

Seven Story Plot Patterns

*This section has been
written in the format of
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
followed by their Answers.

FAQ: What is the hardest part of story for children?

Answer: Choosing a motive, sticking to it, creating a story problem and finding an effective resolution.

FAQ: How do the seven story plot patterns help children write stories?

Answer: Understanding the seven story plot pattern provides children with story problems and resolutions to choose from which can be used again and again in different settings with new characters to create stories.

FAQ: How does a motive create a pattern?

Answer: Motive creates pattern(s) when story action matches it.

Simple Example: Motive: Character wants to find his lost dog.

Story Action created by this motive causes a lost and found Circle Story with a Contest/Stuck subplots. Character goes in search of his dog and at the end of the story finds it locked up at the dog pound. The circle was completed, the contest for finding the dog was won and the dog was released from where it was being held.

Many stories have been written about things lost and the journey undertaken to find them. e.g. Franklin is Lost by Paulette Bourgeois.

Story Patterns and Genres

FAQ: What role does genre play in story and does it conflict with the seven story patterns?

Answer:

1. Genre is the type of setting, characters, and story language in which pattern is placed (e.g. westerns, science fiction, mystery)
2. All people share similar motives. For example, in all cultures people need food, water, and shelter. Therefore, motive is the center of all stories including genre stories. Motive linked to corresponding story action (characters attempting to get what they want or need) creates story plot patterns. These same seven story patterns are found in every genre from stories around the world. Some examples include:
 - *copycat story -Greek Myth of Daedalus and Icarus
 - *stuck story - Greek myth of King Midas
 - *contest story - Greek myth Arachne and Athena
 - *physical transformation story - The Creation retold by Chewing Black Bones (Blackfoot Elder)
3. The seven story patterns do not conflict with genre stories, because the two work together. Genre stories rely on motive and pattern to supply story problems and resolutions.
4. Children struggle the most with finding a story problem and corresponding resolution. The beauty of the seven plot patterns is that anyone can learn basic story problems and resolutions which can be used repeatedly with new settings and characters to create stories in any genre. Try it out and see for yourself!

Seven Basic Story Patterns/Plots

FAQ: How many story patterns/plots are there?

Answer: There are seven basic story patterns/plots called copycat, stuck, contest, physical transformation, circle, switch and character transformation.

FAQ: How do the patterns/plots function?

Answer: The best illustration of how the seven story plots function is to imagine that four of them can work alone and three of the patterns require subplots.

FAQ: Which patterns work alone?

Answer: Copycat, stuck, contest and physical transformation patterns/plots can function alone or in combination with others.

FAQ: Which patterns require a subplot?

Answer: Circle, switch and character transformation cannot work alone and require subplots. These patterns supply the beginning and end of the story, but not the story problem.

FAQ: Can you give me an example of what happens if you use a circle, switch or character transformation pattern without a subplot?

Answer: The most common example is the infamous dream circle story. When a child writes a series of events and ends it with "He woke up and it was all a dream!" the story is incomplete. Writing a dream circle story with a subplot of copycat, stuck, contest or physical transformation illustrates how the dream circle picture frame complements a stand alone story plot. Matthew and the Midnight Pirates by Allen Morgan is a clear example of how both are required.

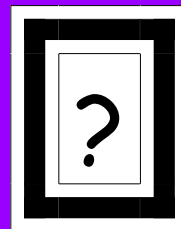
Complete Story Plots:

1. Copycat
2. Stuck
3. Contest
4. Physical Transformation



Story Plots which Require a Subplot(s):

1. Circle
2. Switch
3. Character Transformation



Pattern One: Copycat Story

FAQ: What is a copycat story?

Answer:

A copycat story happens when one character wants to:

- a) be friends with another character
- b) admires another character
- c) acquire a skill another character has
- d) survive in a new setting
- e) frame another character for a crime

and so he imitates him or his actions.

Copying continues until the copycat experiences a disaster.

Disasters will be either:

- *wrecking or breaking something
- *getting hurt
- *getting stuck or getting an object stuck
- *embarrassment when nothing happens or the wrong thing happens
- *misinterpreting instructions (Amelia Bedelia by Peggy Parish)

This disaster will cause the copycat to stop copying.

