

ROALD DAHL'S
Matilda
THE MUSICAL



Plotting a Story

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Using Step 1: Character Resource, the students will have created a character that is both memorable and real. The next step is to create the story for a scene around that character including additional characters and possibly a song. This scene could be a starting point for a whole new theatre play or musical starring their character, just like *Matilda* in her own Musical.

“One trick if you’re writing scenes...is to break it down into small pieces. If you decide to write a whole play it’s suddenly very scary, if you decide to write one little scene it’s suddenly not so scary.”

- Dennis Kelly in his film Telling Stories (part 3) on the Plot Page.

This Plot resource has been designed to work alongside the Plot web-page and the videos with our creatives, not only to develop students’ writing experience in school but to get them thinking *outside the classroom* about the structure of a theatre piece.

Through a selection of practical games and activities, students will build up their exploration of story - how to create a believable narrative and recognise what works well in a plot.

Useful Starting Points:

- As a group, discuss with the students what they understand by the terms ‘story’ and ‘plot’.
- Before watching the filmed interviews, ask your students to share examples they may have of really good stories they know. *What do they think the qualities of a good story are? Do they know any stories that are less good - a bit boring or difficult to follow perhaps? Why might that be?*
- Now watch the filmed interviews on Plot. *(The films are all different lengths and none last more than 10 minutes. Each has been broken down into chapters, and when you click on a tab you will automatically be taken to the specific chapter point.)*
- In the Making Stories film, Dennis Kelly says that everyone is capable of telling a story because most people are capable of telling a *joke*. Invite the students to work in pairs to look at the

structure of a joke they know. Ask them to discuss the point of each line in the joke. If you moved the last line into the middle or the beginning would the joke still work?

- Referring to their work on Character, ask the students to think about the character(s) they invented and what problems they might have at different points in the story.
- Dennis talks about how he created the scene with Bruce using Miss Trunchbull's line '*Who stole my chocolate cake?*' as a starting point. Can they think of a key line or phrase that would help introduce one of their character's problems?

Through the selection of practical games and activities below, students will gradually build up their experience of planning a scene or song.

These resources can also act as stand-alone activities that can be adapted to other forms of writing in your school curriculum.

The pack is divided into two sections:

Part A: Choosing Key Events

Part B: What Makes a Good Plot?

Part A: Choosing Key Events

What you will need:

- A good large space for moving around
- Some examples of movie, TV or theatre trailers (many can be easily sourced on YouTube or theatre websites for e.g.)
- Pens/pencils and paper

1. Movie Trailer

Students learn how to create and identify key events in a good plot by producing movie trailers for a story in which the final image (the most exciting moment in the plot) is the advertiser's 'hook' that encourages the audience to watch or read further. This will help

students create a similar 'hook' for their scene in the Writing Challenge. It will also encourage them to think visually for the theatre and not just the page.

- Discuss with the students what they think the purpose of a movie or theatre 'trailer' is. Explain that the job of a trailer is to pick out just three or four main events from a story that get us so excited about it that we just have to watch the whole thing.
- Show students a couple of examples of trailers for films, television programmes or musicals. An example of a *Matilda* trailer for Miss Trunchbull can be found at:
<http://uk.matildathemusical.com/images-video/videos/>
- Discuss the content of the trailers with the students: *What makes them exciting? What is their HOOK? What do the use of Voice Overs, Music and Sound Effects add? What is the one thing that they will never see in a movie trailer? (Answer: the ending! SPOILERS!)*
- Organise students into groups of no more than five. Give each group a title from a well-known fairytale: e.g. Snow White, Cinderella, Rumpelstilzkin. It is important that students know the stories, so make sure you choose appropriately.
- Explain to students that they are now going to create a trailer for a movie version of their story in FOUR still images; choosing to end with the most exciting event, and leaving out the ending.
- Encourage the students to be really free with their imagination, to create images of characters, events, even inanimate objects - anything to make the pictures clear and exciting to an audience.
- Once they have decided on their images, ask the students to plan and rehearse how they will move from one still image to another as a group. Explain that unlike conventional stories, because this is a trailer, the action does not have to be shown in the same order as the actual story.

