

## The Craft of Fiction: Techniques of Short Story Writing

By Dave Hood

Learning to write fiction requires that you not only understand the elements of fiction, such as setting, plot, character, dialogue, theme, but also the techniques of fiction (the craft of fiction) such as characterization, minimalism, epiphany, plot twist, scene, summary, showing, not telling.

In this post, I'll discuss some of the most popular techniques that writer's put into use in writing short stories and novels. The following will be covered:

- Showing and Telling
- Flashback
- Minimalism
- Figurative Language
- Realism
- Interior monologue
- Stream of consciousness
- Plot twist
- Epiphany

**Showing and telling.** The writer dramatizes the story by showing and not telling. Showing the reader what happens helps to construct a believable story. A believable story assists the writer in creating a dream inside the mind of the reader. To create the dream, the reader must narrate the story by “showing” the reading what happens. The best way to show the reader is to provide concrete and specific descriptions, sensory details, and particular details. The writer also narrates the story in scenes, which include dialogue, time and place details, action, description. All scenes have a beginning, middle, and end, and are like a scene in a movie.

At times, the writer will also need to tell the reader what happens, to compress time, to add background details, to show reflection, to provide narrative commentary. The writer does this with a summary—the material in the story between scenes. A summary “tells” the reader what has happened in the story.

**Flashback.** It is a scene within a scene, or summary, in which the writer reveals details about the past, something that happened before the current narrative, and a way to show fictional time. For instance, it is a way to add background details about events that happened in the past. It is a way to provide background details about the protagonist. This backdrop enables the reader to understand the current story. It is effectively used in storytelling to reveal at the “right point.”

The writer can use a scene or summary to write the flashback. The writer often begins by introducing the flashback with the following: I recall...I remember....

**Minimalism.** It is a literary writing style introduced by Ernest Hemingway, who used short sentences, short paragraphs, concrete nouns, action verbs, and vigorous prose to narrate stories. He used adjectives and adverbs sparingly. His prose were sparse. He made every word count—each word had to provide meaning to the story; Otherwise, he omitted that word. His writing was based on his “iceberg theory”, which demands that writer’s do one thing—omit. This metaphor suggests that there is a visible iceberg—and below the surface, there is unseen depth, or subtext. Hemingway omitted every detail nonessential to the emotion he was trying to create in the story. He omitted nonessential details that would create a plodding read. He omitted backstory that could be guessed by reading the plot. By omitting detail, not sharing everything with the reader, Hemingway is able to create “subtext”, emotional tension, suggested meaning—more powerful than if he stated it in detail with words. He created significant meaning through understatement and omission—and the silences throughout the story. *For more information on how to develop the minimalist style of writing, you can read Writing Like Hemingway by R. Wilson.*

**Figurative Language.** The writer describes one thing by comparing it to something else. It is a good literary device to use to compare the abstract with something concrete, in order to be understood by the reader. Writers use various types of “figurative language” to create a dream inside the mind of the reader, add vivid details, entertain the reader, and create a memorable story. Common types a figurative language used by writer are simile, metaphor, symbolism, and personification. When the writer uses **simile**, he/she makes a direct comparison between two different things using “like” or “as”. When the writer uses **metaphor**, he/she makes an indirect comparison between two different things by suggesting that “a” is “b.” For instance, he is a robot at work. The writer uses existing symbols in literature, such as a cross, black crow, blue sky, sunset, or creates new symbols. The **symbol** is something that has deeper meaning, different meaning than its literal meaning. For instance, her cheeks are like red roses. When the writer uses **personification**, he assigns human attributes or characteristics to things or object or animals. For instance, The dog talked to me as we walked along the lonely path.

**Realism.** A realistic short story or novel depicts setting, inciting incident, scenes, and characters realistically, in accordance with the reality as most readers perceive it. The writer narrates a story that includes characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. The writer describe human behaviour and surroundings or to represent figures and objects exactly as they act or appear in life. Realism is nothing more and nothing less than a true to life portrayal human nature and the human condition. Writer Anton Chekhov used realism in writing his short stories.

**Stream of Consciousness.** When using first person POV, the writer can use this literary device to reveal the disjointed or disorganized thoughts, feelings perceptions, and memories that flow in and out of the main character's mind. It is a special mode of narration that undertakes to capture the full spectrum and the continuous flow of a character's mental process. James Joyce used this technique in *Ulysses* (1922), and it was further developed by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* (1928). The writer tries to capture a character's unbroken flow of internal thoughts. The writer can describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of a character without the devices of objective narration or dialogue. In "To the Lighthouse", Virginia Woolf makes constant use of this technique, and it is established as the predominant style from the beginning. In this novel, the action occurs not in the outside world but in the thoughts and feelings of the characters as exhibited by the ongoing narrative.

**Interior monologue.** When using the first person or third person subjective, the writer has the ability to enter into the mind of the main character, and share what the character is thinking and feeling. When the writer puts into use interior monologue, the reader is able to uncover the character's thoughts in sequence. The writer presents the thoughts of the character in logical progression, often by describing inner conflict, imagined dialogue, or self-analysis. Most often the writer uses interior monologue in reflection or the memories the character has. The interior monologue is like hearing the character's internal thoughts. The writer can describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of a character without the devices of objective narration or dialogue. In "To the Lighthouse", Virginia Woolf makes constant use of this technique, and it is established as the predominant style from the beginning. In this novel, the action occurs not in the outside world but in the thoughts and feelings of the characters as exhibited by the ongoing narrative.

**Plot Twist.** Something unexpected happens in the story. It is a change in the expected outcome or expected ending of a story. When a plot twist happens near the end of a story, especially if it changes one's view of the preceding events, it is known as a **twist ending**. A writer uses a plot twist to create surprise and build tension and add suspense.

**Epiphany.** It is a sudden revelation or insight which inspires the character, most often the protagonist, to change his views or beliefs, and his/her behaviour. It occurs in the mind of the character, and results in character change. It is caused from a particular event, experience, conflict in the story, most often revealed in a particular important scene . Epiphany is the moment of sudden revelation or insight by the character, and the epiphany must result in some action by the character. James Joyce first introduced the technique of epiphany in his collection of short stories "Dubliners."