The Syntax of Plot Frames in Storytelling

In this article, the author examines how story frames are made and, by extension, how story frames correlate to syntactic patterns. The author then explores how authors that understand this syntactic framing are able to extend this technique to other types of writing.

Alan Manning
Narrative storytelling serves several purposes in and of itself: as a tool for self-expression, as a tool for teaching moral lessons, and as art. But beyond this, storytelling serves the writer as a training ground, as a place for developing fundamental skills he or she can use to frame forms of writing which for the beginner are less intuitive and more challenging.

Through the practice of story framing (i.e., creating a plot), writers develop skill in looking past their writing as a linear series of sentences to see beyond a flat list of separate events to a larger unity in what they write: the overall story frame. In this article we will explore how essentially the same syntactic patterns that we find in sentences (in essence, X-bar trees) can be used to describe the larger patterns that organize stories. In later forms of writing, this same syntactic-framing skill can be translated into a rare and crucial ability to organize explanations and arguments in support of unified, larger claims. With this skill, writers find themselves able to do more than tinker with text at the sentence-by-sentence level as unskilled writers tend to do. They are instead able to revise and improve their work at the level of overall organization.

Children’s first stories are generally told as a bare sequence of events, without much in the way of illustrative detail. Through the extended practice of narrative (i.e., describing an event sequence), writers develop skill in showing how events unfold with concrete narrative detail, simulating for the reader a perception of the events, real or fictional. In later forms of writing, this developed detailing skill can be translated into an equally rare but valuable habit of using concrete examples to illustrate each and all general explanatory and persuasive statements, re-creating for the reader the writer’s own evaluation of the examples.

We will first consider the principles of story framing and then turn to the narrative detail as a way to diagnose student writing development: in other words, the acquisition of storytelling as a specific kind of linguistic structure. We will consider in particular one aspect of narrative detail, the development of character and dialogue, which in other
writing genres translates into a writer’s ability to utilize other texts as sources (in research papers, for example) and to consider “audience.”

In effect, each successful writer learns to imagine herself or himself, other text-authors, and potential readers as characters debating the meaning of what the writer is writing. Therefore, effective character construction and dialogue is an important developmental step in the acquisition of a mature writing style.

**Principles**

We begin then with basic storytelling because, unlike advanced forms of writing, most people seem to have an innate sense of the basic form of stories even from childhood. (Notice too how the child’s story emerges in dialogue.)

Three-year-old: I had a scary dream.
Adult: What happened?
Three-year-old: There were witches, and monsters...and crocodiles. And they were scary.
Adult: Were they mean to you?
Three-year-old: No. They were nice. Scary, but nice.
(from the PBS video “Out of the Mouths of Babes”)

With this final statement, “Scary, but nice,” the child brings this account of her scary dream to a close, and her statement, in a nutshell, shows us the basic upper frame for storytelling. This frame remains quite the same whether it straddles a simple, two-line account like hers, or stretches out to hold together a multi-volume epic novel like Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

What frame could be so flexible? In all genuine stories, complex or simple, a conflict is established by qualitative details, leading the listener-reader to the conflict’s resolution. Thus, we can compare the simple dream story to *The Lord of the Rings* using parallel diagrams.

As far as this basic framing of conflict and resolution goes, the
account of the scary dream and the epic novel \textit{The Lord of the Rings} differ only in length, complexity, and placement of detail leading to resolution of conflict.

In the most primitive of stories, only enough detail is given to establish the problem; here, the “witches, monsters, and crocodiles” establish the scariness of the dream (the core of the conflict). This problem directs the listener to the resolution (the scary things turned out nice).

In the multi-volume epic, more details have to be established before the core of the conflict can be understood; Tolkien writes a short novel (\textit{The Hobbit}) detailing how Bilbo the Hobbit finds the magic ring. This short novel in turn establishes the main conflict for the rest of the epic—the problem of keeping the ring away from an evil sorcerer who wants it. This conflict is what motivates the reader to wade through over 1,200 pages, following Tolkien’s characters on a quest for resolution (to destroy the ring).

