

# Elements of Writing

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We tell stories to entertain, captivate<sup>1</sup> an audience, to offer an alternate point of view, to explore feelings and ideas, and to pass on ideas and histories.

In order to captivate, explore and convey our thoughts, feelings and knowledge we must capture our reader. By using the elements of narration most suitable to the task, to the best of our ability, we are able to draw our reader into another world.

## Remember **SHOW don't TELL**

Make your reader work by feeding details to them, allowing them to build up an image, this ensuring engagement.

- Telling is relying on simple exposition – it is a non-participatory activity, meaning the reader isn't involved.
- Showing, on the other hand is evocative description – it is interactive, it obliges the reader to be engaged; it creates mental pictures for the reader who accumulated details, deduced facts and actively composes in his/her mind rather than passively allowing the composer to tell it all.
- There are times when you want to tell, however. Trivial or incidental details are better told – sort of past-tracking information that is not vital to the story. Telling uses fewer words than showing and allows you to scoot over non-crucial sections of narrative.

## Elements of speaking

- Unfinished sentences; He looked at me as if he'd found something dirty, you know like ...
- Broken sentences; I tried to tell her ... she just looked at me ... and then I ... Oh God! What was I supposed to do?
- Fillers, ums, you knows etc
- Rambling disclosure joined with conjunctions and, then so etc. this might be fragment of stream-of-consciousness.
- Vague language e.g thingie, whatsacallits
- Repetition
- Abbreviations, nicknames, teen jargon
- Slang
- Idiom

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<sup>1</sup>Enthrall, fascinate, charm, enchant, to be spellbound, intrigued

- Taboo words- be cautious – in order to offer an authentic character you might have to include some of our taboo words e.g A true-blue Aussie is more likely to say, ‘Bugger...’ if things went wrong, rather than, “Oh golly!”
- Ungrammatical sentences-Even though I knowed it was wrong I done nothing to help him..

A reader can only take so much, in writing we don’t exactly replicate ordinary speech, but we can use some elements to offer aspects of character and offer verisimilitude.

### **Making a difference just choosing verbs:**

- Dominance of action words gives vitality, energy, movement, fast pace – ran, lean, move jump etc
- Dominance of sensing verbs (thinking, feeling perceiving verbs) e.g. I *like* apples; my sister *thought* I was mad; I *was* sick; I *was staring* at him etc – tells us a character’s world – sensing verbs can bring the narrative to a standstill while the character evaluates the situation, while something is being absorbed – can build up suspense
- Use of extraordinary “saying” verbs – as in direct speech tags e.g. “you mustn’t do that!” she *groaned*. “You mustn’t do that!” she *screamed*. “You mustn’t do that,” she *whispered* – can show the story as the reader absorbs the significance of what characters are saying and how they are saying it
- Take care with tense – be consistent
- Past tense is usual, but an embedded narrative might use the present
- Use a thesaurus, find strong verbs that convey more than just an action – don’t overdo it however. Rather than saying, *The old man walked along painfully ... say The old man shambled along ...* or rather than *The wind was blowing hard all night ... say The wind howled all night*

### **Vary the length of your sentences:**

- Simple sentences – uncomplicated 1 subject and 1 predicate e.g. The ... Sometimes most effective after a series of complex sentences, long sentences, action.
- Compound – 2 sentences that could stand independently joined with a conjunction – adds interest
- Complex – 1 independent clause and at least 1 dependant clause which cannot stand alone

### **Use transition words**

- After, although, before, finally, instead of, just as, rather than, meanwhile

### **Using adjectives**

- Appealing adjectives add interest and information to a narrative, but, just as using too much salt and pepper can spoil a meal, so too, overusing adjectives can mar your story. The reader becomes overwhelmed.
- Avoid tautology (**linguistic redundancy**: the redundant repetition of a meaning in a sentence, using different words)

### Using figurative language (sparingly)

- Similes, metaphors, personification

### Symbolism

- Develop metonymy – dark light, brooding, joyful, happy, sad, quiet, calm, panic etc – use synonyms to develop an atmosphere

### Patterns of words

- Application of groups of words can have a certain effect – build tension, create an atmosphere, develop a pace, emphasise a point, create positive/negative feelings about a person or place
- Repetition
- Using old-fashioned words
- Emotive language
- Slang
- Soft sounds – soften an effect
- Accumulations of long words – slows things down
- Onomatopoeic words, alliteration, assonance, consonance (sparingly)

### Use direct speech

- Ensure you apply the correct punctuation
- Needn't always use a tag – every 2, 3 words offer the reader an appropriate tag to ensure clarity
- Use interesting verbs to convey feeling, use sparingly, don't overdo them. Most tags will use *said* but occasionally, when you are wanting to convey an emotional response use one of the dozens of verbs for speech we have in the English language<sup>2</sup>

### Experiment with chronology

- Before you write plan an interesting way of telling your story, decide what will happen, who will narrate, what tense, in what order events will happen
- Use retrospection – where you go back in time, perhaps to childhood, allowing you to change your "voice" and offer a different point of view (innocence, naivety) – this could become an embedded narrative

### Experimenting with the traditional narrative structure

- Play around with orientation, complication, climax, resolution/coda – you might begin with the climactic point, go back, pass through the climax and conclude or begin with the resolution and go back

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<sup>2</sup>Screamed, whispered, supposed, gulped, uttered, mumbled, gabbed, stammered, stuttered, blabbered, drawled, droned

## Orientation

- You might want to use an “abstract” to cue the reader into the beginning of your story – an abstract is a short section which gives the reader a clue as to what the story will be about. It could be italicized
- The orientation introduced characters and draws the reader in
- It anchors the narrative – giving time, setting introduced characters
- Tells the reader when, where, who, what and why
- Gives a hint about the problems characters will encounter

## Complication

- Something happens, complications
- Conflict occurs, internal or between characters

## Climax

- A series of events builds to a critical point

## Resolution

- Problems are resolved, events are sorted, order is restored, people are punished, rewarded – these are *unequivocal* endings
- Modern narratives will leave the reader without a resolution, and *equivocal* ending

## Coda

- Round off the story with a short comment on what happens, what somebody has learnt, what happens to someone in the future

## Experimenting with point of view

- First person, I, has limitations, but offers a sense of intimacy and authenticity
- Third person, he she, omniscient – offers greater narratorial freedom, but is less intimate – is the most common
- Vary the point of view through *embedding* another’s view of events – embed a diary written by another, filling the gaps, expanding the narrative and overcoming the limitation, perhaps of 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view
- See the note about retrospection of POV above

## Experimenting with mood

- Writers colour their writing with certain moods which will/might change according to the point in the narrative. Eg. A light bright opening which becomes darker, more intense as the climactic point approached, changing again for a lighter resolution, or perhaps, if it is a mystery/horror story, a very sinister, shadowy ending.