Five Style Tips for Writing Narrative

1. **New ideas mean new paragraphs.**

Every time you change scenes, move from one character’s actions to another’s, or switch speakers, you should begin a new paragraph. Always indent.

**INCORRECT:**

**“Do you want to go or not?” Pete shook his head no. “Are you sure?” “Yes. I hate the zoo.” *Who can blame him?* Amanda thought. *If gorillas had thrown bananas at me, I wouldn’t be their target again either.***

**CORRECT:**

**“Do you want to go or not?”**

**Pete shook his head no.**

**“Are you sure?”**

**“Yes. I hate the zoo.”**

***Who can blame him?* Amanda thought. *If gorillas had thrown bananas at me, I wouldn’t be their target again either.***

1. **Punctuation during dialogue goes inside quotation marks.**

Use periods or commas for statements; use question marks for questions; or place exclamation points when a character is excited or shouting.

**INCORRECT: “**I’d like to go home now**”.**

**“**Gold fish are tasty**”,** Robert said**.**

**“**What do you want to have for dinner**”?**

**“**The Red Sox win the World Series**”!**

**CORRECT: “**I’d like to go home now**.”**

**“**Gold fish are tasty**,”** Robert said**.**

**“**What do you want to have for dinner**?”**

**“**The Red Sox win the World Series**!”**

1. **When attributing dialogue, typically cite the speaker *first*, then the verb. Omit dialogue tags when implied.**

**INCORRECT:** “Will the final exam include an essay?” **asked Stephanie.**

“If it does, I’m going to sleep in that day,” **said Brent.**

“Genius idea,” **responded Stephanie.**

**CORRECT:** “Will the final exam include an essay?” **Stephanie asked.**

“If it does, I’m going to sleep in that day,” **Brent said.**

“Genius idea.”

1. **Be consistent with verb tense. Use past tense or present, but not both.**

**INCORRECT:** Larissa **went** to the window; she **sees** a nest of sparrows nearby.

**CORRECT:** Larissa **went** to the window; she **saw** a nest of sparrows nearby.

Larissa **goes** to the window; she **sees** a nest of sparrows nearby.

1. **Show the story; don’t tell it.**

It’s understandable to want to *tell* the entire story, but getting to the ending quickly isn’t going to accomplish that. Don’t simply tell the reader what happened, *show* the reader these events through the three components of fiction: 1) *narrative*—the action or play-by-play of the story; 2) *description*—the details about a character’s or setting’s features; in other words, describing the senses of sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch; and 3) *dialogue*—bringing the character’s to life through his words.

**TELLING:**

The cop asked Peter about his sister’s registration. Both he and his wife were getting nervous. The cop kept pushing Peter for more information.

SHOWING:

“Is that the vehicle registration, sir?” the cop asked crisply. He was now looking at the canary-yellow sheet of paper.

“Yes.”

“Hand it to me, please.”

Peter handed it out the window. Now the cop, still squatting Indian-fashion in the sunlight, had Peter’s driver’s license in one hand and Deirdre’s registration in the other. He looked back and forth between them for what seemed a very long time. Peter felt light pressure on his thigh and jumped a little before realizing it was Mary’s hand. He took it and felt her fingers wrap around his at once.

“Your sister?” the cop said finally. He looked up at them with his bright gray eyes.

“Yes—”

“Her name is Finney. Yours is Jackson.”

“Deirdre was married for a year, between high school and college,” Mary said. Her voice was firm, pleasant, unafraid. Peter would have believed it completely if not for the clutch of her fingers (from Stephen King’s *Desperation*).

TELLING:

The cop told Peter that his license plate was missing, ruining Peter’s day.

SHOWING:

The cop turned and walked toward the back of the Acura without bothering to see if Peter was going to obey. Peter *did* obey, walking on legs that still felt as if they were relaying their sensory input by some form of telecommunications.

The cop stopped beside the trunk. When Peter joined him, he pointed with one big finger. Peter followed it and saw there was no license plate on the back of Deirdre’s car—just a marginally cleaner rectangle where it had been (King).

1. **Other random tips for more fluid storytelling…**

* Use **commas** to address specific characters in dialogue:

“**Raylan,** do you understand that? And do you**, seniors,** understand what that looks like?”

* Use **italics** for emphasis or to show shouting:

“You weren’t supposed to *shoot* him.”

“*What the hell was I supposed to do?”*

* Use a **dash** to indicate an interruption:

“So the first thing I said when I met Justin Timberlake was**—**”

“Whoa! You met J.T.? When was this?”

“I’m gettin’ to it. Hold your horses.”

* Use an **ellipsis** to indicate pauses or trailing off:

“License and registration please.”

“Hold on a sec. I know**…**I’ve got it**…**here somewhere**….**”

* Use a **hyphen** to connect two or more words used as an adjective.

It was a **heart-wrenching** moment for the **eight-year-old** girl.

* Avoid writing **ha ha**. Like, *never* do this. People laugh. They chuckle.

They even chortle. But very rarely does someone say, “Ha ha oh he he ha ha…that’s rich!” Just write, **He laughed. “Damn, that’s funny!”**

* The word is spelled **yeah**.

**Yeah** means, “**Yeah**, I’ll meet you there.”

**Yay** means, “**Yay!** We’re going to Disneyland!”

**Ya** means, “So…do **ya** wanna go to prom or what?”

* Avoid using **semicolons** in dialogue. Periods will do.