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Recommended Citation
Tucker, Austin B., "Guiding Preachers in Development of Narrative Skills for Sermon Illustrations" (2005). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 326.
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Evangelical Homiletics Society, 2005

Guiding Preachers in Development of Narrative Skills for Sermon Illustrations

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Abstract

Preachers can and must cultivate storytelling skills. They may find help in a *Narration Worksheet* charting the essential elements of story: plot, setting, character, point of view, and unity. A *Plot Movements Worksheet* helps keep the narrative flowing from situation, through stress and searching to solution and a new situation.

Introduction

Lisa Lax, NBC-TV's Senior Sports Producer needed to know how to keep viewers watching the Atlanta Olympics. The network paid $456 million for the broadcast rights and budgeted $3.5 billion for Olympics coverage through the year 2008. They simply could not afford for you and me to tune out as so many did the Seoul Olympics. So, in the six years leading up to Atlanta, the network interviewed some 10,000 viewers. What do people like and what do they dislike about sports on TV? The big finding of all that research came down to one fact: *Tell them stories and they will watch*. The result was more than 135 two-to-three minute narratives the network produced and scattered throughout the Atlanta Olympics coverage (Impco1996, 36).

Fifteen-year-old Charles Spurgeon, a few months after his conversion, began teaching a Bible class of younger boys. One day a lad interrupted his lesson: "This is very dull, Teacher. Can't you pitch us a yarn?" Young Spurgeon could and did. Later the Prince of Preachers said he learned to tell stories in that class because he was "obliged to tell them" (Drummond 1992, 157).

Yet some preachers consider narrative in their sermons optional. A few even scorn storytelling in the pulpit. When I was a seminary student, I wrote D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones about sermon illustrations. He was G. Campbell Morgan's successor at Westminster Chapel, London. He responded with a note about his "strong views on this subject." He reminded me he had always been a critic of a man like W. E. Sangster who used to carry a little book in his pocket to take down any stories he heard, and who had a "card-index of illustrations appropriate to various subjects." He said, "I always described that as the prostitution of preaching (Lloyd-Jones 1965, 1).

It is the conviction of this writer that illustration in preaching is a skill that can and must be cultivated. The purpose of this paper is to offer some suggestions for guiding preachers in the development of narrative skills. The two-phase plan begins with guiding the student in understanding the elements of story -- especially plot. It continues with exercises designed to enhance narrative skills for preaching.

Teaching the Essential Elements of Narrative

There is a lot to storytelling, and much of it is easier caught than taught. The essential elements of a story, however, are not hard to master. In the appendix you will find a *Narration Worksheet* and a *Plot Movements Worksheet*. These simple tools may be useful for teaching the elements of narrative in preaching and re-enforcing that understanding with assigned exercises. If so, permission is granted to any member of EHS to reproduce them with or without acknowledging the author. The first worksheet guides the preacher in identifying the five crucial elements of any story. They are plot, character, setting, point of view, and unity.

Plot is the plan of the story. Sometimes called *action*, it is the chain of events in the narrative. In the plot, something is at stake. There is a conflict to be resolved, a source of tension to be relieved, or a mystery to be solved. In mystery stories, the term *denouement* is used to describe the "unraveling" of the knotty tangle of the conflict. The conflict may be between two characters or between a character and his environment. It may be an inner conflict such as David confessed in Psalm 91. In Scripture, the basic conflict is between a rebellious person (or people) and God.

Character, usually more than one, deals with who is involved. The preacher wants to help the listener to see himself in one character or another. Sometimes the heart of a character may be described overtly as in R. G. Lee's *Payday Someday*: "I introduce you to Ahab, the vile human toad who squatted upon the throne of his nation." It may be better to let the narrative and the dialogue unveil that heart. In a very helpful workshop on *Preaching as Storytelling*, Fred Craddock recommended the preacher avoid introducing a story with something like, "Let me tell you about one of the finest, most noble and generous of deacons who ever warmed a pastor's heart and blessed a church with unselfish service." Already we are instructed how we should regard this person. Craddock also discouraged summary application such as: "Now aren't we all sometimes like that older brother?" (Cf. Craddock 1980).

One might object that a sermon illustration does not afford time to develop a full character sketch. Of course, there are time restraints, but recent research supports the theory that our first impressions and snap judgments tend to be accurate (Gladwell 2005). Let the story include enough data for a first impression of a character. This may come in dialogue and action as well as in description.

