

Story Elements: Character, Plot, & Setting

Imagine you're describing your favorite episode of a TV show to a friend. You would probably tell your friend about the people in the show, what their lives are like, and the things that happened in the episode. Those three things are in every story – whether you read it on a page or view it on a screen – and they are what make the story interesting.

What Are the Elements of a Story?

Each of those three parts of a story have names.

- **Characters:** The people (or sometimes animals)
- **Plot:** The events in the story
- **Setting:** The time and place where the story happens

When we talk about all three together – plot, setting, and characters -- we call them the **elements of a story**. We'll talk about all of them in this resource, but if you only need to go over one of these elements, you can skip to each section by clicking on [Character](#), [Plot](#), or [Setting](#)!

Character: The People in the Story

When we describe a story, we normally talk about what happens in the story. But there wouldn't be a story if there wasn't anyone in the story for those events to happen to. The people (and sometimes animals) in the story are called **characters**.

All of the characters in a story are important, but some types of characters are more important than others. Most stories focus on one character, and that main character is called a **protagonist**.

For a story to be interesting, there must be **conflict**, which is some sort of problem that the protagonist has to deal with. Most often, the conflict in a story happens when the protagonist wants something, but something (or someone) gets in the way. We call the thing that the protagonist wants **motivation**, and the person or thing that gets in the way is called an **antagonist**.

Sometimes, there are other characters in a story that aren't protagonists or antagonists, but they still are important to the story. We normally call these **support characters**, and they might help the reader to better understand the protagonist or the antagonist, or they might help to move the story along.

For more information about comparing and contrasting two characters, see our article, "[Comparing and Contrasting Two Characters](#)."



Character Examples in “Little Red Riding Hood”

Let’s use “Little Red Riding Hood” as an example to talk about characters. If you’ve not read the story, you can read it by clicking on this link: [Little Red Riding Hood \(americanliterature.com\)](http://americanliterature.com)

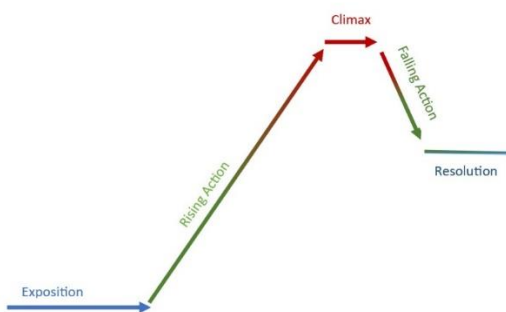
Figuring out the **protagonist** in this story is easy: she’s the character in the title of the story. We know she’s the protagonist because the story focuses on her, and she’s the one that experiences conflict in the story.

Her motivation is to see her grandmother, and the character that keeps her from doing that is the wolf, so he’s the **antagonist**. Red’s mother, her grandmother, and the woodsman are all **support characters**. Her mother gives her the basket and tells her not to stray from the path, which starts the story, and the woodsman saves the day at the end, allowing Red to finally get what she wants.



Plot: What Happens in the Story

You could try to imagine a story where nothing happened, but that story would probably not be written down because it would be boring. The events that happen to the protagonist are called the **plot**. The events in a story normally happen in a specific order, which we call **plot structure**.



Most stories have five parts, and each has an important job to do. The **exposition** sets up the information the reader needs to know to understand the story. The **rising action** is where the conflict is introduced and is the series of events leading up to the climax. At the **climax**, the conflict gets most intense, and the protagonist has to do something to resolve it. Then, the story starts moving towards the end, starting with the **falling action** where we see what happens to the protagonist right after the climax. Finally, the story ends when we get to the **resolution**.

For more information on plot structure and an example, you can check out our guide on [“Plot Structure.”](#)

Setting: Where the Story Takes Place

We've talked about how a story has to happen to a character who experiences the events in the story (the plot). The story also has to happen somewhere, and we call the time and place that the story takes place the **setting**. You can think of the setting as the background or backdrop for the story.



Setting is just as important as plot or character even if it doesn't always seem that way. Where a story takes place often affects the characters and what happens in the story. For instance, try to imagine if "Little Red Riding Hood" happened in a big city today. Red's mother would probably drive her to her grandmother's house, so Red would never meet the wolf, and the conflict of the story never would happen. The setting helps the story to feel real, and it sets up the rules for how the characters will behave in the story.

There are three big parts to understanding setting, which are the **location, time, and mood**. Where the story takes place is **location**. When the story happens is **time**. The words used to describe how the character or reader should feel about the location are called the **mood**.

As the characters go through the plot, time may pass, or they may move to a different location. That means that there's often more than one setting in a story. When you're thinking about setting, it can be helpful to choose a specific point in the story, such as the exposition or the climax, and describe the setting in that part of the story.

Part of Setting	What is it?	Questions to ask yourself
Location	The place where the story and characters are.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does the story take place? • What does it look like? • How do the characters describe the place?
Time	The time period, time of year, and time of day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When does the story take place? • What time period is the story in? • What time of day or year is it?
Mood	The general feeling of the setting. An author can choose words that make a setting feel like a happy place or a scary place or anywhere between.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the place the protagonist is in make you feel? • What words does the author use to make you feel that way?

Setting Examples in “Little Red Riding Hood”

Setting 1: The Forest



Setting 2: Grandmother’s House



	Setting 1: The Forest	Setting 2: Grandmother’s House
Location	A forest. We know there’s a path, lots of trees, and some pretty flowers.	Grandmother’s house. The author tells us it’s deep in the woods, under three oak trees. It’s a small cottage with a door, a bed, a table, and curtains over the windows. The only light is from the windows, which we know because Red can’t see her grandmother until she opens the curtains.
Time	Since there’s a village and woods, it was probably a really long time ago. Red’s mother tells her to set out before it gets hot, so the story starts in the morning, and it’s probably spring or summer.	Later that day, probably afternoon or early evening.
Mood	The author mentions the sunbeams and the pretty flowers, so it’s a pleasant and happy place.	When Red gets there, it’s tense. The door is open, and she feels uneasy going into the dark room.