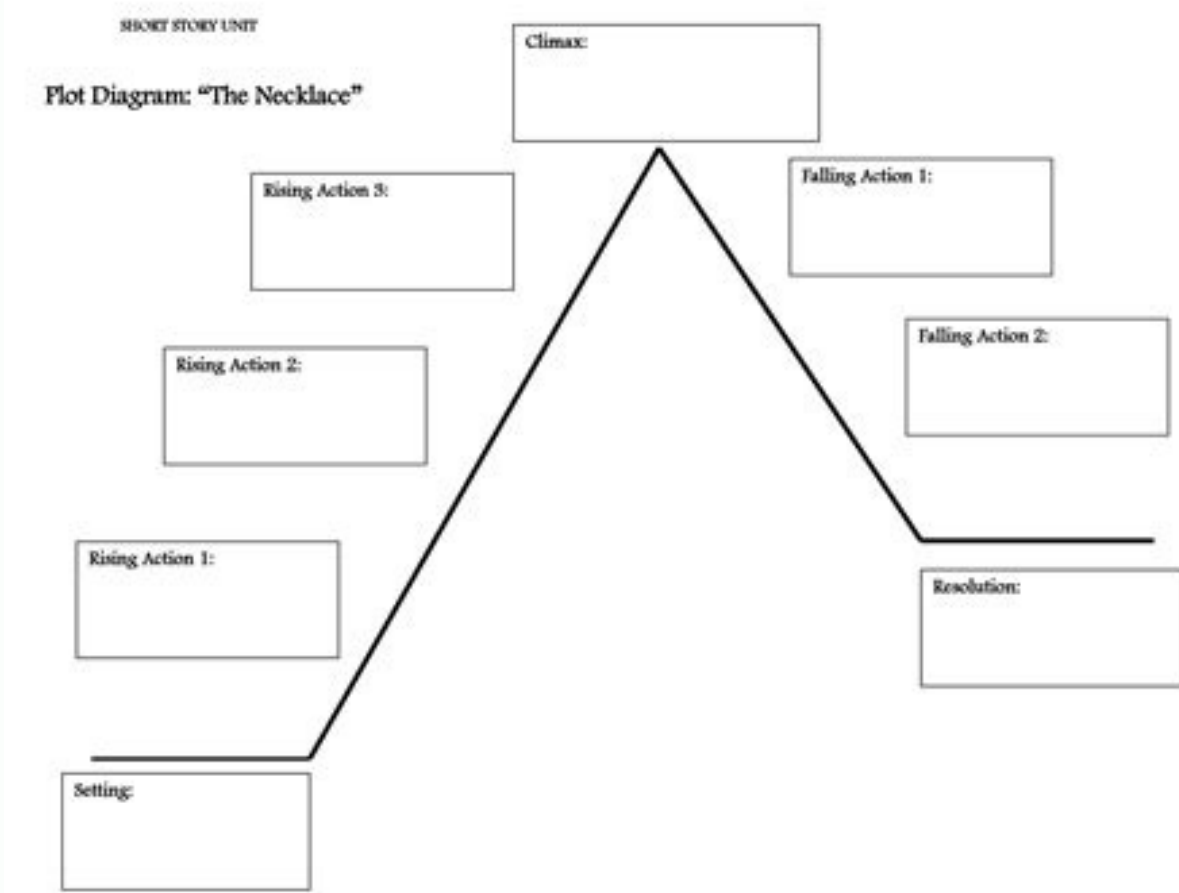
You might want to write a short story, but are unsure about how to develop a short story plot? Short stories rarely require extensive plotting. They're short, after all. But a bit of an outline, just to get the basic idea down, can help you craft a strong plot. Plotting your short stories will give you an end story goal and will help you avoid getting stuck in the middle, or accidentally creating plot holes. You'll have fewer unfinished stories if you learn to do a little planning before you start writing. And in this article, you can learn how to take your short story's primary conflict, and build a plot around it. Definition of Plot and Structure I see the terms "plot" and "structure" thrown around interchangeably quite a bit, so I'd like to correct that before we move on. Plot is a series of events that make up your story. Structure is the overall layout of your story. Plot is (most likely) unique to your story, but there are a handful of basic structures that are universal and used over and over again. (We'll get into the basic three act structure in a later post.) Structure is the bones and plot is what fills it out.