In sum, this two-part framing defines the common agenda for all genuine stories. A conflict frame is established, the conflict having two essential parts (hence, the detail-conflict branching fork in the Figure 1 diagrams): background details (1) establish a core conflict (2).
This problematic conflict provokes a listener or reader to seek the resolution frame, which in turn consists of two parts: the detailed conflict already discussed (1+2) and a resolution to the problem (3), as diagrammed in Figure 2 (below). More mature stories simply add further detail (1) to the resolution phase (3) of the story. These details create an elongated path of cause and effect. Such resolution paths in mature stories allow the author to lead the reader/listener through several causal event details before reaching the final effect, the resolution (Figure 2, right).

Thus, Frodo and his Lord of the Rings companions have several adventures leading up to their finally disposing of the troublesome ring at the end of the fourth volume. The trick for writers is to recognize one essential upper framework for all genuine stories, despite the different shades and degrees of detail that are found between a child’s simplest dream account and an epic novel.

The trick for writing instructors is to take students, with their inborn ability to give a simplistic account of an event, and guide them to frame sophisticated, multi-layered narratives.

It’s not that we even want to turn all students into epic novelists. There’s hardly room in the literary market for the ones we already have. Even so, we certainly do want to bring more students a fair distance in

![Resolution Frame Diagram](image)

Figure 2: A basic story contains a detailed conflict and a resolution to the problem. More mature stories add detail in the resolution phase, which create an elongated path of cause and effect.
the direction of epic narrative, because the skills developed in narrative framing will prove valuable in framing effective writing in business, technology, and academia, and we have far too few effective writers in those markets.

To help students to advance their narrative and story-framing skills, we must be able to determine where their current skills are on the path between the simplest and most complex stories. We’ve discussed the key features of the first two common stages of narrative framing, from the most basic frame to the more complex path-frame (detailed in Figure 2 left and right, above). We will now consider the third and most sophisticated of these storytelling formats, the detail-closure frame, where the end of the story is carefully foreshadowed in prior story details, creating the powerful textual effect called closure.

Different nursery stories nicely illustrate the difference between framing a story as a bare cause-effect path and framing a story with illustrative details and genuine closure. The usual bare-path telling of a Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, or Snow White, for example, always includes a merely formal “closure” line, immediately after the actual resolution line, thus:

**C. Resolution:** …because the slipper fit, the prince knew Cinderella was the woman he’d searched for.

**S.W. Resolution:** …so it turned out Snow White was still alive. The prince immediately proposed to her.

**S.B. Resolution:** …so the prince kissed the sleeping beauty and she woke up.

What follows is in fact the same line each time, the ritual ending:

**Ritual Closure:** “They got married and lived happily ever after.”

Besides this tag line (and the prince), these stories also share a tendency to be told as a sequence of events, each key event being described with just one sentence. Outside of the Disney cartoons, it is rare to find a telling of these stories that has much in the way of
descriptive detail. All this is left to the imagination of hearers: what events actually looked like, sounded like, and felt like to the characters.

**Background Detail:** Cinderella was an orphan who lived with her evil stepmother and ugly stepsisters...

**Core Conflict:** They wouldn’t let her go to the ball to meet the prince...

And so on. There are relatively few nursery stories customarily performed, with dialogue and sensory details included. The common exceptions are *The Three Bears, Red Riding Hood, and The Three Little Pigs*, which typically include short stretches of ritual dialogue:

“Grandma, what big eyes you have!”

“Little Pig, Little Pig, let me in!”

“All the better to see you with, my dear.”

“All by the hair of our chinny-chin chins!”

Of these, *The Three Bears* is the strongest example. In American culture at least, telling this story also requires ritual dialogue performance in detailing its conflict, its key events, and its resolution. Parents may tell *Cinderella* but they must perform *The Three Bears*. Because more details of the story are made explicit, closure in the story genuinely results from parallels in detail. Because all of the *Three Bears* event-details have parallel structure, the closure effect here is strong and genuine rather than weak and merely formal.

**Goldilocks enters the house [core conflict]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Bears sit down to eat. (conflict background)</th>
<th>Goldilocks tries the food.</th>
<th>Goldilocks tries the chairs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detail 1</td>
<td>“This porridge is too hot.”</td>
<td>“This porridge is too hot.”</td>
<td>“This chair is too soft.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail 2</td>
<td>“This porridge is too hot.”</td>
<td>“This porridge is too cold.”</td>
<td>“This chair is too hard.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail 3</td>
<td>“My porridge”</td>
<td>“This porridge”</td>
<td>“This chair”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is too hot too.” is just right.” is just right.”

