

MEMBERSHIP

HOW STORIES WORK



About this activity

In this activity, students learn some fundamental principles of story.

- ▶ **Language level:** A2 upwards
- ▶ **Main task:** Speaking, storybuilding
- ▶ **Topic:** Story structure and storytelling principles
- ▶ **Language focus:** Terms that are related to story (*character, setting, plot, stakes, etc.*)

For this activity, you will need the following:

- **The worksheet** on page 5 (one for each student)
- **The handout** on page 6 (one for each student)



Note: For all materials and discussion, go to the corresponding page in the Resources section:

<https://membership.lessonstream.com/resources/how-stories-work/>

Storybuilding

This lesson plan is intended to introduce students to some fundamental principles of how stories work. Page 6 includes a handout that students can refer to when creating stories of their own. It can complement any of the activities in the Resources section tagged *Storybuilding*.

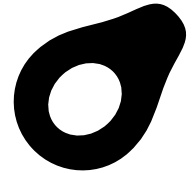
Credits

- The idea for the first part of this activity comes from Jane Spiro's book *Storybuilding* (Resource Books for Teachers, Oxford University Press 2006).
- Thanks to Chris Rose (CD Rose) for contributing to this lesson plan with some valuable guidance and feedback.


Activity outline


1. Give students the following text which you can write on the board, dictate or use for a dictogloss:


John was making guacamole. He took a ripe avocado, cut it in half and removed the stone. He scooped out the green flesh with a spoon and put it in a bowl. Then he added some lime juice, a chopped tomato and some chopped onion. Finally, he mashed all the ingredients together.



Note: You might prefer to use one of the following texts:

 Petunia, the parrot, sat on her eggs. She sat, and sat, and sat, and sat. Then one day there was a *peck-peck*, and a baby parrot walked out. (From *Storybuilding* by Jane Spiro.)

 Jennifer was walking in the park. She walked past the lake and then she sat on a bench. She watched some children playing. Then she went home.

 Once upon a time, there was a lovely little sausage called Baldrick. And it lived happily ever after. (From *Ink and Incapability*, the third episode of *Blackadder the Third*)

2. Ask students to look at the text and decide whether or not it is a story. Have a vote to see how opinions are divided.

Note: At this stage, students have to commit one way or another. They cannot change their answer to “this is a bad story”, for example.

3. Put students into pairs or small groups and ask them to write as many reasons as possible for both opinions:

- It is a story because ...
- It isn't a story because ...

4. Once students have done this, invite them to share their reasons. You can write these on the board. You will find a list of possible answers and ideas on the next page with some useful words and phrases **in bold**.

It is a story because ...

- It has **a main character**. His name is John.
- The first line sounds like the start of a story (“John was making guacamole.”)
- It has **a beginning, a middle and an end**.
- Things happen in a story. In this case, John makes guacamole.
- Stories involve change and there is change here. We start with ingredients and end up with guacamole.

It is not a story because ...

- It’s just a description of someone making lunch.
- Nothing interesting happens while John makes the guacamole.
- It is not **compelling**. There is no **emotional investment** for the reader.
- A name on its own is not a character. We know nothing about John.
- There is no **conflict** – no problems or difficulties for John.
- Stories involve **transformational change** in people – not food!

5. On the board or screen write the following words:

- | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|------------|----------|
| • Causality | • Character | • Conflict | • Plot |
| • Resolution | • Setting | • Setup | • Stakes |

Note: You can also provide equivalent terms in your students’ first language(s). ChatGPT is quite effective for doing this.

My instruction to ChatGPT:

The following terms relate to story and how stories work. Please suggest equivalent terms in Spanish: Causality, character, conflict, plot, resolution, setting, setup, stakes

ChatGPT’s response:

Causalidad, personaje, conflicto, trama, resolución, escenario/entorno, configuración/preparación, apuestas

6. Tell students that each of these words refers to stories and how they work. Put students into pairs or groups and ask them to speculate about/share their understanding of what each term means and what it refers to.

7. Listen to students' ideas without giving feedback. Then give out copies of the worksheet on page 5 and ask students to fill the 8 gaps the 8 words.

