

What Key Skills Will We Need To Learn?

In our first language experiment we saw that reading, writing, listening and speaking are all skills central to the process of communicating well. We also saw that effective communication is extremely important in most careers. And finally, while doing this experiment we found that the word "read" can be used to describe more than just the process of understanding the meaning of words on a page. Similarly "listening" is not just a matter of hearing and understanding the meaning of words. The process of listening or reading, and then speaking or writing can be quite complicated and requires practice.

Introduction:

In this next discussion we will explore the whole problem of communication a little further. Specifically we will examine and identify the differences between essays and stories. Why?

You have no doubt heard that a lot of time in high school English classes is focused on two major areas of discussion: reading stories or things that could be broadly classified as narratives (a fancy word for stories), and writing essays. And yes this is the sort of thing that we'll be doing in this class—learning how to read and write stories and essays. So wouldn't it be a good idea if we could at least begin our discussion of these two forms, by clarifying why we're doing this? Examining the similarities and differences between these two forms will help us understand which key skills they help us develop and also what these skills look like when they're well developed.

Exercise

Part A (Group Assignment)

Lets begin our discussion this time around by defining the keywords that we will be working with (doing so will help us understand our assignment a little better).

Introduction:

Characters:

Illustration:

Setting:

Conclusion:

Plot:

Thesis:

Tension:

Part I:

In this exercise you and two partners (we will form new groups for this exercise) will select a single work from a list of items that are found in our textbook. Some of these works are more *story-like*, some are more *essay-like*, and some have the qualities of both. You and your partners will then:

1. Read this piece of writing (Homework).
2. Then assemble a short presentation in which you answer the question:

“Is this work a story or an essay?”

To answer this question your group should:

- Provide a brief outline of what your piece of writing is about.
- Indicate and then illustrate, using examples, which of the following components your piece of writing contained:
 - **Introduction**
 - **Thesis**
 - **Illustrations**
 - **Conclusion**
 - **Characters**
 - **Plot**
 - **Setting**
 - **Tension**

In assembling your presentation you should make up a sheet of chart paper that provides the basic ideas included in your presentation. You will use this sheet to help you stay focused during your presentation, and to show the class what you are discussing. On these sheets indicate:

- The title of your work (at the top of the page)
- Four terms that you will be explaining (i.e. Introduction, Plot, Tension etc.)
- Where each term being used appears in your work. You should provide a point form reminder of *an example or two* that helps *illustrate* your ideas.

Here's an example of the sort of information you could include. This example uses "How to tell Renata." I've provided way more detail here in my notes than you will need to provide on your chart paper. What we'll do in class is turn these notes into a nice piece of chart paper that lets you see how I have gone about this, and what your chart paper should look like:

“How To Tell Renata”

“How To Tell Renata” is a short story about a young girl who is threatened by her mom’s boyfriend who appears to be interested in the young girl sexually.

Characters:

There are three characters:

- The narrator, who’s name is Jacinda. Jacinda struggles with the problem of trying to find a way to tell her mom that Jerry is touching and looking at her. She reads the dictionary, and we don’t hear anything about her friend
- Renata is Jacinda’s mom. Renata works at a muffin place (maybe in a mall or something). Renata seems to be trying hard to just make ends meet.
- Jerry is Renata’s boyfriend. He seems to be around Renata’s house a lot and has his eyes on Jacinda too much

Setting

This story is set in Renata's house which is old and musty. The story includes scenes in the living room (Jerry is looking at Jacinda), the kitchen (at the end of the story), and Jacinda's bedroom (where she hangs around a lot hiding from Jerry)

Plot

The plot of this story is weird"

1. Jacinda wants to tell her mom about Jerry but she can't find a way
2. She says her mom avoids "scary stuff."
3. Jacinda says her mom loves Jerry, but as we find out through the story that Renata senses something is going on.
4. When Jacinda tries to tell Renata what's going on Jerry appears in the doorway.
5. Renata then has to go to work. Jacinda doesn't feel safe that night so she goes to a friend's house.
6. Later that night she comes home and Renata is in her bedroom.
7. The last thing Jacinda describes is Jacinda moving toward Renata who has her arms in the air.

Major Tension:

There is a lot of tension within this story between Jacinda and Jerry. Jacinda is afraid but can't tell her mom about this really serious stuff. This tension is resolved as Jacinda senses the problem. Jerry is gone at the end of the story.

Part 2:

When you are listening to other groups' presentations, your job will be to *read the material that is presented the day before each presentation takes place*. Each day's readings will be posted on the blackboard as homework a day ahead of time. Before each presentation is delivered I will give the class a short comprehension quiz based on the work that is about to be discussed (We'll do a sample quiz ahead of time...don't worry—the quizzes are pretty straight forward if you've done your reading, you will see this once we've done the sample). When completing these comprehension quizzes you may use any **hand written** notes about the readings you have taken while doing your homework.

Part 3:

Having completed our exploration of these shorter works you will complete an in-class letter to a friend in which you describe the major similarities and differences between essays and short stories. You will use examples taken from the readings discussed in class to illustrate the similarities and differences that you describe. I will discuss and demonstrate how to put this piece of work together as we begin to complete it.