

## Storytelling Strategies

*Stella Evans*

### Introduction

I often tell my students a story from when I was in kindergarten. When I started kindergarten, I didn't speak any English. My parents are immigrants, there was no English spoken at home, and so I only spoke Greek at the time. Furthermore, the only milk I knew was plain white milk; chocolate was not something we added to it. When I was given chocolate milk at snack time, it was completely foreign to me. I didn't like it, but didn't have the words to tell my teacher. So on chocolate milk days, I cried.

I tell this story to my students because many of them started school not knowing much English. They come from homes where only Spanish is spoken. There are many other students and teachers with whom they can communicate, but it is still intimidating to be expected to function in a foreign language. I want to share my struggles with my students. I want them to know that it is possible to succeed even when you struggle at the beginning. I needed extra support at first just like they do. Our similar experiences allow us to connect in this area.

Most teachers use similar strategies to connect with their students. We tell students about our children at home. We tell stories about our former students. We tell stories that we heard on the news the night before. We tell stories about when we were students. Stories can spark our students' interest, help them remember material, help reduce anxiety by making material accessible, and build rapport between students and teachers.<sup>1</sup>

Then we listen to our students' stories. From kindergarten on, our students will share as many stories as we have time to listen to. They tell us stories about what they did the night before or over the weekend. They tell us about their parents and siblings. They tell us about their favorite TV shows. This story telling builds a sense of community as the students learn about each other. It improves listening skills. It increases enthusiasm for writing as the students are anxious to share their stories.<sup>2</sup>

In this unit, I will be using technology to inspire students to become better storytellers. Students will create a story using flash writing techniques. They will use a maximum of one hundred words to write a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end. They will make sure that the story has one event that will constitute the climax of the story. They

will then create backdrops that will become the set for their movie. Finally, they will use Lego figures to make stop motion movies that tell a story.

## **Demographics**

Anna P. Mote is an elementary school in the suburbs of Wilmington, Delaware. There are approximately 450 students enrolled. According to data from the 2014-2015 reports, 68% of our students are Hispanic/Latino. 45% of the students are English language learners, and 52% come from low income households. While the state and district suspension rates are 11% and 12% respectively, only 4% of the students at Mote had been suspended last year.<sup>3</sup>

The spring assessments were concerning. Our students' test scores were low. At the third grade level, students showed 40% proficiency in reading and 33% proficiency in math. In fourth grade, scores were even lower. In Reading, our students showed only 26% proficiency and 21% in Math. The fifth graders did better in Reading with 49% proficiency, but their math scores were at 23% proficiency.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the number of English Language Learners, it is not surprising that our students struggle in reading, where language is critical. Writing is also very difficult when you are writing in a language that is not a student's native language. This unit will help students with their storytelling without the difficulty of language barriers.

I am the technology teacher at Mote. I see all students for 50 minutes a week as part of the students' related arts rotation. Additionally, fourth and fifth graders have an elective period one day each week. For this elective, students are allowed to choose which related arts activity they would like to participate in for the marking period. Students can choose Physical Education where the PE teacher offers things such as a Dance Off, Survivor, or Soccer. The Music teacher holds chorus practice where students prepare for school concerts as well as district events. The art teacher offers paper mache sculpting, sewing, and maze building. In technology, I have offered programming with Scratch, digital photography, and website building.

For this unit, I will offer Stop Motion Movie Making as an elective. I will offer it at the fourth grade level and the fifth grade level. Each group will have a maximum of 20 students. All of the students will have chosen this elective knowing what they will be doing. This should lead to students who are motivated to complete the project. Additionally, the technology and Legos are motivating to fourth and fifth graders.

## **Background**

Storytelling is the oldest form of teaching. Plato, the founder of the first institute of higher learning in the western world, used storytelling to teach philosophy, ethics,

politics, and law.<sup>5</sup> Storytelling allows students to relate to information. The brain can store information that is attached to a visual image created by a story much more efficiently than a random fact.<sup>6</sup>

My students love to listen to the stories I tell, and the more personal it is, the more they enjoy it. They want to know about my children, my dogs, and my sister. They want to know about what I did over the weekend. And if they see me at the grocery store or the mall, they want to know why I was there. They seem to see this connection as proof of an important personal relationship.

They want to tell me their stories as well, and they are very good story tellers. Even kindergarteners sense when you are really listening, and when you are distracted. They are animated and enthusiastic when they share their personal experiences. They want to feel connected to their teachers and this is how they do it.

