

“Structure” is how a story is put together, and it is the most important thing to consider in creative writing. All good stories have three parts: a **beginning**, a **middle** and an **end**.

Let’s look at this in action with an example:

Anthony the fire ant had found a gargantuan chocolate crumb. “If I could just get this back to the colony,” he thought, “it would feed everyone for weeks!” Heartily, he pulled, and heaved, and strained, but it was just too heavy for him to move. To make matters worse, it was beginning to rain. “I’ll have to leave it here. It’s a tragedy!” he muttered. Just then, a kindly wasp was flying by and heard Anthony grumbling in the grass below. He swooped down and asked what was wrong. After Anthony explained, the wasp had an idea: “I’m quite strong you see, perhaps I can carry it – and you – back to your home?” Anthony was thrilled. The pair flew all the way home, weaving between the raindrops, and delivered the chocolatey feast to the ants waiting there.

While this is a very short story (and could certainly be improved), there are several things we can learn from it.

- ① There is a clear sequence of events. We can easily follow what is happening because the things that occur are sensible: there aren’t any jumps in logic. If Anthony randomly gained the strength to carry the chocolate on his own, we’d begin to wonder how he managed it.
- ② Things get worse before they get better. In the middle of the story, Anthony is quite sad. Something is wrong!
- ③ The ending ties together the story without introducing a load of new information. If I introduce a problem in the last sentence, it is an unsatisfying ending. If I don’t solve all of the problems from the story, it is called a **cliff-hanger**. (We’ll talk about these more soon.)

Now let's look at an example which doesn't have a clear structure.

Thomas was late for school and arrived by bus. His teacher told him off, and he didn't do very well on his test. He was sent to the headmaster. The headmaster told him he needed to do the test again. He went home and had dinner: he had fish and chips with mushy peas and ketchup. His pet hamster was hungry and tried to eat some of his dinner. He went to bed extra early because he was so tired.

This story has some issues.

"Thomas was late for school and arrived by bus."

- The first half of this sentence has very little to do with the second half. It is a bit confusing. Try to consider how your sentences will end before you start writing them. Instead, we could have written: "The bus had made Thomas late for school."

"His teacher told him off, and he didn't do very well on his test."

- Again, we are starting to talk about one thing and suddenly moving on to something else. Try to complete an idea before going on to the next. It helps to make the story clear. Instead, we could have written, "His teacher told him off. It then got even worse: his test was returned, and he had performed very poorly."

"... he had fish and chips with mushy peas and ketchup."

- Although this is a nice level of detail (it is good to be specific), it doesn't seem relevant to the story. We don't need to include random information.



It seems that this example should have been about Thomas **redoing his test**, and on the second attempt, **scoring better**. This would have a clear beginning, middle, and end, but our example is jumping all over the place.

Before you write, think about what happens at the **start, middle, and end** of your story.

