Teaching Realistic Fiction

Realistic Fiction is a popular genre among students of all ages. Reading about humorous events, survival escapades, maturing, living with different types of people, and reacting to the “light” and the “dark” sides of life helps us understand ourselves, our relationships with others, and our life experiences.

Background Information for Teachers

Although this unit is designed for Grades 3 through 6, teaching literary elements can be customized for students’ varying ability levels and their background knowledge of the genre. The beginning intermediate students (Grades 3 and 4) can study the basic elements of realistic fiction, while intermediate level students (Grades 5 and 6) can learn additional elements that will enhance their reading and writing. (See Figure 1.1 on page 8 for a chart of Elements by Level.)

Definition

The publication of Robinson Crusoe (1719) by Daniel Defoe marked the beginning of realistic fiction as a genre of literature. Realistic fiction is a classification of literature that contains stories that could happen in the real world, in a time and a setting that is possible, with characters that are true to life. The central character’s problem makes up the plot and is the source of the conflict. Hillman (1999) states that “realistic fiction, then, is the ‘real’ story; it is what we perceive reality to be, filtered through the literary devices of story” (p. 166). Lukens (1999) states “character and conflict are both well developed and interrelated” (p. 15). Books such as The Last of the Mohicans (1826) by James Fenimore Cooper, Little Women (1868) by Louisa May Alcott, and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) by Mark Twain also fall within this genre.
The difference between *historical* realistic fiction and *contemporary* realistic fiction is a matter of time periods. Literary experts usually define contemporary realistic fiction as books published either after World War II or after the 1960s. In this chapter *contemporary* is defined as the period between the 1960s and the present.

**Literary Elements of Realistic Fiction**

Realistic fiction is structured as a narrative. The introduction includes background information that is needed to understand the story, and establishes the setting, the characters, and the conflict. The middle of the story develops the plot, which includes the story’s events, the characters’ reactions to these events, and the roadblocks the characters encounter. Usually the plot builds events to a climax, which is called rising action plot development. The story ends with a resolution to the conflict or a conclusion.

It may be helpful to describe the elements of realistic fiction to students using the following basic definitions:

**Introduction** is where the author builds the story’s background. This is where the reader learns about the setting, the characters, and the story’s conflict, and perhaps what took place before the story begins.
**Setting** is where and when the story takes place: location, season, weather, and time period (Tompkins, 1994). Setting is important to the plot, the characters, the characters’ problems, and the theme. For example, in realistic fiction the season and the weather may be important to the characters’ dilemma. Because realistic fiction must depict characteristics of the real world, authors must develop detailed descriptions of the setting so that the reader can imagine the setting and understand the characters and their plights.

**Characterization** allows the reader to learn about what characters look like, what they say, what others say about them, and what they do (Lukens, 1999). Characters seem real because their actions and dialogue are believable. As readers, we often can identify with these characters because they are like our friends or ourselves.

There are many types of characters in realistic fiction. The main character is usually fully developed and multifaceted and is called a *round character*. If this character changes during the story, this character is also *dynamic*. *Flat characters* are not as well-developed as round characters. *Static characters*, on the other hand, can be round or flat characters who do not change but stay the same in the story. A character who has the opposite personality traits of the main character is called a *foil character*.

Characters can also be classified as a *protagonist* or an *antagonist*. The protagonist is usually the main character who is involved in a conflict. The antagonist is the character who is the opposing force in the conflict.

**Conflict** in realistic fiction is defined by the type of problem in the story. Conflict is the tension that exists between the forces in the character’s life.

*Person-against-self* is a conflict where the main character is both the protagonist and the antagonist. The character must work out relationships with others, feelings of conflict, and problems. One book that illustrates person-against-self conflict is *On My Honor* (1986) by Marion Dane Bauer. In this book, the main character, Joel, has to resolve the conflict of whether to tell his parents, his friend’s parents, and the authorities what happened to his best friend, Tony.

*Person-against-person* is a conflict that puts the protagonist in direct conflict with another person. One example, *The Pinballs* (1987) by Betsy Byars, contains three characters that meet each other in a foster home and are in conflict with other people. Harvey is in conflict with his father; Carlie is in conflict with her stepfather; and Thomas J. is in conflict with his parents, who abandoned him when he was 2 years old.
Person-against-nature is a conflict where the main character has to fight nature. An example of this type of conflict is *Hatchet* (1987) by Gary Paulsen. In this story, Brian has to survive in the wilderness with only a hatchet, a gift from his mother.