Outcome Bears go out for walk. She eats Baby Bear’s food. She breaks Baby Bear’s chair.

This parallelism of detail continues through the bears’ return, their inspection of the house, and their discovery of Goldilocks in Baby Bear’s bed. This start-to-finish parallelism eliminates the need for a ritual “happily every after” closure typical of bare-frame fairy tales. Instead, the original conflict (Goldilocks in the Bears’ house) is resolved when Goldilocks runs out of the house in fright, and this is the last fixed line of the story.

My mother used to add a final closure line: “And Baby Bear was sad because he would’ve liked to play with the girl.” I have never felt quite satisfied with this ending. Since then I’ve thought of a more effective way to follow up on the resolution of The Three Bears with further parallel detail. This ending does give final closure, but it requires our changing the resolution somewhat:

. . . And Papa Bear said, “Somebody’s been sleeping in my bed.”
And Mama Bear said, “Somebody’s been sleeping in my bed.”
And Baby Bear said, “Somebody’s been sleeping in my bed, and here she is, STILL sleeping in my bed!”

Resolution: So the three Bears (being bears, after all, and having missed breakfast) ATE Goldilocks,

Closure: because SHE wasn’t too hot, and SHE wasn’t too cold.
She was, in fact, JUST RIGHT.

In modern, mature storytelling, the closure effects of parallel detail are not usually this obvious, or this relentless, but they are present, and serve an important unifying function. In Gone With the Wind (book and film), for example, Scarlett O’Hara finds herself at the end of the story much changed by events of the Civil War and three bad marriages. However, ironically, Scarlett is stuck in the same emotional situation that she’s been in from the first page of the book:
**Conflict:** Scarlett is in love with Ashley Wilkes, but can’t have him.

**Closure:** Scarlett is (FINALLY!) in love with Rhett Butler, but can’t have him.

Now, to bring all of the foregoing storytelling shop-talk to closure, the key differences between a bare path frame and a detail-closure frame are diagrammed in Figure 3.

We recognize mature, detail-closure storytelling as that stage in which the bare, cause-effect sequence (like *Cinderella* the fairy tale) is “fleshed out” with detail (*Cinderella* the motion picture), and that detail is most effective when it unifies the story as a whole with certain parallel elements which create a sense of closure.

![Figure 3: In a fully developed story, the resolution-path frame contains a number of detail-event frames, each consisting of a key event and the detail describing the event.](image)

As we have already seen, in even the most basic narrative, a storyteller must give (1) a little detail at least, to define conflict (2). The dream was scary because of the details: the witches, monsters and crocodiles. The conflict is necessary so something may be resolved (3) (the witches, etc., were scary but nice). Thus, the resolution frame contains conflict and resolution; the conflict frame contains background detail and conflict. As shown in Figure 3, in a fully developed story there are
(naturally) a number of detail-event frames, each consisting of a key event and the detail describing the event.

Detail Diagnostics
Beginning storytellers may provide just one detail-event frame, enough to establish conflict. Fully-developed storytellers have to learn to balance and manage several detail-event frames to flesh out the bare frame of a story. Skill with detail management also develops through sub-stages, roughly parallel to the overall progression from (1) basic framing to (2) bare cause-effect path framing to (3) detail-closure framing.

We will now consider these three sub-stages of detail management: (a) the “pure detail” stage, (b) the “pure event” stage, and (c) the “pure dialoging” stage. These stages serve as diagnostics, tools for actually evaluating writers’ progress from basic framing to fully mature story framing, full of illustrative detail, which should finally be a balanced mix of each of these pure types of detail.

Recall that any number of events can be stacked to create a resolution path (see Figures 1 and 2 again). That is to say, good stories (well-formed resolution frames) can grow to considerable length (as Gone with the Wind and The Lord of the Rings do). It is likewise true that any number of details can be stacked to describe the internal shape of an event, from initial event to the event outcome. It will prove important to remember, however, that this event outcome, not the detail stack itself, is what advances the reader/listener another step along the resolution path and what makes the reader/listener feel the story is going somewhere.

Let’s go back to The Three Bears (just once more, I promise) to compare the quite different effects of these two methods of bulking up a story: event-stacking vs. detail-stacking.

