

LITERATURE PAPERS: PLOT vs. INTERPRETATION

In literature papers, we sometimes find ourselves explaining what happens in the **plot** of the work we're writing about. A short plot overview at the beginning of a paper can be helpful to your readers: one or two sentences is usually enough for a short paper on a work the class has just read, while a full paragraph may be needed in a longer paper on a less familiar work.

Yet there is rarely any reason to present the plot of a story in the body of your essay. The body of a literature essay should, instead, focus on **interpretation**--on your ideas about the story and on evidence to back them up. Other people should be able to agree with your ideas (especially after you finish arguing why they should!) but they should also be able to disagree. For example, no reader of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* can disagree with the statement that Scrooge is visited by three spirits, so that's plot summary--it's not your idea.

Many readers, however, could disagree about what, exactly, Scrooge learns from the spirits. One reader might believe that Scrooge changes because he sees the bad things that will happen to him if he doesn't. Another reader might believe he changes because he learns the true importance of Christmas. A third reader might believe he changes because he learns to feel sorry for other people. What **you** think he learns is your interpretation of the story.

Maybe you think that Scrooge changes because he learns to feel sorry for other people. That idea becomes the **thesis** of your paper, and you may make it the last sentence of your introduction. Each of your body paragraphs, then, will start with a topic sentence that supports your thesis. For example:

Scrooge begins to change when he is able to feel sorry for himself as a lonely boy left in the classroom.

Be careful, though, because this is where many writers begin to have trouble! Consider these two paragraphs:

Scrooge begins to change when he is able to feel sorry for himself as a lonely boy left in the classroom. The Spirit of Christmas Past takes him to his old boarding school during Christmas break. All the other students have gone home except Scrooge, whose family doesn't seem to have wanted him. The room is "dreary" and depressing, and the older Scrooge, looking on, starts to cry (65). The boy is sitting next to the fire, reading. As he reads, visions of the characters he is reading about appear in the room. The older Scrooge is happy to remember the characters, but he starts to cry again when he remembers the boy he turned away from his door the day before (66).

Scrooge begins to change when he is able to feel sorry for himself as a lonely boy left in the classroom. Until now, he has shown no ability to feel emotions like sadness and joy, and he has had no compassion for anyone else. Seeing his younger self in the deserted schoolroom, however, he remembers how painful loneliness can be, and he begins to cry. A moment later, he remembers the pleasures of imagination, and he laughs with joy to see visions of the characters from his old children's books (65). Because he's connecting his own emotions with the emotions of the boy in front of them, he is, for the first time, able to have compassion for someone in some way outside himself. Since the boy is just his younger self, that's only a small step--but he immediately makes it a larger one by connecting the boy in the schoolroom to the boy singing at his door the night before. Because he wishes that someone else had been kind to the boy in the classroom, he now wishes that he himself had "given something" to the boy at his door (66).

What's the difference between these two paragraphs?

The plot summary on the top is well-detailed, but everything in it comes directly from the story. Yes, all the details the writer mentions are connected to the idea of Scrooge's change, but the writer never makes it clear how they're connected or how they support the point she wants to make. The organization of the paragraph, too, just follows the story.

The interpretation on the bottom, by contrast, is organized around the writer's own ideas. It moves from emotion to compassion, and the writer clearly explains how she believes these issues are connected and exactly how Scrooge's actions relate to them. By discussing his smaller and larger steps towards compassion, she also explains how Scrooge changes--the main idea of the opening sentence.

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