Setting provides the boundaries of the story in time and space. Is it reality or fantasy? Is it in the past or present or even the future? Is it here or there or just somewhere? This need not take a lot of time. Suppose the story begins, "Three teenaged girls from our city were speeding down I-35 last Sunday night in a BMW convertible." Immediately we know this is not set in ancient Jerusalem or Damascus.

Point of View may be considered along with setting, but it is a distinct element of the storyteller's craft. It may be either the all-knowing storyteller or a more realistic point of view. For example, the first-person narrator in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" tells his own thoughts and motives as well as actions, but he only tells the words and actions of his protagonist as he gets him drunk and seals him up brick by brick in the wine cellar.

Unity is another important element in storytelling. A chronological frame of reference gives unity even if the so-called "epic formula" (flashback technique) is used. Unity in storytelling requires integrity of detail including only what advances the story and excluding all else. The setting tells *where* we are; the plot tells *what's happening*, and character tells *who* is involved. The question of *why* provides the unifying significance that pulls the other elements together in a coherent whole. The rule of rhetoric is the "test of removability." Submit every character, every scene, and every incident in the story to this test: can the climax occur without this? If the answer is yes, then cut that detail. (Hughes and Dunamel 1962, 67).

Here the teacher of preachers must make a decision. How should a preacher apply the point of a narrative? Craddock taught a generation of preachers to tell stories to stimulate reflection. Later everyone may make his or her own application or none at all. This is consistent with the estimate of the person in the pulpit "as one without authority" (Craddock, 1971). Grady Davis also, writing earlier about the "story sermon" as one of five organic forms a sermon may take, said,

> The listener must draw his own conclusions and make his own application to himself, or he will miss the point of the story. If a preacher cannot trust his hearers to do this, he should not use the story form (Davis, 1958, 161).

. Teachers of rhetoric such as Hughes and Dunamel disagree.

> [In persuasive speech] the point of the story must stand out clearly . . .. Every part of the story must make its contribution. The writer who includes details for the sake of variety runs the risk of distracting the audience and even suggesting another interpretation of the sequence of events (Hughes and Dunamel 1962, 67).

What about the parables of Jesus? Were these stories designed mainly to stimulate reflection and to make the truth portable? Or were they like the ideal sermon in the Grady Davis analogy of the orange tree bearing fruit and flower at the same time? Isn't there in them something of food for present nourishment and something "for the harvest of a distant day" (Davis 1958, 15-16)?

Jesus quoted Isaiah to explain his use of parables. The parables of Jesus, like the ministry of that prophet, reached the hearts of those ready to receive it and veiled the truth from those of hard heart and ready to reject it. To the insiders the secrets were given, but to the outsiders everything was said in parables. This is because rebellious people

> "' . . . will be ever hearing but never understanding; . . . ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused . . .. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" (Matt. 13: 13, 15 NIV, quoting Isa. 6:9,10).

A well-crafted story, like a parable of Jesus, can convey spiritual truth to those ready to receive it and yet be just a story to those whose hearts are not ready to let God's truth enter. Therein is its splendor, and there is its risk. To really hear God's message and reject it is to invite judgment.

That is risky for the preacher and risky for the congregation. And therein is a weighty burden also for those who presume to instruct preachers!

The Plot as the Essence of Story

All five elements of a story are essential, but preachers seem to need most help with getting the plot in place. The following is an illustration from a seminary student's sermon in 1994. I had his permission to use it in class as a good example of how not to tell a story. Then the class used the *Plot Movements Worksheet* (see appendix) to help him rework it.

> Let me tell you about a particular situation in my own life, which left me disoriented and confused for a while. In December of 1982 my wife, my children, and I saw a man jump into the icy waters of a canal to take his own life. The incident has replayed itself in my mind many times, like a slow motion video. I saw the look of terror on the man's face as he gasped his last breath and then let out a terrifying scream which sent chills to the very depth of my soul. I felt a great loss even though I didn't know the man. The incident has served to give me an imperative to help people realize that there is hope and that help is available to them . . . through Jesus Christ.

We are moved to sympathy for the seminary family and pity for the suicide victim, but the narrative leaves much to be desired. Like a newspaper account, it gives the whole story in the first two sentences. The rest of the paragraph expands on the lingering shock to the life of the seminarian. A narrative needs a plot that starts with a *situation*, moves right away to something of *stress*, then on to *searching* until we arrive at a *solution* and perhaps a *new situation*. We would like a little more about the setting. What canal? The seminary was in New Orleans very near the intercoastal waterway for ocean-going vessels. More likely we should think of one of the smaller canals such as connected Lake Pontchartrain with the old city. Was the man on a bridge? We don't even know if it happened in New Orleans, since it happened twelve years before the student wrote this sermon.

