

FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

A Series of Lesson Plans on Film in the Classroom

Suitable for: 5th/6th Class

INTRODUCTION

This series of lesson plans are designed to educate students on the core concepts underpinning creative writing through the medium of film and TV.

Specifically, each lesson plan is designed to guide students through the official industry process of creating a **treatment** for a creative project, showing students the practical application of creative writing skills using existing stories they already know.

Treatment: a document that presents the story idea of your film before writing the entire script. Treatments highlight the most important information about your film, including title, elevator pitch, story summary, and character descriptions.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Literacy:

Students at 5th and 6th class level already have a wealth of knowledge about creative writing. They have watched a hundred movies, read dozens of books, read comics or manga or even watched music videos with a narrative.

They know how stories work.

However, like chefs who understand what an ingredient tastes like but not what it's called, students often need guidance in recognising just what they know. In over nine hundred school visits, I've seen the genuine surprise in students' faces when I call out complicated terms like foil, antagonist, mentor, heel turn, denouement, and arc, and show them how they already understand these terms, just not their fancy titles.

Almost anything we discuss using film and television can be applied to literature. Stories are stories, no matter the medium. The tools they learn here can be applied to studying class texts and writing their own stories.

Empowerment:

Students also already have taste. They have concepts and characters that they hate and that they love. These lesson plans empower students to recognise that listening to those instincts is exactly what professional creatives do, and that there is no difference between them and a visionary director or writer, except practice.

Iteration:

Practice is what makes a writer. Talent can be part of it, yes, but if you want to be a working creative, even talented people have to practice over and over again to hone that talent.

When you first begin writing, you worry and value every word and every idea. This is actually counterproductive. I use film writing specifically with students because it trained me to be less precious. You throw fifty bad ideas into the mix, argue over them, bat them back and forth, and then idea fifty-one is the one that works.

Students should not value ideas to the point where they mythologise them. These lesson plans encourage students to treat ideas like Lego - rummage around for them, try and fit them, toss them back when they don't work, find the one that does.

These lesson plans also highlight that no idea is fully-formed. You have to have it, consider it, dismantle it, put it back together. This is actually very useful for students because there should be no such thing as getting it 'right' on the first try.

A bad idea can be fixed. A good idea can be improved. The only thing that can't be fixed is a blank page.

Structure:

Creating work for screen is an extremely formulaic process. Structure is everything. There are beats you need to hit, there are tropes you need to lean into, and everything must be built off stories that are already successful.

This makes it a really useful tool for working with students because there is a blueprint to follow. A blank page can be terrifying for reluctant readers, or for students who do not see themselves as confident writers. Teaching structure allows for students to have a creative scaffold for their ideas if they're less confident and allows confident writers to play with and dismantle the structures that they see all around them.

Media Literacy:

Once you learn how films are made, you cannot help but see that process in every film and TV show you watch. This is incredibly useful in discussions about diversity, about bias, about politics in art, and simply about culture itself.

These lesson plans gently offer the tools students need to interrogate media - to learn from it, and to question what it is telling them.

Emotional Literacy: Students will be empowered by these discussions to talk about how media makes them feel - what events or characters they connect to or are emotionally affected by. Having an emotional response to a movie isn't bad or negative - it is absolutely what the creators intend to happen. It also promotes a diversity of opinion - everyone's emotions are valid, and if you were affected by something and somebody else wasn't, that just means you are different people and not right or wrong.

Teamwork:

Unlike the majority of novels, TV and film writing is a collaborate art. You have writer rooms, you have production teams, you have collaborations between writers, directors and actors. Having students write stories together normalizes talking about ideas and creativity, as well as taking some of the pressure from individual students who might be strong in some creative areas but less strong in others.

In this introductory session, the students will learn about the different genres of story, and the 'furniture' each genre comes with - the settings, characters and problems that form the toolkit they will be using in future sessions.

Lesson Plan 2 - The Elevator Pitch

In this session, students will be formed into small groups. Each group is now a writers' room and must work together to devise a pitch for their movie, using the formula 'PERSON - PLACE - PROBLEM.'

Lesson Plan 3 - Tone & Palette

In this session, students will learn about tone, as this will help guide their decision-making process while devising their plot and character arcs. They will look at examples of different tones on screen, and how one contributes to tone - colour, lighting, music, mood.

Lesson Plan 4 - Character

In this session, students will build first their main character, and then two supporting characters, using a character armature of 'WANT, NEED, FLAW, STRENGTH.' They will examine existing characters for these drivers, and build their own characters, right down to the clothes they wear.

Lesson Plan 5 - Plot

In this session, students will use what they have learned to devise a plot structure, learning about the Universal Narrative - Introduction, Complication, Rising Action, All is Lost, Climax, Resolution.

Lesson Plan 6 - The Pitch

In this final session, students will get to put together a mood board, theme song and actively pitch their ideas to the other students and their teacher, presenting their own work and taking questions.

NOTES ON DELIVERING THESE LESSON PLANS

When I deliver these workshops, a crucial part of them is meeting the students where they are in terms of media references. It becomes a lot easier to explain a certain trope or detail of a story when you can point at a film or show that they know.

To aid you in this, there are a few different approaches you can take.

One is setting a syllabus for these lesson plans - ie, asking the students to all watch the same couple of movies so that they, and you, are all on the same page.

Another option is simply making a list of two or three movies they have all already seen - Disney, Illumination or Marvel tend to be ubiquitous with this age group - and using them as examples. I'll try and use as broad examples as possible over the course of this resource.

You can also mix and match or skip a couple of these if you do not feel that they will fit your students. I find the most optional one of these is the 'tone and palette' class as that is perhaps a little more advanced, but it is very rewarding to watch students suddenly understand why all movie posters are blue and orange, or why superhero movies are all in red and blue, while villains are always purple and green.

Finally, though it can be fun to have the students compete against each other at the end by displaying their pitches for the whole school and getting the audience to vote on which they'd like to see, creativity is not a competition.

I've included at the end a list of useful terms and vocabulary on how to compliment and gently critique creative work. Students will not believe 100% praise but will take to heart 90% praise and 10% critique, oddly enough. It shows you're taking their art seriously, which is all any creative can ask for.

LESSON PLAN 1 – GENRE

1.1 – INTRODUCTION

In this introductory session, the students will learn about the different genres of story, and the 'furniture' each genre comes with – the settings, characters and problems that form the toolkit they will be using in future sessions.

Specifically, students will be learning the elements by which genre can be identified and learn that these elements are in fact building blocks. They can be assembled, disassembled, changed, and disregarded completely.

Genre: Genre is a system of categorisation for stories based on similarity of theme, setting, narrative, character or mood. These categorisations are broad and they are fluid. Writers can be genres. Directors can be genres. Eras can be genres. Most stories will exist in a couple of genres to varying extents, though usually one genre will be dominant.

Though this sounds complicated, it is ironically the easiest concept to explain to 5th and 6th class because if they have any experience with a streaming service, they will know all these genres already.

Genres to the streaming generation are boxes you put stories in. Horror. Action. Adventure. Comedy. This is helpful as a foundation for their understanding, but we will be building on it as we move through the course.

1.2 - CLASS EXERCISE

Invite students to name as many genres as they can.

Once they have exhausted the easier ones, you can lead them to others in a variety of ways. Ask them to identify the genre of their favourite movie. Ask them to try and identify genre from a screencap of a moment from a movie. Play a Family Fortune-esque game where you challenge them to name movies or TV shows that exist in genres not already mentioned.

Once you have a strong list, you can then get students to make a list of their favourite genres and ones that they do not like as much. Ask them *what* they like about these genres. Press them to give more developed answers than 'I just like them.'

It can even be a homework assignment - ask the students to rewatch their favourite movies and identify the moments they responded to most strongly.

It is important that the students at all times feel like their opinion or their 'feeling' about an aspect of art is treated as seriously as a correct or incorrect answer might be treated in a more binary subject like Math or Science. No opinion should be presented as incorrect, but as something to discuss and debate.

If two students disagree - great! That is them having different tastes and should be celebrated.

This exercise can also be done with books, whether a class text or a group of books from the school library (or a library you visit, or whatever collection of books they may have access to)

Invite the students to try to work out what genre the books are from the description and the cover.

1.3 - GENRE CONVENTIONS

Genre Conventions: Genre conventions are elements, themes, topics, tropes, characters, situations, and plot beats that are common in specific genres. Genre conventions are what make certain stories the genre that they are. Wizards are a fantasy genre convention, as you usually see them in fantasy. Characters double-crossing each other is a genre convention of the heist genre.

These conventions can be quite elastic. *Star Wars: A New Hope* is not set in the Old West but borrows many of the genre conventions of a Western - frontier civilisations, rebelling against authority and scoundrels with good hearts.

Most importantly, these genre conventions are there for students to use in their own stories. It isn't 'copying' or 'ripping off' another story to use its conventions - it's in fact a real strength to use recognisable genre conventions in your own work.

My analogy for genre conventions is to refer to them as the 'furniture' of the genre. How do we recognise a kitchen? How do we recognise a bedroom? By its furniture. By the items and concepts and ideas we see most regularly.

Genre conventions are a signal to the reader what kind of space the story is operating in, and this allows the writer the ability to give the reader what they want.

1.4 - CLASS EXERCISE

Ask students to choose a genre with which they are familiar. For this example, we'll use superhero movies.

Starting with the obvious genre conventions, lead students through identifying the furniture of the superhero genre. I've included some easy ones below, but there are hundreds. A useful resource for this is the website TV Tropes, which divides up common genre conventions (or tropes) by title, genre and medium.

[Here](#) is an exhaustive list they've compiled on what you might see a lot of in superhero movies, but I've included a sample list below.

The Training Montage: A scene or series of scenes where the main character trains to become better with their powers. This can be played dramatically (*Batman Begins*) or for comedic purposes (*Shazam*) but the effect is the same - get our character trained up fast (faster than is plausible, really) so that so that we can see them doing cool things for the rest of the movie.

The Person In The Chair: When a superhero has a person in their earpiece giving them advice, technical support, gadgets or their next objective. This is explicitly called out in *Spiderman: Homecoming* but examples exist everywhere.

The Costume Customisation: When a hero redesigns their costume to make it more like them, often to symbolise them figuring out who they are as a person. This sounds complicated, but it's such a common story beat in superhero movies that students will immediately be able to name several, precisely because it's a particularly powerful part of visual storytelling.

1.5 - GROUP EXERCISE

Once students are familiar with the idea of genre and genre convention, split them into groups if you have not already.

Explain that each group is now a writers' room. Over the course of the next few lessons, they are going to be building a treatment for a movie.

Ask them to nominate one student as the head writer. It will be their job to settle disputes, keep the conversation flowing, and make sure students do not veer off track.

The first step of any treatment is to choose a genre or genres to work in. Often, the path to originality and fresh ideas is to mix two or more genres. An example of this is romantic comedies, or horror comedies, where one genre is more prominent, but the other helps provide extra entertainment or even some contrast.

Once each group has decided on their genres, you can talk through their choices, and which genre they think they will predominantly focus on, with the other acting as a sub-genre or back-up genre.

The focus here should be on **sharing of process**. Stories - particularly those for the screen - are not written in secret, or in a competitive fashion. Students should all be aware of what the other groups are writing, so that they can discuss their collective and differing approaches.

If there is a discussion or argument over more than one group doing the same genre, explain to the students that ideas aren't unique or special, it is the **execution** of those ideas that will make each one stand out.

Once they have all chosen their genre, you can ask them to write a list of their favourite genre conventions from that genre, and which ones they think they might use. Then, move onto the next lesson.

LESSON PLAN 2 – THE ELEVATOR PITCH

In this session, the students will learn how to develop disparate ideas into a cohesive foundation for a story, using the formula studios use to make elevator pitches.

Elevator Pitch: Also called a logline, this is a short explanation of what your movie is going to be about. No more than three lines.

Here's how I explain an elevator pitch to students.

Picture the scene. You're in an elevator in a hotel in LA. A person in a very expensive suit steps into the elevator beside you.

It's (insert name of popular director here) A good option might be Kevin Feige, the main architect of the Marvel Universe, or Kathleen Kennedy, who was the main architect of the Star Wars universe for a very long time.

They're on the phone. They're saying that they need an idea. A great idea. They have a billion dollars in their back pocket for the next great idea.

And you tap them on the shoulder. You say you have it. Something incredible. Something exciting.

And they say 'you have until I get out of this elevator to tell me your idea.'

That's an elevator pitch. A short, succinct explanation of your idea. It isn't a million miles away from what you might receive in school from a teacher as homework, or what a writing competition might ask you to do in order to enter.

It's a prompt that pushes you to write.

2.2 – THE FORMULA

At this stage, the students will have decided on their genres and feel comfortable with the type of furniture you normally identify with them. It's time for them to put together an elevator pitch that will form the foundation for the rest of the treatment.

This is a simple blueprint for the students to follow in crafting their own elevator pitch.

PERSON

PROBLEM

PLACE

These three elements are essentially;

CHARACTER

PLOT

SETTING

A person has a problem, they must solve it, and in doing so navigate a space that in some way affects the story. This is every story ever written to some degree, and students will recognise that in the stories they know really well.

Toy Story: A child's favourite toy gets jealous of the new toy in the house.

Lion King: The actual elevator pitch for this was 'Bambi in Africa,' according to its writer.

Iron Man: After a crisis of conscience, a weapons inventor decides to be a hero.

It's also important to talk at this point about originality. There is no such thing as an original idea really – just different executions of the same ideas we've seen

before. Often, changing just one of the above things is going to make the whole story fresher. A superhero story set in Carlow is going to feel very original compared to one set in New York, for example.

2.3 - CLASS EXERCISE

In either a verbal back-and-forth, individually on paper or in their groups, ask students to write elevator pitches for movies they have already seen.

