Writing About Plot and Structure:
The Development and Organization of Narratives and Drama

Stories and plays are made up mostly of actions or incidents that follow one after another in chronological order. Finding a sequential or narrative order, however, is only the first step toward the more important consideration—the plot, or the controls governing the development of the actions.

PLOT: THE MOTIVATION AND CAUSATION OF FICTION AND DRAMA

The English novelist E. M. Forster, in Aspects of the Novel, presents a memorable illustration of plot. To show a bare set of actions, he uses the following: "The king died, and then the queen died." He points out, however, that this sequence does not form a plot because it lacks motivation and causation. These he introduces in his next example: "The king died, and then the queen died of grief." The phrase "of grief" shows that one thing (grief) controls or overcomes another (the normal desire to live), and motivation and causation enter the sequence to form a plot. In a well-plotted story or play, a thing precedes or follows another not simply because ticks away, but more importantly because effects follow causes. In a good work, nothing is irrelevant or accidental; everything is related and causative.
Determine the Conflict in a Story or Play

The controlling impulse in a connected pattern of causes and effects is conflict, which refers to people or circumstances that a character must face and try to overcome. Conflict brings out the extremes of human energy, causing characters to engage in the decisions, actions, responses, and interactions that make up fictional and dramatic literature.

In its most elemental form, a conflict is the opposition of two people. Their conflict may take the shape of envy, hatred, anger, argument, avoidance, gossip, lies, fighting, and many other forms and actions. Conflicts may also exist between groups, although conflicts between individuals are more identifiable and therefore more suitable for stories. Conflicts may also be abstract, such as when an individual opposes larger forces like natural objects, ideas, modes of behavior, or public opinion. A difficult or even impossible choice—a dilemma—is a natural conflict for an individual person. A conflict may also be brought out in ideas and opinions that clash. In short, conflict shows itself in many ways.

CONFLICT IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO DOUBT, TENSION, AND INTEREST. Conflict is the major element of plot because opposing forces arouse curiosity, cause doubt, create tension, and produce interest. The same responses are the lifeblood of athletic competition. Consider which kind of athletic event is more interesting: (1) One team gets so far ahead that the winner is no longer in doubt, or (2) both teams are so evenly matched that the winner is in doubt even in the final seconds. Obviously, games are uninteresting—as games—unless they are contests between teams of comparable strength. The same principle applies to conflicts in stories and dramas. There should be uncertainty about a protagonist’s success: Unless there is doubt, there is no tension, and without tension there is no interest.

FIND THE CONFLICTS TO DETERMINE THE PLOT. To see a plot in operation, let us build on Forster’s description. Here is a simple plot for a story of our own: “John and Jane meet, fall in love, and get married.” This is a plot because it shows cause and effect (they get married because they fall in love), but with no conflict, the plot is not interesting. However, let us introduce conflicting elements in this common “boy meets girl” story:

John and Jane meet at school and fall in love. They go together for two years and plan to marry, but a problem arises. Jane wants a career first, and after marriage she wants to be an equal contributor to the family. John understands Jane’s wishes, but he wants to get married first and let her finish her studies and have her career after they have had children. Jane believes that John’s plan is not for her because it constitutes a trap from which she will never escape. This conflict interrupts their plans, and they part in anger and regret.
Even though they still love each other, both marry other people and build separate lives and careers. Neither is happy even though they like and respect their spouses. The years pass, and, after children and grandchildren, Jane and John meet again. He is now divorced, and she is a widow. Because their earlier conflict is no longer a barrier, they marry and try to make up for the past. Even their new happiness, however, is tinged with regret and reproach because of their earlier conflict, their unhappy solution, their lost years, and their increasing age.

Here we have a true plot because our original “boy meets girl” story outline now contains a major conflict from which a number of related conflicts develop. These conflicts lead to attitudes, choices, and outcomes that make the story interesting. The situation is lifelike; the conflicts rise out of realistic aims and hopes; the outcome is true to life.

WRITING ABOUT THE PLOT
OF A STORY OR PLAY

An essay about plot is an analysis of the conflict and its developments. The organization of the essay should not be modeled on sequential sections and principal events, however, because these invite only a retelling of the story. Instead, the organization is to be developed from the important elements of conflict. Ask yourself the following questions as you look for ideas about plot.

