

How reading published stories and making story webs can work together to enhance classroom story writing

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Many students find story writing a challenge (Beard & Burrell, 2010; Calfee & Patrick, 1995; Dunn & Finley, 2010; Dymock & Nicholson, 2010; Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012; Saunders & Smith, 2014). Teachers need a simple strategy that will have a significant positive effect on the quality of student writing. This teaching idea is about going from “Too hard” to “I can do that”. Our suggestion is to use the well-known story web strategy in a different way by applying it to a published story and then going from this to story writing.

The story web and how it fits with the New Zealand Reading and Writing Standards

The New Zealand Reading and Writing Standards explain that students (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Reading-and-writing-standards>) should be able to structure a simple narrative by the end of their third year at school and that a student’s narrative should increase in complexity as they progress through the year levels. The Literacy Learning Progressions (<http://www.literacyprogressions.tki.org.nz/>) for writing are closely aligned to the New Zealand Standards and explain that by the end of Year 6 narratives should have the following criteria: “an

orientation, a problem, a climax, and a satisfying resolution” (p. 16). The story web graphic organiser encapsulates these criteria.

What is a story web?

You can teach your students to write well-structured narratives if you use the story web (sometimes called a story map) as a graphic organiser for writing (Calfee & Patrick, 1995). The story web is based on story grammar research which found that most stories have certain key features: a setting, characters, a plot, and a theme (Mandler & Johnson, 1977). There is a scarcity of research on using the story web as a graphic organiser for story writing but the research that has been done shows that it helps younger students and even older primary school students to write a better story (Graham, McKeown, Kiuahara, & Harris, 2012; Hennes, Buyuknarci, Rietz, & Grunjke, 2015; Liu, Wu, Chen, Tsait, & Lin, 2014; Montague, Graves, & Leavell, 1991; Zipprich, 1995).

Features of a story web graphic organiser

The story web is like the hub of the wheel with the four main features of the story surrounding the hub: the setting, characters, plot, and theme (see Figure 1).

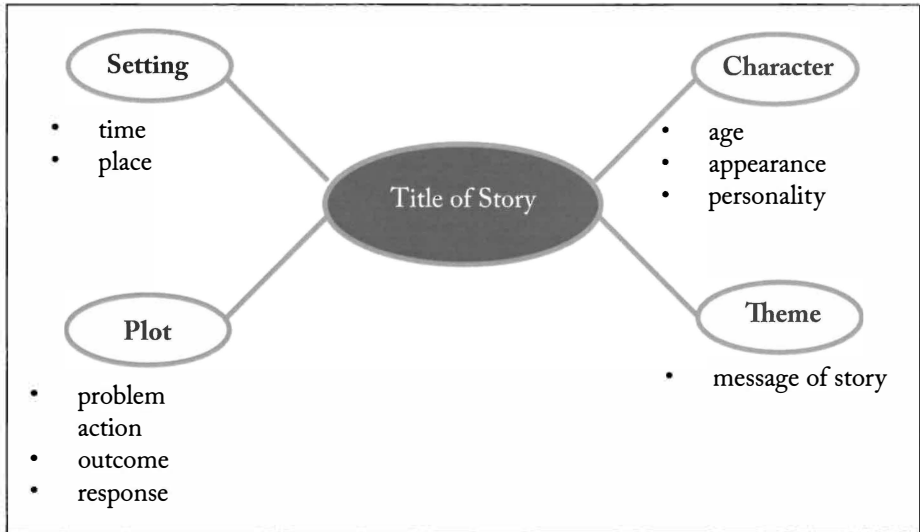


Figure 1. Story web template

- 1. Setting.** Story writers establish where and when the story takes place and the atmosphere in which it happens – time, place, and ambience.
- 2. Character/s.** Stories include one or more characters. Characters can play a major or minor role in the story. Characters should be different to each other, such as in age, appearance, and personality.
- 3. Plot.** Every story has a plot. The plot is a sequence of events. The plot can have one or more episodes. Each episode has four parts. An episode starts with a problem and ends with a resolution of that problem:
 - **Problem.** The character/s encounter a problem.
 - **Response.** The character/s respond to the problem. This involves an emotion (e.g., sad, annoyed, frustrated, happy).
 - **Action.** The character/s do something about the problem.
 - **Outcome.** There is an outcome (the problem may or may not be solved).
- 4. Theme.** The theme is the message that underlies the story. Many stories do not have an explicit theme but there is always an implicit message to take away.

