

The Junior Secret Noveling Club

Eight Lessons for Children
Who Want to Write Novels

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Junior Secret Novelist Club Preparations

Writing a book is not easy. It's not something that people generally expect a child to be able to do. Not many children are willing to even contemplate writing a book, let alone attempt to begin one. This hesitation is not a natural reaction; it is a learned one, most likely born out of a parent's impression of what's involved in writing a novel. Kids don't know that writing a novel is something that should intimidate them. And truly, there's no reason for a child to approach novel writing with such trepidation. Can an eight year old child write a best-selling novel or a literary masterpiece? No. But in the process of writing the novel she can write, she learns a lot about the books she's reading, and a lot about the creative process, and has a lot of fun.

The process of writing a novel can be broken down for your child into eight lessons. This curriculum is less a curriculum and more a club. Kids will name their club, choose a secret handshake and "oath," and earn "badges" by doing weekly lessons, games, and activities. By completing these lessons, the student prepares him or herself for the task of writing a novel, without ever getting spooked by the enormity of the task.

To form your own Junior Secret Novelist Club, you will first need some kids. Six is a good number. For optimal fun and awesomeness, these should be mostly kids who are pretty game. Naysaying kids who are nervous and uncertain will definitely benefit from this course, but there should be a good percentage of kids who will jump in with both feet and not be afraid to get a little crazy. With a few enthusiastic little writers in the mix, the hesitators will be more likely to cast aside doubt and join right in.

You'll need a notebook for the kids to write in, do their homework in, and use to collect their exercises. Choose a small notebook, not a standard size, so they can really fill it up. A 3x5 is too small, but an 8x10 is too big. 6x9 is perfect, and recycled paper is cool. Ideally the notebook will have a sturdy front and back cover, since this is where the students will be collecting their badges. You will also need eight very very cool stickers per child that are more like badges than paper stickers. I found three dimensional glossy flower ones for the girls, and metallic compass/clock stickers for the boys. Look in the scrapbooking aisle for something that will really make their eyes go wide.

The key concepts are as follows:

1. Writing a novel is fun.
2. Writing a novel can be broken down into easy, manageable steps.
3. By the time you get to the part where you have a blank page in front of you, you have a solid, detailed plan and lots of material to use in your book.
4. Planning and writing your own novel helps you become a better reader of books that others have written.
5. Finishing means getting all your badges, not writing a complete novel and typing The End at the end.

On the front cover of the notebook, mark off four spaces, and label them GENRE, HERO, VILLAIN, and CONFLICT. On the back cover, mark off four more spaces, and label them SETTING, PLOT MAP, ANALYSIS, and CHAPTER LIST. Each week, as the children complete the exercises, you'll hand out their badges.

The final thing you'll need is something really super ridiculous to award them at the end of the course. I used a cool-looking paper clip, which became the Official Novel Writing Paperclip. After the final meeting of the club, you will pass out these official totems, and authorize the students to write their novels. Yes, it will be silly, but yes, you very much need something tangible. You could use hats, t-shirts, socks, necklaces, or whatever can be turned into an official, authorized novel writing item.

Kids, notebooks, badges, and a final prize. If you have all that in order, you are ready to begin!

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 1: Genre

This is the first meeting of your group. Serve a nice big donut to everyone, or something comparably exciting that fits your foodstyle. Celebrate the fact that you're launching this big endeavor. Join up around the table and get ready to novel.

Name the Club:

Ask each of the children to think of their favorite word. Think of a word that inspires them, that makes them feel creative, that creates interesting pictures in the mind. An adventure word, a mystery word, a colorful word, a delicious word. Write each of these words on the white board and then craft your club name out of all of these names. It will sound RIDICULOUS. That's good. It's key that each child feel that he/she has ownership of this club, and putting their own word into the title is much better than collaborating on a simpler title that everyone likes. My students came up with this: The Junior Secret Dreams of the Spirit Cyclops Magic of Elves and Novelsmarts Noveling Club.

Write the Oath:

Have the students open to a blank page in their notebooks. Ask them to think of their favorite book, and write down three things that made the book really great. It could be a quality of the writing, like "mystery" or "adventure." It could be something specific like "lots of brothers and sisters" or "happy ending." Anything they liked about it is fair. Then ask them to think of a book that they weren't crazy about, and write down three reasons why. It could be that it was too boring, or that there were spiders in it, or that the chapters were too long, etc.

After each child has decided on and shared their three qualities of good writing and three qualities of bad writing, work on developing a group list — what can they all agree will make a great book, and what can they all agree will kill a book? From these you can write your oath. Here's what my students came up with: I promise to always write with fantasy, mystery and adventure. I promise never to write boring stuff with girly-girl tea parties and realistic school. Write down what the students decide so that you can put it into the worksheet and have it printed for them next week, but leave the threat part open so it can be filled in individually.

Genre Lesson:

First explain what a genre is with examples. One metaphor I used is dessert. Dessert comes in genres — ice cream, candy, cake, pie. Within these genres are individual examples, but there are certain characteristics of candy bars as opposed to pie that make each one recognizable. Pie is not frozen, cake is not mushy, ice cream doesn't come in a wrapper, etc. Ask the kids if they can think of a type of book, and as soon as they give you one good genre, put it on the white board, and start generating a list of elements that define that genre. Scifi: robots, space travel, computers, aliens. Fantasy: unicorns, elves, swords, magic. Here are the genres you should hit on: Sci fi, fantasy, western, historical, modern drama. You can also do romance, supernatural, horror, and others if your kids are aware of these types of books and old enough to write in these styles.

When you've made a list of stuff you might find in each of these genres, have the kids do the genre worksheet and paste it into their books. They should choose a genre and make a list of six cool things that they want to include somewhere in their books. A Pegasus, a secret, a dry riverbed, a potion — it can be anything at all that stimulates their imaginations. After each student has completed the worksheet and you've pasted it into the book, give out the badges. Yay!

DO NOT: Worry if everything they think of is extremely trite. Most of it will be terribly trite, and that's absolutely fine.

DO NOT: Ever, ever, ever tell a student that one of their ideas is bad or wrong or say something like "you can do

better than that!”

DO NOT: Give the child the “answer” or tell a child what to write. Don’t help with answers or ideas.

DO: Suggest ways to expand an idea. Ask questions. Say “What if?”

DO: Always say “That is great. You are doing a fantastic job.” It’s very very easy to say these words, very very hard for a child to sit with criticism. There is absolutely no harm in telling them that everything they do think of is a fantastic idea, because even if it isn’t, with the proper encouragement, the *next* idea they have might be the great one, and it’s not your job to defeat them, but to build them up.

DO: Give the child tons of time. Don’t push. But also don’t let them linger and get themselves too crazy. If a child is stuck, can’t work it out, and nothing is working, suggest they put it away for now and come back later, and specify a time to come back to it, so it doesn’t just fade away. It’s also possible to ask the student if he/she wants help from the group, and open it up to the other children to give help and suggestions, if that’s welcome.

Grammar Wrap-up:

Talk about nouns. After you discuss what a noun is and how they work, talk about using specific nouns rather than general ones. Try tossing out some nouns like car, dog, building, chair, and see if they can think of more specific nouns, nouns that create an image in the reader’s mind, rather than making the reader guess at what the author intends. Talk about capitalizing proper nouns.

To reinforce the idea of nouns, have them come up with a noun for every letter of the alphabet.

Homework:

Correct the spellings on your alphabet of nouns.

Club Name:

Club Name:

Club Oath:

I promise to always write

I promise never to write

If I break this oath, may _____

Club Oath:

I promise to always write

I promise never to write

If I break this oath, may _____

Club Name:

Club Name:

Club Oath:

I promise to always write

I promise never to write

If I break this oath, may _____

Club Oath:

I promise to always write

I promise never to write

If I break this oath, may _____

My Genre:

My Genre:

Six things I want to put in my story:

Six things I want to put in my story:

My Genre:

My Genre:

Six things I want to put in my story:

Six things I want to put in my story:

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 2: Hero

Greeting:

Greet the students by passing out the name and oath worksheet. They'll now need to write their own part of the oaths, where they invent the awful thing that will happen to them if they break the oath. The threat part of the oath must contain two of the following words: Camels, chickens, armpits, toenails, pizza, lemonade, rotten, rancid. Have them fill in their own threat, and then read the oath in unison, with everyone reading their individual parts simultaneously for maximum silliness. Paste the worksheet into the inside cover of their notebooks.

This is also a good time to come up with a secret handshake. At the beginning of each meeting, someone needs to call the meeting to order with the full name, then everyone reads the oath together, and the secret handshake gets passed around the table.

Warm-Up:

Have the students open their notebooks to a fresh page and write a want ad for a hero. The ad should begin: WANTED: HERO. It should include the working hours, the characteristics desired, experience required, and also compensation. However they want to format it is fine. Give them a few minutes to work on it, and then have them share what they wrote.

Hero Lesson:

Talk about what makes a good hero. See what they come up with for attributes that heroes need. Everyone knows heroes are strong, smart, wise, and good. You may develop a fine list of virtues and brags. What makes a really interesting hero, though, is a great flaw. Whether this is a fear, a failing, a weakness, or some other crack in the armor, every hero needs a complication. Teach your students that this is where the interest lies — in the imperfection. Use the example of Superman. Without Kryptonite, there is no story. Fill out the hero worksheet, and give out the badges.

Paint Your Hero:

Using watercolors and a small rectangle of watercolor paper that you can then paste into their books, have them create a pencil sketch and then painting of their hero. If they're up for the challenge, have them depict the hero showing his flaw or weakness.

Grammar Wrap-Up:

Today's grammar point is the adjective. After you talk about what an adjective is and give a few examples, do this exercise on the white board. Write one of these sentences on the white board, with the blanks empty:

The _____ dog gave a _____ bark.
The _____ dream left a _____ memory.
The _____ book gave me a _____ idea.

Have the students write two adjectives to go in the blanks. Have them share what they wrote, and see where they overlapped, choosing the same adjectives, or chose different ones. Show how the meaning of the sentence changes with different adjectives. Repeat the exercise for each sentence.

Homework: Write 20 adjectives for hair. Make sure they are spelled correctly!

Hero Name:

Hero Name:

Goal:

Goal:

Fear:

Fear:

Sidekick:

Sidekick:

Strengths:

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses:

Hero Name:

Hero Name:

Goal:

Goal:

Fear:

Fear:

Sidekick:

Sidekick:

Strengths:

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses:

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 3: Villain

When you start your meeting, say your oath, and send the secret handshake around the table.

Warm Up:

Write three sentences using as many Ts as possible. The t can come anywhere in the word. Give everyone a chance to read their sentences aloud and giggle (or titter).

Villain Lesson:

Start the discussion with some questions. Ask the children to give an example of a villain. Ask why we need villains in stories. Ask what a story would be like without a villain? Take some well-known stories and give examples of the villains we find there: Snow White, Cinderella, The Incredibles, Peter Pan, Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin, Little Red Riding Hood.

Maybe you're getting some answers like "The villain gives the hero someone to fight" or "the villain makes the story more interesting." Next tell a story with an obvious villain, like "The Jungle Wolf." I've included it on the next page. The Jungle Wolf is a good story to tell aloud in a class, because it repeats, and the students can take over telling it after a while. What purpose does the Jungle Wolf serve, in the story? What does he represent? What does the red flower represent? Then ask the students what the story would be like without the villain. Can anyone retell the story of the Jungle Wolf without the Jungle Wolf? My guess is that it would come out something like this: A little girl went and gathered some flowers in the woods. Not a very interesting story! Without the villain (danger) there would be no obstacle to the girl collecting the flowers (freedom). Try taking the villains out of some other stories and see what you come up with. Lead the students to understand that without a villain, there's no conflict, there's no problem for the hero, and the hero can just get what he/she wants immediately.

The true purpose of a villain is not to be evil, not to be wrong, but to provide conflict, to stop the hero from getting what he wants. Which leads us to our next question: Are there any stories that don't have a villain? Think about some of these stories: Lady and the Tramp, Wall-E, Finding Nemo, Ratatouille, Balto, Little House on the Prairie, Anne of Green Gables. The villain of a story doesn't have to be a mean person with a pointy mustache. It could be the weather, a volcano, a character's own self-doubt, or anything that gets in his way.

One final point to make about villains: Just like there's nothing very interesting about a hero who is too perfect (Superman without Kryptonite), there's also nothing very interesting about a villain who's too perfectly evil. A villain with no redeeming quality, no endearing good side, no sympathetic backstory, is not going to create a juicy, complicated conflict for you. The story will take place where the hero has flaws and the villain has his good points. The scenes you imagine happening will arise from these cracks in the armor too. Hero has a fear of heights? I guarantee he'll have to cross a rope bridge. Villain have a soft spot for dogs? I guarantee he'll have to choose between saving his dog and executing his evil plan. Think of Indiana Jones and snakes. It's always about the snakes!

Now it's time to fill out your villain worksheet, and paint your villain. When your villain is created and you've drawn and painted a picture of him/her, then you can have your badge.

Grammar Wrap-Up: Talk about verbs — action verbs! Discuss using specific verbs rather than general ones. How many other ways can you find to say "running"?

Activity: Verb Hunt. Choose a blank page in your notebook and then take a walk outside collecting as many verbs as you can from what you see there. Don't forget the ones you're doing — looking, listening, writing, leaning, thinking, etc. Even a completely stationary tree has all kinds of verbs associated with it. See who can find the most!

Homework: Write down 10 sports, and then write a verb associated with each sport.

The Jungle Wolf

This is my version of the story, "The Jungle Wolf," told to me many times by my mother, adapted from the folk story The Gunnewolf.

Once upon a time, in the middle of the woods, there was a brave little girl who lived with her mother in a small stone cottage. Every morning, when she went out to play, the mother told her, "My daughter, you can play in the front yard, and you can play in the back yard, and you can climb the trees, but DON'T go into the woods. Not even if you really, really want to! Because in the woods lives the Jungle Wolf! He has red eyes, and drooling jowls, and sharp fangs, and he eats little girls!"

And the little girl always did just what her mother told her because she wasn't the type of child to disobey her mother, and because she didn't want the Jungle Wolf to eat her up!

Now one day, the little girl was playing just at the edge of the yard, and she was staring into the woods, wondering what it would be like to go there, and see all the interesting things hidden there among the ferns and the tall trees. There in the woods, just out of her reach, she saw a beautiful red flower. It was so lovely, and so interesting, that she just had to pick it! So do you know what she did? She went right into the woods, that brave little girl, straight over to that flower, and she picked it.

When it was in her hand, she turned her head and had a look around. After all, this was her chance to see the woods and all the interesting things she'd dreamed she'd find there. Was she afraid of the Jungle Wolf? Not much! And do you know what she saw, just over there, just out of her reach?

Another red flower.

So do you know what she did? She went deeper into the woods, that brave little girl, straight over to that flower, and she picked it. And another, and another. And when she had a big bouquet of all the red flowers she had found, she looked around herself, and realized that she was very, very far away from home. And all around her the forest was still. And quiet. (*whisper*) And she could hear the ferns waving, and the trees growing. And she could hear (*suddenly loud*) GAHOGACHEE! GAHOGACHEE! GAHOGACHEE! It was the Jungle Wolf! And he was coming to eat her up!

The Jungle Wolf pounced on her, with his red eyes, and his drooly jowls, and his sharp fangs, and he said, "NOW I have you! And I am going to eat you up!"

The little girl said, "Oh, please, Mr. Jungle Wolf! Don't eat me! For if you let me go, I will stay right here and sing you a song!"

The Jungle Wolf let go of the little girl. He was very fond of songs. "Well alright," he said. "You can sing me a song, and I'll eat you right after that."

So the little girl began to sing: (*in a sweet high sing-song voice*) "Quee-Quiy-Quo-Quay, Quee-Quiy-Quo-Quay." And the Jungle Wolf began to get a little sleepy. (*Pretend to get sleepy, and have the child join you in singing the song*) "Quee-Quiy-Quo-Quay, Quee-Quiy-Quo-Quay." And then... he... was... asleep. Now the little girl stopped singing and began to creep, creep, creep away from the Jungle Wolf and back toward her house. Creep, creep, creep.... SNAP! She stepped on a twig and broke it!

(*Then you repeat the last part, as many times as it's amusing to the child who's listening. The last time will end with the little girl getting home.*)

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GAHOGACHEE! GAHOGACHEE! GAHOGACHEE! <> *(bring your hands down hard on the table, or clap, or something)*. She leaped into the kitchen, and slammed the door, and was SAFE from the Jungle Wolf, who had to go back to the woods. And she never, ever, ever went out into the woods again by herself, no matter how many red flowers she could see from where she stood! The end.

Discussion:

1. What would the story be like without the Jungle Wolf? Can you retell the story without a villain?
2. What does the red flower symbolize for the girl? What does it represent?
3. Was the little girl right or wrong to go out of the yard and after the red flowers?

Villain:

Villain:

Goal:

Goal:

Fear:

Fear:

Sidekick:

Sidekick:

Strengths:

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses:

Villain:

Villain:

Goal:

Goal:

Fear:

Fear:

Sidekick:

Sidekick:

Strengths:

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses:

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 4: Conflict

Greeting:

Start your meeting, say your oath, and send your secret handshake around the table. Ask the kids if they had any great ideas this week? Share with them how noticing the world around them can inspire them in their novels, and how just about anything they see or do that's interesting can end up in their stories.

Warm-up :

Game: You give the answer, have the kids write down the question. As with all warm-ups, don't overthink this. The purpose is just to get the kids pencils moving. For each answer, give them a few minutes to write down their questions, and then share what they've written.

Answers to use: 1. In a minute! 2. Never! 3. Immediately!

Conflict discussion:

There are two major events in a novel that create the conflict and make the story interesting. Without conflict, a story is very flat, more like an explanation than a plot. A conflict gives a plot direction, energy, kind of like the story's engine that drives the reader onward to find out what happens next. At the beginning of a novel, the hero and villain are locked in stasis. Demonstrate by holding your two fists out, pressing against each other, frozen in an long, still punch.

The inciting incident is the explosion that sets the story in motion. You may have heard this called the initiating action, or some other term, but I like "inciting incident" because it's kind of a silly way to express this. You can use a golf analogy to describe what happens with the inciting incident and the climax. At the beginning of the novel, the ball is on the tee. We see the ball, we see the club, we look down the fairway, but nothing is happening. Then the club pulls back, waaaaaay, back, and WHACK, the ball is sent flying through the air. That first WHACK is the inciting incident. After several more whacks, we're on the green, and the climax may be the final putt, when we're on the edges of our seats waiting to see if the ball will go in under par.

Here are some possible inciting incidents. See if the kids can come up with more categories:

Stranger comes to town

A man goes on a long journey

Something precious is lost

Something lost is found

Decide on your inciting incident and fill out your worksheet.

The climax of the story is the final battle, when the hero wins or loses, either reaches his goal or fails utterly. Discuss some examples from movies and stories the children are familiar with. The climax is where the question is answered that was first raised in the inciting incident. Will the world be saved? Will the hero get the girl? Will the seeker find what he's looking for? Etc.

