

Narrative Writing

Module 1: Understanding Plot

Day 1 – Exposition and the Inciting Incident





Bell Ringer

Think About Stories

Think of your favorite movie or novel. Every great story has a moment that starts it all — a moment before which nothing would have happened the same way. Discuss with a partner:

The Beginning

What happens at the very start of the story? Who do we meet, and where are we?

The Spark

What single event starts the main story rolling? What changes everything?

The "What If?"

Would the story still be interesting if that event never happened? What would be lost?

Learning Objectives

By the end of today's lesson, you will be able to accomplish all of the following. Keep these goals in mind as we work through the material.

01

Define Plot

Explain what plot is and why it matters in storytelling.

03

Identify the Exposition

Recognize how a story establishes its world, characters, and setting.

02

Explain Freytag's Pyramid

Describe the classic structure that organizes most stories.

04

Identify the Inciting Incident

Pinpoint the moment that launches the main conflict and drives the story forward.

What Is Plot?

Plot Defined

Plot is the sequence of events in a story. Every event should lead naturally to the next, creating a chain of cause and effect that carries the reader forward.

Authors Use Plot To:

- **Develop Characters**
Show how people grow, change, or are revealed under pressure.
- **Create Conflict**
Introduce obstacles and problems that must be faced.
- **Build Suspense**
Keep readers wondering what will happen next.
- **Communicate Themes**
Deliver the deeper messages and ideas of the story.

Why Do Stories Need Structure?

Stories are more enjoyable when events happen in a logical order. A recognizable pattern helps readers understand what is happening and why it matters — it creates anticipation and emotional investment. Think about stories you already know:



Harry Potter

When does Harry's ordinary life end and the adventure truly begin?



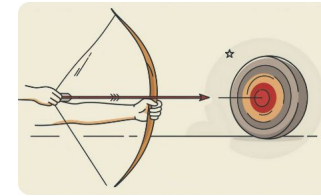
Finding Nemo

What single event sends Marlin on his desperate journey across the ocean?



The Lion King

What shatters Simba's carefree life and sets the story in motion?



The Hunger Games

What moment changes Katniss's world and makes the story impossible to ignore?

Freytag's Pyramid

In the 1800s, playwright Gustav Freytag identified a pattern common to most stories. This model — known as Freytag's Pyramid — helps readers and writers understand how stories are organized from beginning to end.



Each stage serves a purpose: setting up the world, introducing conflict, intensifying tension, reaching a turning point, and finally resolving the story. Recognizing this structure helps you read — and write — more effectively.

Meet Mathilde Loisel

Before diving into the story, let's understand our protagonist. Mathilde Loisel is the central character of *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant. She is complex, relatable, and deeply human.

Beautiful & Intelligent

Mathilde possesses natural charm and wit that she feels are wasted on her modest life.

😞 Deeply Dissatisfied

Despite having enough to live comfortably, she is consumed by longing for something more.

💎 Dreams of Luxury

She yearns for wealth, elegant parties, fine clothes, and the admiration of high society.



Guided Reading

Reading *The Necklace*— Opening Pages

Read the opening pages of *The Necklace*. As you read, pay close attention to how the author introduces Mathilde and her world. Good readers actively question the text as they go.



Who is Mathilde?

What details does the author share about her personality, appearance, and situation? What kind of person does she seem to be?



What does she want?

What are Mathilde's dreams and desires? What kind of life does she wish she had?

Why is she unhappy?

Is her unhappiness reasonable? What clues does the text give us about the source of her discontent?

Exposition

The exposition is the opening section of a story — the foundation on which everything else is built. Without a strong exposition, readers have no reason to care about what comes next.



Setting

Where and when does the story take place? The exposition anchors readers in a specific time and place.



Main Characters

Who are the key people in the story? We meet the protagonist and learn what makes them who they are.



Ordinary Life

What does the protagonist's everyday world look like before the conflict begins?



Background Information

What do readers need to know to understand the coming conflict and why it matters?