Person-against-society is a conflict where society is the antagonist in a story, and the main character must figure out how to overcome the pressures of the society in which he or she lives. An example of this type of conflict is *Journey to Jo’burg* (1986) by Beverly Naidoo. In this story, Naledi and Tirs must fight the racial adversities placed on them by the white people in South Africa in order to contact their mother and bring her home to care for their ill sister.

Plot is what happens in the story. Cornett (1999) explains that “plot is the sequence of events usually set in motion by a problem that begins the action or causes conflict” (p. 89). The plot in realistic fiction must be believable or possible and easily understood, fast-paced and moving toward resolving the conflict. Two types of plots found in realistic fiction are the progressive and the episodic plots.

Progressive plot is common in realistic fiction. The story begins with one event and all the other events are tied to the same story line. These events form a chain, with each event leading to the next event until the main character resolves the conflict. Examples of realistic fiction books with progressive plots include *Maniac Magee* (1990) by Jerry Spinelli and *Stone Fox* (1980) by John Reynolds Gardiner. (See Figure 1.2 for an example of progressive plot development.)

Episodic plot occurs when the author tells short stories that are related by setting or characters. *Fig Pudding* (1996) by Ralph Fletcher, *Skinnybones* (1982) by Barbara Park, and *Beezus and Ramona* (1990) by Beverly Cleary all contain episodic plots.

**Figure 1.2 Progressive Plot**

![Progressive Plot Diagram](image-url)
Authors use other techniques such as flashbacks and foreshadowing to vary the plot. Flashbacks allow the author to refer to a period before the actual story being told to fill in the background information for the reader. Foreshadowing allows the author to drop hints about how the main character will solve the problem. (See the example of an episodic plot diagram shown in Figure 1.3.)

**Theme**, according to Lukens (1999), is "the idea that holds the story together,...the central meaning of a piece of writing" (p. 135). Realistic fiction is often classified according to its themes, which center around the need to be loved, to belong, to achieve, to be secure, or to know. Realizing the theme of a story is a personal response; each reader brings his or her own personal meaning to the story. This personal response is a "life-to-text" connection.

Therefore, what individual students identify as theme may differ. For example, let's look briefly at the story by Marilyn Sachs, *The Bears' House*. In this story, Fran Ellen, a fourth grader, must hide her home situation of living with an ill mother and an absent father, while tending to her brothers and sisters and coping with an unfriendly school situation; Fran Ellen escapes these adversities by playing with her teacher's doll house. Individual student responses might focus on the themes of loving and caring for family members, surviving at school, living without parents, finding relief from adversity, or receiving a gift. Depending on the individual student's perspective and his or her life experiences, the transaction with the text will differ.

Authors use different elements to capture the reader's interest. They use different points of view to tell their story, and they use imagery and figurative language to build pictures in the reader's mind. Authors also write with a certain intent. This intent of the author is how the author wants the reader to feel as the story is read.
**Point of view** is the perspective of the storyteller. When a story is written from the first-person point of view, the main character usually tells the story and uses the word “I.” *Fig Pudding* (1996) by Ralph Fletcher, *The Bears’ House* (1996) by Marilyn Sachs, and *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1996) by Beverly Cleary are written in first person.

When a story is written from the third-person point of view, the person telling the story is a central observer who knows all (omniscient) and can recount details, actions, thoughts, and feelings of the characters (conscious and unconscious). The author writes from a storyteller’s perspective and uses pronouns such as “he,” “she,” and “they.” Stories written from this point of view include *On My Honor* (1986) by Marion Dane Bauer, *Journey to Jo’burg* (1986) by Beverly Naidoo, and *The Goats* (1987) by Brock Cole.

**Imagery** refers to the author’s choice of descriptive words and phrases that help readers form a mental picture of settings, characters, and events, thus keeping readers fully involved in the story. The following example of imagery is from Ralph Fletcher’s book *Fig Pudding* (1996) in which the author describes how Grandma made stollen for the holidays:

She gave Josh a pile of walnuts and a block of wood for breaking the nuts into smaller pieces. That was a tradition: whenever Grandma made stollen the youngest kid always got to smash up the walnuts. Josh took the wood and started pounding like a madman, as if he wanted to pulverize each walnut right down to the dust. (p. 18)

**Figurative language**, including similes and metaphors, is used in realistic fiction to enhance imagery. *Similes* are comparisons that make use of “like” or “as.” A *metaphor* compares two unlike things directly without using like or as. This example of a simile is found in *Fig Pudding* where one of the characters describes his grandma: “One time when she fell asleep on the couch I spent fifteen minutes studying her hands, the dark veins slowly throbbing under her skin that looked thin and clear as tissue paper” (p. 17). This description of Grandma continues on, but this time the author uses a metaphor: “Her hands made me think of driftwood, old and pale and worn smooth” (p. 17).

