

Writing on Plot

Using “The Lamp at Noon” by Sinclair Ross

Definition

Plot is the storyline or organization of incidents. One incident follows another *not simply because time passes* but because **effects** follow **causes**. These are due to the **conflict**.

Conflict, the struggle between two opposing forces, usually between the protagonist and someone or something else, is the controlling impulse which connects the causes and effects of the series of incidents. Conflict brings out the extremes of human energy, causing characters to engage in decisions, actions, and reactions. A **dilemma** is a situation in which a character must make a difficult choice between two disagreeable, undesirable, or unfavourable alternatives. Plots usually build to a **climax** and may have **denouement** where the plot and conflict is unknotted. For example, the following does **not** form a plot: “The king died, and then the queen died.” This sequence of action does not form a plot because *it lacks motivation and causation*. However, the following **does** form plot: “The king died, and then the queen died of grief.” The simple phrase “of grief” shows that one thing (grief) controls or overcomes another (the normal desire to live). Thus, motivation and causation enter and form plot.

Examples of some kinds of conflict

- human vs. human
- human vs. himself
- human vs. the environment
- human vs. society
- human vs. animal
- human vs. machine

Writing about plot

A writing assignment about plot is an analysis of the conflict and its developments. **DO NOT SIMPLY RETELL THE STORY!** Assume the reader already knows the story. Instead, the discussion should be organized around the central conflict and its effects.

To help write about the plot of a short story, one should first process the following:

Ask questions to help in pre-writing

1. Who are the protagonist and the antagonist, and how do their characteristics put them in conflict?
2. How does the action develop from the conflict?
3. What problems does the major character face? How does the character deal with these problems?

4. How do the major characters achieve (or not achieve) their goals? What obstacles do they overcome? What obstacles overcome them?
5. At the end are the characters happy or unhappy, successful or unsuccessful, changed or unchanged, satisfied or unsatisfied, enlightened or ignorant? How has the resolution (denouement) of the major conflict produced these results?

Organize the discussion on plot

1. In the beginning make **selective** reference to the main characters, circumstances, and issues of the plot. Assume your reader has read the story.
2. Then stress the major elements of the conflict. Rather than describe everything a character does, focus on his conflict and the resulting actions.
3. If the plot is broad, that is contains elements of chance or historical perspective or issues, then this should be added to the discussion.
4. In the conclusion summarize the main points and perhaps briefly indicate the impact produced by the conflict. Additional ideas might focus on whether the author has arranged actions and dialogue effectively.

SAMPLE PARAGRAPHS

The following paragraphs discuss the plot of the short story “The Lamp at Noon” by Sinclair Ross.

1.

In “The Lamp at Noon” by Sinclair Ross the main conflict is between Ellen and Paul over whether they should stay on the farm or leave it. Ellen wants to leave because she sees no future in staying there. There is a dust storm blowing all the good soil away and that means they won’t be able to grow any crops. In the story they argue a lot because they both work very hard, but are still very poor. Paul doesn’t want to move into the city and work for Ellen’s father. He would rather stay on the farm and continue to try and make it work; he refuses to listen to Ellen and retreats to the barn to get away from Ellen’s nagging. After warning Paul that she cannot take it anymore, Ellen finally flips out and runs out into the storm with her baby. As a result the baby dies, but Ellen doesn’t realize he’s dead and asks Paul to hold him carefully away from the wind so he doesn’t get hurt. So in the end Paul has lost his son, his wife has gone crazy, and his farm is ruined. It’s pretty sad.

2.

In “The Lamp at Noon” by Sinclair Ross the fierce windstorm raging outside Paul and Ellen’s prairie farm mirrors and intensifies the conflict between the husband and the wife over whether to stay on the farm and continue to fight the storms, drought, and the darkness at noon, or accept defeat and move into the city. Ellen too has worked very hard to make the farm a success, but the elements have worked against them, yet she cannot convince her husband that their efforts are futile for they are living at a subsistence level. Furthermore, she is afraid for their son, that he will suffocate from the dust, just as she is suffocating from the restrictive and futile life she is living. She argues with Paul every time she sees him and warns him that she is frightened and feels caged. She has no hope. Paul, on the other hand, more optimistically, convinces himself that after the storm they can start again and that the farm can be prosperous one day. This stubbornness to stay is rooted in his desire not only to master the elements but also to show his more educated wife that in spite of all the hardships he can forge a home for his family out of this wilderness. He insists on maintaining his independence on the farm as opposed to moving into the city to work for Ellen’s father. His need to be in control dominates his decisions. Thus they argue and he, to get away from his wife’s pleas, stays in the barn with the animals instead of in the house comforting his wife. Even when the dust storm was finally over and he saw the results, the “naked fields”, his “instincts of loyalty to the land” were too strong to abandon. As he walked back to the house, his thoughts concerned how he would justify his intention not to abandon the farm to his wife in the face of such overwhelming desecration. However, it was too late. Ellen had broken out of the house with the baby and, although she is found alive, she is distraught, while ironically their baby has suffocated from the very dust she feared while she was safe inside the house. Thus, this was not a story wherein an man conquered the elements, rather the elements put immense pressure on the relationship between a husband and a wife to disastrous consequences.

Quick Scale: Grade 10 Writing About Plot

Writing is usually required to be carefully revised, edited, and proofread.

Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
<i>SNAPSHOT</i>	<i>The writing features problems with style, form, and mechanics that make it difficult to determine the purpose and meaning. Reflects little knowledge of plot and writing conventions and techniques.</i>	<i>The writing is generally clear, with a beginning, middle, and end. Development may seem uneven. The writer has difficulty controlling the form and style. Tends to tell about events rather than “show” them.</i>	<i>The writing is clear and carefully developed, with some sense of audience and purpose. Some variety and engaging features. May overexplain in places, telling rather than showing.”</i>	<i>The writing creates an impact, with a sense of vitality, economy, and finesse. Features some complex, engaging ideas, language, structures, and techniques. Relies on “showing,” not telling.</i>
MEANING • sense of audience • understanding of the topic • plot • conflict • literary devices • development • support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> little sense of audience or purpose (unfocussed) may be too short with few examples and details no underlying structure or development (ideas not developed) inadequate material and understanding of plot and its elements details, examples, or quotes not clearly linked to topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> some sense of audience; little impact includes most plot elements (basic understanding) easy-to-follow development with a simple understanding of conflict and elements of plot simple details, examples, or quotes sometimes linked to topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sense of audience; some impact clear, focused thesis with sound understanding of elements of plot clearly and logically developed demonstrating good understanding of the main elements of plot relevant details and examples support main ideas of the essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strong sense of audience; engaging clear if not provocative thesis; strong sense of direction efficiently developed around relatively mature understanding of elements of plot; attempts to interpret well-chosen details, examples, and quotations
STYLE • voice and tone • syntax • word choice • techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> little awareness of audience simple sentences and coordination; limited range basic vocabulary; may make errors; repetitive as well as colloquial immature style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> voice and tone may be inconsistent some sentence variety; often problems with subordination some variety in word choice; not concise direct, conversational; difficulty expressing abstract ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> appropriate voice and tone varies sentences varied word choice; some complex vocabulary some risk-taking to create effects; uses a variety of stylistic or rhetorical techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> creates and sustains effective voice and tone; may use humour or irony syntactic maturity effective, economical word choice takes risks, often showing originality and inventiveness
FORM • beginning • structure and sequence • transitions • paragraphing • ending	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> beginning unclear sequencing is often confusing few transitions; may seem disjointed paragraphing illogical or missing weak ending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> organization adequate but ineffective connections among ideas often unclear transitions awkward; some paragraphs not well developed conclusions often short or formulaic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> organization carefully and chronologically structure transitions make connections clear competently developed paragraphs explicit, logical conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> structure appears natural and spontaneous well-chosen transitions create unity effective paragraphing creates continuity ending has some “punch”
CONVENTIONS • spelling • sentence structure and punctuation • usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> frequent noticeable errors in basic sentence structure, spelling, and usage that distract the reader and may interfere with meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> noticeable errors that may cause the reader to pause or reread; often surface errors could be fixed by careful proofreading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> few errors; these do not affect meaning; appears to have been carefully edited and proofread 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> few errors; these do not distract the reader (may only be noticeable when the reader looks for them)