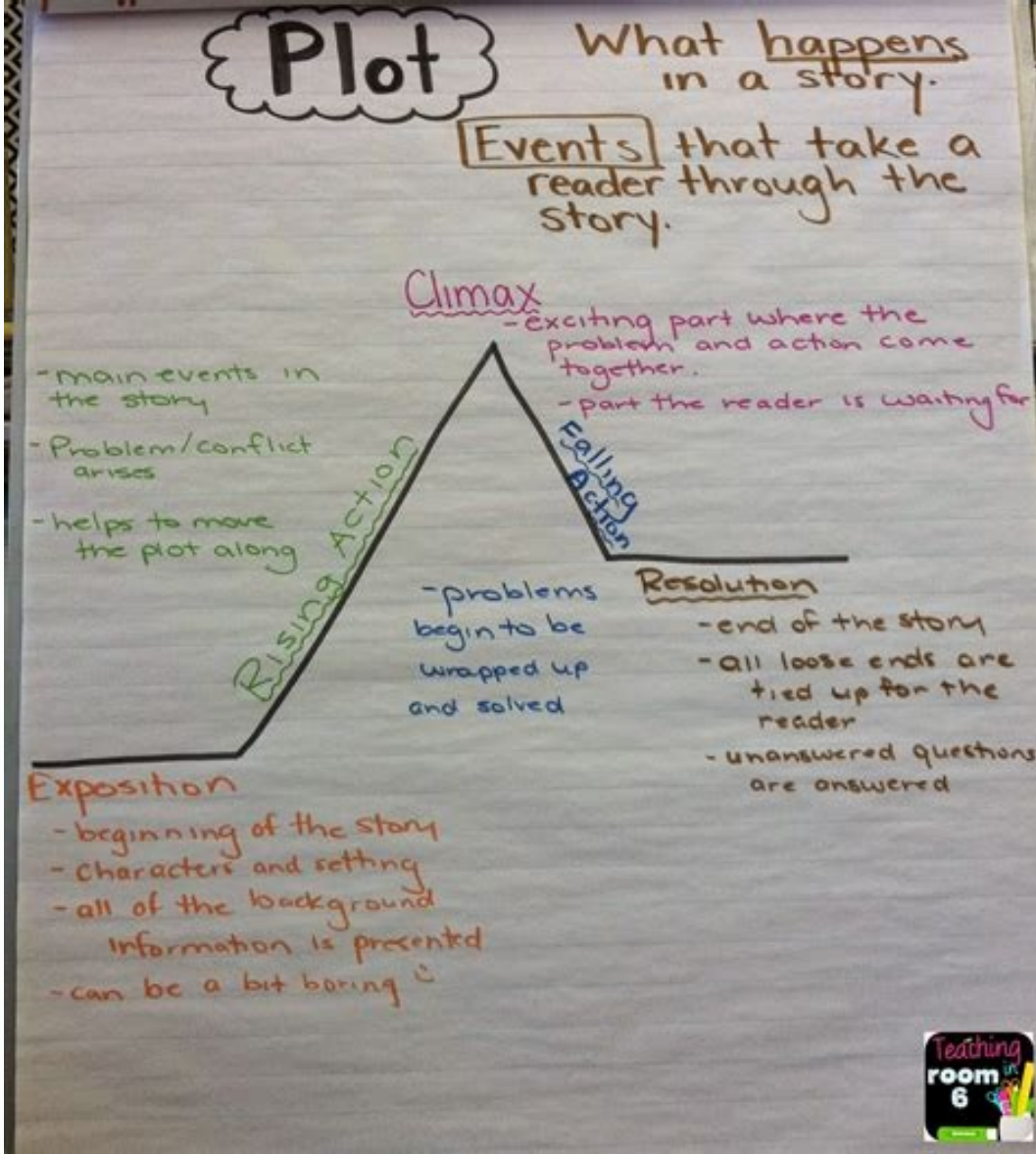
You can learn more about plot and structure in this article, or the different story types here. The Strength of a Short Story Idea When I first started out writing short stories, I had no idea where I was going with any of them. Absolutely none. I see this time and time again with newer writers. I think it's because we're conditioned to think any kind of story is only driven by that infamous and often elusive muse rather than hard work. I felt the same way. And then I started getting more stories under my belt. Some I finished. Some I didn't.



Do you know what the difference was? The stories I finished, I plotted before I wrote. Now I know a lot of writers loathe plotting or outlining stories—of any length, but especially short stories. They have various reasons for this dislike, but the most common one I hear is planning or outlining takes all the “magic” out of writing. “Creative writing is about being creative!” I won’t get into the idea that writing is actually a job here—it is. That’s not what this article is about. Instead, I’m going to propose a different reason for planning a short story with one important question: Is your idea even a story? Planning out your story, even if it’s short, can give you an answer to this question. It will determine whether or not your central character can work towards achieving a goal (and simultaneously the plot moves towards a climax), or if your idea ends there—at the idea. Writer’s tip: If you’re feeling stuck on coming up with an idea that could withstand a story’s length, try looking at the types of plots discussed in this article. Is It a Story or Just a Story Idea? Don’t panic. I don’t plan extensively. But what I’ve found was absolutely no planning whatsoever more often than not leads to wasted time. Nobody has time to waste. If I don’t plot at all, I’ll get maybe a third of the way through the story and get stuck. I’ll have no idea where it was going, and without that goal in mind, I’ll flounder. I might tinker around with the idea a little longer, but most of the time I’ll end up abandoning the story.



A few weeks ago, I had the infamous muse visit me. I grabbed my notebook and started writing. It was great writing. The prose was good, the main character was crazy interesting, ditto for the secondary character, and I'd set up a mystery that made you want to turn the page. The problem was I had no idea what the mystery was.



I had set up and no payoff. This story idea fizzled out at the start of the second act. Now, to be clear, I do indulge my muse every once in a while. It does feel good to be taken over by an idea, even if you don't know where it's going. It's all very "artistic." But the fact is I've sold one story that I finished without plotting it beforehand. One. Out of dozens I've started. That one took me about a week to write and it was torture for me, for my characters, and, I'm sure, for the backspace on my keyboard. Everything about the story reads as forced. It's uninspired. And you know what? That's the one my muse started me on! Inspiration is supposed to be the point of the muse, right? But a muse can only get you started; it can't keep you going.



You muse won't finish a story for you. When your muse starts poking at you and you don't know if your idea is a story, ask yourself a couple of questions: Am I going to remember this idea tomorrow? Yes, it's nice to be taken over by inspiration. Feel free to indulge that every so often. But also be prepared to have an unfinished story on your hands. You do not necessarily have to wait until tomorrow to write the thing (especially when we're talking about shorts), but you do need to know if your enthusiasm is going to wane a few minutes down the road when your muse decides to go take a nap, leaving you with nothing but frustration. (That story I mentioned a moment ago? I haven't completely forgotten about it, but it does not sit at the top of my mind.) Do I have a "What If?" question and an answer to that question?

If you're thinking about beautiful sentences where nothing is happening, that's probably not a story. If you can't think of an end goal for your character, that's probably not a story. See the next section for more on "What If?" and the answer. (The story I didn't finish did not have a goal in mind.) Do you have a character? This one seems like a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised how often I used to start "stories" and just ramble on with purple prose. No people, no action, no story. If the answer to all these questions is "yes," then you most likely have a finishable story. If it's "no" tell your muse to go back to its hole until it can come up with something better. If you must, explore the idea a little further.

Do you have a conflict? A little something, yes. Do not write your "What If?" How Ask That Question Can Plot a Short Story In the last post, I told you my favorite way to think of a short story idea is the "What If?" question. This question can help you think about various ways to put your central character into a conflict, like: What if X happened? Or: Your own mind giving itself creative writing prompts. Let's expand on that method a bit. Notice it's a question. And questions often have answers, do they not? Knowing the answer to your "What If?" question is the most basic outline of a story. Let's start with a basic question. Q: What if someone knocked on my door? A: I'd probably ignore it.

That's it. That's the story.

It's kind of crappy, right? Notice that answer is my immediate reaction to the knock.

It's not something that happens down the road.

That's part of what makes this a NO-CA story. The other issue here is there is no conflict. I don't answer the door, the person goes away, and I'm left to my own devices. There are no consequences for my decisions, so nothing happens—and nobody reading about this incident cares. Without conflict, there are no stakes in a story. No conflict equals no story. What makes a Good Conflict? Remember conflict can come in many forms and doesn't have to be a shoot 'em up kind of situation. Internal conflict can also make a short story. But there MUST be conflict.

No, on multiple levels, this question and answer session is a loser. Now, let's say I don't answer the door. (I'm a millennial. I'd rather not talk to people if I can help it, so this really is the most likely thing to happen.) The person assumes I'm not home. But wait! They're a burglar. They now try to break into my house. The "What If?" question has now changed to "What if someone tried to break into my house while I was home?" See how the central character has to do something now?

Even if they don't, there will be consequences. Because the story idea establishes stakes, I know I've got something. How do I know? There are myriad possibilities here. I could call the cops.

I could run out and confront them myself. I could freeze and run upstairs and hide. I could sic my dog on them. I could wait for them to get inside and invite them to join me in having a cup of tea. Whatever I choose to do, there will be a cause and effect trajectory of events. Which means more stakes, and more opportunities that force my protagonist to face their conflict. They have to make decisions, which will lead to a whole slew of other "What If?" questions: What if they get in before the cops get here? What if they break a window? What if my dog was outside and they hurt him? What if a neighbor sees them and comes running over? What if they "break in" but it's really just my sister needing to borrow some tools from my room? These are all more interesting scenarios than just ignoring the door and the person getting away. But we're still looking for the answer to the initial "What If?" question. The answer solves the question and puts it to bed.

It doesn't lead to other questions. Don't Forget to Answer Your What If Questions A short story may have one to three scenes normally, so your answer needs to come in as a short span of time. It can't come years down the road. Any span of time longer than a few hours, maybe a day or two, is probably too long. Q: What if someone tried to break into my house while I was home? A: I would call the cops, but also grab my bat and be ready to use it. But wait. That still doesn't answer the question, not in a final way.

(Here's still an open ending there, still questions.  
Did I use the bat? What happened if I did?) Let's try again. A: I would decide not to use my bat and would talk to them until the police got there. That's better. With this scenario, I can think of a couple of things that would happen after the police got there, but at that point the situation is over. I've done it. I've defeated the burglar. Anything afterwards is a conclusion to the story. The best part is, I've actually done it in a way that means change for me as a central character. I didn't want to talk to anyone to begin with, which is what led to the whole situation. But I have to overcome that aversion by talking to someone in order to solve the problem. Short Story Structure We've got two important elements of the story narrowed down now: the "What If?" question and its ultimate answer. If you've been following this blog for a while, you might have come across the many posts we have about plot structure. In a story you need six things: Exposition (Background and setup.) Inciting Incident (A major event happens to your character.) Rising Action (or progressive complications, a sequence of events where things get worse.) Crisis (Ah, what is your character going to do?) Climax (Showdown based on what your character decided to do.) Denouement (Finish it up.) Need a refresher on these plot elements? Dive further into story structure here. A short story is often only one to three paragraphs long, so the story must stretch over the six framework. (The scenario you're writing is a one-scene story, so I'm taking liberties with the framework here). These six elements are your story structure. So what do we have here after all this thinking about questions and answers? The "What If?" question is your Inciting Incident. The ultimate answer is your Climax. Boom. Two elements down. And these two elements happen to be the bulk of what your readers will remember from your story. We've planned a story, believe it or not. And it didn't even hurt that much. But wait! There's more. (Sorry, couldn't help myself.) In the process of coming up with these two elements, we've inadvertently come up with a couple of others. Choosing not to use the bat and talking to the burglar instead? That's the Crisis. All those streams of "What if?" questions? Those are progressive complications. Whoops. We've outlined basically the whole thing, haven't we? I sort of tricked you there. Sorry, not sorry. Plotting Doesn't Hurt--Too Much Plotting a short story doesn't have to be a meticulous thing that requires hours of work and a running spreadsheet. It also doesn't have to take the magic out of writing. Your plan for your short story can be a simple, loose outline. (By the way, outlines can change if you think of something better! They're not set in stone.) Really, you just need two elements to get to writing a short story: A "What If?" question (identifies the Inciting Incident) The answer (shows the Climax) And then you're ready to write! In future articles, we'll dive more into writing structure and the essentials and plot elements of a short story. For now, use this "shortcut" to plan out a few short stories of your own! Have fun with it! Do you like planning or are you more of a pantser? Let me know in the comments. For today's practice, use this method of taking a short story idea and turning it into a short story plot. Choose one of the "What If?" questions below and come up with the ultimate answers for at least two of them. Remember, if it's not an ultimate answer or nothing really happens between the What If and the answer, you don't have a story.

What if an alien landed in your backyard? What if you got a phone call informing you that you've inherited a horse farm? What if you were forced to live with a talking robot? What if you won a trip to space? What if you found a dead body at your workplace? What if your child's imaginary friend was real? Work on coming up with answers to at least two of these for fifteen minutes. When your time is up, share your questions and answers in the comments section (bonus points if you have some progressive complications in there!).

After you post, please be sure to give feedback to your fellow writers. Happy writing! Simply stated, it is a way of tracking the important events in a story. Formally, it is a linear graphic representation of the narrative arc of a story that demonstrates the important elements occurring from beginning to end. To put it simply, this visual triangle (as shown in the above image) is an easy way for students to remember the way a story's events unfold. When diagramming the plot line, or the story arc, the literary concept is broken down into three segments: beginning, middle, and end that include six main parts or "The Six Parts of a Story": Exposition, Conflict, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution. Plot Structure Diagrams are essential tools for students studying literature, but they are also referred to as story charts, story arcs, story plots, plot graphs or charts, story arcs, plot graphs, plot diagrams, plot maps, plot lines, plot structures, plot frameworks, plot outlines, plot summaries, plot guides, plot organizers, plot planners, plot templates, plot worksheets, plot activities, plot games, plot projects, plot presentations, plot posters, plot displays, plot boards, plot cards, plot flipcharts, plot handouts, plot materials, plot resources, plot ideas, plot inspiration, plot motivation, plot encouragement, plot support, plot assistance, plot help, plot advice, plot tips, plot tricks, plot shortcuts, plot hacks, plot cheats, plot secrets, plot insider information, plot intel, plot intelligence, plot knowledge, plot wisdom, plot expertise, plot mastery, plot proficiency, plot skill, plot talent, plot genius, plot brilliance, plot creativity, plot imagination, plot 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generally includes introducing the reader to the main and supporting characters as well as where the story takes place. The exposition also gives the reader the story idea. Conflict The plot diagram conflict is the primary problem that drives the story. The conflict may also be called the inciting incident and it is the principal goal for the protagonist or main character to achieve. In a common story structure, the conflict is usually revealed as a problem the main character must solve or an obstacle they need to overcome in order to reach their goal. Both the Exposition and the Conflict are considered part of the Beginning of the story. Rising Action The rising action of the story consists of all of the events that lead to the eventual climax of the story. The rising action includes the events in which the character attempts to solve the primary conflict of the story. The events broaden the character's development and are notable in the way they create suspense, increased emotion and tension in the story. The rising action is the bulk of the middle of the story. Climax The rising action culminates in the climax or turning point in the story. The climax is often the most exciting point of the story or a series of exciting events. The climax in the chart is at the peak of the mountain. This is the moment or moments where there is a marked turning point for the story or the goals of the main character. This may include a major revelation, the overcoming of an obstacle or the character's main problem is resolved. The climax concludes the middle of the story. Falling Action The falling action is the beginning of the end. It includes all of the events and everything that happens as a result of the climax, including wrapping-up of main points, questions being answered, and character development. The falling action are all of the events after the turning point that lead the reader to the end or resolution of the story. These events are usually more relaxed and notably decreasing in tension as the story makes its way towards its conclusion.