**Author’s intent** or **tone** relates to how the author wants readers to feel as we read the book. An author can intend the story to be humorous, sad, serious, slapstick, or any combination of these throughout the story, and will use sentence structure, word choices, patterns and arrangements to communicate and set the story’s tone (Lukens, 1999).
Variety Within the Genre

Because there are a number of themes in realistic fiction, most experts delineate categories of realistic fiction using aspects of theme. Among these categories, themes such as living in a diverse world, accepting differences, living with others, and growing up are all superimposed. This section will focus on five themes that occur often in contemporary realistic fiction:


**Animal** stories feature an animal as the central character of the story. The animals in these stories have realistic traits and are not personified. In these stories, the antagonist can be nature as in *Incredible Journey* (1996) by Shelia Burnford, or other people as in the book *Shiloh* (1991) by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. Other books in this category are *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1996) by Wilson Rawls and *Stone Fox* (1980) by John Reynolds Gardiner.

**Sports** stories deal with sports as part of the main theme. These stories deal with perseverance, sportsmanship, and game description. Conflict centers around person-against-self as in the story *The Trading Game* (1990) by Alfred Slote, where the main character tries to sift out the importance of family versus winning. Person-against-society is the theme in Robert Weaver’s *Nice Guy, Go Home* (1968), where the main character in a baseball story is Amish. Females are also portrayed in sports stories, as in *Spike It!* (1998) by Matt Christopher. Other books in this category include *Snowboard Showdown* (1999) and *The Fox Steals Home* (1985) by Matt Christopher.
Teaching the Realistic Fiction Story

There are three instructional arrangements used in this unit: a whole-class read-aloud, small-group guided reading, and individual writing of realistic fiction. Each instructional arrangement will be discussed in detail. The first instructional arrangement, whole-class read-aloud, has two components: pre-read-aloud activities and during read-aloud activities.

Pre-Read-Aloud Activities

The pre-read-aloud activities revolve around building background knowledge of the genre, developing an understanding of realistic fiction, and preparing students for reading realistic fiction.

To begin the unit on realistic fiction, conduct a brainstorming session to find out what students already know about realistic fiction. After students have relayed what they know about this genre, discuss the difference between fiction and nonfiction. Tell them that fiction is a type of literature that contains stories that might be possible in the real world, but these stories are made up and did not really happen; nonfiction stories are about things that did occur and include biographies and autobiographies. Explain that in realistic fiction, the characters act like real people, the setting could be a real place, the characters experience problems of real children, and the resolution could happen in the real world, but the stories did not actually happen. To give an example, read from the credit section found in the biography, The Story of Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad (1991) by Kate McMullen, where the author states

The events described in this book are true. They have been carefully researched and excerpted from authentic autobiographies, writings, and commentaries. No part of this biography has been fictionalized.

Compare this testament to the note in the credit section from the book Flip-Flop Girl (1996) by Katherine Paterson:

No character is this book is intended to represent any actual person; all the incidents of the story are entirely fictional in nature.

These examples will spark a discussion of the differences between fiction and nonfiction. After the concepts of fiction and nonfiction have been introduced, give students a Realistic Fiction Quiz (see Figure 1.4). This quiz includes matching the titles of popular realistic fiction stories to the main characters.
If students are unable to match the book titles to the characters, invite them to read the books listed in the quiz to find the answers.

### Read-Aloud Activities

To develop an understanding of the elements of realistic fiction, you must select a book for a whole-class read-aloud. While reading this story, you will teach, demonstrate and apply the elements of realistic fiction. Have the following charts ready: Circle of Friends Map (page 17), Determining Round Characters Map (page 19), Life Events by Character Chart (page 20), Plot Diagram (page 22), Rising and Falling Plot Chart (page 23), and Author’s Style Chart (page 25).

