

Tips for Writing a Plot Scaffold

Plot scaffolds are temporary linguistic tools or strategies that teachers can use to assist students in moving to higher levels of comprehension and performance. Building upon a very basic story with minimal details, students add dialogue, imagery, and plot elements to create their own imaginative narratives.

Plot scaffolds can be incorporated into social studies, science, or language arts classes. *Wolf Kids* is an example of a legend, perhaps based upon some historical event. Note that the ending of the story is not told, but left for students to either research or create their own endings.

1. Select a genre

- Literary genres have certain key, unique elements. For example, science fiction must have an element of real science or it is not true science fiction. Science fiction stories do not have wizards or magic---that's fantasy. Crossing genres by combining science fiction and fantasy is certainly possible, but students should be aware of the distinctive features of their selected genre.
- Plot scaffolds may also be based on picture books. Often the plots within picture books can be used and expanded on by beginning or intermediate writers. Illustrations help writers see the images for the story and help students understand how mental images are created in a reader's mind.
- Historical events and legends provide excellent source materials for plot scaffolds. Depending on your learning objective, you may ask students to research and write about the true historical ending to the story or create their own ending that is relevant to modern life or reflects how students think the problem should have been solved historically. For example, what if Romulus had not killed Remus? How would twin brothers solve sibling rivalry problems today? Scaffolding an historical event may also include scaffolding relevant to English-language learners. For example, Spanish-speaking students may be interested in the history behind today's Cinco de Mayo celebrations. This event as a plot scaffold may include English, Spanish, and French components.

2. Choose the characters

Once the genre has been determined, decide which characters might appear in that type of story and let their characteristics, problems, or jobs drive the plot. In a science fiction story, characters may be astronauts, scientists, computer technicians, or aliens.

- Make a list of characters before writing the scaffold to help you think of the problems that might arise between or because of all the characters' possible interactions. You may want to do this exercise with students if they are creating group stories so that students are instrumental in creating the questions that drive the plot.
- Be sure to explore issues of stereotype and diversity. For example, do all heroes have to be male or save the girl?

Tips for Writing a Plot Scaffold (continued)

3. Plan the plot

- The plot should have a question to answer, so scaffold only to the point of making that question or problem clear. Don't provide the answer! Scaffolding to the climax or dark moment of the story will provide background for struggling writers to build upon and a platform for more advanced writers to prolong the story if they wish.
- Remember that a plot scaffold is not a whole story. Try to keep it short; a maximum length of four to five pages will prevent students from rambling. Larger scaffolds are possible if one is accommodating a very large class and wants everyone to have a line.

4. Write the dialogue

- Leave spaces between the characters' dialogue, making the scaffold look very much like a play script. Provide blank lines for students to write on so they may fill in the scaffold and use it as a rough draft, plan, or outline. This makes it easy for students to keep their place during oral reading, and later the completed scaffold will be clear and easy to copy. Let them cross out words or change preexisting dialogue in the scaffold.
- Keep the lines short and use words that students are familiar with, but do not be afraid to add a few harder vocabulary words. Students will read the scaffold several times, and this repetition of a word in context helps students—especially English-language learners—practice vocabulary pronunciation and comprehension.

Sample Plot Scaffold Implementation

Using the picture book *Working Cotton* by Sherley Anne Williams (Voyager Books, 1997), write the beginning lines and have students complete the rest. The plot scaffold might read as follows:

Daddy: Shelan, time to wake up. Time to work.

Shelan: But Daddy, the sun's not up.

Daddy: I know. We gotta start working.

Shelan: (What would you say?) _____

Daddy: (What would you say?) _____

You may choose to include Shelan's family members and incorporate the other field laborers as characters to accommodate larger classes. Next, create dialogue for these characters---for example, they could talk with Shelan's family or they might create a song to sing while they work.

As students create stories based on the scaffold, work together with students to compare the workings of cotton fields a century ago with today. Students can build images in the story using the information that they discover about this time period and about the African Americans who worked the cotton fields. In addition, students can study the music and dance of the time and incorporate this into stories or performances based on their plot scaffolds.