

What Could Go *WRONG*?

The Simple Question Your Students
Can Build a Story Around

Writing Unit

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“I don’t know what to write.”

Have you ever heard that in your classroom? When it comes to writing, so many students (and adults!) get stuck right at the beginning. This unit will show your students how to use the four-word question that defeats writers’ block every time. This simple approach will not only get your students unstuck when it comes to writing, but teach them plot structure* at the same time. The benefits will extend beyond writing to reading comprehension, making this an excellent all-around literacy booster for your classroom.

*Go to robinpawlak.com to download a *Plot Structure* graphic that will give your students a visual to assist in their understanding of the way stories are built.

Step 1

Students **brainstorm** simple everyday activities, such as:

making a meal	ordering food	siblings doing chores
doing homework	playing a game	putting on makeup
sewing	fixing something	meeting someone new
getting a dog/cat into a crate	buying/returning an item in a store	
trying an activity for the first time	lessons (dance, singing, karate, etc.)	

Helpful Hint:

For this activity, keep it simple. Students should stick to the kinds of things that most people have done, or have at least seen someone else do. Solving a murder or climbing Mount Everest wouldn't qualify. Students may want to write stories about more glamorous (and complex) topics, and they should definitely get that chance sometime. But not now. This is a short story, not a novel. And even writing a short story well is enough of a challenge—even for seasoned writers. The goal with this activity is to show students how to generate ideas, and to learn how to structure a good, simple story.

This first step could be completed as a whole class, with small groups, or partners.

Step 2

1. Students choose an activity from Step 1 and ask the simple question, “What could go wrong?”
2. Repeat until students have generated a number of potential story ideas.

Helpful Hint:

Students may not come up with anything for some of the scenarios, and more than one idea for others. That’s fine. Just have them come up with as many as they can in whatever time period you allot for this step.

Examples:

Making a meal

- Get distracted
- Forgets important ingredient

Ordering food

- Language barrier
- Server is rude

Meeting someone new

- Very nervous

Plot Structure Connection:

By asking “What could go wrong?”, students create a problem, or conflict, in each situation. Each of these is the seed out of which a story might grow. That problem corresponds to #2 on the *Plot Structure* graphic, the inciting incident.

In some cases, students might come up with an idea that is more a description of how the story ends up than an inciting incident. For example, in response to what could go wrong when making a meal, a child might say, “The person burns it.” In most cases, an answer like that isn’t the starting point (inciting incident), but rather an outcome. Therefore if I got that response, I’d ask, “Why does he burn it?” Some possible answers might be, “He doesn’t know how to cook”, or “He gets distracted”. Either one of those is a suitable inciting incident that the student could build upon in the next step.

Step 3

Each student develops one idea from Step 2.

Plot Structure Connection:

This step corresponds to #3 on the *Plot Structure* graphic, the rising action. Sometimes called “raising the stakes”, this is what keeps the story moving, making the excitement/interest level grow until it peaks with the climax.

Helpful Hints:

- In a short story, particularly for the purpose of this assignment (where we want to keep it simple for your students), the problem should grow two or three times. Often, students will go on far too long at this stage, and what could have been a wonderful little story turns into a never-ending, rambling nightmare. (Have you ever come across one of those?)
- The problem should get a little bigger each time. Not a lot. Your students should resist the temptation to “go nuclear” immediately.
- What kinds of things make the problem bigger? I’m so glad you asked. Here are some of the more common ones we see in stories (and, sadly, also in real life ☹).
 - Foolish decisions
Example: A man is desperately trying to finish making supper before his fiancée’s parents arrive, gets frustrated and begins drinking large quantities of the wine he needs for his sauce.
 - Failed attempts to solve the problem
Example: Toast is stuck in the toaster and burning, so the protagonist sticks a fork in the toaster to pry it out. (Yes, this is also a foolish decision.)
 - Added challenges
Example: The man making supper for his future in-laws gets a call saying they’re running early and will be there in five minutes.
 - Conflicts between characters
Example: Two people are trying to get a car started and they disagree about how to proceed.
 - Increase consequences
Example: A child has put off completing a school project and is struggling to finish it before the school bus arrives. A parent notices and says if it’s not finished on time, the child will be grounded for a week.

Step 4

Students brainstorm ways to resolve the problem in their story.

Plot Structure Connection:

This step corresponds to #4 on the *Plot Structure* graphic, the climax. The peak of the story, this is the moment the reader has been waiting for. At this point, the author should clearly show how everything works out regarding the problem that has been developed.

Helpful Hint:

How might your students end their stories? Another great question! Here are some of the more common resolutions we see in stories.

- Happy ending
Example: *Cinderella tries on the slipper. It fits! The prince suddenly recognizes her and proposes immediately.*
- Problem repeats
Example: *The two people trying to fix the car finally figure it out (dead battery), fix it (boost) and drive away. One block later, there is a grinding noise and the transmission drops onto the road beneath them.*
- Fail/solve the problem a different way
Example: *Both the toast and the toaster are burnt beyond recognition. The protagonist chucks it all out into a snowbank, grabs a Pop-Tart and eats it right out of the package.*
- Fail/give up
Example: *Both the toast and the toaster are burnt beyond recognition. The protagonist says "I guess today's the day I start my diet" and walks away.*
- Twist
Example: *An adult attempts to fix a computer while a toddler plays nearby. Finally the adult gives up and walks away in disgust. Once the adult has left the room, the toddler climbs onto the chair and has the computer fully operational within seconds.*

Step 5

Students write the story!

Helpful Hints:

- It is common for students to struggle with starting a story. Often, this is because they don't have an idea. Hopefully, we've solved that by now. The other challenge that arises once they actually have an idea is not knowing how to begin. One way to solve that is to avoid it (temporarily). At this point, you (hopefully) have a class full of students with an idea all ready to go. Why not take advantage of that momentum? Forget about a proper beginning for now and just have them start with the inciting incident. Later, when the stories are 'finished', you can have them go back and add a beginning.
- Whether you decide to start at the beginning or in the middle, I highly recommend the following:
 - Teach them how to write each part just before they write it. The middle generally takes care of itself, and in any case this activity has set them up for success with that part of the story. But many children struggle with knowing how to write a proper beginning and end. (see the *Plot Structure* graphic for more details about beginnings and endings)
 - I recommend teaching one part, then having them write that (and *only* that) part. That allows you to check and make sure they have it more or less right before moving on, and to make sure everyone knows what they're doing before proceeding to the next stage.

I hope this process works well for you and your students! As with anything, you may need to run through this with your class a few times in order for them (and you) to really get comfortable with the approach. And of course, this isn't the only way to teach writing, so you'll adapt and incorporate as you go along.

If there are any questions I might be able to answer for you, feel free to contact me at hello@robinpawlak.com.

Thanks!