Who is the main character? What is the problem they are trying to deal with?
Where is the story set?

Once these are established, you can then invite students to try and connect these three pillars of storytelling. What effect does the setting have on the characters? How does trying to solve the problem change the characters, or the setting?

It's important to clarify that these effects can be small, or they can be huge. For example, American superheroes wear red and blue and white, because that is the colour of the American flag, and those colours culturally invoke their idea of a hero. That is the 'place' influencing the 'person.'

Are characters different at the end of their stories than at their beginning? Yes - the plot has forced them to learn new skills, new abilities, and to make new friends in order to solve the problem in front of them.

These might seem obvious, but students feel very empowered by realising they know these connections on an instinctual level and are now getting to put names to them.

2.4 – GROUP EXERCISE

Equipped now with this practice and these examples, the students now have the task of writing their own elevator pitch for their story. Explain to them that they do not have to know where the story ends up, or how necessarily the problem is solved right now. Explain too that this is not a legally binding elevator pitch – they can tweak, change or mess around it later, but it's important to put down a first draft at this stage that they can iterate on.

While students are working on their pitches, feel free to visit each group and discuss their process, offer hints and tips, and encourage conversation between the students.

2.5 – CLASS EXERCISE

One key aspect of these lesson plans is forging a connection between what the students are doing and what professional writers do every day. Collaboration and critique is an essential part of writing, and while it can take a little bit of work and effort to create a culture of healthy critique in a classroom, it is really useful for students to have that language available to them.

Depending on your class's temperament, you can lean more or less into this aspect, by having the students present on each aspect of their treatment, and the other students give feedback.

Try having each group take to the top of the room and read out their pitch, and then take questions on it from you and the other students.

Tell the presenting group that questions are just a way for the audience to show interest. It's perfectly fine to say 'I don't know' in answer to a question. The presenting group are not being tested on their knowledge – they are in fact

learning what audiences might be interested in and can expand their story accordingly.

Teachers should take part in this process, leading by example with some basic questions like those below.

1. How do you think the character will change by fixing this problem?
2. Will the setting influence the problem or the person?
3. Why did you choose this problem/place/person?

It's important to respond with enthusiasm to even the most unformed ideas, while also asking them some leading questions that might help them put a shape on their ideas. Pitch yourself as someone so excited about their idea, you're just dying to hear more. This works so much better than telling the students they have left out information or have only delivered something piecemeal.

With a first draft of their pitch complete, students can then move onto the process of deciding on tone and palette for their story going forward.

LESSON PLAN 3 – TONE, MOOD & PALETTE

In this session, the students will learn about the visual and subtextual language of storytelling. This session allows them to incorporate other useful skills like art and emotional literacy into their storytelling and recognise when stories are trying to evoke emotion in them.

Tone: A filmmaker's point of view about their film's subject matter, conveyed through filmmaking techniques such as cinematography, camera movement, editing, music, dialogue, and atmosphere. Do they view a certain scene as comedic, or dramatic, or suspenseful? How do they feel about certain political ideas, certain jobs, certain events in history?

Mood: Mood, in contrast, is what the filmmaker wants the *audience* to feel, scene-by-scene. There is some crossover here with tone, but mood is about the audience, not the filmmaker.

Palette: These are the tools you might use as a filmmaker or writer to achieve a certain mood or convey a certain tone. Colour, music, dialogue – all of these can tell us that a scene is sad or happy or meant to be funny.

3.1 – DISCUSSING TONE, MOOD & PALETTE

This is a complicated topic that entire books have been written about, so you can spend as much or as little time on this with your class as feels appropriate.

It can be a simple discussion of colour - most movie posters tend to mix together a cold, bright blue and a warm, golden orange, because the warmth and the brightness of the orange contrast powerfully with the cold of the blue. The heroes are often put in the orange light and the villains in the blue, to further push that contrast and combativeness.

Or it can be a discussion of soundtrack and music - how no music, sad music or upbeat music can completely change a scene.

The important lesson here is that creators are trying to speak to their audiences. Every detail of a story is a brushstroke in a much larger painting, all coming together in a composite whole.

3.2 - CLASS EXERCISE

Show the students a trailer for an age-appropriate movie. Trailers are a great example of tone in miniature as their entire purpose is to give an audience an indicator of tone and mood.

Studios are very invested in making sure they reach the exact audience for their movies, particularly in movies for young people. If the tone is wrong or misleading, and a movie is not appropriate, there can be a huge backlash.

Some good examples from YouTube, depending on your class's interests.

1. Moana Trailer 1
2. Avengers Infinity War Trailer 1
3. Encanto Trailer 1
4. Spiderman Homecoming Trailer 1

Once the students have watched the trailer through once, ask them two questions.

