

## Embracing Social Media to Engage Students and Teach Narrative Writing

by JENNIFER BORCH

Twenty-first-century learners are “plugged-in,” fluent with technology, and motivated by social media. Why not embrace their passion and use social media to engage them in authentic and meaningful English-language learning that allows them to practice reading, writing, speaking, and listening in a familiar and motivating context?

I initially experimented with the following activity in a graduate-level Creative Writing course at Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech, Morocco. Working through a unit on narrative fiction and short stories, students were developing their narrative-writing skills in what was, for many, the first time they had written an entire short story. After reading a few short stories and discussing the “essentials” of plot, character, setting, theme, and point of view, students set out to write their own piece of fiction. Yet, even for advanced-level graduate students, the task was daunting. The idea of breaking away from “academic writing” and “intellectual dialogue” was unsettling. A writing task that I had imagined would be a fun and creative break from the norm turned out to be, for many students, an anxiety-ridden plunge into uncertainty.

I reevaluated how I could break down the project into more manageable chunks of learning and reduce the stress that the task had created. In doing so, I realized that Facebook could make narrative writing more

student-friendly and less threatening; as a result, this series of social-media-connected lessons was born. The following activities based on a model text, if completed in their entirety, could span three one-hour sessions (with the option to repeat the activities with students’ personal writing in future classes).

### ESTABLISHING A MODEL

To produce good writing, we need to read good writing; every writer needs a model text from which to learn. Before you can ask students to write narrative fiction, it’s essential to expose them to quality examples. You can do this with students of all ages and at various language levels.

Find a text that is appropriate for your students and that clearly models the essentials of narrative fiction on which you intend to focus (e.g., character, setting, plot, point of view, and theme). Have students read the text alone, in pairs, or as a group. This initial reading is just for comprehension. Do students understand the story? Can they identify the main theme or themes? Define difficult vocabulary or figurative language. Now, when you teach about each of the essential components of narrative fiction, you will have a common text to refer to.

Continue by discussing each of these components, using examples from your

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model text. For instance, I may ask students to identify the main characters and secondary characters in the story. We might discuss the physical settings in the story and try to imagine the time frame in which the story takes place. Students summarize the plot in five or six sentences, identify the point of view of the narrator, and discuss lessons they may have learned from the story. In essence, I teach students how to analyze narrative fiction for each of these elements before asking them to produce fiction of their own.

### CONNECTING IT TO FACEBOOK

The world of Facebook is one in which most students typically have experience outside the classroom. Connecting an academic lesson about the elements of narrative fiction with this social-media platform is likely to decrease your students' anxiety level and give them an opportunity to display their proficiency with technology. Teachers who are less experienced with using Facebook might take this opportunity to learn from their students or collaborate with colleagues to become familiar with its basic functions. Free online tutorials and guides are available (from GCFLearnFree.org and Lifewire,

for example). Once you feel comfortable with the basic tools of Facebook, the connections to narrative writing will become obvious, and you will be prepared to put this social-media platform to use in your classroom.

Although you will be using Facebook to analyze and scaffold narrative writing, you do not need to have access to the Internet in the classroom to make this work. It takes a little extra planning to take screenshots, but the visuals included with this article are samples of the images you could display with a projector as a reference for students as they work through the activity.

First, display a picture of a sample Facebook "status update." This feature lets users create a brief multimedia post about what is happening in their lives, including feelings, whereabouts, and actions. A simple photo like the one shown in Figure 1 will model the features you would like students to use. Have each student use a blank sheet of paper to quickly design a personal status update. Encourage students to make use of all the available Facebook "tools." The "Photo/Video" tool allows users to upload media files to

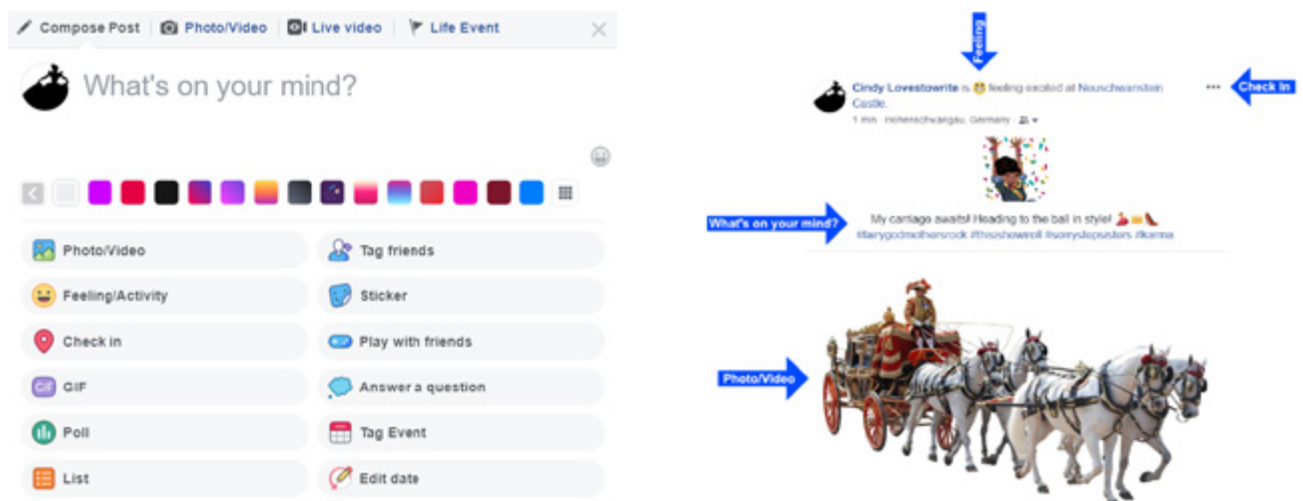


Figure 1. Sample status update

accompany their posts. The “Check in” feature encourages users to report their location, and the “Feeling/Activity” tool allows users to express their feelings by using emojis. Finally, “Tag friends” lets users label the people they have included in their post. This tagging feature can also be used to notify other friends about the post.

When students have completed their personal updates, ask a few to present the sketches they have created, highlighting how they have used each of the Facebook tools to enhance their posts. If the students have neglected to use the enhancement tools, ask them questions about their post to get them to fill in missing details. Point out how these details present a clear picture of the setting or help the audience to better understand a character. After a few students have presented, ask the class to identify how each of the components of a status update relates to a component of narrative writing. If students see that, as Figure 2 shows, status updates are an example of narrative writing that they are already doing, the overall task becomes less stressful and more fun.

### EXPLORING CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT WITH FACEBOOK PROFILES

Authors strive to develop well-rounded characters that readers will relate to and care about. Good writers describe their characters

as much through the characters’ actions as they do through the narrator’s words. For new writers to become adept at character development, analyzing characters in model texts can be helpful. Facebook provides an effective and creative means of analyzing characters through profile development.

Have students work in pairs and assign them characters from the text you have read as a class. As an example, I facilitated this activity using the children’s fairy tale *Cinderella*. Pairs of students are assigned the roles of Cinderella, Prince Charming, the Fairy Godmother, and the Evil Stepsisters. In large classes, more than one pair will prepare a profile of the same character. Each pair of students works together to complete a poster-sized version of a Facebook profile for its assigned character. Display a profile “template” for students to refer to when creating their profiles (see Figure 3 for a sample). Depending on the size of your class, you may display this with a projector, or you may provide printed templates to your students.

Students may be able to fill out much of their character’s profile with information provided by the author’s direct characterization. They might need to infer some information, however, from the character’s actions. Other information may not be available in the text. For example, we don’t know where

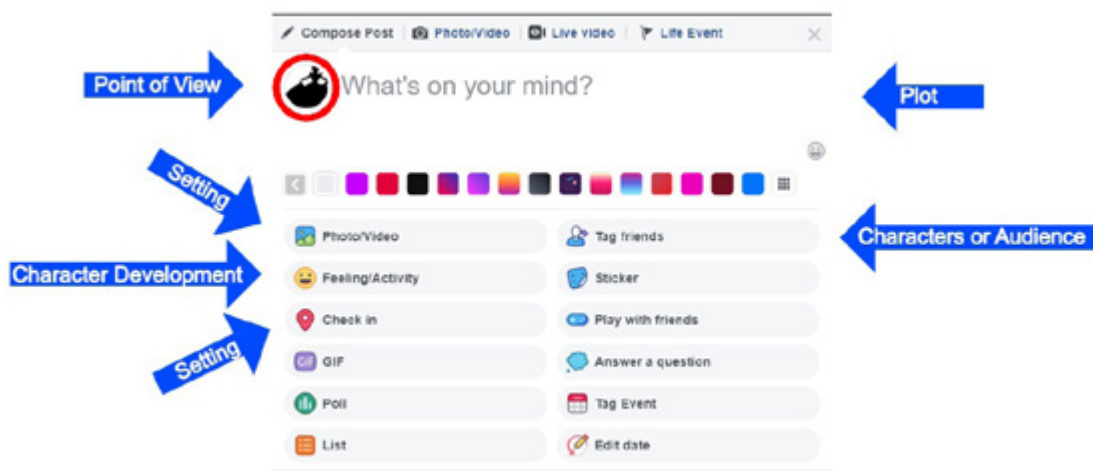


Figure 2. Components of a status update related to components of narrative writing

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## Highlight to students that they have just completed an in-depth character analysis.

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Cinderella went to school or how she might describe her job on Facebook, but we do have enough information about her character to “think like Cinderella” and infer what she might write. Students can use their knowledge of their assigned character to imagine the information that character would provide in his or her own Facebook profile. Allow a reasonable amount of time for this task, based on the level of challenge it will present for your students.

At the end of the allotted time, ask a few pairs to share with the class the profile posters they created. In a large class, students could form groups where each character is represented and share within that group to allow every pair an opportunity to present its work. This interactive activity is entertaining, as students work together to

create humorous profiles for their characters. By sharing aloud, they practice their English presentation skills in a low-anxiety, authentic situation.

Then have students reflect on the activity. Was it easy or difficult to fill out a profile for their character? Was there information that they had to invent? Were they able to make predictions about what their character would have written? Are they able to identify main characters and secondary characters based on the information that was provided by the author? Ask students to think about whether their character was developed through specific descriptions by the author or whether they learned more about their character indirectly through the character’s actions. Which type of characterization do they find more interesting?

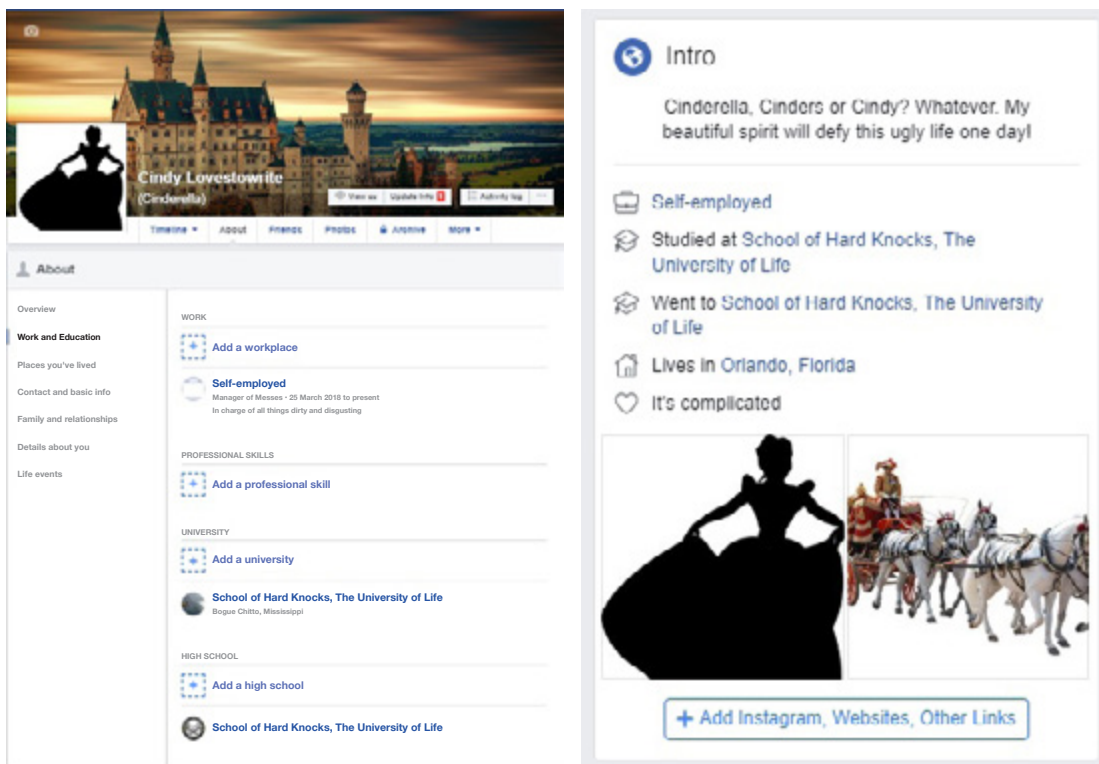


Figure 3. Sample character profile

When you are satisfied with the discussion, highlight to students that they have just completed an in-depth character analysis. As students move from the practice stage to the production stage of writing, you can repeat this activity with students' personal writing. Ask them to create a Facebook profile for the characters in their own stories or for the characters in a classmate's story. This is a great way for students to self-assess whether they have fully developed their characters. When we write fiction, our characters live in our heads, and we imagine every detail about them. When we turn imaginary characters into characters on a page, it is easy to leave out important details. The Facebook status check reinforces students' character-development skills as they begin writing their own stories.

### ANALYZING PLOT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH STATUS UPDATES

Facebook status posts can also be used for plot analysis by readers and for plot development by writers. Using your model text, have students work in groups to retell the entire story in five or six status updates, which they will display on a poster. Each group should be assigned a specific character, and the status updates will be written from that character's point of view. This activity tends to take longer than the profile-building activity because students must synthesize a lot of information

for each status update. Encourage students to make use of all the previously discussed Facebook tools when creating their posts. Students will need to reflect on the setting, the characters present in the scene, and the mood of the narrator at the time of the post.

Remind students of the general storyline that narrative writing follows. There should be a clear introduction, rising action, a climax, falling action, and a conclusion. Each status update should represent a significant event in the trajectory of the story. It might help to display a visual of the storyline—or plot diagram—as well as a sample Facebook status update to remind students of the descriptive tools available for each post (see Figure 4).

Allow time for students to complete their status updates. Ideally, students will complete this entire plot-analysis activity in one class session so that they maintain momentum from beginning to end. As students work on their posters, you can circulate and make sure students are moving at a pace that will allow them to successfully complete the task by the end of the class. Remind students to include photos (or drawings), locations, and feelings, and to tag additional characters in their posts to paint a complete picture with each update.

Have a few students share their status-update plot diagrams with the class, highlighting the

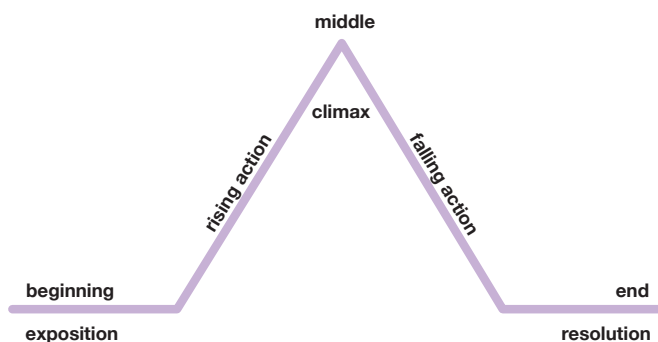


Figure 4. Plot diagram and sample status update

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important events and the commentary from their character's point of view. Once again, in large classes, divide the class into groups for these presentations. Students will be actively engaged in listening, speaking, and writing while collaborating with their classmates on an authentic task in a low-stress situation.

Ask students to reflect on the process they have just completed. Through status updates, students have identified the essential elements that drive a story's plot forward and created a summary of the story. Did students generally agree on the most important events in the story? This activity also draws students' attention to the way in which the narrator's voice affects the telling of a story. They were asked to tell the same story from different points of view. How did that affect the plot diagram they created? How would writing a summary of the text differ from the status updates provided by one character?

Once again, in moving from practice to production, this status-update activity can be reapplied to students' personal writing. Can they summarize the plots of their own stories in five or six status updates? If not, why not? Are there too many different trajectories? Is the storyline unclear? Implementing this activity as a prewriting exercise might help some students scaffold the trajectory of their stories. The activity might help other students choose the point of view that seems most appropriate for their narrators. Completing this activity from multiple perspectives may help students choose the most engaging voice.

Having readers use status updates to analyze plot development and asking writers to implement status updates to scaffold their personal work are just two of the ways teachers can tap into social networking to make meaningful and motivating classroom connections. Social media provide teachers

with a chance to embrace a context that is meaningful to twenty-first-century learners and to capitalize on their enthusiasm in order to create authentic and entertaining language-learning opportunities.

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