

# STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS AND ORGANIZATION

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Build comprehension and appreciation of literature, using knowledge of literary structure and point of view

## KINDERGARTEN

Recognize familiar narrative text genres (e.g., fairy tales, nursery rhymes, storybooks). (K.RL.3.1)

### Unpacking the Standard

The kindergarten standard asks students to understand that there are some types of literature that are organized as narratives (stories). Stories have characters, setting, and events that move through time. The easiest way for kindergarteners to recognize a story in literature is to ask: *Is this about “the time” something happened?*

### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

Teachers can help students understand books that are stories by contrasting them with books that are organized as a list (e.g. pages can be read in any order). Most informational books are organized as a list, and there are many other books that aren't informational that are also organized as a list. Consider the book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, which is not a story. It doesn't have a plot or sequenced events. You could rearrange the middle pages and it wouldn't change the meaning. It's organized as a list. We can help students see that we can't really complete the sentence: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* is about the time \_\_\_\_\_ (although they will try). But, with a story like *The Snowy Day*, students can say, “This book is about the time Peter played in the snow.” Early in the year teachers can model how to think about different types of books. Then, throughout the year any time we are reading a book we can ask:

- Before reading a book: What type of book do you think this book is?
- After reading a book: Is this one of those books that's about *the time* something happened? If it is, then it's a story!

## GRADE 1

Identify the basic characteristics of familiar narrative text genres (e.g., fairy tales, nursery rhymes, storybooks). (1.RL.3.1)

### Unpacking the Standard

The first-grade standard asks students to understand what makes a story a story by identifying narrative characteristics such as: character, setting, plot/sequence of events, movement through time, change.

Movement through time means that there are a sequence of events and transition language to indicate that time has passed. It could be indicated with something as simple as a word like *then*. What changes in a story could be very small and subtle or be a more significant character change.

### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

One way to help students think about narratives before reading a book is to ask them what type of book they think it is and how they will be able to tell when reading it. Students might say:

- If it's a story, it will have a character who is on most of the pages.
- If it's a story, something will happen.
- It will have words like *then*.

Teachers can also point these things out while reading a book simply by referring to and using the words character or setting. After reading, the teacher can ask what the problem was and how it was solved (if it was solved). And teachers can ask students to check to see if the book was a story by asking if they can finish the sentence, "This book was about the time \_\_\_\_\_." Teachers can help students meet this standard during a narrative reading unit, or by highlighting these narrative characteristics any time they are reading a story throughout the year.

## GRADE 2

### Describe the overall structure of a story, including describing how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action. (2.RL.3.1)

#### Unpacking the Standard

The standard in second grade is the first time the word *structure* appears in the standard's text. In kindergarten and first grade, the related standard focuses on understanding the characteristics of narrative genres. The second-grade standard assumes students understand the characteristics of narratives and introduces structure by focusing on beginnings and endings.

### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

Teachers can help students become aware of different types of beginnings and what they do. Beginnings engage readers and set them up with information they need. Teachers can help children categorize different goals of beginnings (information about the character, stating the problem quickly, etc.) by comparing the beginnings of stories they have read that year and know well. Once students have an idea of how beginnings work, they can continue to notice how stories start throughout the year. Students can do the same thing with endings by comparing and categorizing different types of endings (sum up the big idea, leave the reader wondering, etc.) Teachers can assess how students are using structure to aid comprehension in conferences by asking questions like:

- When in this story did the author tell you what the problem was?
- What type of ending did the author use?
- Why do you think the author started/ended the story that way?

## GRADE 3

### Use terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza to refer to the parts of stories, plays, and poems; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections. (3.RL.3.1)

#### Unpacking the Standard

The third-grade standard significantly expands concepts of beginnings and endings in stories introduced in second grade. This standard asks students to explain the relationship of one structural part to another; not just in stories but also in plays (which are also narratives) and poems (which may or may not have a narrative structure). This more encompassing view of narrative is the foundation for the fourth- and fifth-grade standards, which continue to refer to stories, plays, and poems.

### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

In order to understand how structural elements build across a story, play, or poem, students need to read authentic examples of each throughout the year. Attending to structure could be taught explicitly as a short focused study, but only so students can continue to think about and use structure to aid their comprehension during the school year. Teachers can best support students in recognizing and using structure to better understand a text when discussions occur in the context of reading authentic literature. These conversations might include noticing specific structural elements like turning points or endings, or thinking about the connections between structural elements of a narrative poem, story or play.

To get a clearer, deeper understanding of students' knowledge about structure teachers might ask students to respond orally or in writing to questions like:

- How and when did the author let you know what the problem was in this story or play?
- What technique did the poet use to end the poem? Why do you think the poet ended it that way?
- How did the author of this play give you information at the beginning to help you understand the play before the actors started talking?