Introduce the read-aloud by telling the book’s title and author, then share the entire story by reading it aloud to the class. The book used in this chapter to model the literary elements of realistic fiction is *Flip-Flop Girl* (1996) by Katherine Paterson. This is an appropriate read-aloud for fourth and fifth grades. However, all activities and questions used in this unit are suitable for most realistic fiction stories, so you could read any realistic fiction story to your class. (See the bibliography’s realistic fiction section on page 155 for additional book selections.) Share the questions in this section before reading aloud in order to

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**Figure 1.4 Realistic Fiction Quiz**

Can you match the main character to the book title?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Character</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Jerry</td>
<td>a. <em>Dogs Don’t Tell Jokes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Leslie</td>
<td>b. <em>Skinnybones</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Meg</td>
<td>c. <em>Dear Mr. Henshaw</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Applesauce</td>
<td>d. <em>Bridge to Terabithia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sam</td>
<td>e. <em>The Leaves in October</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Alex</td>
<td>g. <em>The War With Grandpa</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Pete</td>
<td>h. <em>The Chocolate War</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. John</td>
<td>i. <em>A Summer to Die</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Livvy</td>
<td>j. <em>Aldo Ice Cream</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Leigh</td>
<td>k. <em>Crash</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answers: 1-h; 2-d; 3-i; 4-j; 5-f; 6-a; 7-b; 8-g; 9-k; 10-e; 11-c.
set purposes for listening; allow students to answer the questions and discuss the story once you have finished reading.

**Building Background of the Story**

*Flip-Flop Girl* begins with an introduction of what is happening in Vinnie’s life when the story begins. The setting is a funeral home, and Vinnie’s father has died of cancer. Other background information provided are the characters at the funeral home and the angry dialogue between Vinnie and Mason, her brother.

**Evaluating Setting**

The setting in realistic fiction is integral to the story, the main character, and the theme. These questions and activities help students understand the importance of a realistic setting to the development of the character or problem:

1. Where does the story take place?
2. Does the weather or the season affect the characters or the plot?
3. Does the author describe the setting using enough detail for you to gain an understanding of how the setting affects the characters?
4. Could the setting that the author developed be a “real” place, existing in our times?

In this story, the setting becomes the major problem for the main character, Vinnie. Vinnie’s father has died of cancer, and her mother cannot afford to stay in Washington, so the family must move in with Vinnie’s grandmother in Texas.

After the read-aloud is completed, discuss the descriptions of the settings in relation to the main character, the main character’s problem, and the events in the plot. This discussion will lead readers to the conclusion that the setting is indeed important to the story line. The setting is the main source of Vinnie’s problem: a new town, new school, no friends, and taking care of Mason at school.

**Identifying Types of Characters**

The questions and activities in this section help students identify four types of characters—round, dynamic, foil, and static—and the re-
relationships of these characters’ problems, actions, thoughts, and moods. These questions can be asked about any character in realistic fiction:

1. Who is the protagonist (main character) in this story?
2. Who are the characters that are in the main character’s life?
3. Which characters are fully developed? (round characters)
4. Which characters change as the story progresses? (dynamic characters)
5. Does the author develop a character that displays the opposite personality traits of the main character? (foil character)
6. Who is your favorite character in the story? Why?
7. Do you know any people in your life that remind you of any of the characters in this story?

The protagonist in *Flip-Flop Girl* is Vinnie, because she is the main character and the character whose actions move the story along.

A Circle of Friends Map could be designed to illustrate the other people who are part of the story. The Circle of Friends Map clearly illustrates that the people in the story change as the story progresses. Therefore, it might be useful to design two Circle of Friends Maps, one for before the story begins and one for during the story (see Figure 1.5).

In order to identify the round characters in the story, the attributes of the characters presented in the Circle of Friends Maps need to be

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**Figure 1.5  Circle of Friends Map**

![Circle of Friends Map](image)

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collected and analyzed. For the story *Flip-Flop Girl*, students need to assess the following characters: Vinnie, Mason, Mom, Grandma, Mr. Clayton, and Loop. For example, the attributes of Vinnie might include the following: dislikes Brownsville, likes her teacher, is mean to Mason, picks up Mason after school, eats alone in the cafeteria, plays hopscotch with Loop, dreams, remembers her father, cries, has long hair, wears clothes from the Salvation Army.

Organize character attributes by using the different categories of a round character—what the character looks like, what the character does and thinks, and what others say about the character—on the Determining Round Characters Map (see Figure 1.6). List each character in the story on the chart, and as you collect the attributes of each character, fill in the chart and determine the round characters in the story. By analyzing the attributes, students find two round characters in this story: Vinnie and Loop.

At the end of the story, discuss which characters changed during the story in order to identify the dynamic characters. Develop a Life Events by Character Chart to illustrate events in each character’s life and their responses to these events. For example, a Life Events by Character Chart for *Flip-Flop Girl* could be designed for Vinnie and Loop. This chart can be filled in as the story progresses (see Figure 1.7 on page 20).