Copycat books you might know:

1. Stephanie's Ponytail by Robert Munsch
2. The Chick and the Duckling by Mirra Ginsburg
3. Emma's Eggs by Margriet Ruurs
4. The Hat by Jan Brett
5. Little Lumpty by Miko Imai
6. Ruby the Copycat by Peggy Rathman
7. Charlotte's Web Ch. 9 "Wilbur's Boast" by E.B. White
8. Coyote by Gerald McDermott
9. The Happy Hedgehog by Marcus Pfister
10. The Copy Crocs by David Bedford
11. The Pedlar's Caps traditional
12. Frog is Frog by Max Velthuijs
13. If Only I had a Green Nose by Max Lucado
14. Keeper of the Swamp by Ann Garrett

FAQ's About the Copycat Story Pattern/Plot

FAQ: Is this pattern a complete story plot?

Answer: This plot stands alone as a complete story just like a finished piece of art. It can also be used as the subplot of circle, switch and transformation.

FAQ: What kind of characters work well with this plot?

Answer: This plot works best if the characters are very different from each other or if they have at least one very different ability.

FAQ: Is a copycat story like a retelling?

Answer: No, it is not. Copycat stories are about characters who mimic the actions, appearances, behaviours or abilities of another character for the purpose of acquiring a friendship or a skill. Think about Stephanie's Ponytail by Robert Munsch. In that book, everyone is copying Stephanie's hairdo. The story is not retelling an existing story, it is creating a new one.

FAQ: What is a retelling?

Answer: Retellings take existing stories and share them again in a new author's words or use the strategies of: changing the sex of the main character, flipping the protagonist to the antagonist, changing the setting, or changing all the characters to animals. An example would be Cinderella Penguin by Janet Perlman.

1st Copycat Story Pattern

1. Setting
2. Encounter (interesting meeting between the Leader and Copycat)
3. Motive: They want to be friends.
4. First Activity friends do in which Copycat imitates Leader and has success.
5. Second Activity friends do in which Copycat imitates Leader and has success.
6. Third Activity friends do in which Copycat imitates Leader, but has a disaster.
7. End: Copycat gets help from the Leader, but stops copying.

Literature: Chick and Duckling by Mirra Ginsburg

2nd Copycat Story Pattern

1. Setting
2. Encounter (interesting meeting between the Leader and Copycat)
3. Motive: Copycat wants to acquire a new skill that the Leader has.
4. Copycat attempts skill and has a disaster.
5. Copycat attempts skill a second time and has a different disaster.
6. Copycat attempts skill a third time, has success, and doesn't need to copy any longer. He has achieved a new skill or ability.

Literature: Keeper of the Swamp by Ann Garrett

Pattern Two: Stuck Story

FAQ: Is this pattern a complete story plot?

Answer: This plot stands alone as a complete story just like a finished piece of art. It can also be used as the subplot of circle, switch and transformation.

FAQ: What interesting ways can objects/characters become stuck as/by/in?

Answer: Characters/objects can become stuck as/by/in:
animals, gold, statue, ice, stone, sleep, space, zipper, throat, invisible, tongue.

1st Stuck Story Pattern

1. Character/Object gets physically stuck due to:

*trick *act of god
*disaster *use of force

2. Motive: free person/object

3. First unsuccessful attempt at freeing person/object.

4. Second unsuccessful attempt at freeing person/object.

5. Person/Object is freed through:

*trick *luck
*someone helps *hard work
*act of god

Berlioz the Bear

by Jan Brett

2nd Stuck Story Pattern

1. Character takes an object/person that belongs to a second character through:

*trick *act of god *use of force

2. Motives: First Character tries to keep object/person.

Second Character tries to get back the object/person.

3. First unsuccessful attempt at getting back the object/person.

4. Second unsuccessful attempt at getting back the object/person.

5. Person/Object is freed by:

*trick *luck *someone helps *hard work *act of god

Tiddalick, the Frog who Caused a Flood

by Robert Roennfeldt

FAQ's About the Stuck Story Pattern/Plot

FAQ: What is a stuck story?

Answer: A stuck story occurs when a character or object gets accidentally caught, or is deliberately taken, stolen, kidnapped. Stuck stories are such a simple idea and yet they have been used in a host of ways. For instance, just think about all the ways characters/objects get stuck in the movie Finding Nemo.

FAQ: What format works best for stuck stories?

