

## The use of narrative techniques.

In this post, you'll learn how to define narrative technique, exactly what is a narrative technique when it's used in both fiction and non-fiction stories, and how you can start to incorporate some of these ideas into your own work.

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### What Is Narrative Technique?

You'll most commonly hear narrative technique referred to when talking about fiction or literature, with "literary device," "fictional device," and "literary technique" often being used in academic and professional circles to mean the same thing. But what do we consider to be the main narrative technique definition? What does narrative technique mean? At its core, narrative technique is the way in which 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 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.

### What Is Narrative Structure?

It is easy to think that narrative structure and narrative technique mean the same thing when they sound so similar, but they do not. It is best to think of narrative structure as the overall blueprint for the house, whereas narrative techniques are the individual bricks used to build the house.

Structure is fundamentally about your plan for the story and the different elements you will be using to create that content—how everything works together to form the bigger picture.

Of the four types of narrative structure, the most common is **linear, where the story moves from beginning to end in chronological order**.

If you think about some of your favorite books and even films, a typical linear structure will follow a pattern of five acts:

1. Beginning/Character Introduction
2. Problem/Conflict
3. Plot Climax
4. Resolution
5. End/Character Conclusion

When thinking about how we define narrative technique, these different pieces are used within this structure to help us get to the finish line and make the reader's journey more complex or interesting.

### **1. Setting**

This technique is particularly popular in Gothic fiction, where a house or landscape are 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 Flash Forward**

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 in order 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 in relation to 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 being 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 defined 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 about the future, which then come true as a result of them 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 a key character 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 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 own behavior.

## **13. Narrative Hook**

The best stories are the ones that grip you from the beginning, and that is 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 in nature that reflects on elements of what it is 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 own 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 humor 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 is 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 in 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 Miserables* 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 is 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 main character Elinor Dashwood, and a significant plot twist toward the end of the novel.

## NARRATORS IN FICTION

A *narrator* is a person or character who tells a story, or a voice fashioned by an author to recount a narrative.

Professor Suzanne Keene points out that "the nonfiction narrator is strongly identified with the author, whether a first-person self-narrator in autobiography or a third-person historian or biographer" (*Narrative Form*, 2015).

**An unreliable narrator** (used far more often in fiction than in nonfiction) **is a first-person narrator whose account of events cannot be trusted by the reader.**

## Examples and Observations

- "The term '**narrator**' can be used in both a broad and a narrow sense. The broad sense is 'one who tells a story,' whether that person is real or imagined; this is the sense given in most dictionary definitions. Literary scholars, however, by 'narrator' often mean a purely imaginative person, a voice emerging from a text to tell a story. . . . Narrators of this kind include omniscient narrators, that is, narrators not only who are imaginary but who exceed normal human capabilities in their knowledge of events." (Elsbeth Jajdelska, *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator*. University of Toronto Press, 2007)
- **Narrators in Creative Nonfiction**
- - "Nonfiction often achieves its momentum not just through narrative--telling the story--but also through the meditative intelligence behind the story, the author as **narrator** thinking through the implications of the story, sometimes overtly, sometimes more subtly.
- "This thinking narrator who can infuse a story with shades of ideas is what I miss most in much nonfiction that is otherwise quite compelling--we get only raw story and not the more essayistic, reflective narrator. . . . [I]n telling nonfiction stories we can't as writers know anybody's interior life but our own, so our interior life--our thought process, the connections we make, the questions and doubts raised by the story--must carry the whole intellectual and philosophical burden of the piece." (Philip Gerard, "Adventures in Celestial Navigation." *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, ed. by Lee Gut kind. W.W. Norton, 2005)
- - "Readers of the nonfiction work expect to experience more directly the mind of the author, who will frame the meaning of things for herself and tell the readers. In fiction, the writer can become other people; in nonfiction, she becomes more of herself. In fiction, the reader must step into a believable fictional realm; in nonfiction, the writer speaks intimately, from the heart, directly addressing the reader's sympathies. In fiction, the **narrator** is generally not the author; in nonfiction--barring special one-off personas as encountered in Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"--the writer and narrator are essentially the same. In fiction, the narrator can lie; the expectation in nonfiction is that the writer will not. There's an assumption that the story is, to as great an extent as possible, true; that the tale and its narrator are reliable." (New York Writers Workshop, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. Writer's Digest Books, 2006)

- **First Person and Third Person Narrators**

"[S]imple, direct storytelling is so common and habitual that we do it without planning in advance. The **narrator** (or teller) of such a personal experience is the speaker, the one who was there. The telling is usually *subjective*, with details and language chosen to express the writer's feelings.

"When a story isn't your own experience but a recital of someone else's, or of events that are public knowledge, then you proceed differently as narrator. Without expressing opinions, you step back and report, content to stay invisible. Instead of saying, 'I did this; I did that,' you use the third person, *he, she, it, or they*. . . . Generally, a nonparticipant is *objective* in setting forth events, unbiased, as accurate and dispassionate as possible."

(X.J. Kennedy et al., *The Bedford Reader*. St. Martin's, 2000)

- **First-Person Narrator**

"Once there, beside the ocean, I felt a little frightened. The others didn't know I'd gone. I thought of the violence in the world. People get kidnapped on the beach. A sneaker wave could take me out, and no one would ever know what had happened to me."

(Jane Kirkpatrick, *Homestead: Modern Pioneers Pursuing the Edge of Possibility*. Water Brook Press, 2005)

- **Third-Person Narrator**

"Lucy felt a little frightened, but she felt very inquisitive and excited as well. She looked back over her shoulder and there, between the dark tree-trunks, she could still see the open doorway of the wardrobe and even catch a glimpse of the empty room from which she had set out."

(C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950)

- **Narrators and Readers**

"It is well known that in linguistic communication *I* and *you* are absolutely presupposed one by the other; likewise, there can be no story without a **narrator** and without an audience (or reader).

"(Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," 1966)