Identifying Narrative Elements in Literature: A Poster Project

by NICHOLAS GORDON

LEVEL: Lower Intermediate to Advanced

TIME REQUIRED: Two or three 90-minute class periods. During the first class, you will clarify the task, form groups, and direct students as they begin planning and designing their stories and posters. In the second class, students will finalize their posters and give presentations. Depending on your class size or class length, you may need a third class period to complete the final project preparations and presentations.

GOALS: To use writing, speaking, and listening skills while reflecting on and analyzing narrative elements in a fictional text; to work cooperatively with groupmates to develop a fictional story that includes specified narrative elements; to collaborate with groupmates to create a poster that identifies and depicts the narrative elements; to present the story and poster to peers; to practice giving and receiving peer feedback

MATERIALS: Poster paper or large sheets of paper; markers, crayons, or colored pencils; glue or glue sticks; scissors; chalkboard and chalk or whiteboard and markers; newspapers or magazines with images that can be used to illustrate the posters (optional); projector (optional); photocopier or printer (optional)

BACKGROUND: In my university and secondary-school literature classes, I have found that giving students a chance to work with the narrative elements of literature through creative poster projects improves their understanding of difficult texts and helps them visualize ways in which these elements cohere to create a story. Having students identify and give examples of each element of literature for a simple story can prepare them for the rigors of identifying and analyzing those same elements in more complicated texts (Vari 2020).

Because poster projects require a variety of contributions from group members, the projects can address a range of learning styles. Visual learners can benefit from arranging the poster's spatial layout, kinesthetic learners can benefit from the hands-on aspect of creating the poster, social learners can benefit from the teamwork involved, and so forth. If students complete this poster-creation task virtually as described in the Variation section, they will also develop and use digital-literacy skills.

Furthermore, this activity can be adapted and used in diverse class contexts. I have completed this project with groups of students who had a firm understanding of the narrative elements of literature and with students who were just being introduced to these elements.

In sum, assigning this flexible poster project offers students a creative way to collaborate with classmates and demonstrate their

understanding of narrative elements in action. Give it a try. Your students' stories and posters might surprise and delight you—mine did!

PREPARATION:

1. Collect and prepare poster-creation materials. If possible, gather old magazines, newspapers, and other print media that students can cut up and use while creating their posters. Using print images can add colorful content to the project and enhance student creativity. My students often first find print images they like, then form their fictional narratives around those images. However, if you do not have access to these materials or prefer not to use print images, students can draw the images on their posters.

2. The project directions in this article assume students have received level-appropriate instruction on the narrative elements of literature. If necessary, prepare to review these concepts at the start of the activity or during the class period prior to beginning the project. Terms to review include the following:

- **Plot** – what happens in the story; the general sequence or outline of events

- **Character(s)** – the people, animals, or other beings in the story

- **Setting** – where and when the story takes place

- **Atmosphere** – the feeling(s), emotion(s), and mood created by the setting and story

- **Conflict** – the problem in the story; the thing the character(s) must struggle with

- **Resolution** – how the conflict plays out and the story ends

For advanced classes, you might add and review other literary elements and devices such as *protagonist/antagonist*, *theme*, *symbol*, *tone*, and *imagery*.

3. Depending on your aims, select either the Poster Presentation Survey (Figure 1) or the Poster Presentation Rubric (Figure 2) to use as a peer-feedback form during the presentations. Adapt the contents of either form to suit your desired project objectives. Make the needed number of copies or printouts of the peer-feedback form you select, or prepare to have students manually copy the form, based on an example you will draw or display on the board.

Story Title:
1. What is the story's setting?
2. What is the conflict in the story?
3. What is the resolution of the story?
4. What is something you liked about this poster?
5. What is one question you have about this poster?

Figure 1. Poster Presentation Survey (for peer feedback)

Story Title:			
Question	Yes	No	Somewhat
Did the presentation include the required narrative elements?			
Did each group member speak during the presentation?			
Did the group members speak clearly?			
Was the presentation easy to understand?			
Did the presentation have a good pace, and was it interesting?			
Comments:			

Figure 2. Poster Presentation Rubric (for peer feedback)

PROCEDURE:

1. To activate students' prior knowledge, hold a discussion in which students describe essential elements of literature in a text the class is reading together, a book most students are likely to have read, or a popular movie. On the board, write a list of the narrative elements you will include in the poster project, filling in examples and details that students supply for each item. For instance, many of my students have seen the movie *Titanic* and can describe elements such as these: *characters* = Jack, Rose, Rose's parents, Rose's suitor (Caledon, a villain); *setting* = in 1912, a magnificent new ship in the Atlantic Ocean with elegant upper-class decks and crowded, plain lower-class decks; *conflicts* = the ship is sinking, class divisions between the main characters; and so on.

