Elements of Narrative

by Sophia Tutorial

WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines the elements of narrative writing, including voice, point of view, character and characterization, and the difference between relevant and irrelevant details, in five parts:

1. Elements of Narrative
2. Voice
3. Point of View
4. Character
5. Relevant Detail

1. Elements of Narrative

The elements of narrative are used in both personal and fictional narratives. The difference between these two types of narrative is that personal narratives must be a true account of a writer's experiences, while writers of fictional narratives can invent characters, plot elements, and points of view. This tutorial focuses on personal narrative, and includes examples from this genre.

2. Voice

Voice is the unique way in which a writer expresses his or her writing style. It is something that enables readers to recognize a work as having been written by their favorite writer the moment they begin to read it. Even experienced writers can only partially control voice; beginning writers must work to discover it.

In the following passage from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Thoreau writes about his relationship to nature. You'll get a strong sense of the style in which he writes — his voice — even if you haven't read his work before now:

> The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature--of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter--such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in

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> midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?

3. Point of View

Point of view, in personal narrative, is that of the writer. However, even though a writer of personal narrative is limited to his or her point of view (unlike a writer of fictional narrative), he or she can make use of retrospection and reflection.

To understand how this can be accomplished, read this excerpt from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, written by Frederick Douglass. Look for the ways in which Douglass uses his perspective as an older man to recall and reflect on his youth.

> I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek.

Even though the "I" in a personal narrative refers to the writer, he or she can tell the story from other points of view. The young Douglass and the old Douglass are not the same person in this account (even though, in other ways, they are). They observe, feel and interpret experiences and events in different ways.

4. Character

Character and characterization are terms that are used to refer to the people within a narrative.

HINT

Characters must be portrayed in sufficient detail so that readers will feel as if they are reading about people they know (even though they almost certainly don't know them.)

The following passage describes how a group of children respond to a strong, handsome boy named Pierre, and his unfortunate classmate, Antoine.

> Guided by instinct, the other children hung about Pierre and willingly accepted his leadership; by instinct also they avoided Antoine, repelled by a feeling of chill, as if from the neighbourhood of a reptile, and shunning him unless to profit in some way by their superior strength. Never would he join their games without compulsion; his thin, colourless lips seldom parted for a laugh, and even at that tender age his smile had an unpleasantly sinister expression.

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After reading the preceding paragraph, you should have some idea of what it was like to be Antoine (i.e., not good). Consider that, just a page or two later, readers are informed (in grim detail) how Antoine murdered Pierre.

THINK ABOUT IT

Would your reaction to Pierre's murder be different if you hadn't been given a humanizing glimpse into Antoine's lonely childhood?

5. Relevant Detail

Relevant detail is included in a narrative to gain the *focused attention* of readers. Focused attention is achieved when writers include the events or things that readers must know in order for the narrative to make sense to them.

HINT

Relevant details are those which aren't just relevant, but are *necessary* to the narrative.

Read the following excerpt from the introduction of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*:

> This obscure family of ours was early in the Reformation, and continued Protestants through the reign of Queen Mary, when they were sometimes in danger of trouble on account of their zeal against popery. They had got an English Bible, and to conceal and secure it, it was fastened open with tapes under and within the cover of a joint-stool. When my great-great-grandfather read it to his family, he turned up the joint-stool upon his knees, turning over the leaves then under the tapes.

In this paragraph, Franklin wrote to his children about the early history of their family. He describes how they had to conceal their religious practices from the authorities in the years before the family emigrated to America. It conveys a sense of his love for his country, and the zeal with which he would defend it.

Now, read this passage, which occurs a page or so earlier in Franklin's *Autobiography* (i.e., before the previous passage about the Bible). Do you notice any differences?

> John was bred a dyer, I believe of woollens, Benjamin was bred a silk dyer, serving an apprenticeship at London. He was an ingenious man. I remember him well, for when I was a boy he came over to my father in Boston, and lived in the house with us some years. He lived to a great age. His grandson, Samuel Franklin, now lives in Boston. He left behind him two quarto volumes, MS., of his own poetry, consisting of little occasional pieces addressed to his friends and relations, of which the following, sent to me, is a specimen. He had formed a short-hand of his own, which he taught me, but, never practising it, I have now forgot it.

Even without reading the later chapters of the *Autobiography,* it should be clear which of these two passages contain details that readers must know. It's likely that readers don't need to know that Franklin's Uncle John was a dyer (probably of wool).

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HINT

Here is the "litmus test" for detail: Can the narrative do without it (i.e., the detail in question)? If so, that detail should be left out of the narrative.

SUMMARY

This tutorial examined the following elements of personal narrative: voice, point of view, character, and relevant detail. It used examples from personal narratives to illustrate the effective use of these elements.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall

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