"Icy water" suggests midwinter time. It might help if the story started with bundling up the children in their cold-weather coats and caps. Where are we going? Out for a walk? Emotionally, we need more setting of the scene. Was this seminarian already a ministerial student when this happened, or does he mean to suggest by his last sentence that this shock was crucial in shaping his sense of vocation? Step one in the story is missing; we do not know the starting s*ituation*. The whole paragraph is step two -- s*tress*. Step three, s*earch*, is also wanting. We wonder if the student is stalled in step three waiting for his own internal stress to play itself out. Certainly the story does not move to a s*olution* or a n*ew situation*. He introduced his wife and children in the beginning, but he did not mention them again. How did this trauma impact them? In this testimony we are left with too many unanswered questions.

Perhaps he could start the story with a description of himself as less caring. Then he could move through the dramatic narrative that expanded his vision. At first he cared for himself and his little family; at the end he answered God's call to compassion for a world filled with desperate souls. We need a plot!

Ten Ways to Enhance Narrative Quality in Sermons

How can preachers enhance the narrative quality of their sermons? Instead of resorting to omnibus volumes of stale anecdotes, try these exercises. A teacher might make writing assignments from this list over a period of weeks. Encourage the students to include the illustrations in sermon assignments. Much of this section was previously published in *Proclaim* magazine and used by permission (Tucker 1997, pp.46-48). This is my top-ten list of ideas for adding narrative to brighten sermons.

Number 10: Summarize a short story. A short story or even a whole novel may be reduced to one or two hundred words. Keep the plot in place. Here's one that illustrates the destructive power of the tongue warned of in James 3.

> A little old man stooped on the dusty road to pick up a "Piece of String" in Guy de Maupassant's tale by that name. He was embarrassed to note that someone saw him do so, and he quickly hid the innocent scrap. By the time he got to town to discover that a wallet was lost, he was already accused of finding it. His denials and explanations about "a piece of string" seemed only to confirm growing suspicion. Then, a week later, someone did find the wallet and return it. Instead of clearing the old man, this gave the rumors momentum. Shortly after that, he died. Talk killed him.

If the sermon can afford twice the space for this illustration, add dialogue, names and other details from the story (de Maupassant 1884).

Number 9: Turn a cartoon or comic strip into a narrative. Comic strips have something of a story line built in, but even a cartoon can provide a bit of narrative with setting, characters, and plot. A *Forbes* magazine cartoon shows a grandfatherly gentleman in an oversized easy chair talking to a little girl seated opposite him in a matching chair. Around them in the elegant sitting room is ample evidence of wealth. He is answering her question about how he made his fortune.

> "It was really quite simple. I bought a pencil for a penny, sharpened it, and sold it for two cents. With this I bought two pencils, sharpened them, and sold them for four cents. And so it went until I had amassed $10.24. It was then that your Great Aunt Selma died and left us $10 million." (Killen 1985, 20).

The cartoonist probably never meant that to illustrate spiritual truth, but it might. Think of the testimony of one who does not really appreciate salvation by grace. "I joined the church and was baptized. I started working in the church and giving to the church. Oh yes, and Christ died for all my sins."

Number 8: Place a quotation in its historical context. As a diamond is shown to its best advantage in the right mounting, so a familiar quote sparkles more in its historical setting. A preacher citing Martin Luther might be surprised how many in the congregation think he is quoting a mid-twentieth century civil rights leader rather than the seventeenth century reformer. I was in college and had heard the "Here-I-stand" statement numerous times before I learned the Diet of Worms was a general assembly of the empire and not what Luther had to eat in prison. Let the

preacher give a thumbnail sketch of Luther's life with focus on that crucial scene. What if you need help with the biographical data and don't have a good reference book like Moyer and Cairns, *Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church*? You can do an online search with the help of Google or Yahoo and probably find more than you ever wanted to know. Just be sure to use a reliable source.

Number 7:Glean from leisure reading and TV time. Sometimes a scene in a Christless book, movie or television show will be useful for presenting Christ as the hope of the hopeless**.** Get the notebook habit. I keep a few index cards handy while relaxing with TV or leisure reading.

