

HOW MANY ELEMENTS OF FICTION: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10? by Mike Klaassen

Are there five, six, seven, eight, nine, or ten elements of fiction? I recently googled “how many elements of fiction” and was surprised to find lists ranging from five to ten topics. This is an example of the conflicting information published about fiction and the craft of writing it.

Let’s review these lists and develop one that is both *inclusive* (includes everything that belongs on the list) and *exclusive* (excludes anything that doesn’t belong on it).

Hopefully, this will be a list with which we can organize our knowledge for the benefit of writers, teachers, and students of the craft of writing fiction.

To start this process, I combined all the lists, eliminated the duplicate elements, and alphabetized the remaining candidates, as follows: antagonist, character, chronology, climax, conflict, mood, narrator, plot, point of view, protagonist, purpose, resolution, setting, style, tension, theme, and tone. That’s seventeen items! Let’s see if we can winnow this list to a more manageable size.

The first two topics are *antagonist* and *character*, but clearly antagonists are a subset of a category that includes all characters, so let’s eliminate *antagonist* from our list.

Likewise, we can delete *protagonist*.

Next is *chronology*, a sequence of events in the order in which they occur, which corresponds to “what happens in a story,” i.e., its plot. Our list also includes *climax* and *resolution*, which are parts of a plot, while *conflict* may lead to *tension* in a plot. Let’s lump all four of these terms under the category of plot and eliminate them from our list.

Purpose could be synonymous with a character's objective, or it could represent the broader purpose of a story, or its theme; either way, we can eliminate it. *Setting* and *theme* stand on their own as elements of fiction, so let's leave them on the list.

The remaining words on our list are *mood*, *narrator*, *point of view*, *style*, and *tone*. I define *style* as the "how" of written fiction, the sum of the myriad of choices a writer makes in the process of creating a story. These choices include decisions about *mood*, *narrator*, *point of view*, and *tone*, so we may eliminate these from the list.

Our list now includes five elements: *plot*, *character*, *setting*, *theme*, and *style*. Is this list inclusive? I believe many aspects of fiction may be easily categorized as a subset of either *plot*, *character*, *setting*, or *theme*, and the remaining "other stuff" of fiction may be included under the element of *style*. Is this list exclusive? If many aspects of fiction fit under the *plot*, *character*, *setting*, and *theme* elements and everything else fits under *style*, the list must be exclusive. Until someone comes up with a better idea, let's recognize five fundamental elements which comprise all written fiction: plot, character, setting, theme, and style.

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Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

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