

Narrative Techniques

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of narrative techniques. We will focus on the many narrative techniques that writers use to tell their stories, covering what they are and their best application, so that you will be a more effective reader of personal narratives and a more effective teller of your own stories. We will discuss the following techniques: dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, point of view, and plot lines.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Narrative Techniques
2. Applying Narrative Techniques: Examples

1. Narrative Techniques

As mentioned, today's lesson will cover six narrative techniques:

- **Dialogue.** This is the first -- and seemingly the most straightforward -- of the narrative techniques we will discuss today. It 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.
- **Pacing.** This is 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** For example, a well-paced piece might go from a slow, leisurely introduction to a fast-paced climax and back to a slower denouement.

- **Description.** This is one of the simultaneously most important and most overused narrative techniques. Description means the explaining of the characteristics of things, including people, places, experiences, actual things, 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.

- **Reflection.** Reflection is another very important narrative technique. It's used to allow 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 -- information, delivery, and argumentation, for example -- within the structure of a narrative.



HINT

Again though, this technique, if overused, will bog down the narrative and can even cause readers to forget about the narrative structure in which the reflection is meant to function.

- **Point of view.** This 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.
- **Plot lines.** These are the structure of the story itself, as in the events that occur 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 non-sequential order.

2. Applying Narrative Techniques: Examples

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 examples, so that you can see them in action. This will give you a sense of how some of these techniques can be used to further the goals of a piece of narrative writing.

First, look at this fairly long 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 was 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 selection 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 rather different, isn't it? It definitely is 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 began *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

Today we learned about narrative techniques: dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, point of view, and plot lines. We also learned how they can be used to further the purposes of a piece of narrative writing. Lastly, we read three very different examples, providing a demonstration of the breadth of writing available to us through the mastery of these techniques.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall