

THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF STORIES: BEYOND STORY GRAMMAR

By Carolee Dean, M.S., CCC-SLP

www.caroleedean.com

The purpose of this workshop is to look at the methods used by teachers and therapists to analyze stories and compare their techniques to the ways that published authors analyze stories.

Carolee Dean is a speech-language pathologist working in the public schools who has spent over a decade helping children of all ages/ability levels to analyze and write stories. She is also a published author who writes fiction for young adults. Her titles include *Comfort* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002) and *Take Me There* (Simon & Schuster, Summer 2010).

Narratives not only touch our hearts and minds but can also be used to address a wide variety of skills. After summarizing the research on story grammar, Fran Lehr (1987) made this statement: “One of the most effective ways to promote children’s reading and writing skills is to help them develop a sense of story. Teachers can accomplish this through the use of story grammar” Lehr, F. 1987. “Story Grammar.” *Reading Teacher* 40 (FEB): 559-52

Students with expressive language deficits often struggle with writing, but even students in the general education population have difficulty with this highly complex task. 73% of all 8th graders and 78% of all high school seniors were below proficiency in writing in a 2002 study. Ehren, B.J. (2002). Getting into the literacy game. *ASHA* 7, 4-5, 10.

The average child can create simple narratives by age 6. Students with language disorders often still have difficulty with written and oral narratives at age 14. Montgomery, Judy, & Kahn, Nancy (2005) What’s your story?” Evidence-based Narrative Strategies for Adolescents. Thinking Publications. Eau Claire: Wisconsin.

Students with communication disabilities need even more “explicit, systematic instruction” to learn how to write narratives than do their normally developing peers. Montgomery, Judy, & Kahn, Nancy (2005) What’s your story?” Evidence-based Narrative Strategies for Adolescents. Thinking Publications. Eau Claire: Wisconsin.

Writing is a painstaking task for these students and their writing difficulties do not lessen with age, in fact, as they grow older, the performance gap continues to widen. Roth, Froma P. (2000). Narrative writing: Development and teaching with Children with writing difficulties. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 20 (4), 15-28.

Story grammar can be an effective tool to teach writing skills because it represents the internal structure of a story. It is “... a set of rules that describe how a story can be broken down into units and how these units are related to one another.” Stein, N., & Glenn, C. (1979). An analysis of story comprehension in elementary school children. In R. Freedle. (Ed.), *New directions in discourse processing* (Vol. 2, pp. 53-120). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Though experts from a variety of disciplines agree that story grammar is important, different types of professionals have different approaches for teaching story grammar. Let’s take a look at some of these...

How SLP's View Story Grammar

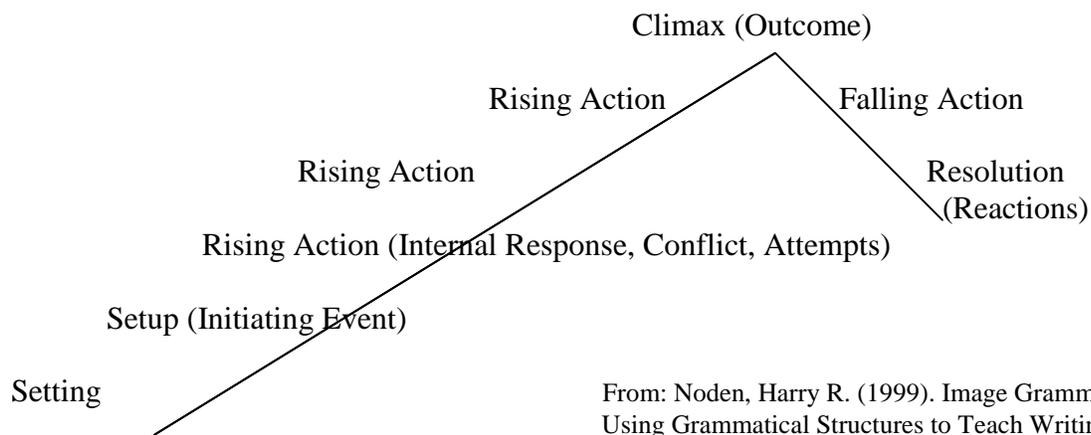
- Setting
- Initiating Events
- Internal Responses
- Internal Plans
- Attempts
- Direct Consequences
- Reactions

From: Stein, N.L., & Glenn, C. (1979). An analysis of Story comprehension in elementary school children. In R.O. Feedle (Ed.), *New Directions in discourse processing*, (pp. 53-120). Norwood, NJ: Ablex

How Reading Teachers View Story Grammar:

- Initiating Event
- Internal Response
- Attempts
- Outcomes
- Resolution
- Reaction

FREITAG'S PYRAMID: How English Teachers Analyze Stories



Note: For monthly articles and activities associated with “The Secret Language of Stories” visit <http://spellbindersbooknews.blogspot.com> and sign up to receive the free monthly newsletter. You may unsubscribe at any time.

Now we will take a look at the way that authors analyze stories. By comparing the techniques that authors use to the techniques educator’s use, we will come away with a much richer understanding of the underlying structure of stories. On the next four pages you will find descriptions of the various story stages found in “The Secret Language of Stories.” For a quick and easy reference, enlarge the pictures received in the handouts by approximately 300%. Then cut out the descriptions below and paste them on the backs of the pictures.

<p>THE OLD WORLD: The main characters and the setting are described in detail in this section. The old world is often a boring place in comparison to the new, magical, exciting world the hero is about to enter. If the hero stayed in the old world there would be no rising action, no conflict and no story. He would continue on indefinitely in his present condition. This stage of the story may also been referred to as: Ordinary World, World of Common Day</p>
<p>THE CALL: Something happens to alert the main character that things are about to change. He may receive a threat, a challenge, or an invitation. This may arrive in a variety of ways—a letter, a phone call, a verbal confrontation. In olden times a king sent a herald with a bugle to call everyone to the town square to make important announcements such as letting the young men know they were being called to war, or to tell the young ladies that there would be a ball at the palace. This stage of the story may also been referred to as: Initiating Event, Kick Off, Invitation, Challenge</p>
<p>REFUSAL: Characters are often reluctant at first to leave their comfortable home and the things that are familiar to them to journey into dangerous and unknown territory. They may be afraid, feel unprepared, or think they are unworthy. They may hide, run away, argue, or simply refuse to accept the challenge. This stage of the story may also be referred to as: Avoidance, Denial</p>
<p>CROSSING INTO THE NEW WORLD: This is the point where the main character makes a decision to act. Often it is a mentor or guide who encourages him embark on the journey. Sometimes this decision is made after much soul searching and at other times he concedes reluctantly after being forced on the journey against his will. He takes off toward the New World by boat, plane, car, time-traveling device, or even on foot. There is usually a specific goal or intention such as rescuing a princess, marrying a prince, winning a tournament or stopping an evil wizard from taking over Middle Earth, but if the hero is thrust into the new world against his will, his goals may not be clear at first. This is a time of change and the hero may face opposition as he sets off on his new course. Sometimes the hero stays in the Old World, but something new arrives to change that world. This stage of the story may also be referred to as: Setting, Sail, Deciding to Act, Accepting the Challenge, Internal Response</p>

SMALL CHALLENGES IN THE NEW WORLD:

The new setting is described and the hero meets new characters. Some of these new characters will prove to be allies and some will be enemies. There will be trials, obstacles and challenges. Through these challenges the hero will gain power, strength, and information while identifying and drawing closer to his ultimate goal. Though the main character may face difficult challenges and obstacles at this stage of the story, they are nothing compared to the big challenges to be faced in the latter part of the story. This stage has been compared to an initiation where new members of a society must go through a series of tests to prove themselves worthy of belonging in the New World. This stage of the story may also be referred to as: **Initiation, Exploration**

PLANS & PREPARATIONS:

Plans will be discussed. Blueprints and maps might be drawn. A game plan may be written on the chalkboard. There may be a series of scenes showing the hero and his allies preparing for a big event by running drills, working out, practicing routines, or rehearsing for a play. There may be more obstacles faced as the hero approaches the Midpoint Challenge and setbacks may occur. On the other hand, the main character may approach the Midpoint with little forethought and may even stumble toward danger without realizing what he's heading into. If this is the case then this part of the story may simply be referred to as the **Progression**.