From the information charted for the two characters, Vinnie and Loop, students will find that Loop displays personality traits opposite those of Vinnie and is a foil character. The author develops a foil to stress the traits of the main character.

**Clarifying the Conflict**

The problem or conflict in realistic fiction must be possible in life. The following questions help students identify and clarify the types of conflict in the story:

1. What is the conflict in this story?
2. Are the other characters in the story drawn into this conflict by the main character?

Person–against–self is the type of conflict presented in *Flip-Flop Girl*. To document this answer, share the following information as the read-aloud progresses: Throughout the story, Vinnie takes out the anger she feels about her father’s death and her move on the other characters in the story. During the first months in her new environment, Vinnie’s
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Acts</th>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>Thoughts</th>
<th>Others Say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vinnie</td>
<td>wears brown leather shoes, cotton dress</td>
<td>looks after Mason; plays hopscotch with Loop</td>
<td>“I don’t want to pack. I don’t want to move.” (p. 8)</td>
<td>should she tell mother what she said to Mason? misses her father.</td>
<td>“She’s a bit poorly today, but she does hate to miss.” (p. 95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loop</td>
<td>6 feet tall, wears glasses, stringy black hair, colored skin</td>
<td>plays hopscotch with a stone; picks pumpkins; works in neighbor’s yard</td>
<td>“Wanna play?” (p. 8) “You need your own rock.” (p. 24)</td>
<td>reads Vinnie’s thoughts; likes her real name; believes her father is innocent</td>
<td>“Her father brought her down here last year. From someplace up North—Boston, New York. I forget.” (p. 53) “Poor child.” (p. 55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>big, ghostly eyes, toothless grin</td>
<td>makes monkey faces</td>
<td>“Don’t cry, Momma,” he said. (p. 117)</td>
<td></td>
<td>“He’s not noisy....” (p. 26). “We heard your little brother is the worst kid in kindergarten,” a girl named Taylor said. (p. 67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Momma</td>
<td>beautiful; wears Daddy’s old plaid jacket; carries big shoulder bag</td>
<td>marches up the stairs at the school</td>
<td>“If you packed your own things, Vinnie—” (p. 8). “Nurses can always get jobs.” (p. 8)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
grief and anger are evident in her mean treatment of her silent younger brother, Mason, and her grieving mother and grandmother, as well as her criticism of the only person who befriends her, Loop. She misplaces her grief over the loss of her father on her unsuspecting fourth-grade teacher, and she tries to replace her father’s love with that of her teacher.

**Following the Plot**

The plot is the structure of the story and consists of a series of episodes or events; the plot can be either progressive or episodic. The following questions and activities will help students follow the progression of the plot in a realistic fiction story:

1. How is the plot organized?
2. What are the main events in this story?
3. How exciting are each of these events?
4. What roadblocks did the characters encounter?
5. What is the high point of the story?

The plot for the story *Flip-Flop Girl* is organized using a progressive plot structure. Two graphic organizers can be used to answer the other questions for plot. The first is called a Plot Diagram, which was adapted from one created by Macon, Bewell, and Vogt (1991). To complete the Plot Diagram, students collect the following information dur-
ing the read-aloud: the title of the story, the main conflict, the events that include the roadblocks or the setbacks of the character and are identified as falling action, the high point of the story, and the solution. A Plot Diagram for the story *Flip-Flop Girl* would look like Figure 1.8 (see page 22).

Another graphic display is the Rising and Falling Plot Chart (see Figure 1.9 on page 25) adapted from the plot profile by Johnson and Louis (1987). To complete this chart, identify the events of the story. Looking at each event in the top portion of the Plot Diagram in Figure 1.8, have students determine the excitement (or the rising action) of each event. Then plot these events on a graph according to whether the intensity of the event was rising or falling. Individual events may also be placed on cards, and students can negotiate the degree of rising or falling actions. Since each reader interprets text from his or her background experiences, these plot maps may differ. Then, using the Plot Diagram from Figure 1.8, plot these events in the Rising and Falling Plot Chart, which might look like the chart in Figure 1.9.