The teaching idea: Using the story web to model story structure

This teaching idea comes from working with a group of 10-year-olds but it could work with a range of age levels.

Step 1- Pre writing activity: Using the story web with a published story

Select and read an age-appropriate well-structured published story such as the School Journal story, *Hanging in*

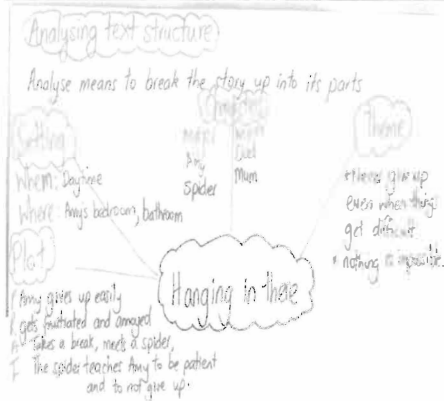


Figure 2. Story web for *Hanging in There* (Leach, 2002)

There (Leach, 2002) that has a theme relevant to older students (i.e., to persevere when faced with a challenge). Ask the students to help fill out the story web. As they give ideas, record these (see Figure 2). Work through each part of the web, asking:

- What is the setting? It is Amy's house and the shower.
- Who are the characters? The main characters are Amy and the spider and a minor character is Mum.
- What is the plot? The main episode has 4 parts: There is a problem (Amy cannot make book ends), a response (frustration), an action (Amy distracts herself, has a shower), and a solving of the problem (Amy

realises that she should not give up on the book ends).

- Theme? The students suggest, "Never give up even when things get difficult."

Step 2 – Modelling the story web for planning and writing stories

- After the group makes a story web for a published story they draft out ideas for their own story. They begin by brainstorming problems they have experienced. One problem they have all encountered is finding shoes that they like. This is the topic the students decide to write about. To model how to use the story web for writing stories here is an example of how the teacher helps students to draft a



Figure 3. Story web for student generated problem on school shoes

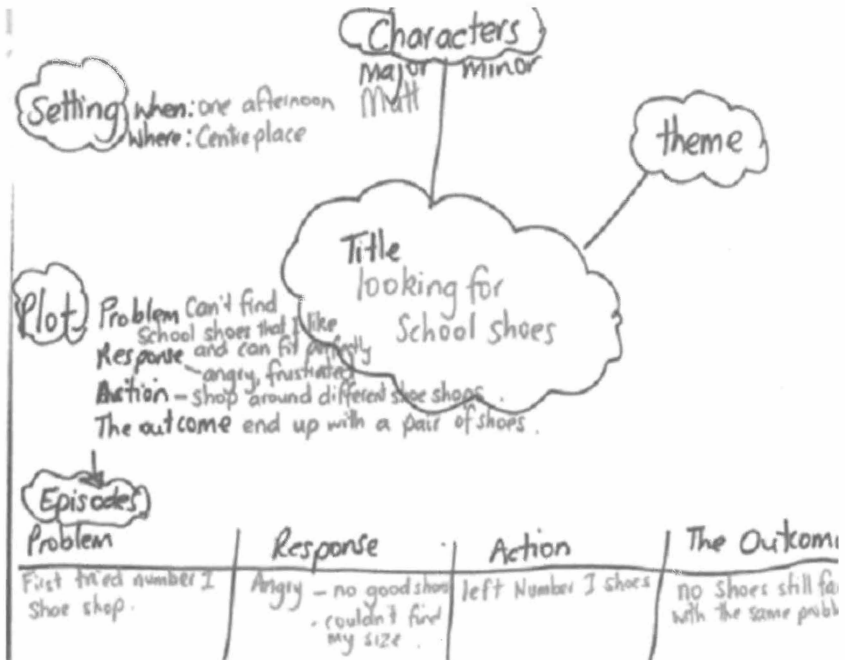


Figure 4. Draft story web for Matt

story web for one of their group, Matt. Figures 3 and Figure 4 show how the teacher and children gradually work up a story web for Matt.

