

Analyzing the Structure of Stories

CCSS

RL.6.5: Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter [or] scene . . . fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

Theme: *Wilderness Adventures*

Stories are made of words. Authors build those words into sentences and paragraphs and—if the story is really long—chapters. This is pretty obvious. What’s less obvious is how these parts work together to develop a story’s theme, setting, and plot. When you think about how a story’s parts work together, you’re thinking about the story’s **structure**.

One way to analyze a story’s structure is ask yourself this question: How does a specific sentence or chapter help develop this story? You can do something similar with cartoons.

Read the cartoon below. The two panels are part of a longer story. Ask yourself: What does each panel contribute to the setting and the plot of the longer story?



Complete the chart. It will help you analyze what each panel contributes to the story.

Panel	Contribution to Setting	Contribution to Plot	Contribution to Theme
Left	The characters are in a forest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The characters have been walking for hours. 	The panels, when taken together, suggest the story’s theme is about how people should act when in danger.
Right	The forest is not safe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The boy has broken his ankle. 	

As you read, stop and ask yourself: How does this section of the story build on what came before? How do these pieces help develop the theme, setting, or plot? Doing this sort of analysis will help you understand not just what a story tells but how it tells it.



Read the first two paragraphs of an adventure about encountering an animal in the wild.

Genre: Adventure Story

A Moose Encounter *by Lucy Barrett*

Jill quietly slipped out of the faded orange tent and into the cool fall air of a Minnesota morning. Though the sun had just begun to rise, she could hear woodland creatures scurrying on the ground. Jill glanced back to make sure her father was still asleep inside. He had told her not to wander around alone, but she *had* to see a moose. They had been making this camping trip for three years now, and though this was supposed to be moose territory, they had yet to actually see one. Jill was determined to change that.

Moving swiftly, Jill eventually found herself at the river. She decided to wait, hoping that a moose might come and drink. A short time later, Jill saw a brown animal in the distance, and she held her breath as the creature approached. It was a moose calf! Grinning broadly, Jill began walking toward it, but before she could get very far, a giant female moose appeared out of nowhere and came charging toward her.

(continued)

Explore how to answer this question: *"What role does each paragraph play in helping to develop the story?"*

Each paragraph plays its own part in telling a story. Reread each paragraph and ask yourself: What does it add to the story?

Complete the chart below. It will help you analyze what each paragraph contributes to the story.

Paragraph	Contribution to Setting	Contribution to Plot
First	It establishes the setting: a fall morning in Minnesota	It starts the story: Jill wants to see a moose so badly that she disobeys her father to see one.
Second		

With a partner, discuss what the theme of this story might be. Then discuss what roles paragraphs 1 and 2 play in developing that theme.



Continue reading the adventure story. Use the Close Reading and the Hint to help you answer the question.

Close Reading

Circle details that show what happens to Jill after the calf’s mother comes running toward her. How does this moose encounter contribute to the story’s plot and theme?

(continued from page 154)

Petrified, Jill could only stare as the animal galloped closer and closer. She knew the worst place to be was between a mother animal and her young, especially an animal as massive as a moose.

Suddenly, Jill felt herself being yanked out of the moose’s path, and she held on tightly as her father pulled her behind some trees to hide from the moose’s view. They watched as the mother became distracted by her calf, and Jill sighed in relief.

Later, when she had finally returned to the safety of the campsite, Jill was full of apologies. “I learned my lesson,” she vowed to her father. “No more moose encounters for me.”

Hint

A story’s falling action occurs after the climax has been reached. It leads to the resolution, when the story’s conflict is resolved.

Circle the correct answer.

Which statement best describes the role the second paragraph on this page plays in the story’s plot?

- A** It details the story’s turning point, when Jill’s father scolds her.
- B** It presents a new problem that Jill and her father must face.
- C** It shows that Jill has learned to always listen to her father.
- D** It explains how Jill’s father saves her and sets up the resolution.



Show Your Thinking

Explain your answer. Why is the second paragraph on this page necessary to the story?

Discuss the story’s overall theme with a partner. Which sentences are most important in developing this theme?



Read the following excerpt from a novel. Use the Study Buddy and the Close Reading to guide your reading.

Genre: Adventure Story



According to the introduction, John is looking for a deer. I wonder if he's going to find one. I'll look for signs of a deer in the story.

Close Reading

In this excerpt, the setting is not directly stated. **Circle** clues in paragraph 2 that suggest the setting.

How does hunting the deer help John? **Draw a box** around details in paragraph 5 that show how the deer encounter affects him.

from *Tracker* by Gary Paulsen

John Borne always hunts with his grandfather, but this year his grandfather is dying of cancer. John can think of little else. As he goes looking for a deer alone, he hears a noise.

- 1 It was a releasing sound, as if a branch or tree which had been held had been turned loose—a kind of swoosh—in back of him, back to his right, and he froze, waiting for another sound to guide him. None came.
- 2 He turned and took two steps, then two more, and so covered a distance of perhaps thirty yards until he came to a deer bed. It was about a yard across, where snow had been melted down to bare swamp grass in a cupped little warm place under a stand of willows. . . .
- 3 He knelt next to the bed and felt the grass and it was still warm. That had been the sound. A deer had been here in its storm bed . . . and he had walked past it and it had jumped up, apparently hitting the willow on the way.
- 4 It must have surprised the deer, his coming, because the first tracks were more than ten feet from the bed. The deer had bounded up and away. The next tracks were twenty feet from the first ones, out into a clearing and across, craters in the new snow where the deer had run.
- 5 Well, he thought. *I was close to one, anyway, even if I didn't know it.* . . . It came to him suddenly that he hadn't thought about his grandfather for nearly an hour and he didn't know if that was good or if that was bad.