Exercise

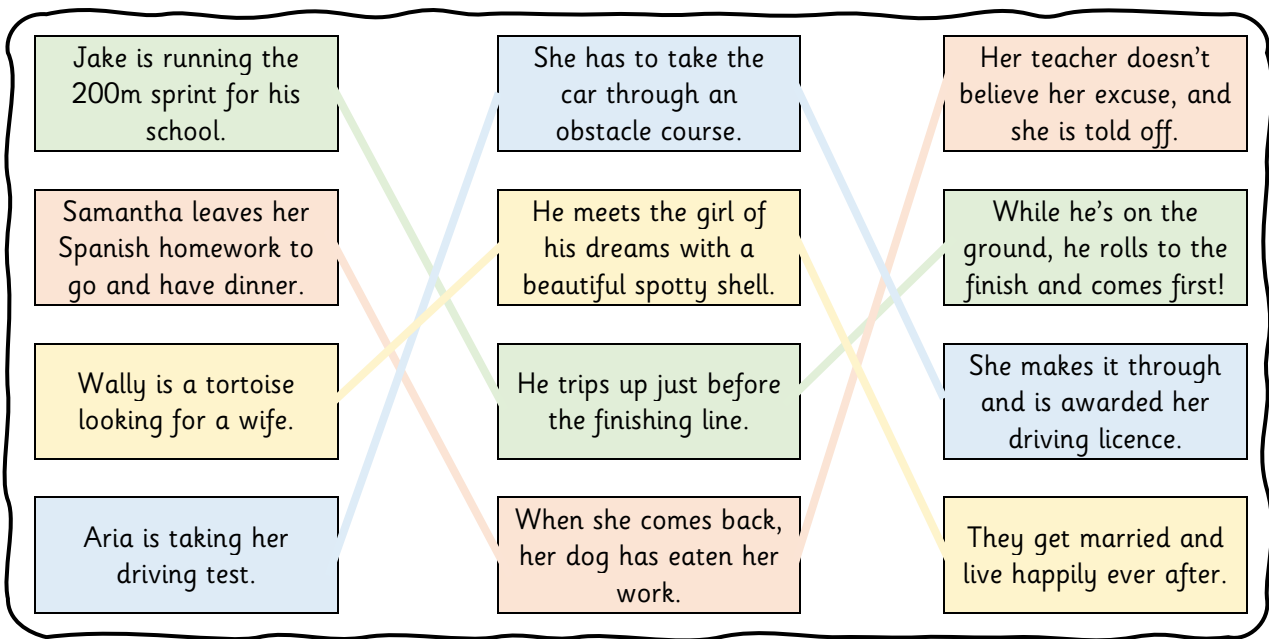
Draw lines to match up the following beginnings, middles, and ends. Pick the most logical pairings, as more than one combination *could* work, but some make more sense than others.

Beginning	Middle	End
Jake is running the 200m sprint for his school.	She has to take the car through an obstacle course.	Her teacher doesn't believe her excuse, and she is told off.
Samantha leaves her Spanish homework to go and have dinner.	He meets the girl of his dreams with a beautiful spotty shell.	While he's on the ground, he rolls to the finish and comes first!
Wally is a tortoise looking for a wife.	He trips up just before the finishing line.	She makes it through and is awarded her driving licence.
Aria is taking her driving test.	When she comes back, her dog has eaten her work.	They get married and live happily ever after.

You can find the answers on the next page.

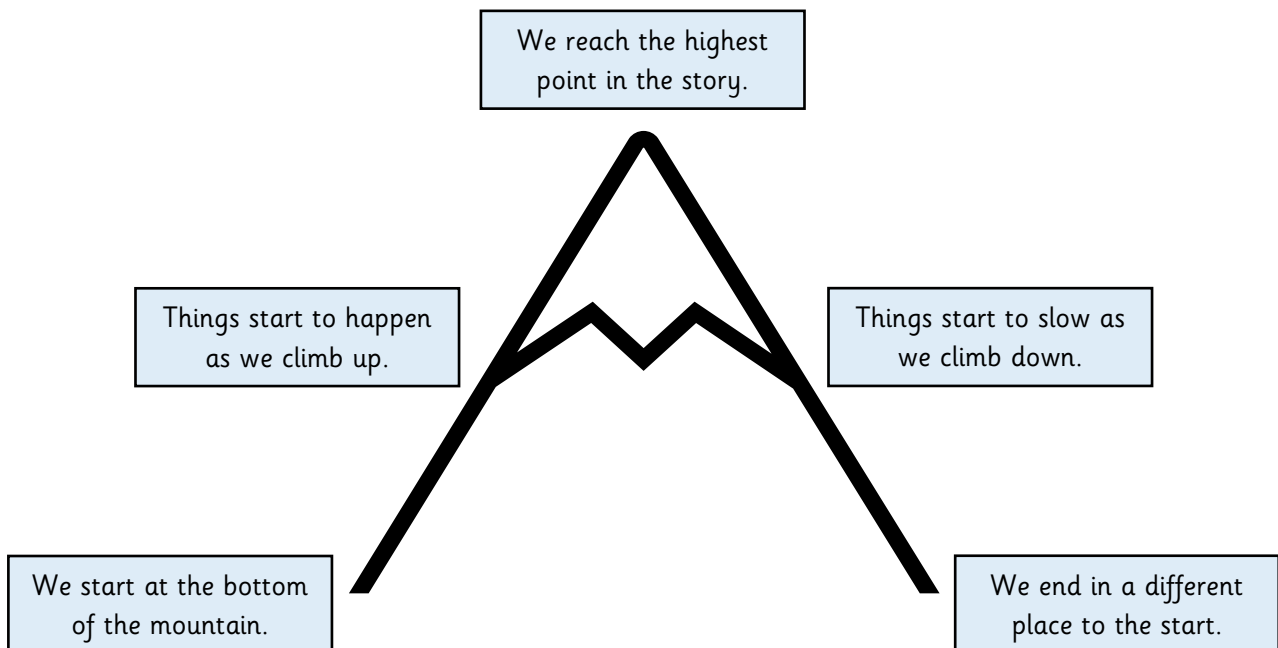
Hopefully, now that you've looked at a few examples, you are getting more familiar with the general structure. We'll go into more depth soon, but here's a broad summary:

- ① Beginning: We start by introducing what's going on and who it's about.
- ② Middle: Something happens – usually something goes wrong.
- ③ End: We fix whatever happened.



The Story Mountain

You might have heard that writing a story is like climbing a mountain.



As we climb up the mountain, we set up the story: the story is building up. Then at the peak, the most exciting thing happens. This is usually a **problem** (the thing that goes wrong). Everything after this point happens on the way down, as we try to **resolve** (fix!) what happened.

The Three-Paragraph Structure



Here is an easy way you can structure your story which considers the things we have looked at today.

① The Beginning and Build-up

In this paragraph, we want to answer the following questions in any order.

- **Who** is involved in our story?
- **What** is happening right now?
- **Where** is this happening?
- **When** is it happening?
- **How** is it happening?

Tom was sitting in bed on a miserable Monday morning daydreaming about being somewhere else. He didn't want to go to school today.

From this short extract, I know the story is about Tom, that he doesn't want to go to school, that it's Monday morning, and that he's miserable.

② The Problem

In this paragraph, something goes wrong (our **problem** – keep it simple.) We want to include **lots of description** here. Remember to use **more than one sense**.

Just then, Tom heard a mysterious rustling coming from his wardrobe. He moved towards it slowly and could smell the sweet scent of almonds and bananas. Cautiously, he opened the door, and before he could react, out flew a fluffy chimpanzee with razor-sharp teeth!

I have highlighted the **adjectives** and **adverbs** and have underlined the descriptive sentences.

③ The Resolution and Ending

In this paragraph, we fix the problem and finish the story. Here we can include lots of **thoughts** and **feelings**.

*Tom managed to trap the monkey under a cardboard box and was **immensely relieved**. "What am I going to do next?" he thought to himself, "at least this is better than school!"*

Example Story

Here is an example story which makes use of the above structure. My comments are on the right.

The Statuette

"This is the place," muttered Dan, "if the map is right." Trepidatiously, he dismounted his horse and approached the waterfall. The sun was high in the sky; its light was distorted by the mist of droplets cast up into the air by the cascading water. It was loud. Very loud. Dan's white mare was whinnying uncomfortably and pacing around the pool. Slowly, Dan approached the waterfall, tiptoeing lightly around the water to avoid falling in. From the corner of his eye, he noticed an opening behind the blue curtain of rippling glass. "There it is! The cave." He crept inside.

