

DECONSTRUCTING A STORY

What is a story?

To find out, we'll take one to bits.

'Paddy saves the day' is a simple story - but it contains *all* the basics.

As we listen to it and look at it, we are going to take note of what is actually happening in terms of narrative. We are going to 'deconstruct' the story as we go along.

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PADDY SAVES THE DAY

One day a stray dog arrived at the farm. Tom and Megan found him at the back door.

"What's your name?" said Megan.

"Woof, woof," said the dog, and he licked Megan's face.

They called him Paddy. He was a big, friendly dog.

"Can we keep him, Mum?" Tom asked.

"Ask your father."

(A situation arises – the appearance of the dog. The main characters (Tom and Megan) are faced with a challenge.)

But their father didn't want him.

"What if he chases the sheep?" said Dad.

"But Dad," said Megan, "I'm sure he's a good dog."

"Woof, woof," said Paddy.

"He can stay for a week. But if he isn't good, he must go."

(A problem occurs – the children want the dog, but their father doesn't want him. Out of this tension something develops. The father sets a test – Paddy must be 'good'. How will the dog meet this test?)

Unfortunately, Paddy was anything but good.

The first day, he jumped into the pond and chased the ducks and geese.

Then he came inside, and put mud on Mum's new carpet.

Then he barked at the moon and kept everyone awake all night.

"That's it," said Dad. "He's going!"

(There is a major problem now – the dog has failed the test. The children have become fond of the dog, and they are about to lose him! What can be done? They are now motivated to take serious action.)

"Let's hide him," said Tom.

"Where?"

"On the island."

The farm was near a big river. In the middle of the river was an island. The children often had picnics there.

"We can leave Paddy there, with food," said Tom. "He can sleep in the hut we built."

(The main characters, Tom and Megan, find what they think is a solution to the problem – hiding Paddy on the island. But will this resolve the problem?)

So the children told their mother they were having a picnic on the island.

With Paddy, they went down to the boat on the river.

They rowed across to the island. Megan and Tom showed Paddy the island and the hut.

Suddenly it started raining. There was lightning.

It rained for hours. Inside the hut, Tom and Megan waited. Paddy didn't like the thunder. Sometimes he licked their faces.

(All seems to be well so far. But the author has introduced a strange development – the storm. It doesn't appear to have anything to do with the children's problem, and therefore with the narrative. But is it a clue of some kind? Are we being told something whose significance will become clear later?)

Finally the rain stopped. They walked outside.

"What's wrong?" asked Megan. Tom looked frightened.

"The boat's gone," said Tom. "And the river's rising. It's a flash flood."

"What can we do?" said Megan. For the first time, she realized that they were in danger.

(Sure enough – the storm itself is part of the 'plot' – the way the story is unfolding. It has created a huge complication. In trying to solve one problem, Tom and Megan have landed themselves in a bigger problem – they are in physical danger. Now what will they do?)

"Paddy. We helped you. Now you must help us."

Tom and Paddy went down to the river.

"Paddy, you're a good swimmer. We want you to swim home. We want you to tell Mum and Dad that we're here. Okay?"

Paddy looked at Tom's face. He seemed to understand.

"Woof, woof."

Paddy walked into the water. He looked at them. Then he started swimming across the river.

"Tom, what if he drowns?"

They watched as Paddy swam across the river.

"Good dog!" shouted Tom.

Paddy swam and swam.

(The characters are now attempting to solve what has become the major problem – the rising water (and their own danger). They are using Paddy to try and get help. But this solution is very doubtful. What if Paddy doesn't get across the river? What if he doesn't go home? What if nothing happens until it's too late. The tension, or drama, is now at a peak. Readers will be very keen to know what happens next.)

Dad was not pleased to see Paddy.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Is it the children?" cried Mum.

"No. It's only this dog."

Mum had been crying. She had looked everywhere for the children. She had phoned the neighbours. No one had seen them. It was beginning to get dark.

(The characters' attempt to solve their problem – being trapped on an island with rising water – has come up against an obstacle. It links back to what we saw earlier – and what we understand of the father as a character. He doesn't like Paddy and is taking no notice of him. The plan appears to have failed. Things can't get much worse. What now?)

"WOOF, WOOF," said Paddy.

"Jack, he's wet," she said. "He's trying to tell us something. What if he was with Tom and Megan?"

"Dog, this is your last chance. Where are they?"

(Just when things seem about to collapse into despair, one of the character (Mum) makes the connection that is needed – again in line with what we understand of her personality. She sees that the dog is the clue – and she acts on the father to do something. He finally acts too. The solution beckons. Will the problem (of the children on the island) be solved?)

Dad borrowed a boat, and found the children. They were in the branches of a tree on the highest part of the island.

"Paddy saved us, Dad," said Megan.

"Are you still going to send him away?" added Tom.

"Send away such a good dog?" said Dad. "He's a hero. No. I've changed my mind. Paddy can stay with us forever."

"Woof, woof," said Paddy.

(The children are saved – which resolves their problem. But because Paddy was a key part of this solution – the other problem (Paddy being sent away) is also resolved. Out of gratitude for what has happened, the grumpy and disagreeable character (Dad) changes and acts in a way which responds to the inner needs of the main characters (Tom and Megan) – who desperately want to keep Paddy. We have a 'happy ending' – something every reader desires. With the resolution of the characters' key problems (which 'drove' the narrative), there is nothing else to be said. The story is over.)

Now that we've looked at how a story works, you are ready for a lesson in narrative writing. We call it 'How to write a story'.