

Building a Story: The Art of Narrative

BY MARILYN BATES

“When short story season rolls around, I live with a sense of dread. I know I’ll have to read endless pages of scrawled, dead prose about Rambo-like robots shooting their way to heaven — it’s discouraging, to say the least” (Larson, 1993, p. 2). This lament by a high school English teacher typifies the difficulty of teaching students how to write a short story. Often times first-person memoirs by students sound like a recap of what happened at the prom or a conversation about the big party at someone’s house on Saturday night. Student writers may follow the instructor’s directions carefully, detailing who the characters are, what they look like, and their mannerisms, but their narrations lack the scene development and timing that turn a piece of writing into a story.

Teaching students to write stories is a complicated process, because the finished product involves several components that are difficult to teach simultaneously: building a scene to a climactic moment, creating dialogue, and developing character. How does one teach all of the elements of a good story and get students to incorporate them into the final product?

I use a multistage procedure, teaching what I shall call “the incident” first; then dialogue, and finally a character sketch, which often lengthens into a short story. Each assignment’s goal should contribute to the next assignment’s development. That is, the lesson of the incident, which relies on timing and scene development, is incorporated into the dialogue assignment; and both of these lessons into the character sketch. Students may develop three different scenarios, but some become so enthralled

with their work that they carry the same basic story through all three stages. Others write a completely new scenario for each assignment.

The Incident

I kick off my short story unit by asking students to describe an “incident.” The incident should encompass one moment in time — not be carried into the next day, or week, or even overnight. The moment in time must build to a climax, with the emphasis on timing. I point out that a well-timed climax has much in common with a well-told joke: timing is everything. I ask students to focus at this stage on storytelling as opposed to dialogue, although a small exchange may occur to maintain the action of the episode.

I tell students to avoid writing about arrests for traffic violations, automobile accidents, illegal teenage parties involving drugs and alcohol, or mob executions. These make awfully dull incidents, and a proliferation of such tales makes the teacher’s job tedious. Additionally, I don’t permit students to kill anyone off in their incidents, a practice which invites *deus ex machina* endings and plots with little thought.

A good source for samples of the incident can be found in *Flash Fiction*, edited by James Thomas (1992), particularly Julia Alvarez’s “Snow” and Michael Delp’s “Draft Horse.” Although the incident assignment need not be a completed story, as are these two examples, both of these stories focus on a single happening in which a scene is developed.

The Dialogue

Now I ask students to create dialogue. I want students to strive for dialogue that develops character and that imitates real speech. I provide the following list of pitfalls students encounter as they write dialogue.

1. Too much narration mixed in with the dialogue.
2. Too many buffers (he said, she saw, they observed, etc.).
3. Telling rather than showing (using “he said alarmingly, angrily, noisily,” etc., instead of having the dialogue reveal these actions or emotions).
4. Dialogue that addresses the reader rather than other characters (tells us things other characters already know or lectures readers).
5. Too many dialogue descriptors (he announced, she chided, etc.). Remember, “said” is always the best.
6. Consistently using whole, formal sentences, or consistently writing logical and sequential dialogue. Real speech is not smooth and flowing. In fact, one character may not entirely hear what the other is saying because he is thinking up a reply while the other is speaking. Instead, a writer should try to catch verbal tics and overlapping speech.

Then, my students and I look at some models. We examine Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman*. Students do not have to read the entire book, just the first four pages of

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Chapter Six. I preview these pages by telling students that Lorraine is a high school student who lives with her mother, a private duty nurse. The mother, a divorcee, takes care of the terminally ill. The dialogue in this section of the book contains an excellent delineation of character and reveals the essence of this mother-daughter relationship. As students sift through the dialogue, they find that Lorraine's mother:

- is distrustful of men — she tells Lorraine they only have “one thing” on their minds;
- has little compassion for the sick people she attends — “The old guy’s throat was closing, and he was bouncing up and down in bed for days”; and
- makes Lorraine feel guilty about any normal expenses associated with child-rearing — “Twenty-three bucks for a dental certificate! I can’t even afford to get myself a pair of nylons.”

