

Avoiding Plot Summary

by Eric Wiessinger

Plot summary retells the events in a story. Too much plot summary irritates some professors and can bury your ideas and analysis.

When It's Okay to Summarize Plot:

- If a professor asks the class what events occurred in chapter one, the professor is looking for plot summary.
- If the focus of a journal entry is to recap a portion of a book, essay, poem etc., then plot summary may be the goal.
- Retelling the text's plot is rarely the goal of Clarkson Seminar or literature papers.

When Plot Summary is NOT Appropriate:

- Analytical writing
- Position/opinion paper (i.e. "Do you think Odysseus was a hero?")
- Thesis papers for Clarkson Seminar, literature courses.

Why Professors Dislike Plot Summary:

A misunderstanding of audience and purpose can lead writers to overuse plot summary. For academic writing, the audience is usually a professor and the purpose is often to analyze, for example, a text's premise, character, or techniques. If the professor/reader knows the work, plot summary is not needed.

Instead, a writer can focus on presenting an interpretive point and using the text to support it and analyze it fully. A certain amount of information from the text is necessary, but plot should be included only when it relates directly to the writer's point. For example, consider the two selections below.

[Example A:](#)

Jane is an extremely giving, selfless person and has been her entire life. When she was in elementary school, she used to help take meals to her elderly next door neighbor and organize food drives for the homeless. When she was older she started working in soup kitchens after school and even ran one over the summer. She went to college to become a social worker, and began working in New York City helping reunite families that were split up by the legal system.

[Example B:](#)

Jane's continued humanitarian efforts prove she is a giving, selfless person. From helping an elderly neighbor to practicing social work, Jane's life has always been dedicated to helping others.

Example A provides a great deal of specific information about Jane's activities. For a reader familiar with this piece of literature, much of this information is unnecessary.

Example B cuts out the overuse of plot and provides adequate proof of Jane's work. This selectivity

- displays knowledge of the text,
- adds support for the insight,
- avoids boring/irritating the professor and
- frees space for more analysis.

Here are some guidelines for academic essays (and other tasks) to keep in mind:

- Assume you have to prove everything: thesis, interpretation and analysis to your reader. The reader won't accept your analysis unless you prove it.
- Never give your reader more plot information than he/she needs to understand your point fully.
- Never bury your point.
- Use selective quotes instead of voluminous plot summary whenever possible (see section on quotes below).

How to Avoid Plot Summary & Focus on Analysis

Be selective & trim plot

One nasty side effect of plot summary is that it can bury the main point that the essay writer is trying to make. Emphasis on plot distracts the reader from the paper's argument. Confusing your reader is never a good thing, especially when your professor is your audience.

Example A:

Bill became very upset when he and his wife were finally divorced, and in a rage he went for a drive in the mountains. He drove on a narrow, dangerous road. Bill decided to kill himself by driving off the cliff. This shows that Bill was suicidal because of his divorce.

Notice how the paragraph topic (Bill is suicidal because of the divorce) becomes secondary to the plot summary. The conclusion almost seems like an afterthought.

Example B

Bill's decision to drive off a cliff immediately after his divorce was finalized shows that the end of his marriage made him suicidal.

Not only is example B shorter and clearer than example A, it prevents the conclusion from being buried. By avoiding unnecessarily detailed information about the plot, we have given the writer's point priority.

Place quotes strategically

Often assignments require the writer to support a point using examples, and this often means quotes. Rather than using plot dump, a writer can select a fairly short quote (no longer than 4 to 5 lines is ideal) that provides the reader with the relevant information.

Example A (plot summary):

Although Bill might appear weak because of his suicide, he was actually a very strong person. When Bill was at work and found out that his company was illegally polluting a nearby river, he didn't put up with it. Even though his company saved a lot of money by easily getting rid of their waste, Bill decided to go to the authorities. Bill's boss confronted him before he went to the police and offered him a raise to keep his mouth shut, but Bill turned in the company executives anyway.

Example B (quote):

Although Bill might appear weak because of his suicide, he was actually a very strong person. When Bill discovered his company was polluting a nearby river, he didn't fold. Bill shouted at his boss "Forget it! Your devious bribes don't mean anything to me. I'm going to the police." Rather than take the easy way out, Bill stood his moral ground and turned in the company executives.

Example B uses a quote to show Bill's courage instead of the plot: "when he was at work," "he decided to go to the authorities," and "he went to the police."

In example B, the well-selected quote makes it clear that Bill was going to be bribed to keep his mouth shut but did the right thing anyway.

By using quotes, the writer shows the reader relevant evidence for the analysis. Quotes can reduce plot details.

Warning:

When there is a length requirement, some students may use overly long quotes in an attempt to flesh out a short paper. Not only can professors see your motive, but very long quotes can be overwhelming to the reader. **Note:** If you do use quotes of 4 lines or longer, they must be blocked.

Integrate quotes in sentences

Example:

In the *Apology*, Socrates is put on trial because he does not believe in the gods and “inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger and teaches others to follow his example.” Socrates’ ability to question is a threat to those in power. (Chris Erat)

Focus on Analysis

In the following example, the plot references support the writer’s analysis.

Example:

As shown in “The American School,” the American occupation of Japan led to the Japanese being treated as students who needed to improve themselves by learning the American way. Although it is their country, the Japanese characters are expected to adapt to the American culture. The Japanese teachers, when going to visit the American school, must dress in American clothes and speak English. Treated like a bunch of school children going in a field trip, they are instructed to be on their best behavior and mask their cultural identity with western clothes and the English language. Although each teacher was instructed to “dress impeccably,” the effort served only to increase their feeling of inferiority. Isa, in shoes that do not fit, and most teachers “with a sprinkling of army issue,” demean themselves even more by emphasizing their defeat and poverty. Isa’s tortuous walk, in his American Shoes, is symbolic of the Japanese adaptation to the American culture and how it hurts their own identity. (Lisa Borisenko)