1. How did the trailer make them feel?
2. How do they think the makers of the trailer wanted them to feel?

The answers you get will be immediate, and vague - on one watch, their reactions will be instinctual and emotional. This is good, though - get them to write them down, and then compare how they feel on a second and third watch.

Using the Spiderman Homecoming trailer as an example, you can then return to the start of the trailer, and go through it scene by scene, asking that same question.

Examine the use of colour, dramatic music, dialogue, the tempo of a scene (long, slow shots or short, choppy shots) what people are wearing, the lighting, as much detail as you like.

In the case of Spiderman, we start with an exciting scene of Spiderman easily defeating some bank robbers. Some sample questions include;

1. Why start with this scene?
2. What do we learn about Spiderman *at this point* in the trailer?
3. Why is it set at night?
4. What effects do the music and the choppy editing create?
5. Is Spiderman in any danger or difficulty?

Then we move to a school scene. Upbeat music, Peter and his friends, his crush;

1. Has the mood changed?
2. Is it very different from his life as Spiderman?
3. What new details do we learn?
4. Is Peter a confident hero or an awkward teenager?

This is also a good opportunity to reinforce previous lessons. A trailer is like a living elevator pitch. Do we know the setting? Do we know the character? Based

on only the information we're given, what we think the problem is for Peter by the midpoint of the trailer?

(Answer - he is a teenager who wants more respect, who wants to be treated like an Avenger, not a kid)

Ned in Spiderman Homecoming is a perfect example of how a character can come with their own tone. Even watching the trailer, students can see that every scene with him in it is lighter and more fun. You can balance out horror or peril with a character making jokes or being inherently funny.

Then, midway through, the tone changes.

We see a glimpse of the Vulture - and this is a useful scene in all sorts of ways to dissect. The first glimpse we get of our villain is him descending from a height. This makes him look bigger. It makes us - the camera - feel smaller, like we're a mouse under threat from a literal bird of prey.

The music in the second half of the trailer is far more ominous. We have more nighttime shots, which give the feeling of danger to the viewer. Things get more serious. The music gets darker. We see shots of the hero being thrown around. Spiderman isn't winning fights anymore. He's losing them. He's being threatened.

This conveys a tone of danger and peril. A tone of fear. The makers of this trailer want you to worry that Spiderman won't win this fight, even though it's a Spiderman film, so he will. Was it successful? Did it make the students - the viewers - worry and be excited, even though they might know that the heroes always win?

3.3 - GROUP EXERCISE

Now that the students understand how tone and mood work, you can give them the project of deciding on the tone for their own movie treatment by creating a **look book**.

This, more than almost any other, is an exercise that they should constantly be returning to over the course of the lesson plan.

A look book is a crucial part of selling a movie. People respond visually before they respond to text, and so any pitch for any movie comes alongside a presentation or collage of imagery and music that shows the audience what they can expect.

To practice this, students can practice creating their look books by creating look books of movies that already exist. This can be assembled physically as a collage, or as a PowerPoint presentation, or even a digital collage using a website like Canva or a program like InDesign.

They can use pictures of characters, pictures of favourite scenes, printed out lines of dialogue, or just art that reminds them of the way the movie made them feel. If it's a comedy, the music should be upbeat. The pictures they choose should be bright. If it's a horror, we're looking at dark pictures and scary music.

This is a good opportunity for some literacy exercises where the students might look up keywords that describe the tone of their movie. Sad, gloomy, dark, decrepit, haunting, eerie - all of these are easy terms to search in order to build a look book.

The teacher can even assemble a library of pictures and challenge students to only pick three or four, along with some songs. A good source for artwork is the website Artstation, searching 'concept art' or just using Google Images.

Remind the students that they are not looking for work that directly references their ideas - a picture with a dragon does not necessarily only suit a movie about dragons, for example.

It just needs to convey the tone and invoke a mood - danger, peril, fantasy, excitement.

LESSON PLAN 4 - CHARACTER

In this session, students will build first their main character, and then two supporting characters, using a character armature of 'WANT, NEED, FLAW, STRENGTH.' They will examine existing characters for these drivers, and build their own characters, right down to the clothes they wear.

4.1 - INTRODUCTION

The main character of a story drives everything else about it. Story is only interesting when it's happening to someone we really care about. Same with a setting - you could have invented the most unbelievable magic system, the most intricate world, but it means nothing without the people inside it. Even nature documentaries focus on character, as opposed to plot - humanising and naming the animals we're going to follow.

The morals, the setting, the plot, the tone, the comedy, if any, it all depends on the main character.

4.2 - CLASS EXERCISE

Invite the students to share their favourite characters in stories and then, in an exercise that should be familiar to them by now, *why* they like them so much. Press them on whether it's their actions, their dialogue, what they want, how hard they try to do the right thing.

Try and get one detail from everyone, and then go through the list looking for commonalities or differences.

Inform the students that there really is no one thing that makes a character good. It depends very much on the audience and the writing.

However, there are a handful of details that make a character easier to write. From their earlier work on the elevator pitch, the students will already have a vague image in their head of a character and a problem they are trying to solve.

Now, they must discuss how to expand on that skeleton and create some more details.

4.3 - WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER BEFORE WRITING

WANT

This might seem obvious, but giving your character a clear want at the start of the story gives them a reason to move through it. They want to find a family. They want to fight the villain. They want to keep people safe. If you know what they want, you know what they're going to try to do, and that's going to make them easier to write.

NEED

Making a character with only one want is easy, but it's also uncomplicated. We like complicated characters because we're complicated. If WANT is where you start your character, then NEED ambushes them halfway through their story when they begin to change. NEED drags a character off the simple path and makes their life far more interesting because it gives them a second path to choose. Difficult choices are good for characters. Internal conflict is exciting.

The classic superhero choice is 'normal life' versus 'saving people.' They want a normal life, but a hero always puts other people first (even if we're not sure they will for some of the movie)

STRENGTH

There is a reason why our main character is the main character. When you are writing them, you are also writing the problem they're facing, and there is a reason why your character is the one who will solve the problem. It isn't because they're strongest, or because they're the best, or because they're perfect. There is something about them that makes them the key in the lock - some bit of knowledge, some bit of determination, some willingness to fight on.

FLAW

We admire people for their virtues, but we love them for their flaws. A flaw is something that holds your character back, keeps them from walking through the plot easily, and is often a far bigger problem than the actual villain. The flaw is often the most relatable thing about a character, because when they struggle, it reminds us of our struggles.

A classic example of a strength and a flaw is that most heroes in children's books are recklessly brave - because otherwise they would not put themselves out there to stand off against tyranny. With that being said, they often take risks that can get them in trouble, and often create more problems than they solve.

4.4 - CLASS EXERCISE

As before, students can wrap their heads around this concept by testing it out on characters they are already familiar with.

If you can find a character everyone in the class is familiar with, it can be a useful exercise for them to all work on the same character because even if answers differ, they could still all be correct.

Characters rarely have one clearly defined flaw, but rather overlapping elements that all tie together.

4.5- GROUP EXERCISE

Now that students are familiar with these concepts, they can apply them to their own story. We know the genre the character exists in, and the problem they will need to solve. This gives us some indications as to the want, need, flaw and strength.

Students can lay these traits down first as bullet points, and then flesh them out into full paragraphs, including whether they manage to overcome these flaws at the end of the story, or whether they simply manage and live with them.

4.6 - SIDE CHARACTERS

Once completed, students can then in their groups outline one or two other characters in the story. Antagonists, love interests, best friends - the core idea here is that every character believes themselves to be the main character of their story. Often the most successful villains in a story are the ones who come across as having complex inner machinery and motivations.

The difference often is that they make the wrong choice while the hero makes the right one, or their own flaw is left to run rampant while the hero manages to control theirs.

4.7 - FURTHER DETAIL WORK

Character creation is one of the most enjoyable parts of writing, particularly for the screen, and so there are a variety of different ways to extend this lesson plan.

For example, while it is useful to know the above four traits before you start writing, devising a character is often about spending time with them through writing. The below are a list of other traits to have in mind when writing a character, but these can be found through simply writing short stories or making art about them with the first four traits in mind.

Remind students that the internal workings of a character, that WANT, NEED, STRENGTH and FLAW will show externally in a character's behaviour, their friendships, the way they dress, how they talk.

DESIGN

What a character wears and how they move. This can be a lot of fun to work on, and can be done through art or writing.

RELATIONSHIPS

Even a loner in a story will have allies or grudging friends to call upon. Designing these tells us something about that hero.

HISTORY

Characters do not arrive onto the world fully-formed. They had childhoods, first loves, mentors, families.

LANGUAGE

Characters will have a particular way in which they speak, gleaned from upbringing, class, family, nationality, culture. This can be an interesting way to talk about history and civics with your students.

Once students have fleshed out their characters, its time to move them through the plot.

LESSON PLAN 5 – PLOT

In this session, students will use what they have learned to devise a plot structure. They will look at existing structures, learn about fun industry guidelines like the 60 minute explosion or the crucial horror opener, and then learn about the Universal Narrative – Introduction, Complication, Rising Action, All is Lost, Climax, Resolution.

PLOT: Plot is the structure of events in your story. Event follows event follows event. More than that, event triggers event. They're all connected. One can't happen without the other.

