



Narrative Writing

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Structure and Cohesion		
<p>The story lacks focus.</p> <p>This writer has written a version of a “bed to bed” story, beginning with the start of a day or large event (“I woke up and had breakfast.”) and progressing to the end (“I came home. It was a great day.”). The event unfolds in a bit-by-bit fashion, with each part of the story receiving equal weight.</p>	<p>You are learning to write more and more, stretching your stories across tons of pages. That’s great. But here’s the new challenge. Writers need to be able to write a lot and still write a <i>focused</i> story. What I mean by this is that writers can write a whole story about an event that only lasted 20 minutes, and it can still be tons of pages long.</p> <p>To write a really fleshed out, well developed, small moment story, it is important to move more slowly through the sequence of the event, and capture the details on the page.</p>	<p>Not the whole trip, the whole day: 20 minutes!!</p> <p>Write with details.</p> <p>I said, I thought, I did.</p>
<p>The story is confusing or seems to be missing important information.</p> <p>This writer has written a story that leaves you lost, unable to picture the moment or understand the full sequence of events. She may have left out information regarding where she was or why something was happening, or may have switched suddenly to a new part of the story without alerting the reader.</p>	<p>I really want to understand this story, but it gets confusing for me. Will you remember that writers need to become readers and to reread their own writing, asking, “Does this make sense? Have I left anything out that my reader might need to know?” Sometimes it is helpful to ask a partner to read your story, as well, and to tell you when the story is making sense (thumbs up) and when it is confusing (thumbs down).</p>	<p>I reread my writing to make it clearer.</p> <p>I ask myself, “Does this make sense? Have I left anything out that my reader might need to know?”</p> <p>If I need to, I add more information or a part that is missing into the story.</p>
<p>The story has no tension.</p> <p>This writer’s story is flat, without any sense of conflict or tension. The story is more of a chronicle than a story. If there is a problem, there is no build-up around possible solutions. Instead, the dog is simply lost and then found.</p>	<p>You told what happened in your story, in order, so I get it. But to make this into the kind of story that readers can’t put down, the kind that readers read by flashlight in bed, you have to add what writers call edge-of-the-seat tension. Instead of just saying I did this, I did this, I did this, you need to have the narrator want something really badly and then run into difficulties, or trouble ... so readers are thinking, “Will it work? Won’t it?” You’ve got to get readers all wound up! Right now, reread and find the part of the story where you could show what the main character really wants.</p>	<p>Edge-of-the-seat tension:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Someone really wants something. 2. Someone encounters trouble. 3. Someone tries, tries, tries.

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<p>The story has no real or significant ending.</p> <p>This writer has ended her story in a way that feels disappointing to the reader. Occasionally this will be because she has left loose ends unresolved, but most often it is because the ending of the story has little to do with the significance of the story itself. The ending may be something like, “Then I went home,” or “The End!” She needs help identifying what her story is really about and then crafting an ending that ties directly to that meaning.</p>	<p>Sometimes it seems like your endings just trail off, and they aren’t as powerful as they could be because of that. Writers know that the ending of a story is the last thing with which a reader will be left. Today, I want to teach you one tip for writing an ending that is particularly powerful. Writers ask, “What is this story really about?” Once they have the answer to that, they decide on a bit of dialogue or internal thinking, a descriptive detail, or a small action that will end the story in a way that ties back to that meaning.</p>	<p>Writers end a story in a way that shows what the story is really about. They might do this by including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue • Internal thinking • A descriptive detail • A small action that ties back to the true meaning behind the story
<p>The writer is new to the writing workshop or this particular genre of writing.</p> <p>This writer struggles because narrative is a new genre for her. She may display certain skill sets (e.g., the ability to use beautifully descriptive language or literary devices) but lacks the vision of what she is being asked to produce. Her story is probably long and unfocused and is usually dominated by summary, not storytelling.</p>	<p>Someone famously once said, “You can’t hit a target if you don’t know what that target is.” This is especially true for writers. They can’t write well if they don’t have a vision, a mental picture, of what they hope to produce. Today, I want to teach you that one way writers learn about the kinds of writing they hope to produce is by studying mentor texts. They read a mentor text once, enjoying it as a story. Then, they read it again, this time asking, “How does this kind of story seem to go?” They label what they notice and then try it in their own writing.</p>	<p>Writers use mentor texts to help them imagine what they hope to write. They:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the text and enjoy it as a good story. • Reread the text and ask, “How does this kind of story seem to go?” • Note what they notice. • Try to do some of what they noticed in their own writing.
<p>The writer does not use paragraphs.</p> <p>This writer does not use paragraphs to separate the different parts of his story. Because of this, the story is difficult to read and hold onto. He needs support understanding the importance of paragraphs, as well as the various ways writers use them.</p>	<p>Your writing will be a thousand times easier to read when you start using paragraphs. A paragraph is like a signal to a reader. It says, “Halt! Take a tiny break. Do you understand what is happening so far? Okay, I’m going to keep going!” Paragraphs give your readers an opportunity to take in your stories, and they also alert readers to important things like scene changes and new dialogue. Today, I want to teach you a few of the ways writers use paragraphs. Writers use paragraphs when a new event is starting, when their story is switching to a new time or place, when a new character speaks, or to separate out an important part that needs space around it.</p>	<p>Make a New Paragraph Here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very important part that needs space around it • New event • New time • New place • New character speaks
Elaboration		
<p>The writer has created a story that is sparse, with little elaboration.</p> <p>This writer has written a story that is short, with one or more parts that need elaboration. He has conveyed the main outline of an event (this happened, then this happened, then this happened), but there is no sense that he has expanded on any one particular part.</p>	<p>You have gotten skilled at telling what happens, in order, but you write with just the bare bones sequence. Like, if you went out for supper yesterday and I asked you, “How was your dinner at the restaurant?” and you answered, “I went to the restaurant. I ate food. It was good.” That’s not the best story, right? It is just the bare bones with no flesh on them—like a skeleton. Can you try to flesh out your story?</p>	<p>Not: I ate food. I came home.</p> <p>But: Details, details, details</p>

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<p>The story is riddled with details.</p> <p>In an attempt to elaborate or make a story compelling, the writer has listed what seem to be an endless number of tangential details. (“I got on the ride. There were a lot of people there. I was wearing a bright red shirt with a little giraffe on it. I was eating funnel cake.”) This sort of elaboration often makes the piece feel monotonous, as if there is no real purpose guiding the writer’s choice of details.</p>	<p>Although you are great at including details, you actually choose too many details. Writers are choosy about the details they include in a story. They know they can’t include every detail they remember, so they have to decide which parts of their story to stretch out with details and which parts to move through more quickly. Writers ask, “What is this story really about?” and then stretch out the part of the story that goes with that meaning. Then, they cut details from the parts that are less important.</p>	<p>Although it is great to write with details—some writers write with too many details. Writers need to decide which details to keep and which to cut. They:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask, “What is my story really about?” • Stretch out the heart of the story. • Shorten less important parts.
<p>The story is swamped with dialogue.</p> <p>This writer is attempting to story-tell, not summarize, but is relying too heavily on dialogue to accomplish this mission. The story is full of endless dialogue (“Let’s play at the park,” I said. “Okay,” Jill said. “Maybe we should play on the swings,” I said. “I agree,” Jill said. “Great!” I said.). This writer needs to learn that dialogue is an important part of storytelling but cannot be the only device a writer uses to move a story forward.</p>	<p>Sometimes, writers make their characters talk—and talk and talk and talk. Today, I want to teach you that writers use dialogue, but they use it sparingly. They make sure their writing has a balance of action and dialogue by alternating between the two and by cutting dialogue that does not give the reader important information about the character or the story.</p>	<p>Writers make sure that their writing has a balance of dialogue and action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They often alternate between action and dialogue as they write. • They cut dialogue that does not give the reader important information about the character or story.