2. To make sure students have a clear understanding of the required elements, discuss them in as much depth as your students' ability levels allow. For instance, using the *Titanic* example, with regard to the setting, you might ask students for descriptive adjectives about the ship in the beginning of the story, as well as adjectives to describe the ship as the story progresses. Then, have students describe how the shifts in the setting affect the story's atmosphere.

3. Next, explain the requirements of the poster project. Using level-appropriate language, tell students that, in groups, they will do the following:

a. Make a poster that uses a combination of print images from magazines or other sources (optional), drawings, and written text to create and share an original fictional story. The poster must depict six narrative elements: *plot, character(s), setting, atmosphere, conflict,* and *resolution*. (Add more-complex narrative elements for advanced classes, if desired.)

b. Make sure that their group's poster includes the following, at a minimum:

   • a story title

   • at least one image or drawing for each narrative element

   • two or three sentences describing each image or plot point

c. Present their poster to the class by telling the fictional story it represents. Each group member must speak during the presentation,

reading the accompanying text and describing what is happening, based on the poster's images.

d. Give and receive feedback on the presentations using a peer-feedback form. (At this point, share and review the feedback form you selected in Step 3 of the Preparation section to make sure the learners understand the assessment process).

As you provide the instructions, emphasize the creative nature of the task, reminding students to have fun with their story and strive for surprises as they use the narrative elements. Each story is a work of imagination, and there are no rigid rules that the stories must follow, as long as they include the required poster elements.

4. Further explain that each group's story can be realistic, fantastical, or some combination of the two. To clarify, give two examples of possible fictional poster-story plot outlines, writing or projecting each on the board:

Realistic poster-story example:

Carlos wants to go to the carnival, but it's on a school night, and his parents won't let him. When he tries to sneak out of the house, his dog starts barking and wakes his parents up.

Fantastical poster-story example:

Amina finds an old key that gives her the ability to fly. She flies to Paris for a visit but loses the key and struggles to get back home.

5. Draw or project a basic plot chart (Figure 3) on the board.

6. Review the parts of the chart to help students understand the narrative *movement* or *flow* of stories and to visualize how they might describe their story posters during the presentations. For example, they will first explain who is in the story and where it is taking place (introductory events). Then, they will describe what the problem is and what is happening (conflict and rising action), and so on. Remind students that the chart and the two example stories are stripped down to a basic plotline. For their fictional stories, students should add details related to the plot, setting, and other narrative elements.

7. Based on your class composition and aims, put students into mixed-ability, similar-ability, or random groups of four to six students. Have students sit with their groupmates.
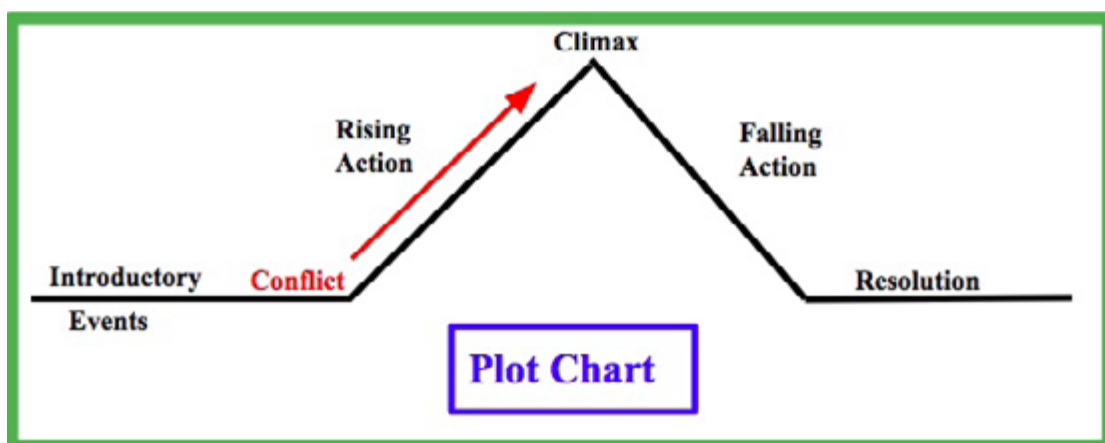