Understanding how the author structures the story will aid in understanding how the events are tied to one another to build the rising and falling action of the story. Explain to students that authors use two literary techniques to vary the plot—flashbacks and foreshadowing. If the author wants to fill in missing information about an event that happened before the story began, the author will use flashbacks; if the author wants to hint at events to come, he or she will use foreshadowing. An example of a flashback from the read-aloud text is:

> She also cut Daddy’s hair. Even when he was sick, he would joke with Sheila [her Mom]. The treatments made him nearly bald, but Sheila would trim the few thin strands he had left.
> “It’s straight as a stick, Sheila,” he’d say.
> “What about a little body wave?” (p. 48)

An example of foreshadowing is found in the text where the Flip-Flop Girl is writing a message to her teacher on the playground. The message said “Congratulations, Mr. C” (p. 51).

Explain that the **climax** of the story is the highest point, the event in which all the actions and responses of the main character come together so that he or she can finally solve the problem or resolve the conflict. The **resolution** is how or what the character does to solve the problem. The actual ending is brief with little detail. Questions to ask about the ending include those that follow on page 23.
Story: *Flip-Flop Girl*

**Problem:**
Vinnie is angry about losing her father. She becomes angry at everyone—even those who are nice to her.

**Sequence of events:**
1. Vinnie moves to her grandmother's house.
2. Vinnie goes to a new school.
3. Vinnie has to go to her new classroom by herself.
4. Loop asks Vinnie to play hopscotch.
5. Loop brings a pumpkin to class.
6. Teacher, Mr. Clayton, gives Vinnie two barrettes.
7. Mason runs away; Vinnie is left to explain to the principal where Mason is; Mr. Clayton saves Vinnie and gives her a ride home.
8. Mr. Clayton gives Loop sneakers.
9. Mr. Clayton gets married.
10. Vinnie scratches teacher's car and lets the blame go to Loop.
11. Mason runs away because Vinnie is mad at him.
12. Flip Flop girl helps save Mason.
13. Vinnie is grateful to Loop and becomes more empathetic to others.

**Rising Action**
(exciting events):
1. Vinnie moves to her grandmother's house.
2. Vinnie goes to a new school.
3. Vinnie has to go to her new classroom by herself.
4. Loop asks Vinnie to play hopscotch.
6. Teacher, Mr. Clayton, gives Vinnie two barrettes.
10. Vinnie scratches teacher's car and lets the blame go to Loop.
11. Mason runs away because Vinnie is mad at him.

**Falling Action**
(roadblocks or setbacks):
5. Loop brings a pumpkin to class.
7. Mason runs away, Vinnie is left to explain to the principal where Mason is; Mr. Clayton saves Vinnie and gives her a ride home.
8. Mr. Clayton gives Loop sneakers.
9. Mr. Clayton gets married.
12. Flip Flop girl helps save Mason.

**Climax** (highest excitement point):
11. Mason runs away.

**Resolution:**
13. Vinnie starts to be more empathetic of others.
1. When did the climax take place?
2. What is the story’s resolution?
3. How did the story end?
4. Do you have any unanswered questions at the end of the story?
5. Were you pleased with how the story ended?

**Identifying the Theme**

The theme is the reason authors write stories. Authors write about what they have experienced or know well. Two questions that can be asked about theme are

1. Why do you think the author wrote this story?
2. What was the author’s message in this story?

The theme in the story *Flip-Flop Girl* is overcoming grief and becoming empathetic toward others. To help students better understand the story’s theme, discuss grief and the grieving process.

**Figure 1.9 Rising and Falling Plot Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Action</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Low Action**

Events
Understanding the Author’s Style

To help students understand that authors use different literary techniques to bring their stories to life, introduce point of view, imagery, figurative language, and tone. Use the following activities and questions:

1. Who is telling this story? (point of view)
2. Did the author write in a way that made it easy to visualize the events in the story? (imagery)
3. What literary devices did the author use to capture and maintain your interest in the story? (figurative language)
4. What was the author’s intent for writing this story?

Explain that point of view is the vantage point from which the story is told. It refers to the side of the story that the reader will hear. An author can choose to write from four points of view, but only two will be discussed in this unit: first-person and omniscient or third-person point of view. *Flip-Flop Girl* is told from the omniscient point of view.

To answer Questions 2 through 4, ask students to find text examples that illustrate imagery, figurative language, and tone.

