

# Narrative Language

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines narrative language, and some of the tools that writers of personal and fictional narratives use to tell their stories effectively. Description and the "show, don't tell" principle will be considered, as well as the use of concrete detail, active verbs, and figurative language.

This tutorial investigates narrative language in four parts:

1. Description
2. Concrete Detail
3. Active Verbs
4. Figurative Language
  - a. Metaphor
  - b. Simile
  - c. Personification

## 1. Description

Description is one of the key elements of personal narrative. It is through description of people, places, things, events, and emotions that writers make their narratives come alive in readers' imaginations. To do so, writers must show readers what these places, people, things, events and emotions are like.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Suppose your friend Joe told you that yesterday afternoon it was so hot that he didn't want to go outside, or that it was 95 degrees, according to the evening news. Those statements convey information accurately, but don't enable you to understand what it was like to be Joe yesterday afternoon. However, if Joe told you that "it was so hot that when I opened the door of my air-conditioned car, the blast of hot air felt like I'd opened an oven," you might feel as if you had been there with him.



### HINT

Don't just provide information — "paint" the scene for your readers!

## 2. Concrete Detail

Another element that writers include to make personal narratives more vivid is concrete detail. When asked to describe something, beginning writers sometimes stop writing when they've finished describing the thing's appearance. They seem to forget that (most of) their readers have four other senses. What about sounds, smells, and tastes? And how about touch - what does the thing feel like? What else can you write that will enable readers to experience it?

Visual details are important, but when you also enable readers to hear, smell, and touch what you describe, they'll experience it more fully.

## IN CONTEXT

Suppose you were going to describe what it's like to walk beneath a tall alpine forest canopy. You might write that the dappled light cuts through the trees in beams, partially illuminating the forest floor. Perhaps you'd also describe the sound of leaves and pine needles crunching beneath your feet, and the hushed, barely audible hiss of the wind high above your head. You might also include the pervasive smell of pine and decomposing plants. Are you beginning to get the picture?

If you want to bring your readers to that location, mention how the cool, dry mountain air raises the hair on your forearms, even though it feels hot when you step into the sunlight. You might even mention the oddly metallic taste that comes to your tongue whenever you hike at a high altitude, how it's a little like blood, or the memory of blood. Something that is both pleasant, and a bit troubling.

The writer of this description may have gotten a bit carried away, but the details included in these paragraphs certainly enable readers to share his or her experience more fully.

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## 3. Active Verbs

Narrative writers must use verbs carefully. Active verbs — actions that are performed by a clearly-identified agent or actor, and which are energetic — are usually the best verbs to use in narrative writing. "To be" verbs (e.g., is, are, were, etc.) slow the pace of a narrative.

➦ **EXAMPLE** For example, "the ball was kicked by him," or "he kicked the ball." Which account of the event uses an active verb? Which one is more "energetic?"

Read the following excerpt from a narrative:

When Kevin pulled the station wagon away from the dump, the car's single working headlight lit up the one-lane road that leads back to Pahala. The man was walking in the grass alongside the road, heading towards the boys. As Kevin approached him, Brad stepped into the middle of the road and raised his other arm over his head as if signaling for help.

This passage demonstrates that using a variety of verbs, and using active voice (for the most part), helps to move a narrative along. Scenes in which action occurs are best conveyed at a brisk pace.

## 4. Figurative Language

Figurative language includes phrases that make comparisons to convey meaning. It encourages readers to involve themselves in the communication process taking place in a narrative.

Instead of simply telling readers what things (people, places, events, etc.) in a narrative are, or are like, writers use figurative language that enables readers to build relationships between those things themselves. By doing so, readers can attain a deeper understanding of a narrative. This process also brings them closer to the narrative as a whole, because it involves them in the process of "meaning-making."

### 4a. Metaphor

There are three types of figurative language. **Metaphor** is a literary device that compares one item to another to convey meaning.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you've heard someone describe good news as "music to my ears," you've heard — and, no doubt, interpreted — a metaphor. If you said, "I'm lost in a sea of nameless faces," you'd make use of a metaphor yourself.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Metaphor

A literary device that compares one item to another, to convey meaning (e.g., "My love is a rose.").

### 4b. Simile

A **simile** is a literary device that compares one item to another item using a conjunction — "like" or "as" — to convey meaning. Consider the following example:

Her feet were covered by shallow wrinkles, like the blue lines of streams on a map of Hilo, mostly-parallel streaks running from the mountain to sea, sea to mountain, feeding the rain to the ocean and the ocean to the rain.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Simile

A literary device that compares one item to another using a conjunction — "like" or "as" — to convey meaning (e.g., "My love is like a rose.").

### 4c. Personification

**Personification**, is a literary device that attributes human characteristics to non-human objects.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you said that your car "didn't want to start this morning," or that it "wasn't happy" with you, you would be personifying your car by attributing the human characteristics of impulse or desire to it. If you said that the sun was "playing hide and seek with the clouds," that would also be personification.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Personification

A literary device that attributes human characteristics to non-human objects (e.g., "The rose is in love.").



## BIG IDEA

All figurative language performs the same function: to imply a connection between a thing and a quality, and to involve readers in making that connection.



## SUMMARY

This investigation of narrative language included an examination of description, and how to "show, not tell." It also explained what concrete details can add to a narrative, and the way in which active verbs can "energize" a narrative's pace. The three ways (i.e., metaphor, simile, and personification) in which figurative language can convey meaning were also considered.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Metaphor**

A literary device that compares one thing to another, for artistic effect. ("My love is a rose.")

### **Personification**

A literary device that imbues nonhuman objects with human characteristics, for artistic effect. ("The rose is in love.")

### **Simile**

A literary device and type of metaphor that compares one item to another item, using the conjunction "like," for artistic or literary effect. ("My love is like a rose.")