Figure 3. Plot chart

8. Discuss group roles with the class. On the board, write or project a list of the roles and responsibilities that each group member might contribute:

- **Timekeeper** – makes sure the team stays on task in the allotted time

- **Illustrator** – draws the imagery on the poster

- **Imagery finder** – supervises finding the magazine/newspaper/website imagery

- **Scribe** – writes the group-developed descriptions on the poster

- **Visuals supervisor** – arranges and glues print images or illustrations

- **Story supervisor** – makes sure all the required narrative elements of literature are included in the poster

You might ask the class to suggest other roles and add them to the list. Tell the class they will decide the roles within their groups. Students can volunteer for more than one role, and the functions of some roles may overlap. Direct the groups to discuss and distribute the roles—but tell students that everyone is expected to contribute to the creation of the story.

9. Confirm that there are no additional questions about the project, and then ask groups to begin working on their stories. Remind them that they can use print images to inspire their stories and that creating a plot chart can help them organize their narratives.

10. Based on the available time in your schedule for this project, set and communicate the time limits for story development and poster creation as well as for practicing the group presentation. I usually provide about 30 minutes for story development and poster creation and 15 minutes for presentation preparation.

11. Circulate and make sure groups are including the required project elements, offering support and suggestions as needed. To check, you might ask prompting questions:

- *Where does this story take place?*

- *Do you have an image or drawing for the setting?*

- *How does the setting affect the mood of your story?*

- *Can you write another sentence describing the conflict to make sure it's clear?*

- *Have you decided how to divide the speaking roles during the presentation?*

12. After the poster preparations are complete, guide the class through the group-presentation process, with the "audience" groups using the peer-feedback form to provide feedback to each presenting group. (Note: In large classes, for the sake of time, you may have several groups present simultaneously in different areas of the classroom to sets of three or four audience groups.)

13. After each group presents its poster and receives applause, comments, and questions from you and the class, give the audience a few minutes to complete the feedback forms. At the end of class, share the forms with the groups and then collect them so you can review and evaluate the peer-feedback process.

EXTENSION

Follow-up Writing Task

For homework after the poster presentations, ask each student to write a three-paragraph reflection on the project:

- **Paragraph one:** Summarize your group's fictional-story poster, including the basic plot, character(s), setting, conflict, rising action, and resolution.

- **Paragraph two:** Describe your role within your group and your experience with the project. What did you contribute to the story and the poster? What did you talk about during the presentation? What did you like or dislike about the project?

- **Paragraph three:** Describe the peer feedback your group received. What did your classmates write about your group's poster and/or your presentation? Was it helpful? Why or why not?

VARIATION

Digital-Poster Project

Modify the procedures described above to use this project idea in virtual or flipped classroom settings:

- Instead of creating a physical poster, each group will create a digital poster or brief e-slideshow. For each group of students, create a Google Slides presentation (or a similar digital-presentation format that supports collaborative editing), giving each student in the group editing permission. Name each presentation "Group 1," "Group 2," and so on for now; ask the groups to add their story's title when they know what it is (for example, "Group 1 – Lost in Osaka"). Set a limit on the number of slides each group can use; this can help students keep their presentations focused (a total of four to six slides works well). Whichever digital tools and apps you decide to use— and these days, there are many to choose from—be sure to streamline the process and resources so that students don't get "digital tool overwhelm."

- When sharing the assignment instructions, explain that students will be working together on one digital slide presentation for their fictional-story presentation. Tell students that they will collaborate on the presentation by using your learning management system's virtual meeting software, Zoom meeting breakout rooms, or another free online meeting tool selected for your context.

- When meeting virtually with your class, share an example digital-poster presentation file, highlighting the required assignment components and reviewing technical features your students may not be familiar with (how to insert images, shapes, and drawings; how to change text color and font size; and so on). Suggest or demonstrate how to use open-access image databases such as Pixabay.com or Unsplash.com to locate graphics for their posters. If you prefer, you could create a short screencast video that explains the instructions and demonstrates key project components.

- Support student groups as they meet virtually. Visit each group's meeting room to make sure that the group is on track to complete the project; ask guiding questions such as those listed in Step 11 of the Procedure section.

- Share and evaluate the presentations during a whole-class virtual meeting. As an alternative, student groups can record their presentations, and "audience" students can watch and provide peer feedback on a selection of the presentation videos.

REFERENCE

Vari, T. J. 2020. Teaching the elements of literature using stories from infancy to age-appropriate. Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools. https://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/initiative_06.03.02_u

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