Answer: A simple stuck story pattern which worked for me was:

1. What caused the character/object to get stuck? Choose:
 - *trick
 - *act of god
 - *disaster
 - *use of force
2. Describe first unsuccessful attempt at freeing the character/object.
3. Describe second unsuccessful attempt at freeing the character/object.
4. Show how the character/object is freed. Choose:
 - *trick
 - *luck
 - *someone helps
 - *hard work
 - *act of god (weather, magic, miracle)

FAQ: Are there other variations on the stuck pattern?

Answer: Absolutely. The goal in finding plot patterns is to help children find a way to frame their ideas successfully. Patterns provide the motive, story problem, and a resolution. Once children become familiar with patterns, they can change them to suit their purposes.

Stuck books you might know:

1. Grandma and the Pirates by Phoebe Gilman
2. Uncle Farley's False Teeth by Alice Walsh
3. Berlioz the Bear by Jan Brett
4. King Midas and the Golden Touch a greek myth
5. Andrew's Loose Tooth by Robert Munsch
6. Tiddalick, the Frog who Caused a Flood by Robert Roennfeldt
7. Mrs. Toggle's Beautiful Blue Shoe by Robin Pulver
8. Ordinary Amos and the Amazing Fish by Eugenie and Henry Fernandes
9. The Boy who Stuck out his Tongue by Edith Tarbescu
10. Princess Frownsalot by John Bianchi
11. The Golden Goose by Barbara Reid
12. You are Special by Max Lucado
13. The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch
14. Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell
15. Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babitt

Pattern Three: Contest Story

FAQ: Is this pattern a complete story plot?

Answer: This plot stands alone as a complete story just like a finished piece of art. It has more variations than any of the other stand alone plots due to the number of themes encompassed. This pattern can also be used as the subplot of circle, switch and character transformation..

FAQ: What are the themes of contest stories?

Answer: man vs. man, man vs. nature, man vs. himself, man vs. evil, man vs. machine, man vs. gods, man vs. God, predator and prey, the dare stories, romance

1st Contest Story Pattern

1. Motive: Predator wants to catch Prey and eat/capture him.

2. Encounter: Interesting way predator and prey meet.

2. Predator escapes prey twice by using tricks.

a. Trick one:

b. Trick two:

3. Prey escapes Predator forever due to:

*trick

*disaster

*act of god

*skill

*courage

*lucky break

*someone helps

*hard work

*truth revealed or confessed

Borrequita and the Coyote by Verna Aardema

2nd Contest Story Pattern

1. Encounter: Interesting way two characters meet.

2. Motive: Two characters challenge each other to a contest (choose a feat).

3. Protagonist's first struggle and Antagonist's first success.

4. Protagonist's second struggle and Antagonist's second success.

5. Protagonist wins contest due to:

*trick

*luck

*someone helps

*hard work

*act of god

*skill

*use of force

*truth revealed

Tortoise and the Hare (traditional)

The Princess Knight by Cornelia Funke

FAQ's About the Contest Story Pattern/Plot

FAQ: Since there are so many contest story variations, which one do you start with?

Answer: I think that the predator and prey contest stories are the simplest and have the most appeal to young writers. Just think about how The Three Little Pigs has stood the test of time. Children eat up the concept of using tricks and in predator and prey stories this is the primary element.

FAQ: Could you actually teach students to write all the different types of contests?

Answer: Definitely not. Just to write a single story based on each contest theme would be almost impossible. Taking into account that each of those themes has incredible pattern variations makes it insurmountable. Choose what is easiest and most meaningful to the age group you teach.

FAQ: Are contest stories easy for students to write?

Answer: Actually, I have found contest stories to be more challenging for students to write than the other stand alone patterns, because the actions of both the protagonist and antagonist must be taken into consideration and these actions oppose each other. Sometimes the perspectives of both the protagonist and antagonist are required to write a contest effectively. Thirdly, a great contest story relies heavily on the story complications of tricks, disasters, acts of god (weather, magic, miracles) and use of force. Collecting, changing and using story complications effectively is hard work. It isn't good enough to write "There was a frog and a dog. They had a contest to see who could get to the pond the fastest. The dog won. The End." There was a contest all right, but it simply fell apart without a story complication.

FAQ: Do contest stories and stuck stories work together?

Answer: Definitely! In the fairytales and science fiction you will see that it is very hard to separate stuck and contest stories. Sometimes the story complication in a contest story is getting stuck.

FAQ: How do the stuck and contest patterns function in fairytales?

