

Understanding Plot Development and Using Plot Diagrams

Understanding how a story is organized can help the reader better understand how the plot develops and how the characters arrive at each point in the story. A plot diagram is a graphical representation of the plot development. The plot diagram is also a useful tool for writing a story because it can assist in planning how the characters will solve a problem. This handout explains the six steps of plot development and presents a plot diagram to visually explain this process. To provide examples, this handout will reference the classic story of *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White.

Plot Development

1. **Exposition** is a literary device used to set the scene for the reader. It introduces the setting and tone for the story along with the Point of View (POV) character or characters.

Example: The setting and tone are presented in the beginning, when the reader is introduced to Wilbur, a runt pig saved by Fern, the daughter of a farmer. Wilbur becomes Fern's pet until her father tells her that she must sell him. He is then sold to Farmer Zuckerman, Fern's uncle who lives down the road. There, Wilbur meets his new farm friends, including Charlotte the spider. It is clear that the story will be told from Wilbur's point of view.

2. **Conflict**, also known as the inciting incident, is the point in the story where the main concern is made known to the reader. This conflict is typically rooted in the main character, also known as the protagonist, and involves another character, a group of characters, or some event that challenges the protagonist.

Example: Wilbur is the main character, and he is told by the other animal characters that pigs are raised to be killed by Christmastime. Wilbur is adamantly against this and makes it clear that he does not want to die.

3. **Rising Action** typically occurs during the first half of the story, when the characters take the steps needed to solve the established problem.

Example: Charlotte takes the initiative to help Wilbur by spinning words in her webs that describe the pig in a remarkable light, including “terrific,” “humble,” and “radiant.” The humans interpret this as a miracle and spread the word, thereby making Wilbur famous. This results in Farmer Zuckerman taking Wilbur to the county fair for a presentation.

4. **Climax** is the part of the story that leads to the resolution of the conflict. It usually presents as a significant event for the character(s) such as a final fight, confrontation, or decision that determines their fates by the end of the story.

Example: During the second day of the county fair, Wilbur and Farmer Zuckerman are brought up on stage and given prizes. While on the stage, Farmer Zuckerman promises the crowd that Wilbur will live a full life and not be sent to the slaughterhouse.

5. **Falling Action** refers to the collection of events following the climax. Some events might be an outcome of the conflict while others might have occurred regardless. However, they all lead to the resolution.

Example: After the events at the county fair, Wilbur finds Charlotte in the barn. She has created her egg sack but is now on the verge of death. Wilbur decides to protect Charlotte’s children. He arranges for his rat friend to collect the sack from the rafters so that they can take it to their home barn when the fair ends. Charlotte dies, and Wilbur protects and tends to her egg sack all winter, waiting to greet her children in the spring.

6. **Resolution** occurs at the end of the story, where the final events and dialogue bring the story to its close. All conflict has ended at this point, and the story concludes. However, if the story is part of a series, there will be allusions to a new conflict in the next book.

Example: After Charlotte’s eggs have hatched, most of her children take off to make webs for themselves, leaving Wilbur behind. However, three runt spiders stay behind in the barn with Wilbur, who helps name them and tells them stories about their mother. When these three runts eventually create their own egg sacks and then die, Wilbur takes care of their children as well as their children’s children. All the while, Wilbur remembers Charlotte.

4. Climax



3. Rising Action



5. Falling Action



1. Exposition



2. Conflict



6. Resolution

