

StoryLines

The Narrative Arc

Action and Growth



In classic children’s literature, every **narrative** (story) has six parts in the same order. If we were to graph those parts on a chart, and then draw a line between each of them, we would see that the story’s action level rises and falls in an **arc** (curve). As the action steps up, so does the main character, because people *learn by doing*. That makes this a growth chart, too.

The six parts and their order are called the **narrative arc**, and every excellent book follows it. If we understand what it is and why it matters, we become better writers, and more astute readers and students. After all, authors follow this arc to keep us turning the pages—not just to sell books, but to help us learn the same lessons the characters learn.

The definitions for the six parts are on the next two pages, along with summaries from *A Wrinkle in Time*. As you read through each summary, practice some visual notetaking skills: think of a symbol for that part of the story, and draw it above the arc.



1. EXPOSITION: The first look at who's here, where we are, and what's going on.

The story's opening is where we get our bearings, just as we do at the theater when the stage curtain pulls back in Act One. Certain words and images help us quickly understand what time period, location, situation, and people are involved. In this book, the exposition can be summarized like this:

- *On a dark, stormy night Meg Murry is feeling miserable, not just about the weather but about herself, her poor schoolwork, and her missing father. Nervous about a tramp in the area, she joins her brilliant little brother Charles Wallace in the kitchen for cocoa. (The family lives in a rural area--words like "village" and "constable" are clues that they might live in England or New England-- and the language and tone tell us the story takes place sometime in the twentieth century.)*

Once we get a sense of the setting and characters, we start wondering "so what?"

2. CONFLICT: The first moment you know what the protagonist (main character) needs most.

This is our first glimpse of the protagonist's *character* problem, a big lesson s/he needs to learn. The "outside" story is set up to show us this "inside" problem. If the protagonist already seems pretty perfect, you know all that goodness is about to be severely tested.

- *Outside of her family, Meg doesn't fit in or measure up.*

Once we know what the protagonist is struggling with, we're eager to see how s/he deals with it!

3. RISING ACTION: The ways the protagonist deals with that need for most of the story.

As the plot progresses and the protagonist faces more challenges, the lessons being learned become more obvious. This makes the protagonist *and* the story lots more interesting.

- *With the help of a strange woman named Mrs. Whatsit (and her friends Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which), Meg, Charles Wallace, and their friend Calvin tessier to strange planets and learn about the dark shadow endangering Earth. Several other planets have already been taken over, including Camazotz, where Mr. Murry is trapped. After being transported there, Charles Wallace is taken over by the evil IT. Under IT's full control, he takes Meg and Calvin to Mr. Murry, who grabs Meg and Calvin and tessiers them to Planet Ixchel. When Meg recovers, she realizes she's the only one who can rescue her little brother. Mrs. Which says she has a secret weapon IT doesn't have, but Meg has to figure out what it is by herself.*

Once we realize that things can't go on this way, we know a crisis must happen to force a change.

4. CLIMAX: The worst thing that could happen to the protagonist is HAPPENING RIGHT NOW!

This is the moment when outer and inner action collide. To resolve it, the protagonist must draw on all his or her strength.

- *Meg returns to Camazotz and faces the evil IT!*

Once our protagonist is truly stuck, we're on the edge of our seats! We hope s/he can get through it but we're not absolutely sure.

5. RESOLUTION: How the Conflict is proven fixed, once and for all.

The way the protagonist survives that crisis in the moment proves s/he's gained strength of character. The outcome (resolution) is a relief and a reward, for us as well.

- *Meg grasps her secret weapon, LOVE, and focuses its power to fight off IT and rescue her little brother.*

Wow, we're so relieved! She got what she deserved! And deep down we realize that if s/he could handle a crisis that way, we can too—whether we're rewarded by others or not. Now we can relax and turn our attention to the unresolved questions in the story.

6. FALLING ACTION: How all the loose ends get wrapped up—the “happily ever after” part.

The last part of the story makes sure *all* the characters get what they need or deserve.

- *Meg and Charles Wallace tesser home and are joyfully reunited with their family and Calvin. The three Mrs. W's appear, then whirl away. Meg now knows that “fitting in” and “measuring up” aren't as important as love and self-acceptance.*

We're done! We don't want to keep reading once everything's fixed; “happily ever after” is boring. (That's why the arc is lopsided.) We can put the book down now, satisfied that all is well in that world—and that all can be well in our own, “real” world, too.

Observations

Astronomy

Planetary Mnemonics

A mnemonic is a special memory tool we use to help us remember something, often a list of items. It comes from a Greek word, *mnēmōn*, which means “mindful.” There are many of mnemonic devices people have come up with to help them remember the names of our solar system’s planets in order. Here are a few of them:

My Very Elderly Mother Just Squished Uncle Ned’s Parrot

My Very Educated Mother Just Showed Us Nine Planets

Most Volcanoes Erupt Mulberry Jam Sandwiches Under Normal Pressures

My Very Easy Method: Just Set Up Nine Planets

My Very Easy Method: Just SUN

As you can see, the best mnemonic devices are either very simple or very outrageous! Can you make up your own mnemonic device to help you remember the names of the planets? Have fun with it – it could stay with you for the rest of your life!

M	_____
V	_____
E	_____
M	_____
J	_____
S	_____
U	_____
N	_____
P	_____

(Sun)

Mercury

Venus

Earth

Mars

(Asteroid Belt)

Jupiter

Saturn

Uranus

Neptune

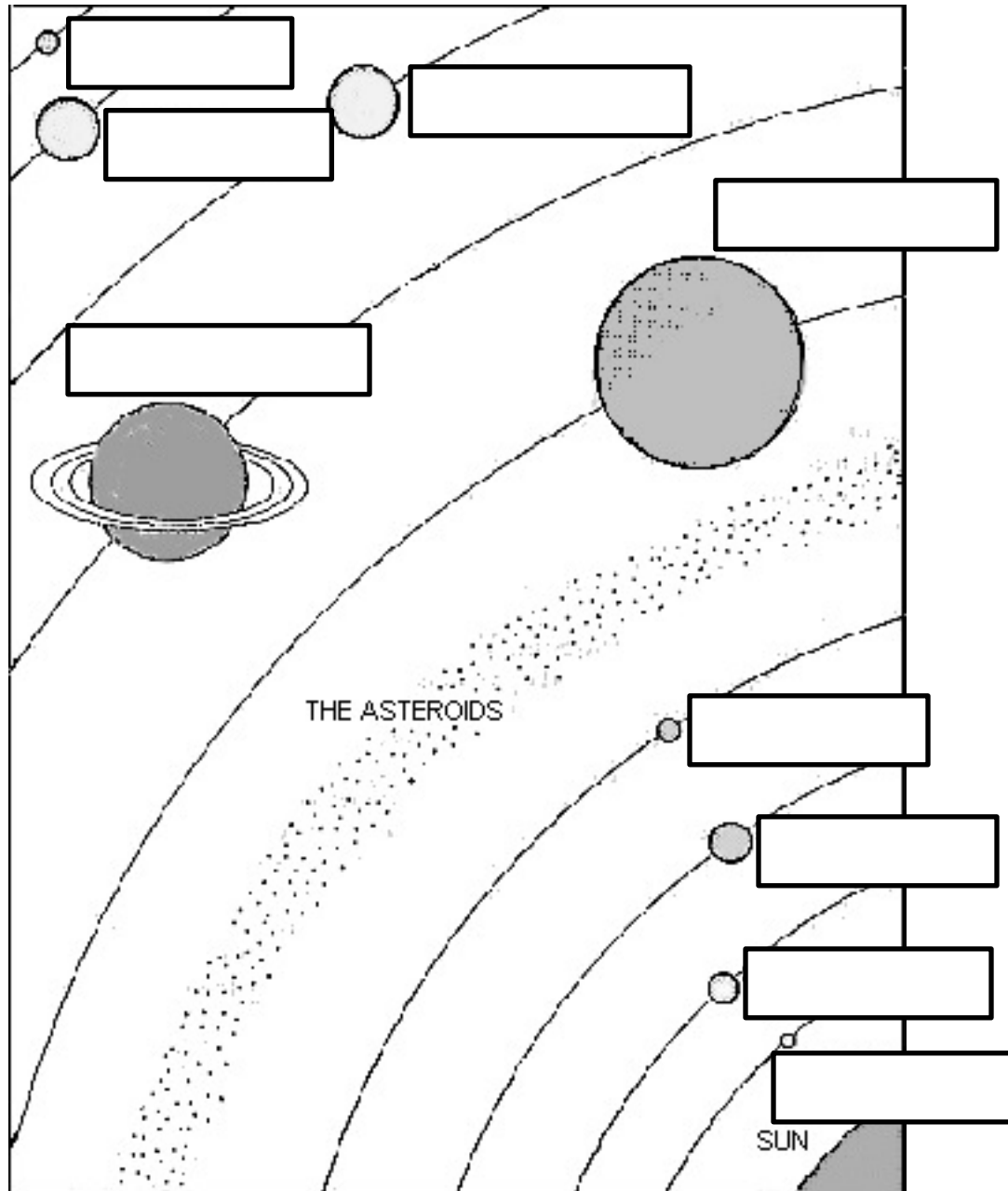
Pluto

WhereABOUTs

Setting

Solar System

Now that you've memorized a mnemonic, use it to label the planets in our solar system:



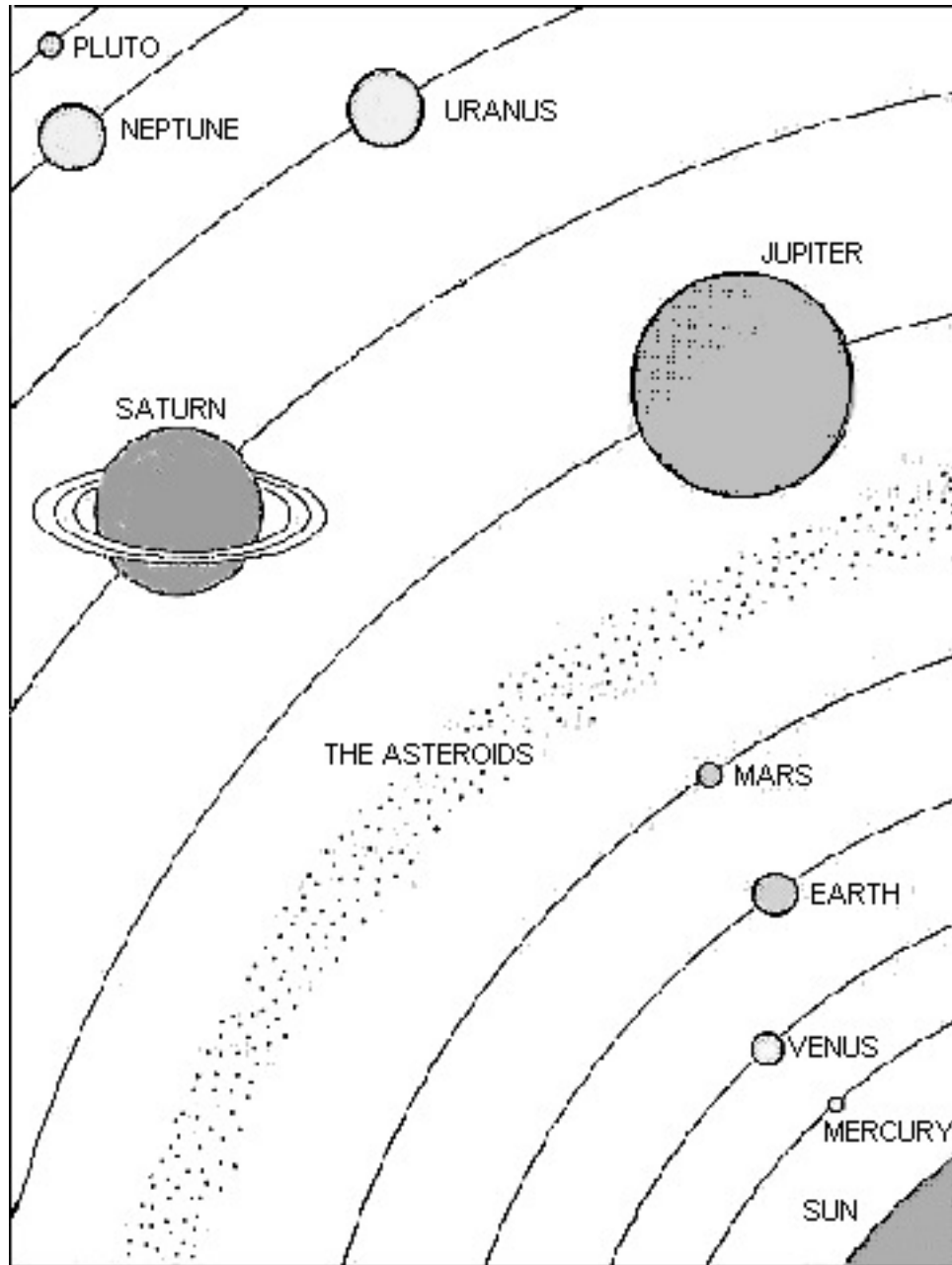
WhereAbouts

Setting



Solar System

Now that you've memorized a mnemonic, use it to label the planets in our solar system:



Write Angles

Characterization

Showing vs. Telling

Madeleine L'Engle could have written "Meg was angry" or "Calvin was sad," but it's much more interesting when the author lets us figure that out for ourselves, by *showing* us the anger and sadness. Let's look at how one character in this story was "shown" to us by the things that person said and did:

Character's name: _____

One word that describes him or her (a word that describes someone is called an <i>adjective</i>)	What's something that the character says or does that makes you choose this word?

Write Angles

Creative Writing & Vocabulary

Mr. Hoozzat

Mrs. Whatsit is fascinating right from the start, because she seems so odd. If *you* were writing a book that featured an odd character, what would he, she, or it look like?

Name			
Species			
Location			
Age		Gender	
Height		Weight	
Clothing			
Diet			
Smells			
Sounds			
Special power			

On the next page, introduce us to this character, using three of these new words from the story:

belligerent (bossy, aggressive)	apprehension (fear or worry)
compulsion (irresistible desire to do something)	constraint (it limits what you can do)
dilapidated (shabby, falling apart)	malignant (bad, dangerous)
tangible (something you can touch)	radiant (bright, shining)
sage (wise)	prodigious (very wonderful, big)
indignant (upset when something is unfair)	materialize (to appear out of nowhere)

Write Angles, cont.

(Character's name)

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.