MIDPOINT CHALLENGE:

The small obstacles and challenges overcome up to this point are small in comparison but have helped prepare the hero for a bigger challenge. The stakes are higher and often it may appear that the hero is about to die or suffer irreparable defeat. There is a prize at stake which might come in the form treasure, medicine, love, information, or simply relief at having survived this particular challenge. The prize may represent the ultimate story goal or merely something needed to attain that goal such as information, getting past a dangerous obstacle, or the winning of a preliminary contest or competition. At the Midpoint the hero may grab the prize or it may elude him. If he does grab the prize he may soon lose it, he may have to fight to keep it, or he may discover that there is something else of even greater importance still to be won. If the hero does not grab the prize, he may have to form a new strategy or redouble his efforts in order to keep it. This stage of the story may also represent an **Internal Shift** or **Moment of Enlightenment**

THE ESCAPE:

The hero has survived the Midpoint Challenge (with or without gaining the prize). At this point in the story there is often a chase scene as the villain realizes the hero has made off with the goods. The villain may retaliate and may even temporarily gain possession of the prize. This section may be very brief or it may be quite long with a detailed sequence of scenes. The hero may feel that he has lost everything. This point in the story may represent a period of giving up. The hero will have to renew his commitment to the adventure to continue. He may think the journey is over and be on his way back to meet with friends when a new threat or danger emerges. This is often the point where the Mentor reappears to offer advice or assistance. It may seem as if the story is over at this point. The hero may even be back with his friends, thinking he is safe and enjoying his prize, but the Ultimate Challenge is about to happen. This stage of the story might also be called: **Retreat, Get Away, Exodus, Flight, Chase**

THE TUNNEL OF TRANSFORMATION: This part of the story can be compared to a caterpillar entering into a chrysalis to go through the process of becoming a butterfly. The prize is just within reach and yet it seems as if the hero will fail in his quest. There is often an internal death and rebirth signifying a major internal change or shift in the hero. A change of heart and a change in thinking often characterize this stage of the story. The transformation may occur during one intense, dramatic scene, or it may occur over a series of smaller scenes. The intensity of the scene is not as important as the internal shift that results. External changes that have occurred up until this point (new clothing, stronger physical stature) will pale in comparison to the internal character growth. This stage of the story may also be called: **Death/Rebirth, Alteration, Change**

THE NEW PERSON: After the main character seems to die to her old self, she is reborn as a new person. This alteration may be represented by external signs such as changes in appearance. She may be stronger, smarter, better looking, or more intelligent than she was at the beginning, but the REAL change is usually something internal such as overcoming fear, learning to speak up for oneself, growing in appreciation of things thought unimportant or conquering inadequacy. Though the change may be drastic, it will not be clear to the audience (or the other story characters) whether this is a permanent change or a temporary transition. This stage of the story may also be called: **Resurrection, Growth, Renewal, Revival**

THE CLIMAX: The main character faces his most difficult challenge and the stakes are at their highest, often life and death. There may be a battle, shootout, duel, debate, contest, final court testimony, or an argument where it seems that an important relationship may come to an end. The climax of the story is point of highest *tension*. This may or may not be represented by a rise in *action*. Whatever transformations the main character has undergone have prepared him for this moment. This is the final test to see if the transformation is real or only temporary. Something might be tackled that the main character was not able to overcome at the beginning of the story. This is the point where the reader's/viewer's heart is pounding as they wonder if the hero will attain his prize or fail. There is almost always a twist. Something unexpected or surprising is bound to happen. This stage of the story may also be referred to as: **Ultimate Challenge, Final Test, Showdown, Outcome**

REWARD: This is a time to tie up loose ends and answer any remaining questions. The hero returns with a prize that can be shared with the group such as an elixir, a talisman, a balm, or an important victory—something that restores peace and happiness to the land. Sometimes this “group” is merely the main character and the reader. The Prize (love, money, medicine, success) may be what has been sought all through the story or it may be something different altogether. Sometimes the Prize has been lost and the real reward is knowledge, self-awareness or simply a good story. There is often a celebration. A marriage ceremony at the end of a love story is an example of the hero sharing his love with family and friends. A parade is a way of sharing a victory. If the hero dies at the end of the story there is often a funeral or celebration of the hero's life. Sometimes it is those who are left behind who learn the important lesson if the hero has died or failed due to foolish decisions. This stage in the story may also be referred to as: **Resolution, Return, Consequence, Conclusion, Reaction**

ADDITIONAL STORY ELEMENTS:

MENTORS & GUIDES: Mentors may include teachers, coaches, guides, Jedi warriors, fairy godmothers, gods or goddesses. The Mentor offers help, advice, assistance and often a special gift such as glass slippers or a light saber. Any character in the story (even the villain) might serve as a temporary mentor, giving the hero advice or knowledge important to his/her quest. The Mentor often helps the reluctant hero overcome the fear of the adventure and get started on the journey. She may reappear at crucial times in the story when the character seems to stall out or give up. This person may also be referred to as: **Teacher, Trainer, Wise Old Man/Woman**

THE PRIZE:

In the story of Prometheus, the Titan steals fire from Mount Olympus but the prize of a story could be anything important to the hero: treasure, gold, medicine, a ship, a car, love, knighthood, knowledge, information, an important clue, self-respect, epiphany, a new rank or knighthood, or simply relief at having made it through the crisis alive. Conflicts, Problems and Obstacles naturally arise in the pursuit of any goal. After the Midpoint Challenge the hero may grab the prize or it may elude him. If he does grab the prize he may soon lose it, he may have to fight to keep it, or he may discover that there is something else of even greater importance still to be won. If the hero does not grab the prize, he may have to form a new strategy or redouble his efforts. The prize may also be referred to as: **Boon, Goal, Award**

DEATH EXPERIENCES: These may be real or figurative, but they represent the loss of what is most important to the main character. They typically occur at points of high dramatic tension such as midpoints, transformational scenes and during the climax. In transformational scenes the death experience includes a rebirth. Sometimes it is someone close to the main character who dies or who is threatened at the midpoint with the threat to the central character coming later in the story. Sometimes it is the villain who dies after a duel with the hero. There may be many such scenes within a story or just one, but at some point it will appear that all hope is lost and that the prize most desired will not be attained. These death experiences may appear to be **Failures or Losses** but they provide the opportunity for **Rebirth**.

STORYBOARD

Story Plot Points

Old World	Call	Refusal	Crossing
New World	Plans & Preparations	Midpoint Challenge	Escape
Tunnel of Transformation	New Person	Climax	Reward

Additional Story Elements

Mentors & Guides	Prize	Death
------------------	-------	-------

Novels by Carolee Dean:

Comfort (ISBN 978-0-618-43912-6, Houghton Mifflin, 2002, ages 12 and up) is the story of a boy from a dysfunctional alcoholic family who gets involved in a series of poetry competitions and discovers that words have the power to transform lives.

Take Me There (Simon Pulse, a division of Simon & Schuster, summer 2010, ages 14 and up) is the story of a boy who drops out of school after years of trying to hide the fact that he cannot read. He dreams of a better life, but keeps finding himself on the wrong side of the law. Pursued by the police and an L.A. gang, he leaves home to look for his father who is in prison in Texas to find out if badness is in his blood or if it is something he can outrun.

REFERENCES

- Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New York, NY: MJF Books.
- Ehren, B.J. (2002). Getting into the literacy game. *ASHA*, 7, 4-5, 10.
- Lehr, F. (1987). Story Grammar. *Reading Teacher* 40 (FEB): 559-52.
- Marks, D. (2007). *The inside story: The power of the transformational arc*. Studio City, CA: Three Mountain Press.
- Montgomery, J. & Kahn, N. (2005). *What's your story?" Evidence-based Narrative Strategies for Adolescents*. Thinking Publications. Eau Claire: Wisconsin.
- Nelson, N. W., & Van Meter, A. M. (2002). Assessing curriculum-based reading and writing samples. *Topics in Language Disorders*. 22(2), 35-59.
- Noden, H.R. (1999). *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing*. Portsmouth, NH.: Heinemann
- Roth, F. P. (2000). Narrative writing: Development and teaching with Children with writing difficulties. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 20 (4), 15-28.
- Saddler, B. & Asaro, K., (2007). Increasing story quality through planning and revising: Effects on young writers with learning abilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*. 30, 223-234.
- Wolster, J. A., DiLollo, A. & Apel, K. (2006) A narrative therapy approach to counseling: A model for working with adolescents with language-literacy deficits. *Language, Speech, and Hearing in the Schools*. 37, 168-177.
- Vacca, R., and J. Vacca. (1996). *Content Area Reading*. New York: HarperCollins College.
- Vogler, C. (2007). *The writer's journey: Mythic structure for writers-third edition*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions