



Levels 3, 6,
8, and 11

The theme is the central message of the story, the point the author is trying to communicate. Young students will usually have one simple theme. For rhetoric students writing more complex stories, a valuable way to determine a theme is to ask the question, “What experiment in living is my character trying out?” In the Bible, for example, Jacob carries out an experiment in deception, and the result is the hatred of his brother Esau.

Stories need to be as long as they need to be. However, if you need an idea of length, here are some very loose page guidelines:
Level 3: 4-6
Level 6: 6-8
Level 8: 8-10
Level 11: 10-12

Story Writing

Introduction

Many students enjoy writing stories. However, fiction is among the most advanced and difficult genres to master and, overall, will serve your student least in his ongoing academic career. Only a small fraction of children will go on to do significant story writing, while many will need to write non-fiction papers skillfully. For this reason, *Tapestry of Grace* seeks to make proficiency in non-fiction genres the centerpiece of its writing program. Still, fiction writing should not be ignored, and for many students, this assignment will constitute a joyous break from the non-fiction genres which they may not enjoy as much.

Why do we say that fiction writing is an advanced form? Think of the tasks that one must undertake in order to write an effective story:

- * Create three-dimensional characters who act in self-consistent ways.
- * Define and describe the setting (place and time).
 - If realistic fiction, each element—from dress, to vegetation, to news of the day, to social customs, etc.—must be researched and then adhered to throughout the story.
 - If fantastic, the elements must be created by the writer in minute detail and *then* adhered to throughout the story.
- * Devise an interesting (and plausible), self-consistent plot. All themes and story lines introduced must work together and be tied up at the end of the tale.
- * Finally, skillfully use all the normal, good, non-fiction writing elements: strong sentences, solid paragraphs, interesting style, and proper mechanics (grammar, punctuation, etc.).

Where to Start?

Where you start depends very much on the level of student you are teaching. With younger children (Levels 3 and 6), don't fuss too much about this project. Focus here:

- * See this assignment as an opportunity to introduce some aspects of fiction that the student will use in analyzing literature all through his school career—things like plot lines, characterization, and setting are all important to understand. An awareness of these literary elements will enhance any child's reading program.
- * If you are writing off of history-based topics see this as an opportunity for the child to solidify details of the historical studies you've been doing.
- * Last, but *certainly* not least, purpose to have fun with the assignment!

Is your child on Level 8? Then it is time for a more systematic approach to story writing. You should expect a much better-crafted piece from him than you would from his younger siblings.

Is your child on Level 11? He should have had plenty of input from his Literature studies, even if he's not done a lot of fiction writing. Use the tools that his literary studies have taught him, and let him apply them to his own creative story writing efforts.

Whatever your child's stage, he needs to know your expectations.

- * Define specifically how long the story is to be (page numbers, line spacing, font size, etc.).
- * If your student is either ambitious or reluctant, he will benefit from your determining how many characters he may use and the general scope of his work. (See next page about overcoming writing difficulties. This is the best stage to tackle some of them.)
- * Explain the criteria by which you are going to grade his story. You should look at the content and structure.
 - Content should include solid writing (concrete, specific words, well-crafted into interesting sentences and paragraphs), characterization, and overall message.



- Structure should include the crafting of plot lines, the organization of the paper overall, and the mechanics of writing.

On to Characters and Plots

These go together like the chicken and the egg: both are necessary to start writing a story, and it's difficult to know which is better to tackle first. You can really start with either one. With younger students especially, we suggest that you start with whichever one the student has a clearer grasp of when you sit down to introduce the assignment. Does he have a strong plot in mind? Start there with the appropriate Story Map supplement from the WA Disc. Is he clearer on one or more main characters, but fuzzy on exactly how all the actions and themes of his story work out? Then show your younger student our Characterization Grid as a starter. Older students will simply want to write character sketches as directed. Refer to our teaching page "Character Sketch" for directions. Looking at samples of favorite stories may also help prepare your student.

Drafting the Story

Once the student has a clear idea of the characters and the plot, the next step is to draft the story. With all levels of students, resist the urge to be critical of results at this stage. As you can see from what we wrote about the complexity of story writing, this is a big job. No one expects the first draft to stand untouched! Encourage your student as he writes, for he will invariably encounter obstacles during this stage. Here are some tips for you to pass on:

- * Can't begin *at all*? Hand him a tape recorder. Have him begin to record his story until he can't tell any more. If he doesn't like it, have him start again, or erase the part he doesn't like and do it from there. Many auditory or tactile learners will do much better with this initial step. When he's finished recording using his voice, he can begin to write.
- * Another strategy for a slow starter is simply to skip the beginning. Teach him to leave space at the beginning of his paper or file and start where he knows he can get some traction. Encourage him that, as he drafts and edits, he will think of a really spiffy way to start his story.
- * Simplify and shorten the story. Help the overwhelmed student who bogs down in the middle to reduce the story's length, or the number of characters, or the number of events. (You may have seen this coming with an enthusiastic and ambitious student who wants to write a novel before he's twelve. Resist that urge to say, "I told you so" and use your authority to require simplification if the student simply has bitten off more than he can chew.)
- * An alternative to this is to ask the student, for the sake of time, to write and edit only one chapter of a longer work he has in mind. Again, the best time to adjust this is in the pre-writing phase, but if the student is waist deep in a flooding story, it's not too late to drain the field, put up a dyke, and start cultivating a smaller patch of ground, as it were.
- * Some students get tangled in their plot lines. As they write the story, they deviate from their original ideas and get muddled. (This is especially common for the Level 3 and 6 students.) If this happens to your student, take him back to the story board. Work with him to simplify or adjust the plot according to the new directions the story has taken. Be aware that he may not even like the way his story is going, and he may be relieved if you talk it out with him and then release him to dump his whole effort and start over.
- * Finally, there is the challenge of ending a story. Some students just can't do it. They want to add one more character or incident. They feel that they just *can't* cut the story off and let it be done. Or, they have gotten away from their original plan and can't figure out a way to resolve their plot. Again, talking this out with your student *gently* and *respectfully* usually yields good fruit.

There are two Story Map Supplements offered on the WA Disc Supplement section: one for Levels 3 and 6 and one for older students, labeled "Story Map (Dialectic/Rhetoric)."



- * Generally speaking, resist the urge to force your solutions to his problems. Offer suggestions, let him consider them, and allow him total freedom to reject them. Sometimes what he needs most is not direction but a sounding board. So be that for him!
- * Hold him to the deadline: rewrites must end sometime. One cannot begin again indefinitely. Remind the student that there are always edits for this draft!

Editing the Draft

When the student has a draft that basically tells the story and defines his characters, it is time for editing. Read his story and look at three main areas for improvement. Remember that the sophistication you require depends heavily on the student's level. We list the areas you need to consider in increasing order of age. In other words, very young students can and should work on details of plot. They may have trouble refining their characters, though, and their writing style and structure can only be as good as their non-fiction efforts regularly are. Older students need a higher level of accountability for the elements below.

- * Plot
 - Does the story flow easily?
 - Are there gaps?
 - Is there confusion of facts or events, leaving the reader baffled?
 - Are there contradictions in the plot? Does one aspect make another impossible?
 - For an older student: is the plot too predictable? Does it need more of a "twist"?
- * Characterization
 - How real are the characters? (Young students' characters won't be at all real, typically!)
 - How well do you, the reader, feel you "know" them?
 - Are there details about the characters that confuse you as a reader?
 - Do the characters act like different people in different scenes of the story, or are they self-consistent all the way through?
 - Do the characters do anything surprising? (This is not the same as inconsistency; most people do surprise us from time to time.)
- * Writing style and structure
 - Has the student used "show, don't tell" narrative techniques?¹
 - Are the sentences full of good, concrete, specific words?
 - Are the sentences varied and interesting in narrative sections?
 - Is the dialogue interesting, illuminative, purposeful, realistic for the characters that speak it, and properly punctuated?
 - How is the overall "flow" of the writing? Any choppy transitions?
 - Is there a way that varying the style or structure would seriously improve the story?
 - Are there errors of grammar, punctuation, or word usage?

"Self-consistent" means that the character acts in accordance with his nature or articulated beliefs. For instance, a sweet girl doesn't turn out to be a gang leader; nor does a hardened criminal typically do a kind thing. If your student's character seems inconsistent, gently poke around in the student's mind, asking how he sees his character.

Odds and Ends

It is not unusual for a story to go through several drafts. Like all writing projects, the paper should be edited, polished, and then presented. Make sure you find an audience for your child's work. At the very least, have Dad read the story out loud at dinner when it's done. You could also consider posting it on the *Tapestry* website Gallery pages.

¹ Many parent-teachers don't quite understand the "show, don't tell" writing maxim of the narrative genre. The idea is this. Let us say that a boy was a habitual liar. The author could write, "Joey was a habitual liar, and his family knew it." Or, he could write a section that begins like this: "Joey!" "Yes?" "Did you just tell me a fib?" Joey looked at his sneakers as his face turned red. He hated that feeling that his mother could read his mind. See? Instead of allowing your child to tell the audience what is going on, encourage him to dramatize it in his storytelling as much as possible. (Of course, in all stories, some narration is always needed.)