

# THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston**  
STATE UNIVERSITY

## Plot Structure

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Each instructor develops his or her own assignments. Your instructor and the assignment sheet s/he has provided are the two best sources for guidance as you work toward a final draft. The handouts for the types of essays feature general guidelines to help you write solid essays, but they should be treated only as supplements to your instructor and the assignment sheet.

### Getting Started

Plot is the arrangement and interrelation of events in a narrative work, chosen and designed to engage the reader's attention and interest (or even to arouse suspense or anxiety). Plot also provides a framework for the exposition of the author's message, or theme, and for other elements such as characterization, symbols, and conflict.

### Terminology

Introduction: (exposition) offers background and context and substantiates the main events of the plot; the main characters and conflict(s) are introduced

Rising Action: the plot becomes more complicated as the conflict intensifies by a series of complications hindering the protagonist's ability to find resolution

Climax: (crisis) the point of greatest tension or emotional intensity; the turning point in the action when a protagonist's lot will change decisively, for the better or worse; the resolution becomes visible

Falling Action: leads to and culminates in the resolution of the plot; major conflicts begin leading to resolution

Resolution: (denouement) the culmination of the plot; all major conflicts come to a close

Conflict: the confrontation or struggle between opposing characters or forces in a work; the action of the plot revolves around the central conflict; there are three major categories: physical, social, and internal

Physical:

Man vs. Nature— a character is threatened by an element of nature

Social:

Man vs. Man— pits a character against another character

Man vs. Society— a character is in conflict with the values of his or her society

Internal:

Man vs. Himself— when a character struggles within himself or herself; the character is torn between courses of action or their consequences

Cliffhanger: an abrupt ending at an exciting and often dangerous time in the plot

Closed Ending: all major plot conflicts are resolved, and a sense of order is restored; readers feel closure

Flashback: scene that interrupts the present action of a narrative work to depict some earlier event that typically occurred before the opening scene of the work; usually accomplished by reverie, remembrance, dreaming, etc.

Foreshadowing: the introduction of material that prepares the reader or audience for future events, actions, or revelations; or the introduction of objects, facts, events, or characters that hint at or prefigure a developing situation or conflict

Frame Story: a story that contains another story or stories; the outer story usually explains why the interior story or stories are being told

in medias res: literary technique of beginning a narrative in the middle of the action; crucial events that occurred before the point at which the narrative starts are related at a later time via flashbacks, character dialogue, or other means

Open Ending: the central conflict is left relatively open; order may be restored, but the details of how or the subsequent effects are left uncertain; readers are left with unanswered questions

Story: a narrative of events ordered chronologically, not selectively, and with emphasis on establishing causality; the raw material from which plot is constructed

Suspense: a state of tension, a sense of uncertainty and foreboding that maintains the attention of the reader; built and maintained during the rising action and climax, usually resolved in the falling action or resolution

### **Analysis**

It is possible to make an analysis of plot structure the central focus of an essay. Typically, plot structure analysis will be one of several points to support an assertion in a more broad literary analysis. One may use terminology to reference events in the plot, or one can use terminology to explain how the author enhances the message of his/her work by utilizing a specific structure.