Examples of metaphors in *Flip-Flop Girl* are

- There was nothing he’d rather be than strange, unless it was a monster from outer space. (p. 26)
- The view was something from *The Wizard of Oz*. (p. 41)

Some examples of similes in *Flip-Flop Girl* are

- It would be like asking the Wicked Witch of the West if you could play with her flying monkeys. (p. 24)
- On the playground, however, with no teachers around, the girl stood out like the golden arches at a McDonald’s. (pp. 20–21)
- Her hair was as long and stringy as Vinnie’s, but it was black as Monna’s funeral outfit. (p. 21)

The author intended to write this story with a serious tone. To document the various literary elements that authors use to convey tone, have students collect examples on the Author’s Style Chart (see Figure 1.10).
To bring it all together, after studying literary elements of realistic fiction with the class, one sixth-grade teacher asked her students to come up with their own definitions for the elements:

Setting: some place where the story takes place in the book  
Characters: the most important part of the story; if there were no characters in the story, there would be no story; the story is based on the characters  
Solution: characters try to solve a problem or try to live with it  
Conflict: a problem that the character deals with a lot  
Theme: the message or lesson learned from the book  
Author’s Intent: what the book was like—serious, funny, scary, sad, or surprising  
Point of View: first-person or third-person; depends on who is telling the story

**Figure 1.10  Author’s Style Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Point of View</th>
<th>Examples of Similes (use like or as)</th>
<th>Examples of Metaphors (do not use like or as)</th>
<th>Examples of Imagery (great description)</th>
<th>Author’s Intent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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**Small-Group Guided Reading**

Now give students the opportunity to read and explore other realistic fiction stories. The questions and instructional activities shared during the read-aloud can be used during the small-group guided reading of realistic fiction. At this time, you and your students should plan the mapping strategies and questions that they will use while reading their book. The questions and the mapping activities are general enough to use with any piece of realistic fiction. Because students have worked through the questions and the strategies with you as the model, they should feel comfortable using them in small groups. You and the students might decide what strategies to repeat, and students should feel comfortable adding some of their own questions to bring to the discussion table. Students can use any of the maps, charts, and outlines in this chapter to answer questions about the story.

**Questions for Small-Group Guided Reading**

1. How did your group decide on which questions and activities to use? Were your questions and activities effective in helping you understand realistic fiction?

2. From the book you read, identify and describe a dynamic character, a foil character, or a static character.

3. Discuss the problem in the book and describe the type of conflict.

4. Give an example of how the author uses foreshadowing or flashbacks to keep your interest in the story.

5. Identify the author’s intent for telling this story and give the reasons for your answer.

**Independent Writing of Realistic Fiction**

An effective way to help students see the whole picture of the literary components used in realistic fiction is to write a story themselves. This independent writing of realistic fiction will follow the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

As students plan the writing of their own realistic fiction, an outline may prove helpful. This outline allows students to decide on the problem, create the list of characters, and plot the entire story line before they begin their first draft. Students may complete this outline from
beginning to end. In the prewriting stage, ask students to create a Realistic Fiction Map (see Figure 1.11) and choose strategies to flesh out their outline.

Now students can begin to fill in their outline by using the techniques that were modeled and practiced in the read-aloud and applied in small-group guided reading. Students may wish to use the Determining Round Character Map, the Circle of Friends Map, and the Life Events by Character Chart to describe the main character and the other characters. To organize the events, students might design a Plot Diagram or a Rising and Falling Plot Chart identifying the story’s events, the roadblocks, and rising action.

**Figure 1.11  Realistic Fiction Map**

1. Decide why you are telling this story. (author’s intent/tone)
2. Decide on the problem or the conflict. (problem)
3. Decide who will tell the story. (point of view)
4. Where will your story take place? (setting)
5. Decide on the characters. (characterization)
   a. the protagonist—round character, dynamic
   b. the antagonist
   c. two flat characters

**Main Characters**

6. Design a Round Character Map of at least one character, illustrating the attributes of this character.
7. Design a Circle of Friends Map for this main character.
8. Decide how this character will change.
9. Decide on at least three events in the story.

**Plot**

10. Decide on the last event, the event that will be the climax.
11. Decide how the main character will solve the problem or resolve the conflict.
12. Decide how you will end the story.
13. Design the outline of the story:
    a. *Beginning:* How will you introduce the story using background information, the setting, the characters, and the protagonist’s problem.
    b. *Middle:* List the events that you will put in the story, including three events, the main character’s responses, and the other characters’ responses.
    c. *End:* How will the story end?
Leah wrote this piece of realistic fiction when this unit was taught in a fifth-grade classroom. When asked how she came up with the topic for her piece, she said that she wanted to write a story about the woods.

The Evening Walk
by Leah

It’s a snowy night when Mom slips on her boots. The house is dark but I can see. She walks out onto the porch. I follow silently.