Another excellent source for dialogue instruction is Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants.”²⁴ The dialogue in this story contributes to the reader’s understanding of the setting as well the situation. The author creates a sense of tension and conflict in the relationship between two world travelers who, trying to enjoy themselves as tourists in Spain, are unable to do so because of the underlying issue they face: an unmentionable, unwanted pregnancy and an impending abortion. In this skillful dialogue characters never make clear the nature of the upcoming “operation.” The readers are left to deduce the circumstances as the characters talk around the topic.

The dialogue reveals not only the situation, but also the relationship between the characters.

The girl begins: “I’ll do what you want to.” “If you don’t want to you don’t have to. I wouldn’t have you do it if you don’t want to.” Further dialogue gives us insight into the way the characters have lived their lives: “That’s all we do—look at things and try new drinks.”

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After studying models such as these, students are better prepared to write dialogue that emphasizes character development and less likely to go back to the incident and focus on the story.

However, after the dialogue is completed, students are expected to incorporate the incident — still focusing on a moment in time and building toward a climactic moment. But now the structure is achieved through a conversation between two people.

Finally, students incorporate into their piece the appropriate movements, vocal intonation and facial expressions that are collectively known as “body language.” I offer students one exercise that allows them to incorporate body language.

They list the steps in a simple chore — washing the car, typing and saving information on a disk, cleaning out the garage,

folding clothes removed from the dryer. Now the writer can integrate the body movements associated with the chore into a conversation with another character.

One student responded to this exercise with the following. The italicized lines are examples of body movement.

Carrie pulled back the lever of the dishwasher and opened the steaming door. “Mom,” she said, “do you think I could stay over at Allie’s after the dance on Saturday?” *She handed the warm casserole to her mother who was stacking the clean dishes on the shelves.*

“I don’t know why you can’t come home. You know I love to hear how it went,” her mother said. *She buffed the bottom of a copper skillet and hung it on the rack of shiny bottomed pans hanging over the stove.*

Carrie was quiet for a moment, taking out the silverware, methodically placing it in the mahogany chest on the dining room table. “Mom, sometimes you treat me like a baby,” Carrie complained. “I mean, it’s just to Allie’s.”

The Character Sketch

Finally, students write a character sketch which is launched with what I call the “landmark assignment.” I ask the students to visualize themselves in the vicinity of a famous landmark in their home town, one with which they are thoroughly familiar.

In Pittsburgh, for example, there is the clock on the corner of Kaufmann’s department

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store, a location where many passersby wait for a bus or gather to meet friends. Standing under the clock is a person whose mannerisms seem vaguely familiar to the writer, yet he or she is unable to make out the character's face from a distance. Maybe the sense of familiarity comes from the way the character tilts a head, holds a raincoat over the shoulder, or leans against the building. Perhaps the character is walking toward the clock, exhibiting a stride reminiscent of someone the writer knows, or is dressed in torn jeans, Phillies' baseball cap worn backwards and a black leather jacket, a style the writer associates with a particular individual.

I point out that a well-timed climax of a story has much in common with a well-told joke: timing is everything.

Then I give the writers a first line prompt to begin their own writings: "From a distance, I could tell it was _____ (name a person) by the way he or she _____." Next I ask students to describe the person's mannerisms, a good technique for incorporating physical description into a writing without making it sound like a post office "wanted" poster. Here is one student example:

Sara glanced through the smog-filled air, catching a glimpse of a familiar figure just as a bus choked to a stop on the corner. It looked like Mark, but suddenly the figure had turned, the broad expanse of his back facing her.

She stepped off the curb, zigzagging through the maze of cars in her path, trying to make out if it was really Mark standing next to the newspaper stand. His jeans hugged a well-toned physique, a small tear in his left knee. Standing with his weight solidly rooted on one leg, the other bent as he propped his foot against the traffic light post. His thumb was unconsciously hooked through the belt loop of his pants. A slight wind blew, ruffling his deep brown hair. He tossed his head, shifted his weight to the other foot, and finally turned in her direction. Yes, it was Mark all right. She hadn't seen him since they graduated from high school, two years ago.