There is a telling scene in the 1986 movie *The Trumpet of Gideon*. It speaks volumes to the impasse of hostility that continues between Arabs and Jews as well as the larger problem of terrorism and war in the world. Steven Bauer plays a young Israeli secret service agent named Avner. He and his select team are on a mission to avenge the Munich Massacre. They have traveled the world killing Arab terrorists. This, of course, stirs Arab retaliation. One after another of Avner's team members are killed. They are blown up or shot or stabbed until he alone is left. Returning to his commander in Israel, Avner expresses his misgivings, "We can not go on this way—'an eye for an eye' – pretty soon the whole world will be blind!"

The commander retorts: "What is the answer then?" To which Avner replies: "I don't have the answer!"

Number 6: When quoting a verse of a hymn or other poetry, place it in a narrative setting. There are a number of good books that tell about authors and composers and the circumstances surrounding the writing of our hymns. One of the better sources is Kenneth W. Osbeck's *101 Hymn Stories*. Kregel, 1982.

John Fawcett was born and raised in poverty in eighteenth century England. At age sixteen he came to Christ through the ministry of evangelist George Whitfield. Ten years later he became an ordained Baptist minister and pastor of an impoverished congregation in Northern England. As the years went by his family grew but not his salary. But then came a call to the large and influential Carter's Lane Baptist Church in London.

When the day of departure came, the saddened congregation gathered around the wagons. Mrs. Fawcett finally broke down and said, "John, I cannot bear to leave. I know not how to go!"

"Nor can I either," said the pastor. Soon the happy congregation was unpacking the wagons. In a sermon some time later, the pastor shared the four verses of a poem he had written which began:

> Bless be the tie that binds
> Our hearts in Christian love!
> The fellowship of kindred minds
> Is like to that above.

Pastor Fawcett stayed in the poverty-smitten parish the rest of his days, but a wider recognition and usefulness did come to him (Osbeck 1982, 45-46).

Number 5: Use one of the elements of narrative to brighten exposition. To have a complete story, you will need a plot that moves, characters, and a setting – all with some controlling purpose. But if that seems too much, just imagine a bit of dialogue to illustrate your sermon text. This may clarify, restate, or emphasize a thought in the scripture. Suppose, for example, your text is James 1:9-11.

> The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like the wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business (NIV).

Whose life is transitory? Is it the rich man or poor man? Attention to the text makes us know that both alike are fading. Imagine this conversation:

> "I'm just like so much grass growing on a Galilean hillside," says the poor man. "I grow for awhile and then burn up."
>
> "My life is like a glorious lily!" boasts the rich man, "Splendid and magnificent like the Lily or Anemone."
>
> "You are both the same," says James. "Rich man or poor man – leaf or petal – all alike are time-bound and fading. Like the Mediterranean spring, life may be brilliant or not, but it will be brief. Very brief!"

When the text is narrative *genre*, as in First Samuel or Acts, such imagination may be unnecessary, but if you are in Leviticus or some New Testament letter, a little narrative with or without dialogue can help you hold the attention and make the message clear.

Number 4: Try your hand at creating a parable, a fable or an allegory. Soren Kierkagaard did this masterfully, but it is not easy to do. Suppose your text is Amos 1-2 where the prophet denounced each of Israel's sinful neighbor nations in order: Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, Moab and even Judah. Then using the same formula he promised judgment also on Israel. It must have been a shock to those who first heard Amos. Perhaps the preacher can make that point with a make-believe story.

> Once upon a time there were eight lambs nibbling clover in a meadow. Seven were white, and the other was black. One day a hungry and ferocious lion slipped up on the lambs and with a terrifying roar sprang on one of the lambs and took it home for dinner. A week later, the lion returned and leaped upon another one. And another and another as time went by. The black lamb said one day, half to himself and half to the other lambs, "I'm glad I'm not a white lamb." This went on until the black lamb was left alone. Then he chuckled to himself, "Fortunately for me, lions don't eat black sheep as everyone well knows." Not long after that, the lonesome lamb saw the lion returning. He greeted him cheerfully: "Hello there, Mr. Lion. How are you today?"

> The lion answered with a paralyzing "R-O-A-R-R-R!"
>
> "O my!" thought the little lamb in his final moments. "What a terrible mistake! This lion must be colorblind!"

Number 3: Narrate in a few sentences your own thoughts on the passing parade of life. Bumper stickers, for example, are often thought provokers. Who of us has never played mind reader with the cues people placard on their autos? I passed a '70s era Chevrolet on the Interstate that looked about used up. It was so rusted you could hardly tell the original color. The bumper sticker, too, was almost faded away, but I managed to read it: *Jesus Christ, the Great Provider*. I nodded a smile of affirmation to the young man driving it and wondered what his life was like. "Not a very great Provider, is He?" jabbed the Devil. But then, the old clunker was transportation, after all. It was getting him there about as well as my nicer car. And maybe he was learning a most valuable lesson of stewardship: live within your means. I would almost bet his car was paid for. The Word promises: "My God will meet all your needs" (Phil. 4:19 NIV).

Number 2: Use your testimony or the testimony of others. This may be a testimony of your conversion or of some more recent work of grace in your life. Many believers have learned to compose their testimony by following a simple four-step plan. Tell first what your life was like before you met Christ, second, how you came to know your need of a Savior, third how you came to conversion, and finally what your life has been like since then. D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge, Florida, is probably the source of this often-copied plan for personal testimony. (Kennedy 1970). It makes a good first assignment for student preachers learning the basics of storytelling. It's also a useful first oral assignment for a sermon delivery course. Relating the testimony of someone else also may be a powerful story. Skeptics may dispute your best arguments, but it is hard to deny a personal testimony.

Number 1: Recast a news story. Journalists are taught to write a lead sentence with the answer to all six of "Kipling's six honest serving men: What and Why and How and When and Where and Who." Then the editor further summarizes the lead in a headline. Read the following story, and then we will see how the newspaper reported it.

> Dianne Mitchell of Blalock's Beauty School in Shreveport, Louisiana gathered her students together at the beginning of the day and gave them a pep talk. "We have to stay together as a team," she told them. She encouraged them to watch out for one another, never imagining how soon they would need and how dramatically they would heed her admonition.
>
> A little before noon the students and workers were cleaning up. In walked a man wearing a handkerchief over his face and a skullcap over his hair. He carried a large caliber revolver. He entered past a sign on the door that read:

WARNING
This property protected by
JESUS CHRIST

> The man with the gun was Jared Gipson, age 24, 5 feet, 8 inches, 140 pounds. He put the gun in the back of instructor Dianne Mitchell who is somewhat taller and considerably heavier. At first she thought it was a joke when she heard "This is a holdup." Then she "saw that big old gun" and heard him order everyone to get down on the floor. "Get down, big momma," he barked at Mitchell. She didn't yet know what court records would show: Gipson has a history of armed robbery and other crimes. Some of the thirty students and staff on the floor started crying as they saw their grocery money and rent money leaving them. When the robber had gathered all the cash, he took the one male student in the class and pushed him with the pistol toward a door. Mitchell thought, "Oh, my God, he's going to shoot him!"
>
> As the robber stepped over his prone victims, Mitchell saw a bare moment of opportunity and stuck out a foot to trip him. The robber tumbled into a wall and dropped his gun. Someone shouted, "Get that sucker!" And that is exactly what they did. They pounced on him with curling irons, chairs, a wooden table leg, clenched fists, shoes, and a flood of pent-up anger.
>
> The police took the bleeding culprit to the hospital for treatment of numerous wounds, especially lacerations to the head. At his arraignment the next day he wore a white bandage across the right side of his forehead. His right eye was blackened and swollen shut. He hung his head when the judge set his bond at $100,000, but he may consider the jail a safer place than the neighborhood (Tucker 2005).

The newspaper, however, did not tell the story in order. It never does except in an occasional feature article. The headline tells it all: "Beauticians stomp, stop armed robber." The first sentence or two gives a little more detail.

> An armed robber brandishing a revolver and some rough talk entered Blalock's Beauty College demanding money Tuesday afternoon. He left crying, bleeding and under arrest, after Dianne Mitchell, her students and employees attacked the suspect, beating him into submission (*The Times*, June 15, 2005,1A).

Now a reader can skip the other sixty column inches. We need newspapers to be written that way. We scan the headlines. If they interest us, we read the lead. If we are still interested, we may read more. If not, we have the synopsis. We would never get through the newspaper if the stories were not capsuled in the headlines and summarized in a lead sentence or two. But that's not the way of the storyteller! Would you read a mystery entitled *The Butler Did It*? Would you tell a joke with the punch line first? Newspapers are a great source of narrative support for a sermon, but preachers need to take care to revise the story in favor of a true narrative with a genuine plot.

We can master the rudiments of narrative for preaching and help each other to do so. Jesus, the master storyteller remains our pattern in the pulpit as in all else, and he "spoke all these things to the crowds in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable" (Matt. 13:34 NIV).

NARRATION WORKSHEET

SETTING

Where are we?

UNIFYING SIGNIFICANCE

Why?

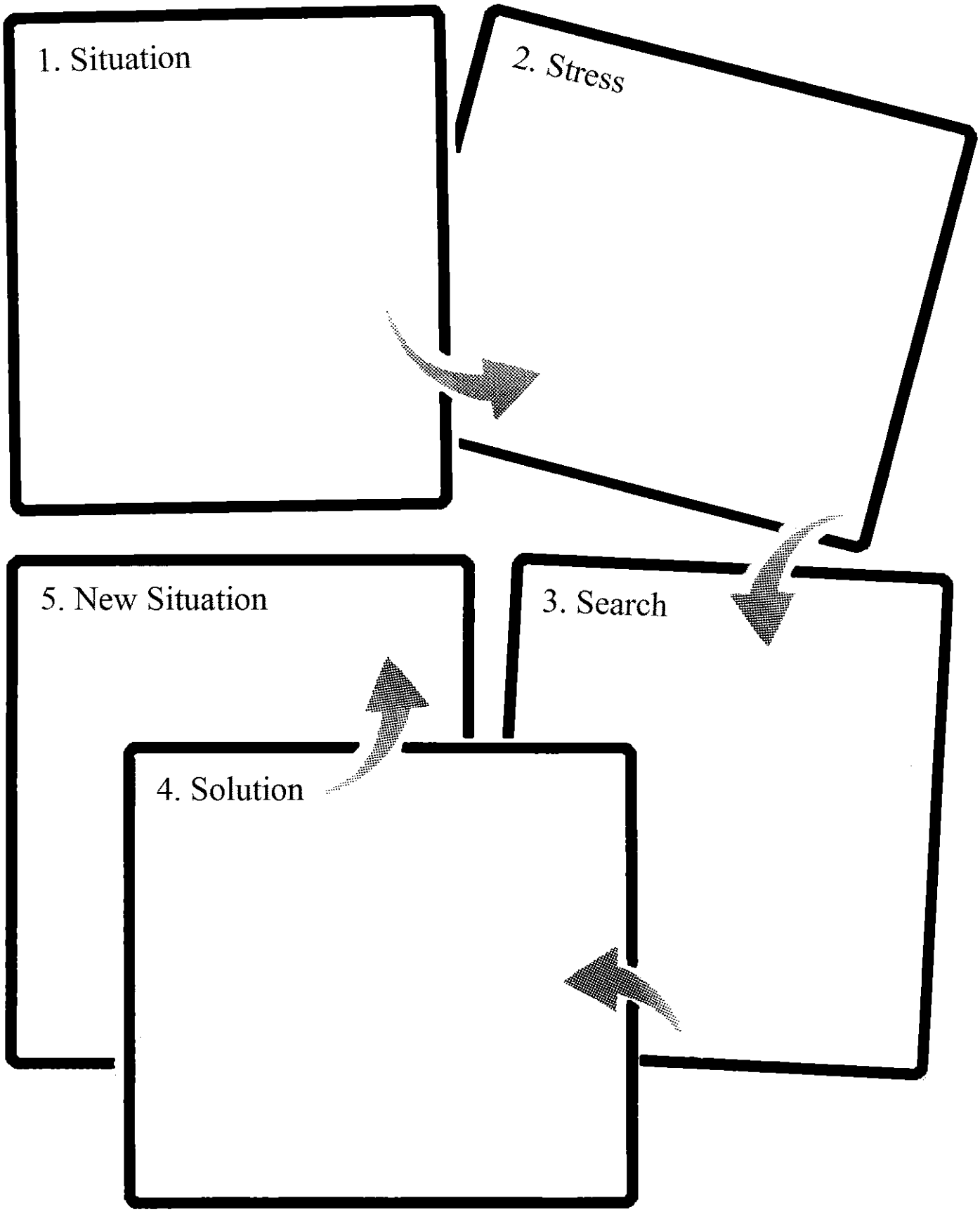
CHARACTER(S)

Who is involved?

PLOT / ACTION

What's happening?

PLOT MOVEMENTS WORKSHEET



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Tucker, Austin B. "Enhancing the Narrative Quality in Your Sermons," *Proclaim: The Pastor's Journal for Biblical Preaching*, Vol. 27, Num. 4. (June-August 1997).