Turn and Talk

Discussion Time

Based on the opening pages of *The Necklace*, discuss the following question with a partner. Remember to support your answer with specific evidence from the text — don't just share your opinion, point to what the author actually wrote.

Why is Mathilde unhappy? Use at least one detail from the story to support your answer.

After partner discussion, we'll share out with the whole class. Be ready to engage with this bigger question:

❏ Does being unhappy always mean someone has a difficult life? Can a person have everything they need and still be miserable? What does Mathilde's situation tell us about human nature?

Guided Reading

Continue Reading — The Invitation Arrives

Continue reading *The Necklace* until Mr. Loisel arrives home and presents Mathilde with the invitation to the Minister's ball. This is a key moment in the story — read carefully and notice Mathilde's reaction.

1

Read Actively

Notice every detail of how Mathilde and Mr. Loisel react. Small details often carry big meaning.

2

Make a Prediction

Before reading further — pause and predict: How do you think Mathilde will react to the invitation? Write down your prediction.

3

Check Your Thinking

After reading, compare what actually happens with your prediction. Were you surprised? Why or why not?

The Inciting Incident

The moment everything changes.



It Disrupts Ordinary Life

The inciting incident is the event that pulls the protagonist out of their everyday world and forces them into the conflict. Life can no longer continue as before.



