



**Overview:** This lesson focuses on teaching students to explore the structure of a literary work, identifying the “big chunks” into which a text can be grouped and analyzing how a work’s structure contributes to its overall meaning and impact.

**Standards:**

- **RL.11-12.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **RL.11-12.5:** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

**Objectives:**

- Students will learn the importance of using evidence to substantiate an opinion or reading of a literary text.
- Students will practice identifying elements of structure, understanding the logic of an author’s choices in structuring a text, and analyzing the ways in which the work’s structure contributes to its overall meaning and impact.

**Materials:**

Classroom copies of the following texts:

- William Wordsworth, “[London, 1802](#)”
- William Blake, “[Infant Sorrow](#)”
- William Shakespeare, [The Taming of the Shrew](#)

**Procedure:**

**Before the Lesson**

Students should have received copies of the poems for individual perusal. Depending on the use the teacher wishes to make of this unit, the students should also have read or watched William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* or be familiar with its story.

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**Activity 1: Lecture**

**What is Structure?**

Structural moves are those large-scale decisions an author makes that determine the course of the narrative as a whole -- those decisions that we could compare to a route on a map. Does



the author proceeds through a narrative in strict chronological order, for example? Is the ending going to be comic or tragic? What informs the decision to begin the narrative in a particular place -- or end it in a particular place? How do these decisions help the author express her or his major message?

**Practice: The Invisible Sonnet**

**Background**

Explain to the students (if necessary) that a sonnet was originally an Italian poetic form. Like all sonnets, it was written in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter and its rhyme scheme was originally ABBA, ABBA, CDE, CDE<sup>1</sup>, as in the following example from English poet William Wordsworth:

London, 1802

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;  
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.  
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;

Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the  
sea:  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,  
So didst thou travel on life's common way,  
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

<sup>1</sup> ...or other variations such as

c d c d c d  
c d d c d c  
c d e c d e  
c d e c e d  
c d c e d c

In short, the sestet (the last six lines) was pretty flexible.



Each sonnet would typically set out a problem or situation -- a dramatic moment whose existence has prompted the speaker of the sonnet to voice his (or her) complaint out loud in lovely verse. The problem would be stated, magnified, amplified, or elaborated on until the turning point, or volta, which typically occurred at line 9 in the Italian sonnet. After the volta, the speaker would see a new aspect of the problem or discover a new perspective or solution, and the sonnet would end.

But why line 9? What's so special about 9? Why not...line 3? Line 14?

It is easy to see why the volta occurs at line 9 when you look at the structure of the rhyme scheme. In the Wordsworth poem above, the rhyme scheme is as follows:

ABBA, ABBA, CDD, ECE

We actually have two big chunks in this poem broken up into two smaller chunks (for a four-chunk total). In the first eight lines (called an octet), we have a nice, easygoing, entirely predictable "norm" or "default option" for the Italian sonnet form: that nice ABBA, ABBA (not to be confused with the Swedish disco group). However, we then boldly forge forth into the comparative confusion of the sestet, a part of the poem which was notoriously flexible, but usually some variation on C, D, and E-rhymes. The volta marks that point where we leave the world of the octet and enter into the (sometimes-messy) world of the solution to the speaker's problem.

With that in mind, have your students practice their structural skills on an "invisible sonnet" -- this time, a sonnet written not in the Italian style, but the English. Ask them where they might first choose to look for the volta...but give them ONLY the rhyme scheme to work with.

**The Invisible Sonnet:**  
ABAB CDCD EFEF GG<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Even though some English writers used the Italian form (as in the Wordsworth example above), the Italian form was harder to use in English for the simple reason that practically everything rhymes in Italian and English, by comparison, has far fewer words that rhyme easily. An Italian sonnet would require, for instance, four A rhymes, four B rhymes, and anywhere from 2-3 rhymes for C, D, or E, depending on the structure of the sestet, a situation that led Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, to develop what is now called (somewhat unfairly) the Shakespearean sonnet form: ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG. For this, you need only two As, two Bs, and so on. Much easier!



