

## Analyzing Student-Made Films: Plot-Purpose

Jenifer Jasinski Schneider, Ph.D., University of South Florida

Aimee Frier, University of South Florida

Patriann Smith, Ph.D. Texas Tech University

2016

### Introduction

In this document, I describe my process of analyzing the elements of student-made films. The student films originated in the context of my writing methods course in which teacher candidates worked with small groups of students to compose written and filmic texts.

To illustrate the methodological process of film analysis, I selected a film created by a group of 5th grade students and two teacher candidates. Their process serves as the context for decision-making and further details about their process are presented in other parts of this collection.

In this document, I included Aimee Frier, a doctoral student and research assistant who videotaped every work session and documented the students' decision-making process and text production. I also included Patriann Smith, a doctoral student, who joined Aimee and me for the analysis. They engaged in the analysis of the focus group's film and their insights were integral in my development of these procedures.

Below I describe my methods for analyzing student-made films. In this phase, I focus on the elements that demonstrate how the students and their teacher candidates made meaning through the plot and/or their purpose for composing.

### Identifying Major Scenes

In the previous *shot* phase, I identified and isolated the students' use of camera shots, sequences of shots, and scenes. In the current phase, the goal is to identify major scenes. The difference between isolating scenes and identifying major scenes is connected to the plot and purpose of the film.

At this point in the analysis, I step back and engage in a macro-level reading of the plot and purpose. In other words, there are occasions when students embed scenes, but the scenes do little to advance the plot or purpose of the film. Therefore, I view the film several times to determine major shifts in meaning.

Translating the dialogue is a helpful technique for identifying shifts in the plot or purpose (Table 1). In the case of the focus film, the students followed a narrative plot structure and their language signaled shifts in meaning. They also used captions to provide a translation of their audio. Interestingly, their Spanish to English translations were not always verbatim and there were occasions when the students/teachers did not provide a translation.

Scene	Staging	Content	Spanish Dialogue
1	Classroom	We are now finishing up the unit on the French and Indian War. Yes! Yes! Awesome! But we do have an exam tomorrow.  With that being said, you are now dismissed.	Today we have finished the unit on....  With that being said now you can leave the class we are finished.  Student: Thank you!!! (Not translated)
2	School yard	No translation  No translation provided.  Wow! It's a journal that belongs to a British soldier. We just finished learning about this in class.	Bye. Bye!  HmMMM What is this?  Verbatim
3	Soldier's camp	Dear journal, right now I am in my camp getting ready for the battle against the French.  "We have to go to the battlefield. Come on."	Inaudible  We have to go to the battlefield now. Let's go.
4	Field	Action: Soldiers and Indians march across a grassy area.	
5	Battlefield	Action: British Soldiers (red shirts), French Soldiers (blue shirts), Indians (brown shirts)  Scrolling dialogue with explanation of the scene. "Meanwhile....."  No translation	"Attack" in Spanish

6	Hotel	Treaty of Paris in English  British: I legally sign this document.  Indian: I am an Indian signing on behalf of Britain.  French: I am a French soldier signing this document.  Indian: I am an Indian signing for the peace between Britain, France, and Indians	Nothing in Spanish.  British – I sign this document.  Indian – I am an Indian and I sign this. French – I am the king of France who is going to sign this document. Indian: Verbatim
7	School yard	Action: Student reads from a journal. Dialogue: “Wow, I’m going to show my teacher.”	Verbatim

### Describing Major Scenes

Once I feel confident that I have identified the major scenes, I time stamp each scene and provide a narrative annotation. Throughout the narration, I comment on any interesting features that may not be noticeable to another viewer who did not view the process of film creation. For example, in scene 3, I noted that the soldier is played by a female student playing the role of a male.

(1) 00:00 The film begins in a classroom where the students finished a unit on the French and Indian War. The teacher tells them they will have a test the next day. The students are dismissed. (2) 00:43 As the students walk on the school grounds, one boy discovers a buried diary in the grass. The boy reads the diary. (3) 01:18 The scene fades into another scene with a soldier (played by a female student) writing in the same diary to chronicle the war. The soldier writes aloud to reveal the contents of the text to the audience. Another soldier interrupts and calls the soldier to war. (4) 01:40 A group of soldiers march to the battlefield, (5) 01:46 where they engage in a series of battles. (6) 03:01 The war scene fades, the location changes to a room where the Treaty of Paris is signed. (7) 03:59 In the final scene, the audience is brought back to the present day as the student reads the end of the diary entry. Then he skips off to give the diary to his teacher. (8) 04:13 Credits, bloopers, and a rap song follow the film.

### Plotting the Plot, Plotting the Purpose, Plotting the Structure

Next, I determine the rhetorical purpose of the film (e.g., narrative, informative, descriptive, argumentative). In most films, the students choose a narrative structure, but some films approach the topic through expository text structures, or descriptive structures such as poetry, rap, or other forms. Through the process of analyzing the text structure, I pay particular attention to the characters, setting, plot, and theme. Often, I will use a simple graphic organizer to record details (Figure 1). I sort out the students’/teachers’ communicative purposes and interpret the effects of their corresponding choices.