## GRADE 4

### Explain major differences between poems, plays, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems and drama. (4.RL.3.1)

#### Unpacking the Standard

The fourth-grade standard continues to expand on knowledge of structural elements (e.g. stanza, scene, chapter) by comparing more broadly the major differences between poems, plays, and prose. Fourth-grade students will need to understand the structural elements of drama that impact comprehension, such as the use of a narrator, indications of acts and scenes, a list of characters, a list of scenes, stage directions, and dialogue. Students will also need to know the wide range of structural elements in narrative poems such as rhyme, rhythm, and repetition that are used to tell the story.

### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

Since this standard has supported students in developing knowledge of story structure since kindergarten, comparing and contrasting drama and poems to stories would be an effective way to make distinctions between structural elements in these three narrative genres. Teachers will want students to notice that both stories and plays have narrative structures that include elements such as characters, setting, plot, movement through time, conflict that leads to change, and theme. Knowing how these same elements work differently in prose and plays would also be a part of this work. For example, stories have a point of view, which works as a narrator (think first-person, third-person) while plays have a more explicit narrator; and story writers show what's happening through narrative action while playwrights use stage directions.

Teachers can also compare stories and narrative poems (e.g. *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech) by exploring the narrative similarities (e.g. character, plot, setting) and differences (e.g. rhythm, visual shape, condensed language).

To get a clearer, deeper understanding of students' knowledge about structure teachers might ask students to respond orally or in writing to questions like:

- How is the beginning of this play similar to a story you've read?
- How is poem structured? How is it different or similar to another poem you've read?
- Why do you think the author structured this piece this way?

## GRADE 5

### Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fit together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, play, or poem. (5.RL.3.1)

## Unpacking the Standard

The fifth-grade standard builds directly on the third- and fourth-grade standard by asking students to explain how the connections between structural elements of literature *fit together* to create an overall structure. In fifth grade students are asked to think about how understanding *the structural parts* contribute to comprehending *the whole* play, story, or poem.

### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

It's crucial that teachers keep in mind that the overall goal of RL 3.1 focuses on comprehension and appreciation of literature. Identifying structural elements is meant to be done in the service of understanding. Recognizing the turning point in a story, for example, is only useful if it helps students comprehend the narrative piece. This means that the content of this standard should always be embedded in reading authentic, complete stories, plays and poems. Teachers can preview narrative structures before reading, help students notice structural elements while reading, but also look back at structural elements following reading, which makes it easier to see the overall structure with shorter pieces of writing. For example, teachers and students can mark up a short story from a children's magazine to show the parts of the story. This helps students see the overall structure all at once. It's easy to do this with poems, too, because they are relatively short. With chapter books, teachers can use a list of the chapters or a map/timeline of key events to help students see the overall structure depicted on a single page.

Teachers can best assess this standard in conversation with students, ensuring that questions related to identifying structural elements are designed to get at student comprehension and understanding. For example, teachers might ask:

- What did the author do at the beginning to catch your attention? How did it affect you as a reader?
- When did you first know what the problem was in this story? What made it possible to predict this would happen, or why was it a surprise?
- How did the author help you understand the character early in the story?
- Did the character change, and if so, what happened that led to this gradual change or sudden change?
- How much of the story happened after the turning point or climax of the story? Why might the author have done this?

## GRADE 6

### Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a work of literature and contributes to the development of the theme, characterization, setting, or plot. (6.RL.3.1)

## Unpacking the Standard

In the sixth grade students are expected to use their fifth-grade knowledge of structural elements to consider ways they contribute to the development of:

- Theme —Broader idea and meaning an author is trying to convey
- Characterization—Details about a character in a story
- Setting— Location, time period, season, where and when a story takes place
- Plot —Sequence of events involving conflict and change in a story

A deeper understanding of theme, characterization, setting, and plot is meant to support comprehension of increasingly complex pieces of narrative literature.

### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

To develop knowledge related to this standard, students can identify and discuss theme, characterization, setting, and plot when reading any piece of literature, always considering how these elements helped them comprehend. Teachers and students could keep track of predictions and changes throughout a story by, for example, making early predictions about a character and then tracking character changes across a story; or identifying a potential theme in early chapters of a book and keeping track of how their prediction changes as they progress in the story. Examining shorter pieces of literature like picture books and short stories can be helpful in making ideas like theme and characterization easily visible.

Teachers can best assess this standard by asking students to identify orally or in writing a key scene (chapter or stanza); and then explain how that key structural element impacts the plot, theme, and changes in character; fits into the overall structure; and ultimately contributed to their deeper understanding of the text.

