

Fiction Lexicon

Action: What happens in a literary work; the events that constitute the plot. **Action** in fiction consists of human interchange: any thought, word, or deed that engages a character with some other character, either directly or indirectly. You'll create action on the page only when your character has an encounter with another character that matters, somehow, to at least one of them. **Behavior** is not action (habitual behavior: brushing teeth, waking up, etc.).

Atmosphere: The tone/attitude as well as setting, period, weather, and time of day of a story; the sensory experience you provide your reader; the background to the character's foreground.

Backstory: Past events necessary to understand a narrative or its significance, often offered in **exposition**.

Catharsis: Aristotle's contention that tragedy well done provides for a reader a sensation of exaltation resulting from the experience of the shared and inevitable sufferings of all humanity. Catharsis can be an intellectual moment that gives you a private recognition. If your story ends in loss, failure, death, abandonment, or some other misery, you have to figure out a way to make your readers feel their pain is worthwhile and rewarding. These days, people seem to be made uncomfortable by unhappy endings. They want things to come out right for the characters they like. Your challenge is to transfigure the sadness you create so readers feel catharsis—that the pattern established in the story was fulfilled by the darkness that brought it to a close.

Character: A fictional person.

Characterization: Means used to create a character. Includes speech, actions, appearance, as well as what the narrator or another character is given to say (or think) about the character. Presentation of a character's thoughts, desires, and dreams is also a means of characterization.

Complications: Aspects of the conflict that build **plot** toward its climax; the *nouement* or "knotting up" of the action.

Concrete/significant details: Specifics that evoke the senses in meaningful ways; **concrete** means there is image, something that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched; **detail** means there is a degree of focus and specificity; **significant** means the specific image also suggests an abstraction, generalization or judgment.

Conflict: Actions and tensions resulting from opposing forces set loose in a plot. These forces may be external or internal. The entryway into every story is **conflict**—some contested issue between people that must be resolved. **Conflict** is necessary to narrative because it is the only thing that *makes* us ask the narrative question: *What happens?* The reader who does not care about this question will not care period. Without some conflict keeping *what happens* somewhere in the reader's mind, the story will not engage (see **plot**).

Crisis: The point of highest tension in a story, at which a discovery or a decision is made that decides the outcome of the conflict (see **plot**).

Dialogue: The characters' talk. Dialogue may be **direct**, the spoken words quoted: *"No, I can't stand the little monsters and I won't herd a bunch of them to the park unless I'm paid."* Dialogue may be **indirect**, the words related in third person: *She said she couldn't stand the kids and wouldn't take them to the park unless she got paid.* Dialogue may be **summarized**, reported at a distance: *She claimed to hate children, and irritatedly demanded payment for taking them to the park.*

Dramatize: To render a scene in detail, stressing what the characters are saying and doing; showing rather than telling or summarizing. See **Scene**.

Exposition: In narrative, the laying out of the situation at the opening of the action.

Flashback: Scene that interrupts ongoing action with prior action, usually triggered by a present event that jogs a character's memory.

Motive/Motivation: Causes, within a character and the circumstances surrounding the character, for the ensuing action. For example: the

character is moved to seek revenge because of some prior event or need. Without adequate motivation, the action will seem arbitrary and unconvincing.

Narrate: Act of reporting a story or scene in a story. The result is narrative.

Narrative: A story; the telling of a story.

Narrative questions: What happens? What happens when? What happens after? (see **plot**)

Narrator: The one who tells the story to the audience. The narrator may be a character in the story (first person) or someone the author makes up to tell the story more objectively (third person). To speak of the story's narrator or speaker allows us to speak about the manner in which the story is told without confusing that manner with the author's.

Person: In grammar and narrative, any of the three groups of pronouns identifying the subject. **First person:** *I* make a phone call. **Second person:** *You* make a phone call. **Third person:** *He* makes a phone a call.

Plot: Sequence in which an author arranges (narrates, dramatizes) events (actions) so as to reveal their significance; the order in which the reader receives material: **when** and **how**. Plot stresses the causal connections, often introducing causes after their effects (as in flashback). To put a character in motion; whatever makes the story move; a series of scenes that move the reader through the character's journey in pursuit of desire. *Questions of plot:* Where does the protagonist want to go—what does s/he desire? What are the obstacles encountered—what discoveries are made, what conflicts arise? What does s/he do to overcome these obstacles—what actions are taken? Is the goal reached? Is it expected? Sometimes the journey of the story ends in fulfillment, sometimes not; sometimes the goal is reached and proves not worth the trip; sometimes a detour leads to the desired end.

Point of View: Vantage point from which the materials of a story are presented. Importantly, the **person** in which the story is told contributes to the ultimate meaning of events.

Premise: Combination of character, setting, and situation at the point of attack.

Protagonist: Main character in a work from whose destiny the plot develops; the figure whose problem is the story's prime focus and whose fate decides the story's meaning. The character whose fate matters most to the story.

Resolution: Moment at which the work's conflicting elements come together, usually involving the restoration of order at the end of a plot. (aka **denouement** or "unknotting" of the action).

Satire: Refers to those works (or parts of works) in which the actions or the statements of the characters ridicule contemporary behavior or fashion. Satiric writing relies for its effects on irony. Mishandled, satire falls off into mere sarcasm.

Scene and summary: Methods of treating time in fiction. A **summary** covers a relatively long time period in relatively short space (gives information, fills in a character's background, lets us understand a motive, alters pace, creates a transition, leaps moments or years); a **scene** deals at length with a relatively short time period (scene is necessary to fiction; scene is to time what concrete detail is to the senses—it is the crucial means of allowing your reader to experience the story *with* the characters. A confrontation, a turning point, or a crisis moment should not be summarized) (see **dramatize**).

Setting: The place, environment, and era in which a story takes place.

Story: A sequence of fictional events usually involving a **conflict**, **crisis**, and **resolution**. Everything the reader needs to know to make coherent sense of the **plot**, and plot is the particular portion of the story the author chooses to present—the 'present tense'—of the narrative.

Syntax: The arrangement of words within a sentence.

Voice: The recognizable style of a particular writer or character, composed of syntax, vocabulary, attitude and tone.