2. Trailer Voice Over

Students develop a voice-over for the movie/theatre trailer they have created.

This will help them learn to link a story together using words and learn to describe key parts of a plot without using too much detail.

- Once the students have rehearsed the sequence of their four still images, explain that they are now going to write their Voice Over: a number of exciting words or lines to be spoken over their trailer.
- Ask students to choose one person from their group to do this voice over.
- If any of the groups are stuck and having difficulty finding a starting point for their voice over, introduce a framework of possible openers such as:
 1. 'Coming to a theatre/cinema near you is...'
 2. 'This is a tale of...'
 3. 'In a world of...'
 4. Big words – Ask them to choose a number of big 'describing words' – and call them out as their images develop. *For example: 'drama, mystery, suspense!'*
 5. A question – end with a question to hook the audience. *e.g. 'But when Snow White is entrapped in a glass coffin is she lost in her dreams forever?'*

Extension:

Encourage students to play around with media interpretations of the stories. *e.g. A serious news report. A live TV interview with some of the characters.* Are there ways of making their fairytales even more sensational?

3. Trailer Soundtrack

Exploring the rhythm of language. Students create a soundtrack using repeated phrases and patterns in the descriptive language they have chosen.

- Ask students to think of five words to describe the journey of their story and to write them in a line. Remind them of their Character work using words with 'relish' so they choose the most effective and accurate words they can.
- Explain that the words can be in whatever order they wish. *e.g. in the case of Snow White, the words might be: Beauty, innocence, happiness, hope, despair.*
- Then for each word, encourage them to think of an opposite. For example:

Beauty – Ugliness

Innocence – Guilt

Happiness – Misery

Hope – Hopelessness

Despair – Joy

- Tell students that if they wish, they can change the order of these words. They are simply going to softly repeat them over and over during the trailer.
- Give the students a couple of minutes to work this soundtrack into their trailer and then invite the groups to perform their finished trailer to their audience.

Extension:

- In the Music section, there are further ideas about creating rhythms and putting words to music. (If they choose to, students could add music to their words and repeat this softly during the trailer.)

Reflection:

- Discuss the trailer exercise with the students. Which events in the stories particularly stood out and why? Were there any point where the events became too big and far fetched? How did the audience feel then? Which stories did the audience want to see more of and why?

Discuss how a writer might use some of these tactics to keep an audience excited about their play or musical as they watch. How important is it to save exciting information for later in the story? How might we plant a 'hook' early in a scene to keep the audience wondering what might happen?

Part B: What makes a Good Plot?

4. The Plot-o-meter

Identifying good plots and bad plots: how and where do stories go wrong. Students will consider how to recognise the elements of a plot that do not work well. Using a simple scale (from 'silly' to 'exciting') they can plan each step of a story, identifying where particular plans create a strong or a weak plot.

- Tim Minchin says in the film *Advice to Writers* (Being a Writer section on the Rewriting page): “Try and think about what goes on in *your* brain and in *your* life” as that uniqueness can create “something really special.”
- Writers like Tim, Dennis and of course, Roald Dahl, make the most use of unique and original ideas to keep their stories as special and entertaining as possible. Discuss with the students some of the ‘stand-out’ events in *Matilda the Musical*. *Why are they memorable? Why do they work in the story? What do they add to the audience’s experience?*
- Show students the **Plot-o-meter** function on the **Plot** web page which uses a simple scale to assess the different events in a scene. Explain that by making practical use of the Plot-o-meter in class, they will understand how to recognise a good, strong plot. The scale moves from ‘silly’ to ‘thrilling’ and can plot what they think about each moment in their story.
- Below is a printable example of the scene’s plot with a contrasting plot that doesn’t work as well. Students can compare the two and discuss what makes a good plot and what doesn’t:

Thrilling!