<p>The writer has written the external story but not the internal story.</p> <p>This writer has captured the events of a story precisely, and likely has done a fine job of moving the story along at an appropriate pace. What is missing, however, is the internal story. That is, as each event occurs, the main character is merely swept along with the current of events (““Don’t you ever do that again!’ my dad yelled. He wagged his finger at me. I went up to my room and sat down to do my homework.”) and has little emotional response. The reader is left wondering what the main character is feeling and thinking throughout the story, and as a result, the story lacks a certain depth.</p>	<p>When we first learn to write stories, we learn to tell the events that happened. We tell what happened first, then next, then next. As we become strong writers, though, it’s important not just to write the external story, but also to write the internal story. Today, I want to teach you that when planning for and drafting a story, the writer plans not just the actions, but also the character’s <i>reactions</i> to the events.</p>	<p>Writers tell not just what happened in a story—the actions—but also how the character felt about each of those events—the reactions.</p>

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<p>The writer struggles to identify and convey a deeper meaning.</p> <p>This writer’s story likely contains most of the surface elements you are looking for but seems to lack a sense of purpose. When asked why she is writing this particular piece or what she hopes to convey to her reader, she struggles to find an answer. Because of this, each part of the story is often given equal attention, without any one part having been elaborated on. Dialogue, details, and other forms of narrative craft are used to move the story forward but do not contribute to the reader’s understanding of the meaning or theme.</p>	<p>Everybody has stories to tell. At a certain point in your life as a writer, knowing <i>why</i> you want to tell these stories becomes almost as important as writing them. What I mean by this, and what I want to teach you today, is that writers reflect on the moments of their lives and ask, “What is this story really about? What do I want my reader to know about me?” Then, they use all they know about narrative craft to bring that meaning forward.</p>	<p>Writers ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is this story really about? • What do I want my reader to know about me? <p>Then they use all they know about narrative craft to bring that meaning forward.</p>
<p>The writer is ready to use literary devices.</p> <p>This writer is successfully using a variety of narrative techniques and would benefit from learning to use literary devices. He has a clear sense of the meaning behind his story, as well as the places where this meaning might be emphasized or further revealed.</p>	<p>I think you are ready for a new challenge. When writers are strong—using all sorts of craft, writing focused, well-paced stories—it often signals that they are ready for something new. I’ve noticed that you are trying to bring out what your story is really about, and I want to teach you one way that writers do this: using literary devices. Writers use comparisons (like metaphors and similes), repetition, and even symbols to highlight important messages in stories.</p>	<p>Literary devices writers use to reveal meaning to a reader:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metaphors and similes • Repetition • Symbolism
<p>The writer summarizes rather than story-tells.</p> <p>There is probably a sense that this writer is disconnected from the series of events—listing what happened first, then next, then next. He writes predominately by over-viewing what happened (“On the way to school I was almost attacked by a dog but I got there okay.”). The writer rarely uses dialogue, descriptive details, or other forms of narrative craft to convey the story to his reader.</p>	<p>Writers don’t take huge steps through their experience, writing like this: “I had an argument. Then I went to bed.” Instead, writers take tiny steps, writing more like this: “‘It was your turn!’ I yelled, and then I turned and walked out of the room really fast. I slammed the door and went to my bedroom. I was so furious that I just sat on my bed for a long time.”</p> <p>It helps to show what happened rather than just telling the main gist of it.</p>	<p>Not giant steps, but baby steps. Show, not tell.</p>

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Language		
<p>The writer struggles with spelling.</p> <p>This writer’s piece is riddled with spelling mistakes. This does not necessarily mean the writing is not strong (in fact, the story may be very strong), but the spelling mistakes compromise the reader’s ability to understand it. The writer’s struggle with spelling may stem from various places—difficulty understanding and applying spelling patterns, a limited stock of high-frequency words, lack of investment, the acquisition of English as a new language—and diagnosing the underlying problem will be an important precursor to teaching into it.</p>	<p>One of the things I’m noticing about your writing is how beautiful it sounds when you read it aloud. I looked more closely, curious about how I had missed all the beauty you’ve captured on this page, and realized that all your spelling mistakes make it difficult for me (and probably other readers, too) to understand. Today, I want to teach you a few techniques writers use to help them spell. Writers use the classroom word wall, they stretch words out and write down the sounds they hear, and they use words they <i>do</i> know how to spell to help them with those they don’t know how to spell.</p>	<p>Writers work hard at their spelling. They:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the word wall. • S-T-R-E-T-C-H words out and write down the sounds they hear. • Use words they know (<i>found</i>), to help them spell words they don’t know (<i>compound, round</i>).
