

*Write Now!*

# **Telling a Good Story** *Using Narrative in Your Writing*



*The Author Series from Praeclarus Press*



As I described in *Show, Don't Tell*, adding stories to writing will help you connect with audiences and bring your writing to life. I would now like to introduce you to some basic techniques of telling a good story using narrative nonfiction. Narrative nonfiction takes the techniques of fiction writers and applies them to nonfiction. You will learn to tell stories

about real events using techniques such as characterization, suspense, and surprise. In this article, I'll describe three techniques: description, scene tension and pacing.

## **Show, Don't Tell: The Art of Description**

One of the things I enjoy about movies on DVD is that they often have "behind the scenes" segments, where designers, writers, and directors talk about how they worked together to tell the story via the script, sets and costumes, and camera angle. Next time you watch a movie, pay attention to how they are telling you the story. Who is narrating it? Whose point of view is represented? How do set and costume designers tell the story without using words?

As writers, we need to capture our readers' attention through their senses. Help readers experience what your protagonist is experiencing, appealing to both their eyes and ears. When telling stories, you need to have a good sense of visual detail. You want to provide enough information so readers can "see" what you are talking about, but not so much that you will bore them. It's sometimes a fine line to walk. You also need a good ear for aural detail. Are you capturing how your speakers sound? How about their behavior? Don't tell your reader that a person is cruel. Instead, describe his cruel acts and let the reader come to her own conclusion. In other words, show, don't tell.

## **Scene Tension**

Another aspect of storytelling is scene tension. Scene tension includes the event that starts your story, the goal of your protagonist, and the conflict or opposition he or she encounters on the way to achieving the goal. What does your protagonist want and why does he want it? What obstacles does he need to overcome in order to get it?

Conflict can be of three types: human against human, human against nature, and human against self. In human-against-human conflict, the people don't necessarily have to fight each other directly; they have inconsistent and competing goals. Human-against-nature conflict includes tales of people against the elements or outdoors. Some examples include chronicling a climb up Mt. Everest, or a family surviving a hurricane. Finally, conflict can include human against self. This may involve some internal conflict, such as regret or guilt that the protagonist seeks to overcome. For all types, without information about conflict, readers won't care about what happens to your protagonist and are less likely to continue reading.

## **Pacing and Rhythm of your Story**

Another factor to consider is the pacing and rhythm of your story. This has to do with subjective qualities of your story: how it sounds and flows. Although we read with our eyes, reading is largely an auditory experience.

Try reading what you have written out loud to see how it sounds. Is it compelling? If you are not sure, try reading it to someone else. (You may need to buy them lunch.) Are there parts where their eyes glaze over? Typical academic prose sounds horrible when read out loud. If you spot an academic sentence as you read, take a minute to re-work it. Reading it aloud to someone else also helps you take advantage of the visual cues we get when we speak that are absent with our written words. (Nodding off is definitely not a good sign!) There are no hard-and-fast rules for this, so feel free to experiment and see what works.

## **Conclusion**

People have a natural affinity for stories. Incorporating them into your writing will make what you say more interesting and easier to remember. Start paying attention to the natural cadence and rhythm of human speech and incorporate it into your writing. Find a way to say what you want to say in someone's voice. Don't be afraid to show some emotion, and make us care about your subject. I think you'll be pleased with the results.

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