
Idea Exchange

This section represents a venue for sharing the work of our teaching peers. More to the point, what follows are suggestions for solving specific teaching problems. There is more than a small chance that some of these practical tips might be useful for those of us who teach. Should you wish more information on one or more of these tips, contact the author at the e-mail address attached to the tip.

Understanding Plot through Emblematic Episodes

Understanding basic elements of plot can sometimes stymie even the most diligent readers of modern fiction. An effective way to encourage students to think more critically about what happens in a novel or short story might focus their attention on the author's use of an emblematic episode as a key to understanding the complex narrative patterns that typify many works of modern fiction. I use the term emblematic episode to define the one event which, when properly understood, represents the key to understanding the significance of what happens in the entire novel or short story. Once a student has identified a specific event as being emblematic, he must then demonstrate how the author's depiction of this event relates to the story's overall resolution.

In both oral presentations before their classmates and in more formal essay assignments, I often require students to analyze a story's plot by identifying the emblematic episode, and then explain why they think that this single event is the key to understanding the remainder of the story. During oral presentations, in particular, it is interesting to hear from a panel of three or four students who have selected different emblematic episodes, develop competing rationales to support their conflicting interpretations of the significance of plot events as they unfold in the story.

Analyzing a story's plot by justifying one's selection of an emblematic episode turns what might otherwise be a boring exercise of plot summary into a more sophisticated way of thinking critically about works of fiction. It is a simple way to develop students' critical thinking skills and, at the same time, introduce an approach to teaching plot that for students is often insightful and always makes for compelling analysis.

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Note: The Idea Exchange is now a regular feature of *The Minnesota English Journal*. Most teachers are astonishingly busy. Sitting down to write a long paper is out of the question for people with five or more preps per day. Thus, we want our readers to "think small" for a few minutes. Jot down on an e-mail message (or an enclosure in an e-mail message in "Word") to the *MEJ* editor a teaching tip, an idea about teaching a piece of literature that has worked for you with a particular audience, a writing prompt you've used to generate discussion, a strategy for developing discussion on a piece of literature, a writing assignment (along with the context you've created for it), a research exercise, or an effective way of dealing with the writing process or revision or mechanics. Label your e-mail "The Idea Exchange" and address it to straits@mnsu.edu.

Thanks in advance for contributing your ideas to this enterprise.

Bill Dyer

Co-Editor, *The Minnesota English Journal*