



Social Media for ELT: Teaching Narrative Writing

by [*Jennifer Borch*](#)

Twenty-first-century learners are “plugged-in,” fluent with technology, and motivated by social media. Start your school year by creatively connecting to tech-savvy students’ enthusiasm for social media: Engage them in authentic and meaningful English-language learning opportunities in a familiar and motivating context.

While teaching a graduate-level creative writing course in Morocco, I realized that narrative writing was a daunting task for even advanced-level linguistics students. The idea of breaking away from academic writing and intellectual dialogue was unsettling. Writing short stories, a task which I had imagined would be a fun and creative break from the norm, turned out to be an anxiety-ridden plunge into uncertainty for many students. This realization prompted me to bring social media into the classroom to show students that they were, in fact, already competent narrative storytellers. Facebook became my friend, and the following series of social media-connected lessons for teaching narrative writing was born.

Lesson 1: Establishing a Model and Making Connections to Social Media

Establishing a Model

To produce good writing, students need to read good writing. Before you can ask students to write narrative fiction, it’s essential to expose them to some quality examples. Find a text that is appropriate for your students and that clearly models the essentials of narrative writing on which you intend to focus (e.g., character, setting, plot, point of view, theme). Have students read the text alone, in pairs, or as a group.

Define and discuss each of the components of narrative fiction using specific examples from your model text. For instance, try the following tasks:

- Ask students to identify the main characters and secondary characters in the story.
- Discuss the physical settings in the story and the time frame in which the story takes place.
- Ask students to summarize the plot in five or six sentences, identify the point of view of the narrator, and discuss any lessons they may have learned from the story.

In essence, teach students how to analyze narrative fiction for each of these elements before asking them to produce it.

Connecting It to Facebook

Most students are adept at navigating the world of Facebook. Connecting 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.

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 in Figure 1 will get students excited and model the features that you would like them to use. Have each student use a blank sheet of paper to quickly design a personal status update. Encourage them to make use of all the available Facebook tools to enhance their updates.

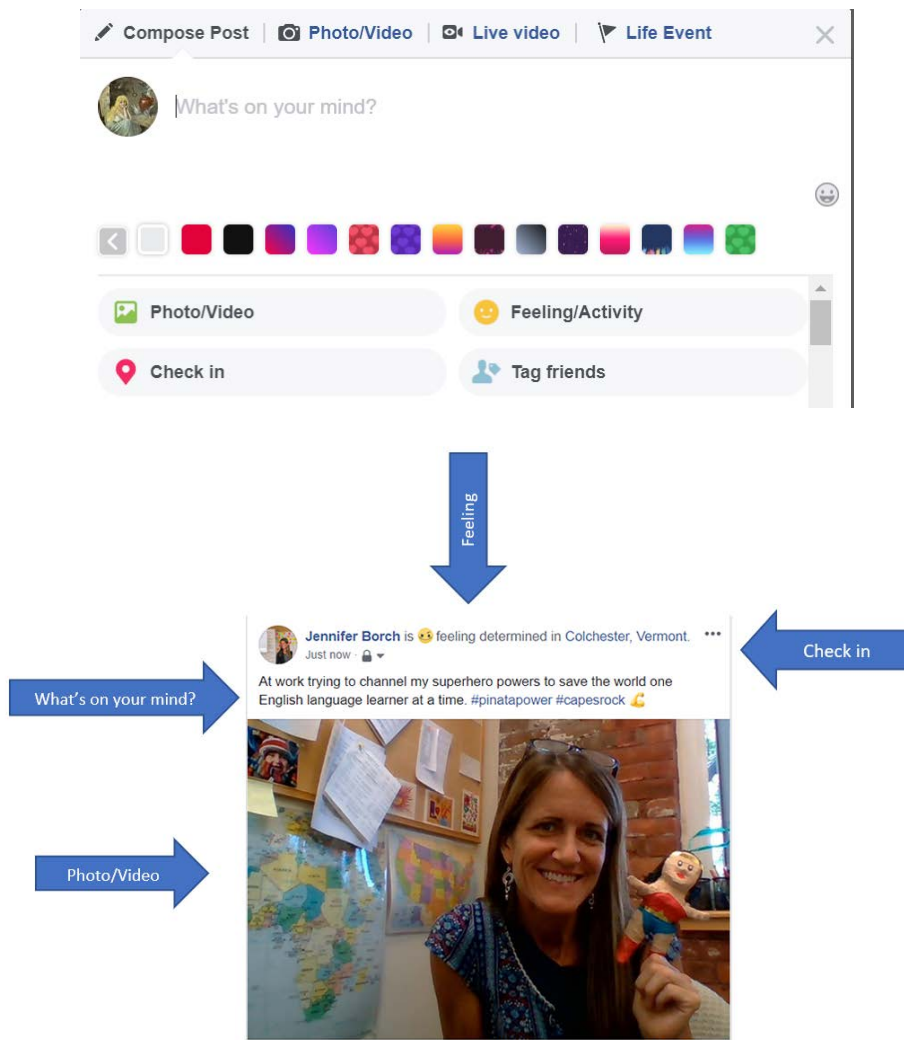


Figure 1. Example status update.

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. Discuss how these details help the audience to better understand a character or present a clearer picture of the setting. Next, ask students to identify how each of the components of a Facebook status update relates to the components of narrative writing. If students see that, as Figure 2 shows, Facebook status updates are an example of narrative writing they do daily, the task becomes less stressful and more fun.

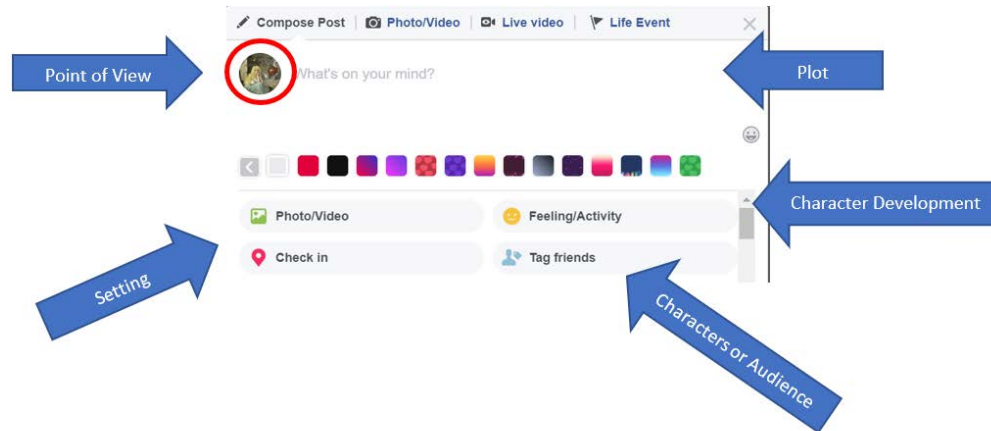


Figure 2. Components of a status update related to components of narrative writing.

Lesson 2: Exploring Character Development With Facebook Profiles

For new writers to become adept at character development, it is helpful for them to analyze characters in model texts. Facebook provides an effective and creative means of character analysis through profile development.

Group Work: Preparing a Profile

Have students work in pairs and assign them characters from your model text. As an example, I facilitate this activity using the children's fairytale *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. Have students work together to complete a poster-sized version of a Facebook profile for their 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.

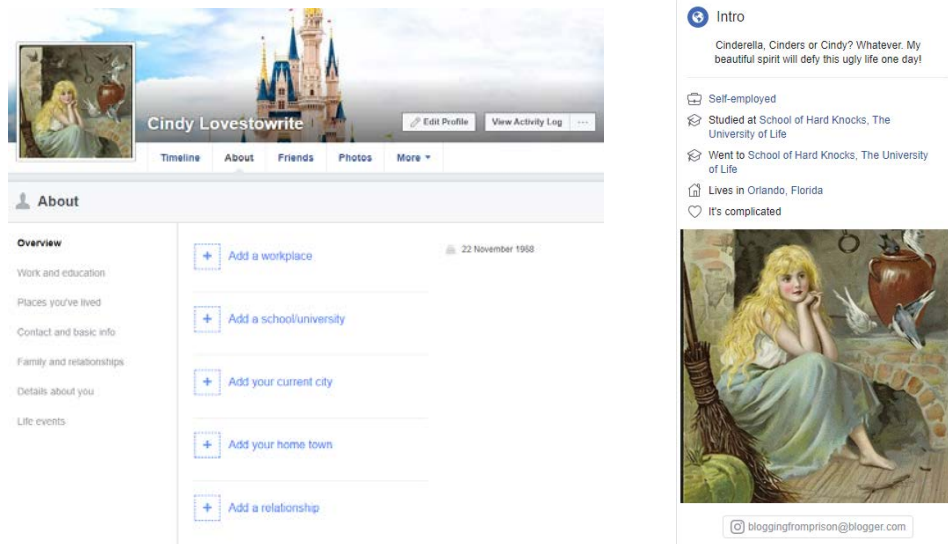


Figure 3. Example character profile.

Students may be able to fill out much of their character's profile with information provided in the text. They might also need to infer some information from the character's actions. For example, we don't know where Cinderella went to school or how she might describe her job, but we do have enough information about her character to "think like Cinderella" and infer what she might include in her profile. Allow a reasonable amount of time for this task based on the level of challenge this will present for your students.

Sharing and Reflecting

Next, ask a few groups to share the profiles they created. In a large class, students could form small groups where each character is represented and share within that group to allow every pair an opportunity to present. This interactive activity is entertaining for students, as they work together to create humorous profiles for their characters. By sharing aloud in small groups, they practice their presentation skills in a low-anxiety, authentic situation.

Finally, 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? Discuss what this means. Which type of characterization did they find more interesting? Highlight to students that they have completed an in-depth character analysis.

As students move from the practice to the production stage of writing, they can repeat this activity with their own writing. In this way, students can self-assess whether they have fully developed their characters. When writers 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.

Lesson 3: 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 the model text, have students work in small groups to create a poster that retells the entire story in five or six Facebook-style status updates. Assign a specific character to each group and ask them to write status updates from that character's point of view. 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 (see Figure 4). Each status update should represent a significant event in the trajectory of the story.

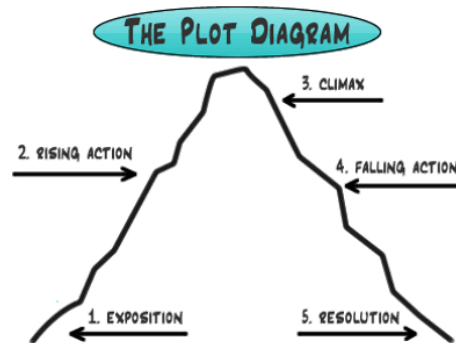


Figure 4. Plot diagram.

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. It might help to display a visual of the storyline as well as a sample Facebook status update (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Example status update using Cinderella.

Have groups share their status-update plot diagrams with the class, highlighting the important events and the commentary from their character's point of view. Ask students to reflect on the process they have just completed. This activity stresses the way in which the narrator's voice affects the telling of a story. How would writing a simple 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.

Pick Your Platform and Get Creative

Linking Facebook posts to narrative writing is just one example of the limitless creative connections that teachers can make between social media and language lessons. Bringing social media into the classroom lets teachers create authentic and entertaining language-learning opportunities for tech-savvy 21st-century learners.

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