Novice writers will often first try to lengthen a story by adding pure detail, just as I have lengthened the beginning of The Three Bears
below by adding more detail to the first background scene. Notice that I haven’t given the bears many extra things to DO:

Pure Detail
Three mangy black bears lived in a little, slightly run-down two-story cottage in the middle of a large, dark wood. It was the first morning in many months that was not bitter cold. It had been a long winter. Pale but welcome sunlight fell across and warmed the rough-hewn wooden table in the little kitchen. Papa Bear’s chair, like all the other kitchen chairs, was made of wood and wicker. It creaked and squeaked as Papa Bear sat down. He grumbled a terse and insincere “good morning” at Mama and Baby who were already seated. Papa scratched his left ear absently as he sniffed and stirred the slightly stale brown porridge Mama had served him . . .

Now, as “pure” detail, the above passage is all that it should be. I’ve described the opening scene with sights, sounds, feelings, and even a hint about the smell of the porridge. And yet, if I continue in this style for more than a few lines, most readers will lose interest, and not because they know the story. Although I’m painting a vivid scene here, nothing is happening to hold anybody’s interest. On the other hand, a pure sequence of happenings, of cause-effect events that is, will not hold interest either, especially if the sequence comes prior to (or instead of!) the main conflict-resolution path that genuine stories require. Then the narrative becomes mere history, a page, as it were, from the Bear Bible:

Pure Event History
Abraham Bear begat Isaac Bear, and Isaac Bear begat Jacob Bear, and Jacob Bear begat Judas Bear (and his brethren), and Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram. And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon, and Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David the king.
bear; and David the king begat Solomon Bear of her that had been the wife of Urias Bear . . . (see Matthew 1:2–6).

Readers lose interest in this sort of narrative very quickly indeed. Even if fleshed out by detail, this kind of pure-event narrative can only serve as prologue to the real story (which is exactly what it does in the actual Bible). Only in the last line is there even a hint of something that might be called an interesting detail, because it hints at a social conflict.

Again, this is something that even experienced writers can find themselves doing—writing an overlong historical prologue before they get to anything actually interesting. Attractive writing needs to create some kind of balance between “hot” detail and “cold” event-history.

Readers need something in the middle, something “just right” (sorry about that; I’m almost done).

The next version holds interest better, mainly because I’ve mixed new details with new events, but also because the events I do add are laying down a cause-effect path to the story’s resolution, to create a full sense of detail closure:

Details + Cause-Effect Events ➞ Resolution Path Closure

Mama Bear placed Baby in his highchair, and he began to whimper and fuss.

“Pine nut porridge again?” he bawled mournfully.

“Hush now, Baby,” Mama said softly, as she finished ladling the steaming goo into Baby’s mid-size bowl. She put the smallest bowl in front of her own place at the table, dabbing two scant spoonfuls in it. “Papa does the best he can,” she whispered,
mostly to herself. “Most of the berry bushes have died from the cold, and rabbits and deer are getting hard to find, let alone catch.”

In this third version, new events support the new detail, and separate event-details are linked by cause and effect: Baby is upset by the same dull porridge, which he’s getting because Papa couldn’t find anything but pine nuts to feed his family and this was because the winter was harsh—so harsh, in fact, that the Bear family is even running short on pine nuts, which is why Mama Bear takes so little porridge herself, and this is why her bowl of porridge gets cold before Baby Bear’s porridge (in the mid-size bowl), which is why Goldilocks eats Baby Bear’s porridge all up, which by the way is why Baby Bear really ought to eat Goldilocks at the end of the story. (And now I really am done with these poor bears.)

And so we’ve seen how both details and events are useful and necessary to flesh out a good story, but that either can become an obstacle to effective storytelling unless they are balanced and unless they clearly support the essential frame of a story, from conflict to resolution.

Note that part of the strength of the third passage above lies in my use of dialogue, words the characters say to one another and to themselves. As narrative detail, dialogue has the special property of being simultaneously an event and a detail (and something else, as we shall see). It’s an event because it’s something a character does, an act of speech that causes other characters to respond. It’s a detail because it’s something the reader would actually hear if they observed the story events firsthand.

