

The Anatomy of a Story

Story Structure

K20 Center, Gage Jeter
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Grade Level	9th – 11th Grade	**Time Frame**	3-4 class period(s)
Subject	English/Language Arts	**Duration**	180 minutes
Course	Composition		

Essential Question

How does the structure of a story apply to our own life stories?

Summary

Every surgeon needs to have an in-depth knowledge of the structure of the human body before diving into surgery. The alternative would be catastrophic for the patient. The approach to literature should be no different. For readers to successfully navigate and understand a text, it is important for them to have an understanding of story structure before they read. This lesson lays out a very simple approach to dissecting the structure of a story. The end result will give students not only a means for understanding literature, but also a means for understanding their own "story." This lesson stresses the idea that exploring literature helps us better understand the human experience. While this lesson is currently aligned only to 9th grade standards, it would be appropriate to teach in grades 9 through 12, adjusting standards as needed.

Snapshot

Engage

Students write about and discuss their favorite hobbies, especially in terms of their structures.

Explore

Students pick apart the structure of a story.

Explain

Students outline their own life stories.

Extend

Students create personal narratives and write them inside a life-size outlines of their bodies on butcher paper. Students also apply these story strategies to novels.

Evaluate

Students' outlines and stories are assessed; moreover, students complete a reflective activity centered on what and how they learned throughout this lesson.

Standards

ACT College and Career Readiness Standards - Reading (6-12)

TST302: Identify a clear function of straightforward paragraphs in somewhat challenging literary narratives

Oklahoma Academic Standards: English Language Arts (Grade 9)

9.2.W.1: Routinely and recursively prewrite (e.g., develop and organize ideas).
9.3.R.3: Evaluate how literary elements impact theme, mood, and/or tone, using textual evidence:
- setting
- plot structure (e.g., foreshadowing, flashback, *in media res*)
- conflict (i.e., internal, external)
- characters (e.g., protagonist, antagonist)
- characterization (i.e., direct, indirect)
- point of view (e.g., narrator reliability)
- archetypes

9.3.W.1: Compose narratives reflecting real or imagined experiences that:
- include engaging plots involving well-developed, complex characters resolving conflicts
- establish narrator(s) that enhance(s) the narrative
- are intentionally sequenced in a way to achieve a specific effect (e.g., create suspense, establish mood, reflect theme)
- provide clear descriptions, using precise language, sensory details, and dialogue
- include varied syntax to enhance readability
- emulate literary elements and/or literary devices from mentor texts

Attachments

- Handout 1—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.docx
- Handout 1—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.pdf
- Handout 1—The Anatomy of a Story.docx
- Handout 1—The Anatomy of a Story.pdf
- Handout 2—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.docx
- Handout 2—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.pdf
- Handout 2—The Anatomy of a Story.docx
- Handout 2—The Anatomy of a Story.pdf
- Handout 3—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.docx
- Handout 3—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.pdf
- Handout 3—The Anatomy of a Story.docx
- Handout 3—The Anatomy of a Story.pdf
- Handout 4—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.docx
- Handout 4—The Anatomy of a Story - Spanish.pdf
- Handout 4—The Anatomy of a Story.docx
- Handout 4—The Anatomy of a Story.pdf
- Narrative Rubric.pdf

Materials

- Handouts 1-4 (attached; one per student)
- Narrative Rubric (attached; one per student)
- Writing materials: pen, pencil, paper, etc.
- Butcher paper
- Art supplies: markers, crayons, colored pencils, etc.

Engage

Begin with a 5-minute quick write. Students are asked to write about their hobbies and how they spend their free time. Encourage students to make a list of skills required to be "good" at what they do. For example, musicians need to understand chords and notes; athletes need an understanding of offensive and defensive structures, etc.

Teacher's Note: Modeling

Before students begin writing, model the above questions and answers for students. You could share a hobby or interest you have and explain the skill set that is required to successfully engage in the hobby or activity. Once you have modeled this for the class, allow students to write and share from their own perspective.

Lead students through some of the following leading questions in order to direct students into consensus:

1. Would you say that it is important for a musician to understand how the strings on a guitar are arranged before they try to play?
2. As an athlete, what knowledge would you need before you ran out onto the field for the first time? Rules? Offensive and defensive structure?
3. Would you want a medical student performing surgery on you in his first week of school, before he learned about the human body in great detail?
4. Can we all agree that in order to truly master something, we need to have a working knowledge of how it is put together, its structure?