- The teacher works through each part of the web, asking:
- What will the setting be? An afternoon at a shopping mall called Centre Place.
- Who will the characters be? The main character will be Matt and minor character, Mum.
- What will the plot be? There is a problem (Matt needs new shoes but it is hard to find the right shoes), a response (Matt gets angry and frustrated) and action (keeps trying different shoe stores). At

this stage the plot of the story web is incomplete (Matt still has to find shoes) but the teacher has done enough to get Matt's story started.

- What will the theme be? Prior to developing the story web, students have brainstormed problems or challenges they have encountered. "Keep trying" is a possible theme although not explicitly stated in Matt's story.

Step 3 – Prompt the whole group to use the story web

After this the teacher follows up what was done with Matt's story by working with the whole group to write up some specific planning steps.

- The hook. The teacher might say, "You need a hook to catch the attention of the reader. Try to think of something that would attract attention." A student might say "Ouch! A rock has busted through my sneakers!"
- The setting. The teacher might say, "Give some details about time and place and what the day is like." A student might say, "It was a beautiful day and the birds were singing."
- The characters. The teacher might say, "Introduce the main characters as soon as you can

and give some details if you can (appearance, personality)." A student might say, "Oh no, cried Melissa, as she huffed and puffed, trying to put on her best shoes."

- The plot. The teacher might say, "The plot is a series of episodes. Each episode has 4 parts: the problem, a reaction to the problem, an action to solve the problem, and the outcome where you solve the problem. But also include a complication. Don't solve the problem too easily. Make

the reader wonder if this story is going to end well or not."

A student might say, "Mom, we have a problem. I've got no shoes to wear to school today. I'll just have to walk in bare feet."

A complication might be that you can't find the right shoes.

- The theme or message of the story. The teacher might say, "There usually is a message in the story but you do not have to spell it out, leave it to the reader to work it out."

The teacher might give more advice to her students by

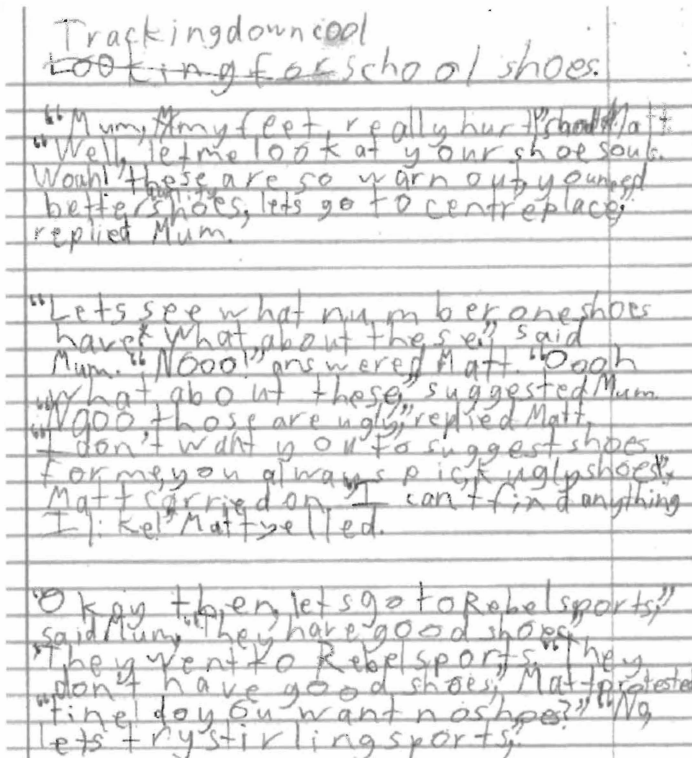


Figure 5. Matt's story draft

asking them to check their story web with her before they get going with their writing. Some children might feel more confident if the teacher checks their writing plan beforehand.

Examples of student writing

In Figures 5-6 are two of the stories that students in the story web group wrote. A practical use of the two stories is to have a discussion with your students about whether or not they are good stories. Do they meet the criteria for being a good story? That is, is there a setting, are there characters, is there a 4-part episode sequence in the plot section, and is there a theme? Do the stories include

other features such as a hook to engage the reader as well as dialogue?

Matt's story

Matt wrote a story about finding a new pair of shoes with his Mum (see Figure 5 for Matt's initial draft).

