



The Art of Flashback



“You can’t go home again,” according to Thomas Wolfe. While this may be true in life, it isn’t true in writing. You can go home again, or to sixth grade, 1984 or any point in the past you wish too. How? With memories and flashbacks. Yes, I hear you, and, no, memories and flashbacks are not the same thing.

Memories are quick, usually no more than a paragraph or two, and are written in past perfect tense. Keep memories short for this reason. Past perfect tense gets very tedious very quickly. The good news is past perfect tense only needs to be used in the first and last sentences of the memory, serving as a time signal. That’s it. Simple. Flashbacks, on the other hand, can range in length and are written in past tense, the same as the novel, and are more difficult to use properly. Short to medium length flashbacks are signaled in one of two ways. The first is a short transition paragraph, but be careful with this. Transition paragraphs are often the most difficult to write and you have to watch the surrounding action so as not to confuse your reader. For example, if Amy is riding in a taxi going to Radio City Music Hall, you cannot flashback to yesterday in the mall without confusing the reader. Chances are he will ask, “Huh? What happened? I thought we were in a taxi, not at the mall.” This is because, even though it may not seem like it, the taxi ride is an action scene and it is always a bad idea to flashback in the middle of action.

Most authors choose the other option, using asterisks. A bridge still needs to be established to show the relevance of flashback to novel present, but one sentence is easier than an entire transition paragraph. Not to mention, asterisks get the reader’s attention and there is no chance the signal will be missed. Which ever method you choose, make sure a bridge is built between the flashback and present novel time. The bridge can be a smell, a color or an overheard part of a conversation, for example, but there has to be a reason for the flashback. When you flash forward again, that is bring your reader back to the relative present, use another short transition paragraph or another line of asterisks.

In addition to scenes, entire stories can be written with a flashback construction. These are called formula or frame stories and are nothing more than very long flashbacks after beginning with a major present event. This type of flashback is also the easiest to handle. Just remember that there can be no flashbacks within flashbacks. There can be quick memories, but since a formula story is a giant flashback, you can’t use this method any more.

However, be aware that flashbacks do come with pitfalls. They interrupt the story, the action, though mini-flashbacks are less offensive than their longer kin. It is also very easy to replace tight writing and tight plotting with the flashback, not mention how easy it is to fall into the trap of telling the story through flashes between past and present, a virtual tennis match so to speak, with readers watching volleys of time. This leads to reader confusion very easily. No matter whether or not you use flashbacks, the reader must have a concrete time to start from and return to.

Also remember, as I have said, flashbacks always stop the action. The longer the flashback, the harder it is going

to be for your reader to remember the events leading up to the flashback. Flashbacks should be as brief as possible, as rare as possible and only take place after the anchor to the present has been established. Here is a good rule of thumb to follow. With the exception of the formula story construct, if you find yourself needing a flashback within the first few pages of your story, then chances are the story would be better told chronologically.

So, now comes the next question. How do you know if a flashback is necessary? Simple. If the character is about to act in a manner contrary to all his previous actions, there need to be a quick flashback to explain this, otherwise your reader will quite rightly think your character is out of character. For example, what if Charlie always comes on strong around people, being dictatorial and the like and suddenly he meets someone around whom he is meek and subservient. The reader is going to ask, “What happened? Did the author forget Charlie is supposed to be a jerk?” Now I have to use a flashback, building a bridge based on this opposing character’s mannerisms perhaps, and explain how this person reminds Charlie of his father and how he used to be abused all the time. If I, as the narrator, told the you this, rather than showing it, you might be skeptical. After all, the old adage about actions speaking louder than words holds true for fiction as well. Just remember that all antecedent action has to be relevant to the present story. If it’s not, your reader will know.

Do you have to use flashbacks in your writing? No, of course not. As a matter of fact, before making the effort to build the bridge and write the flashback, ask yourself, “Can I make the same impression on my reader using conflict in the novel’s now?” If the answer is no, then write the flashback. However, the rules that apply to good writing also apply to flashbacks. You must have well-rounded characters and scenes, rising conflict, inner conflicts, et cetera or your flashback is pointless.

In short, the flashback is the most misused and overused tool in the writer’s toolbox. As a result, you may find editors telling you to rewrite you golden prose because you used a flashback and he doesn’t like them, or thinks readers don’t like them. While the flashback should not be considered taboo, it should be used sparingly. Your writing will always be stronger when told chronologically because readers want to know what happens next, not what happened the day before yesterday. Before flashing back to an event in the recent past, make sure there is an anchor in the present, otherwise your reader will find himself hopelessly adrift in a sea of memories that have no bearing on the story.



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