

Narrative Writing

Narrative stories focus on characters that have problems, adventures or experiences and are written for the purpose of entertaining an audience of others. Most often students will find two types of narrative stories: character/problem/solution or personal experience. In a character/problem/solution piece the character struggles through an adventure or problem. The character in the story then solves her/his own problem, ultimately coming out at the end changed in some way. In a personal experience story the setting or experience is central to the piece. To make up for the lack of story tension (the problem) the author relies on powerful language and detailed description. For some excellent examples of books that highlight each type of writing see the **literature corner** on this web site.

The following pages from *The Comprehensive Narrative Writing Guide* have been chosen for parents as both background on Empowering Writers and specific techniques taught in narrative writing. When reading with your child these are great jumping off points for discussion.

(continued ...)

So, at a glance, here is an outline of the three types of writing:

CHARACTER/PROBLEM SOLUTION:

Focus on Character

Main Character (Hero) struggles, grows, and changes

Purpose: to entertain an audience of others

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE STORY:

Focus on Experience, Activity, or Setting

Follows a beginning, middle, end sequence, is highly descriptive

Purpose: to entertain an audience of others

EXPOSITORY WRITING

Focus on a TOPIC

Follows an Introduction, Body, Conclusion sequence

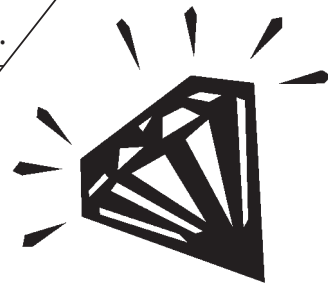
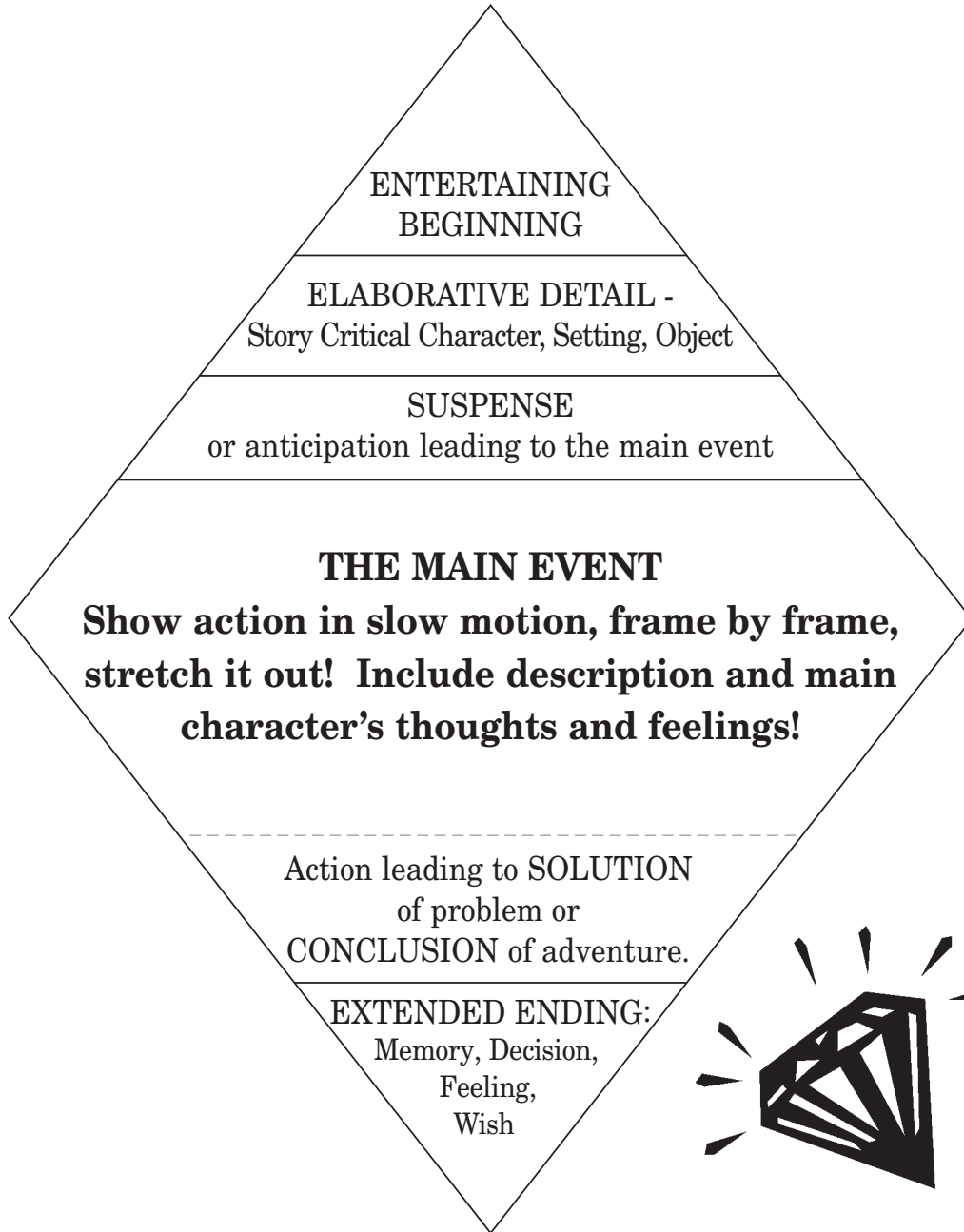
Purpose: to give information