Decide on your climax and fill out your worksheet.

Grammar Wrap-up:

Today we're talking about adverbs, and specifically how we can eliminate clunky and extraneous adverbs by choosing better verbs.

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Lesson 4: Conflict Page 2

Have the children resolve these verbs with adverbs into one verb that more specifically expresses what is being said:

Walked quickly
Laughed crazily
Talked slowly
Walked proudly
Laughed quietly
Talked quickly
Walked unevenly
Laughed squeakily
Talked loudly

Homework:

Find 20 adverbs in the book you are reading and write the list in your notebook.

Inciting Incident:

Inciting Incident:

Who?

Who?

Where?

Where?

What is the conflict that results?

What is the conflict that results?

Inciting Incident:

Inciting Incident:

Who?

Who?

Where?

Where?

What is the conflict that results?

What is the conflict that results?

Climax:

Climax:

Who?

Who?

Where?

Where?

What is the resolution?

What is the resolution?

Climax:

Climax:

Who?

Who?

Where?

Where?

What is the resolution?

What is the resolution?

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 5: Setting

Greeting:

Start your meeting, say your oath, and send your secret handshake around the table. Ask the kids if they have gone to any cool places this week. Ask what they remember seeing on these trips, if they saw anything unexpected.

Warm-up :

Game: Have each child make a list of objects present in a physical location. Then one by one, give them a chance to read their list while the rest of the kids try to guess the location. Encourage them to be as specific as possible to lead the other players to a very specific answer. For example, saying “slide, swings, jungle gym” would make others guess “playground” but not a specific playground. Saying “twirly slide, leaning tree, bug jungle gym” might lead your guessers to the right answer. Think of a commonly known location (Sarah’s back yard, the co-op common room, Benny’s room, etc) and try to find one object you could mention that would lead everyone straight to the answer.

Setting discussion:

Sometimes if you ask a new writer what her setting is, she might say “the castle” or “the woods” or “a cave.” She might think she’s telling you everything you need to visualize her scene, but actually we need much more information! A setting consists of five elements:

Place (the castle, Chicago, the woods)

Location (the dining room, the top of the Sears tower, beside the old oak tree)

Objects (a vase of tulips, a pair of binoculars, a ring of mushrooms)

Time (morning, midnight, dusk)

Weather (stormy, clear sky, hot)

Sometimes the setting is just what the place looks like, helping the reader picture the action going on. Sometimes, however, it gets really interesting, and the setting can influence the plot. Try to think of a scene in a book you’ve read and ask yourself how the scene would be different if it took place in a different setting, or if certain objects were missing, or if it happened at a different time of day or in different weather.

Examples (use examples from stories your students are engaged with): Alice in Wonderland, Hogwarts, tribal lands in Warriors.

The best way to use setting is to present problems or obstacles for the characters, and also give them opportunities and advantages. Before you just describe a generic cave or castle or kitchen, think about how you can make your story more interesting by manipulating all the elements of setting to create your scene.

Activity:

Paint your setting. Include as many elements as you can. Now fill out your setting worksheets, one for each of five settings. Get your badge!

Homework:

Go to three different locations and give information from all five senses.

Setting #1:

Setting #2:

Time/Light:

Weather:

Objects physically present:

Time/Light:

Weather:

Objects physically present:

Setting #3:

Setting #4:

Time/Light:

Weather:

Objects physically present:

Time/Light:

Weather:

Objects physically present:

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 6: Plot Map

Greeting:

Start your meeting, say your oath, and send your secret handshake around the table. Ask the kids if they can think of any reason to use a map, what kinds of maps they've used, where they've recently seen maps. Let them know that maps can be used to write books, too!

Warm-up :

For this game, you will need "Stickman in Peril" stickers. Here is a link to the product on the Archie McPhee web site, where you can also find Stickman in Fairyland and Stickman in Officeland. Let each child choose a "Stickman in Peril" sticker and stick it onto a blank page in their books. Then write about what's happening in the picture. Share what you wrote, and talk about how having something awful happen to a character can really kick a book into gear. Encourage the kids to be as silly as the pictures!

Plot discussion:

A plot is what happens in the novel. The plot map we're going to look at has five parts: introduction, inciting incident, complications, climax, and denouement. Make sure you have the students pronounce denouement with an outrageous French accent! It's also important to wave your hand around in front of you when you say "denouement," for full literary effect. To explain these plot elements, you can return to the golf analogy. In the introduction, we meet the ball, the tee, the driver, and the golfer, and get everything arranged. In the inciting incident, the golfer tees off and the ball goes sailing down the fairway. The complications are the next few strokes approaching the green, and the climax is when the crowd is holding its breath, waiting for that final putt — will it go in or not? In the denouement, the golfer retrieves his ball, waves to the crowd, and collects his check, or else breaks his putter in half and stomps off in shame.