<p>The writer struggles with end punctuation.</p> <p>This story amounts to what appears to be one long, endless sentence. The writer may have distinct sentences (“We ran down the road James was chasing us we thought we needed to run faster to escape him”) that are simply not punctuated. Alternatively, he may have strung his sentences together using an endless number of <i>ands</i>, <i>thens</i>, and <i>buts</i> in an attempt at cohesion. (“We ran down the road and James was chasing us and we thought that we needed to run faster to escape him but then we could hear his footsteps and his breathing and we were scared.”)</p>	<p>I read your piece today, and it sounded a bit like this. “We ran down the road and James was chasing us and we thought that we needed to run faster to escape him but then we could hear his footsteps and his breathing and we were scared.” Phew, I was out of breath! Today, I want to teach you that writers use end punctuation to give their readers a little break, to let them take a breath, before moving on to the next thing that happened in the story. One way to figure out where to put end punctuation is to reread your piece aloud, notice where you find yourself stopping to take a small breath, and put a period, exclamation point, or question mark there.</p>	<p>Writers reread their pieces aloud, notice where readers should stop and take a small breath because one thought has ended, and use end punctuation to help mark those places.</p>
The Process of Generating Ideas		
<p>The writer has “nothing to write about.”</p> <p>This writer often leaves the minilesson, returns to his seat, and sits idly, waiting for you to visit. When you do visit, he is generally quick to tell you that he has “nothing to write about.” This writer needs help with independence, but also with understanding that life is one big source of stories. As long as one is living, one has something to write about!</p>	<p>I’m noticing that you often have trouble finding things to write about, and I wanted to remind you that life is one big source of story ideas. Writers see the world through special eyes, imagining stories in the tiniest of moments. Writers find stories at the dinner table, while walking down the street, in the classroom, and at recess. Writers know that it matters less <i>what</i> they write about and more <i>how</i> they write about it.</p>	<p>Writers have the eyes to find stories everywhere. They know it matters less what they write about and more how they write about it.</p>

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<p>The writer’s notebook work does not represent all she can do.</p> <p>This writer is content to summarize and write in cursory ways in her notebook, and does not hold herself to using all she knows when collecting entries. This may mean the entries are short, underdeveloped, or lack narrative craft. When you look at this child’s entries, you do not get the sense that she is striving to do her best work while collecting.</p>	<p>Many people think that the writer’s notebook is just a place to collect stuff and that real writing happens when you pick a seed idea and draft on lined paper. I sort of get the idea you think that way. It is true that the notebook is a place for collecting, but it is also true that the notebook is a place for <i>practicing</i>. Today, I want to teach you that writers hold themselves accountable for using everything they know about good writing whenever they write, even in their notebooks. This includes everything they know about structure, storytelling, revision, and editing!</p>	<p>Writers use their notebooks to practice becoming better writers. They use everything they know about structure, storytelling, and even revision and editing!</p>
The Process of Drafting		
<p>The writer has trouble maintaining stamina and volume.</p> <p>This writer has a hard time putting words down on the page. It may be that he writes for a long period of time producing very little or that he refuses to write for longer than a few minutes. The writer often has avoidance behaviors (e.g., trips to the bathroom during writing workshop, a pencil tip that breaks repeatedly). He gets very little writing done during the workshop, despite urging from you.</p>	<p>Today, I want to teach you a little trick that often works for me when I’m having trouble staying focused. When writing is hard for me, I set small, manageable goals for myself. I make sure these goals are something I <i>know</i> I can do, like writing for ten minutes straight. Then, when I reach my goal, I give myself a little gift, like a short walk or a few minutes to sketch a picture. Then, I get back to writing again.</p>	<p>Writers set goals for themselves and work hard to achieve them. When they do, they reward themselves for their hard work.</p>
<p>The writer struggles to work independently.</p> <p>This student is often at your side, asking questions or needing advice. She struggles to write on her own and only seems to generate ideas when you are sitting beside her. When she does write, she needs constant “checks” and accolades. She is task-oriented. That is, she will complete one thing you have taught her to do and then sit and wait to be told what to do next. She does not rely on charts or other materials to keep her going.</p>	<p>As a writer, it is important that you take control of your own writing life. You can’t be content to sit back and relax. Instead, you have to ask yourself, “What in this room might help me get back on track as a writer?” Then, you use those resources to get started again. You can look at charts in the room, ask your partner for help, read mentor texts for inspiration, or even look back over old writing for new ideas.</p> <p>or</p> <p>One thing I’m noticing about you as a writer is that you write with me in mind. What I mean by this is that when I teach something, you try it. When I suggest something, you try it. But I am not the only writing teacher in this room. Believe it or not, <i>you</i> can be your own writing teacher, too. Today, I want to teach you how to look at your own work against a checklist, assess for what is going well and what you might do better, and then set goals for how you might revise your current piece and for what you might try out in your future work, too.</p>	<p>When you are stuck, you can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult charts • Ask your partner for help • Read mentor texts for inspiration • Look back over old writing for new ideas

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The Process of Revision		
<p>The writer does not seem to be driven by personal goals so much as by your instructions.</p> <p>If you ask, "What are you working on?" this writer acts surprised. "My writing," she says, and indeed, you are pretty sure that is what she is doing. She is trying to crank out the required amount of text. She doesn't have more specific goals about how to do things better that are influencing her.</p>	<p>Can I ask you something? Who is the boss of your writing? I'm asking that because you need to be the boss of your writing, and to be the best boss you can be, you need to give yourself little assignments. You need to take yourself by the hand and say, "From now on, you should be working on this," and then after a bit, "Now you should be working on this."</p>	<p>My Writing Goals Are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
The Process of Editing		
<p>The writer does not use what she knows about editing while writing.</p> <p>This writer is not applying what she knows about spelling, grammar, and punctuation while writing. You may notice that you have taught a particular spelling pattern, and she mastered it in isolation but is not using that knowledge during writing workshop. She may also spell word wall words incorrectly or misspell words that are similar (e.g., spelling <i>getting</i> correctly but misspelling <i>setting</i>). This writer needs to be reminded that editing is not something left for the last stages of writing. Instead, writers use all they know <i>as they write</i>.</p>	<p>You are the boss of your own writing, and part of being the boss is making sure that you are doing, and using, everything you know while you write. Often when people think of editing, they think of it as something they do just before publishing. This is true, but it is also true that writers edit as they write. Today, I want to teach you that writers use an editing checklist to remind them of what they've learned about spelling, punctuation, and grammar. They take a bit of time each day to make sure they are using all they know as they write.</p>	<p>Editing Checklist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read, asking, "Will this make sense to a stranger?" • Check the punctuation. • Do your words look like they are spelled correctly?