This technique leads to lively writing and away from flat narrations that sound like a conversation with a friend about a Saturday night football game. The writer is immediately involved in the scene he or she is creating, because he indicates his position relative to the person at the landmark. Right away the reader gets a sense of Sara's intrigue with a character from her past, the description of his body language hinting at his relaxed, slightly unconventional behavior.

Once the characters are introduced and the setting is developed in the landmark exercise, the next step is to have the narrator interact with the character. Here is Part II of "Sara and Mark" who have just reunited under the Kaufmann's clock:

"Mark," she called out, her voice timid at first.

Trying to conceal his surprise, Mark stammered, "Sara? Sara Cromer?" His lips curled into a wide grin.

"Yeah. I saw you from across the street and thought I'd stop and see how you were." Her left hand nervously twisted the gold charm that hung from a delicate chain around her neck.

"I'm back for the holiday break. I'll be in town for a couple of days, then off to my dad's in New York."

"Well, what are you doing for your vacation?" she asked.

Looking down at the cigarette butts littering the sidewalk, he says, "My mom has this thing for nagging people to death. I, ah, just couldn't hang around the house anymore." He stared intently at Sara.

Her cheeks flush a little. "I understand. My mom gets that way sometimes too." She looks over at the pigeons waddling on the pavement. Her stomach fluttered with the same feeling she got every time Mark trudged through the door to Chemistry class, three minutes late. She thought of his wisecracks, the crooked smile. Her face became serious as she mustered the courage to say, "Um, well, what are you doing today?"

"Nuthin', exactly. I'm trying to scrounge up a few bucks. I'm busted flat."

By now the reader is intrigued with the characters introduced in this opening scene, which comes alive in a dramatic way.

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Because the narrator is immersed in the story, the student-writer becomes an active participant in the drama depicted.

Later, Mark asks Sara out to a party —

Startled by his invitation, Sara responded sounding a little more eager than she wanted, "I'd love to!"

After copying her phone number down, Mark tossed out suggestions, "How 'bout we go to a party? My friend, Charlie, is having a bash at his place. Parents in Florida this week. Should be pretty crazy. Always are." Pausing, he offered another suggestion, "Or, we could head over to this type club I go to. It's called Obsession. There's always a crowd there. I know the bouncers so I shouldn't have a problem getting you in."

Sara now has doubts about Mark, but agrees to go with him. Just as she is about to depart, a skinny man with greasy hair walked over to Mark. His bloodshot eyes stood out against his pallid skin. Looking over at her warily, he said, "Are we gonna take care of this here?" Instinctively, she stepped behind Mark, clutching his arm. "Manuel, I'll meet you across the street in a minute. I just want to finish here," he said, nodding in Sara's direction.

The man walked across the street toward the bench on the other side. "What did that man want?" Sara asked, not really needing an answer. So

many emotions rioted inside her mind, her heart pounding out of control.

Mark took her hand, "Sara, I don't know what to say to you," his voice sounded out in a low rumble.

"What is there to say?" Sara said, her voice trailing off, leaving the words unspoken.

When students have practiced techniques for storytelling and are launched into assignments spontaneously, they often write freely about deep emotional issues, the story becomes the outward manifestation of their psychological interiors. Their characters take on real-life personalities because they develop scenarios that come from past experience, the expressive content of their stories serving as a kind of "objective correlative" for their emotional state.

According to Gabrielle Rico, storytelling has cathartic and therapeutic value: "Although the emotions reach beyond language, it is words, used evocatively and metaphorically, which make patterns of our quagmire of feelings. Through the complex system of sounds we call language, we reach constantly toward expression. Through expression, we grope our way out of the quicksand of emotional reaction onto solid emotional ground" (p. 118). The classroom instructor, then, becomes a valuable catalyst, enabling students to tap into their richest sources of storytelling.

But I have found that my students are most likely to benefit in the way Rico describes if they are provided with a structure that encourages them to move from incident to dialogue to character.

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Marilyn Bates is a TC with the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project and teaches at Mt. Lebanon High School, Pittsburgh, PA.