

Narrative Language

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how narrative language is a tool that writers of personal and fictional narratives can use to tell their stories effectively. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

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

1. Description

Description is one of the key elements of a 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, "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.

When using description, don't just provide information—paint a picture of the scene for your readers. This is often referred to as the principle of "show, don't tell" in writing.

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 feel 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.

This description may have gotten a bit carried away, but the details included in these paragraphs certainly enable readers to share the writer's experience more fully.

3. Active Verbs

Narrative writers must use verbs carefully. Active verbs—verbs relaying 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 ("is," "are," "were," etc.) typically slow the pace of a narrative.

↪ **EXAMPLE** "He kicked the ball" is more engaging than "The ball was kicked by him."

Consider the following narrative excerpt.

When Kevin pulled the station wagon away from the dump, the car's single working headlight lit up the one-lane road that led 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."

There are three main types of figurative language:

- Metaphor
- Simile
- Personification

While they differ from each other in their execution, they all perform the same function: to imply a connection between a thing and a quality, and to involve readers in making that connection.

4a. Metaphor

A **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 be making 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 using "like" or "as" to convey meaning.

⇒ **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 the sea, the sea to the 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 "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 characteristic 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").



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how narrative language can be used to enhance narrative writing.

Description allows a writer to "show rather than tell," while **concrete details** can help readers experience what the writer is describing. **Active verbs** can energize a narrative's pace, and the three main types of **figurative language**—**metaphor**, **simile**, and **personification**—can convey meaning to the reader in unique ways.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Metaphor

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

Personification

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

Simile

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