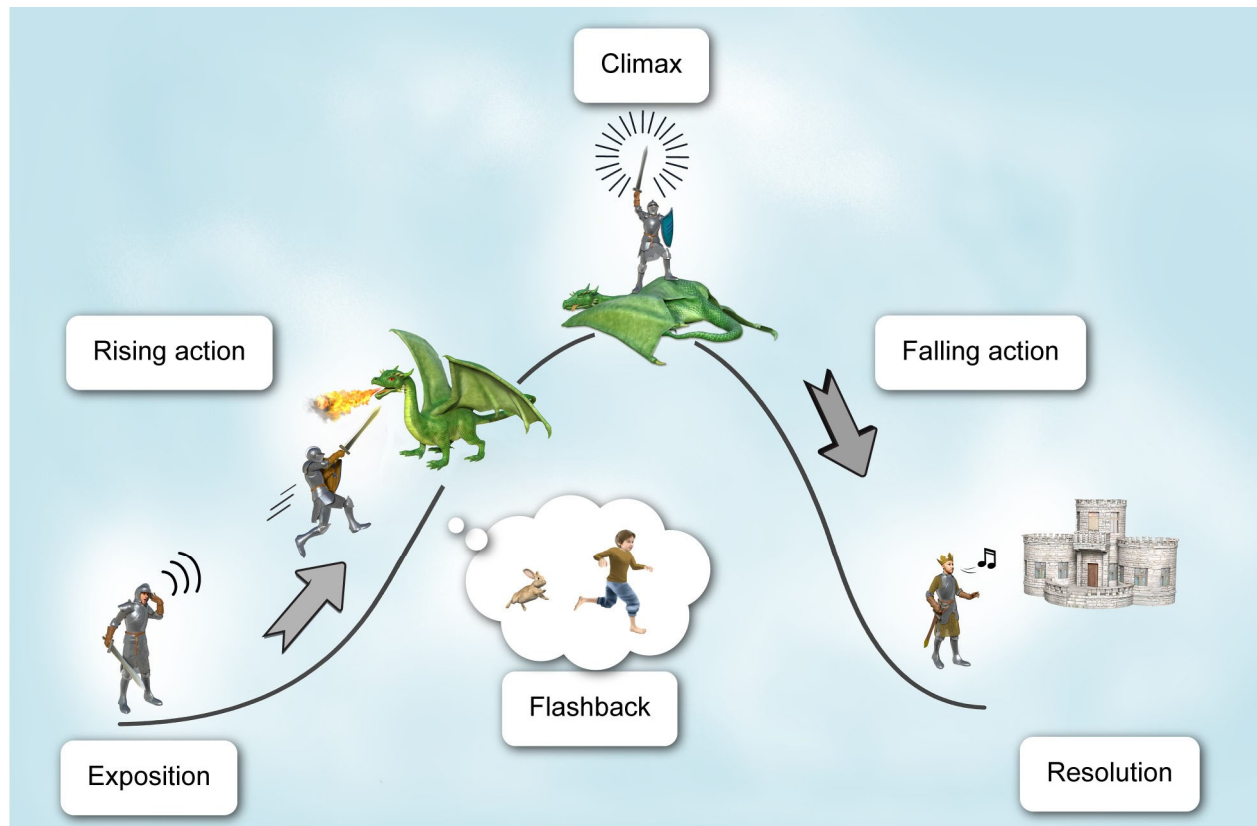


## Skill Category 3: Structure



Just as a builder must first create a solid foundation and framework when constructing a building, writers must create a framework or structure for their stories. The term narrative or prose structure refers to this framework and includes both the content of the story and the form in which it is written. The content of the story includes the events, the conflicts the characters encounter, and the resolution of those conflicts. The form refers to how the events are related and includes elements such as sequence of events, foreshadowing, flashback, pacing, shifts, and irony. Understanding how these elements function and their purpose is the focus of many of the AP exam questions concerning prose structure.

### 3.A-B Plot and Sequence of Events



The image above of the traditional story development illustrates some of the elements of a plot's structure. The multiple-choice section of the AP English Lit exam won't ask for identification of these very basic parts of the plot, but it will test your knowledge and understanding of how specific elements in the plot reveal meaningful nuances about what is happening, where it is happening, and the characters' relationships to the events and each other.

### Key Concepts

**Plot—the sequence of events, including the exposition (introduction)—is composed of significant moments that develop the narrative's characters, their roles, and their relationships with each other and the setting.**

Because a plot is a constructed sequence of events, an event must be viewed in relation to what has happened before and what happens after it. Questions about plot may ask you to identify the significance of a particular event for the passage as a whole, or ask about the effect of placing an event at a certain point in the narrative. Other questions may ask you to choose the best description for the structuring of events in a passage or poem.

- In J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Frodo and Sam's suspicions about Gollum are intensified by moments along their journey when Gollum betrays their trust.

**Archetypes are recognizable narrative patterns that have recurred often in literary works.**

Because these patterns are so common, people have certain expectations for how the events of the narrative will unfold and how the conflicts will be resolved. The AP exam expects you to understand the term archetype and to recognize familiar plot patterns, such as the heroic quest, the journey from innocence to experience, and the detection and clearing of evil. For questions about plot archetypes, you should examine the sequence of events in a passage or poem and select the best description for the pattern.

- In the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy must follow the yellow-brick road to find the Wizard of Oz in the archetypal hero's journey. Because this type of journey is prevalent in literature, the reader can expect the hero to encounter obstacles and experience struggle, ultimately finding her way home changed or transformed. In Dorothy's case, she battles the evil witch and other adversaries, finds the Wizard, and ends up back home with a deeper appreciation for her home and the people around her.

**Some narrative structures may interrupt the plot's chronology to create expectation or suspense, or to reveal important information.**

Familiarizing yourself with the following terms and their definitions will make it easier for you to recognize the effect of their use in the prose passages and poems you encounter on the AP exam.

**1. Flashbacks** affect a narrative's pacing by interrupting the sequence of events to describe events that happened previously.

- For example, in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the narrative is interrupted by scenes that flash back to Gatsby's past, revealing important information about his motivations and his earlier relationship with Daisy.

**2. Foreshadowing** is a device that hints to readers that something will occur later in the story.

- For example, in *Macbeth* by Shakespeare, the witches' words are an omen of future troubles. Their prophecy that "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him" foreshadows Macbeth's eventual defeat at the end of the play.

**3. *In medias res*** is Latin for "in the midst of things" and refers to stories that begin in the middle of the plot.

- For example, the opening scene of the movie *Forrest Gump* depicts Forrest sitting on a bench, waiting for a bus and talking to a bored woman. As he speaks, the woman and the audience become engrossed in his life story, which is described through flashbacks.

**4. Stream of consciousness** mirrors the unstructured and often scrambled way a character thinks. Look for internal thoughts presented in a random manner and the lack of normal punctuation and capitalization that usually characterizes stream of consciousness narration.

- For example, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the reader gets a glimpse into the thoughts of the ghost that haunts the main character's home:

They are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water they break up the little hill and push it through I cannot find my pretty teeth I see the dark face that is going to smile at me it is my dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around our neck she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in the water with my face.

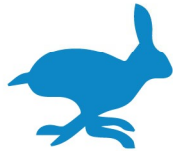
**5. Pacing** is the manipulation of time in a narrative and is impacted by the placement of details, frequency of events, syntax, and the order in which the events occur. Pacing may be affected by a flashback or an unexpected interruption to the action. Shifts in pacing may **elicit** an emotional response, reveal an event's significance to the narrative or indicate an important contrast. Below are two different types of pacing and their function.

The rate or speed at which a story unfolds



Elements that **slow** the pace:

- Long, detailed descriptions
- Longer, complex sentences
- Complex diction



Elements that **accelerate** the pace:

- Consecutive short descriptions
- Short, simple sentences
- Short, blunt words



Elements that **interrupt** the pace:

- Flashbacks
- Digressions to other topics
- Interruptions in events

- **Speed at which events occur:** The fast-paced sequence of events in the short story "The Most Dangerous Game" creates suspense and anticipation in the reader as a man being hunted struggles to elude a hunter.
- **Arrangement of details:** In Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, the revelation that Magwitch is the source of Pip's money comes very late in the novel, surprising the reader and changing Pip's understanding of his relationship with Miss Havisham and Estella.

## What to Look for

As you encounter questions about a prose excerpt's plot, look for the following in the passage:

- Events and actions that affect other parts of the narrative
- Structures that interrupt the chronological progression of the events
- Descriptions of characters' reactions to events
- Changes in the narrative that affect the pacing of the events
- Comments by the narrator that guide the reader's response to events

### Practice Activity

**Directions:** The following passage from *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles contains events that take place in three different times: 1885, 1918, and 1922 (the story's present time). Read the passage carefully and complete the following:

- Use three different colors to highlight events from the **three time periods**: 1885, 1918, and 1922 (the present).
- Annotate any structures that interrupt the narrative, such as **flashback**, **foreshadowing**, or **stream of consciousness** and explain what each reveals.
- In an annotation, describe how the **pacing** of events affects the plot, characters, or readers' reactions.

#### *From A Gentleman in Moscow*

Once in the bedroom, the Count paused before the marble-topped table on which lay an assortment of curios. From among them, he picked up a pair of scissors that had been prized by his sister. Fashioned in the shape of an egret with the long silver blades representing the bird's beak and the small golden screw at the pivot representing its eye, the scissors were so delicate he could barely fit his thumb and finger through the rings.

Looking from one end of the apartment to the other, the Count took a quick inventory of all that would be left behind. What personal possessions, furnishings, and *objets d'art* he had brought to this suite four years before were already the product of a great winnowing. For when word had reached the Count of the Tsar's execution, he had set out from Paris at once. Over twenty days, he had made his way across six nations and skirted eight battalions fighting under five different flags, finally arriving at Idlehour on the seventh of August 1918, with nothing but a rucksack on his back. Though he found the countryside on the verge of upheaval and the household in a state of distress, his grandmother, the Countess, was characteristically composed.

"Sasha," she said without rising from her chair, "how good of you to come. You must be famished. Join me for tea."

When he explained the necessity of her leaving the country and described the arrangements he had made for her passage, the Countess understood that there was no alternative. She understood that although every servant in her employ was ready to accompany her, she must travel with two. She also understood why her grandson and only heir, whom she had raised from the age of ten, would not be coming with her.

When the Count was just seven, he was defeated so soundly by a neighboring boy in a game of draughts that, apparently, a tear was shed, a curse was uttered, and the game pieces were scattered across the floor. This lack of sportsmanship led to a stiff reprimand from the Count's father and a trip to bed without supper. But as the young

Count was gripping his blanket in misery, he was visited by his grandmother. Taking a seat at the foot of the bed, the Countess expressed a measure of sympathy: "There is nothing pleasant to be said about losing," she began, "and the Obolensky boy is a pill. But, Sasha, my dear, why on earth would you give him the satisfaction?" It was in this spirit that he and his grandmother parted without tears on the docks in Peterhof. Then the Count returned to the family estate in order to administer its shuttering.

In quick succession came the sweeping of chimneys, the clearing of pantries, and the shrouding of furniture. It was just as if the family were returning to St. Petersburg for the season, except that the dogs were released from their kennels, the horses from their stables, and the servants from their duties. Then, having filled a single wagon with some of the finest of the Rostovs' furniture, the Count bolted the doors and set out for Moscow.

