

Elements of Fiction

1. Dialogue

Dialogue helps the reader understand the characters. Use real language and make each character sound distinct. Each person's "voice" is like a fingerprint — unique. Find places in your story where you tell, instead of using dialogue, to make your characters come alive:

Tell: Her mother told her to go to her room.

Dialogue: "Tina, you had better get in here and clean up this nasty bedroom. If you're not in that room cleaning by the time my foot hits the stairs, you're in big trouble," my mom said as she stood at the bottom of the stairs.

Helpful Hints: When creating dialogue, avoid words like exclaimed, bellowed, and proclaimed. The more sensational the speaking verb is, the more likely it will call attention to itself. You want your reader to focus on the dialogue.

2. Blocking

Think of blocking as "stage directions." It tells where the characters are and what they are doing while they are talking. The blocking sets the scene, creates a place for the dialogue to happen. Ask yourself: Are your characters disembodied voices? What are they doing while they are talking? Walking? Looking out the window? Tapping a pencil? Make us see them.

Where is the character? In the kitchen? Sitting on the sofa? In the third desk in a science classroom? Be specific.

Example: In this example from the book *Coffee Will Make You Black*, note how April Sinclair uses blocking to show the reader what the character is doing while she's speaking. This gives the reader a visual image of the scene. The italicized section is blocking.

*Mama sat down on my unmade bed. She rubbed her hands nervously against her housedress.
"What are you talking about? What did they say?"*

In the following excerpt from a piece by student writer Michelle Lee, notice how the blocking helps the reader visualize the speaker and his actions:

"You betta' listen to yo' little sista," ordered Justin. The rest of the kids stood with their backs to the sun looking at me and Justin standing face to face.

3. Interior monologue

What is the character thinking and feeling while the dialogue and action are happening? This literary device helps the reader discover more information about the character or the story.

Example: Interior monologue from "The Bracelet" by student Chetan Patel:

"Hi," I whispered to a girl staring at me. She answered with a roll of her blue eyes. Back then I wished I had those eyes. Life would have been so much easier. No more standing on the bus, not dirty bathrooms! Would it make a difference to wash in a clean sink? Or use an unclogged toilet? I liked having a bathroom that smelled clean, without bugs crawling at my feet. The bell rang, and I came back to reality.

4. Setting Description

Describe the setting. Where is this story taking place? In *Escape from New York Pizza*? Make us smell the salami and tomato sauce. Let us hear the cooks talking in the background. Tell us the color of the restaurant walls.

Example: Setting description from "My Nerves Wasn't All She Got On" by student Pamela Clegg:

I knew she had opened up the hall closet, and I'll be the first to say this closet was a mess. This was the reserve closet for me and my sister. Whenever we heard our mother coming up the stairs, we would throw anything and everything that was on the floor in this closet: shoes, underwear, clean socks, dirty socks, towels, dolls, paper, pop cans, books, anything.

5. Character Description

Describe the characters. What do they look like? What are they wearing? What are their habits? Their background?

Example: from *What Looks Like Crazy on An Ordinary Day*, by Pearl Cleage:

The Good Reverend himself was a revelation. Tall, white-haired, and sixtyish, the Rev looked like an aging Cab Calloway and preached like Jesse Jackson. He had a long, black robe with full sleeves that billowed out like wings when he raised his arms in praise or flung them wide in surrender. His voice was rich and more powerful than his slender frame would lead you to believe.

In the following example, student writer Stephenie Lincoln draws word pictures for her readers:

Little Ronnie was the fat one. He never did anything but instigate and eat. He had on one of those polyester T-shirts that was brown and orange, with some brown pants. They looked like they both had been painted on.

6. Figurative Language — metaphors & similes

Figurative language makes the reader see everyday things and people in a new way — metaphors and similes make comparisons, sometimes between the known and the unexplored. For example in the sentence, "His teeth were like a weasel's, sharp and pointed, but twisted and bunched at the roots," A person's teeth are compared to a weasel's teeth. Although we think of using figurative language in poetry, it helps strengthen narrative and essay writing.

7. Personification

This literary device gives human qualities to non-humans. For example, if I wrote, "The moon wept at the end of each month," I would be giving the moon the human quality of emotion.

Example: from *Billy* by Albert French:

"The shades had been drawn in the room where Lori lies, the late-afternoon sunlight coming through the window *is weakened and lets the darkness cuddle up in the corner.*"

8. Flashback

You create a flashback when the character remembers something from his/her past that helps build the story. A flashback is not essential, but it is a good tool to give background on a character. Usually something triggers the memory:

As she drove down the highway, she saw a lone light in the distance. *It reminded her of the time her father. . . .*

Sometimes you can just begin: "He remembered. . . ."

9. Scene and Summary

A summary gives the reader a quick sketch of what is happening or what has happened. Often these are places that you need to go back and fill out with more details. Scenes, on the other hand, create a mental movie for your readers — they can see, hear, sometimes even smell what you're writing about.

Example of summary: from a piece by student Erika Mashia:

I was excited about the game against Benson. It was an important game, and I was nervous about the outcome. Sarah Green was an obstacle our team would have to overcome. Benson had a clear height advantage, but that's never stopped me. I beat both Imé and Kenny at the hoop. Steph and I have our outside shots down, and. . . .

Example of scene:

A wave of must and heat hit me when I ran through the doors to Benson's gym. The crowd rose to their feet shouting, "Tiger power!" as we made our entrance. "It's on," Steph said as we took off our huge, yellow warm-up shirts. "We can do it."

Steph's the talker. I get clear and focused. When I'm playing, the band, the cheerleaders, even the yelling between the "boys'" teams melts into the walls. It's just me, the ball, my team — and in this game, Sarah Cooper.