

Fiction

refers to works of prose that have imaginary elements. Although fiction can be inspired by actual events and real people, it usually springs from writers' imaginations. Fiction is meant to entertain, but it can also provide the reader with a deeper understanding of life. The two major types of fiction are novels and short stories. A novel is a long, often complex work. A short story is much shorter than a novel and can usually be read at one sitting. Both novels and short stories contain four basic elements: **plot**, **character**, **setting**, and **theme**. Use the following passages from "Plainswoman" by Williams Forrest to learn more about the elements of fiction.

Plot

The sequence of events in a story is called the story's **plot**. The plot is like a blueprint of what happens, when it happens, and to whom it happens. Plots are almost always built around conflicts—problems or struggles between opposing forces. Although plots differ, a plot usually includes the four stages of development described in the diagram below: **exposition** (introductory material that gives the background of the story), **rising action**, **climax**, and **falling action** (sometimes called **resolution**).

YOUR TURN Read the passage at the right, which is taken from the exposition of "Plainswoman." What potential conflict is introduced? Is there only one?

PLOT

Her pregnancy told her that she should hurry back East before the solemn grip of winter fell on the land. She was afraid to have the child touch her within, acknowledge its presence, when the long deep world below the mountains closed in and no exit was available—for the body and for the spirit.

Her baby had not yet wakened, but soon it would. But gusts of wind and a forbidding iron shadow on the hills told her that the greatest brutality of this ranch world was about to start. And then one morning Pleny came in for his breakfast, holding the long finger of his left hand in the fingers of his right.

PLOT AT A GLANCE

Exposition

- introduces characters and setting
- supplies background
- sets tone

Rising Action

- introduces complications
- builds suspense
- is when plot "thickens"

Climax

- is turning point of story
- is the moment when suspense reaches its peak
- results in change for main character
- sometimes occurs at end of story, without being followed by falling action

Falling Action

- occurs after climax of story
- resolves conflict
- ties up loose ends of story

Character

The **characters** in a story are the people, animals, or imaginary creatures who take part in the action. In most stories, the events center on one or more **main characters**. The other characters, called **minor characters**, interact with the main characters and help move the story along. Characters can be dynamic or static. **Dynamic** characters change as a result of events, whereas **static** characters remain unchanged. Writers show characters' growth and change by presenting carefully chosen details.

YOUR TURN What details in this passage give you clues to understanding the very different characters of Nora and Pleny?

Setting

The **setting** of a story is the particular time and place in which the events occur. A story may be set in a real or an imaginary place. The events may occur in the past, the present, or the future. Vivid descriptions help readers picture the setting in their minds. Setting can play an important role in what happens to the characters and how they respond to problems.

YOUR TURN In this passage, what words and phrases help evoke the setting?

Theme

A **theme** in a work of fiction is a perception about life or human nature that the writer conveys to the reader. Most themes are not stated directly.

Themes can be revealed by

- a work's title
- key phrases and statements about big ideas
- the ways the characters change and the lessons they learn about life

A theme in a short story might, for example, be "Life is only as good as you make it" or "Good relationships take work." In this passage from "Plainswoman," the idea that "birth, survival, help, lay . . . in her heart and in her hands" is a clue to the theme of the story.

CHARACTER

Nora had been thinking of New England when Pleny came in— . . . of men with businesslike faces and women who drank tea and read poetry. . . . She was thinking of home and comfort, and then Pleny walked in; the dust trailed around his ankles, and the smell of cattle seemed to cling to his boots. A thousand miles of cattle and plains and work and hurt were clung like webs in his face.

SETTING

After a time they were on a rough train that ran among hills and plains, and after a while there was nothing to see but an endless space with spring lying flat on it in small colorful flowers and with small bleak towns in erratic spaces, and the men on the train laughed roughly and smelled of whiskey. Some men rode on the roof of the car and kicked their heels, fired guns and sang to a wild accordion.

THEME

She heard the wind and many messages and she imagined Pleny waiting. She felt a sense of response, of obligation, of angry maternal love, as if all the wistful hope and female passion of her nature had been fused, struck into life, made able because she was woman, and was here, and birth, survival, help, lay potent, sweet, powerful in her heart and in her hands.