Explore

By this point, students should understand that every story has a structure, that if we can grasp a better understanding of that structure, perhaps we can begin to understand our own human experience. Tell students that the focus for today's lesson is to pick apart the structure of a story and see how we can relate it to our own personal story.

Give students **Handout 1**. Tell students that they are going to learn to look at a story's structure the same way that a surgeon looks at the human body. Before a surgeon begins an operation, he needs to know the basic structure of the body. In the same way, before we enter into a story we need to understand what we will find inside. This visual aid is a very basic way to break down the structure of a story.

The handout shows four basic components to a story. We call this the Somebody Wanted But So Then model. Here's how it works:

Somebody: The main character of a story will usually be the character that is described with the most detail. In most cases we will know more about the main character than we do about the other players in the story. In most short stories the main character will be established within the first few sentences. In the case of a novel, we generally come to know the main character within the first chapter.

Wanted: This is the hero's quest! For what is the character seeking? What is the hero's heart desire? In many cases, the hero's objective is very clearly defined. The hero must reach a far-off land, save the princess, or destroy a villain; or maybe he just wants to survive sophomore year! In some cases, however, the main character's goal is not so easy to see. Perhaps the character is trying to find love, or maybe he is hoping to find approval in someone's eyes.

But: What is getting in the way? The "but" of a story is what we call the conflict. As mentioned earlier, a conflict can take on many different forms. The main character will generally encounter numerous conflicts in a story. Conflict can be either internal (man vs. his own limitations) or external (man vs. an outside opponent). A story can potentially have several conflicts for a character to overcome, but usually there will be what is called a major conflict. Conflicts within a story help build suspense and move the plot along. This portion of a story often refines and shapes the main character.

So: Once the conflict of a story has been identified, the main character must confront this conflict in some way. A very important question is answered; "So what is the main character going to do about it?" This is the high-point or climax of the story, ultimately leading to the resolution and conclusion of the story.

Teacher's Note

By teaching students to recognize story structure, we are giving them a lens through which they can view any story. The SWBS model will not be the exact structure for every piece of literature that a student encounters, but it can serve as a frame of reference for the student to understand the progression of plot.

Give students **Handout 2** and **Handout 3**. Using Handout 3, "The Poor Hungry Wolf" as a class. Have students fill out handout 2 for the story.

As you begin the story, model the SWBS process for your class. Tell them to be actively looking for the "Somebody" of the story. Once the main character has been located, have them write the name of the character in the space provided. A question mark symbol has been inserted at the head of the body next to the "Somebody" space because students are answering the question, "Who is this story about?" Have students place a question mark in the margin of the story next to the sentence that introduces the main character.

Now that the main character has been identified, tell the students that they are to be looking for the "wanted" element of the story. What is the main character seeking? The symbol of a heart has been used because we are answering the question, "What is the character's heart's desire?" Have students place a "heart" in the margin of the story next to the sentence that expresses the character's goal.

Stop reading, and have the students begin making predictions as to what potential conflicts the main character may encounter. Predicting plot has been proven to be a very useful tool for comprehension.

Now, continue with the reading. It should be noted that the main character may encounter several conflicts as the plot develops. These conflicts are what move the plot toward the climax, or high point, of the story.

As each conflict arises, encourage the students to write them down in list form and continue progressing through the story. An "X" has been inserted at the stomach to represent the "But" of the story. Conflicts can often knock the wind out of us just like a punch to the stomach! Have students place an "X" in margin of the story next to the sentence that explains the conflict of the story.

As the main character encounters conflict, discuss with students whether these struggles are internal, external, or perhaps both. Is the character wrestling with his own mind and limitations, or is his struggle with something outside of himself?

Finally, have students make predictions as to how the character will confront, and ultimately overcome, the conflicts that have arisen. Encourage students to draw from personal experience. How have they dealt with similar conflict? What was the outcome?

An exclamation point has been used to represent the "So" portion of the story because this is the climax and resolution. This is what the entire story has been building up to. Students answer the question, "So what did the character do about it?" Have students place an exclamation point in the margin of the story next to the sentence that explains how the character deals with the conflict.

Quick Assessment: At the bottom of the sheet, have students write a short summary using the SWBS method. Their summary might look something like this: "The poor hungry wolf desperately wanted to have a sheep for a meal, but the shepherd and his dog were always standing guard. So one morning, the wolf dressed up in sheep's wool and lured a lamb into the forest."

