



1 Elements of a Short Story

In a short story, elements such as characters, setting, plot, and conflict combine to create a unified impression, or main effect.

Short stories are brief fictional narratives intended to be read in a single sitting. Because of a short story's length, the narration and character portrayals must be focused and compressed, adding a special energy and depth to the form. As a result, a good short story leaves the reader with a unified, strong impression—its **main effect**. Each element of a story can contribute to this effect.

Characters The **characters** are the people or animals who take part in the action of the story. Details in the story help readers understand characters' **traits**, or qualities, and **motives**, or reasons for acting. The main effect of a story often involves a change or revelation experienced by a character.

Setting The **setting** of a story is the time and place of its action. Often, a short story takes place in a single, unified setting. The setting often contributes to a story's **mood**—the general feeling the story conveys.

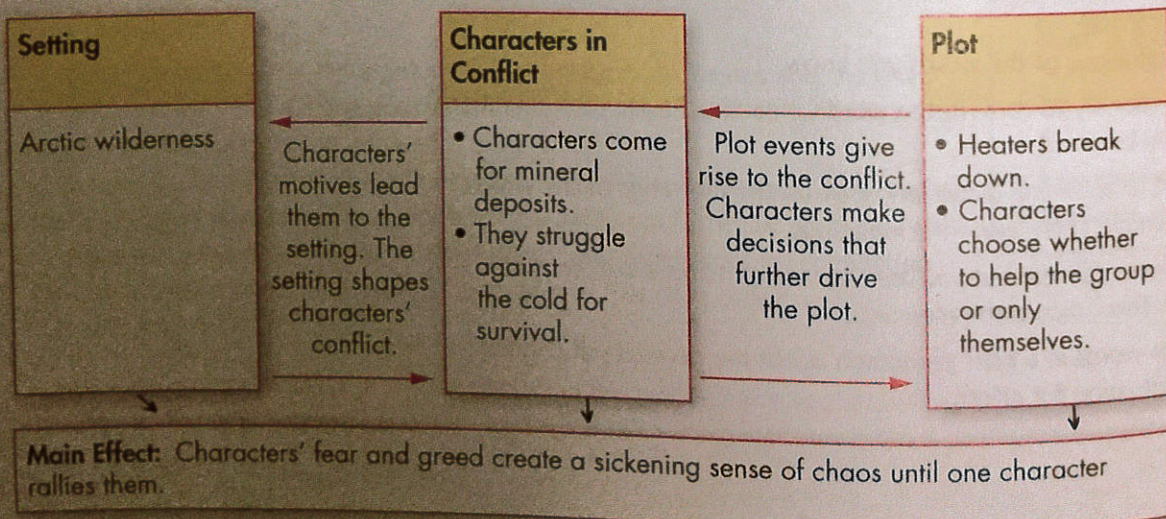
Plot The **plot** of a story is the sequence of events it tells. Plot often contributes to the unified effect of a story by building toward a **climax**, or turning point, in which a character reaches an insight or undergoes a change.

Conflict A plot is driven by a **conflict**, or struggle between two opposing forces. Short stories usually focus on one central conflict.

- An **internal conflict** takes place in the mind of a character. The character struggles to make a decision or overcome feelings.
- An **external conflict** takes place between a character and an outside force, such as another character or a force of nature.

Theme and Symbols As the elements of a story combine to create a unified effect, they also suggest a **theme**, or insight into life. Most often, readers come to understand the theme by making inferences from key elements, including symbols. A **symbol** is an object or a story element that stands for a larger meaning.

The elements of a short story are interrelated and contribute to a unified effect.



2 Plot Structure in a Short Story

No matter what tales short stories tell, many stories share a basic plot structure. Understanding this structure can help you appreciate how a short story builds to a satisfying conclusion.

In the section of the plot called the **exposition**, the author introduces the setting and the characters. This section often includes an **inciting event**—an event that establishes the **conflict**, or struggle between opposing forces, that drives the story. Types of conflicts include

- a struggle between two characters;
- a struggle between a character and an outside force, such as nature;
- a struggle within the mind of a character, such as a struggle with guilt.


The next part of a typical plot is the **rising action**, which includes events

and complications that intensify the conflict. The rising action leads to the **climax**, which is the turning point in the story—the moment of highest tension or suspense. The climax is the part of the story that makes readers want to read on to find out what happens next.

