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Hold Readers at a Climax

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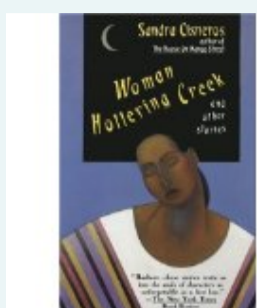
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"Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros is a short story in the collection titled *Woman Hollering Creek*.

[Click here](#) to download an excerpt and follow along with Julie's article.

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Julie Patterson is writer-in-residence for the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers and also an associate faculty member of the English department at the IU School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI.



Julie has taught in classrooms and after-school programs in Boston, Chicago and Indianapolis, and is currently on the artist roster for Arts for Learning Indiana (formerly Young Audiences of Indiana) and the Indiana Repertory Theatre. She has presented at the annual Indiana State Reading Association conference and Pike Township's Literocity.

Hold Readers at a Climax

by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence

As promised, this week I'm diving deeper into the subject of a story's climax.

When I first read stories with students and ask them to identify the climax, they tend to point to a small amount of text, often two sentences or less. This is one of a handful of common phenomena that still baffles me -- where did so many of us get the idea that climaxes are small?

More accurately, the climax is often the most important part of the story, and, consequently, it gets the most space.

When I first ask students what the climax is in Sandra Cisneros' short story "Eleven" (at left), for example, I always hear a range of answers:

On page 9, when Rachel starts crying in front of everyone.

No, that's too late in the story. It's when Sylvia Salvidar says the red sweater belongs to Rachel.

No, right after that, when the teacher puts it on Rachel's desk.

When Mrs. Price makes Rachel wear the sweater -- that's the worst part.

I propose that all of these responses are correct, because technically, the climax begins near the end of page 7, when Sylvia Salvidar pinpoints Rachel as the owner of the abandoned sweater, and ends somewhere near the end of page 9, when Rachel is crying in front of everyone. Note: a smart literary friend of mine argues that it ends even later, when "only Mrs. Price pretends everything's okay."

I think each of us pinpoints a different exact moment of climax because we bring our own baggage -- our own personal experiences with teachers, crying in front of others, embarrassment, birthdays, clothing, etc -- with us when we read this story. The exact moment that the story stings the worst is different for different readers. That's actually the beauty of literature, friends.

So Sandra Cisneros is smart. Her climax is not any one of these lines but an entire *scene* that occupies two pages of a story that's barely over three pages long. (That's important, so let me say it again very plainly: the climax is 2/3 of the whole story!) Cisneros knows that in order for readers to really feel the height of tension in this story, she needs to hold us as long as possible in the moments of discomfort. This is where she wants readers to feel what Rachel, the protagonist, felt -- disgusted, frustrated, humiliated.

So how do we, as writers, drag out a fleeting moment of agony like this?

If we look again closely at "Eleven," we see that the climax is where Cisneros piles on the craft strategies we recognize -- metaphors, imagery, sensory details, spoken dialogue, internal dialogue/thoughts, repetition, alliteration, action and more. Sure, she sprinkles a few of these strategies in important parts of the story outside of the climax, too, but she *really* layers them on thick *inside* the climax. This is where almost all of the dialogue is placed, and there's a metaphor in almost every paragraph of the climax. In this way, Cisneros zooms in on this scene and effectively slows time, holding readers in the most important part of the story.

As writing teachers, we often tell students to "add details" or "write with all your senses." We applaud the use of imagery and dialogue. But we do students a disservice if we let them believe that good writers do these things indiscriminately. Quite the contrary, good writers place literary devices, imagery, sensory details, dialogue, etc, very intentionally in the places they want readers to think about, feel and remember. So naturally, you might find a high proportion of these strategies in the climax.

Wonder what else to teach about climaxes? Use what you've learned here to isolate the climaxes in some of your favorite stories and see what else you notice about the text in those specific scenes.