The Narrative

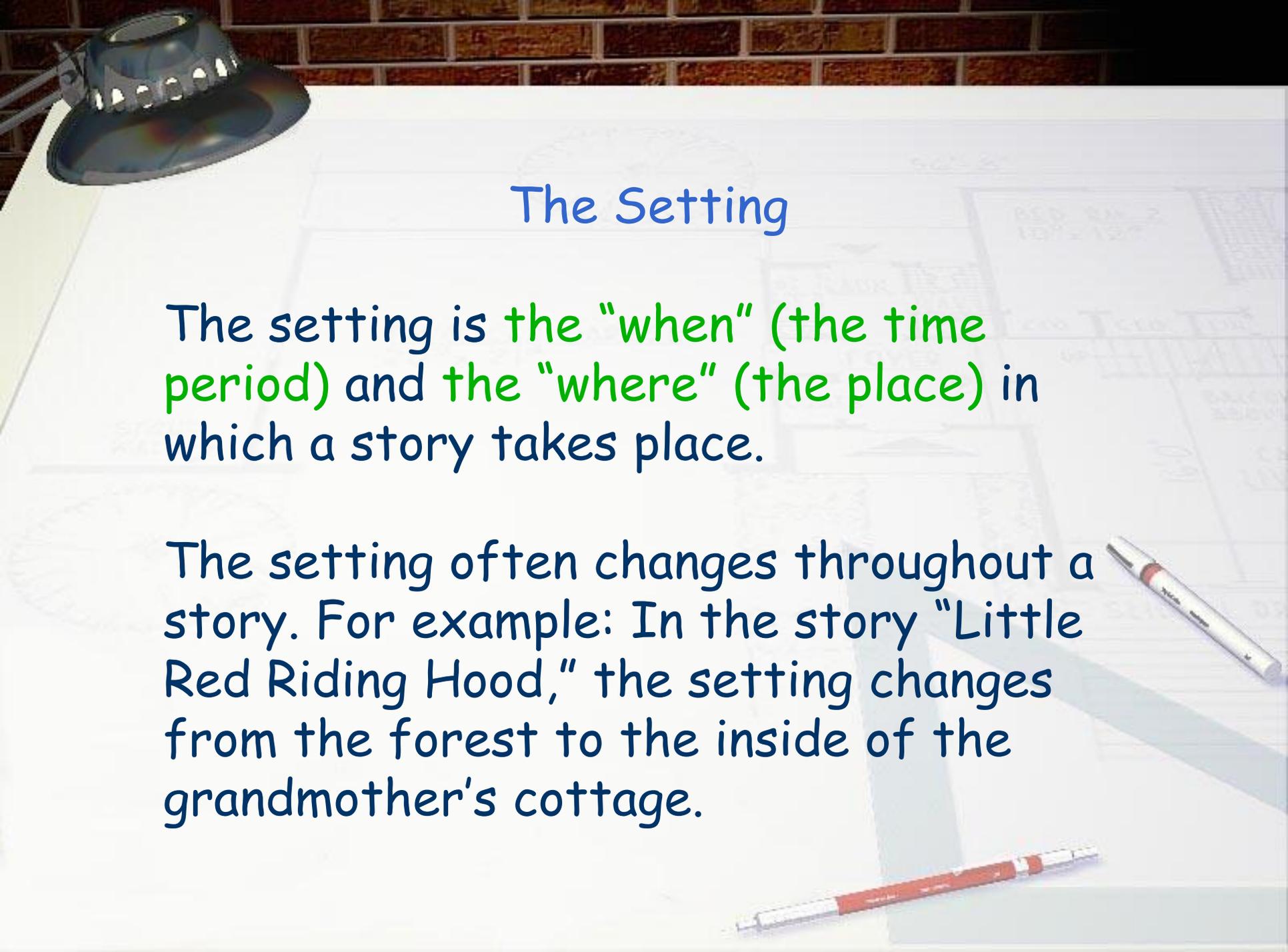## Composing a True or Fictional Story
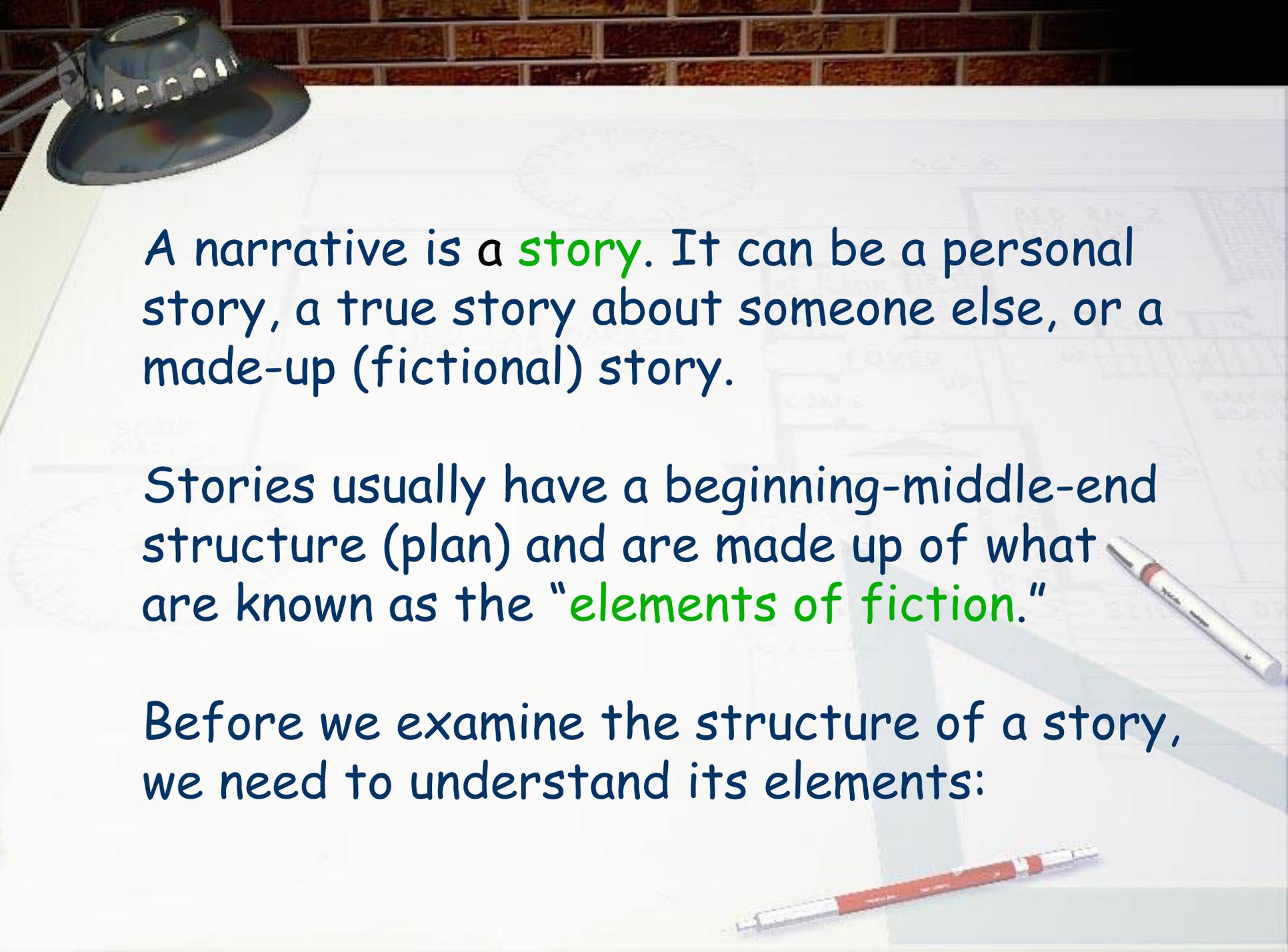
A narrative is a story. It can be a personal story, a true story about someone else, or a made-up (fictional) story.

Stories usually have a beginning-middle-end structure (plan) and are made up of what are known as the "elements of fiction."
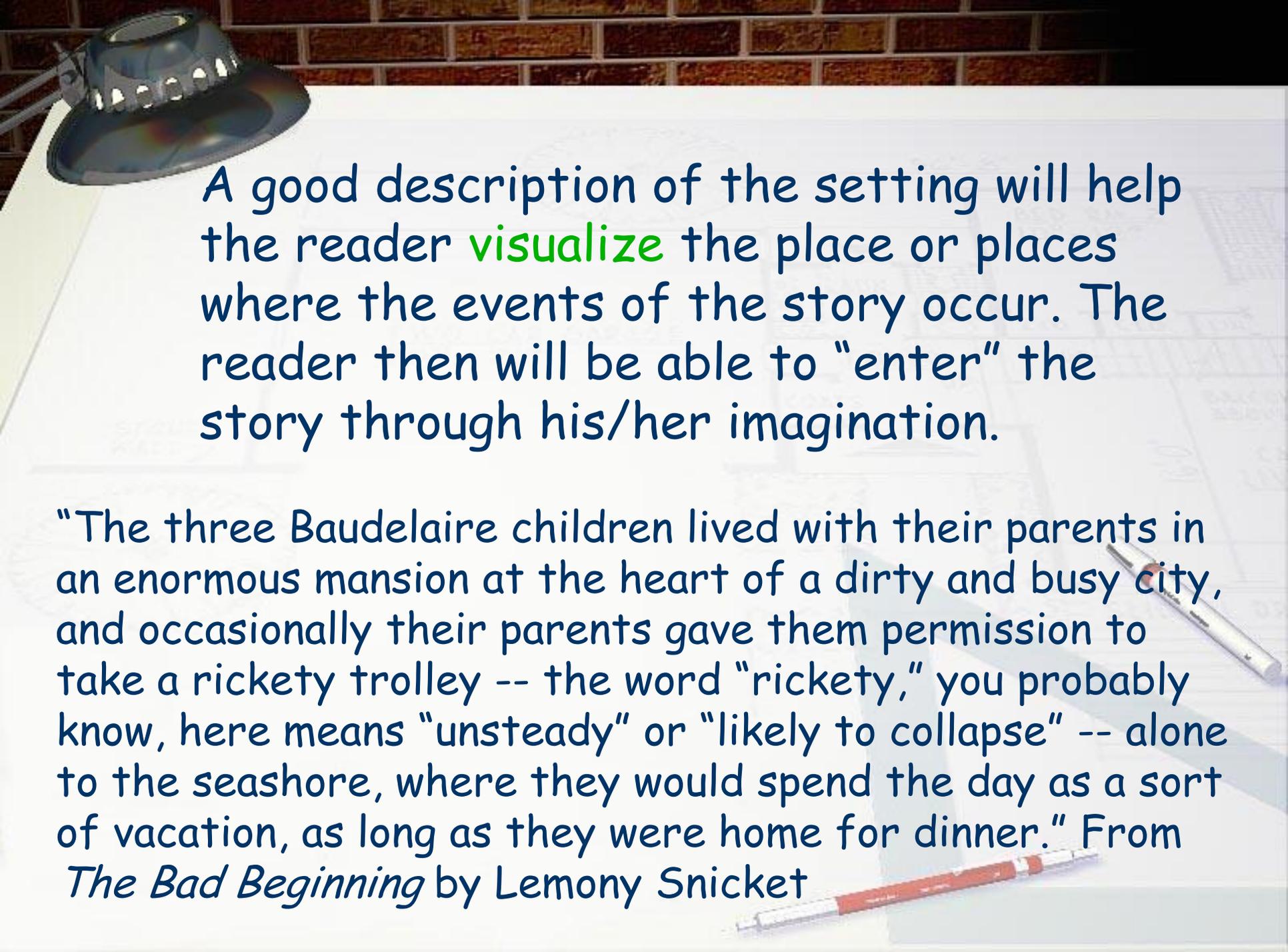
Before we examine the structure of a story, we need to understand its elements:

The Setting

The setting is the "when" (the time period) and the "where" (the place) in which a story takes place.

The setting often changes throughout a story. For example: In the story "Little Red Riding Hood," the setting changes from the forest to the inside of the grandmother's cottage.

A good description of the setting will help the reader visualize the place or places where the events of the story occur. The reader then will be able to "enter" the story through his/her imagination.