Hilarious /

Here is a possible plot for a scene about a new character at Crunchem Hall.

Thrilling!

Hilarious / Victorious / The Climax

Exciting

Introduces suspense

Interesting

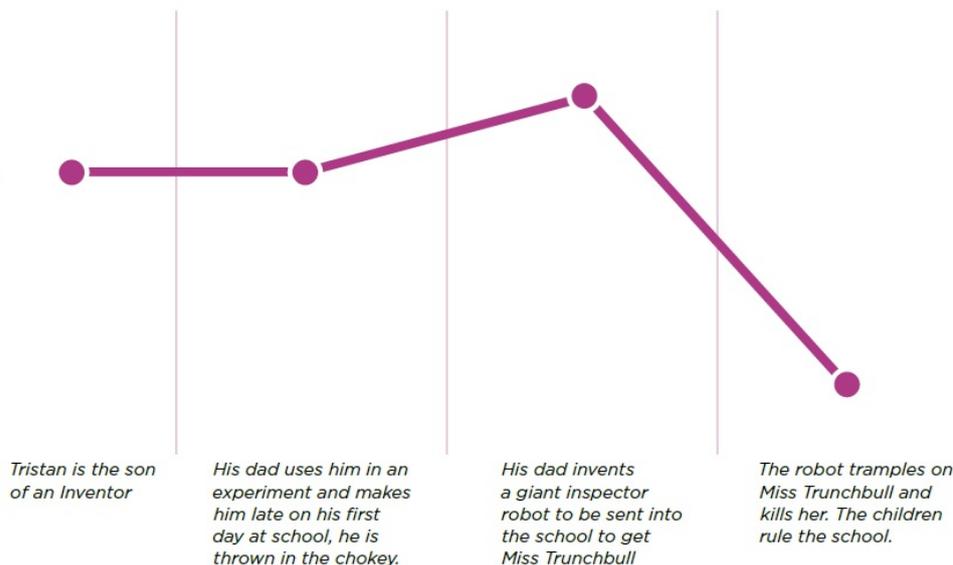
Makes us ask questions / Curious / Fascinating

Okay

Uninteresting

Boring

Silly / Random information / Cliff Dropper



Extension:

- There are many examples of plots to look at on the [Plot-o-meter](#). You can either look at them as a class, or ask students to work through them on individual computers. However it is certainly worth looking at an example together as a whole group.
- The structure of the Plot-o-meter can be printed out and saved for students to use once they have planned the key events for their own scene or song. It will help them to assess their ideas and those of their peers.

Reflection:

- Ask what they think about the last point: *the robot trampling on Miss Trunchbull and killing her*. Is the idea workable on stage? Is it a satisfactory and believable ending? This action takes place towards the beginning of the play - is it helpful to have Miss Trunchbull die so early on? Does an audience stop caring when an idea is too ridiculous?
- As Dennis and Tim both say, even when characters are big and colourful, the story needs to be something we can *believe*.
- Can we identify the exact reason the plot starts to go wrong?
- What could we change to make the story more believable?
- Once we have changed this, are there other points that we need to change to make the plot work? At what point would you add in a song?

5. Plotting your own Scene

Students start to put together the key events that will happen in their story and so, create the outline of their scene.

What you will need:

- Large pieces of paper and pens
- As a group, recap what they have created so far. They have invented their lead character, they know their background, what they look like and what their problem is. Now it's time to build events around them to make their very own scene.

