

## What is Narrative Structure?

Narrative structure is about two things: the content of a story and the form used to tell the story. Two common ways to describe these two parts of narrative structure are story and plot.

Story refers to the raw materials of dramatic action as they might be described in chronological order. Plot refers to how the story is told — the form of storytelling, or the structure, that the story follows.

If we want to analyze narrative structure, we can use “who,” “what,” and “where” questions to look at the story or content of a movie. “How” and “when” questions are used to examine plot structure.

Conventionally, both story and plot are described in terms of how a character’s life is disrupted by an event or change in his/her situation; this causes a series of conflicts that the character(s) must face, including the major conflict that is eventually resolved at the end of the film. “Conflict” in this model can take many forms, be it emotional, interpersonal, or even between the character and his/her physical environment.

To describe story in a film, we would need to answer the following questions:

- Where is the story set?
- What event starts the story?
- Who are the main characters?
- What conflict(s) do they face? What is at stake?
- What happens to the characters as they face this conflict?
- What is the outcome of this conflict?
- What is the ultimate impact on the characters?

To describe the plot structure of the movie, we would need to answer these questions:

- How and when is the major conflict in the story set up?
- How and when are the main characters introduced?
- How is the story moved along so that the characters must face the central conflict?
- How and when is the major conflict set up to propel the film to its conclusion?
- How and when does the film resolve most of the major conflicts set up at the outset?

In each case, story and plot are slightly different ways of analyzing a movie.

From the audience’s perspective, story and plot refer to the different ways movie narratives construct meaning for spectators. Story is about trying to determine the key conflicts, main characters, setting and events. Plot is about how, and at what stages, the key conflicts are set up and resolved. What’s interesting about most of the movies made in Hollywood is that, while the stories may change, the fundamental plot structure is virtually identical.

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