'Tis a funny thing, reflected the Count as he stood ready to abandon his suite. From the earliest age, we must learn to say good-bye to friends and family. We see our parents and siblings off at the station; we visit cousins, attend schools, join the regiment; we marry, or travel abroad. It is part of the human experience that we are constantly gripping a good fellow by the shoulders and wishing him well, taking comfort from the notion that we will hear word of him soon enough.

But experience is less likely to teach us how to bid our dearest possessions *adieu*. And if it were to? We wouldn't welcome the education. For eventually, we come to hold our dearest possessions more closely than we hold our friends. We carry them from place to place, often at considerable expense and inconvenience; we dust and polish their surfaces and reprimand children for playing too roughly in their vicinity—all the while, allowing memories to invest them with greater and greater importance. This armoire we are prone to recall, is the very one in which we hid as a boy; and it was these silver candelabra that lined our table on Christmas Eve; and it was with this handkerchief that she once dried her tears, et cetera, et cetera. Until we imagine that these carefully preserved possessions might give us genuine solace in the face of a lost companion.

But, of course, a thing is just a thing.

And so, slipping his sister's scissors into his pocket, the Count looked once more at what heirlooms remained and then expunged them from his heartache forever.

Excerpt from *A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW: A NOVEL* by Amor Towles, copyright © 2016 by Cetology, Inc. Used by permission of Viking Books, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

## Sample Annotations

Once in the bedroom, the Count paused before the marble-topped table on which lay an assortment of curios. From among them, he picked up a pair of scissors that had been prized by his sister. Fashioned in the shape of an egret with the long silver blades representing the bird's beak and the small golden screw at the pivot representing its eye, the scissors were so delicate he could barely fit his thumb and finger through the rings.

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When the Count was just seven, he was defeated so soundly by a neighboring boy in a game of draughts<sup>3</sup> that, apparently, a tear was shed, a curse was uttered, and the game pieces were scattered across the floor. This lack of sportsmanship led to a stiff reprimand from the Count's father and a trip to bed without supper. But as the young Count was gripping his blanket in misery, he was visited by his grandmother. Taking a seat at the foot of the bed, the Countess expressed a measure of sympathy: "There is nothing pleasant to be said about losing," she began, "and the Obolensky boy is a pill. But, Sasha, my dear, why on earth would you give him the satisfaction?" It was in this spirit that he and his grandmother parted without tears on the docks in Peterhof. Then the Count returned to the family estate in order to administer its shuttering.

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### 1922

This is the present, and the long descriptive sentences slow the pace as the narrator contemplates the scissors that were prized by his sister. The details make the reader feel sympathy for the narrator, who must leave behind his possessions.

### 1918

Flashback to a time when the Count had to travel quickly from Paris to Idlehour to take care of his grandmother. This flashback is important because it provides context and information that helps the reader understand the direness of the Count's present situation.

### 1885

Flashback to the Count's childhood: his grandmother taught him the importance of not giving the other boy the satisfaction of his tears. This explains why he doesn't display emotion when parting from his grandmother.

### 1918

The narrator returns to the story about the departure of the Count's grandmother and the necessity of closing of the estate and releasing the animals. This information prepares the reader for the Count's thoughts about leaving behind possessions.

'Tis a funny thing, reflected the Count as he stood ready to abandon his suite. From the earliest age, we must learn to say good-bye to friends and family. We see our parents and siblings off at the station; we visit cousins, attend schools, join the regiment; we marry, or travel abroad. It is part of the human experience that we are constantly gripping a good fellow by the shoulders and wishing him well, taking comfort from the notion that we will hear word of him soon enough.

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And so, slipping his sister's scissors into his pocket, the Count looked once more at what heirlooms remained and then expunged them from his heart forever.

**1922**

The passage returns to the present as the Count reflects on saying goodbye and the emotional attachment people have to material items, such as his sister's scissors, which he keeps. This information causes the reader to sympathize with the Count.