Your students shouldn't have much trouble figuring out what their main plot arc will be. The challenge for them and for you will be in developing a subplot. The main plot of a book often involves a yes-or-no question. Will the hero save the world? Will the boy get the girl? Will the seeker find what is lost? Will the traveler reach his destination? A lot of times, the answer to this question is too simple, too obvious, to create any tension: it's usually yes! So, the tension can come from a subplot which has a more complicated resolution. Where the main plot follows its course across the map, the subplot may follow the same shape, the same rises and falls, just offset by a few points — lower and to the left.

Possible subplots: romantic, supporting character's goals, family issues.

It's not too early to help your students understand the difference between the political (the public, overarching plot like — will the hero save the world) and the personal (the underlying plot like — will the hero find love, will the villain stop hating his mother, will the hero be accepted by his family) Some good examples of this kind of complexity can be found in the movie Cars, the Harry Potter books, and the movie Wall-E. Have the children practice finding the political plot (Harry vs. Voldemort, Lightning McQueen winning the race, the humans reclaiming earth) and the personal plot (Harry's search for a family, Radiator Springs' revitalization, Wall-E and Eve's romance).

It may seem like a lot for elementary school kids to grasp, but with a lot of examples they may start to see it. This kind of analysis and the ability to read on several different levels will really improve their understanding of the books they read, even if they don't apply the ideas to the one they're writing.

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 6: Plot Map Page 2

Activity:

Magnet challenge. For this exercise I use a tin of magnets that each have a very simple line-art icon on them. You could use any kind of tiles, or even printed out clip-art on cardstock squares. Some examples of the icons on my magnets: a clover, a planet, the word “WOW,” raindrops, a key, the number 7, a question mark, a birthday present, etc. Just random stuff! For the activity, ask the children to draw five random tiles and try to form a some plot complications out of the elements they find.

It’s hard for kids to develop complications, because they kind of want to go straight from the inciting incident right to the climax. Putting some random images into their creative mix can spark some ideas on what to do in the middle of the book. Also, remind them that novels often happen in very formal stages. A seeker might have to travel to five different cities, looking for what he seeks. A quester might have to complete five tasks. A hero might need to collect five objects to make his goal happen. He might need to talk to five different people — these are natural ways that tension grows, chapters fall into place, and complications emerge. I’m just using the number five randomly of course!

After you do your magnet complications, fill in your plot map and your plot worksheet, and get your badge!

Homework:

Here’s a cool plot map that you can fill in online:

<http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/plot-diagram/>

The only issue I really have with this map is that the end point is at the same level as the beginning point. I like my plot map to end with a net gain, but that may be just me! I also like the climax to be a little farther to the right. However, this map is certainly a fun way for them to break down the process of plotting their books, and it has stuff to click on!

Introduction:

Inciting Incident:

Complication:

Climax:

Conclusion:

Introduction:

Inciting Incident:

Complication:

Climax:

Conclusion:

Introduction:

Inciting Incident:

Complication:

Climax:

Conclusion:

Introduction:

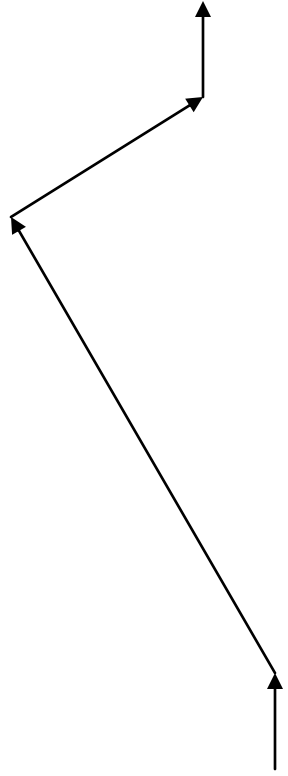
Inciting Incident:

Complication:

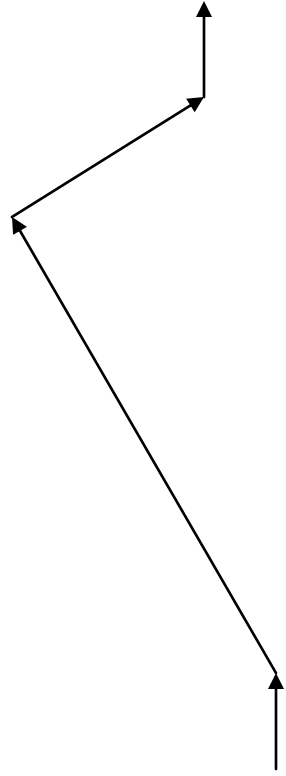
Climax:

Conclusion:

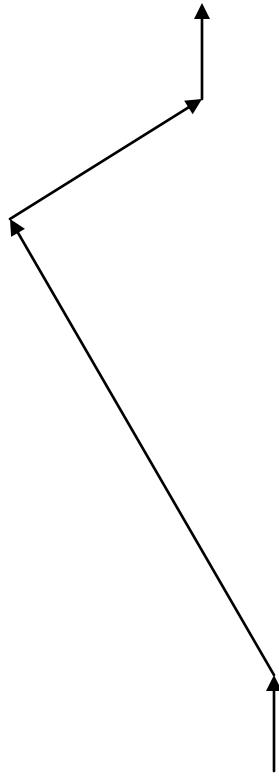
Plot Map



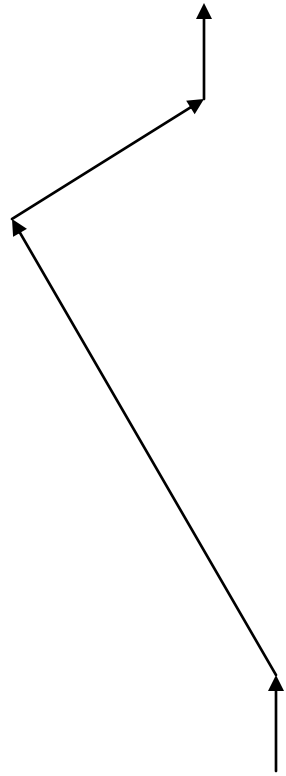
Plot Map



Plot Map



Plot Map



Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 7: Analysis

Greeting:

Start your meeting, say your oath, and send your secret handshake around the table. Ask the kids which chapter book or movie they've seen or read the most times. Ask them each to settle on one book that they're very very familiar with — that they remember really well.

Warm-up :

Pick a movie you know well and write the first and last lines of a book based on that movie. You don't have to use "once upon a time" or even stick to the first scene of the movie, but think about the story and try to decide how you would begin to tell it. Which character would you start with? Which scene? And how would you end the story — with what scene would you leave the reader?

Analysis Activity:

This is going to be a very challenging activity for the children, but when they're done with this, they will be well prepared to develop their chapter lists next week. Print out two analysis worksheets for each child, and have them fill out one for the movie/book they are most familiar with, which they chose at the beginning of class. Then fill out one for their own novel. Filling it out for the movie/book they've chosen should be a breeze but they may need help simplifying their language and summarizing to fit the form.

When they move to working on their own books, you may find that they get stuck and frustrated. Always be cheerful, always be forward-moving, and do not indulge any negative behavior or language like "I can't do it" or "I don't have any ideas." If you get stuck, skip that. Move on to what you know. Many of these boxes can be filled in by using information in worksheets the students have already done and pasted into their books, so you can always have them move on to something they can just fill in easily. Do not give answers. Do not give ideas. Ask questions, praise their efforts, encourage them, stay positive, and do not accept defeat. When this is done, they're going to feel a huge sense of accomplishment, and they should! Planning a novel is hard work.

Dialogue Activity:

To complete this activity, you need to record some of their dialogue on tape or with a computer. You don't have to do it in secret, but don't let them know that you're analyzing their sentence structure, etc. Ask them to talk about something they're interested in, preferably something they will get heated about. You could ask them to tell you, collectively, about an incident they will all remember. Or ask them to decide what to do later. Ask them to come to an agreement on which book is better: Harry Potter or Percy Jackson. Ask them to talk about whether everyone should have a pet. Something like that.

After you record the dialogue, play it back. Here are some points you can make about dialogue:

1. People don't speak in complete sentences.
2. The person speaking is often not responding directly to the person who just spoke.
3. People interrupt each other all the time.

Now, it's impossible to always write truly realistic dialogue, because it would be incomprehensible and awkward for a reader. But by taking some of these things into account, you can improve the way your dialogue "sounds."

Homework:

Write a dialogue between two kids arguing over the rules to a game of tag, and show them resolving the argument.

Name	Hero	Goal	Villain/Obstacle	Supporting Characters

Setting	Setting	Setting	Setting

Introduction	Inciting Incident	Complication	Climax	Denouement

Junior Secret Novelist Club

Lesson 8: Chapter List

Greeting:

This is your last meeting! Bring treats, balloons, horns, dancing gorillas, trained peacocks, etc. Generate a festive atmosphere; you have lots to celebrate! Say the oath, send the handshake around the room, and talk about how it feels to be at the end of this course, having accomplished so much hard planning and thinking. Tell them that today they're going to get their last badge and their Official Noveling Paperclip (or whatever silly object you found) and be authorized to begin writing their novels.

Warm-Up:

This warm-up is pure silliness, since they're going to have to do such hard work and brain exercise later in the hour. Write down five things that you refuse not put in your novel, no matter what! The goofier the better — give them some examples to set the tone. Mutant ninjas, exploding reindeer, broken telephones, coffee mugs full of rhino snot, etc.

Chapter List Activity:

Your chapter list worksheet has ten spaces for chapters. It's much much easier for a child to fill in within a set framework than to try and figure out how many chapters there should be, as well as what should be in them. Fill in the main action of the chapter on the first line, and the setting of the chapter on the second line. Some of the chapters you can fill in right away: The first one is the intro. The second one is the inciting incident. The ninth one is the climax. The tenth one is the denouement. So really, all that's left is to fill in chapters 3-8. Look back at the settings that have already been decided and see if any are still to be used. Look back at your plans for complications, rising action — how many towns must be visited, how many people must be met, how many items must be located, how many battles must be fought? Etc.

This may be the hardest part of the whole process for the kids, so it's important you stay positive, keep offering motivation and asking questions, but don't give them answers or ideas. Encourage them to choose exciting settings, bring in new and interesting characters, introduce dramatic events, give the characters unexpected problems or presents. If you break down and tell them what they should do, they will not feel like they own the book. If you cleverly push them in interesting directions, and keep them moving toward their own answers, they will be so proud at the end of the exercise!

When they are finished, line them up in a row and present them with their Official Noveling Paperclips (or hats, or toenail clippers, or flutes) and pronounce them official novelists and ready to begin to write their books.

Follow-Up:

After the plans have been laid, the time has come to write the novels. I suggest using a sticker chart or some kind of visible, tangible reward system for word count. I use two sizes of sticker tiles — if you write “a little” you get a small one. If you write “a lot” you get a big one. The amount that constitutes a little or a lot is purposefully subjective.

As they write, do not criticize anything, at all, ever, including grammar, style, punctuation, etc. Your job is to be a cheerleader. Writing a novel is very hard, plan or no plan, and anything that shuts them down must be avoided! Give treats! Wave pom poms! Read what they produce excitedly, and ask questions! Beg for more! Claim that you cannot rest until you know what happens in the story! Reward novel-writing with thunderous applause.

Enjoy!

Chapter List



1

Setting:



2

Setting:



3

Setting:



4

Setting:



5

Setting:



6

Setting:



7

Setting:



8

Setting:



9

Setting:



10

Setting:

Junior Secret Novelist Club

FAQ

I am not a writer and I've never written a novel. Can I still teach this course?

Yes! In fact, if you want to, you can do the course right along with your students and be a great example to them of someone who can tackle a creative challenge with bravery and style.

The method you're presenting seems to create a highly formulaic and predictable novel. Aren't you encouraging the kids to indulge in a lot of clichés?

Yes. At the age of 7, or 8 or 9 or even 15, writing a formulaic novel is great practice. Writing *any novel*, even the most derivative piece of copycat nonsense, is a huge accomplishment for a child. I don't care if they set the book at Hogwarts and name their characters Parry, Permione and Pon. The truth is that a lot of the books they're going to read are very formulaic, follow a predictable, comfortable plot arc, and defy no rules. A lot of what this course is about is learning how to read books, see how they're made and how they operate. Understanding the formulas, the scaffolding, the inner workings, begins with learning the "rules" and how the typical book is organized and arranged. Experimentation can follow. In fact, experimentation can happen right now today — they don't have to follow the guidelines that I've laid out, but the rules are there to fall back on, when they're looking for direction.

My child is frustrated and wants to quit. What should I do?

Make sure your child knows that the feeling of frustration and the desire to quit is very, very common and normal. It happens to the best of us, even to great novelists who have been published and read around the world. It is part of writing. If it wasn't hard, it wouldn't be worth doing.

One of the reasons it's a good idea to do this course with a small group of kids, rather than just one, is the cheery sense of "we're all in this together" that the group can generate. You can help this along by having frustration sessions: groan and moan and tear your hair, pretend to choke on your own angst. Make it funny, make it ridiculous. Do not take anything very seriously. This is, after all, a course that ends in the presentation of a paper clip. Don't let the kids get too down on themselves. If you do have a child who absolutely stalls out and is truly upset and miserable, of course you don't want to push them past where they're comfortable. However, try to end each session on a good note. If they can't think of what goes in chapter 5 and they've become morose about it, tell them chapter 5 doesn't exist any more and that they should make a list of as many ice cream flavors as possible before the end of class. Always always try to end with a success, however minute.

Where can we find support for young novelists online?

I strongly encourage participating in NaNoWriMo, or National Novel Writing Month. You can find the web site here: <http://www.nanowrimo.org>. The Young Writers Program is fantastic — the kids can set their own word count goals, interact with other young writers on safe message boards, and more.

Any more questions? Please email me: lydianetzer@gmail.com.
Visit me at my web site here: <http://lydianetzer.blogspot.com>.

My novel, *Shine Shine Shine*, which I wrote while homeschooling my two kids, was named a New York Times Notable Book in 2012, a People Magazine "People's Pick," an iTunes top ten book of the year. The New York Times called it "stellar" and the Boston Globe called it "luminous," and it is available in bookstores and online.

All materials in this course were written by me, Lydia Netzer, in 2009, and updated in 2013.