

A Teacher's Activity Guide for  
*Fiona Finkelstein,*  
*Big-Time Ballerina!*

Written by Shawn Stout



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Teacher's Guide created by Debbie Gonzales

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## Foreword

*Fiona Finkelstein, Big-Time Ballerina!* is not only a funny, quick-paced, heart-warming, delightful story, this book deals with real issues that kids deal with on a regular basis—humiliation, embarrassment, self-consciousness, absentee parents, and the angst of a potentially broken friendship...real things that real kids worry about. In a quick-wittedly lively manner, Stout portrays the anxiety of fourth-grader Fiona Finkelstein, a young ballerina wrought with stage fright, in a humorous, nonthreatening way. Should a child be worry-free they will simply enjoy the story. Should a reader have issues weighing heavy on their minds, they will find solace in Stout's fun-loving, action-packed prose.

This guide begins with Discussion Questions that have been annotated with the pages the topics were pulled from. I love to watch a child rifle through a book in hand searching for the exact quote needed clarify their statements. Use the guide in this way. Keep Fiona nearby when discussing this wonderful book.

Next is a multi-faceted lesson presenting the terminology of the Story Arc and offers an opportunity to practice the skill of sequencing. In the activity we analyze the plot line of the familiar story of Cinderella, apply new knowledge to plot point found in *Fiona Finkelstein, Big-Time Ballerina!*, and lastly the child is encouraged to illustrate their own creative plot on using the Story Arc structure.

Also included in this guide is a creative, artistic approach to understanding the metaphor as a figure of speech and a simple science experiment in which the child makes homemade rain. Lastly featured is an interview with author Shawn Stout in which she discusses the inspiration for her the plot, characters, and sheds a little light on just how much of Fiona's character is similar to her own.

It was truly a delight to create a guide for this important book. Put it in the hands of young readers, will you? They will laugh, cry, and undoubtedly learn a few valuable life lessons from zany, likable Fiona Finkelstein. I know I did.

Debbie Gonzales

Author/Educator

*Freelancer Debbie Gonzales has well over 35 years experience in the field of education. She's worked as a classroom teacher, educational consultant, school administrator, and a curriculum designer. She earned her MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults and has published a number of early readers with Gilt Edge Publishing. Deb currently serves as the Regional Advisor for the Austin, Texas chapter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.*

## Discussion Questions

1. **“Worry gives small things a big shadow,” Madame Vallée said. “It’s best to stay in the sun, Fiona dear” (6).**
  - What is Madame Valle really trying to say to Fiona? How does worry make small matters seem like big ones?
  - When someone can manage to “stay in the sun” their shadow disappears. How can staying in the sun, or seeing things as they really are, make worries disappear?
  - What sorts of things worry Fiona? Regarding her dancing? Cleo? Benevolence? Her mother? Her father? Weather forecasts?
  - What sorts of things worry you? How is worry making small matters in your life seem like really big ones? What can you do about these worries? Who can help?
  
2. **Fiona’s mother is a popular *Heartaches and Diamonds* soap opera star and her father is a successful WORD weather man. Both of her parents’ jobs involve performing in public all the time and they are good at it!**
  - Do you think Fiona’s parents’ successes contribute to her stage fright in any way? If so, why?
  - Do you think that her parents understand Fiona’s struggle? Do you think that they can even relate to being frightened to perform?
  - Do you understand why Fiona has stage fright? Have you even been terrified to get in front of people and perform? If so, when did this happen? How did you feel inside? How did you manage to survive the moment?
  
3. **Fiona lives in a town named ‘Ordinary’. The dictionary defines this word as something common; usual; having no exceptional ability, second rate; average; of having inferior quality.**
  - Why do you think the author chose to name Fiona’s home ‘Ordinary’? Do you think the town’s name has anything to do with how Fiona feels about herself?
  - How does the town where Fiona lives compare with her mother’s home? How do you think Fiona feels about this? How do you feel about it?
  - Is a prima ballerina ordinary? Explain your answer.
  - What does it mean if something is ‘common’, ‘usual’, or ‘average’? Do you think that Fiona feels that she has ‘no exceptional ability’? What is like to feel ‘second rate’? Have you ever felt this way? When? What did you do about this feeling?
  
4. **At the television station Fiona and her father play a little word game together. Dad says that he would like to buy a vowel. Fiona asks, “Which one?” He answers, “I’ve always liked ‘u’.” She says “I like ‘u’, too” (24).**
  - What does this game say express Fiona’s feelings for her father?

- How does Fiona feel about her father? Why do think she feels this way?
- Do you like her father? What is it about him that is appealing?

**5. Fiona is troubled with the fact that “These days, she saw more of her mom on TV than in real life. Her mom had gone from a starring role in Fiona’s life to one of those extras who didn’t have a big part” (59).**

- What does this statement say about Fiona’s relationship with her mother? Does Fiona miss her mother? Does her father? How do you know? What did the characters do to communicate their feelings to you?
- What does it mean to have a ‘starring role’?
- In what ways had Fiona become an ‘extra who didn’t have a big part’ in her mother’s life?
- Do you think that this could be one of Fiona’s main problems? Do you think that if her mother were more involved in her life Fiona might not have such severe problems with stage fright?
- Is there anything that Fiona can do about dealing with her feelings regarding missing her mother? If you were Fiona’s friend what would you do to help her?

**6. In the beginning of the book Benevolence is Fiona’s antagonist. This means that Benevolence’s character is against Fiona and makes trouble for her. However, if a person is known to be ‘benevolent’ they are generous, kind, thoughtful, and concerned for the well-being of others.**

- Does Benevolence’s name suit her? Is she generous and kind toward Fiona? Is Benevolence concerned for Fiona’s well-being?
- How does Benevolence make trouble for Fiona? Why do you think she treats Fiona so badly, teasing her so cruelly?
- Have you ever met someone like Benevolence? What did you do? How were you able to handle their taunting?

**7. During ballet class Benevolence taunts Fiona once again, shaming her for throwing up before a major performance. Though part of Fiona wanted to shame Benevolence right back that “...part was a small part inside her. And *that* part was being overruled by a bigger part, which told her just to ignore her. Hard as it was, that is what Fiona did” (109).**

- Fiona is learning how to handle problem people who bother her in a positive way by ignoring them. Though this behavior is very hard to do, ignoring irritating people is one of the best ways to get them to stop bothering you. What changes in Benevolence does this behavior bring about? What changes in Fiona does this behavior bring about?
- Why is this method of dealing with personal antagonists so effective?
- Have you ever had to deal with one of your antagonists in this way? What was the situation? What changes took place? In your antagonist? In you? Was it hard to do?

**8. When Benevolence was cast as the prima angel, Fiona “...notices a strange look flash onto Benevolence’s face. It was there and then gone. But Fiona knew that look. It was a look of fear” (116).**

- Do you think Fiona saw a little of herself in her antagonist? If so, in what way?
- To have compassion for another person means that a person has a deep awareness of another and the desire to relieve it. Did Fiona have compassion for Benevolence in this situation? In what way? How does Fiona respond? How does Benevolence respond?
- Is it good to have compassion for others, even your enemies? Should people respond this way to others? Why or why not? Have you ever had an experience such as this with someone? What happened?

**9. Consider the character of Cleo, Fiona’s best friend.**

- In what ways did Cleo help to motivate Fiona? How did she encourage Fiona to do things that Fiona didn’t think that she could do? How does Cleo attempt to motivate Fiona?
- In what ways did Cleo reassure Fiona, helping to build Fiona’s confidence?
- Why did Cleo organize the can-can dance performance opportunity for Fiona? What about the pinkie-swear? What does Cleo hope to gain in these things? Or does she even care about personal gain? Should she? Why or why not.
- In what ways does Cleo demonstrate loyalty to Fiona? Are you loyal to your best friends? Are you quick to forgive them if they disappoint you?