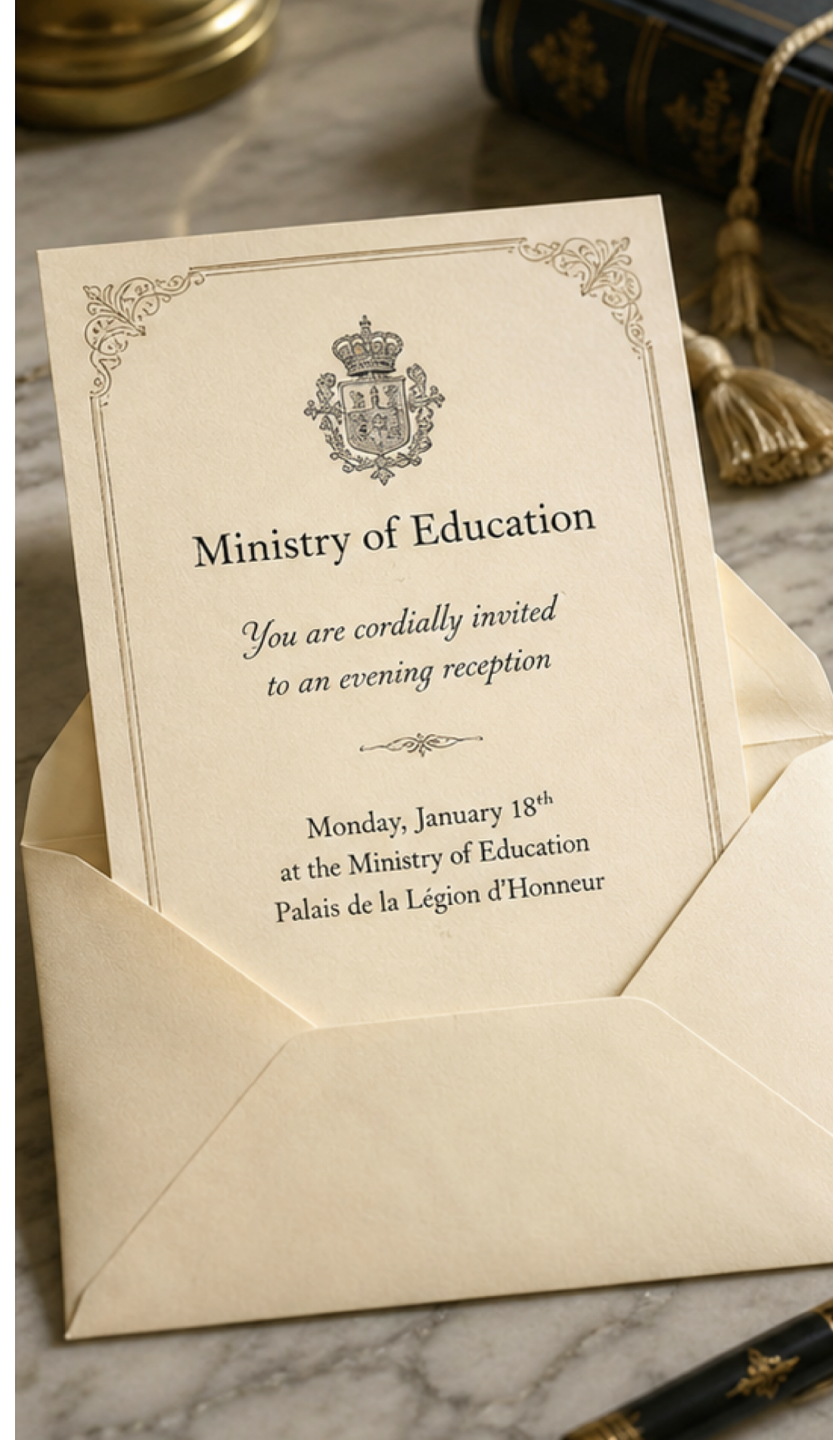
It Introduces the Main Conflict

This single event sets the central problem in motion. Every scene that follows grows directly out of this moment.



It Is Irreversible

Without the inciting incident, there is no story. It is the spark that ignites everything — the story cannot move forward without it.



Why Is the Invitation So Important?

At first glance, receiving an invitation to a glamorous ball seems like wonderful news for Mathilde. But look closer — the invitation doesn't solve anything. Instead, it creates a brand new problem and reveals a deeper conflict hiding beneath the surface.

Why Isn't Mathilde Happy?

What is Mathilde's immediate reaction to the invitation? Why does good news feel like bad news to her?

What New Conflict Appears?

What problem does the invitation create? How does it push Mathilde to make a decision she might not otherwise have made?

How Has the Story Changed?

Compare where Mathilde was at the story's opening with where she is now. What has shifted? What is now at stake?

Exposition vs. Inciting Incident

These two elements work together — but they serve very different purposes. Understanding the difference is key to analyzing any story.

Feature	Exposition	Inciting Incident
Function	Introduces the story world	Changes the story world
Life Status	Shows ordinary life	Ends ordinary life
Characters	Introduces characters	Forces characters into action
Conflict	Hints at tension	Launches the main conflict



Could the invitation have arrived before the exposition? Discuss: Why does order matter? What would readers lose if the inciting incident came first?

Writer's Toolbox

Every Story Begins with Change

Before you write your own story, you need to answer four essential questions. The best stories begin when an ordinary life is interrupted — when something forces the protagonist to act, choose, or change.



Who is my protagonist?

Who is your main character? What do readers need to know about them before the conflict begins?



What does my protagonist want?

Every great protagonist has a desire — something they are chasing, dreaming of, or working toward.



What event changes everything?

What is the moment that disrupts the ordinary? This is your inciting incident — make it count.



Why can't life remain the same?

What makes the situation irreversible? The protagonist must be unable to simply go back to normal.

Exit Ticket

Show What You Know

Answer both questions below in complete sentences. Your answers should demonstrate that you understand today's key concepts and can apply them to the text we read. Use evidence from *The Necklace* to support your thinking.

1

Exposition vs. Inciting Incident

Explain the difference between exposition and the inciting incident. What does each one do, and why does every story need both?

2

The Necklace — Inciting Incident

Identify the inciting incident in *The Necklace* and explain why it is important to the story. What does it change, and what conflict does it set in motion?



COMING UP NEXT

Looking Ahead

Next Lesson: Rising Action

How does one small decision lead to a life-changing disaster?

In our next lesson, we'll follow Mathilde as her story accelerates. The decisions she makes after the inciting incident will set off a chain of events she never could have predicted. Get ready to explore how rising action builds tension — and how authors keep readers turning pages.