INVISIBLE SONNET STRUCTURE QUESTIONS

1. What are the “big chunks” into which the poem is divided?
2. Are the chunks the same size, or are some bigger or smaller?
3. Do you see a “norm” -- that is, a solid pattern the author establishes for the size of the “chunks”?
4. What is that “norm”?
5. Is there a deviation from the norm?
6. Where does the deviation occur?

= If you have identified the “norm” as a four-line chunk and the “deviation” as the last two lines (the couplet), then place your volta on the line where the deviation begins.

Solution: Line 13.

**Lecture: The Really Big Ideas**

There are three Really Big Ideas to communicate to students about structure:

- What are the big chunks?
- What is the “norm”?
- What is the “deviation”?

Get students used to looking at the “big chunks” -- the acts in a play, the stanzas in a poem, the rhyme scheme in a poem, the chapters in a book, and the scenes in a chapter. If a poem is written in two stanzas, is there a reason for the “break” between the two large pieces? Is there an order or a plot to the pieces -- a reason why the author placed part A before part B before part C?

**Group or Individual Practice: William Blake, “[Infant Sorrow](#)”<sup>3</sup>**

In small groups or individually, have students practice on the following poem by William Blake, “Infant Sorrow.” Questions are below and may be reprinted for students’ convenience.

<sup>3</sup>For the reading of this poem’s structure, I am forever indebted to Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* ([http://www.amazon.com/Poems-Poets-Poetry-Introduction-Anthology/dp/0312463197/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1298151357&sr=8-3](http://www.amazon.com/Poems-Poets-Poetry-Introduction-Anthology/dp/0312463197/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1298151357&sr=8-3)).



**Infant Sorrow**

My mother groaned, my father wept,  
Into the dangerous world I leapt;  
Helpless, naked, piping loud,  
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,  
Striving against my swaddling bands,  
Bound and weary, I thought best  
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

1. What are the “big chunks”?
2. How has the speaker’s perspective different in the second stanza than in the first?
3. In which stanza is the baby more powerful?
4. Where do you see repetition of words or word forms?
5. What are the two action verbs the speaker-baby gives himself?<sup>4</sup>
6. What is the difference between those two verbs, and how does this difference reflect a change in the speaker from the first stanza to the second?

**Closure**

Students can share ideas about the poem in whole-class discussion, exploring the relationship between the poem’s form and the poem’s views of infancy. As a closing or summation activity, students can summarize the essence of the ideas they have learned about the relationship between structure and meaning.

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**Activity 2: Larger Pieces**

Once students are familiar with the idea of looking at structure as a tool for conveying the author’s meaning in poetry, it’s fun to move them up to larger pieces, specifically novels, short stories, plays, or generally larger works of literature.

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<sup>4</sup> There are two main clauses: “I leapt” (3) and “I thought” (7).



Before you begin, review with students the following fundamental questions for structural analysis:

#### Fundamental Questions of Structural Analysis

- Why begin the text at this point? What would the author have “lost out on” if s/he had chosen to begin the text elsewhere?
- Is there a frame to the story -- that is, do we have a story-within-a-story? How does this choice affect our understanding of the work’s meaning?
- Why end the text at this point? In studying the classic five-part plot (e.g., exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution), we quickly learn that not all parts are equal. Some texts plunge like cliff divers from the heights of the climax to the inevitable end while others take their time, telling about the characters’ fates after the events of the story are officially “over.” What would the author have lost by ending the story at a different point?
- At what point was the ending inevitable? When did the protagonist of a tragic work “lose the game,” as it were? When did the protagonist of a comic work win it?

#### Lecture Points

##### Beginnings

Why does an author choose to begin a novel where she does? If the novel is convincing -- and the good ones usually are -- then we sense that there was a previous moment -- very many of them, perhaps -- before the “Once upon a time...” moment of the novel’s opening sentence. Charles Dickens’ semiautobiographical novel *David Copperfield* begins quite sensibly in this vein:

*Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.*

For other authors, finding the beginning -- and therefore the place to begin -- is not so easy. In Laurence Sterne’s comic novel *Tristram Shandy*, the main character tries to write the story of his life and wants to begin (naturally!) at the beginning...but when we write our life story, where do we begin? Do we begin with the moment of our birth? Slightly earlier, say, on our parents’

Honeymoon? (Yikes!!) Do we begin with our parents’ meeting? What about where *they* were born? By the end of the novel, Tristram has not even gotten to the start of his own story!



