

Story Skeletons: Teaching plot structure with picture books by Shutta Crum

Picture books are quick reads, lots of fun, and often gems of characterization, mood, and dialogue. They are also perfect for teaching the beginning writer—regardless of his or her age—how to organize plot logically.

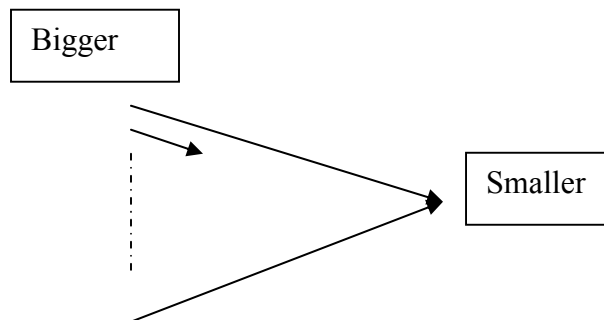
Many writers start new works by capturing tidbits of ideas on scraps of paper, in journals, or on tape. But how do we make sense of those ramblings? This question leads to a classic step in teaching writing often called *pre-writing*. (The traditional educational steps being: prewriting, drafting, revising, proofreading, and publishing.) It also points to what I consider one of the most important early steps in story-making—creating organization with plot structure.

In pre-writing many teachers use clustering or webbing techniques to help children see relationships between ideas. Or if large ideas need to be narrowed down, inverted triangles can be used. Often a variety of story-mapping techniques are used; i.e., the listing of items/actions that belong to the beginning, middle, or end of a story. All of these are helpful, especially for visual learners. But I believe they do not go far enough. How does a student know which items listed in the “middle” section of a story map should go first, second, third? Sometimes it is the sequencing of the action in a story that can cause the student to falter. But this step can be mastered by the use of visual and textual examples of standard plot structures.

When I introduce the idea of structuring a story, I talk about how our skeletons hold us up—otherwise we’d be . . . “puddles!” (The kids shout.) Stories have internal structures that hold them up, too. Knowing what the skeleton of a story looks like early in the process makes knowing what to write next—when the student comes to sequencing the action in the drafting and revising steps—a lot easier.

I demonstrate this by telling the story of “The Tailor.” (Some book versions are: *Something from Nothing*, and *Bit by Bit*.) In this folktale a poor tailor saves scraps of cloth to make something nice for himself. First he sews the pieces together to make a large square. Then he makes a coat. When the coat wears out he cuts it down to make a jacket. Later, as more cloth wears away, he makes a vest, a cap, a pocket and a cloth-covered button. As his cloth wears out over time, each

resulting item is smaller. The simple skeleton of this story is a triangle going from bigger to smaller. I draw it on the whiteboard.



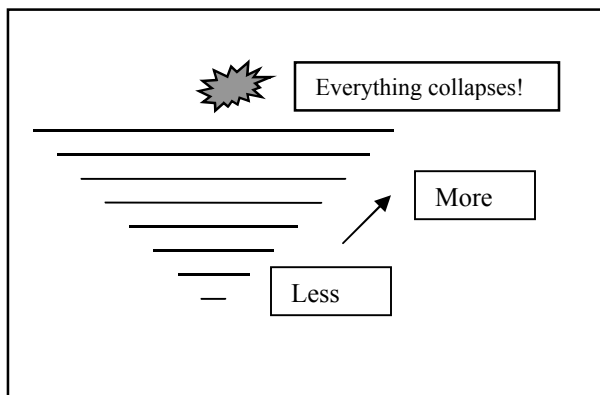
Students understand that the story would make no sense were a pocket made from the coat, then a cap, then a jacket. It must be laid out as it is in order to work. So in the early pre-writing stage I strongly advocate the teaching of some of the basic plot structures. Once students have clustered, or webbed ideas, have

them take the next step and choose a plot structure to hang those ideas upon. Remember, it's not an irrevocable choice—if one plot structure doesn't work, try another.

Below is a visual chart of some basic plot structures, and book titles that use those structures. Of course, there are more complicated plot types one can use for teaching advanced writers.

Before we leave this introduction, let me get back to “The Tailor.” It's a wonderful story to tell your students, for what is that last thing the tailor makes? From that tiny cloth-covered button there is just enough good cloth left to make . . . a story! Happy story-making.

Simple Plot Structures:



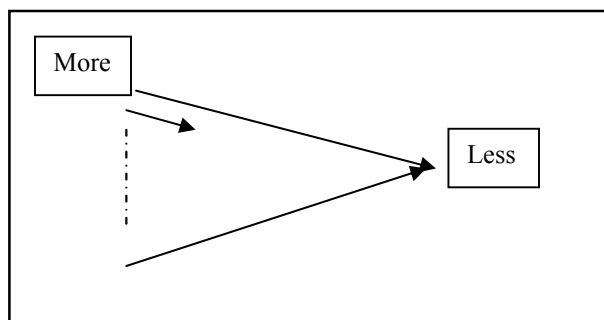
1. Cumulative→Toppling Structure:

📖 (Traditional) “The House that Jack Built.”

📖 Rhonda Gowler. *This is the Teacher*. Illus. by Mike Lester. 2004. 32p. Dutton, \$15.99 (0-525-47125-1). Gr. 1-3. From the time the students rush in, drop their lunches, spill the ant farm, and let loose a snake, until the teacher collapses at home, this cumulative story is one funny romp.

📖 Polacco, Patricia. *In Enzo's Splendid Gardens*. 1997. 32p. Philomel, \$16.99 (0-399-23107-2). Gr. 1-3. Using the “The House that Jack Built,” structure, slap-stick activities pile one on top of the other in this humorous take off on what happens when a bee buzzes into Enzo's restaurant.

📖 Robart, Rose. *The Cake that Mack Ate*. Illus. by Maryann Kovalski. 1986. 28p. Megan Tingley/Little, Brown, \$14.95 (0-613-81956-X); Megan Tingley, paper, \$5.99 (0-316-74891-9). Preschool-Gr. 2. In this cumulative tale, a farmer's wife bakes a cake for Mack. The story proceeds to a toppled ending where we meet Mack. And what a surprise that is!



2. Decreasing Structure:

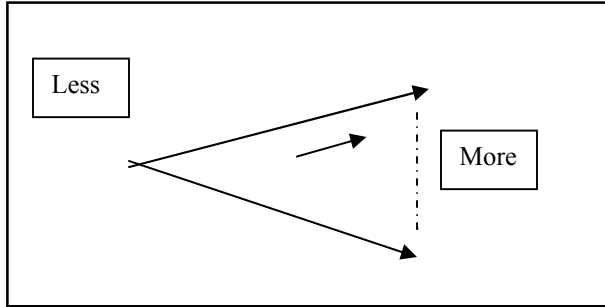
📖 (Traditional) “The Tailor.”

📖 (Traditional) “Ten Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed.”

📖 Schaefer, Carole Lexa. *The Biggest Soap*. Illus. by Stacey Dressen-McQueen. 2004. 32p.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$16 (0-374-30690-7). Gr. K-3. This story, set in Micronesia, tells of

Kessy sent to get “the biggest soap” for laundry day. On the way home, the soap gets smaller as it is employed to rescue friends and family. Despite the decreased size of the soap when he finally returns, it is enough for the laundry—and provides the basis for many stories to share.



3. Increasing Structure:

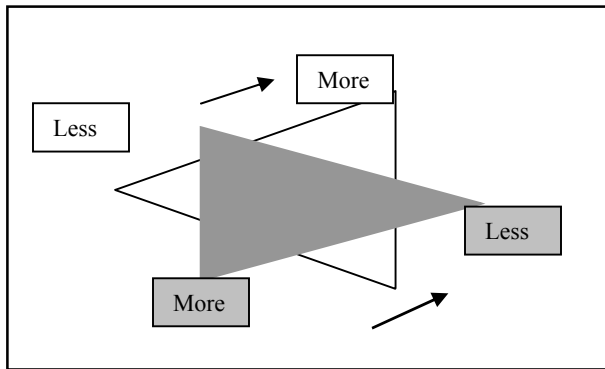
📖 (Traditional) “The Little Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly.”

📖 Feiffer, Jules. *Bark, George*. 1999. 32p. Michael di Capua Books/HarperCollins, \$15.99 (0-062-05185-7); HarperCollins, paper, \$5.99 (0-062-05930-0). Preschool-Gr. 2. A mother

dog takes her child to the vet only to discover he has swallowed a series of animals, each one larger than the last. Wonderful illustrations and a funny ending.

📖 Ginsburg, Mirra. *Mushroom in the Rain*. Illus. by Jose Aruego. 1974. 32p. McMillan, \$15.30 (0-613-06850-5); Aladdin, paper, \$6.99 (0-689-71441-6). Gr. K-2. Gathering animals hide from the rain beneath a mushroom and discover there is always room for one more. Why? Because mushrooms grow bigger in the rain. A book with a doubly-increasing structure.

📖 Grossman, Bill. *My Little Sister Ate One Hare*. Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 1996. 32p. Crown, \$17 (0-517-59600-8); Dragonfly Books, paper, \$6.99 (0-517-88576-X). Gr. 1-4. This hilarious counting story relates all the horrible things a little sister eats up to 10 healthy peas. As the sister’s appetite increases so does the hilarity. Includes a wonderful refrain for kids to join in on.



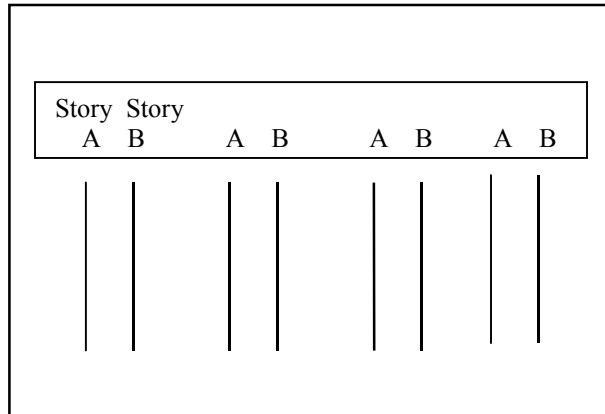
4. Simultaneously Increasing and Decreasing Structure:

📖 Crum, Shutta. *The House in the Meadow*. Illus. by Paige Billin-Frye. 2003. 32p. Albert Whitman, \$15.95 (0-8075-3393-9). Preschool-Gr. 2. Tradespeople of all ages and races build a new house. As the house becomes more complete, the number of tradespeople involved decreases in this reverse counting book. Cut

paper illustrations with lots of machinery and tools.

📖 Gilman, Phoebe. *Something from Nothing*. 1993. 27p. Scholastic, \$16.95 (0-590-47280-1). Gr. K-3. A version of the “The Tailor,” this folktale relates the decreasing nature of Joseph’s blanket. Another story takes place below the floor where more and more bits of worn-out blanket flutter down to a mouse family.

📖 Hutchins, Pat. *The Doorbell Rang*. 1986. 24p. Greenwillow, \$15.99 (0-688-05251-7); Harper Trophy, paper, \$5.39 (0-688-09234-9). Gr. K-3. In this story the number of cookies per child decreases as the number of drop-in visitors increase. But there's a surprise at the end! Great for a fun math exercise as well.

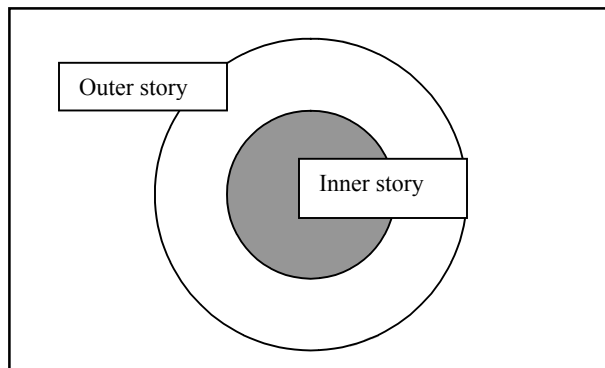


5. Parallel Structure:

📖 Asch, Frank. *Just Like Daddy*. 1981. 32p. Prentice-Hall, \$14.15 (0-808-53688-5); Aladdin, paper, \$5.99 (0-671-66457-3). Preschool-Gr. 2. (Easy reader.) Little Bear does most things just like his daddy. In a surprise ending, he also does some things like his mommy. This story switches between the two main characters and clearly illustrates parallel activities.

📖 Crum, Shutta. *Click!* Illus. by John Beder. 2003. 24p. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$14.95 (1-5500-5074-5); F & W, paper, \$7.95 (1-55005-079-6). Gr. 1-3. The parallel stories of a polar bear cub and his mother, and a boy with his first camera and his mother, serve to illustrate the families' similarities as they make for the water's edge for lessons in hunting and photography.

📖 Noble, Trinka Hakes. *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch*. Illus. by Tony Ross. 1987. 32p. Dial Books, \$14.15 (0-833-59283-1); Puffin Books, paper, \$6.99 (0-140-54564-6). Gr. K-3. Nothing ever happens in Sleepy Gulch. But while Farmer Hicks goes to town to look at the same wanted posters that have been there for twelve years, his wife, Elna, is in for some surprises. This parallel tale hilariously switches between the two characters and their situations.



6. Story Within a Story Structure:

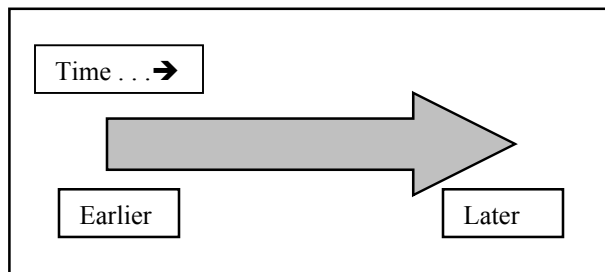
(For more sophisticated writers, the outer and inner stories may have varied plot structures.)

📖 Noble, Trinka Hakes. *The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash*. Illus. by Steven Kellogg. 1980. 32p. Dial, \$16.99 (0-803-71723-7); Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (0-140-54623-5). Gr. K-3. In reverse chronological order, a girl relates the school's field trip to her increasingly startled

mother. Despite havoc involving crying cows, joy-riding pigs, and a left-behind boa constrictor, things end up well in this story inside a story.

📖 Wiesner, David. *The Three Pigs*. 2001. 40p. Clarion, \$16 (0-618-00701-6). Gr. 2-5. A Caldecott medal winner and an artist's delight. This is not a traditional retelling. A dragon comes into the story and things fly right off the page! Discover a story within the one we think we all know.

📖 Yashima, Taro. *Seashore Story*. 1967. 40p. Viking, OP. Gr. 1-4. A Caldecott honoree in 1968, this story within a story, has children listening to a tale of a fisherman who saves the life of a sea turtle. The turtle takes the man on an underwater journey. After missing his family, the fisherman asks to return and finds that so much time has passed no one recognizes him, and his family is gone. The book concludes as the children debate the moral of the story. Beautiful abstract art.



7. Time Line Structures:

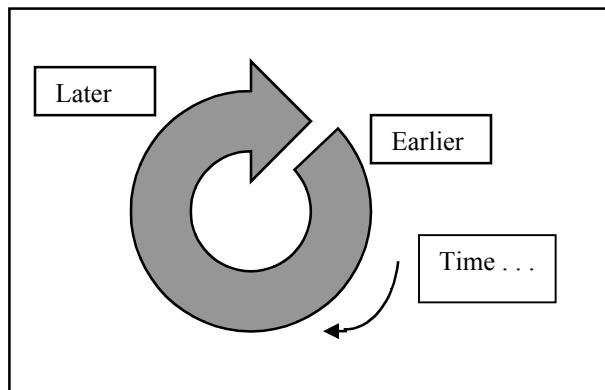
7A. Straight time line:

📖 Arnosky, Jim. *Every Autumn Comes the Bear*. 1993. 32p. G. P. Putnam's Sons, \$14.30 (0-613-88086-2); Putnam, paper, \$5.39 (0-698-11405-1). Gr. K-4. Naturalist illustrator Arnosky vividly portrays the search for a winter

den, moving through the last days before a bear's hibernation. Realistic illustrations.

📖 Carle, Eric. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. 1979. 26p. (Collins) Philomel, \$20.99 (0-399-20863-4). Preschool-Gr. 2. A very hungry caterpillar eats and grows large. Following his stay in a cocoon, he emerges as a butterfly. This timeline book includes the days of the week with cut-out pages.

📖 Zimmerman, Andrea Griffing. Illus. by Dan Yaccarino. *Trashy Town*. 32p. 1999. HarperCollins, \$15.99 (0-060-27139-6). Gr. K-2. Mr. Gilly is the trash man, and this timeline story follows his day as he empties the trash bins around Trashy Town into his truck. With a wonderful refrain throughout, the kids can chime in as you read.



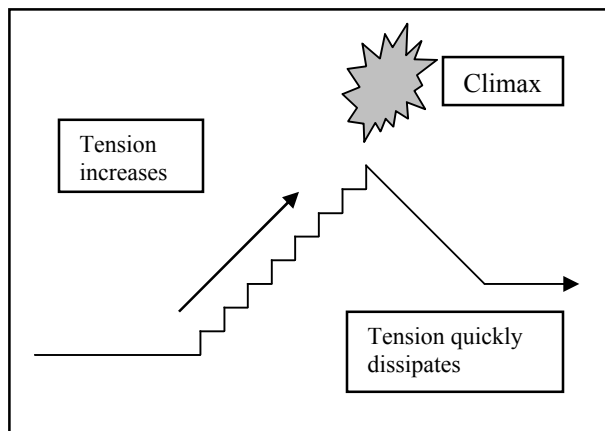
7B. Around the clock or full circle:

📖 Martin, Jr., Bill and John Archambault. *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. Illus. by Lois Ehlert. 1989. 40p. Simon & Schuster, \$15.95 (0-671-67949-X); S & S, paper, \$6.99 (0-689-83568-X). Preschool-Gr. 2. Those naughty numbers climb up the tree and get in trouble. After getting bandaged, can they resist doing it again? This fun story goes full-circle and teaches the alphabet.

📖 Numeroff, Laura. *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. Illus. by Felicia Bond. 1985. 32p. Laura Geringer/Harper & Row, \$15.99 (0-060-24586-7); Scholastic, paper, \$2.50 (0-590-40233-1). Preschool-Gr. 2. The first in Numeroff's series of fun circular tales, Mouse *logically* desires one object after another just because he was given a cookie. Be careful what you offer a mouse!

📖 Sanfield, Steve. *Bit by Bit*. Illus. by Susan Gaber. 1995. 32p. Philomel, \$14.15 (0-613-19341-5); Putnam, paper, \$5.99 (0-698-11775-1). Gr. K-3. In another version of "The Tailor," Zundel wears each item of clothing "until bit by bit he w-o-r-e it out." This is a fine example of a circular tale with a great storyteller's voice. Even the cover warns that the structure is special.

📖 Wheeler, Lisa. *Bubble Gum, Bubble Gum*. Illus. by Laura Huliska-Beith. 2004. 32p. Megan Tingley/Little, Brown and Co., \$15.95 (0-316-98894-4). Gr. K-2. Toad, Shrew, Goose, Bee, and Crow get stuck on a wad of bubble gum in the middle of the road. Oh, no! Here comes a blue truck. Ingenuity and cooperation pay off, but the story's not done yet . . . for in this full circle story a bear and a hen start it again.



8. Traditional Rising Action Structure:
(Exposition, rising action, climax, denouement)

📖 Crum, Shutta. *Who Took My Hairy Toe?* Illustrated by Katya Krenina. 2001. 32p. Albert Whitman, \$15.95 (0-8075-5972-5). Gr. 2-5. A greedy man has found a hairy toe and takes it home. The monster that comes to claim it gets closer and closer . . . This folktale retelling ratchets up the suspense using a traditional rising action plot.

📖 Stanley, Diane. *Saving Sweetness*. Illus. by G. Brian Karas. 1996. 32p. Putnam Pub. Group, \$16.99 (0-399-22645-1); Putnam, paper, \$5.99 (0-698-11767-0). Gr. 2-5. The sheriff is bound and determined to rescue little orphan, Sweetness, before she runs into that desperado, Coyote Pete. But it isn't as easy as he thought. This story, with a traditional rising action plot, has lots of twists and turns and a hum-dinger of an ending. The illustrations are a delight.

📖 Yorinks, Al. *Company's Coming*. Illus. by David Small. 1988. 32p. Hyperion, \$15.99 (0-786-80500-5); Hyperion, paper, \$4.99 (0-786-81345-8). Gr. 3-4. This story is a wonderful example of what can happen when jumping to conclusions. Moe thinks there is something fishy about their intergalactic dinner guests and warns the Marines. And just what have the guests brought in that gift package for Shirley? The tension rises rapidly. Although military weapons appear in the

story, this is a humorous tale worth discussing, with a rip-roaring funny finish from award-winners Small and Yorinks.

Activities:

- 📖 If your students are using clustering techniques during pre-writing, have them cut out their ideas and glue them to a large copy of one of the plot structures. This will give visual learners a template for the drafting step.
- 📖 Cut up a story into sentences and distribute. Have the class line up in the order they think the story should be told. Discuss. If it is a story with a traditional rising action plot are they in line by the least tense action to the most? If it is a story with a decreasing or increasing plot line, are they lined up correctly? (Hint: to make this more visual have the kids sit on the floor and use cushions/chairs/stools so that their heights range progressively up or down.)

Sidebars:

I. Additional Resources

- 📖 Fletcher, Ralph and Joann Portalupi. *Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K-8*. 1998. 139p. Stenhouse Publishers, paper, \$21.88 (1-571-10073-3). Clear, concise writing lessons. Usually a single page in length, each lesson has a short discussion section, a how to teach it section, and lists resources needed.
- 📖 Willis, Meredith Sue. *Deep Revision*. 1993. 192p. Teachers & Writers, paper, \$22.95 (0-91592440-4). Insightful examples of early drafts, and later revisions. Includes many exercises on going deeper into the story-making process.

II. Meets these National Curriculum Content Area Standards

(at <http://cnet.iste.org/currstands/cstands-ela.html>)

1. *English Language Arts*:

📖 “Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, and graphics).”

📖 “Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.”

2. *Social Studies* (for the early grades):

📖 “Demonstrate an ability to use correctly vocabulary associated with time such as past, present, future, and long ago; read and construct simple timelines; identify examples of change; and recognize examples of cause and effect relationships.”

III. Web Connections

📖 *Just4Teachers* at <<http://expage.com/4writing>> was created by a Baltimore teacher. This is a comprehensive collection of writing resource links, especially for the classroom. A good place to start your online research.

📖 *Picturing Books: A website about picture books* at <<http://picturingbooks.imaginarylands.org/#anatomy>> has almost everything you could possibly want to know about picture books. With images from inside well-known books, information on how picture books are put together, and tips on how to evaluate them, and how to share them, this website is a wealth of information for lovers of picture books.

📖 *WriteNet* at <<http://www.writenet.org/>> is a wonderful resource where writers and teachers advise each other on methods for teaching writing to students in grades K-12.

Shutta Crum is an author, an educator, and was the Michigan Library Association's, Children's Services Division, Youth Librarian of the year for 2002. Her novel, SPITTING IMAGE (Clarion, 2003), is listed on the New York Public Library's "100 Books for Reading and Sharing—2003," and VOYA's "Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers, 2004." Her newest title is BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE (Knopf, 2005). For more information: www.shuttacrum.com.

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