

Narrative Structure

Story Grammar for The Westing Game by Ellen Raskin

SETTING

The settings of stories establish the contexts for the events that will take place. Authors let their readers know when and where the story is taking place. Authors also let readers know who the people are who play out the story and how they relate to one another. In The Westing Game, Raskin does this by having letters delivered to the main characters in her book. Depending on the complexity of the story, the setting may be single or multiple, the characters may be few or many, and relationships between different characters may be simple or complex.

PLOT

Plots of stories are made up of episodes. Episodes create a sequence of actions or events that usually have causal relationships with each other. Depending on the complexity of the story, there maybe be one episode with a causal sequence of events that is straightforward and linear or there may be multiple episodes with causal sequences of events that are complex and interactive. Whether the story contains an interactive or linear plot, the sequence of events create a “causal chain.” Vacca and Vacca suggest the following elements in a causal chain (taken from Mandler and Johnson, 1977):

1. Initiating Event: an idea or action that sets further events into motion.
2. Internal Response: the protagonist’s inner reaction to the initiating event, in which the protagonist sets a goal or attempts to solve a problem.
3. Attempt: the protagonist’s efforts to achieve the goal or alleviate the problem. Several attempts (some failed) may be evident in an episode.
4. Outcome: the success or failure of the protagonist’s attempts
5. Resolution: an action or state of affairs that evolves from the protagonist’s success or failure to achieve the goal or alleviate the problem.
6. Reaction: an idea, and emotion, or a further event which expresses the protagonist’s feelings about success or failure of goal attainment/problem resolution or which relates the events in the story to some broader set of concerns (Vacca and Vacca 1989, 192).

By using this causal sequence, you can map out the structure of your story as you prepare to teach it. Students can also learn how to trace and follow the story structure as they read, enhancing their comprehension and understanding of a story.