

Narrative Types and Techniques

Narrative

Narrative is writing that connects ideas, concepts, or events. The definitions below show three important aspects of narration in storytelling:

It connects events, showing their patterns, and relating them to each other or specific ideas, themes, or concepts.

It is a practice and art in that when we tell a story, we shape the narrative – the connection between events.

Narrating a story involves shaping events around an overarching set of aims or effects (whether consciously or unconsciously). For example, in a comedic narrative, the overarching aim is to surprise/shock or otherwise lead the audience or reader to be amused.

Common types of narrative:

- ✓ Descriptive narrative
- ✓ Viewpoint narrative
- ✓ Historical narrative
- ✓ Linear narrative
- ✓ Non-linear narrative

Descriptive narrative

Descriptive narrative connects imagery, ideas, and details to convey a sense of time and place.

The purpose of descriptive narrative

Descriptive narrative has two key purposes:

- ✓ To create a sense of setting, of time and place.
- ✓ To convey the mood and tone of said time and place (e.g. threatening, peaceful, cheerful, chaotic).

Viewpoint narrative

Often, the express purpose of a section of narration is to help us understand the views and feelings of the narrating character or ‘viewpoint narrator’. Point of view or POV is thus a key element of narration (read about different types of POV here and a definition of narration here).

The purpose of viewpoint narrative

Viewpoint narrative presents events or scenes to us so that we see and understand them through the narrators' feelings, desires, beliefs or values.

Historical narrative

In genres such as biography, autobiography and various historical subgenres, a lot of narration recounts events in the past. Of course, the author may choose to tell a war story in a tumultuous present tense. There's no single way to narrate the past.

Linear narrative

Linear narrative is narration where you tell events in the order they happened, i.e. in sequence. This type of narrative is typical of realist fiction where the author wants to create the sense of a life unfolding as a character experiences day to day or year to year.

The purpose of linear narrative

Linear narrative shows causation clearly. When we see what happened to a character yesterday, then today, then tomorrow, it is often easier to notice patterns and chains of cause and effect.

Stories told in a linear time frame might be told mainly using past, present, or even future tense. Yet each event flows on simply from the previous incident described.

Nonlinear narrative

Different types of narrative include narration that does not follow events in the order they happened.

Chronological events (e.g. what happens in 1990 followed by what happens in 1991) don't have to match up with the order of narrative events. The author might share key details from 1990 before going back to the events of 1987 in the story.

The purpose of non-linear narrative

- ✓ It can represent the narrator's emotional state or consciousness.
- ✓ It can show stories with related arcs or themes unfolding in different places and times.
- ✓ It can build suspense.

What is Narrative Technique?

The narrative technique is how a writer conveys what they want to say to their reader and the methods that they use to develop a story.

The individual elements of different narrative techniques can be broken down into six distinct categories:

- ✓ Character
- ✓ Perspective
- ✓ Plot
- ✓ Setting
- ✓ Style
- ✓ Theme

Each of these plays an important role in developing a story — taking the writer's message and presenting it to their audience in a deliberate way.

25 Types of Narrative Techniques with Examples

1. Setting

This technique is particularly popular in Gothic fiction, where a house or landscape is used almost as an additional character in the story, setting the mood and having a significant influence on the protagonist.

Example of Setting

The buildings of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë are often described as cold and miserable places, reflecting the characters that live inside.

2. Foreshadowing

As the name suggests, writers will use foreshadowing to suggest events or outcomes that will happen later in the writing, using either characters or objects within the story.

Example of Foreshadowing

“My life were better ended by their hate than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.” – *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.

3. Cliffhanger

A cliffhanger is when a story is left open-ended and unresolved. This is a commonly used narrative technique in television and film, as creators want the viewers to come back for the next episode or sequel to see if the answers are revealed.

Example of Cliffhanger

The Pickwick Papers by Charles Dickens has plenty of examples of cliffhangers throughout the story. It was originally released in weekly newspapers and chapter endings were left deliberately open-ended to encourage readers to purchase the next week's issue.

4. Flashback or FlashForward

Taking the reader out of an otherwise chronological story, a flashback or flash-forward will show events that happened in the past or future that impact the characters in the present day of the story timeline.

Example of Flash Forward

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens is one of the most notable examples of flash forward in classic literature.

5. Red Herring

Red herrings are popular in crime and mystery writing in particular, where writers divert the attention of the reader onto another character or element of the story to distract them from the truth.

Example of Red Herring

A staple of the mystery genre, The Hound of the Baskervilles by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle sees Sherlock Holmes navigating numerous red herrings while solving a murder.

6. Epiphany

A sudden realization by a character can have a dramatic impact on a story. This is usually about a problem that a character has been facing and a solution or different perspective emerges.

Example of Epiphany

In Hamlet by William Shakespeare, the title character realizes that he must take revenge for his father's murder while sailing to England.

7. First-Person Narrator

When using this narrative perspective, a writer tells the story from the point of view of one character. In most cases this is the protagonist, but not always.

Example of First-Person Narrator

The narrative of Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë is told through the eyes of Jane ten years after the events of the novel.

8. Backstory

Backstory reflects on events that happen before the main body of the story is told, giving context for what happens in the present time. This is often featured as a prologue but can also be shared throughout a linear timeline using character reflections.

Example of Backstory

Throughout Frankenstein, references are made to the past events of both Dr. Frankenstein and the creature. Those events impact the reader's understanding of the characters.

9. Author Surrogate

Most writers will write elements of themselves into their characters, but an author surrogate is a more refined version of this. A character will take on the personal views, morals, and even personality traits of their author when using this narrative technique.

Example of Author Surrogate

The character of Jo March is commonly believed to represent author Louisa May Alcott in the classic American novel, Little Women.

10. Repetitive Designation

Repetition is common throughout works of fiction and is often used to further a particular point in the story. This technique makes use of repeated references to either a character or object. At first, this reference appears unimportant but is later proven to be a crucial part of the narrative.

Example of Repetitive Designation

The green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock is used throughout The Great Gatsby to symbolize the gradual destruction of Gatsby's dream.

11. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

As the name suggests, a writer will use this technique to have characters make predictions, which then come true as a result of their thinking about that event.

Example of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

If you were worried about being late for school and continually thought about this, then ended up being late for school because of your constant worrying, this would be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

12. Unreliable Narrator

To some extent, most first-person narrators can be seen as unreliable as they're often key characters in the story and show an element of bias. An unreliable narrator will deliberately mislead a reader to add intrigue to the story.

Example of an Unreliable Narrator

Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* is one of the best examples of an unreliable first-person narrator. He intentionally withholds key information about major characters and is dishonest about his behaviour.

13. Narrative Hook

The best stories are the ones that grip you from the beginning, and that's exactly what a narrative hook does. Usually found at the start of the narrative, they entice you to keep reading.

Example of Narrative Hook

As one of the world's most famous opening lines, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is the perfect example of a first chapter narrative hook.

14. Allegory

An allegory is a symbolic story, often religious or spiritual, that reflects on elements of what it's like to be human.

Example of Allegory

The story of *The Tortoise and the Hare* is framed around a moral, that you can be more successful if you are slow and steady rather than being fast and careless.

15. Hyperbole

This technique uses extreme exaggeration to create a lasting impression or create strong feelings in the reader.

Example of Hyperbole

“I was helpless. I did not know what in the world to do. I was quaking from head to foot and could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.” – Old Times on the Mississippi by Mark Twain.

16. Sensory Detail

Without images to support the writing, the reader is left to their imagination. Sensory detail and imagery is a commonly-used method to help readers create mental images of a scene, using descriptive language that touches specifically on the five senses.

Example of Sensory Detail

“Its pendulum swung to and fro with a heavy monotonous clang; there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical.” – The Masque of the Red Death by Edgar Allan Poe.

17. Onomatopoeia

Used throughout literature and nonfiction, an onomatopoeia is a word that sounds similar to the word that it’s describing.

Example of Onomatopoeia

“Buzzing bee” or “roaring lion” are examples of onomatopoeia.

18. Parody

Parodies are typically used to mock or convey humour through exaggerated and over-the-top imitation.

Example of Parody

The story of Gulliver’s Travels by Jonathan Swift is framed as a parody of English society.

19. Oxymoron

They say opposites attract and that’s the case with oxymorons. These are two words that are deliberately used together to imply the opposite of each other.

Example of Oxymoron

“Alone together” or “known secret” are examples of oxymorons.

20. Anthropomorphism or Personification

Personification is commonly used to give human-like characteristics and traits to non-human elements. Anthropomorphism is a form of this, specifically referring to animals.

Example of Personification

“Wind howling” or “heart skipped a beat” are examples of personification.

21. Pathetic Fallacy

This is where the mood of a character is reflected in non-human objects surrounding them. Weather is typically used in fiction to suggest a character’s frame of mind at a given moment of the story.

Example of Pathetic Fallacy

Violent thunderstorms or driving rain are often used throughout fiction to depict and convey the anger or sadness of key characters.

22. Multiperspectivity

A story can have both multiple narrators and perspectives. This technique is used to show different character’s viewpoints throughout the story, often in the form of an all-knowing, or omniscient, third-person narrator.

Example of Multiperspectivity

The story of *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, through the lens of multiple main characters.

23. Metaphor

We use metaphors throughout our daily lives, and it’s one of the most popular literary techniques. A writer will use descriptive language as a figure of speech to describe a scene or character, rather than being completely literal in their description.

Example of Metaphor

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” – *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare.

24. Story within a Story or Frame Story

A narrative can contain multiple stories or subplots and this technique is a good example of that. Writers using frame stories will often create “mini-stories” within the main narrative to highlight other characters or develop the plot.

Example of Frame Story

The plot of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a compilation of short stories about the characters Alice meets on her journey.

25. *Plot Twist*

When something unexpected happens in a story, this is often described as a plot twist. Used throughout all manner of storytelling, the expected ending is usually shifted at a pivotal moment in the plot.

Example of Plot Twist

Spoiler alert! The revelation in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* that Miss Steele is married to Robert Ferris, not Edward, is a turning point for the main character Elinor Dashwood, and a significant plot twist toward the end of the novel.

References:

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