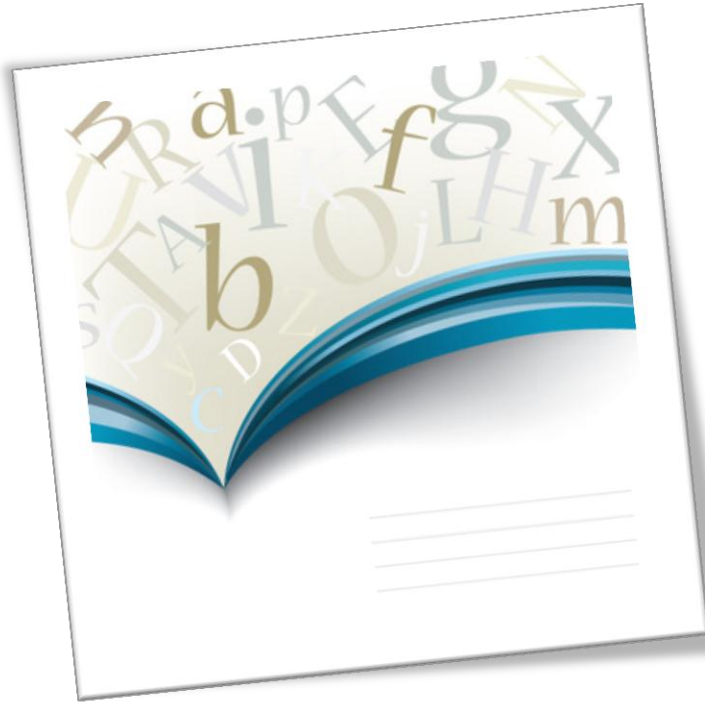


Write Now!

Using a Timeline to Increase the Readability of Your Story



The Author Series from Praeclarus Press



When telling a story, you must also establish a timeline of events. What time period are you speaking about? Do all the events you report take place in a day, week, month or longer? Where your story begins and ends are the “bookends” of the story.

You don’t necessarily have to follow events chronologically. In fact, in many cases it is boring to begin at the beginning. Theodore Cheney describes a technique known as *in medias res*, or the “middle of the story,” which Peggy Noonan uses effectively in her biography of Ronald Reagan. Rather than

starting at the beginning of Reagan’s life, she brings us in by describing a recent event: former staffers and friends are gathered for the christening of the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan. The scene is compelling. Twelve years have passed since these people have seen each other. Many had had very public feuds. Some became enemies before, during and after their time in the White House. But now, people have mellowed. Many have retired and have pursued new interests. Her description of this gathering pulls us immediately into the story.

It was like the last gathering of the clans, the reunion of five hundred friends, cabinet secretaries, aides, staffers, clique, tong and cabal members and appointees of Ronald Wilson Reagan, fortieth president of the United States, in Williamsburg, Virginia, on March 3, 2001. It was the biggest coming together of the Reagan hands since the day he left office, in January of 1989.

The big room in the Kingsmill Resort rocked with greeting. “I don’t believe it,” “Great to seeeee you.”.... People with young eyes, lifted eyes, crinkled eyes from being in the sun; people with strollers, with walkers.....(p. 1).

Noonan manipulated the timeline effectively for her narration, and by doing so, made us interested to know what happened next. You can also do this by starting at the end of the story and backtracking to how the protagonist ended up in that situation. (Think dead guy in the pool at the beginning of *Sunset Boulevard*.) My one caution is that you don’t lose readers by flipping back and forth between past and present too quickly. Give your readers plenty of markers so that they know where they are.

Conclusion

As with any of the other aspects of storytelling I've described over the past several issues, knowing when to manipulate the timeline largely comes down to a subjective sense of "ear." But telling the story out of order can be a great way to grab the reader's interest. Start with the most compelling part up front. Make the reader curious about this person and want to read the rest of the story.

Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., IBCLC, FAPA is owner and Editor-in-Chief of Praeclarus Press. For more information, go to www.PraeclarusPress.com.

