

# EXPOSITION

The word “exposition” comes from Latin, meaning “to put forth.” During the exposition of a narrative, the author introduces the major characters of the story, including their physical descriptions, history, behaviors, motivations, fears, and relationships to other characters. During this stage of the story, the author establishes the setting by determining the time and location where the action will take place.

The mood of the story – that is, the emotional atmosphere (for example, the story may be light-hearted [“Once upon a time...”] or scary [“It was a dark and stormy night...”]) – is often established during the exposition, as is the tone – the way in which the narrator tells the story (for example, the narrator might have a romantic way of describing what happens, or a bitter and ironic take on the events).

Although exposition often takes place at the beginning of a narrative, sometimes it is woven throughout (often through the use of flashbacks) as a way of starting the action of the story sooner.

In well-crafted exposition, only the details that are essential to understanding the progression of the story are including. This principle is sometimes referred to as “Chekov’s Gun” – the Russian writer Anton Chekov is reputed to have said “Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.”

## QUESTIONS ABOUT EXPOSITION:

1. What important events occurred before the story began?
2. Who is the protagonist of the story? Describe that person’s physical traits, history, behaviors, motivations, fears, and relationships to other characters. In what ways is the protagonist a hero, and in what ways is the protagonist an anti-hero?
3. Who are the secondary characters in the story? Are any of them foils (contrasting characters) to the main character?
4. What is the world of the story like? Does it take place today, in the past, or in the future? Is the setting realistic, or does it take place in a world unlike our own?
5. What are the rules (official laws, unspoken expectations, limitations of physics/technology/magic) of the world in which the story takes place?
6. Who is the narrator of the story? (Is it told in first-person, second-person, third-person limited, or third-person omniscient?) Can we trust the narrator’s version of events? What sort of tone does the narrator use (for example, humorous? detached? wistful)?
7. What is the mood of the story? What does this element suggest about what might happen later in the story?

# RIISING ACTION

The rising action stage begins when something occurs to disrupt the balance established during exposition. (This event is sometimes called the “inciting incident” or “catalyst.”) This disruption creates a conflict that the protagonist must face. It could be a conflict with another character (called the “antagonist” – not necessarily a villain, but someone who gets in the protagonist’s way and prevents the main character from getting what he or she wants). Alternatively, the protagonist could be in conflict with society as a whole, with the forces of nature, fate, God, or even with him or herself. Rising action can include multiple kinds of conflict – for example, the protagonist might be fighting against a challenging enemy but may also have to confront his or her own flaws. The expression “the plot thickens” refers to the complexity introduced by these conflicts.

Rising action usually involves multiple steps, including smaller challenges that will prepare the protagonist for the most significant struggle. The steps or episodes that take place during the rising action stage of the story often force the protagonist to change by developing a greater understanding of him or herself and the world. The protagonist may grow stronger as a result of these challenges. Secondary characters – mentors and sidekicks – may help the protagonist along in the journey.

Rising action creates tension by introducing uncertainty about the consequences of events. The reader should feel an incentive to continue reading to find out what happens next. The more significant the conflict, the greater the drama will be – if the protagonist has a lot at stake, the reader should feel more deeply invested in discovering the outcome.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT RISING ACTION:

1. What is the inciting incident or catalyst that changes the situation?
2. What kinds of conflict does the protagonist face? What does the protagonist stand to lose?
3. Who are the primary antagonists in the story, and how do they get in the way of what the protagonist wants? In what ways can you sympathize with the antagonists?
4. How do other characters help the protagonist?
5. What are the steps in the rising action? How do the smaller episodes prepare the protagonist for his or her greatest challenge?
6. How does the protagonist change during this stage of the plot? How do their values and attitude evolve?
7. What different kinds of power do the various characters have?

# CLIMAX

The term “climax” comes from the Greek word for “ladder” – the climax is at the very top of the slope of the plot triangle, the point of greatest tension and drama. The climax occurs when the greatest conflict of the story comes to a head, and the protagonist must make a choice or take an action that will have significant consequences. Often, the climax is an opportunity for the protagonist to demonstrate how he or she has changed from the person he or she was at the beginning of the story. The choices made by characters in the climax can reveal their true feelings about what is most important.

In stories with multiple narrative threads – sets of characters and conflicts, or subplots – those different storylines often converge.

By the end of the climax, the uncertainty introduced by the conflicts is resolved, and major questions about the story are answered.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT CLIMAX:

1. What event leads to the climax?
2. How have the other challenges the protagonist has faced prepared him or her for the climax?
3. What choices does the protagonist have to make? What do those decisions reveal about him or her?
4. What roles do the secondary characters and the antagonist play in the climax?
5. Who wins? Who loses? Explain.

# FALLING ACTION

During falling action, the immediate consequences from the outcome of the climax are made apparent. Minor conflicts, or conflicts resulting from the climax, are resolved. Characters struggle to come to terms with the new situation.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT FALLING ACTION:

1. How does the protagonist feel about the outcome of the climax?
2. What has changed as a result of the climax?

# RESOLUTION

At the resolution stage (also sometimes called *dénouement*), balance is reestablished. The conflicts of the story have all been resolved, and so the dramatic tension is reduced. Often (but not always) the major characters will have experienced significant internal or external changes. If there are lessons to be learned from the story, they are made apparent by the resolution.

The writer Kurt Vonnegut said that a well-crafted ending to a story should feel as though insects ate the last few paragraphs of the paper – that is, the reader should have a sense of what will happen after the story has ended without the author explicitly stating it.

Resolutions also often take the main characters back to the same place (physically or emotionally) at which the story began as a way of calling the reader's attention to what has changed (or what has not changed). This is called a full-circle ending.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT RESOLUTION:

1. How does the author give the reader a sense of conclusion and completion?
2. What will happen to the characters after the story is over?
3. What has changed from the beginning of the story? What had remained the same?
4. What is the mood of the ending? (for example, triumphant? ironic? bittersweet? tragic?)
5. How does the ending of the story relate to the beginning?