Picture a rollercoaster – rising action, getting tenser and tenser and tenser and more exciting, until there is a peak, a climactic moment, and then a slowing down as we bring everything to a close.

5.1 – INTRODUCTION

Plot is the most formulaic and structured part of writing for the screen. In a book, you can add as many extra scenes or chapters as you like, because it will only cost you the price of the pages when you go to produce it.

In film, every extra minute filmed is probably costing you around twenty grand. With that in mind, every second you put on screen must matter and be worth it. More than that, every student at this age level will have sat through a show that was too long, or a scene that dragged, so they are intimately familiar with the concept of timing and pacing in a movie – i.e., how quickly or slowly the events play out.

5.2 – THE UNIVERSAL STRUCTURE

This structure is so named because it is everywhere. Every movie, every television show, most novels - all follow this structure. And that doesn't make it clichéd - it simply makes this structure road-tested. It works. It's worked a million times. And more than that, it works satisfyingly - in a way that delivers everything people want from a story.

As before, we will introduce the students to the concept, see examples, and then get them to work on their own.

1. THE INTRODUCTION

This is the grunt work part. It is a scene or collection of scenes that show us who our main character is, the where, the when, our supporting cast. It introduces our character's values - who and what they love. Most importantly, it gives us a baseline for the main character's normal - whether that's running a coffee shop or fighting aliens on the moon.

EXAMPLES

Spiderman starts off as a normal kid. Thor starts off as a Norse God with a whole kingdom that loves him. The main character of the Lego Movie starts off a little left out and a little lost, but a fundamentally cheerful character.

2. THE COMPLICATION

Something happens to throw the main character's life off-track. A new want, a new quest, a new challenge, a threat. They must deal with this, even if they don't know it yet, and that is what makes our stories exciting. Usually, there is an internal complication (our Lego character wanting to be liked) and an external complication (a villain) Dealing with one will solve the other. This is an important point for students who find

it difficult to make their stories longer - more complications mean a longer story.

EXAMPLES

Spiderman gets bitten and gets powers - that's a complication, but a good one. Villains appear - that's a bad complication. Learning to deal with his powers means learning to face these villains. Thor loses his kingdom and his powers. That's a problem. But the real complication is the arrogance that caused him to lose his kingdom in the first place.

3. RISING ACTION

Trying to deal with this complication gives us interest. Maybe the first time they try and fix the problem, they fail. Maybe they fix it, but another one crops up. Maybe in fixing it, they realise there is a worse one coming. Either way, things are getting tenser and more complicated.

EXAMPLES

Spiderman tries and fails. Thor is hunted by government agents. These threats aren't enough to end the story or our hero, but they do make things more stressful, and give us exciting moments.

4. THE ALL IS LOST MOMENT

Something goes *badly* wrong, and it looks like our hero has broken things beyond repair. A fight with a friend, the villain escaping, the hero losing their powers - this is the lowest moment of the story, and it's there because our hero needs that final push to overcome their flaw.

EXAMPLES

It's two thirds of the way through your romantic comedy, and the hero has just had a huge fight with her love, and it's raining. Hans in Frozen

turns out to be evil, and Anna is now frozen and fading away. It's now or never.

5. THE CLIMAX

All these complications build to the climax. This is the make or break moment, the moment where everything you've been building up to pays off. The hero has learned what they need to learn, they've accepted their role, they've reached out and apologised, they've seen the light. Now, they're ready.

EXAMPLES

This moment will often be signalled by repetition of a line from the beginning, or the reappearance of an old character, or the hero saying something that the film or book has been trying to teach them all along. Spiderman goes back to his old costume and stops relying on Iron Man's tech or his approval. Thor acts selflessly instead of selfishly.

6. RESOLUTION

This is the dust settling. The moment of reflection. Losses are counted. Friends are reunited. We see who has survived, who has changed, who's in love, who's broken up. Because stories are a change machine. Plot has to have an effect on your characters, otherwise it may as well not have happened.

EXAMPLES

Often the big musical numbers at the end of animated movies are there to give quick epilogues to various characters (including the villain, to reassure us they were not killed when they were defeated)

5.3 - CLASS EXERCISES

These steps can be further reinforced by the fact that not just every movie presents these steps, but also every TV show. Every episode will have its own contained version of the universal structure, as well as a structure that plays out over the entire series.

You can even refer back to the trailer you used in Lesson Plan 3 and see that it will follow the same structure - though often without the resolution so that the ending of the film is somewhat in doubt.

Challenge students to plot out the narrative of one of your selected movies, or a class text with which they will all be familiar.