Even in this short description, it should be easier to see that the author’s struggle of where to begin a narrative raises some unexpectedly profound questions about origins, the problem of defining ourselves through the conventions of narrative, the nature of narrative itself.

**Practice: Famous First Lines**

Rather than having students “rewrite” the beginning of a given story and begin it some other place (which really doesn’t tell them why the *author*, whose story it really is, chose to begin it where she did), students can explore the impact of these famous first lines:

Famous First Lines
Midway in our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood. - Dante Alighieri, <i>The Divine Comedy, Inferno</i>
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. - Charles Dickens, <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." - F. Scott Fitzgerald, <i>The Great Gatsby</i>
Who’s there? - William Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i>

For each of these beginnings -- or for many, many others -- students can discuss the choices the author made. Remember, at this moment, reading the first line, the students don’t know any more about the book than an average reader does.



### Small-Group or Whole-Class Discussion

Students can be broken up into small groups to discuss the impact of these first lines on the reader. The following questions are not all-encompassing, but they will help as starting-points.

- From what genre is this story? Adventure? Mystery? Autobiography?
- Where does the author suggest the story will go from this point?
- What is occurring in the life of the protagonist or narrator at the moment the story begins?
- A moment ago, the story had not begun. Now it has. Why? What caused it to begin here?

### Lecture, Continued

#### Beginning in the Wrong Place

If the author defies conventional chronology and begins, as it were, in the “wrong place” for the genre or the general expectations of the reader, this deliberate decision should ideally cause the reader to ask, “Okay, why did she do that?” and explore the effect that this decision had on the author’s meaning.

One clear inference readers can almost always make with confidence when authors “break the rules” is that **the rules wouldn’t have helped them say what they wanted to say**. Consider the opening line of Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History*:

*The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation.*

Aha, we say! A murder mystery!

The problem is that by the end of the first sentence, we know the one unknowable piece of information an author of a murder mystery is supposed to conceal until the climax of the book when Hercule Poirot gathers everyone together in the parlor for a come-to-Papa moment: We know whodunit.

Murder mystery? Yes. Who’s the victim? Bunny. Who did it? “We” -- that is, the narrator and at least one other person. Okay...so what keeps us reading for the next several hundred pages? Tartt begins with the climactic moment, leads up to it in flashback for the first half of the novel, and then explores beyond that point to the consequences of the action in the second half.

Bottom line, **the structure of the novel with its violation of standard chronology and convention teaches us that Tartt’s work is fundamentally not a *whodunit*. It’s a *whodunit*** --a



work whose purpose is to explore cause and effect, deed and consequence, crime and redemption.

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### Lecture: The Middle of the Story

#### The Middle Isn't the Whole Picture: [\*The Taming of the Shrew\*](#)

What about the choice to frame a story? Consider the problem facing many teachers of Shakespeare's comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*.

#### What Do We Do With the Induction?

The play begins with what is called the "Induction," a short gathering of scenes concerning a practical joke played by a nobleman on a drunken tinker, Christopher Sly. Sly is taken into the nobleman's home and is treated like a lord, with servants pretending that he is actually the wealthy owner of the house who has fallen ill and lost his memory. For Sly's entertainment, a group of players performs the central action of the play, the more familiar story of Katharina and Petruchio. In Shakespeare's work, the frame is never returned to, though in other versions of this play, Sly's comments on the Katharina/Petruchio plot are voiced throughout the action.

#### ...And That Little Antifeminism Problem?

A seemingly less-related issue that many teachers face with *The Taming of the Shrew* is how to deal with the issue of antifeminism. This is a play, after all, about "taming" a woman, one that puts a high-spirited, strong-willed, and intelligent female character center stage -- and then proceeds to domesticate her from a "wild Kate" to a Kate "conformable with other household Kates." Some stagings of this play interpret this "taming" at its most extreme: by the end of some productions, Kate seems more a victim of Stockholm Syndrome than a happy housewife does. On the other hand, Kate may be *pretending* to be a 1590s version of Donna Reed in order to make ~~little miss perfect~~ her sister Bianca look bad and to make Petruchio, with whom she has fallen in love, look like he's a macho, macho man.