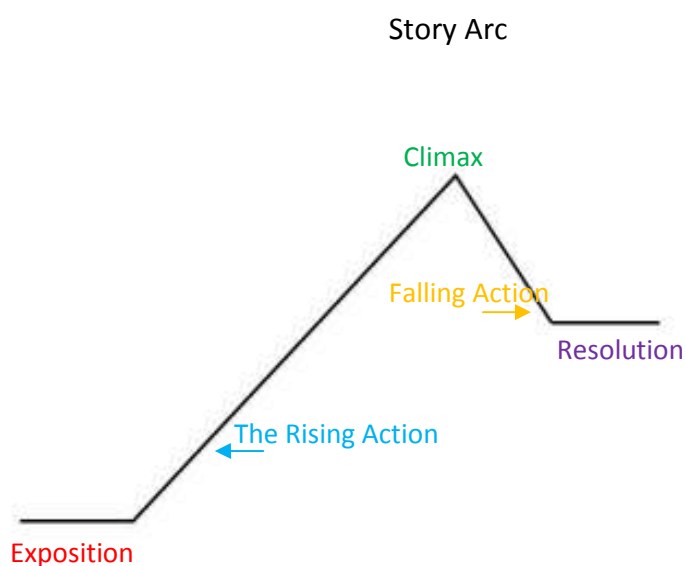
**10. In the end of the story Fiona faces her fear and performs for thousands of weather forecast viewers in her Nutcracker tutu. In fact she “...leaped to the far side of the blue screen and spun around. She clicked the button on the remote again. She was having fun now” (149).**

- How could it be that the very thing that once terrified her was now ‘fun’? Did it have anything to do with helping her father? Was she thinking more about helping someone out rather than worrying about her own troubles?
- Do you think that, for Fiona, performing before television cameras is easier than a theater full of people? If so, why? What difference does this make? They’re both performing, right?
- Since Fiona has had a good on-stage experience at the Television station, do you think she’ll be able to stop worrying so much? Do you think she has triumphed over her stage fright?
- What do you think her mother thought about Fiona’s positive weather-casting performance? How about Cleo’s thoughts? Benevolence’s?
- What do you think about Fiona’s performance? Could you do something like that if you had the chance?
- How did this experience change Fiona? How did it change you? Did you learn anything new about friendship? Confidence? Loyalty? Compassion?

## The Story Arc

The plot of a story is written in a sequence known as **Story Arc**. There are special names for different parts of a **Story Arc**. Each part plays a very important role in creating a story that is interesting, stories like *Fiona Finkelstein, Big-Time Ballerina!*

There are basically five easy terms to learn when working with the path of a **Story Arc**. All the best stories follow this hilly path. Readers and writers use these terms to analyze stories and to help write new ones. The terms consistently lie in the same place on the **Story Arc**, pictured below.



Notice how the illustration forms an arc? Notice how the story begins flat at the beginning of the line, then rises up at an angle to a sharp point? See how the line then drops at an angle and then stops at another flat place? There are the important names and special meanings for each place on the **Story Arc**.

In the beginning, the background of the story is told in the **Exposition**. Here the reader meets the **protagonist**, or the main character, and **the antagonist**, or the character or situation who presents a problem. The setting and the background and basic idea of the story is presented. Something exciting happens during the last part of the exposition which gets the story started.

The story then begins to take off and climb up the steep incline called **The Rising Action**. Sometimes the things that happen are funny, or sad, or troublesome. As events in the story happen the plot line moving climbing up the steep **Rising Action** incline.

At the sharp pointed top of the **Story Arc** is known as the **Climax** of the story. Here is where the story line makes a big shift usually marking a big change for the protagonist. This is where trouble strikes...big-time!

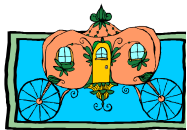
In a plot line the **Falling Action** marks the final decline of suspense. Here conflict between characters swells. During the **Falling Action** of the story, protagonists usually realize what they must do to solve the issues at hand.

And finally at the end, during the **Resolution**, the protagonist is generally better off than they were in the beginning.

Let's apply these terms to a familiar story. Let's briefly consider the story of **Cinderella**.



As **Exposition** Cinderella is sad and lonesome slaving away at home while her wicked step-sisters are getting ready to go to the Prince's ball.



As part of **The Rising Action** her Fairy God Mother magically arranges everything Cinderella needs to go to the ball, even a coach made from a pumpkin!



As the **Climax**, big-time trouble hits the clock strikes midnight and everything magic becomes what it once was.

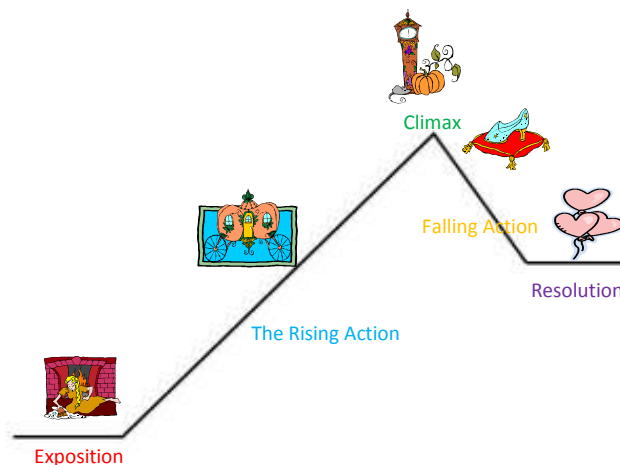


During the **Falling Action** the prince searches the kingdom to find his true love, Cinderella.



As the **Resolution**, the prince finds Cinderella and they live happily ever after!

So...the Cinderella's Story Arc would look something like this.



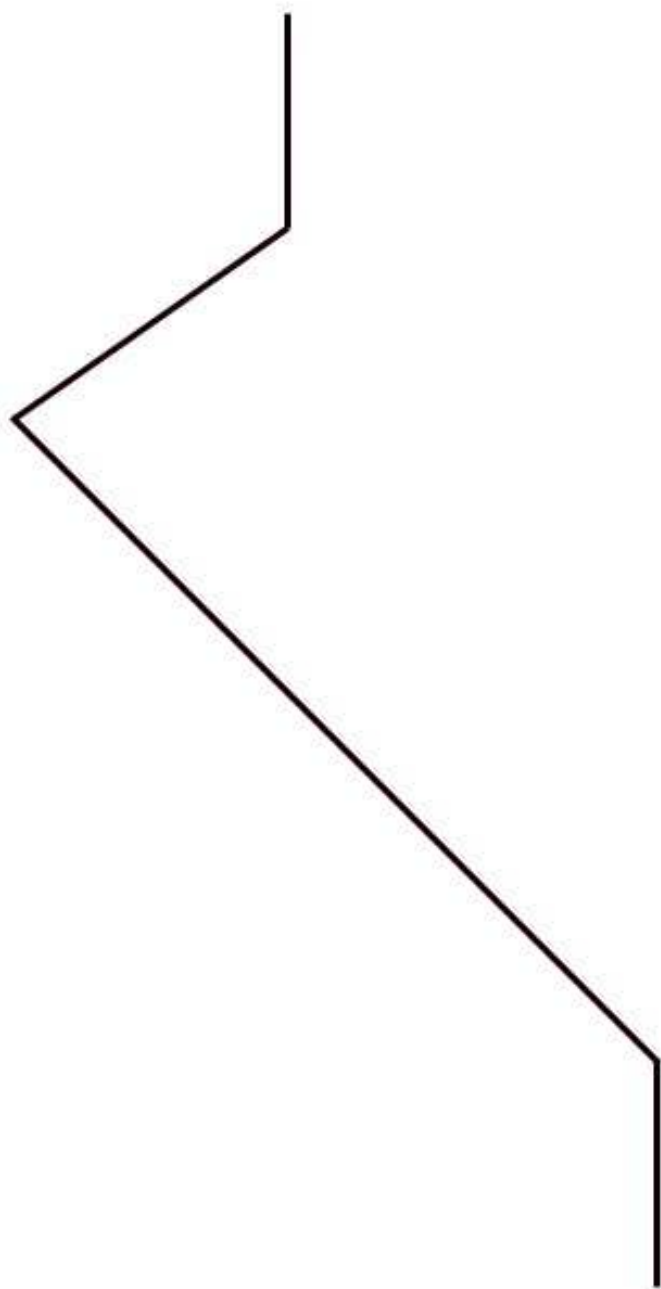


Since now you know the basics of the Story Arc, let's look at some of the **plot points** in *Fiona Finkelstein, Big Time Ballerina!* Plot points are things that happen in the story. Every little thing, each event, that happens is super important to the story. These events line up on the plot line, side by side by side, and form a unique Story Arc.

On the next page is a blank Story Arc. Below are labels for elements of the Story Arc and for various plot points in the novel. Cut out the labels and place them in the correct spot on the Story Arc. Go ahead! Have some fun!

**Special Note:** There can be more than one plot point paced on the inclined Rising Action and the declining Falling Action elements of the plot line.

Climax	Falling Action	Story Arc
Resolution	Rising Action	Exposition
At <i>The Nutcracker</i> performance, Fiona treats Benevolence kindly.	Fiona dances the can-can at the Button's restaurant.	Fiona embarrasses herself when she meets Baxter Buckworth for the first time.
The day before <i>The Nutcracker</i> Fiona discovers that her father's job is in trouble. He might not be able to attend the ballet.	The weather is terrible. Snow. Snow. Snow. Dad is stranded. Mom won't be coming to the ballet. Everything is going wrong for Fiona.	In her <i>Nutcracker</i> costume, Fiona goes on camera to do the weather report in her father's absence.
Fiona learns that her ballet class has been invited to dance in <i>The Nutcracker</i> . Fiona is struck with the worse case of stage fright ever.	Because of bad weather, <i>The Nutcracker</i> is rescheduled.	





## Metaphors: Word Pictures

People say that metaphors are ‘figures of speech’, but what does that really mean? Figures can be objects and speech is...well...words. Metaphors express a form of comparison between words and objects. One thing represents another. Writers use metaphors to help describe feelings, settings, and emotions in a creative way.

**Madame Vallée used metaphors when she told Fiona, “Worry gives small things a big shadow... It’s best to stay in the sun.” (6). Let’s analyze her words:**

- Shadows are long, drawn out, dark images of something of smaller than the shadow. Worry makes little problems seem really big, like long dark shadow.
- In this metaphor, the sun represents being worry-free. When the sun is high overhead, there are no shadows. Those long, dark, scary things vanish in the light of the sun.
- What would Madame Vallée’s metaphor look like as a word picture? How would you draw a big, dark, scary shadow looming over a little worry? Interesting thought, isn’t it?

Let’s try it, shall we? Underline the following metaphors in the following sentences and then draw a picture illustrating what the metaphors, these figures of speech or object words, really mean. Get silly. Have fun!

- Sergeant Preston was a big, shaggy bear of a man.
- Tim was an eagle scout and a real straight arrow.
- A blanket of heavy mist lay over the island.
- It was a tough day; I felt ready to fall apart.
- That dress was a knockout!
- That poor guy is up the creek without a paddle.
- Don’t get carried away with that happy thought.
- The street was an oven on that ninety-degree day.
- They slithered across the dance floor to the music.

*Lesson inspired by Behrman, Carol H. **Hooked on Writing! Ready-to-Use Writing Process Activities for Grades 4-8.** New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education. 1990.*

## Fiona Finkelstein Predicts Homemade RAIN!

Making rain couldn't be easier. Just follow these easy instructions and you, too, can predict the weather...sort of.

### Supplies needed:

- A tea kettle
- A wide-mouthed metal spoon
- Ice cubes
- Water
- A stove top

### Directions:

- Fill the tea kettle with water. Turn on the stove it high heat.
- Wait for the water to become hot enough for steam to whistle out of the tea kettle.
- Place a few ice cubes in the metal spoon. Balance the spoon over the stem streaming out of the tea kettle.
- In a matter of a few minutes, observe the change that is taking place on the bottom of the spoon.
- Water will condense like raindrops and fall from the spoon! You created homemade rain!

### Follow up:

- Research the facts regarding the creation of real rain. How does it happen?
- What item in the experiment simulated the cold, cold atmospheric air?
- How about the dark rain cloud? What item represents clouds?
- The Earth's warm air and water vapor is similar to what part of this experiment?
- Can you draw a picture of how you understand the creation of real rain occurs?

## A Conversation with the Author, Shawn Stout

**Your style of writing is so cleverly quick-witted, yet very poignant in dealing with themes that distress young readers. Absent parental figures, shame, self-consciousness, and performance anxiety are just a few issues you explore. You seem to be able to identify so effectively with Fiona’s angst. Is there a little of Shawn Stout in your protagonist’s character?**

*I think there is a little bit of me in every character I create, for better or worse. Definitely, Fiona and I share self-conscious personalities—overly aware of ourselves and how people see us. With or without a tutu, I am more comfortable by myself than in a room full of people I don’t know.*



**Cleo serves as the perfect model of a true friend. She selflessly guides, forgives, encourages, motivates, and basically pushes Fiona into action. Tell us a bit about Cleo. What was the inspiration for this important character? Was there a Cleo in your life?**

*In many ways, Cleo is the opposite of Fiona. She’s tough, self-assured, and a protector. She does not understand how or why Fiona creates all of the drama around her, but she’s there for her, nonetheless. I think I would have liked to be more like Cleo than Fiona when I was growing up, so I think that’s where the inspiration for her character came from.*

**Benevolence is an intriguing character. You gave her an oxymoron for a name, didn’t you? In the beginning this character is anything but benevolent to Fiona. She is catty and cruel throughout most of the book. And then at the end, Fiona discovers Benevolence’s weak spot and chose to demonstrate compassion toward her nemesis. Shawn, you demonstrated both Fiona’s and Benevolence’s’ transformation beautifully. Tell us about this fascinating character.**

*In my experience, most people with a tough exterior have just as many insecurities as the rest of us, and some even more so. They just work harder to keep them hidden. Benevolence recognizes that she has the same anxieties as Fiona, but she doesn't quite know what to do about them. She's done a good job at keeping them below the surface, well hidden from others, but they can't stay inside forever. For Benevolence, they creep out in the form of insults – "Vomitstein."*

**Cleverly, you named Fiona's hometown "Ordinary" as a metaphor for her life, did you not? How does naming the town Ordinary contribute to the plot? What were you hoping to achieve by doing this?**

*I think a lot of kids think of themselves as nothing special and wish that they were a little more extraordinary. I know I did. Fiona thinks of herself as ordinary, especially in comparison with the rest of her family, who are anything but: her mom is a soap opera actress, her dad is a TV meteorologist, and her brother thinks he's a superhero. So by setting the story in an average (and yes, ordinary) town, an underlying conflict is already established between the protagonist and the setting, and indeed, it serves as a metaphor for how she feels about herself.*

**Fiona's primary antagonist lies within herself, isn't this so? She must not only overcome the devastation of stage fright, she must deal with the ongoing realization that her parents successfully perform in front of thousands and people every day, and yet she struggles to dance on stage as a member of a ballet company. What was the inspiration for this intriguing plot thread?**

*Absolutely. Fiona has to overcome her fear to get what she wants—to achieve her dream of being a big-time ballerina. But you're right, it's not just that fear she is dealing with in the story. She has to cope with the realization that the rest of her family has not had to face this same sort of struggle. She is different from them, and she has to come to terms with that. I think the inspiration came from my own childhood of feeling like I didn't really fit in with the rest of my family. My sister was an amazing artist, and my brother was athletic and could design and build furniture, and then there was me. So, I think it's common for kids to try to find their place.*

**You handle the notion of the absentee parent so very well. Not only does Fiona miss having her mother around, her father does, as well. The theme of the absentee parent is one that many young readers can relate to. Expound on your reasoning for this plot thread.**

*Fiona has come up with some pretty creative excuses for getting out of ballet recitals after her stage fright first showed up (a case of the hiccups, restless leg syndrome, and even a disappearing costume). So basically, in order for her to get away with that, I needed one of her parents out of the house and the other one to be preoccupied with a busy job. Once I made that decision, I knew that it would be Fiona's mom who would be physically absent.*

**Can we look forward to any new projects? If so, what are they?**

*I have a contract with the publisher to do two more FIONA FINKELSTEIN books in the series, so I'm finishing the second one now. It's called FIONA FINKELSTEIN MEETS HER MATCH, and it will be released in September of this year. When Fiona isn't running my writing life, I'm working on a historical fiction middle grade novel set in 1939 and another chapter book series featuring a character named Penelope Crumb.*