"The three Baudelaire children lived with their parents in an enormous mansion at the heart of a dirty and busy city, and occasionally their parents gave them permission to take a rickety trolley -- the word "rickety," you probably know, here means "unsteady" or "likely to collapse" -- alone to the seashore, where they would spend the day as a sort of vacation, as long as they were home for dinner." From *The Bad Beginning* by Lemony Snicket
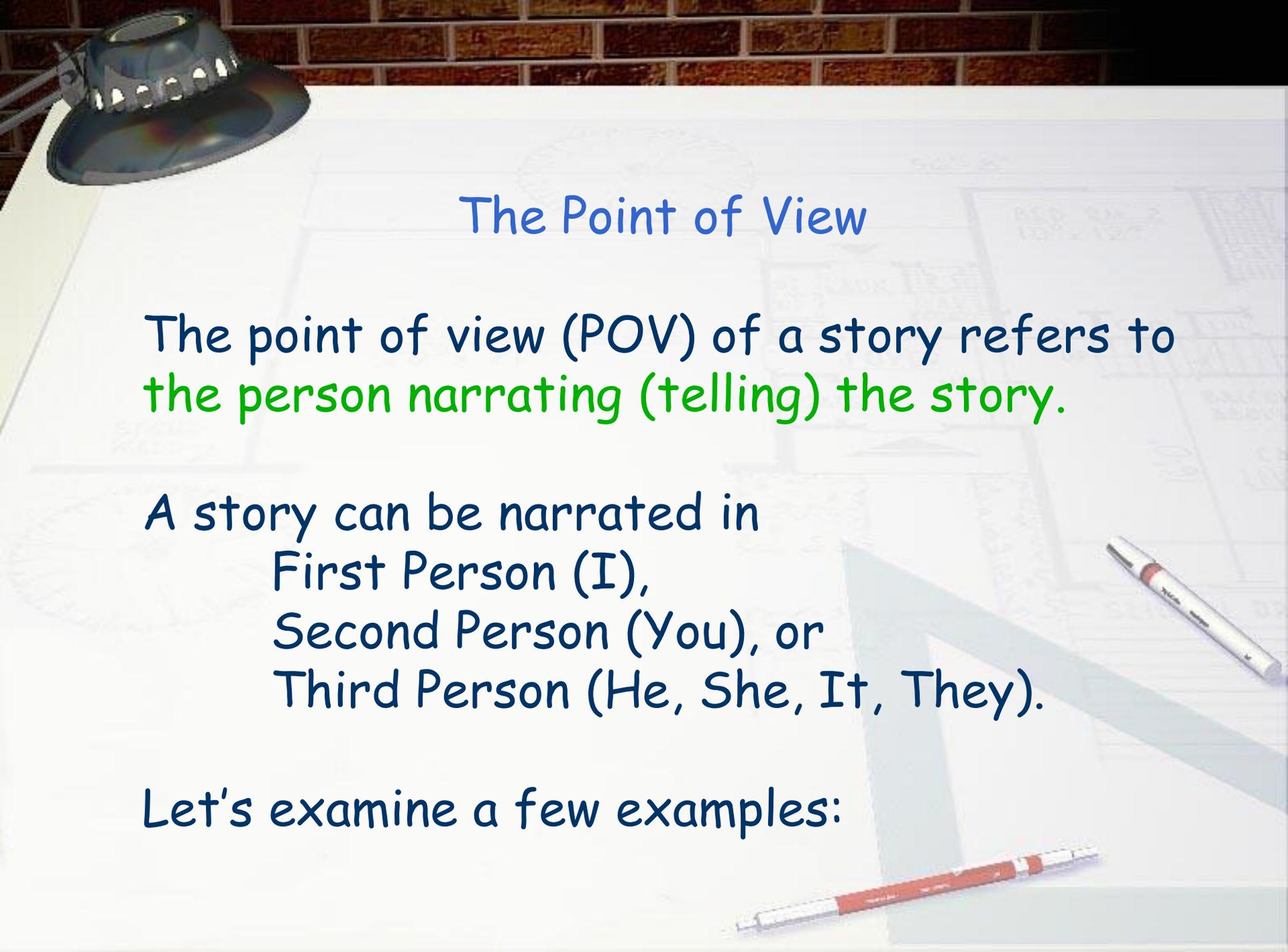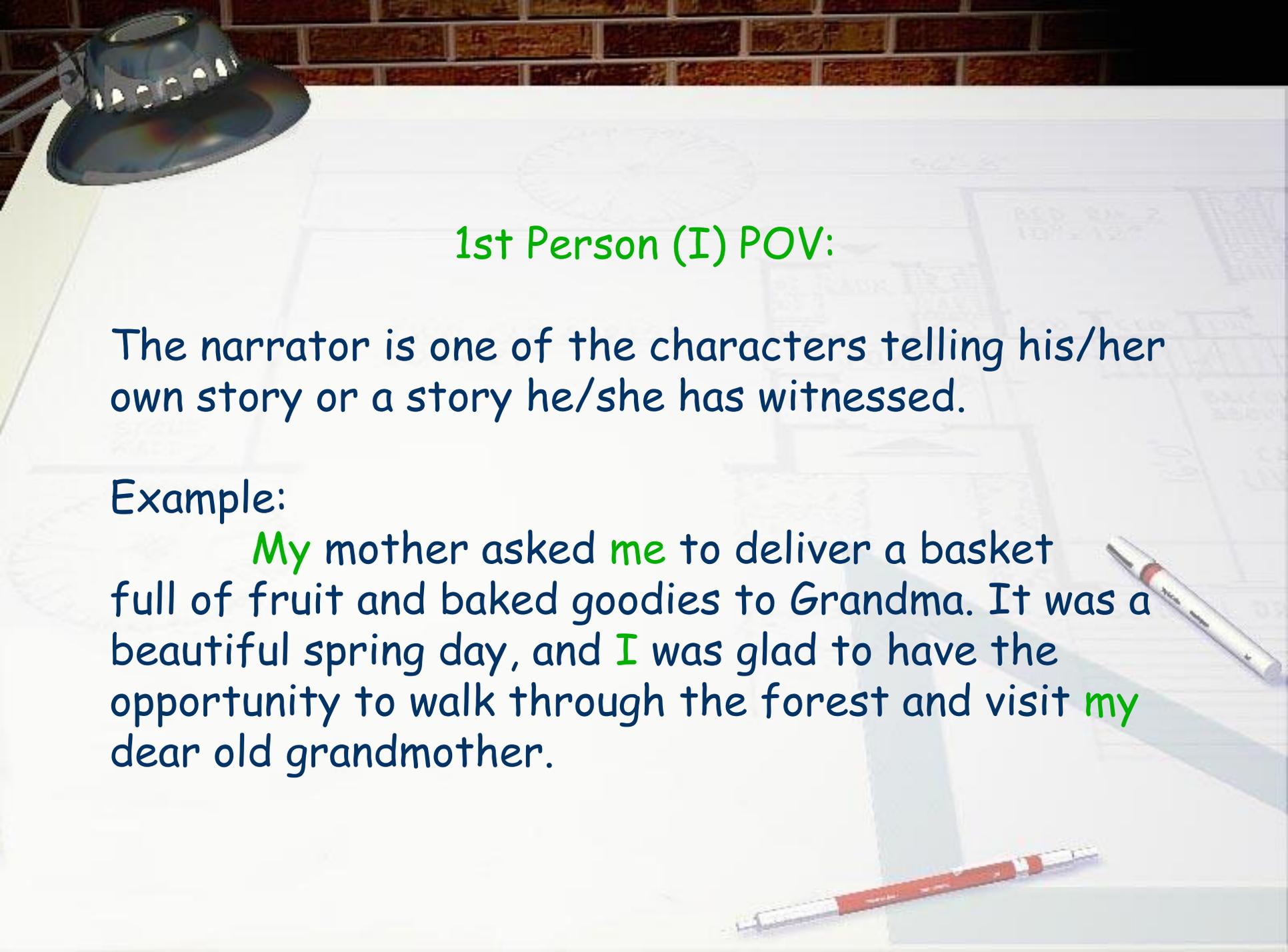
The Point of View

The point of view (POV) of a story refers to the person narrating (telling) the story.

A story can be narrated in
     First Person (I),
     Second Person (You), or
     Third Person (He, She, It, They).
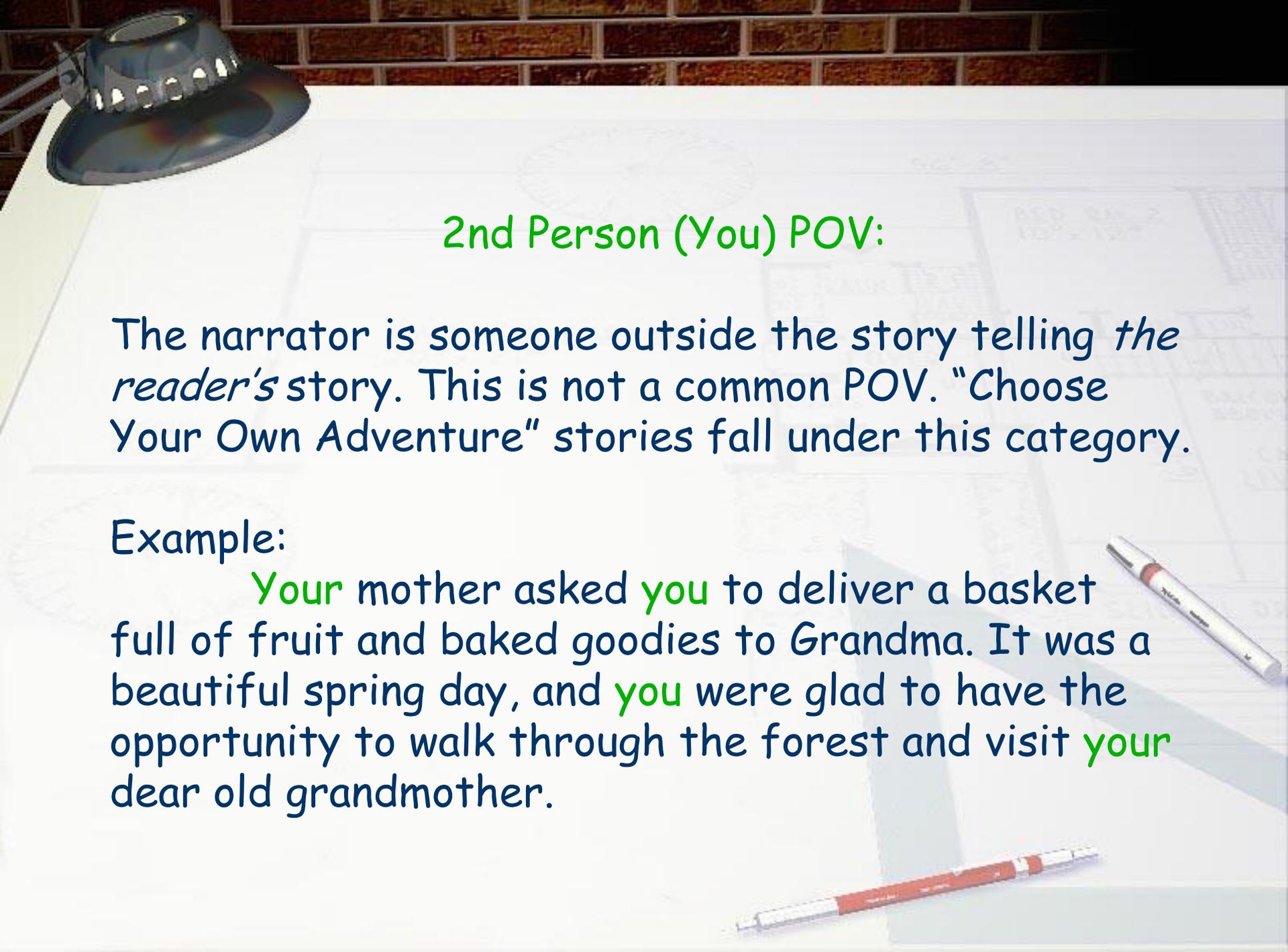
Let's examine a few examples:

1st Person (I) POV:

The narrator is one of the characters telling his/her own story or a story he/she has witnessed.

Example:

My mother asked me to deliver a basket full of fruit and baked goodies to Grandma. It was a beautiful spring day, and I was glad to have the opportunity to walk through the forest and visit my dear old grandmother.

2nd Person (You) POV:

The narrator is someone outside the story telling *the reader's* story. This is not a common POV. "Choose Your Own Adventure" stories fall under this category.

Example:

      Your mother asked you to deliver a basket full of fruit and baked goodies to Grandma. It was a beautiful spring day, and you were glad to have the opportunity to walk through the forest and visit your dear old grandmother.

3rd Person (He, She, It, They) POV:

The narrator is someone outside the story. The narrator may describe what each character is thinking/feeling (3rd Person Omniscient), what one or a few characters are thinking/feeling (3rd Person Limited), or he/she may choose not to describe anyone's thoughts/feelings (Camera View).

Example: 3rd Person Limited (the narrator describes how Red feels):

Red's mother asked her to deliver a basket full of fruit and baked goodies to Grandma. It was a beautiful spring day, and Red was glad to have the opportunity to walk through the forest and visit her dear old grandmother.

The Characters

The characters of a story are the people (or animals, etc.) that participate in the story. Most stories contain main characters and secondary characters. The protagonist is the main character of a story (usually the hero), and the antagonist is the character (or the force) that opposes the protagonist (usually the villain).

Example: In "Little Red Riding Hood," the protagonist is Red and the antagonist is the wolf.
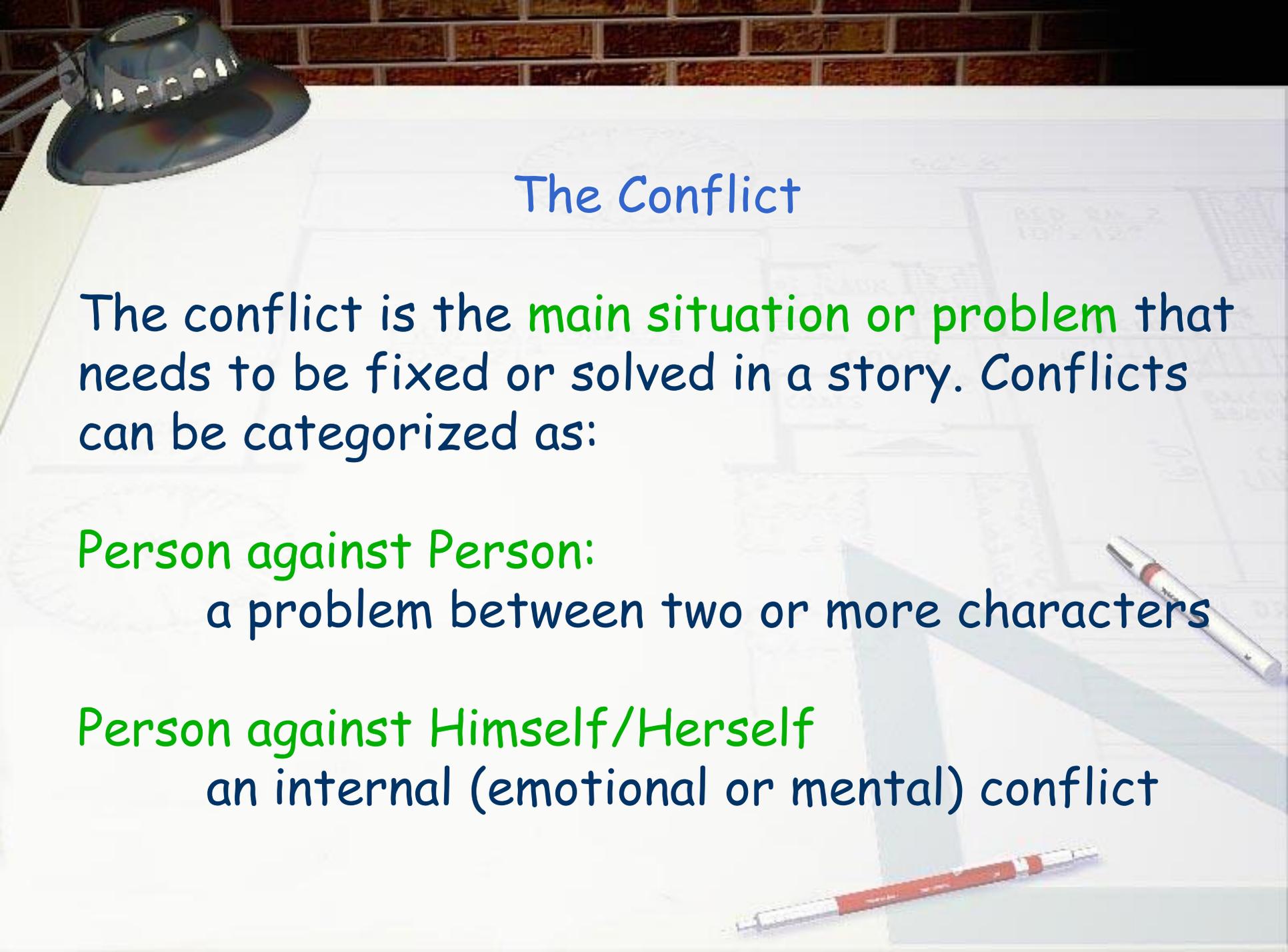
Characterization

Characterization refers to the way in which a writer develops a character. A writer reveals what a character is like through:

1- the character's name, appearance, and background
2- the character's choices and actions
3- the character's words
4- the character's thoughts
5- what others say or think about the character
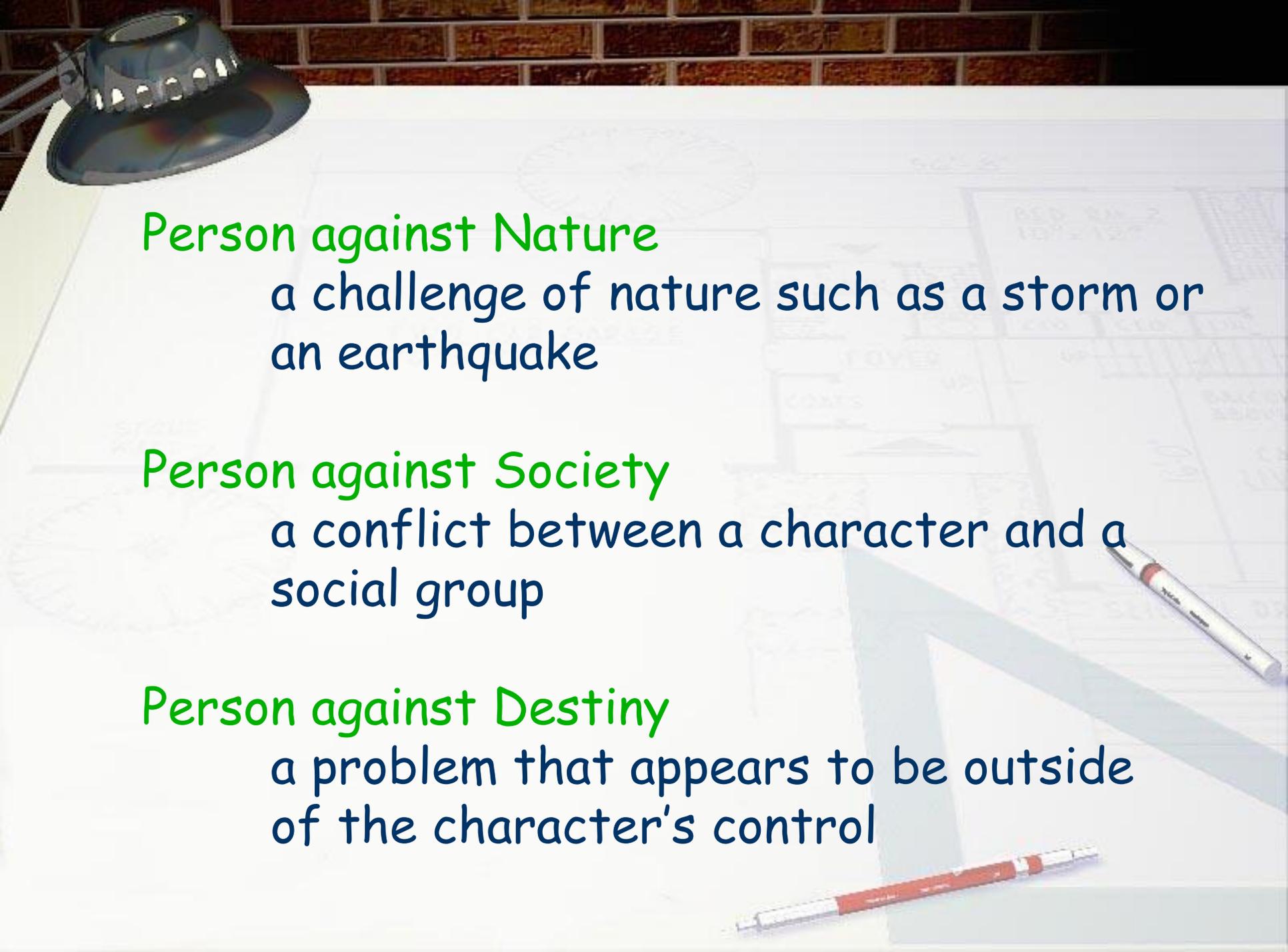6- the way others act toward the character

The Conflict

The conflict is the main situation or problem that needs to be fixed or solved in a story. Conflicts can be categorized as:

Person against Person:
a problem between two or more characters

Person against Himself/Herself
an internal (emotional or mental) conflict

Person against Nature
a challenge of nature such as a storm or an earthquake

Person against Society
a conflict between a character and a social group

Person against Destiny
a problem that appears to be outside of the character's control

The Style

Style refers to the way a writer uses language (vocabulary, sentence structure, figurative language, dialogue etc.) to tell a story.

Example:
Lemony Snicket's writing style includes inserting definitions of high-level vocabulary words in his stories: "The children had mixed feelings when, over a dull dinner of boiled chicken, boiled potatoes, and blanched -- the word "blanched" here means "boiled" -- string beans, Mr. Poe announced that they were to leave his household the next morning." From The Bad Beginning by L. Snicket.

The Mood

The mood is the feeling a story creates in the reader. All the elements of a story put together help create the mood of a story, but the setting is especially important.

Example: "The bricks were stained with soot and grime. There were only two small windows, which were closed with the shades drawn even though it was a nice day. Rising above the windows was a tall and dirty tower that tilted slightly to the left. The front door needed to be repainted, and carved in the middle of it was an image of an eye. The entire building sagged to one side, like a crooked tooth." from *The Bad Beginning* by L. Snicket
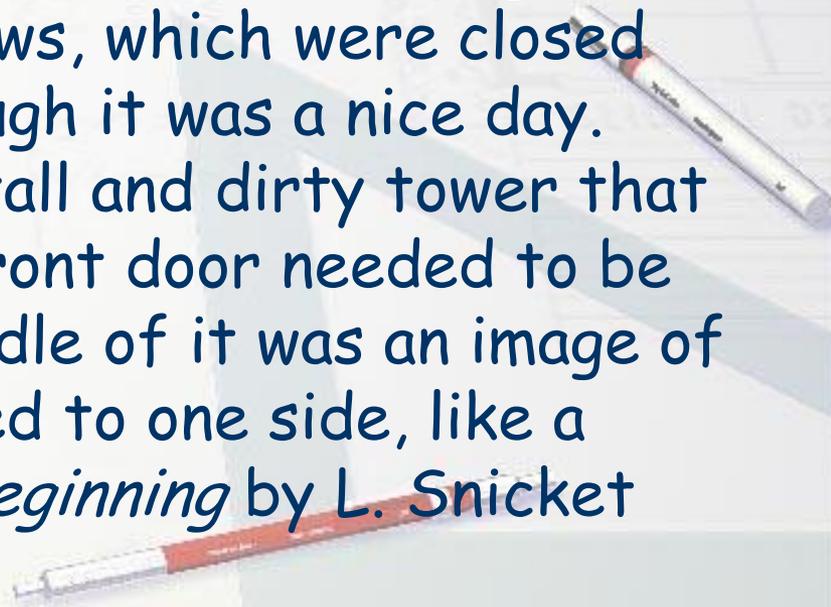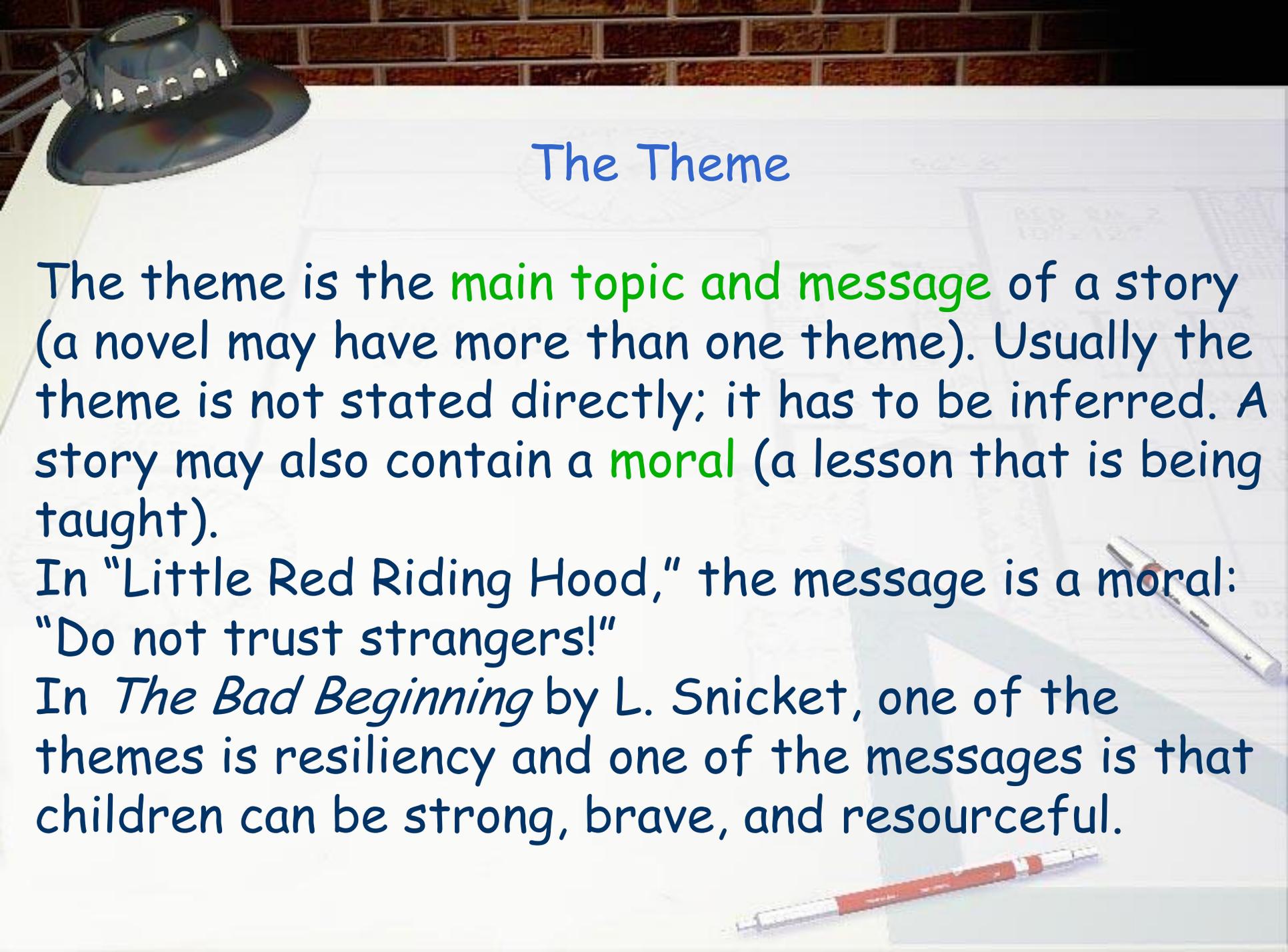
The Theme

The theme is the main topic and message of a story (a novel may have more than one theme). Usually the theme is not stated directly; it has to be inferred. A story may also contain a moral (a lesson that is being taught).

In "Little Red Riding Hood," the message is a moral: "Do not trust strangers!"

In *The Bad Beginning* by L. Snicket, one of the themes is resiliency and one of the messages is that children can be strong, brave, and resourceful.
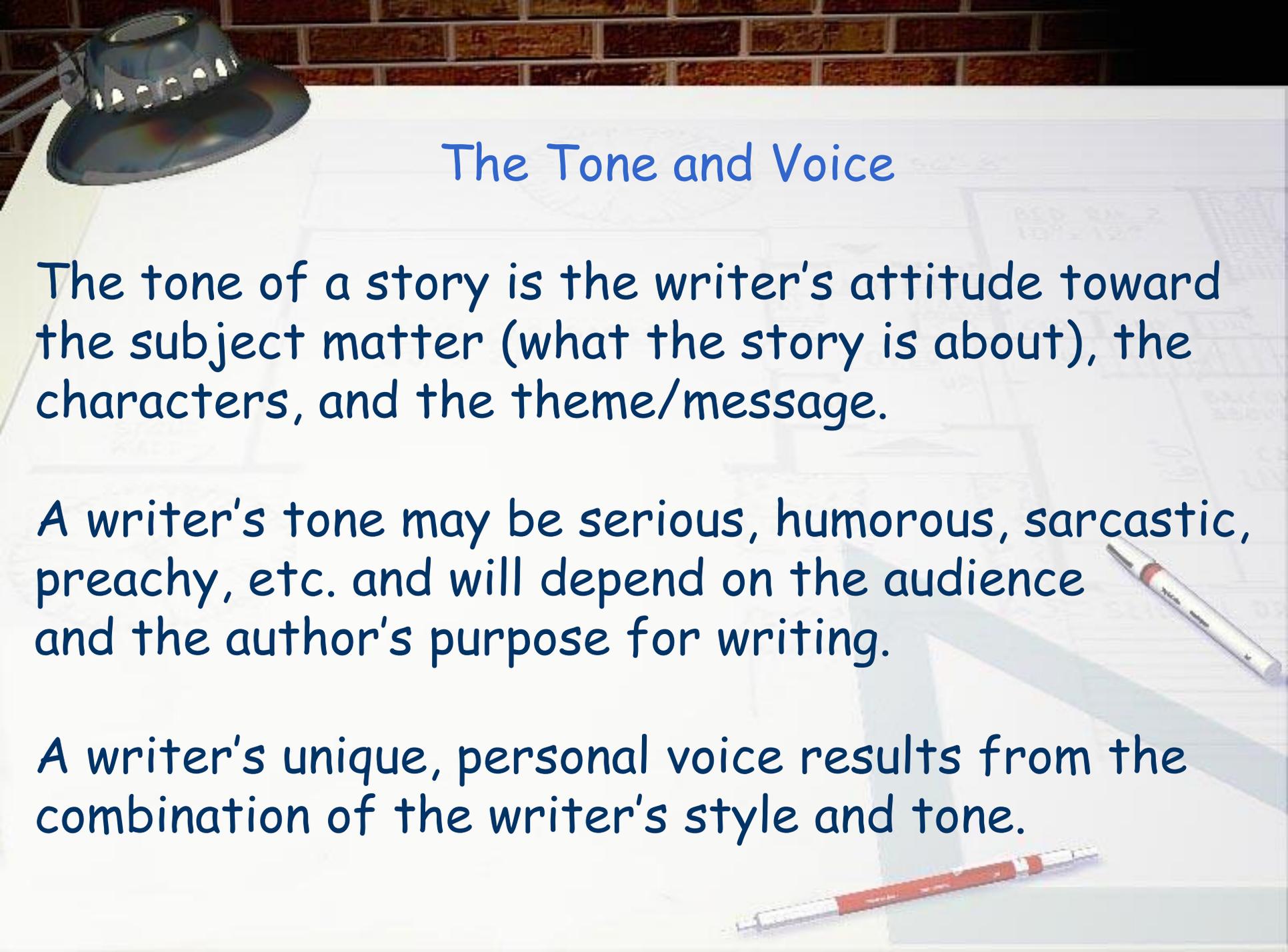
The Tone and Voice

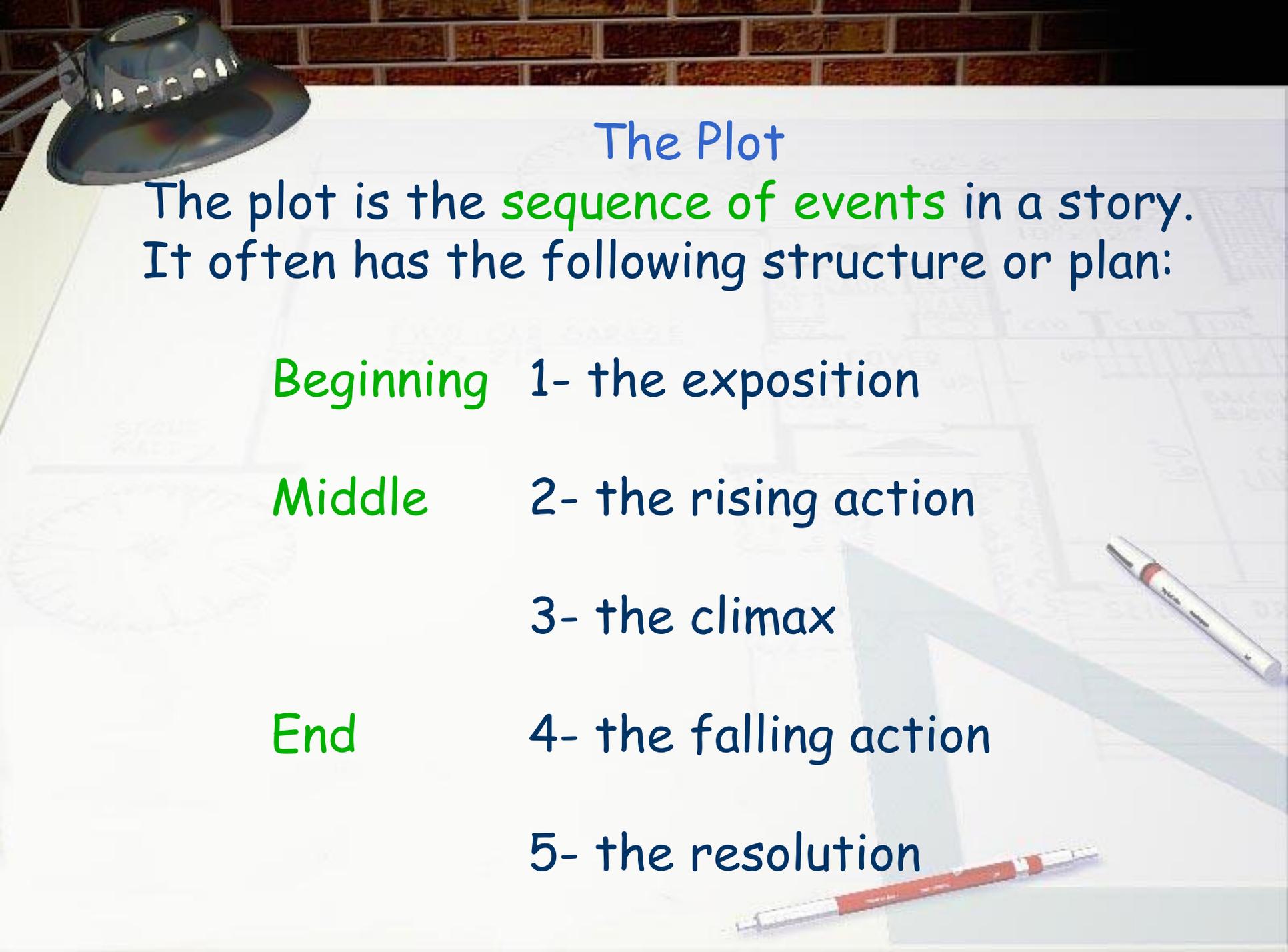The tone of a story is the writer's attitude toward the subject matter (what the story is about), the characters, and the theme/message.

A writer's tone may be serious, humorous, sarcastic, preachy, etc. and will depend on the audience and the author's purpose for writing.

A writer's unique, personal voice results from the combination of the writer's style and tone.

The Plot

The plot is the sequence of events in a story.
It often has the following structure or plan:

Beginning   1- the exposition

Middle   2- the rising action

             3- the climax

End   4- the falling action

             5- the resolution
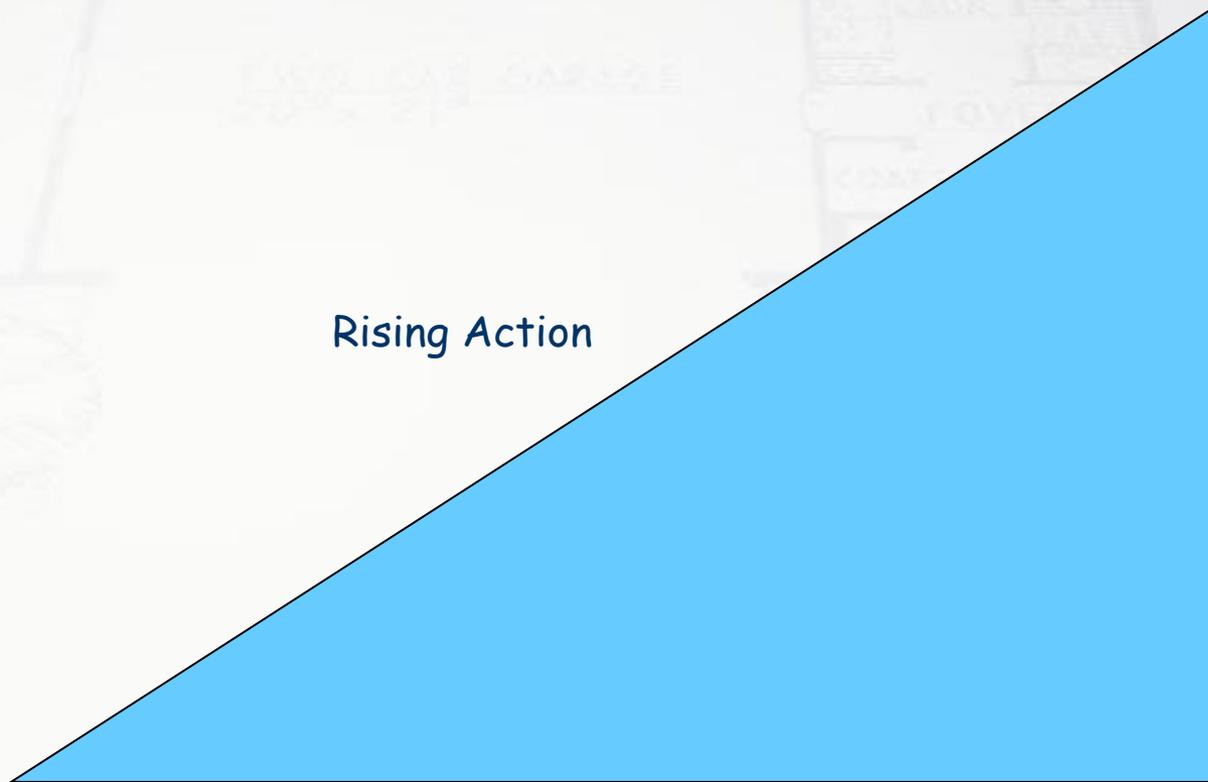
The Plot Structure

(also known as a plot mountain)

Climax

Rising Action

Falling Action

Exposition

Resolution

_____   _____

The Exposition
(The Beginning)

The exposition usually includes a description of the setting and an introduction to the main characters and the situation/problem.

In "Little Red Riding Hood" the exposition introduces the setting: a forest, the protagonist: Red, and the situation: Red will cross the forest to deliver a basket with food to her grandmother. There's also a clue to the problem: her mother warns her not to dawdle and not to talk to strangers.

The Rising Action
(The Middle)

The rising action contains a sequence of events in which the author develops the characters and reveals/complicates the problem through the use of dialogue, action, and various other writing techniques.

In "Little Red Riding Hood," the middle includes Red meeting the wolf and falling for his trickery, the wolf gobbling-up Red's grandmother and disguising himself as her, and Red arriving at Grandma's cottage and making comments on the fake grandmother's appearance ("Why Grandma, what big ears you have!").
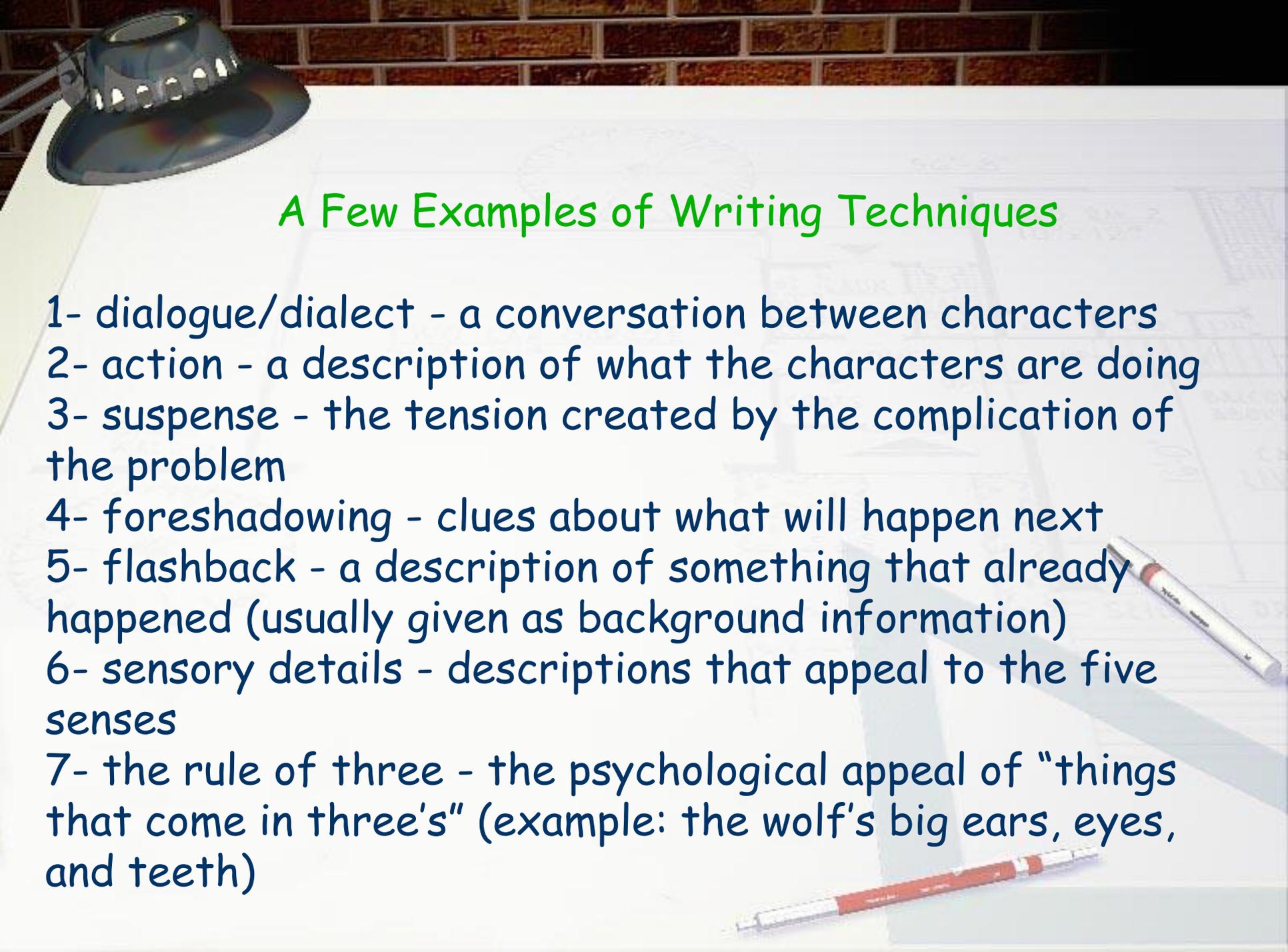
A Few Examples of Writing Techniques

1- dialogue/dialect - a conversation between characters
2- action - a description of what the characters are doing
3- suspense - the tension created by the complication of the problem
4- foreshadowing - clues about what will happen next
5- flashback - a description of something that already happened (usually given as background information)
6- sensory details - descriptions that appeal to the five senses
7- the rule of three - the psychological appeal of "things that come in three's" (example: the wolf's big ears, eyes, and teeth)

The Climax
(The End of the Middle)

The climax is the turning point of the story: the event that generates a solution (positive or negative) to the conflict/problem and which usually reveals the author's message. In most stories, it's also the high point or most exciting event.

In "Little Red Riding Hood," the climax is the moment when the wolf cries, "The better to eat you with!" Red then realizes the terrible mistake she made in trusting the wolf. She screams for help and tries to escape, but the wolf catches her and eats her.

The Falling Action
(The Beginning of the End)

The falling action is comprised of the events that follow the climax and are part of the solution to the problem. Think of it as the part of the story where the writer ties any loose ends.

In "Little Red Riding Hood," the problem of the wolf is solved when a woodsman hears Red's cry for help and rescues her and her grandmother from inside the wolf's stomach.

The Resolution
(The End)

The resolution is the ending of a story. Usually the ending shows that the conflict/problem has been solved, that important lessons have been learned, and that the protagonist has changed/evolved in some way. Whether a story's ending is happy or not will depend on the message on life and human nature that the writer wants to communicate.

In the ending of "Little Red Riding Hood," the wolf gets his comeuppance and a wiser Red happily returns home.
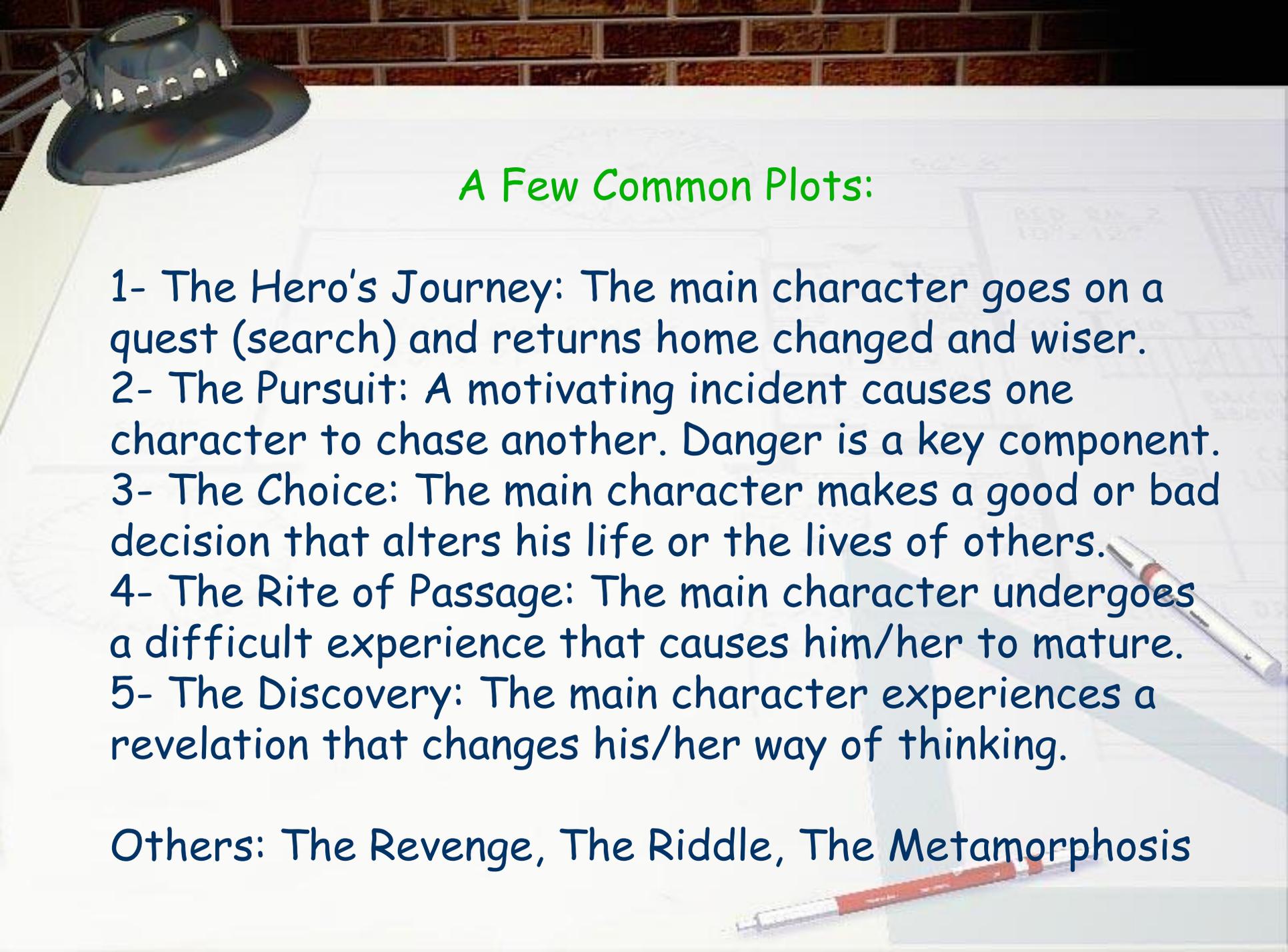
A Few Common Plots:

1- The Hero's Journey: The main character goes on a quest (search) and returns home changed and wiser.
2- The Pursuit: A motivating incident causes one character to chase another. Danger is a key component.
3- The Choice: The main character makes a good or bad decision that alters his life or the lives of others.
4- The Rite of Passage: The main character undergoes a difficult experience that causes him/her to mature.
5- The Discovery: The main character experiences a revelation that changes his/her way of thinking.

Others: The Revenge, The Riddle, The Metamorphosis

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