But back to the Induction for a moment. What to do? Many productions of this play simply cut the Induction altogether -- but there's an inviolability about Shakespeare that should at least make us pause before we grab the scissors or hit "delete."

#### Practice

After (yes, after!) the students read and discuss the play (or simply see it) *without* the Induction, have the students read or see a version of the play with the Induction included. Students can then discuss or write about the merits of including or excluding the Induction and what the inclusion of these scenes does to our understanding of the play.

Some questions to ask include the following:



- The Induction tends to make the Katharina/Petruchio events more “stagey.” Do we take the events onstage more seriously or less so? Why does the Induction have this effect on the audience?
- Are we being invited to view the Katharina/Petruchio events through the prism of acting, playacting, pretense, pretending, and so on -- so that we do not take the “taming” of Katharina as gravely as we otherwise might?
- In earlier versions of this play, the Induction is continued to the end, where Sly vows that he will tame his own wife just as Petruchio has tamed his. Shakespeare obviously does not include this part. Is Shakespeare suggesting to us that “wife-taming is good” would actually be the wrong conclusion to draw about the events of the play?
- When he is being treated as a lord, Sly begins to “grow into” the role. In what way is his situation comparable to Katharina’s? Has she been (in effect) compelled to play a role within her family and society? Does her role change when she marries Petruchio?

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### Lecture: This is the End, Beautiful Friend

How does a work end? At what point, for example, does a narrative turn darkly tragic...or veer upward into comedy? Consider texts such as one famous play by William Shakespeare in which two lovers are parted by a terrible set of circumstances and the heroine, on the advice of a priest, decides to feign her own death. *Romeo and Juliet*? Nope. Try the bubbly comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. How about *King Lear* -- a work which seems to offer the promise of redemption, reconciliation, and renewal up until...well, about the very last minute? The Common Core Reading Literature standards ask teachers to pursue how these choices affect the larger structure of the work -- and what kind of impact the choice to end a work in a particular place makes on the audience or reader.

For each of these endings -- or for many, many others -- students can discuss the choices the author made. It is not necessary for students to have read the whole work, but of course teachers can select particularly apropos final lines from works read previously as a class and either intermingle them with the ones below, or consider them separately.



### Small-Group or Whole-Class Discussion

Students can be broken up into small groups to discuss the impact of these “famous last lines” on the reader. The following questions are not all-encompassing, but they will help as starting-points.

- From what genre is this story? Adventure? Mystery? Autobiography?
- Where does the author suggest the story will go from this point?
- Can the story go anywhere from this point, or is the story at so much of a dead end that no progression -- even one the author does not choose to show us -- is possible?
- A moment ago, the story was not finished. Now it is. Why? What caused it to end here?
- If you have not read this work, what sense do you have of the event that occurred before this final line? What do you believe led up to this moment? Why?
- As readers, what feeling or mood are we left with at the end of this work? Why do you think the author wished us to feel this way?

### Practice

First lines -- and last lines -- are fun places to consider issues of diction, syntax, and characterization as well as structure and impact on the reader. Try some!

#### Famous Last Lines

They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.

- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

And you say, “Just a moment, I’ve almost finished *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino.”

Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979; trans. William Weaver)

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne  
back ceaselessly into the past."

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

A way a lone a last a loved a long the

-- James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*



### Assessment

Assessment of this concept could take a variety of forms, including reflection papers on the inclusion of the Induction in *The Taming of the Shrew* to a shorter exploration of structure in a smaller work such as a poem. Using the questions and reflections about structure discussed in this unit, the student should be able to explore the “big chunks” of the work’s structure, identify norms and deviations, analyze the impact of the author’s decisions to begin or end a story in a particular place or place it in a frame. **Ultimately, the student should be urged to connect the structure to the author’s message, theme, or point**, asking herself, “In what way did this structure help the author communicate her message to the reader?”