Resolution The resolution is not always happy, but it does complete the story. It can leave a reader with questions, answers, frustration, or satisfaction. The resolution or ending of the story may answer important questions and tie up loose ends. However, the resolution can also end in a 'cliff-hanger' wherein some problems remain unsolved perhaps for the reader to ponder or to queue up a sequel. Why Teach Plot Diagrams? Teaching students about story structure encourages critical thinking and greater comprehension in reading. Understanding the narrative helps students engage in deep reading and utilize skillful analysis as they read. It encourages students to predict what will happen next and make connections between the story they are reading and other books they have read. In addition, narrative arcs provide a useful framework for students to apply to their own creative writing. When students engage in creative writing a common challenge is in organizing their ideas and honing in on the important elements that they need to convey. Making storyboards that illustrate a plot diagram chart can bring students' understanding to life as they identify the key ideas. Storyboarding is an engaging and fun way for students to interact with the texts they read in class. The details featured in a student's storyboard allow their teacher to immediately assess whether the student is comprehending the main events of the story, and the scope of the objectives. "Four Innovative Ways to Teach Parts of a Story" is another helpful article on teaching narrative arcs in elementary school using the popular teaching tools: "Somebody Wanted But So Then" and the "STORY" acronym. By utilizing storyboards, teachers can easily assess students' understanding of important story components. Combined illustrations and text can enliven difficult concepts like "rising action" and "climax". These story arc templates help students to flesh out the most important parts of a story in a clear, visually appealing way. Make a Plot Diagram with Storyboard That! Students having difficulty making a story arc? Storyboard That Creator to the rescue! Teachers can quickly and easily use the Storyboard Creator in a variety of ways to introduce story plotting to their students. Students can create short story arc diagram examples using a simple "BME" or "Beginning, Middle End" in a three-cell storyboard. They can also track longer novels or more complicated stories in a "Six Parts of a Story" six-cell storyboard. In addition to traditional storyboards, students can use our worksheet layout to create digital worksheets! BME: Beginning, Middle and End Summaries Students can use our classic comic strip layout to retell the elements of plot using a three-cell storyboard. This is best for younger grades, short stories, or for those looking for a quicker assessment. Check out the example stories below! These illustrate how a Beginning, Middle, End, sometimes known as a three act structure, is included in the novel studies for the popular books Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, Pattan's Pumpkin and Charlotte's Web. Note that for Charlotte's Web students can create a BME summary in a chart layout that has two cells for each part giving them more choice in what scenes and important events to include. Below is a blank BME template and a completed example of a BME summary for the exciting tale Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky by Kwame Mbalia. Teachers can also take Storyboard That offline with these pre-made Beginning, Middle, End worksheets. Like all of our pre-designed worksheet templates, these can be easily customized by the teacher or the student to include images and ample space for writing. For longer books and more complicated plots, a six-cell storyboard is necessary for the story diagram. The storyboard template can include titles above each cell for: exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Below is an example from the classic high school novel, To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. As you can see, there is ample room for descriptions as well as compelling images that illustrate these primary story elements. Plot Diagrams for any Book How to get started? Copy the storyboard below to easily give students a blank template to map the narrative arc of a story for any book! Blank Template Or, copy our pre-made lesson plan in our General Novel Study Guide and adapt it to meet the needs of your students! The finished example using the tale Goldilocks is below. Since most students know the story of Goldilocks (or can easily re-read it), it is an effective plot chart example to use for many students! More Examples of Related Activities A plot diagram in literature can be completed with any novel and across grade levels from elementary through high school. Below are some of our most loved pre-made activities that you can quickly and easily copy into your teacher account: Because of Mr. Terupt by Rob Buyea, The Stars Beneath our Feet by David Barclay