- Remind them that this is a scene that could take place at any time during the plot of a brand new play or musical starring their lead character (just like *Matilda* in her Musical). It could be the opening scene, the final scene or a 'cliff-hanger' scene just before the interval that leaves the audience wanting more! It could even contain a song.
- As a group, watch Dennis Kelly talk about Telling Stories (*part 3 of the Film on Plot*). Dennis explains that it's not a good idea to put too many details into a scene, to avoid the '*and then, and then and then...*' trap.
- Ask them to concentrate on creating no more than FIVE KEY MOMENTS. Four may well be enough. They are only starting with one scene. As Dennis says, it's less scary to write one little scene that think about writing a whole play all at once!
- Explain that a writer must consider how they want the audience to feel at the end of their experience in the theatre. *Ask them to think about times when they've left a theatre or cinema feeling: elated, sad, scared, excited, inspired.* The audience's experience is one of the most important factors of any production.
- Choosing where their scene is in the plot will have a big impact on how they want the audience to feel. For example:
 - *If the scene is at the beginning, they might want the audience to feel outraged or frustrated because something unfair has happened to a character that they care about.*
 - *If it's before the interval, they may need the audience to feel excited or anxious about some new set-back that has occurred.*
 - *If towards the end, they might want the audience to feel triumphant because the character has overcome their problem.*
- Ask students to draw a big heart on the top of their paper, then ask them to think about how they want their audience to feel at the end of the scene and to write this inside the heart (see *example below*).
- Now they have done this, ask them to think about what sort of ending to give their scene to make an audience feel this way. Here are some tips:
 - Plotting the climax of your scene **first** can sometimes be helpful, as it can be the most difficult bit to write. It is an important bit as all the events in your writing will lead to this moment.
 - Explain to the students that if they chose to write their climax first, they will need to work backwards from this point, still creating their four or five events that lead up to it.

- In the diagram below, the numbers show the order of the events in the scene, the arrows show how the writer worked backwards to create the complete story.
- Once the students have decided on their main events that happen in their scene, including the climax, give them a few minutes to check that they are happy with this as a **Plot**.
- When students have completed their plot, they can use the **Plot-o-meter** to check they are happy the events in their scene work well.
- Now's the perfect time to build up their plot points with more detail. It may help to use different coloured pens to add in this information. *e.g. red to add more character backstory, green for ideas of what the characters might say at this point.* You will see in the example below that the writer has begun to do this.

Reflection:

- Encourage the students to share their ideas among the group. As a writer, it is always good to get feedback - you may want to use any feedback to make changes to your ideas or you may decide to stick with what you've written.
- Discuss with the students what stage they are now at with their scene. This is a very exciting time for a writer: *they have created a believable three-dimensional character, they have planned interesting and exciting events for a scene that could become a whole new theatre play or musical for that character.* Now they will be ready to start writing the scene with **real actors** in mind, thinking about how their story will work on a stage.
- The next step is to create the **dialogue** for their characters and consider the possibility of where a **song** might be placed in the scene. This is where the scene really comes to life!

Diagram of Scene Plan

*Audience should feel
frustrated, angry
and on the edge
of their seats*

5. The Trunchbull is inspired by the idea of a robot and takes the remains round to Tristan's father who she knows is an inventor. She asks him to create a robot that can be programmed to pick children up and throw them in the Chokey.

3. The Trunchbull decides to do a uniform inspection because she frequently finds Eric looking untidy and she is sure she will catch him out. As she walks along the line, she has an alarming sneezing fit. She claims that the reason is that there is a child who has completely the wrong smell. She walks along the line, sniffing the air in front of each child (and sneezing) until she can choose the rogue pupil. The sneezes get more frequent as she approaches 'Tristobot'.

7. Tristan is the son of an inventor. His dad often used him as a guinea pig for his experiments. Because he comes to school late and all dishevelled, he is thrown in the Chokey. He has planned to defy Miss Trunchbull by creating a robot which looks identical to him that will take his place.

4. The Trunchbull doesn't like the 'smell' of the boy (robot). He doesn't smell like a child so she hammer-throws him across the playground. The robot comes crashing down onto the ground and is destroyed.

2. He unveils the robot to his best friend Eric, who is one of 10 children. Because there are so many children in the house, he knows that the robot will go unnoticed. Eric vows to keep the robot at home and take it to school every day.