The Elements of Narrative
*Handout adapted from http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/hhecht/The%20Elements%20of%20Fiction.htm*

Plot, Setting, Character, Conflict, Symbol, and Point of View are the main elements which fiction writers use to develop a story and its Theme.

Because literature is an art and not a science, it is impossible to specifically quantify any of these elements within any story or to guarantee that each will be present in any given story. Setting might be the most important element in one story and almost nonexistent in another.

Just as a Crime Scene Investigator cannot approach a crime scene looking for a specific clue (e.g., shell casings), you as a reader cannot approach a story deciding to look for a specific element, such as Symbol. To assume could blind you to important elements. Both the CSI team and you must examine the entire “area” carefully to determine what is present and how it is important.

With that understanding, let’s examine the elements.

**PLOT**

You may be familiar with plot already, but it is, nonetheless, important. It was what got us interested in reading in the first place. It was the carrot on the string that pulled us through a story as we wanted to see what would happen next. **It is the order of events in a story.**

That said, realize that plot is only sometimes the most important element of a good story; however, it is important to have a good understanding what the plot is. As much as I’ve always loved surprise endings, if the only thing a film or a story has is a great twist ending, it doesn’t have anything on a second look.

Also, it’s worth noting that recent fiction and film have deemphasized plot, frequently stressing character or conflict for example. In film, for example, think David Lynch or *Pulp Fiction*.

1. **Exposition – The Introduction / Establish**
   a. Often introduces the characters (see below)
   b. Often introduces the setting (see below)
   c. May introduce limited information about the character (more likely in a short story or non-fiction short piece like an article than in a novel, or in an extended essay, article or book).

2. **Rising Action – The Intensification of the Conflict**
   a. Often a series of small conflicts on the way to the climax.
   b. The nature (type) and objects (stakes – what the characters risk gaining or losing) of the conflict become apparent.
   c. Tension increases, overall, although depending on the length and complexity of the story, it may alternate between increasing, relaxing slightly, increasing more, relaxing slightly, etc.

3. **Climax – The Point of No Return**
   a. This may or may not be the “most exciting” moment in the story.
   b. It is the moment/events in the story after which nothing will be the same for the character(s)
   c. The outcome of the conflict is determined.
4. Falling Action – The Dénouement
   a. The events immediately after the climax of the story.
   b. Clears up what happens as a direct result of the conflict’s climax.
   c. Often still involves some tension and stakes for the characters.

5. Resolution – The Wrap Up
   a. Gives an idea of what might happen next, or at least the long-term results of the conflict having been resolved.
   b. May suggest a continuation of the story and/or the characters’ existence in some way.
   c. In short stories, may be abrupt.
   d. In some novels, this is dealt with in an epilogue.

**SETTING**
Stories actually have two types of setting: Physical and Chronological.

The physical setting is where the story takes place. The “where” can be very general—a small farming community, for example—or very specific—a two story white frame house at 739 Hill Street in Scott City, Missouri.

This could be the place in the world (or universe), or a place as specific as a broom closet under a staircase in a particular house, on a particular street, in a particular town, country etc.

Likewise, the chronological setting, the “when,” can be equally general or specific. For example, stories can take place in present or past time, a specific time of day, etc.

**The author’s choices are important.** For example, Shirley Jackson gives virtually no clues as to where or when her story “The Lottery” is set. Examination suggests that she wants the story to be universal, not limited by time or place.

**CHARACTER**
What type of individuals are the main characters? Brave, cowardly, bored, obnoxious? If you think that the protagonist (main character) is brave, you should be able to tell where in the story you got that perception.

The antagonist is not, as some assume, “the bad” guy. The antagonist is the force or character that is in the way of the protagonist (main character) meeting their goals and successfully navigating the conflict.

In literature, as in real life, we can evaluate character three ways: what the individual says, what the individual does, and what others say about him or her, but the most important reason to figure these things out is to understand WHY the character said and did these things.

Characters may be of a “type” or an archetype. **Character archetypes** can be iconic (referring to a specific character or person in a sort of cultural or classical allusion), generic (of a type that might be found in any family or community) or elemental (usually specific to a role in society and/or character traits).
CONFLICT
Two types of conflict are possible: **External** and **Internal**.

**External conflict**
- could be character against nature (people in a small lifeboat on a rough ocean)
  - Jaws (film), Moby Dick (novel), Into Thin Air (nonfiction)
- character against character
  - Harry Potter (novels and films)
- character against society
  - To Kill A Mockingbird (novel), 1984 (novel)
- character against technology / machine
  - 2001 (film), Mars (film)
- character against fate, the gods, the supernatural
  - Oedipus Rex (play), The Odyssey (epic poetry), Buffy the Vampire Slayer (multimedia)

**Internal conflict**
- character against self: happens within one character.
  - For example, a character may have a strong sense of honesty, but when his wife asks him about his faithfulness, he questions how honest he wants to be. This is an internal conflict.
  - Hamlet (play), Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (novel)

Film and fiction sometimes tend to emphasize external conflict not simply because “it’s more interesting” but also because it’s easier to write. In a film script, you merely have to write “A five-minute car chase follows” and you’ve filled five minutes. How long would it take to write five minutes worth of dialogue?

**Note:** particularly in extensive pieces like novels and books, there may be multiple conflicts evident, particularly in subplots. Usually when you are looking for “THE” conflict in a piece, you are looking for the central conflict faced by the protagonist in reaching their priority goals.

**SYMBOL**
Simply put, a symbol is something which means something else. Frequently it’s a tangible physical thing which symbolizes something intangible.

The basic point of a story or a poem rarely depends solely on understanding a symbol. However important or interesting they might be, symbols are usually “frosting,” things which add interest or depth.

It’s normal for you to be skeptical about symbols. If I tell you that the tree in a certain story symbolizes the Garden of Eden, you may ask “Is that really there or did you make it up?” or “How do you know what the author meant?”
Literature teachers may indeed “over-interpret” at times, find symbols that really aren’t there. But if you don’t occasionally chase white rabbits that aren’t there, you’ll rarely find the ones that are there.

In the film 2001, a computer named HAL is controlling a flight to Jupiter. When the human crew decides to abort the mission, HAL—programmed to guarantee the success of the mission—“logically” begins to kill off the humans. Science fiction’s oldest theme: man develops a technology which he not only cannot control, it controls him.

Consider HAL’s name. Add one letter to each of the letters in his name. Change the H to I, the A to B, and the L to M. When you realize how close HAL is to IBM, the first response is disbelief. But clearly the closeness of the names is either an absolute accident or an intentional choice. As much as we are startled by the latter, we probably agree that the odds against the former—it being an accident—are astronomical.

Somebody thought that up. Or maybe a computer.

POINT OF VIEW
Point of View is the “narrative point of view,” how the story is told—more specifically, who tells it.

There are two distinctly different types of point of view and each of those two types has two variations.

In the First Person point of view, the story is told by a character within the story, a character using the first person pronoun, I.

If the narrator is the main character, the point of view is first person protagonist. Mark Twain lets Huck Finn narrate his own story in this point of view.

If the narrator is a secondary character, the point of view is first person observer. Arthur Conan Doyle lets Sherlock Holmes’ friend Dr. Watson tell the Sherlock Holmes story. Doyle frequently gets credit for telling detective stories this way, but Edgar Allan Poe perfected the technique half a century earlier.

In the Third Person point of view, the story is not told by a character but by an “invisible author,” using the third person pronoun (he, she, or it) to tell the story. Instead of Huck Finn speaking directly to us, “My name’s Huckleberry Finn” and telling us “I killed a pig and spread the blood around so people would think I’d been killed”, the third person narrator would say: “He killed a pig and spread the blood…..”

If the third person narrator gives us the thoughts of characters (He wondered where he’d lost his baseball glove), then he is a third person omniscient (all knowing) narrator.
If the third person narrator only gives us information which could be recorded by a camera and microphone (no thoughts), then he is a third person dramatic narrator or third person limited.

In summary, then, here are the types of point of view:

**First Person Narrator**
- Protagonist
- Observer

**Third Person Narrator**
- Omniscient
- Dramatic

Different points of view can emphasize different things. A first person protagonist narrator would give us access to the thoughts of the main character. If the author doesn’t want us to have that access, he could use the first person observer, for example, or the third person dramatic.

There is a second person point of view but it used most often in legal or very formal documents using items like “the person” or “the individual”, although it is also sometimes used in advertising, song lyrics and instructions with the use of “you”.

**THEME**
Theme isn’t so much an element of fiction as much as the result of the entire story. The theme is the main idea the writer of the poem or story wants the reader to understand and remember.

You may have used the word “Moral” in discussing theme, but it’s not a good synonym because “moral” implies teaching about positive (helpful, healthy) values. And not all themes are positive, nor do all themes necessarily aim to teach an audience (author’s purpose).

One word—love, for example—may be a topic; but it cannot be a theme.

A theme is a statement about a topic. It typically implies a judgement or opinion.

For example: “The theme of the story is that love is the most important thing in the world.” That’s a cliché, of course, but it is a theme.

Not all stories or poems (or films) have an overriding “universal” theme.