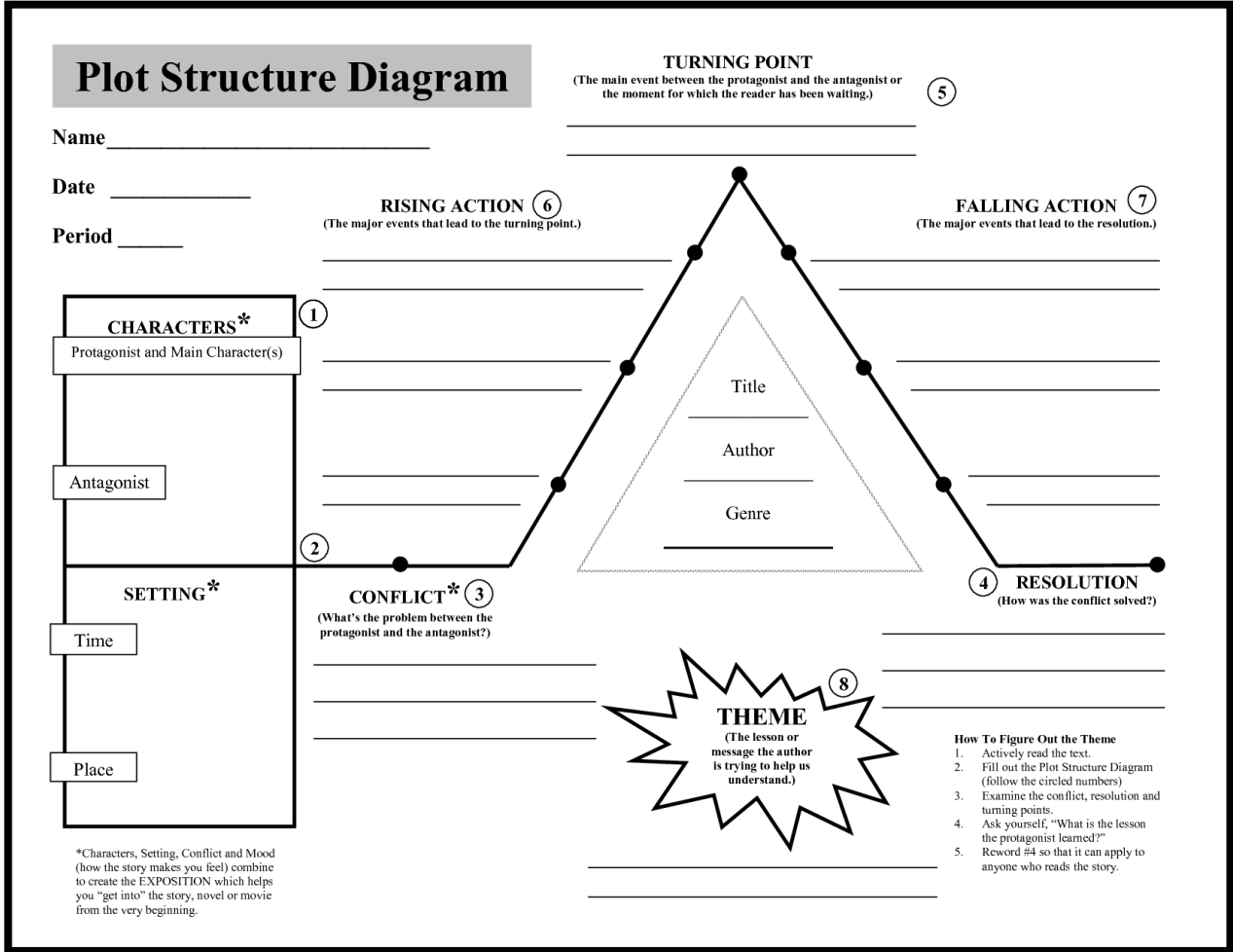


Figure 1. Graphic organizer for plot. Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.com/source/pictagram.xyz>

In this phase, I focus on the larger message of the film by identifying the major scenes, describing the scenes, and plotting the purpose and text structure. I can also compare my analysis of the text structure to the students' intentions by examining their storyboards and other materials I may have collected during the field experience.

**Key Publications:**

- Frier, A.D., Schneider, J.J., & Smith, P. (2013, December). *Pre-service teachers' approximations of literacy instruction during a multilingual, multimodal field experience*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Literacy Research Association. Dallas, TX.
- Smith, P., Frier, A.D., & Schneider, J.J. (2014). Negotiating American history: Bilingual learners collaboratively compose information texts. In J.J. Schneider (Ed.) *Casework in K-6 writing instruction: Connecting composing strategies, digital literacies, and disciplinary content to the Common Core* (pp. 193-203). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Smith, P., Schneider, J.J., & Frier, A.D. (2013, April/May). *Leveraging linguistic "privation" into semiotic sufficiency: Examining multilingual learners' process of collaborative media composition*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.