The Trouble with
Beginning, Middle & End

by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence, Indiana Partnership for Young Writers

I recently helped judge a story writing contest, and one of the criteria on the assessment form I was provided was: *Does the story have a beginning, middle and end?* As I began reading the entries, I quickly discovered that this was not useful assessment criteria.

After all, doesn't the single word *cat* have a beginning, middle and end? Yet, *cat* printed on a plain white piece of paper is not a story. Certainly the sponsors of this contest-—gifted storytellers in their own right—didn't mean to suggest that the most important trait of a good story is that it is divisible by three. So what, exactly, did they intend for me to look for?

Because all the entries were narratives, or stories, I decided that what the sponsors really wanted to know was: *Is there rising action, a climax and an effective resolution?*

Climax
(the middle)

I found it easy to determine whether or not each story had a climax. Simply put, could I identify a place in the story where the tension was highest, a make-it-or-break-it kind of moment where I was sweating for the main character? A point where I was cheering for—or yelling at—the main character? A scene where the main character confronts a physical crisis—or more interesting, in my humble opinion, a social or emotional crisis? In school, perhaps we are accustomed to talking about this moment as the turning point that changes the character's fate. With these markers as my guide, identifying the *middle*—or more precisely the "climax"—was easy.

Rising action
(the beginning)

"Rising action" proved a bit more difficult. Dictionaries and textbooks tell us that rising action is "the events of a dramatic or narrative plot preceding the climax" (American Heritage Dictionary) or "a related series of incidents in a literary plot that build towards the point of greatest interest" (Random House Dictionary). Hence, we've gotten in the habit of calling this simply *the beginning*, but I don't like that term because it doesn't shed any light on what we should actually expect to see there (and, really, it doesn't *have* to be at the beginning).

It is perhaps hard to define or describe "rising action" more specifically because writers have more leeway here. It doesn't always look or sound the same, but some of the following things may be present:

- Descriptions and small scenes that help readers develop a clear sense of the main character and his/her antagonist, if applicable. Readers will need enough information to fully comprehend the impact of the moment of climax. We also need enough information to be invested in the main characters, to care about what happens to them.

- Descriptions and scenes that help readers develop a clear sense of setting, especially if *where* or *when* the story takes place is important.

- Scenes that foreshadow the climax, perhaps smaller versions of the same emotional conflict or scenes that reveal characters' weaknesses, desires and potential obstacles.

What, exactly, is required in the rising action depends on what, exactly, the climax is. The rising action has to make readers *feel* the tension of the climax, *believe* that it is feasible and *care* about the outcome.

Falling action (the end)

"Falling action," often grouped together with the "resolution" (or "denouement," if you prefer fancy French words) is perhaps just as elusive. This, too, has such a generic definition—"the part of a literary work in which the conflict or complications are solved or simplified" (American Heritage Dictionary)—that we've grown accustomed to calling it simply "the end."

Like rising action, this part of the story doesn't always look or sound the same, but some things that might be present include:

- Scenes that help readers see that the main character's perseverance or an unchanging desirable trait produces the desired outcome.

- Scenes that help readers see that the main character's "tragic flaw" brings about an undesirable outcome.

- Scenes that help readers see how a *change* in the main character's behavior or thinking brings about a specific outcome (desirable or undesirable).

Remember that the resolution does not have to *literally* be the solution to a problem or conflict. The subtle, realistic endings in modern literature are often more powerful than the dramatic resolutions of older texts.

These are all things that we know as readers--and teachers of reading--yet somehow the facts tend to get lost in the vocabulary of assessment when we teach writing. We should resist that tendency; what we know as readers should always inform what we value in our writing classrooms.

ABOUT US

Julie Patterson is writer-in-residence at the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. Her poetry and nonfiction has appeared in newspapers, magazines and literary journals nationwide. She has a MFA in creative writing from Lesley University and is an adjunct professor of English at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

The Indiana Partnership for Young Writers, a program of the Butler University College of Education, provides ongoing and in-depth professional development in the teaching of reading and writing to teachers in grades K-8. The Partnership is committed to inquiry-based workshop teaching that sustains students' lifelong academic and workplace success.

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