The **falling action** sets up the story's ending. The intensity of the conflict lessens and events wind down, leading to the **resolution**, or **denouement**, which shows the outcome of the conflict. In some stories, the conflict is settled, meaning that the central problem is solved; in other stories, the conflict may be left unsettled. In still other stories, the ending may revisit the characters after time has passed to show how the situation changes after the conflict is resolved. Look at the example in the chart below.

3 **In This Section**

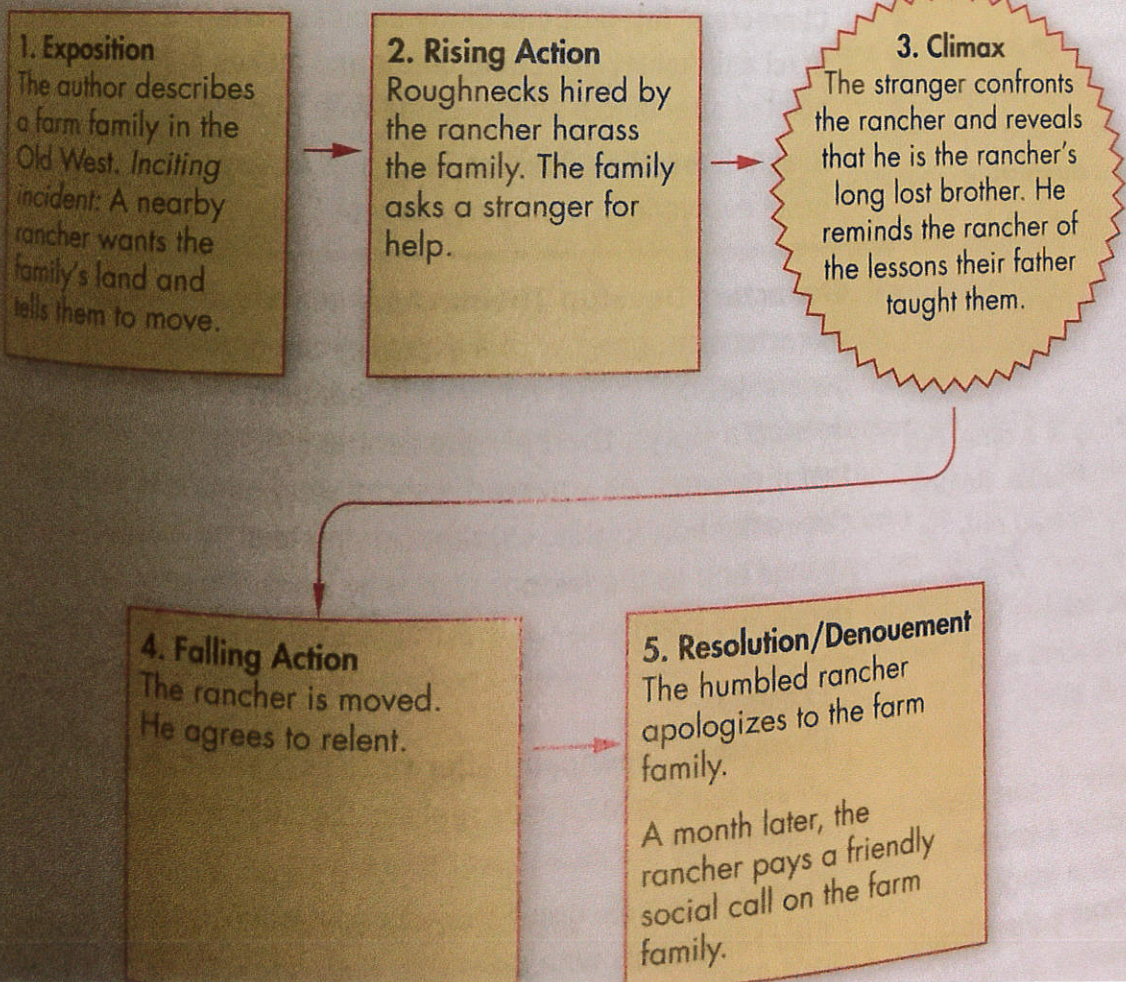
- Elements of a Short Story
- Analyzing Character
- Analyzing Structure and Theme
- Close Read: Elements of a Short Story
 - Model Text
 - Practice Text
- After You Read

 **Common Core State Standards**

RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.5

[For the full wording of standards, see the standards chart in the front of your textbook.]

Example: Plot Structure



Reading Literature

3. Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

1 Analyzing Character

An author develops **characters** in ways that advance a story's **plot**.

Developing Complex Characters

In the best short stories, the main characters are interesting and **complex**, or well-rounded.

Complex characters share these qualities:

- They show multiple or even contradictory **traits**, or qualities.
- They struggle with conflicting **motivations**, or reasons for acting as they do.
- They may change by the end of the story.

Example: Complex Character

Contradictory Traits Bob's ability to organize ideas leads the debate team to victory—but his room is a mess.

Conflicting Motives After high school, Bob wants to stay near his friends; he also wants to go to the best college he can.

Change After making a new friend on a trip, Bob decides he will move away for college.

Characterization To create and **develop** a character, a writer will use techniques of **characterization**.

- In **direct characterization**, the narrator makes direct statements about a character's personality:
Afshin focused on just one thing at a time, but the depth of his focus was remarkable. Before a race, his single-minded trance could only be broken by the sound of the starter's whistle.
- In **indirect characterization**, readers learn what characters are like by analyzing what they say and do as well as how other characters respond to them:
Summer or winter, in sun, wind, or rain, Jess rose before dawn and jogged the two-mile loop around the reservoir. After a quick shower and two chocolate donuts, she always felt ready to face the day.

How Characters Advance a Story

Characters Advance the Plot As characters interact with one another and struggle to overcome problems, their choices move the story along. A character's action—or decision *not* to take action—can lead to new plot developments and may intensify the conflict, heightening tension or suspense in the story.

Example:

Conflict Cindy is friendly with Matilda. Cindy's friends Staci and Ashley do not like Matilda and put pressure on Cindy to shun her.

Characters' Interactions Cindy decides that Staci and Ashley are being unfair and makes a point of attending a school game with Matilda.

Result: Intensified Conflict Staci and Ashley invite everyone to their party except Cindy.

Characters Develop Theme As in real life, a character's struggles with a situation can teach a general lesson. In this way, characters help develop a story's **theme**—the central insight that it conveys. As you read a short story, pay close attention to the ways that characters change and to the lessons that they learn. These details will point you toward the story's theme.

Example:

Character's Experience After struggling to please her friends, Cindy realizes that they are shallow and decides to let them go.

Theme As people grow, they may outgrow their friendships with others.

Analyzing Structure and Theme

An author **structures** a story in ways that create interest and help develop the **theme**.

Structuring a Text for Effect

The way in which an author structures or organizes information in a story can create effects like tension, mystery, and surprise.

Plot Structure Authors make decisions about the order in which to present information as well as the pacing of events.

• **Openings** The opening establishes the general feeling of a story.

Examples of Some Story Openings

Focus on Setting: *The hospital waiting room was empty at that hour of the night. It was so quiet I could hear the second hand on the large wall clock toll each passing second.*

Focus on Character: *I'll never forget my grandfather. He was the most charming man I ever met.*

in medias res (Latin for "in the middle of things"): *"Someone call for help!" shouted a man at the side of the road.*

• **Sequence** Narrators tell plot events mainly in **chronological order**—the order in which events occurred. However, they may break from chronological order for effect.

Flashbacks are sections of a narrative that describe a time before the present time of the story. A flashback might give insight into a character's motivations. **Foreshadowing** gives readers hints about what will happen later in the story, as when a narrator says, "That would be the last time they spoke." Foreshadowing can create **suspense**, or a reader's feeling of anxious uncertainty about the outcome.

 **Common Core State Standards**

Reading Literature

5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

• **Pacing** refers to the "speed" with which a narrator relates events. For example, by describing a scene at length and giving many descriptive details, the narrator "slows down" the pace. This effect can be used to heighten suspense, as in the following example:

Example: Slow Pace

Beads of sweat stood out on Agent Vole's forehead. As he struggled with the ropes that bound him, he could hear each beat of his heart, rapid but distinct. Ba-dum, ba-dum. With each beat, the second hand on the timing device clicked one notch closer to catastrophe.

• A narrative can also create a sensation of "speed" and excitement by moving quickly from one idea to another in a scene that is loaded with tension.

Point of View The **point of view**, or narrative perspective, from which a story is told determines the information an author includes. There are three main points of view.

- **Third-person omniscient:** The narrator is outside the events of the story and tells the thoughts and feelings of all characters.
- **Third-person limited:** The narrator is outside the story but tells the thoughts and feelings of only one character.
- **First-person:** The narrator is a character in the story and uses the pronouns *I* and *me*.

Point of view can be used to achieve striking effects. For example, if the first-person narrator is naive, or unsophisticated, the reader may know more about what is going on than the narrator, creating an effect known as **dramatic irony**.

2 Analyzing and

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