## GRADE 7

### Analyze how a work of literature’s structural elements such as subplots, parallel episodes, climax, and conflicts contribute to its meaning and plot. (7.RL.1)

#### Unpacking the Standard

The seventh-grade standard introduces elements that make the structures of narratives more complex and interesting, including:

- Subplot— A secondary story of the plot, a supporting side story
- Parallel episodes— Scene that happens again in a different context or to a different character
- Climax—Highest level of emotional response
- Conflict—Struggle between two opposing forces

Students should be able to use their understanding of these elements to better comprehend complex pieces of literature.

#### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

One way to help students understand complex story structures is to examine an entire, short narrative. Picture books and short stories (of appropriate topic and complexity) work well because teachers can help students see the entire structure of a story. For example, teachers and students can highlight different structural elements in a short story and see the structure across several pages. Or, with a picture book students can chart the structure in a single lesson. When students understand structural elements in shorter pieces, it will be easier to see and use these elements as they unfold in a much longer piece of literature.

Teachers can assess this standard by asking students to choose a key scene, subplot, or parallel episode, and explain why the author might have decided to include that element, and how that element helped them understand the conflict in the story. Teachers can also ask students to explain why the author might have chosen to position the climax in a particular part in the story, which would require students to understand the action that comes before and after the climax.

## GRADE 8

### Compare and contrast the structure of two or more related works of literature (e.g., similar topic or theme), and analyze and evaluate how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style. (8.RL.1)

#### Unpacking the Standard

The eighth-grade standard requires students to apply all that they’ve learned about narrative structure to compare and contrast two or more pieces of literature. The pieces of literature should be on the same theme (e.g. perseverance, good vs. evil, redemption, etc.) or topic (e.g. combating inequality, losing a loved one, etc.). Students will need to consider structural elements such as scenes, subplots, turning points, climax, flashbacks, flash forwards, and parallel scenes that might appear in both pieces of literature. Students will also need to consider how these elements impact theme, conflict, setting, and characterization in each piece of literature.

#### Considerations for Lessons and Assessment

One way to help students learn to compare and contrast pieces of literature is to first examine an entire, relatively short piece of literature. Picture books and short stories (of appropriate topic and complexity) work well because teachers can map out the structure of two short pieces of literature in a single lesson.

Seeing both structures, side-by-side, will make it be easier to identify similarities and differences. Comparing structural elements in short pieces of literature will better equip students to notice and compare the use of structural elements in novels and longer pieces of literature. As is true for this standard throughout the grades, the goal is to help students understand how these structural elements improve their comprehension. This means attention should always be given to the role of these elements in their meaning-making process.

Teachers can assess this standard by asking students to show how the structure of a new piece of literature compares to a familiar piece of literature read earlier in the year, also articulating how making the comparison deepened their understanding of the new text. This could be cumulative across the year with students making reference to previously read texts to inform their understanding of increasingly complex new texts, compiling a record of the way different structural elements unfold in different narrative genres, and noting its impact on readers' understanding of the texts. Teachers could also do something more abbreviated with students reading two pieces of short literature, comparing and contrasting their structural elements, and explaining impact readers' understanding of those two short texts.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Gallagher, K. & Kittle, P. (2018). *180 days: Two teachers and the quest to engage and empower adolescents*. Heinemann.
- Keene, E. O. (2008). *To understand: New horizons in reading comprehension*. Heinemann.
- NY Book Editors. (2016, February). *What's the difference between perspective and point of view* <https://nybookeditors.com/2016/02/whats-the-difference-between-perspective-and-point-of-view/>.
- Ray, K.W. (2006). *Study driven: A framework for planning units of study in the writing workshop*. Heinemann.
- Ray, K.W. (2005). *In pictures and in words: Teaching the qualities of good writing through illustration study*. Heinemann.
- Serravallo, J. (2015). *The reading strategies book: Your everything guide to developing skilled readers*. Heinemann.
- Partnership for Inquiry Learning (n.d.). <http://partnershipforinquirylearning.org>.

### Children's literature featured in the video

- Cornwall, G. (2017). *Jabari jumps*. Candlewick Press.
- Deffner, E. (2015, June). Fiddle fanatic. *Highlights Magazine*.
- Duncan, A.F. (2018). *Memphis Martin and the mountaintop*. Calkins Creek.
- Mochizuki, K. (2018). *Baseball saved us*. Lee and Low Books.
- Medina, T. (2006). *Love to Langston*. Lee and Low Books.
- O'Connell G. K. (2001). *Toasting marshmallows*. Clarion Books.
- Palacio, R.J. (2012). *Wonder*. Random House.
- Ramsey, C.A. with Strauss, G. (2010). *Ruth and the green book*. Carolrhoda Books.
- Reynolds, J. (2016). *Ghost*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Woodson, J. (2001) *The other side*. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers.

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