Discuss the structure with them. Why do they think it works? What is their favourite part of the structure to watch? Is there a way to change the structure around? Some movies will show you the climax first and then jump all the way back to the introduction, so you have a taste of a future scene but don't know the set-up.

As with all of these blueprints, it is important that students do not believe they work simply because they have been told they work. They should be encouraged to interrogate them, try them out for themselves, argue over which parts they do not agree with, and seek to break down and reassemble them for their own stories.

When they are sufficiently familiar with this structure, you can then invite each group to put together their own structure for their movie. Start with bullet points for each step of the structure and, when these are agreed, get them to expand these into paragraphs. Ask the students to keep in mind what villains might be doing during the moments they are not 'on-screen' as well, so they also feel like well-rounded characters who are busy during the plot.

When this is complete, students may present their work to the rest of the class and field questions as before.

It's worth also encouraging students to think about whether the chronological structure above is how the *audience* experiences the plot. Many movies will give us a glimpse of the climax or the complication first, and then jump back to the introduction so we spend the runtime wondering how our hero ends up in that position. Students can have fun working out how their story might look out of sequence and what effects that might create for a viewer.

LESSON PLAN 6 - THE TREATMENT

In this final session, students will get to put together a mood board, theme song and actively pitch their ideas to the other students and their teacher, presenting their own work and taking questions.

6.1 - INTRODUCTION

This is the culmination of all the students' hard work in one document - a comprehensive explanation of the movie they wish to make.

How you display this can be up to you, or the students. Treatments sometimes take the shape of a presentation on PowerPoint, along with a speaker. Sometimes they are documents with clearly-defined sections, which we will outline below. Students could also make trailers based on their movie, or even record a scene from it to act as a teaser.

In Ireland, the funding body Screen Ireland will look for something similar to the following;

Elevator Pitch (25 words only)

Two Page Synopsis of Plot

A Page Describing Characters

A Page of Writers' Notes Explaining Tone and Mood

You can follow this method, but treatments can also be wild and wonderful 'found' documents, such as the [Stranger Things treatment](#) - which has been made to look like a document from that era. Students are encouraged to get creative and artistic with their treatments - a pirate movie treatment down on paper soaked

in coffee grounds to look like parchment, with hand-drawn maps, or a sci-fi movie treatment put on a poster made to look like a computer screen or a map of a star system.

Theme songs, fake posters, playlists of songs, potential casting choices, whole written scenes or concept art design for monsters, villains and costumes - all of these can be incorporated to make sure every student has been given a chance to deliver creative input.

Whether or not you have been incorporating the public speaking element so far, this is a fantastic opportunity to make a big deal out of the final presentation. It could be done in front of the entire class, or even a couple of classes, with the students getting a chance to question the writers' room on different elements.

There can also be a competitive element, where a panel of judges decide which movie they would 'fund,' but its important that all students feel like their work was valued and an integral part of the process.

6.2 - FEEDBACK VOCABULARY

Giving constructive feedback is an artform, and one that takes practice to become comfortable with. However, feedback is crucial in empowering young creatives. If time is spent in creating a system in which students feel comfortable critiquing each other, it pays off in terms of their investment.

Some useful tips and vocabulary:

1. **Specificity:** never say simply that you thought something was good - *find* something specific to compliment. This is true also of constructive feedback - the students have been encouraged all along this process to think about *why* they do not like something, and they should do that here.

2. **Questioning:** A non-combative way of outlining an issue with a text is to ask questions. 'What were you hoping to evoke in the audience here?' 'I'm not sure what you were trying to explain here, can you help me understand?' Simple plot questions like 'how did this character do this thing?' will highlight problems for students without explicitly calling them out.
3. **Phrasing:** Phrases like 'I bumped on this' are more gentle than 'I didn't like.' Using the compliment sandwich - 'I liked this, I wasn't sure about this, I also liked this' - is also helpful. If you are going around the room collecting feedback, it's useful to do all the positive comments first, and then go around and ask for the constructive feedback. If the same comment keeps coming up, encourage students only to speak up if they have something new to add, or they can just say 'I agree' with the previous comment.
4. **The Point of Feedback:** Stress to students that hearing this feedback now is the equivalent of winning an argument before you have it. If you hear this feedback in the early stage of a project, you catch it before it goes out to the public, and more people see it.
5. **Redrafting:** It isn't hard to research the original versions of stories the students love, from early drafts of books to first drafts of films. Pointing out the differences can show students that everything, even their favourite stories, gets rewritten and edited. No story is perfect, first try.

With their work complete, encourage the students to try these writing tips in different settings. Writing.ie has a whole host of writing competitions for all age groups, and there are many journals now that cater to young people who wish to write.

Stress that writing is not talent, but practice, and the more of it they do, the better they will be.