But, like pure sensory detail and pure event history, pure dialogue can also have a third, skewing effect on narrative. This skewing effect is most apparent when storytellers have some specific point they want to make, some moral, political, or philosophical statement. If they can’t think of a way to have characters act out the point, they may choose to have characters discuss the issue:
“I’m against capital punishment,” Cosmo said. “Killing a second person won’t bring the first one back.”

Gerald shrugged. “No, it won’t. But what you’re also saying is that murderers should be rewarded for being so efficient.”

“What’re you taking about?” Cosmo asked.

“Well, suppose that crazy old boyfriend of Ellie Mae’s came in here in a jealous rage and stabbed you with a knife. You’re bleeding bad. But suppose before you die from it, you stumble to the fireplace and get hold of the poker. Whatcha gonna do with it?”

“Bust the guy in the head, of course. Aw, I see where you’re going. Sure, I’ll kill him first if I can, but that’s different, that’s self-defense,” Cosmo said.

“But you’re gonna die anyway,” Gerald protested. “Killing Gus won’t bring you back, but you’d want to kill him anyway. Now suppose Gus is more efficient with the knife, and gets you right in the heart. You die, and he just gets twenty years, and he’s paroled in seven. He’s been rewarded for being such an efficient killer. If he hadn’t been so efficient, you’d have killed him yourself. What do you think of capital punishment now?”

Cosmo grimaced. “I’m not so sure now.”

Figure 4: Pure detail without action can only create a vivid description. Pure cause-effect event sequences can only create a history or prologue leading up to the “real” story. Pure dialogue creates a story frame.
Now, we’ve seen how pure detail or pure event narration will inevitably clog or delay the essential story frame of conflict and resolution. Pure dialogue, on the contrary, inevitably creates a bare story frame. That is to say, if people have a genuine conversation, it must have started with some question unanswered for at least one speaker, or some disagreement between two. In a word, there must have been some conflict. Furthermore, the natural outcome of (friendly) conversation is some consensus, some resolution.

Pure detail without action can only create (a) a vivid description (Figure 4 left). Pure cause-effect event sequences can only create (b) a history or prologue leading up to the “real” story (Figure 4 center). Pure dialogue (c) creates a story frame. Although it will be a fairly bare sequence of utterances, dialogue naturally begins in conflict (a question or disagreement) and ends in resolution (an answer or agreement).

Most modern fiction contains stretches of “talking heads” dialogue like the example above, but some novelists get accused of relying on it too much. They get accused of lecturing their readers, of spoiling their stories with overly pedantic, didactic prose. The reason for this objection has nothing to do with the structure of storytelling, however. Instead, the problem with lecturing dialogue like the last example is that it threatens the basic agenda of literary narrative.

In brief, literature is expected to serve as a substitute for the perception of actual events, and so literary narrative is not supposed to carry with it a fixed, single-minded message. Two people who observe the same event are never compelled by the event itself to draw the same conclusions. What happens when two (or more) people get together and talk about the event is another matter, however. In that social context, people are inclined to talk about what happened until they come to agreement.

To the extent that “talking heads” dialogue persistently drags the reader along to a particular moral, political, or philosophical
conclusion, it frustrates reader expectations that a literary text should simulate life itself, full of multiple interpretations. In sum, dialogue detail goes far to satisfy the structural criteria of storytelling, but pure dialogue also overtly leads readers to a particular propositional conclusion and so begins to defeat the usual purpose of modern storytelling, which is entertainment rather than commitment to specific claims.

It’s worth remembering, though, that Western philosophy was born in dialogue-heavy storytelling, that is, in the Dialogues of Plato. As philosophy was born, however, the analytic division of discourse genres began. Plato proposed to ban all poets (tellers of fictional stories) from his utopia. Plato’s student Aristotle subsequently distinguished poetics (literature), rhetoric (persuasion), techné (craftsmanship), and skientia (knowledge). There are legitimate reasons for this division of genres, but when pushed too far, this division becomes fragmentation: Much of commercial and political rhetoric has become vitriolic; much of technical explanation, unreadable; and much of academic writing, dry and plodding. All in all, the sense of a dialogic negotiation with readers (as characters in a compelling narrative) has been lost.