Explain

Express to students the idea that we are the authors of our own life stories. We are all faced with unique challenges, but we have the opportunity to face those challenges and, in a sense, "write" our own ending. Learning to break down the structure of a story can help us analyze the events in our own life.

Great literature is full of characters who are faced with challenges. Many of these characters struggle through trials very similar to our own. Edgar Allen Poe's works are full of characters who struggle through fear and paranoia. Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" gives readers a haunting look at tragic love, and modern-day authors have created characters like Harry Potter who deal with feelings of inadequacy and doubt.

At this point in the lesson, now that students have experimented with the SWBS model, it is important to have them put it to use in another context. Begin a discussion to help students relate story structure to their personal stories. Ask the students the following questions and have them copy down simple, short responses: 1) What are some short-term goals that you have set for yourself? (Graduation? A car? A job? A relationship?) 2) How about long-term goals, what kind of future do you envision for yourself? (Challenge students to think BIG.) 3) What stands in the way of your short term goals? 4) In the way of your long term goals? 5) What future conflicts might come up? 6) What are some ways that you plan on dealing with current and future conflicts that might keep you from reaching your goal?

Give students **Handout 4**. Explain to them that you want them to begin outlining their own life stories. (This outline will be turned into a narrative in the next stage of the lesson.) You will notice that in this version of the chart, there is a little more room for elaborating. This chart will give them an easy visual foundation from which to begin writing their stories.

Teacher's Note

Remind students to use their short answers from the previous discussion to help them complete their outline. Within these answers they will be able to find their "Somebody" (themselves), their "Wanted" (their short or long-term goals), and their "But" (their predicted conflicts).

The final step in the outline will be to write their "So." This is the portion of their story where they get to take control of their destinies! Encourage students to evaluate the conflicts standing in the way of their goal. By anticipating conflict they can propose various solutions, weigh the pros and cons of those solutions, and then effectively combat the conflict within their story.

Require that students write the story from third person point of view as opposed to first person. This will allow students to view their circumstances from a new point of view and perhaps step outside of their former way of thinking about their situation.

Teacher's Note: Related Lesson

For a review of point of view, see the lesson titled "The Way I See It." If students have not completed that lesson, you may want to let them write from a first person point of view. (I, me, my, etc.)

Extend

Students should first transform their outlines into narrative form, incorporating setting, characters, plot, dialogue, conflict, suspense, etc. For an authentic visual representation, have students trace each other's body outlines onto butcher paper. They can then write their finished narratives inside their bodies' outlines. Students can display their stories around the room.

Although this lesson has focused on using SWBS with a short story text, it can, and should, be applied to other texts of greater length. The lesson briefly discusses the importance of relating to literary characters in order to understand our own experiences. With that in mind, have students choose a novel in which they feel they might connect with the main character. (A good description of characters can usually be found in the book's summary on the back cover or inside flap.)

The SWBS structure not only applies to the novel as a whole, but it can be applied to individual chapters as well. Have the student read through the novel, breaking down each chapter using the SWBS approach. For each chapter, the student should be able to answer the following questions: Who is the main character(s) of the chapter? What goal is the character trying to achieve in the context of this chapter? What conflicts arise in this chapter? Are they new conflicts? Is the conflict resolved by the end of the chapter, or will it continue to build into the next chapter? By analyzing each chapter, students are ensuring comprehension of the novel as a whole. Teaching students to break a novel down into chunks helps them avoid being overwhelmed. At the conclusion of the novel, have the student write a summary of the book using the notes that they have collected from each chapter.

Evaluate

The length of the final product (students' narratives written inside their life-sized body drawings) should be determined based on the individual student's abilities. A rubric has been provided that can serve as an assessment for students' narratives (see "Narrative Rubric" attachment). However, feel free to adapt and modify this rubric to fit the needs of your students. You could collaboratively create a rubric with your students, in order to provide them with autonomy and ownership over their learning.

Students could wrap up the lesson by completing an Exit Ticket in the form of a brief reflective quick write in which they write about what they learned concerning the structure of a story and how that can be applied to their own lives. Students should be encouraged to "go meta" and think not just about what they learned, but also how they learned.

Resources

- K20 Center. (n.d.). Bell Ringers and Exit Tickets. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/125
- K20 Center. (n.d.). SWBST: Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/2346