Note: Strong A2 students should be able to complete the worksheet with the help of a good dictionary. For B1 students, there are just two words that they probably won't know. Ask them to find a word that means:

- A difficulty or problem that prevents you from achieving something (Answer = *an obstacle*)
- The parts of a building that are below the ground and support the rest of it (Answer = *the foundations*)

8. Go over the answers:

- | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| (a) Character | (b) Plot | (c) Causality | (d) Setting |
| (e) Setup | (f) Conflict | (g) Stakes | (h) Resolution |

9. Ask students to go back to the guacamole text at the start of this activity. Ask them to rework it so that it starts to look more like a story. You can ask them to think about any of the following:

- **The character and the setup:** Who is John? Perhaps he has a very important reason for making guacamole.
- **The setting:** We might assume that John is making guacamole in a kitchen. But maybe not. How could the setting change things?
- **The conflict and story stakes:** Can you think of any obstacles that John has to get past in order to make the guacamole?

10. After listening to your students' ideas, give out the handout on page 6. Let students read it and then give the the following task:

Think of a story that you know quite well. It can be from a film, a book, a play, a TV series, etc. Then look at the handout. Does the story fit the structure shown? Most importantly:

- Who is the main character and what is their goal?
- What is the obstacle that prevents them from achieving their goal?

11. Now ask students to describe their story and refer to goals, obstacles and story stakes when possible. Other students should listen and try to identify the story. Get the ball rolling with an example of your own:

In this story, a teacher gets involved in a life of crime. His goal is to launder the millions of dollars he makes so that he can secure his family's financial future. But the obstacle is that he has terminal cancer and has limited time to do so. (Answer = *Breaking Bad*)



LessonStream WORKSHEET

How stories work

Use the words in the box to fill the gaps below:

- Causality
- Conflict
- Resolution
- Setup
- Character
- Plot
- Setting
- Stakes

ONE. Three essential ingredients for a story

1. _____ (a): Stories are usually about people. And if they are not about people, they are often about creatures that behave and think like people (e.g. *Animal Farm*, *Toy Story*, *Avatar*). To really care about the story, we need to know about the people in it.
2. _____ (b): This is the series of connected events in the story. The important word here is *connected*. In stories, things happens as a result of other things. This is called _____ (c).
3. _____ (d): If a story is a journey, it is important to know where we are at each step along the way. Characters are born out of their environments. And environments have a direct effect on the plot. In some cases, we might also need to know *when* events take place.

TWO. Story parts

It is often said that stories happen in three parts.



1. The _____ (e) (the beginning): This is the story's foundations. We introduce the characters and provide information about the setting. Importantly, there should be something that the main character wants or needs – a goal.
2. The _____ (f) (the middle): This is when things start to get exciting. A problem enters the story and stops the main character from getting what they want. We can now ask: How is the character going to get past this obstacle? Will they achieve their goal?

Will they or won't they?

All stories need some sort of conflict. Sometimes the conflict will lead to questions about whether the main character will succeed or fail.

- Will Dorothy get to the Emerald City, find *The Wizard of Oz* and return to Kansas?
- Will *Romeo and Juliet* live happily ever after despite their rival families?
- Can Charlotte the spider save Wilbur the pig from slaughter? (*Charlotte's Web*)

Such *will-they-or-won't-they* questions are called the story _____ (g).

3. The _____ (h) (the end): This is when we find out if the character achieved their goal. Whatever happened, stories involve change. What does the character know now that they didn't know at the beginning? Or how has the world around them changed?

Dorothy, a young girl from Kansas, is caught in a tornado and transported to the magical land of Oz. The only way for her to get home is to walk the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City and get help from *The Wizard of Oz*.



SETUP

- **Who:** Introduce the main character.
- **Where:** Tell us about the setting.
- **What:** There should be something that the main character wants or needs – a goal.

Unfortunately, the Wicked Witch of the West has other plans for Dorothy!

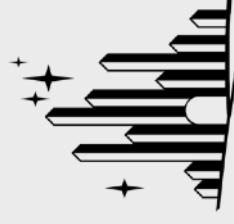


CONFLICT

This is when things start to get exciting. Introduce a problem into the story – something that stops the character from getting what they want. We can now ask:

- Will the character achieve their goal?
- How will they get past this obstacle?

Eventually Dorothy defeats the witch, arrives at the Emerald City, meets the wizard and returns to Kansas. She learns a lesson about the importance of home and the people she loves.



RESOLUTION

- How does your story end?
- Does the character achieve their goal?

Whatever happens, stories involve change:

- What does the character know now that they didn't know at the beginning?
- Or how has the world around them changed?

Causality: in a story, events are connected. In other words, things happen because other things happen. Avoid “and then ...”