Moore, and The Book Thief by Markus Zusak. For more inspiration, see all of our novel studies in our vast Literature Library! Working on plays with your students? We also have lots of information about Five Act Structure and three act structure to help you and your students understand more about the plot format of the dramatic arc! How to Differentiate Lessons with Modified Templates Within all classrooms there are varying degrees of abilities, challenges and needs. Some students may be able to complete a narrative arc template with little assistance while others need a more personalized approach. Students who struggle with reading comprehension may have difficulty picking out the different parts of a story. In our Storyboard That assignments, teachers have the ability to add as many templates as they wish! Teachers can add templates that include leading information such as prompts, sentence starters and even finished cells to help students that need more scaffolding with the assignment. The best part about providing templates is that teachers can control just what information is provided and decide how much to guide students. Providing visuals prior to asking the students to complete the assignment gives them "clues" to what they are looking for when completing the diagram. The visuals act as context clues for students to focus their energy on the appropriate information, as seen in the Holes examples below. In the first template on the left, the teacher used our finished example but removed the text in the description boxes. In this way, the student may use the illustrations as a guide but the challenge is to complete the writing in the descriptions for each plot element. In the second story template on the right, the teacher included the text in the description boxes but left the cells blank for the student to create the illustrations. In the third example on the left, the teacher included one finished cell to help get students started. They can see what an illustration and description can look like and apply that knowledge to completing the rest of the diagram. Finally in the last example, both text and images are included for those students that need maximum support. Teachers can have students use this as a starting point and add speech bubbles, quotes or other text evidence to enhance each plot element. Digital or Printable Worksheets Teachers and students can use our worksheet layout along with the pre-made graphic organizer found in the worksheets category in the Creator to create a template from scratch. Even better, teachers may choose from our pre-made narrative arc worksheets! These worksheets can be customized and printed out for students to fill out by hand, or they can be completed in the Storyboard Creator like a digital worksheet. You can even create multiple versions for those students who might need a little extra help with their plot map, and keep them in your teacher dashboard for future use! Check out our Digital Worksheet Plot Diagram Assignment for the popular book Wonder by R.J. Palacio. A GIF of the finished example is below! Do your students love Wonder? Check out our more in-depth lessons on this modern classic. These lessons are all standards-aligned and ready to assign to students in just a few clicks! Analyzing a literary work with a plot structure diagram fulfills Common Core ELA standards for many age groups. Below are only two examples of ELA standards for different levels. Please see your Common Core State Standards for grade-appropriate strands. ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3: Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution Example Rubrics for Story Diagram Lesson Plans Rubrics are an essential tool to use with assessments for both teachers and students. For students, rubrics help outline what is expected in a positive, clear and concise way. Students do not have to guess how to meet the expectations of an assignment because it is clearly iterated and can be referenced as they work. For teachers, rubrics allow them to point to specific criteria when grading and providing feedback. The challenge for most teachers is that rubrics are extremely time consuming to make. Fear not! The educators at Storyboard That have created them for you! Below are some example rubrics that you can use with any plot point lesson plan in elementary, middle and high school. They are all created with Rubric, our easy online rubric maker! These rubrics can be attached to any assignment by simply copying the url! You can also customize and edit these rubrics to meet your specific needs by going to Quick Rubric. Proficient 33 Points Emerging 25 Points Beginning 17 Points Each cell includes a creative heading. Cells include images that help to tell the story and do not hinder understanding. A cell is missing a heading, or headings are completely unrelated to the diagrammed work. Cells have no headings. There are three cells. Each one represents a different part of the story. The cells are in order from beginning to end. Cells