We walk across the snow trying not to sink in. Our shadows follow us like a baby chick and a hen. The trees stir as we walk. A rabbit scampers to the right. All I hear is our feet crunching on the ice-covered snow. My Mom pauses, inhaling the pine-scented air. I see fox tracks going east. My Mom points at a clearing. There is a fawn and its mother. We watch them. They watch us. All is silent. I move, stepping on a branch. Crack! They sprint off into the darkness. We are alone once more. A sudden breeze makes me shiver. I breathe deeply watching my breath curl up into the air and disappear. We walk home. The tree branches hang lowly over us. The snow weighs them down. We trudge along. The moon gleams off our rosy cheeks. We reach the house once again.

We are both tired. I slip out of my boots and jacket. I take off my damp snow pants and climb into bed. My Mother kisses my forehead and turns off the light. She whispers in my ear “Good night.”

When this unit was taught at the fourth grade level, Chris wrote this story:

Chris the Fisherman
by Chris

Chris the Fisherman was in the middle of Otter Lake. He had been fishing for a very long time. Chris was in a contest to catch the biggest fish. He had been dreaming of this trophy since he was 5 years old.

He was waiting and waiting for the biggest fish in Otter Lake. Suddenly a fish was on his hook. It was the biggest fish Chris had ever seen. Chris and the fish fought for an hour, reeling and tugging. It was a sturgeon! Then it took Chris 5 minutes to get the hook out of the fish’s mouth. Chris put the fish on the bottom of the boat because it was too big for the cooler.

Chris went to shore and showed the sturgeon to the judges. He won! He was so excited. It was his first trophy ever. Chris took the fish home in a big, big bucket and had a big, big dinner.
Questions for Independent Writing

This assessment gives the student an opportunity to reflect on the progress of writing realistic fiction. The questions ask students to provide a rationale for their choice of characters, setting, point of view, and also their intent for writing the story.

1. What types of characters did you include in your story? (foil, static, round, dynamic)
2. Describe why you chose your setting and its effect on your character’s development or problems.
3. Discuss your intent for writing this story.
4. Whose point of view did you use to tell the story? Why did you decide on this point of view?
5. Would you like to share your realistic fiction with others?
6. Will you write another realistic fiction story?

Realistic Fiction Extensions

To extend this unit, invite students to explore sequels and trilogies. Sometimes readers want to know more about a character and what happened to him or her after the original story ended. Some good examples of these types of books follow:

**Sequels:**

**Trilogies:**

If there is not a sequel already published, perhaps students would like to write one for their favorite realistic fiction story.

To extend the lesson using drama, invite students to pantomime one event from the story while the other students guess the essence
of the pantomime. Closely related to pantomime is Mime Theatre, in which students mime an event in the story while the event is read aloud by one of the students.

Have students write a Clerihew for the main character in the book that they are reading. This type of poetry was named after E. Clerihew Bentley, an English writer during World War II who often included these short rhymes in his columns.

Line 1: Person's name is at the end of the line
Line 2: Rhymes with the name in line 1.
Lines 3 & 4: Rhyme with each other.

An example might be

The ambition of Jess
Is to run, not play chess.
But Leslie has something else planned:
A kingdom in another land.

Summary

This realistic fiction unit focused on building an understanding of the important literary elements common to most fictional stories. We identified the differences between nonfiction and fiction and covered the importance of building background knowledge of the story, creating an integral setting, developing types of characters (round, flat, dynamic, static, and foil), and identifying the story’s conflict. This unit discussed use of point of view, figurative language, and tone to convey author’s intent.

Realistic fiction is our first unit because this genre contains the basic elements of narrative story structure and leads easily into the sub-genre of mysteries.
Get real! Use nonfiction to connect reading and writing in the elementary classroom.

**Reading and Writing Nonfiction Genres**

*Kathleen Buss, Lee Karnowski*

Increase your students’ understanding of nonfiction text—and increase their confidence in their own abilities.

Buss and Karnowski suggest teaching nonfiction to students in grades 2–6 with an emphasis on the author’s purpose, which helps your students gain a better idea of text types and how to read and write them more effectively. As their awareness of nonfiction expands, students will feel confident reading, writing, and sharing these texts with others.

Authors Buss and Karnowski—well-known for their best-selling book *Reading and Writing Literary Genres*—now bring nonfiction texts into your elementary classroom. With teacher modeling and student discussions as primary instructional strategies, *Reading and Writing Nonfiction Genres* will help you and your students explore the purposes, structures, and literary elements inherent in nonfiction genres such as biography and autobiography, recipes and game rules, and ABC and cycle books, to name a few.

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