Raise Questions to Discover Ideas

- Who are the protagonist and antagonist, and how do their characteristics put them in conflict? How would you describe the conflict?
- How does the action develop from the conflict?
- If the conflict stems from contrasting ideas or values, what are these, and how are they brought out?
- What problems does the major character (or do the major characters) face? How does the character (characters) deal with these problems?
- How do the major characters achieve (or not achieve) their major goal(s)? What obstacles do they overcome? What obstacles overcome them or alter them?
- At the end, are the characters successful or unsuccessful, happy or unhappy, satisfied or dissatisfied, changed or unchanged, enlightened or ignorant? How has the resolution of the major conflict produced these results?
Organize Your Essay About Plot

**INTRODUCTION.** To keep your essay brief, be selective. After you refer briefly to the principal characters, circumstances, and issues of the plot, be sure that your thesis sentence includes the topics for fuller development.

**BODY.** Stress the major elements in the conflict or conflicts developed in the work. Rather than describing everything a major character does, for example, focus on his or her conflict. Thus, an essay on O’Connor’s “First Confession” might emphasize Jackie as he deals with the obstacles either in his own home or else in his preparation for his impending confession. Similarly, an essay on Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” might emphasize how Louise develops a conflict between her grief over her supposedly dead husband and her relief at realizing that for the first time, she may be free to do as she pleases. When there is a conflict between two major characters, the obvious approach is to focus equally on both. For brevity, however, emphasis might be placed on just one. Thus, an essay on the plot of Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” might stress the things we learn about the narrator, Montresor, that are important to his being the initiator of the action.

In addition, the plot may be analyzed more broadly in terms of impulses, goals, values, issues, and historical perspectives. Thus, you might emphasize the elements of chance working against Mathilde in Maupassant’s “The Necklace” as a contrast to her dreams about wealth. A discussion of the plot of Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” might stress the reclusiveness of Miss Brill, the major character, because the plot could not develop without the disclosure of her secret life. In a similar approach, an essay on the plot of “The Cask of Amontillado” might stress the diabolism of Montresor, because the plot depends on how this quality has produced his plan to bring Fortunato to destruction.

**CONCLUSION.** The conclusion may contain a brief summary of the points you have made. It is also a fitting location for a brief consideration of the effect or impact produced by the conflict. Additional ideas might focus on whether the author has arranged actions and dialogue to direct your favor toward one side or the other, or on whether the plot is possible or impossible, serious or comic, fair or unfair, or powerful or weak.
Sample Essay (on Plot)

Conflicting Values in Hardy’s “The Three Strangers”

As one begins reading Thomas Hardy’s “The Three Strangers,” the nature of the plot is not immediately clear. There is no apparent protagonist, no single major character but rather a number of characters, and no apparent conflict. At first one thinks the major character may be Shepherd Fennel, but he stands out only as the cooperative host and opener of doors for the strangers entering his home during the stormy night. The first stranger might then seem to be the major character, and this possibility is strengthened because of the jarring and obnoxious second stranger. Here the story establishes the beginning of a conflict, but a puzzling one because it seems no more than a contrast of personalities. The third stranger to enter the cottage does not stay long enough to make him seem a protagonist, for he leaves as quickly as he enters. However, it becomes clear, once all the characters have been involved in the story, that Hardy’s plot stems not so much from the conflict of individual characters as from a conflict between aspects of legality and the law. On one side is justice, and on the other injustice. This opposition may be analyzed according to the characters on each side. 

In the order in which Hardy interweaves the opposing parts of his plot, the unjust side—the side opposing the people at the Fennels—is represented by the second stranger, the Hangman. The cruelty of the Hangman’s duties is underlined by his own personal selfishness, egotism, and arrogance. He drinks all the mead in the large common cup, never caring about the wants of anyone else. He sings a merry song about his grisly job as hangman. He is officious in ordering the guests to pursue the third stranger. He shows his contempt for the people by calling them “simple-minded souls, you know, stirred up to anything in a moment” (paragraph 125). To make clear just how obnoxious this Hangman is, Hardy compares him to the devil (paragraph 87). In short, the Hangman, because of these qualities, is the story’s cruel and thoughtless antagonist, and for this reason he stands as the negative part of Hardy’s plot.

By far the most powerful aspect of the plot is the positive and just side, represented by the Fennels, their guests, and the first and third strangers. They are ordinary, good folks, no more and no less, and their feelings about life are perhaps best shown by their celebration of the christening of the daughter of the Fennels. With regard to law, the story makes clear that such people favor fairness and compassion above strict punishment. Thus, when one of the guests explains that Timothy Summers (the first stranger) has been sentenced to be hanged because he had stolen a sheep when his “family were astarving” (paragraph 80), the other guests become hushed. Further, when the Hangman starts pushing them to start a search, they are slow and unwilling.

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See pages 312–26 for this story.

Central idea.

