

Story Elements

Plot

Plot is the *what*, *how*, and *why* of a story. What happened? How did it happen? Why did it happen? Plot is the key event of a story and the logic between that key event and the supporting events (Novakovich). Take the first few pages of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, for example:

One evening, after thinking it over for some time, Harold decided to go for a walk in the moonlight.

There wasn't any moon, and Harold needed a moon for a walk in the moonlight.

And he needed something to walk on.

He made a long straight path so he wouldn't get lost.

And he set off on his walk, taking his big purple crayon with him. (Johnson, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*)

Characterization

Character is not the part of a person that conforms, but rather, character is the part of a person that sticks out. The part of the character that does not conform builds a conflict, and the conflict makes the story (Novakovich).

An author creates a fascinating, memorable character by describing the character's appearance, recording the conversations of the character, revealing the character's thoughts, revealing the perceptions of other characters, and showing the character in action (Norton). Here follows an example of characterization from Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*:

Pippi was indeed a remarkable child. The most remarkable thing about her was that she was so strong. She could lift a whole horse if she wanted to! And she wanted to. She had a horse of her own that she had bought with one of her many gold pieces the day she came home to Villa Villekulla. She had always longed for a horse, and now here he was, living on the porch. When Pippi wanted to drink her afternoon coffee there, she simply lifted him down into the garden. (Lindgren, "Pippi Moves into Villa Villekulla," *Pippi Longstocking*)

Setting

When and where does the story take place? Setting means a certain place at a certain time, a stage. Many writers avoid laying out the setting because they fear boring their readers, but the lack of a vivid setting may in turn cause boredom. Without a strong sense of place, it's hard to achieve suspense and excitement because suspense and excitement depend on the reader's sensation of being right there, where the action takes place (Norton). J.K. Rowling's description of Diagon Alley is a marvelous example of setting:

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everyone at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, "Dragon liver, seventeen Sickles an ounce, they're mad..."

A low, soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium--Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys of about Harry's age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it. "Look," Harry heard one of them say, "the new Nimbus Two Thousand -- fastest ever --" There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon... (Rowling, "Diagon Alley," *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*)

Point of View

Point of view (POV) is the vantage point(s) from which the story is observed/told. Where does the story come from? Who is telling it? To answer these questions, writers use POV (Novakovich).

1. First-person POV:

The most natural POV is the first-person singular, since all stories and trials originate with someone, an "I," witnessing what happens (Novakovich). Take for example the following passage from Roald Dahl's *The Witches*:

The next evening, after my grandmother had given me my bath, she took me once again into the living-room for another story.

"Tonight," the old woman said, "I am going to tell you how to recognise a witch when you see one."

"Can you always be sure?" I asked.

"No," she said, "you can't. And that's the trouble. But you can make a pretty good guess."

She was dropping cigar ash all over her lap, and I hoped she wasn't going to catch on fire before she'd told me how to recognise a witch.

"In the first place," she said, "a real witch is certain always to be wearing gloves when you meet her."

"Surely not always," I said. "What about in the summer when it's hot?"

"Even in the summer," my grandmother said. "She has to. Do you want to know why?"

"Why?" I said.

"Because she doesn't have finger-nails. Instead of finger-nails, she has thin curvy claws, like a cat, and she wears the gloves to hide them." (Dahl, "How to Recognise a Witch," *The Witches*)

2. Third-person POV:

In the third-person POV, the writer uses "he," "she," or "they" rather than the first-person "I." For example, Ludwig Bemelmans' *Madeline*:

In an old house in Paris that was covered in vines lived twelve little girls in two straight lines. In two straight lines they broke their bread and brushed their teeth and went to bed. They smiled at the good and frowned at the bad and sometimes they were very sad.

3. Second-person POV:

In second person POV, a rather unconventional POV in which to write, the author makes believe that she/he/or it is talking to someone, describing what the person addressed is doing. The "you" is not the reader (Novakovich).

In Drew Daywalt's *The Day the Crayons Quit*, each crayon uses second person in their letters to Duncan, the boy who has (mis)used the crayons:

Dear Duncan,
Yellow crayon here. I need you to tell orange crayon that I am the color of the sun. I would tell him but we are no longer speaking. And I can prove that I'm the color of the sun too! Last Tuesday, you used me to color in the sun on your "Happy Farm" coloring book. In case you've forgotten it's on page 7. You can't miss me. I'm shining down brilliantly on a field of YELLOW corn!

Your pal (and the true color of the sun),
Yellow Crayon.

Theme

The theme of a story is the underlying idea that ties the plot, characters, and setting together into a meaningful whole. A theme is a controlling idea or central concept. A story may have more than one theme.

When looking for theme, it is important to consider the following issues: (1) How the main character changes in the story, (2) what conflicts are found in the story, (3) what actions are rewarded or punished, (4) and what the main character has learned as a result. Titles and illustrations may also provide clues to the theme.

When searching for theme, ask, "What is the author trying to tell us that would make a difference in our lives?"

*Picture storybooks with their shorter texts and fewer themes, allow readers to analyze, trace, and discuss evidence of theme in a briefer, whole story (Norton).