Hints

How do the clues about the deer lead into the rest of the story?

Which answer fits best with the clues you circled in paragraph 2?

What does the last sentence tell you about the main conflict of the story?

Use the Hints on this page to help you answer the questions.

- 1 In the first sentence, John hears a swoosh and looks around. How does this sentence contribute to the story?
 - A It shows that John is not very good at hunting by himself.
 - B It introduces a theme about the thrill of deer hunting.
 - C It establishes that John’s conflict will be with the deer.
 - D It creates suspense about whether John will find a deer.

- 2 How does paragraph 2 develop the setting of this story?
 - A It shows snow and swamp grass on the ground.
 - B It reveals how far from home John has walked.
 - C It helps readers understand what a deer bed is.
 - D It explains what time of day it is in the story.

- 3 Describe how the final sentence contributes to the plot of the story. Use details from the story to support your answer.



Read the following excerpt from a novel. Then answer the questions that follow.

from *Hatchet*

by Gary Paulsen

Thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson is stranded in the Canadian wilderness after a plane crash, and now he must study his environment to survive. In this part of the novel, he has been dreaming of his father. Now he dreams of his friend Terry.

1 He was not gesturing to Brian but was sitting in the park at a bench looking at a barbecue pit and for a time nothing happened. Then he got up and poured some charcoal from a bag into the cooker, then some starter fluid, and he took a flick type of lighter and lit the fluid. When it was burning and the charcoal was at last getting hot he turned, noticing Brian for the first time in the dream. He turned and smiled and pointed to the fire as if to say, see, a fire.

2 But it meant nothing to Brian, except that he wished he had a fire. He saw a grocery sack on the table next to Terry. Brian thought it must contain hot dogs and chips and mustard and he could think only of the food. But Terry shook his head and pointed again to the fire, and twice more he pointed to the fire, made Brian see the flames, and Brian felt his frustration and anger rise and he thought, All right, all right. I see the fire but so what? I don't have a fire. I know about fire; I know I need a fire.

3 I know that.

4 His eyes opened and there was light in the cave, a gray dim light of morning. He wiped his mouth and tried to move his leg, which had stiffened like wood. There was thirst, and hunger, and he ate some raspberries from the jacket. They had spoiled a bit, seemed softer and mushier, but still had a rich sweetness. He crushed the berries against the roof of his mouth with his tongue and drank the sweet juice as it ran down his throat. A flash of metal caught his eye and he saw his hatchet in the sand where he had thrown it at the porcupine in the dark.

5 He scootched up, wincing a bit when he bent his stiff leg, and crawled to where the hatchet lay. He picked it up and examined it and saw a chip in the top of the head.

6 The nick wasn't too large, but the hatchet was important to him, was his only tool, and he should not have thrown it. He could keep it in his hand, and make a tool of some kind to help push an animal away. Make a staff, he thought, or a lance, and save the hatchet. Something came then, a thought as he held the hatchet, something about the dream and his father and Terry, but he couldn't pin it down.

7 "Ahhh . . ." He scrambled out and stood in the morning sun and stretched his back muscles and his sore leg. The hatchet was still in his hand, and as he stretched and raised it over his head it caught the first rays of the morning sun. The first faint light hit the silver of the hatchet and it flashed a brilliant gold in the light. Like fire. That is it, he thought. What they were trying to tell me.

8 Fire. The hatchet was the key to it all. When he threw the hatchet at the porcupine in the cave and missed and hit the stone wall it had showered sparks, a golden shower of sparks in the dark, as golden with fire as the sun was now.



9 The hatchet was the answer. That's what his father and Terry had been trying to tell him. Somehow he could get fire from the hatchet. The sparks would make fire.

10 Brian went back into the shelter and studied the wall. It was some form of chalky granite, or a sandstone, but imbedded in it were large pieces of a darker stone, a harder and darker stone. It only took him a moment to find where the hatchet had struck. The steel had nicked into the edge of one of the darker stone pieces. Brian turned the head backward so he would strike with the flat rear of the hatchet and hit the black rock gently. Too gently, and nothing happened. He struck harder, a glancing blow, and two or three weak sparks skipped off the rock and died immediately.

11 He swung harder, held the hatchet so it would hit a longer, sliding blow, and the black rock exploded in fire. Sparks flew so heavily that several of them skittered and jumped on the sand beneath the rock and he smiled and struck again and again.

12 There could be fire here, he thought. I will have a fire here, he thought, and struck again—I will have fire from the hatchet.

Answer Form

1 (A) (B) (C) (D)

2 (A) (B) (C) (D)

3 (A) (B) (C) (D)

Number
Correct

3

1

How does Brian's dream contribute to the plot of the story?

- A The dream suggests that Brian needs to find food.
- B The dream shows what Brian's normal life was like.
- C The dream reveals that Brian is feeling lonely.
- D The dream provides clues to help Brian survive.

2

In paragraph 10, the author describes the setting in detail. Why is this paragraph important to the story?

- A The rock wall of the cave can make sparks.
- B The cave provides a place for Brian to rest.
- C The wilderness presents a huge challenge.
- D The wilderness offers different types of fuel.




3 Read this sentence from paragraph 11.

He swung harder, held the hatchet so it would hit a longer, sliding blow, and the black rock exploded in fire.

What does this sentence contribute to the plot?

- A** It is the resolution, because Brian has solved his problem, ending the conflict.
- B** It represents the rising action, because the problem is becoming even worse.
- C** It serves as the climax, because after this Brian begins to solve the problem.
- D** It is part of the falling action, because it is the solution to Brian’s problem.

4 Describe how paragraphs 8 through 12 contribute to the development of the story’s theme. Use details from the text to support your answer.

 **Self Check** *Go back and see what you can check off on the Self Check on page 127.*