Thesis sentence.
and when they go out looking, they produce the wrong man. As we learn, the first stranger is really the fugitive Summers, whose crime is justifiable in the eyes of the people, and the third stranger is the fugitive's brother, who flees not because he is guilty but because he wants to deflect suspicion away from Summers. These are the characters toward whom Hardy directs our understanding, admiration, and sympathy. Any attempt to sentence anyone harshly, as the law has done with Summers, brings out their hesitation and resistance.

An integral aspect of Hardy's plot is the countryside itself, which during the search becomes an almost active opponent of the legal capriciousness represented by the Hangman. The treacherous hill, containing the "flint slopes" of the hog's-back elevation near Higher Crowstairs, causes the searchers to stumble and tumble and make mistakes. After the initial search for Summers proves fruitless, the people and the countryside unite to foil the thoughtlessly harsh law. The "woods and fields and lanes," together with the "lofts and out-houses" (paragraph 160) furnish hiding places for Summers, so that this man, the first stranger, is "never recaptured" (paragraph 161).

This side of rightness represented by the people is shown by Hardy as not just occasional, but rather eternal. He carefully sets the story in the framework of "the lapse of centuries" (paragraph 1), and he includes references to the ancient figures Timon and Nebuchadnezzar, as though the happenings at the party of the Fennels are as ageless as human history (paragraph 2). Beyond this, Hardy compares the activities of the shepherd folk to the movements of the universe itself, for the energetic dancing moves "in planet-like courses, direct and retrograde, from apogee to perigee" (paragraph 10). When the third stranger is discovered, he steps out from behind an ash tree that was "probably sown there by a passing bird some fifty years before" (paragraph 131). Hardy's concluding paragraph places the entire story in the fabric of virtual myth, thus stressing the continuum from the past to the present. In other words, people like the shepherds share a common humanity that is as old as time.

This brief description of the major conflict making up the plot of "The Three Strangers" does not account for the story's power. Hardy skillfully paints a sympathetic picture of the shepherds and their way—a way of friendliness and good will in which the literal and harsh application of law has little place. His contrasting antagonist, the Hangman, personally violates the shepherd's home just as the law he represents violates the concept of justice felt by the people there. Admittedly, the complete intermeshing of the plot does not seem certain until the circumstances are explained by the brother of Timothy Summers—an explanation that makes clear the opposition between the people's justice and the Hangman's injustice. Hardy's plot in "The Three Strangers" is strong because it is so real, and because the people themselves are presented as a collective force for fairness and justice over an application of law that is unfair and unjust.

COMMENTARY ON THE ESSAY

Because the subject is plot, this essay emphasizes the conflicting elements in Hardy's "The Three Strangers"—the forces of understanding and humanity, on the one hand, and of harshness and cruelty, on the other. The first para-
graph demonstrates how this conflict emerges in the story after a somewhat hesitant opening. Throughout the body of the essay, the conflict is stressed as the major element of Hardy's plot.

Note that the essay assumes that readers know the story already. Hence the essay is not a plot "summary" but is instead an analysis of the elements making up the plot. As much summary as is included here occurs in paragraph 6, in which the explanations by the third stranger are cited to show how Hardy does not make all aspects of his plot clear until near the story's end.

In the body of the essay, paragraph 2 deals with the characteristics of the antagonist, the Hangman. Following this, the greater portion of the body considers the collective (not individual) protagonist arrayed against the Hangman and the harsh law he represents. Thus the human protagonists are the people and the first and third strangers (paragraph 3), the geographical protagonist is the countryside around Higher Crowstairs (paragraph 4), and the historical protagonist is time itself (paragraph 5).

The concluding paragraph summarizes the conflicts of the plot and concludes with a final reference to the central idea, that the story exalts fairness and justice and deplores unfairness and injustice.

THE STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVES AND DRAMA

Structure refers to the ways in which writers arrange materials in accord with the general ideas and purposes of their works. Unlike plot, which is concerned with conflict or conflicts, structure defines the layouts of works—the ways the story, play, or poem is shaped. Structure is about matters such as placement, balance, recurring themes, true and misleading conclusions, suspense, and the imitation of models or forms like reports, letters, conversations, or confessions. A work might be divided into numbered sections or parts, or it might begin in a countryside (or one state) and conclude in a city (or in another state), or it might develop a relationship between two people from their first introduction to their falling in love. To study structure is to study such arrangements and the purposes for which they are made.

FORMAL CATEGORIES OF STRUCTURE

Many aspects of structure are common to all genres of literature. Particularly for stories and plays, however, the following aspects form a skeleton, a pattern of development.