In future study, we should return to this point and re-examine the common roots of all writing in story and dialogue. Again, the goal here is not to make all writing into an overt dialogue between story characters. Rather, writers may improve their ability in each modern genre by reviewing the basics of storytelling and by consciously evaluating their performance in each genre relative to their storytelling and dialoging skills, this common center for all writing.

Classroom Practice
Now that we’ve gone over the basic principles and diagnostic features of storytelling, we are ready to look at some possible techniques for teaching this genre as a foundation for later kinds of writing. Although
these storytelling principles I’ve described are fairly constant, the strategies that teachers might use to implement these principles in the classroom are open and infinite. Readers should consider exercises and assignments that I’ll describe in this next section as exemplary suggestions only.

Generally speaking, though, teachers and students will want to work through three sequential goals:

1. To be able to IDENTIFY the basic features of story in the writing of others.
2. To be able to OUTLINE the frame for an original story of their own.
3. To be able to DEVELOP a bare story frame with detail, appropriately balanced with cause-effect event sequences and dialogue leading to a satisfying resolution.

Again, generally speaking, teachers and students will want to work through this three-goal sequence with relatively short stories, perhaps only one paragraph or one page in length initially, especially if students have difficulty with longer texts. Once students have mastered the one-paragraph or one-page story, then the whole IDENTIFY-OUTLINE-DEVELOP sequence can be repeated with progressively longer texts, progressively more intricate stories: two to five pages, five to ten pages, ten to twenty pages, and so on.

Practice identifying story features.

Humorous anecdotes like those published in Reader’s Digest serve as abundant, handy examples of the one-paragraph story.

I began my last semester of college six months pregnant. Walking down the hall in the psychology building one day [BACKGROUND-DETAIL], I was grabbed from behind and spun around to face a totally strange young man [CONFLICT]. His eyes fastened on my protruding midriff; his face paled; his books dropped to the floor [DETAIL-EVENT#1]. I shook his
arm and asked if he was all right [DETAIL-EVENT #2]. He looked at my face, then whooped and swung me around in a bear hug [DETAIL-EVENT #3]. “Thank God!” he said. “You’re someone else!” [RESOLUTION & CLOSURE] From Laughter, the Best Medicine, NY: Berkeley Books, 1982, p. 28.

The basic mechanism of this humorous story (and most others) is that the resolution of its conflict leads readers to a special kind of closure. The punchline leads readers to reinterpret explicitly mentioned details (here, the young man’s shock and then sudden joy) and fit these together with unmentioned but now clearly imagined details to create a slightly different but equally coherent story. The original story conflict is explained: the young man grabbed the narrator because from behind she looked like his girlfriend. But this resolution serves as background for conflict in the hidden story: the young man was shocked because he thought his girlfriend was pregnant. This new conflict also has a resolution path: the young man finally looked at the woman’s face (EVENT #1). He whooped for joy (EVENT #2) because he was relieved to find the narrator wasn’t his girlfriend (RESOLUTION).

This kind of “anecdote exercise” is handy for students because it works at two levels: beginning students might only be asked for the key elements of the first, most obvious story frame; more advanced students might be asked for the key elements of the hidden story created by the punch line.

This sort of anecdote exercise is also useful because it directly illustrates a point I would like to make: that is, story frames (or any other kind of discourse structure) do not physically exist in the words of a written text. Rather, these frames exist in the mind of the writer, whose task is to lead readers to rebuild similar frames in their minds using the text as a guide.
Practice outlining an original story frame.

For most students, this proves the most difficult step, to transform their passive comprehension of key story elements into an active production of original work. Once the student has outlined a bare story frame, however, the detail-development process becomes much easier.

The student’s first original outline might be a joint effort with the instructor, developed in an office visit or a class-time workshop. Another good first-effort exercise is to have a student pick a common fairy tale and alter it slightly to serve as the frame for a new story. Hollywood screenwriters do this often enough, so there’s no reason student writers shouldn’t be allowed. But, whether a student begs or borrows his or her first story-frame outline, he or she alone ought to be responsible for the first essential step:

BEFORE they even begin to work out a story frame, writers must discover a key incident—a principle, situation, or event—that serves as the “seed” for the story they will tell. If any story is to be any good, its writer has to care about its essence, so naturally student writers should pick their own key incident to build on. The main problem is, young people often haven’t discovered or don’t consciously realize that they really care about anything, and so, as writers, this is precisely where they get stuck.

To get around this problem, I tell students in my introductory linguistics class that their main task in their story-writing assignments is to illustrate some concept or principle they’ve learned about in class, whatever idea they’ve found most interesting, but preferably some idea they’ve seen actually exemplified in real life, outside of class.

So, for example, after one of my lectures on the differences between animal communication and human language, one of my students was particularly struck by the idea that even a super intelligent dog would not be able to speak, since the animal would lack a human vocal tract specifically evolved for resonating human vowels and articulating human consonants.
This idea led this student to her key incident: she imagined the frustration that a superintelligent animal would suffer if it knew about language but was unable to use it. All she had to do then was pick a pre-existing story frame such as Red Riding Hood:

**Conflict:** Red Riding Hood tells a wolf she’s taking goodies to Grandma (BIG MISTAKE).

**Event #1:** Wolf takes shortcut to Grandma’s.

**Event #2:** Wolf eats Grandma & puts on her outfit.

**Event #3:** Wolf tricks Red Riding Hood into coming close to the bed.

**Resolution:** Wolf eats Red Riding Hood (punishment for little girls who talk to strangers).

With a key incident of her own in mind, the student was then able to reshape this familiar story frame into something original, creative and instructive:

“Hello, my name is Maria Lopez, but my friends call me Little Red Riding Hood,” Maria said to the wolf she met in the woods. The wolf glared at the little girl. He hated it when humans tried to talk to him. Try as he might, he could not make his carnivorous wolf mouth form the words that he heard so clearly in his head. This caused him great frustration and was consequently a touchy subject.

Maria decided that the reason behind the wolf’s silence was that he couldn’t understand English. She tried once again to speak to the wolf.

“Hola, me llamo Maria Lopez, pero mis amigos me llaman Capulacita Roja.”

The wolf grew ever more furious with the little girl and something snapped inside his head. Meanwhile, the little girl decided that the wolf’s silence was purely rude.

“I don’t understand why you won’t talk to me. I don’t think you’re very nice. Well, I’ll be on my way then over to my
grandmother’s house…”

The wolf was quite annoyed with Little Red Riding Hood and proceeded to plot out revenge for the little girl’s insensitivity...

The key incident students invent in a fairy-tale setting may become the background for their story’s main conflict (as in the example above). This is perfectly acceptable, but more mature writers typically work backwards from a key incident they have directly experienced themselves, developing a separate conflict and resolution path that leads up to the key incident, then past it to a resolution of the original conflict. This approach indicates that students are planning ahead and thinking in terms of concrete examples, but they still must watch for plotting pitfalls.

For example, many students have approached me with proposed story outlines based on my linguistics lecture on the difference between literal, direct language (“Hand me the salt shaker right now”) and more socially acceptable, indirect language (“Could you pass me the salt, please, when it’s convenient?”). This linguistic principle resonates with many precisely because we’ve all experienced the different emotional effects created by direct and indirect language. On several different occasions, different students have proposed to me this very same story frame:

**Conflict:** The main character is accused of being socially inept because he uses blunt, direct language when he ought to have been indirect (polite, tactful).

**Event #1:** Character expresses wish that everybody would learn to be completely honest and direct in what they say, just like him.

**Event #2:** Character has dream where he gets his wish. Everybody is blunt and direct, and the character’s feelings are hurt.

**Resolution:** Character wakes up and realizes his mistake.

As popular as the “dream-sequence” story frame is with TV sitcom writers, this is one plot device that I try to discourage, and not just
because it’s been beaten to death. The main reason I try to get students to improve on this outline is because it automatically suppresses the authentic, concrete experiences that students have had, experiences that made them interested in direct and indirect language to begin with. The next version is much improved:

**Conflict:** Boyfriend breaks up with main character. She is hurt because he has used several “break-up” clichés meant to spare her feelings: “I need some space,” “You deserve better than me,” etc.

**Event #1:** Main character complains to roommate that she wishes boyfriend would just tell the unvarnished truth: he’s met somebody else he’d like to date more than her.

**Event #2:** Wise roommate (a linguistics student of course!) later makes several completely direct, completely true remarks to main character: “Those jeans make your behind look huge,” and “I need your dictionary for a paper I’m writing. Give it to me,” and so on.