Answer: A very rough description would be that evil hates good and makes good stuck. Good can be stuck in a place (Rapunzel in the tower), in a state such as sleep (Sleeping Beauty) or turned into another creature (The Frog Prince). Good has to obtain an item by going on a quest or meet a condition (e.g. wait for a hundred years to pass) to be released from its stuck condition and win the life and death contest.

FAQ: How do these two patterns work in science fiction?

Answer: A brief example would be a space ship getting stuck when it breaks down in space or on a strange planet. Next, an alien space ship flies up and threatens to destroy or capture it. When the alien space ship locks onto the space ship with its tractor beam, the characters are doubly stuck. If they get their warp shields up in time they will save themselves and win the contest for control. Once again, the stuck plot provided a story complication for the contest story.

Contest books you might know:

1. Tacky the Penguin by Helen Lester
2. Rainbow Fish and the Sea Monsters' Cave by Marcus Pfister
3. Dazzle the Dinosaur by Marcus Pfister
4. Trouble with Trolls by Jan Brett
5. Borreguita and the Coyote by Verna Aardema
6. The Princess Knight by Cornelia Funke
7. Emma and the Coyote by Margriet Ruurs
8. Axle Annie by Robin Pulver
9. Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel by Virginia Lee Burton
10. The Wolf Who Cried Boy by Bob Hartman
11. The Perfect Pet by Peta Coplans
12. John Henry by Brad Kessler
13. The Three Little Pigs by Marie-Louise Gay (retelling)
14. The Three Billy Goats Gruff by Paul Galdone (retelling)
15. The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch
16. The Enormous Crocodile by Roald Dahl
17. Kate and the Beanstalk by Mary Pope Osborne
18. Clever Tom and the Leprechaun by Linda Shute

Pattern Four: Physical Transformation Story

FAQ: Is this pattern a stand alone plot or a picture frame plot?

Answer: This plot stands alone as a complete story just like a finished piece of art. This pattern can also be used as the subplot of a circle, switch, or character transformation story.

FAQ: What are physical transformations?

Answer: Scientific stages of change, growth or development found in the galaxy, or world and its living creatures.

1st Physical Transformation Story Pattern

1. Encounter: interesting way Character(s) finds a new season/setting
1. Motive: Character wants to explore: choose a season/setting
2. First attribute of season/setting explored.
3. Second attribute of season/setting explored.
4. Character returns home.

The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats
Chapter 1 of
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe
Ch. 1 by C.S. Lewis

2nd Physical Transformation Story Pattern

1. Motive: Character wants to be able to: _____ (choose a skill)
2. First unsuccessful attempt at achieving skill
3. Second unsuccessful attempt at achieving skill
4. Skill is achieved by:

*trick	*disaster	*act of god
*skill	*courage	*lucky break
*someone helps	*hard work	*truth revealed or confessed

Whistle for Willie by Ezra Jack Keats

FAQ's About the Physical Transformation Story Pattern/Plot

FAQ: How did you discover this pattern?

Answer: Another teacher questioned me one day about whether any pattern existed in the books The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats and The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle. Both of these are complete stories, but neither contains any story complications (tricks, disasters, acts of god, use of force). After studying them I came to the conclusion that this pattern is closest to non-fiction writing. Its goal is to show stages of human experience, animal development or attributes of earth. A picture book using this pattern relies heavily on illustrations or else delves into the poetic language of sensory imagery.

FAQ: Aren't these rather difficult stories to write?

Answer: Due to the fact that this pattern relies on factual knowledge about the world it is easier to research than some patterns. The tricky part of the story is creating the sensory imagery vocabulary required to write it well.

Physical Transformation books you might know:

1. The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats
2. Whistle for Willie by Ezra Jack Keats
3. The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle
4. The Very Quiet Cricket by Eric Carle
5. The Very Lonely Firefly by Eric Carle
6. Jeremiah Learns to Read by Jo Ellen Bogart
7. Amber on the Mountain by Tony Johnston

Pattern Five: Circle Stories

FAQ: Is this pattern complete or does it require a subplot?

Answer: This plot requires one or more subplots.

Choose Type of Circle:

*Journey (return home at end)

The Best Nest by P.D. Eastman

*Time Travel (return home at end)

A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L'engle

*Lost and Found

Stellaluna by Janell Cannon

*Dream

Beetle Boy by Lawrence David

*Self acceptance

Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes

*Entering Other Worlds Without Time Travel

(return home at end)

The Secret World of Og by Pierre Burton

Next Choose Subplot:

copycat

stuck

contest

physical transformation

Circle Story books you might know:

Journey Circle Stories:

1. Rosie's Walk by Pat Hutchins
2. Elmer in the Snow by David McKee
3. Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter
4. Small Green Snake by Libba Moore Gray
5. Hang on Hopper by Marcus Pfister

Time Travel Circle Stories:

1. The Great Kettles by Dean Morrissey
2. A Handful of Time by Kit Pearson
3. A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L'engle
4. The Time Warp Trio 2095 by Jon Scieszka
5. The Magic Treehouse Series by Will and Mary Pope Osborne

Lost and Found Circle Stories

1. Stellaluna by Janell Cannon
2. The Paper Crane by Molly Bang
3. No Spots for this Giraffe by Lucie Papineau
4. The Case of Hermie the Missing Hamster by James Preller
5. The Mitten by Jan Brett

Dream Circle Stories

1. Green Wilma by Tedd Arnold
2. Will's Mammoth by Rafe Martin
3. Matthew and the Midnight Pirates by Allen Morgan
4. Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang by Mordecai Richler
5. Beetle Boy by Lawrence David

Self Acceptance Circle Stories

1. Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes
2. I want to be Somebody New by Robert Lopshire
3. Edward the Emu by Sheena Knowles

Entering Other Worlds without Time Travel

1. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis
2. Miss Smith's Incredible Storybook by Michael Garland
3. Gordon Loggins and the Three Bears by Linda Bailey
4. Matthew's Dragon by Susan Cooper
5. The Secret World of Og by Pierre Berton

Pattern Six: Switch Stories

FAQ: Is this pattern complete or does it require a subplot?

Answer: This plot requires one or more subplots.

Choose Type of Switch:

*Jobs

The Rooster and the Weather Vane by S. Peters

The Prince and the Pauper retold by J. Gerver

*Objects

The Magic Hockey Stick by Maloney & Zekauskas

Babar Loses his Crown by Laurent de Brunhoff

*Places

The Adventures of Sparrowboy by Brian Pinkney

The Princess and the Dragon by Audrey Wood

*Parents

Blueberries for Sal by Robert McKloskey

The Great Mom Swap by Betsy Haynes

*Roles

What Newt Could do for Turtle by J. London

Little Polar Bear and the Brave Little Hare by

Hans de Beer

Next Choose Subplot:

copycat

stuck

contest

physical transformation

Pattern Seven: Character Transformation Stories

FAQ: Is this pattern complete or does it require a subplot?

Answer: This plot requires one or more subplots.

Choose Type of Transformation:

*Viewpoint

Wemberley Worried by Kevin Henkes

Toad Sleeps Over by John Bianchi

The Quiltmaker's Gift by Jeff Brumbeau

Sister Anne's Hands by Marybeth Lorbiecki

*Linear Journey (move somewhere & never return)

It's not Easy Being a Duck by Joan Rankin

Selina and the Bearpaw Quilt by Barbara Smucker

The Giver by Lois Lowry

Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan

The Man Whose Mother was a Pirate by M. Mahy

The Subway Mouse by Barbara Reid

*Friendship

Effie by Beverly Allinson

The Story of the Toothfairy by Tom Paxton

Shaggy by Marcus Pfister

Next Choose Subplot:

copycat

stuck

contest

physical transformation

FAQ's About the Character Transformation Story Pattern/Plot

FAQ: What is a character viewpoint transformation?

Answer: In this type of plot one or more characters change their views. For example, in the book The Quiltmaker's Gift, the king believes he can only be happy when everyone gives him a present. At the end of the story he has learned that giving to those in need brings happiness.

FAQ: What is a linear journey character transformation?

Answer: In this pattern, a character goes on a journey to find a new home due to problems or persecution. During the journey or at the end of it the character is transformed. For example, in the book It's not Easy Being a Duck, the duck refuses to swim or fly until she is about to be eaten by a fox. At that moment she is transformed into a more adult duck by flying to escape the fox. She soon joins her family in the next pond. A more adult example of this would be Underground to Canada by Barbara Smucker which is a slave's journey to freedom.

FAQ: What is a friendship character transformation?

Answer: In this pattern two unlikely characters become friends through unlikely events. For example, in the book Effie by Beverly Allinson, an ant and an elephant become friends due to the ant's big voice. When he yells at the elephant to prevent him from stepping on his ant colony the two form a unique friendship.