

Use Plot, Place, and Character in a Story



THINKING We want to teach students about the elements of a story—what they are and how to write them. But before we unravel a narrative and look separately at these elements, it's important to give students a feel for how they contribute to the whole.

PREP

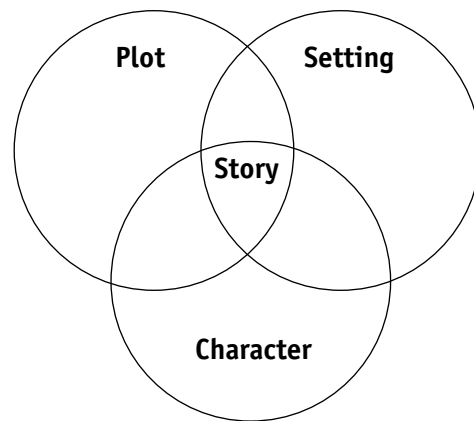
- Copies of "Teeth," from *Marshfield Dreams*, by Ralph Fletcher, to hand out to your students
- Chart paper and markers

TEACHING This year we're going to be exploring an important question, What do you need to include in order to write a strong story? Let's start by hearing a short story by Ralph Fletcher.

- Pass out copies and read aloud "Teeth."

What did you notice? What surprised you?

Discuss. Then draw the following Key Ingredients chart on chart paper.



Most stories we read and write are built on three pillars: plot, place, and character (which is also called the *setting*). The combination of plot, place, and character results in the story. There are other elements, but we're going to concentrate on these three. Let's see what parts they play in the story we just read. Who are the characters in "Teeth"?

Discuss and write them down. Do the same thing with the plot and setting. Students may note that the story takes place both inside and outside the house.

When you write a story—whether it's true or a work of fiction—make sure you have these three elements in your writing. Make sure you have included enough details and examples so the reader can picture them clearly.

FOLLOW UP While plot, place, and character are not present in every single story, the vast majority do include all three.

Unfortunately, these three elements don't always show up in student writing. You'll probably find that all student stories have plot, most use characters, but relatively few bother to develop the setting.

You might start both the narrative and fiction cycles with this lesson. If you are returning to this lesson, substitute another story for "Teeth." Some recommended picture books for this purpose are: *The Gardener*, by Sarah Stewart; *Fly Away Home*, by Eve Bunting; *Brave Irene*, by William Steig; and *Fox*, by Margaret Wild.

Conference Questions:

When you reread your story, point out where you have included these elements.

Find a place where you may need to add details or examples to strengthen the character, setting, or plot.

Teeth, *from Marshfield Dreams, by Ralph Fletcher*

Mom had a “tooth bank” shaped like a coconut. When one of our teeth came out, she washed off the blood and deposited it into that bank.

“Why are you saving our teeth?” my brother Jimmy wanted to know.

“Because.” She smiled at him. “They’re precious to me. And so are you.”

Great Grandma came to visit two or three times a year. She was old and tiny, and it took her a long time to get anywhere because she walked so slowly. She always wore a gray sweatshirt way too big for her, and always smelled like the gingersnap cookies she baked. She put whole chunks of ginger into the cookies, so when I bit into them they were so spicy they made my eyes water. But I loved her with all my heart, and pretended to love those cookies so I wouldn’t hurt her feelings.

Early one morning I heard her outside my bedroom, going downstairs. I waited until she reached the bottom stair before I got out of bed and sneaked after her. She padded into the kitchen, dressed in slippers and the gray sweatshirt. What was she doing? Getting a snack? Making coffee? Moving closer, careful to stay out of sight, I saw her go into the pantry. I was amazed when she came out holding the tooth bank! She unscrewed the rubber plug on the bottom, emptied some teeth into her hand, and went out the back door.

I knew if I followed too closely she’d catch me spying, so I eased out the front door and ran around the house. The grass was a cold wet shock to my bare feet. Stealing from tree to tree, I saw Great Grandma go into the garage. A minute later she came out carrying a trowel. Then she went to the vegetable garden in back of the house.

The whole thing felt like a dream but my toes were so cold they were numb so I knew it was real. I was about thirty feet away, close enough to see her kneel down and start digging a hole in the garden. She put one of the teeth into the hole, covered it with dirt, and patted it down. She did the same thing, three more times. Then she turned around and moved slowly back toward the house.

I made myself wait five minutes, then five more, before I went over to the garden where she just planted our teeth. I don’t know what I expected to see. Finally I went inside and back to my bedroom.

That’s all that happened. There’s really nothing more. But all that summer, and for summers afterwards, I had the keenest interest in that spot in the garden. This may sound stupid but it’s the Gospel Truth: every time I went past that spot I would check to see if one of those teeth had taken root in the soil, and started to grow.