The cave was dank and dingy with moss-covered stalactites clinging to the roof. A lonely metronome of dripping water echoed from deep within. It was hard to see, so Dan rummaged through his bag and withdrew a torch, shining it at the wrinkled maze of limestone fingers. The stagnant stench of old rot permeated Dan's nostrils, but the air was surprisingly fresh. For a split second, Dan spotted something glistening. The golden statuette stood as proud as a sentinel, emblazoned with colourful jewels, on a plinth at the centre of the cave. Clambering through the claustrophobic space, Dan made his way towards it. Tentatively, he reached out a hand and swiped it. Click! Dan heard a mechanism engage...

The rocks before him began to vibrate, then rumble, and in a flash, the entire cave had started to shake. Dan knew he needed to escape – he felt terrified of being buried alive in that desolate cavern. He scrambled, crawled, heaved, dodged, and threw himself towards the entrance. Finally, narrowly avoiding being crushed by a falling boulder, Dan leapt through the waterfall and plunged into the cool water below. Statuette in hand, he swam to the surface and was overcome with relief to see his horse waiting for him at the water's edge.

We've answered the five questions.

- **Who:** Dan, an adventurer.
- **What:** he is looking for a cave.
- **Where:** by a pool and waterfall.
- **When:** "the sun was high", which tells us it is afternoon.
- **How:** he is "tiptoeing lightly" – it seems he is acting cautiously.

We have some excellent vocabulary here:

'trepidatiously', 'distorted', 'cascading'. *There are many fronted adverbials:*

'Slowly, ...', 'From the corner of his eye, ...'

We have dialogue:

"There it is!"

Purposeful repetition:

"It was loud. Very loud."

And varied sentence lengths, some very simple, some longer and more complex.

As suggested, this paragraph builds up to the problem – that the cave starts to collapse. We have lots of description:

- **Sight:** "moss-covered stalactites."
- **Smell:** "stagnant stench"
- **Sound:** "A lonely metronome."

There are similes:

'as proud as a sentinel'

Metaphors:

'the blue curtain of rippling glass'

And there's alliteration:

'spotted something'

Our final paragraph solves the problem and ties the story together. Things have changed since we started: we've won the statuette!

Below are the starts of three stories. Beneath each starter, write a summary of what could happen (**the problem**) and how it can be fixed (**the resolution**.)

Start	Ahmed was baking a cake for his sister's birthday.
Problem	
Resolution	

Start	Cathy is about to perform in the final round of a ballroom dancing contest.
Problem	
Resolution	

Start	It's Walter's birthday and he's having a party.
Problem	
Resolution	

Example Solutions

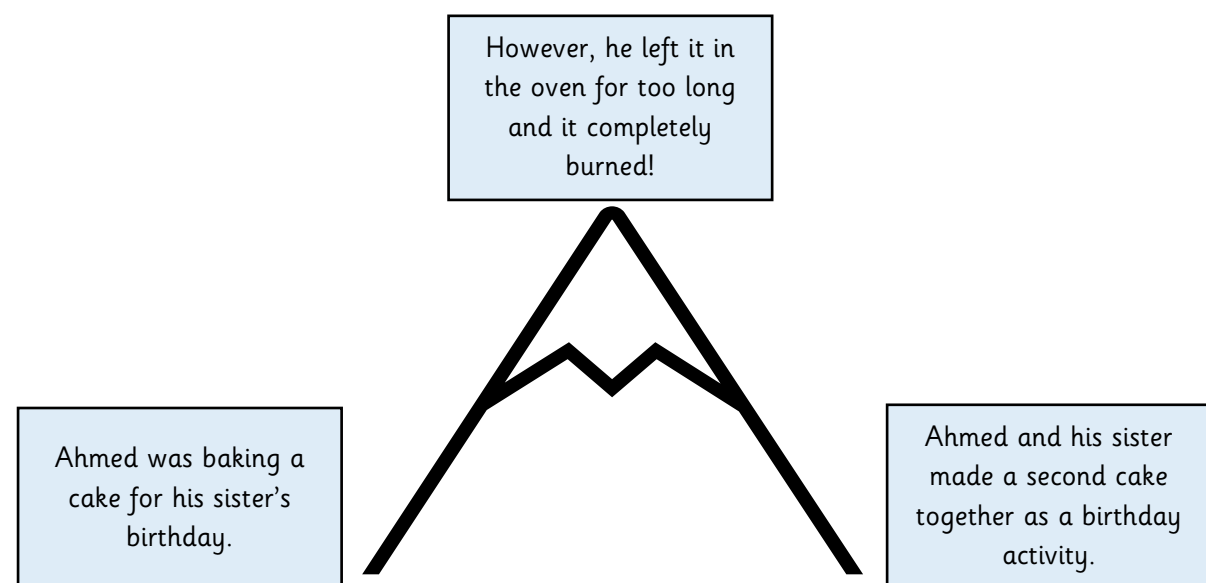
There are many potential solutions, but here are a few examples.

Ahmed was baking a cake for his sister's birthday.	Cathy is about to perform in the final round of a ballroom dancing contest.	It's Walter's birthday and he's having a party.
However, he left it in the oven for too long and it completely burned!	However, her partner has broken his leg and can't dance!	He finishes putting up the decorations, but no one shows up!
Ahmed and his sister made a second cake together as a birthday activity.	She improvises an incredible solo routine and wins first place.	He finds everyone waiting for him in another room: surprise!

What you've just done is **plan** a story. A plan is a short summary of what you'd like to include in your story. It's good to figure out the main ideas you're going to include before you begin writing. If you just jump in without planning, you can write yourself into a corner – this means you can get stuck and not know where to go next.

Some students like to include some examples of vocabulary they'd like to include, like a mini word-bank, which they can dip into. I've also seen students writing similes here so that they remember to include them later.

Some students like to lay out their plan on a story mountain. Here's one of the example plans written in this way.



Main Exercise

[illegible]

[illegible]

(Total Marks: /20)



I mark 7+ and 8+ stories out of 20, according to the following categories.

Category	Description	Mark
Structure, Clarity and Logic	Award one mark for each of the following: • The student has followed the task instructions. • The story has three paragraphs of equal length. • The story has a clear beginning, middle and end. • The story makes sense throughout. • The ending is not rushed.	/5
Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar	Mark according to the following guidelines: • The student has made almost no mistakes. (5 marks) • The student has made a few mistakes, but they don't make it harder to read. (3/4 marks) • The student has made frequent mistakes, and this has made it harder to read. (1/2 marks) • Award zero marks if there is consistent failure in spelling, punctuation and grammar.	/5
Content and Use of Devices	Devices I look for include: • Similes (I am very impressed on the rare occasions I see metaphors at 7+ level.) • Use of multiple senses when describing. • Alliteration. • Onomatopoeia. • Direct speech / quoted speech. • Thoughts and feelings. • Varied vocabulary and sentence structure, including use of fronted adverbials. If the student uses a variety of devices correctly and demonstrates a mature writing style, I award five marks. Otherwise, I base my mark on how well they have attempted this. There is some flexibility here.	/5

Originality and Flair	This is a difficult category to quantify, but here are some questions to consider when you assess originality and flair: • How does the story compare to others you have read for this task? Are you finding it hard to believe it was written by a student of this age? • Does the story follow a conventional progression? Is it cliched? Does it reinvent or subvert anything? • Did the story make you feel anything? Has the student demonstrated emotional maturity, or empathy? • Does the student develop tension, or incorporate a twist, or use mini-cliff hangers at the end of paragraphs to capture the reader's attention? Stories which really make you think "wow!" deserve five marks, whatever your answers to the above are. It is often difficult to put into words what we find impressive about these stories. Do try to stay objective though, particularly if you are marking your son or daughter's composition.	/5
Total Marks		/20