are out of order. One or more of the cells is missing Spelling and grammar is mostly accurate. Mistakes do not hinder understanding. Spelling is very inaccurate and hinders full understanding. Cells cannot be understood. Proficient 33 Points Emerging 25 Points Beginning 17 Points Creativity and imagery are used effectively (helps to tell the story). At least three Textables are included in plot diagram. Creative elements (clipart) are somewhat distracting. At least two Textables throughout their plot diagram. Creativity is minimally apparent, and the overall design shows a lack of effort. Clipart may be confusing and distract from the story. Student used one or fewer Textables. Spelling within the Textables is mostly correct (fewer than eight errors). Grammar does not hinder understanding. Spelling within textables is somewhat correct (fewer than 10 errors). Grammar may hinder some understanding or make reading difficult. Spelling is mostly incorrect (10 or more errors). Grammar severely hinders understanding. There are three complete slides: one for beginning, one for the middle, and one for the end. Slides explain the work of prose and are easy to follow. There are three cells, but one or two do not depict the correct element within the work of prose (e.g. the beginning is misplaced). Story is somewhat difficult to follow. One or more cells is missing. Only one part of the plot is represented (e.g. only the beginning). Story is hard to follow. Create a plot diagram for the story using Exposition, Conflict, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution. Proficient 25 Points Emerging 21 Points Beginning 17 Points Try Again 13 Points Cells have many descriptive elements, and provide the reader with a vivid representation. Cells have many descriptive elements, but flow of cells may have been hard to understand. Cells have few descriptive elements, or have visuals that make the work confusing. Cells have few or no descriptive elements. Textables have three or fewer spelling/grammar errors. Textables have four or fewer spelling/grammar errors. Textables have five or fewer spelling/grammar errors. Textables have six or more spelling/grammar errors. Work is well written and carefully thought out. Student has done both peer and teacher editing. Work is well written and carefully thought out. Student has either teacher or peer editing, but not both. Student has done neither peer nor teacher editing. Work shows no evidence of any effort. All parts of the plot are included in the diagram. All parts of the plot are included in the diagram, but one or more is confusing. Parts of the plot are missing from the diagram, and/or some aspects of the diagram make the plot difficult to follow. Almost all of the parts of the plot are missing from the diagram, and/or some aspects of the diagram make the plot very difficult to follow. Begin by introducing the five key components of a plot diagram: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Provide examples of each of these parts to help students understand their meanings. 2 Use Graphic Organizers Use graphic organizers such as a story map or plot diagram to visually represent the different parts of a story. These organizers can help students see how the different parts of the story fit together. 3 Read Stories with Clear Plot Structures Choose books or stories that have clear plot structures. This will help students see how the different parts of the plot diagram work together to create a cohesive story. 4 Provide Opportunities for Practice Provide students with opportunities to practice creating their own plot diagrams. This could be done through independent work, small group work, or whole-class activities. 5 Connect to Real-Life Experiences Help students see how the plot diagram can be applied to their own lives. For example, they could create a plot diagram for a personal experience or a current event. Frequently Asked Questions about Plot Diagrams What are the six parts of a plot diagram? The plot, or narrative arc of a story, is composed of 6 main parts that make up the beginning, middle and end of the story. The six parts are: exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. These can be mapped out in a storyboard or shown as a plot triangle or story mountain. Why is it helpful to make plot diagrams? Plot diagrams can increase students' reading comprehension as well as aid students in their creative writing. They help students learn to identify the most important parts in the plot as well as delve into higher level literary thinking about themes and devices that authors use to tell a story. How can I make a plot diagram? Storyboard That makes it so easy to create your own plot diagram! Students can use a storyboard template that has titles and descriptions for each of the 6 parts of the story. We also have many plot diagram worksheet templates to choose from that can be used online as a digital worksheet or printed out and used offline as well! In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation.