

Elements of a Narrative

Narrator and Point of View

The narrator of a story is who is telling it. Stories are most commonly told from first-person (e.g., I, me, we) or third-person (e.g., he, she, they) point of view. There are a wide range of options when selecting a narrator—they can be objective or unreliable, omniscient or limited, a character in the story or some outward force—the selection of which contributes to the overall tone of the story.

Summary and Scene

A summary gives the reader a quick sketch of what is happening or what has already happened. Often these are places that need to be filled out with more details later on. Scenes, on the other hand, create mental movies for readers.

“Showing” vs. “Telling”

Providing a scene is can be more effective than giving a summary because it involves more engaging action and allows the reader to come up with their own insights about what is happening.

Dialogue

Characters speak out loud to themselves or one another. This can help the reader understand the characters. Each character’s voice is like a fingerprint – unique. Using real language and making each character distinct from the others will make the story believable and interesting. Dialogue can also affect the pace of the story, breaking up the exposition.

Interior Monologue

This allows the reader to know a character’s internal thoughts and feelings while the dialogue or action is happening, which helps the reader discover more about the character in a way that other characters may not know.

Blocking

Also known as the action between dialogue, this helps set the scene and reveal the characters’ locations and actions.

Flashback

A character may remember something from their past that helps to build the scene or events. A flashback is a good tool to add context to the current events of the story and depth to its characters. This technique is usually written as a triggered memory.

Setting Description

This lets the reader know where the story is taking place. With enough description, the reader can smell the air, feel the heat, see the color of the walls, hear background noises, and become more engaged in the story.

Character Description

Describing the character's physical appearance, habits, and quirks can provide insights into their personality, reflecting who they are based on what they look like and what they do.

Imagery

Sensory description is used to paint a picture in the reader's head, so they know how something feels, what it looks like, etc. Using similar types of images throughout a narrative can unify a story, while contrasting images can create tension. Selection of images contributes to the mood, or atmosphere, of the story.

Tone vs. Mood

Tone is the attitude of a narrative's author or speaker, whereas mood is the atmosphere created by language which leaves an emotional effect on the reader.

Figurative Language

This allows the reader to see everyday things and people in a new way. Figurative language often makes comparisons, including metaphors and similes, between the known and the unexplored. It helps broaden the imagery and contribute to mood.

Personification

In this type of figurative language, inanimate things and non-human animals take on human qualities. Though it doesn't make literal sense, it helps readers picture a scene more clearly.

Themes

The central topics explored in a narrative, recurring and often reaching toward larger relatable ideas.

Motif

A recurring element of a story, usually related to the story's overall themes, growing in meaning each time it is mentioned.

Symbolism

Not everything in the story should be taken at face value—symbols are often subtle and represent important ideas in the narrative connected to its themes.

Irony

A discrepancy between expectation and reality. In a narrative, this regularly manifests as a discrepancy between what the reader knows and what certain characters know, creating tension or humor in the story.

A narrative, in the most basic terms, is a story. It can take many shapes: a work of fiction, a personal recollection, or a number of things in between.