

Narrative Structure and Techniques

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how to structure a typical narrative, as well as techniques to make your narrative more compelling to readers. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Beginning a Narrative: Scene and Context
2. Populating a Narrative: Point of View, Narrator, and Characters
3. Building a Narrative: Sequence of Events and Conflict
4. Techniques for Effective Narratives
 - 4a. Dialogue
 - 4b. Pacing
 - 4c. Description
 - 4d. Reflection
 - 4e. Point of View
 - 4f. Plot Lines
5. Applying Narrative Techniques

1. Beginning a Narrative: Scene and Context

The first lines—even the first words—of a narrative are important because unless the writer engages readers and convinces them to keep reading from the start, the rest of the narrative doesn't matter.

Today, potential readers are constantly enticed to look elsewhere—at television shows or movies, or articles with stimulating (but misleading) titles. Writers must do all that they can to capture and maintain readers' interest despite all of these other demands for their attention.

However, there's more to effective narratives than initial enticement. Writers need to "set the scene" for readers by creating interesting, detailed environments in which the action takes place. This involves explaining, or least presenting, the story's context.

Readers must be provided with relevant details about location, date, and surrounding events that enable them to understand the story and why it is significant—and why they should keep reading. Once the scene has been established, writers can introduce the conflict, problem, or situation in which the character(s) will be involved. This must be accomplished quickly, early in the narrative.

As challenging as it may be, it is often a good idea to balance all of these goals.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Readers will not connect with a narrative in which the writer takes too long to set the scene. How long is too long? When readers lose interest before the story's central problem has been identified, that's too long. However, it is also important not to set the scene too quickly or sketchily. Writers who do so disorient readers, leaving them unsure of how the scene is related to the story being told.

2. Populating a Narrative: Point of View, Narrator, and Characters

Once the base of a narrative has been established, it's time to populate it. The first thing writers must do at this point in the process is to establish a clear point of view—the position from which they'll tell their story.

This is sometimes referred to as the "lens" of the narrative, or the way in which writers can focus readers' attention on a character, event, or other detail of the story.

The establishment of point of view often involves an introduction of the narrator and the narrative voice. Writers must also consider the narrator's limitations: Even in a nonfiction account, it's important to determine how much the narrator knows at different points of time.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Does the narrator of your story know everything you do about the situation, or do you want to bring your readers closer to events (e.g., "I didn't know then that this would be the last time I spoke to her")?

Once the narrator has been identified, the writer must present any other characters that are involved in the story. These characters must be described in enough detail that readers will understand how they are related to the narrator, and to other characters, and why they are part of the story.

3. Building a Narrative: Sequence of Events and Conflict

At this point in the process of writing an effective narrative, writers begin to assemble the components identified in the previous sections. Setting and context have been established, as well as the narrative point of view. All of the characters, as well as their relationships to each other, the scene, and the events, have been created.

Now it's time to construct the story, starting with a logical and smoothly rendered sequence of events. This is the time when the writer tells readers what happened, and why it's important.

To accomplish this, it's necessary to provide readers with details, but only relevant details—only those which enable them to understand what's happening. Readers know less about the plot than the writer, so the writer must include details to ensure that readers understand the context—not only what happened and how, but also why it happened.

Narrative writers must consider conflict at this point in the process. Conflict, or drama, is what keeps readers reading. Remember that effective narratives begin by enticing readers with effective language and a clearly developed scene. Readers are persuaded to continue reading by the narrative voice and the realistic characters. Conflict is the most effective way to maintain the story's momentum.



HINT

When writing a narrative, ask yourself what's happening, and how or why it matters. It is particularly important to do this at the end of the narrative. This will help you to prevent readers from wondering why you told them the story, and what they were supposed to get out of it.

4. Techniques for Effective Narratives

In addition to the tasks outlined in the preceding sections, writers must use effective narrative techniques and language. The degree to which these techniques are used will vary, based on the particular narrative and the writer's goals.

4a. Dialogue

Dialogue refers to what characters in a narrative are shown saying to each other. Dialogue is a deceptively simple technique in that it's easy to use, but difficult to master.

Used too liberally, it can distract readers from what the narrator or author has to say and can get in the way of the story's progression.



TERM TO KNOW

Dialogue

In writing, something that is said by a real or invented person.

4b. Pacing

Pacing refers to the flow of the narrative. As a technique, it's often overlooked, but it's important for writers—especially beginning writers—to pay attention to how quickly their readers can and will move through any particular part of their work.

It's almost always a good thing for the pace to vary as the narrative progresses.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** A well-paced piece might go from a slow, leisurely introduction to a fast-paced climax and then back to a slower denouement.

4c. Description

Description is simultaneously one of the most important and one of the most overused narrative techniques. Description refers to how a writer explains the characteristics of things, including people, places, experiences, objects, thoughts, and emotions.

While it's important for most narratives to build a fabric of sensory detail with which the reader cannot only see but feel the story's most important features, it's easy to slow a narrative's pace by including too much description or by describing things that aren't critical to the narrative as a whole.

4d. Reflection

Reflection allows for contemplation of the meanings or purposes behind events in the plot, or events that happened around the story. It's a way for writers to include material of a more traditionally academic value (e.g., information, delivery, and argumentation) within the structure of a narrative.

If overused, however, reflection will bog down the narrative and can even cause readers to forget about the narrative structure in which the reflection is meant to function.

4e. Point of View

Point of view refers to the narrator or persona with which the author is telling the story. Some narratives, especially in fiction, will include multiple points of view.

Choosing how and when to use this technique, and from what perspective to tell a story, is a challenging task and one that can only be developed through practice.

4f. Plot Lines

Plot lines are the structure of the story itself, as in, the events that happen to the characters in the narrative.

Choosing what events to portray, and in what order, is another skill that comes to writers primarily through experience, both in reading the work of others and noting their use of this and other techniques, and through practicing these skills themselves.



DID YOU KNOW

Some stories will include multiple plot lines, or chains of events that occurred simultaneously and which are often told in a nonsequential order.

5. Applying Narrative Techniques

As with many skills related to writing, it's hard to learn about these narrative techniques in the abstract, so let's look at some excerpts to show you these techniques in action. This will give you a sense of how some of these techniques can be used to achieve the goals of a piece of narrative writing.

First, look at this passage from a book you've likely heard of. It comes from a chapter titled "The Whiteness of the Whale" from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and contains a small part of Melville's exploration into the nature of the color of white.

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink...? And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?

What do you think? Do you see how Melville is able to use reflection to contemplate the meaning and purpose of an event in the plot line? Ahab's hunt for the whale is the central act of the entire novel, and in this reflection, you get to see a little bit of what that means and why it's important. This is the strength of reflection.

The second excerpt is from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," from a section toward the middle of the short story. As you'll see, it demonstrates a couple very different techniques than the *Moby Dick* selection.

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

"Why darling!" said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave before. The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better. I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening, when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away."

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug; "she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"

This selection is definitely not using reflection to explain events, but rather is right in the middle of one. Here you see Gilman's use of dialogue to show you how these two characters interact with one another in a way that builds a certain tension and uneasiness that is central to the story.

Finally, take a look at these passages. They are the first and third paragraphs from Oscar Wilde's book *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Try to determine what techniques you see in use.

The studio was filled with the rich odor of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward, whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement, and gave rise to so many strange conjectures.

In this selection, you are given a lot of description. It's fitting, for those of you familiar with the book, that Wilde begins *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with so much description. It allows you to get a sense of the opulence of the room and the richness of its surroundings, then allows you to see what's actually going on in there—a portrait is being painted.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that structuring a narrative typically involves **beginning the narrative with a scene and context**, **populating the narrative using the narrator, point of view, and characters**, and **building the narrative with a sequence of events and conflict**. You also learned about **effective narrative techniques**, which include **dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, point of view, and plot lines**. To demonstrate how writers can use these strategies to further the purpose of a piece of narrative writing, you looked at different examples of the **application of narrative techniques**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY SOPHIA LEARNING. PLEASE SEE OUR [TERMS OF USE](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Dialogue

In writing, something that is said by a real or invented person.