- What was the setting? The setting was different shoe stores.
- Who were the characters? The main characters were Matt and Mum.
- What was the plot? There was a problem (Matt's feet hurt as his shoes no longer fit), a response (Mum says "Whoa"), an action (Mum takes Matt to find some new shoes), and an expected outcome or

Trove hunt for school shoes:

It was a fine day, the sun was ^{blue} and shining and the birds were singing a beautiful melody. It was time to go to my cousin's party. I grabbed my shoes with sparkly bows and struggled to get them on. Oh no, I yelled, "my shoes don't fit any more!" I tell mum and she makes us go shopping, but my sisters get to go to the party. "That's not fair, I want to go ~~to~~ as well!" I cry in horror. "Well you can't go, my dad's going to take Courtney and Sacha to the party, Mum says. There all dressed in flash clothes and even dad is, for a change."

I get in the car with my frown not turned upside down. It's all right, she tells me in a comforting voice. We go to the warehouse. We go down every aisle. "no, no, definitely, no, yuck, disgusting" I say. We double check the aisles. We leave the busing, crowded and disappointed as we walk out with nothing. In the car still with my frown not turned upside down we depart to ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~park~~ ^{Charwell}. Yes, a park and straight away ~~as well~~ Mum yelled in joy.

We walk into Charwell. We check each aisle ~~the~~ last one. I look up and say "I see it, girl shoes!" We walk down. "Yes, last pair of shoes with sparkly bows, and in my size," as well. We walk out with smiles on our faces. "Yay" we shout.

Figure 6. Briana's story draft

solution to the problem (Matt gets new shoes – though Matt does not quite finish his story, we can see how it will end).

- What was the theme? The theme, to keep trying, to not give up, can be inferred.
- There are other features included in Matt's story. It has a good opening, with a hook that engages the reader, "My feet are hurting!" There is a lot of dialogue which is a good way to engage the reader. There is a complication that Mum wants him to buy one pair of shoes and he wants another.

Briana's story

Briana also wrote a story about finding a new pair of shoes with her Mum (see Figure 6 for Briana's initial draft).

- What was the setting?
A sunny day and shoe stores.
- Who were the characters? There are two major characters, Briana and Mum, and several minor characters, Dad and Briana's sisters.
- What was the plot? There was a problem (Briana's shoes are too small so is not allowed to go to the party, yet her sisters are), a response (cries), an action (Mum and Briana go shopping for new shoes – but Briana has trouble finding a new pair that she likes), and an outcome (Briana finds shoes she likes).
- What was the theme? To keep trying, to persevere, as a solution will be found.
- There are additional features in Briana's story. The story starts with a short description of the setting, which acts as hook. The reader is drawn in to think that everything will be good and then Briana immediately introduces

the problem. Briana also uses dialogue and humour to engage the reader.

Try the teaching idea out!

Here are 5 easy steps:

1. On Monday talk about the story web template and how it works.
2. Tuesday, read and discuss a published story. Together with the students diagram the story (i.e., make a story web).
3. Wednesday. Children plan their story. What topic to write about? It could be something related to the story you have already done a story web for. Or you could try out the topic we have included in this teaching tip which was to write about what can happen when looking for school shoes. Give children a copy of the template to plan with.
4. Thursday. Allow 30 minutes or so for writing, revising, editing. This is a time when they can also work on some of the other things we mentioned earlier that were required for their year level.
5. Friday. Read and review their great stories!

Closing thought

Knowing how authors structure a story can help students to write their own stories. We have found that using the story web to analyse a published story and then using the web to plan your own story has a dramatic impact on student writing because they have a road map to follow. Professional writers often get good ideas for their stories from reading published stories and young writers can do this too. Using this same strategy the teacher can show their students

how to think of a problem, how to solve the problem, and then write their own story.

Suggestions for resources

Similar stories to the one referred to in this article can be freely downloaded on this Ministry of Education webpage: <http://literacyonline.tki.org.nz/Literacy-Online/Teacher-needs/Instructional-Series>. Click on the key words Journals (two good stories to download are “Three Bears” and “Ugly”) or Junior Journals (two good stories are “Breakdown” and “Helpful”) or School Journal Story Library. Teachers can also draw on shared writing resources available on the TKI website: <http://literacyonline.tki.org.nz/Literacy-Online/Teacher-needs/Reviewed-resources/Reading/Comprehension/ELP-Years-1-4/Shared-writing>.

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