But something happens when it comes time to write their stories on paper. All of a sudden, they lose focus and enthusiasm. The structure of their stories disappears. They forget to start at the beginning and work their way to the end. They don't know what to write. They no longer have a voice. I will use many tools to get them back to the place where their stories are bursting to come out.

### Flash Fiction

Flash fiction is a short story that contains all the elements of a complete story in 100 words or less.<sup>7</sup> There is a beginning, middle, and an end, but that is where most conventions end. The writer doesn't need to worry about fully developed sentences that are grammatically correct. Single word sentences are perfectly acceptable. There should only be one or two characters, and the writer doesn't need to fully develop them. The reader can make assumptions about those characters based upon what is there. The writer may or may not talk about the background. Here again, the reader can decide what the background is. If it's not important to the story, it can be omitted.<sup>8</sup>

My students struggle with language. Flash fiction releases them from the conventions of traditional writing and allows them to focus on what is important. Writing a grammatically correct sentence can take a really long time when English rules are so confusing. By releasing my students from these constraints, they will be able to focus more on the story and less on the conventions. They can rely on the reader's prior knowledge and experience to do some of the work for them. Leaving holes for the imagination to fill in is part of the flash fiction process.

### Graphic Organizer

Students struggle with organizing their thoughts. I will provide them with a simple graphic organizer which they will use to ensure that they have all the parts of the story they need. Here they can work with the members of their group to develop two characters. They will decide what their background will be. They will summarize the events of the story. Finally, they will decide what materials they need to make their movie.

### Visual Outline

They will use this six panel graphic organizer to draw the events of their movie. By visualizing their story, they will create a vivid picture that will make it much easier to convert to words.

### Technology

Students enjoy using technology tools to complete projects. They often see work on a computer more like playing than working. This motivates them to work harder.

Students will be using webcams and the program “Monkey Jam” to take 150 to 300 still shots of Lego figure makes micro movements. These pictures will then be imported in “Movie Maker” and manipulated to make it seem as though the Lego figures are actually moving. Students will then add images found on google, some text captions, and music to make a complete movie.

### Audience

Most students really enjoy seeing their work on the school website. When they are proud of the work they do, they want to share it with their peers and their families. When the movies are complete, students will watch each other’s movies and complete the evaluation sheet for each group’s presentation.

They will be looking at many aspects of the movie making process. They will observe whether the technical aspects like focus, stability, and volume of pictures taken. They will evaluate the story to see if has the elements needed to make a good story. They will comment on the background, the special effects and the movie.

Watching other group’s work with a critical eye will help students to compare their work to others. They can decide what they did well and they still need to work on.

## **Lessons**

In this unit, I will be using technology to inspire fourth and fifth grade students to become better storytellers. Students will create a story using flash writing techniques. They will use a maximum of one hundred words to write a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. They will make sure that the story has one event that will constitute the climax of the story. They will then create backdrops that will become the set for their movie. Finally, they will use Lego figures to make stop motion movies that tell a story. They will put together a series of 150-300 pictures to make a thirty- to sixty- second movie.

### **Lesson 1**

#### **One class session**

Students will begin to explore flash fiction. Flash fiction, or micro fiction, is a short story that contains all the elements of a complete story in 100 words or less. (Popek 1999) I will use examples from the websites listed below to read some Flash Fiction to my students. We will then identify and discuss how the author created the entire story with just a few words. We will identify the characters and describe the characters as the author portrayed them. We will discuss whether or not they have a clear picture of who the main character is and whether that is the same for each student. If they are different, is that okay? Do we know the setting? Did the author need to tell us more?

In Appendix A, there are many example of flash fiction. Students will read examples of flash fiction and choose one they want to work with. Using the story that they choose, they will use appendix B and identify the elements of a story that are important. They will find the characters. They will list the events that occur in the story. Sometimes, these story elements are implied rather than directly stated. Therefore, they students may have an answer that is different than the one you would give. This is appropriate for Flash Fiction and can spark great discussions.

Students will meet with other students who have chosen the same story. They will compare their answers. Where the answers the same or different? Where they answered differently, why did that happen? Were the differences important to the story? Did they change the story significantly?

We will come back together as a whole group and discuss their answers. The most important point that I will make here is that it's okay if the story is visualized differently by different students. Each of us brings different backgrounds to the reading, and that's what makes us see things differently. When authors allow us to make stories personal, they look differently through each of our eyes.

## **Lesson 2**

### **Two class sessions**

Students will break up into groups of three or four. Students will begin with a summarizing sheet (Appendix C) where they will come up with an outline for their story. They will develop a title that describes their story. They will choose the characters for their story. I recommend they use two or three characters. This will allow flexibility in their story while still being manageable in the picture taking process. They need to decide the background for their story. I tell the students to choose one location. Having more than one location is difficult to create with the limited amount of time we have. Also, this forces them to narrow their topic to one setting. Finally, they will choose two or three events that take place in their story.

This outline will help them write their Flash Fiction. As a group. They will write a Flash Fiction piece that is up to 100 words long. They will make sure they include information on the characters, setting, and events. There should be an event that shows the climax of the story and then a resolution. While there can be dialogue, it will be limited in their movie, so the story should move along with relying heavily on speech.

## **Lesson 3**

### **One class session**

They will then use a storyboard to draw a series of events which they will depict using small figures like Lego people. Appendix D is the storyboard that we will be using. Each box will represent a group of pictures that show one event in the story.

They will take their summarizing sheet and their Flash Fiction Story and draw it into a storyboard. They need to keep in mind that the pictures will be representing what they can photograph using Legos and matchbox cars. It should be simple enough so that it can be completed using 150 to 300 webcam captures.

They will then create a backdrop for their setting. Students will be given folders which they will decorate to serve as the background for their pictures. Once again, having one setting helps to focus the students' stories.

## **Lesson 4**

### **One class session**

Students will use a webcam and the program "Monkey Jam" to take a series of 150 to 300 pictures. Monkey Jam can be downloaded for free. It is an easy tool for students to use to capture their pictures. When they set up their scene, there are several things that I will be reminding my students of. First the camera needs to be set up and then taped down to the table. Movement of the camera creates a dizzying effect in the movie.

Movement should only happen with the items within the scene. They also need to look at perspective. They need to make sure everything will fit into the scene they have created. Once they begin taking pictures, altering the scene will make their movie look off. They should complete all picture taking in one day so their scene is stable throughout the entire shoot.

They will use Lego figures to depict their characters and can use small vehicles similar to matchbox cars. Students will make minute changes to the figures and vehicles as they move them across the background. The smaller the movements, the smoother the look of the movie when it is put together. Remember that only the figures move, not the background of camera.

All the pictures will be saved in the documents folder or picture folder of the computer. Monkey Jam will not hold the photos in a file to be used for the movie.

## **Lesson 5**

### **Two class sessions**

Students will use “Movie Maker” to put the pictures together into a stop motion movie. Movie Maker comes as a free program with windows. It is easy to use and uses similar tools as most other editing software.

First students need to import their pictures into Movie Maker. If the pictures were all taken in order and selected from the first to the last, they will import in the correct order. If not, they will need to be reordered at this time. Students will need to change the rate of scrolling for each picture from the default of 7 seconds to a rate of .2 seconds per frame. This will make the characters look like that are moving if enough pictures are taken and the movements are very small. At this rate, 150 pictures will make a 30 second movie. 300 pictures will make a 60 second movie.

At this point students will add a title page at the beginning and credits at the end. They can add music from the music section of their libraries or they can download free music from the internet. They can add clip art or photos to add dramatic effect to their movie. When their movie is finished, they will save it as a movie.

## **Lesson 6**

### **One class session**

Students will share their movies with other students and give and receive feedback on their movies. They will use the feedback tool (Appendix E) to tell students what went well and what they can improve on. This debriefing is an important part of the learning process. While watching other students’ projects, they are comparing this to their own work and thinking about what they can do better.

## Appendix A Flash Fiction Stories

### **Thoughts, by Harriett**

My counsellor says make some friends. But I have lots of friends. He keeps saying it though. I tell him he can't speak to me like that. I am royalty I say. He doesn't know what it's like to be a queen. No one does. I am glorious, beautiful, smart and witty. All of my friends, subjects and parliamentaries agree. I tell the people at school this. They laugh and tell me I'm ill. The teachers look at me with sympathy. They must understand how hard it is to be queen. I may be a little overweight, but I'm most certainly not ill. I try to explain this to them. But they just smile and pat me on the back, saying it's a shame I can't be cured. I am queen though, if I was ill I would have been informed. I am their queen.<sup>9</sup>

### **Ticket by Clare**

He's as creased as a used bus ticket. The librarian waits patiently until he produces an old-fashioned library card.

"It's out of date," she says. "The systems changed."

He looks around, blinking: "I used it this morning. I've been... lost in a book."

"This book?" She asks, opening the first page.

It begins: "There's a dusty road just outside Albertsville that doesn't go anywhere..."

The man at the counter says: "No, don't..."

But it's too late. His voice floats away on the breeze. She turns her face against it and sets off down that dusty road...<sup>10</sup>

### **Aesop's Fable – The Wind and the Sun**

The Wind and the Sun were disputing which was the stronger. Suddenly they saw a traveler coming down the road, and the Sun said: "I see a way to decide our dispute. Whichever of us can cause that traveler to take off his cloak shall be regarded as the stronger. You begin." So the Sun retired behind a cloud, and the Wind began to blow as hard as it could upon the traveler. But the harder he blew the more closely did the traveler wrap his cloak round him, till at last the Wind had to give up in despair. Then the Sun came out and shone in all his glory upon the traveler, who soon found it too hot to walk with his cloak on. Moral of Aesop's Fable: Kindness effects more than severity<sup>11</sup>



### **\Prize Winning Destruction**

“What’s your project?” the Universal Science Fair judge asked.

I populated a planet called Earth with diverse foliage and animal life. One animal species evolved to have advanced intellect,” Snarflug answered.

“Very impressive.”

That afternoon Snarflug was awarded the first prize. He collected his trophy then headed to Dawbur’s house.

“Ready?” Snarflug asked. His best friend grinned evilly then nodded.

Snarflug pressed a red button and they watched with glee as all life on Earth was destroyed with volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods.

They dumped the experiment in the trash then went inside to play video games.<sup>12</sup>

### **Rude Interruption**

I began writing my 55 fiction story when suddenly a loud humming arose outside. I opened the door to find – a space ship!

Four tiny creatures emerged. I invited them in for tea. I told them my story idea.

They said it was boring and I should write about them instead, so I did.<sup>13</sup>

**Appendix B**

Flash Fiction Analysis

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Story \_\_\_\_\_

Characters – Name and Description

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Setting

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Events

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C - Outline**

Names of teammates

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Title of Our Story

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Characters

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

Backdrop/Setting

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Summary/Events

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Materials Needed

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## Appendix D

Use the panels below to create a visual outline of your story. What will your scenes look like?


**Appendix E**

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of movie being evaluated \_\_\_\_\_

**Write one example of something that went well and one example of something that needs work for each of the following areas:**

**Background**

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**Camera work**

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**Characters**

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**Story Line**

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**Added text and special effects**

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**Common Core Standards Addressed:**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

**Useful websites**

<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teachingstorytelling>

[http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme\\_d/mod21.html](http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_d/mod21.html)

<http://www.storynet.org/resources/YES%20Position%20Paper.pdf>

<http://www.tracscotland.org/tracs/storytelling/storytelling-in-education>

[http://www.shortbreadstories.co.uk/story/browse/text/genre/flash\\_fiction/#axzz3uJEOf9E](http://www.shortbreadstories.co.uk/story/browse/text/genre/flash_fiction/#axzz3uJEOf9E)

[k](#) – Many examples of Flash Fiction. Most of the stories have topics for older students

<http://www.storiesspace.com/Flash-Fiction.aspx/5> - These Flash Fiction stories are on the longer side. They have up to one Thousand words.

## Bibliography

Aesop. n.d. "The Wind and the Sun." *Tales with Morals*. Accessed December 10, 2015.  
<http://www.taleswithmorals.com/aesop-fable-the-wind-and-the-sun.htm>.

This is just one example of a fable that can be used as a Flash Fiction piece. Most of Aesop's fables qualify as Flash Fiction and can be used.

Cavanaugh, Nancy. 2010. "My Writings." *Nancy A Cavanaugh*. September 10. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.nancyacavanaugh.com/writing.html>.

Nancy Cavanaugh is a writer. This blog has links to many of her pieces of writing. Most are rather dark pieces and is more appropriate for older students.

Clare. 2012. "Ticket." *The Guardian*. May 16. Accessed November 2, 2015.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2012/may/16/your-flash-fiction>.

The Guardian is an electronic journal focused on writing. You can find many writing samples here, as well as articles about the writing process.

contributors, Wikipedia. n.d. "Plato," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, . Accessed December 10, 2015. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato>.

While some teachers have issues with using Wikipedia, I use it with my students, and encourage them to use it as a source as well. There is a lot of information here, and many contributors to keep it accurate.

Delaware Department of Education. 2015. *Anna P. Mote Elementary School Profile*. Accessed September 13, 2015.  
<http://profiles.doe.k12.de.us/SchoolProfiles/School/Default.aspx?checkSchool=264&districtCode=32>.

The school profile was created at the end of last year. Some of the figures are not exactly accurate for our population this year. but it is pretty close. Our population still has a large number of english language learners.

Friday, Matthew James. 2014. "Why Storytelling in the Classroom Matters." *Edutopia*. July 11. Accessed September 14, 2015, 2015.  
<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/storytelling-in-the-classroom-matters-matthew-friday>.

This article talks about the value of teachers stories in the classroom. I found it interesting information for the background section of this unit.

Green, Melanie. 2004. "Storytelling in teaching." *The Observer; The Association for Psychological Science*.

There is a lot of interesting information about the beginning of storytelling, the nature of stories and the value of storytelling in people's lives.

Hamilton, Martha and Mitch Weiss. 2005. *Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the classroom*. Katonah, New York.  
<https://www.rcowen.com/PDFs/CTS%20Ch%201%20for%20website.pdf>.

Harriet. 2012. "Thought." *The Guardian*. May 16. Accessed November 2, 2015.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2012/may/16/your-flash-fiction>.

The Guardian is an electronic journal focused on writing. You can find many writing samples here, as well as articles about the writing process.

Nauert, Nathaniel. n.d. "Rude Interruption." *Teaching Flash Fiction - Slideshare*. Accessed December 13, 2015. <http://www.slideshare.net/JCoxBBB/teaching-flash-fiction>.

This online slide show has great tips about teaching story writing to students. There are also many examples of Flash Fiction stories.

Popek, Joan. 1999. "Flashes of Brilliance." *Writing-World.com: Equipping Writers for success*. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/popek.shtml>.

An overview of what Flash Fiction is. It introduces the elements of flash fiction and some tips for writing this type of story. She also includes some examples of Flash Fiction stories.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Green, Melanie. "Storytelling in teaching." *The Observer; The Association for Psychological Science*, 2004.
- <sup>2</sup> Friday, Matthew James. "Why Storytelling in the Classroom Matters." *Edutopia*. July 11, 2014. <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/storytelling-in-the-classroom-matters-matthew-friday> (accessed September 14, 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> Delaware Department of Education. *Anna P. Mote Elementary School Profile*. 2015. <http://profiles.doe.k12.de.us/SchoolProfiles/School/Default.aspx?checkSchool=264&districtCode=32> (accessed September 13, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> contributors, Wikipedia. "Plato," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, . n.d. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato> (accessed December 10, 2015).
- <sup>6</sup> Hamilton, Martha and Mitch Weiss. *Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the classroom*. Katonah, New York, 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> Popek, Joan. "Flashes of Brilliance." *Writing-World.com: Equipping Writers for success*. 1999. <http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/popek.shtml> (accessed December 2, 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid
- <sup>9</sup> Harriet. "Thought." *The Guardian*. May 16, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2012/may/16/your-flash-fiction> (accessed November 2, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> Clare. "Ticket." *The Guardian*. May 16, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2012/may/16/your-flash-fiction> (accessed November 2, 2015).

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<sup>11</sup> Aesop. "The Wind and the Sun." *Tales with Morals*. n.d.  
<http://www.taleswithmorals.com/aesop-fable-the-wind-and-the-sun.htm> (accessed December 10, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Cavanaugh, Nancy. "My Writings." *Nancy A Cavanaugh*. September 10, 2010.  
<http://www.nancyacavanaugh.com/writing.html> (accessed December 11, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Nauert, Nathaniel. "Rude Interruption." *Teaching Flash Fiction - Slide Share*. n.d.  
<http://www.slideshare.net/JCoxBBB/teaching-flash-fiction> (accessed December 13, 2015).

Curriculum Unit  
Title

Storytelling Strategies

Author

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**KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.**

- Elements of storytelling
- Flash Fiction
- Movie Making

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT**

- What are the elements of a good story?
- What tools can we use to create a good story?

**CONCEPT A**

**CONCEPT B**

**CONCEPT C**

Flash Fiction

Story Elements

Stories into Movies

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C**

What do you need to make a flash fiction story?  
What can you eliminate?

What elements do I need to make an interesting story?

How can we convert a story into a movie?

**VOCABULARY A**

**VOCABULARY B**

**VOCABULARY C**

Fiction

Story Elements

animation

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES**

For the movie making; you will need Monkey Jam and Movie maker. Both are free. You will also need webcams to capture the photos.