**Event #3:** Main character is outraged.

**Event #4:** Roommate explains that she was just trying to show how important indirect language is to happy human relations.

**Resolution:** Main character forgives ex-boyfriend and gets on with her life.

In helping students to develop fiction-writing skills, I encourage them to work through and then move beyond fairy-tale and dream-sequence story frames, to finally plot a story as close to reality as possible, but still fictionalized as much as necessary. Writers make good use of fictional story frames to protect the identity of actual people (including themselves!), avoiding, among other things, embarrassment and libel suits if anybody actually reads their stories. To guarantee that people stay interested in what they write, writers also must edit and reshape real events until they fit naturally with the conflict-resolution frame of storytelling.

I make a final point of this because, once they’re converted to the idea of a realistic story, some writers want to insist on a direct,
completely accurate account of their personal experience, with all the messy, even annoying details intact. At this suggestion I point out that telling an experience “exactly as it happened” entails many of the same dangers we encounter in being totally honest and direct in what we say to other people. We run a great risk of boring readers into a stupor with all our actual thoughts and experiences, or we run the still greater risk of offending them with the unvarnished truth.

Practice developing interesting, goal-driven detail
Once writers have worked out an adequate story frame, growing out of some key incident they are genuinely interested in writing about, they can begin the main business of fleshing out a story with detail. As noted in the diagnostic section of this chapter, we can expect some beginners in their first efforts to get bogged down in descriptive detail.

I woke up and heard the birds chirping. It was nice to hear the sound of birds chirping over the sound of the traffic. My first reaction was that it was going to be a nice day outside, but then I remembered that those same Russian birds were there even when it was thirty degrees below zero. My roommate had shut all the windows before she went to sleep. This didn’t exactly leave much oxygen in the room. I woke up suffocating and faced a new set of cockroaches ...

Still others we can expect to pass over too many events, sometimes without detail, but more typically without getting to the main conflict of the story quickly enough:

When I was first appointed general over the Nephite army, there had already been many wars and contentions over many years. Many of the battles and wars were fought because of the spirit of contention that lived in the hearts of our enemy’s forefathers. They felt they had been robbed of their right to rule over us and they then passed the spirit of contention on down to their sons
and daughters who then passed it on to their sons and daughters. But there is also another reason why the great battles of my career came to pass . . .

Even experienced writers tend to write longish detail or historical prologues in their first detailed draft. Naturally, then, the writing student’s most important remedial exercise at this detail-development stage is to search through their draft until they come to the main conflict in their story, the problem that gets solved by the end. I then instruct writers to delete everything prior to that main conflict and start the story at that point.

If the student’s narrative contains no conflict that ever gets solved, they need to go back to the story-outlining stage described above. Usually though, there’s something to work with. Let’s rejoin the first example above, several dozen lines later in the actual narrative:

I was sitting on the bus wrapped in so many clothes. It was thirty below that day and my babushka [landlady] had made sure that the last coat I put on over the rest of them was a very Russian-looking purple coat. I brought my English/Russian flash cards along with me. [More Detail Deleted] I hadn’t really paid any attention to the man sitting next to me until I became aware that he was staring at my flash cards. [More Detail Deleted]. He pointed to my flash cards and asked if those were English words next to the Russian, and I responded, “Da.” I was then prepared for him to start asking the usual, insinuating questions: Was I American? Would I ever date or marry a Russian man? Instead he asked me if I understood English very well and if it was a hard language to learn. He thought I was Russian, all wrapped up in that ugly purple coat as I was. If I could only keep him thinking I was Russian until I could get off the bus, I thought, maybe I could avoid (for once) being hit on by this guy. Trouble was, my accent would give me away unless I kept saying “Da” to everything he said.

The passage that remains after all this cutting still establishes
the most essential background details: the narrator is an American girl in Russia, on a bus, wrapped up in heavy coats against the cold. Only these details are needed to establish the main conflict, a difficult choice this girl faces: to give up her protective “Russian” appearance and be harassed, or to keep saying “yes” to anything this stranger might say . . . or ask.

Students and mature writers alike have to find the courage to delete all the clutter, scraps of imagery, and unconnected thoughts obscuring an otherwise interesting and effective story. Details and events must either support the main conflict or lead to the final resolution. To do otherwise is to do something other than tell an effective story.