The activities in this section of the book are designed to introduce students to the three types of writing, the corresponding summarizing frameworks (graphic organizers), the narrative writing diamond (which serves as an elaboration tool for use in crafting narrative stories) and in comparing these genres, side by side.



Name _____

Narrative Writing Diamond



The Narrative Writing Diamond

The Writing Diamond Defined

- **Entertaining Beginning** - The beginning must “hook” the reader and make them feel compelled to read on. The author might use an interesting action, dialogue or exclamation, the main character’s thoughts, or feelings, raise story questions or even use a sound to grab the reader’s attention. Stories should begin as close to the main event as possible.
- **Description of Setting, Character or Object** - A descriptive segment (3-4 sentences long) which describes a story critical setting, character, or object will help draw the reader in and help the reader experience the fictional world through the five senses of the main character. If the setting is mundane or boring (an average kitchen, the school yard, etc.) the author may choose to describe an important character or object instead.
- **Build Suspense** - Here the author moves toward the main event by building suspense or a sense of anticipation. This might involve raising worry, wonder, concern, or doubt, all of which build tension. This can be done through the use of “story questions”, “word referents”, or “the magic of three”.
- **The MAIN EVENT** - This is the most important part of the story - the climax, the event that the entire story has led up to - essentially, what the whole story is about. The main event section involves the problem/struggle sequence, or the adventure or interesting peak experience. This “scene” should be told in almost slow motion, expanded upon and stretched out through a balance of action, thought, description, and dialogue. This is the largest, most significant part of the story.
- **The Solution/Conclusion** - This is the section that brings the main event to a close. The problem is solved or the adventure or experience comes to an end.
- **Extended Ending** - The ending summarizes the main character’s thoughts, feelings, memories, hopes, wishes, or decisions in regard to the main event. It might also include a defining action that SHOWS any of the above. The extended ending should not be abrupt, rather it should have a feeling of satisfied closure.

(See each specific skill area in this book for further definition of each skill or section.)

Name _____

Starting Off on the Right Foot!



One way to make your writing more interesting and entertaining is by starting off with a great, attention grabbing beginning! Here are some techniques authors use to begin their stories:

1.) AN ACTION - *Put your main character in your setting doing something interesting and relevant to the story.*

Ask: What would you do?

ex. Joey ran full steam ahead across the corral and jumped on the back of the wild stallion!

2.) DIALOGUE - *Have your main character say something.*

Ask: What might you say or exclaim?

ex. "I can't wait to see the Grand Canyon!" I shouted.

3.) A THOUGHT OR QUESTION - *Show the main character's thoughts, or raise a story question.*

Ask: What would you wonder or worry?

ex. I wondered if we'd make it out alive.

4.) A SOUND - *Grab the reader's attention through the use of a sound.*

Ask: What might you hear?

ex. BOOM! Jack flinched as the thunder and lightning rolled in over the hills.

Beginning tips - Begin your story as close to the main event as possible. For example, if it's a story about being marooned on a tropical island, don't begin the story two weeks before you leave, reading through travel brochures. Begin on or near the island. If you're writing about a day at the beach, don't begin waking up, getting dressed, and having breakfast--begin at the beach! Get right into the action so that you don't lose your reader! Also, since it is very difficult to weave many characters throughout the story, a good strategy is to have your main character start off alone.



How to Generate Elaborative Detail

Teacher Background

A general rule to keep in mind in helping students generate powerful detail is this: **THE QUALITY OF THE QUESTIONS THE TEACHER ASKS WILL DETERMINE THE QUALITY OF THE RESPONSES STUDENTS MAKE.**

Ex. In other words, if the author wanted to describe a wizard, and the teacher asked, “What did he look like?” That would be a GENERAL QUESTION, which would yield a GENERAL RESPONSE. The student would likely respond, “He looked cool.” (or old, or mysterious, or scary) - all general responses which do not allow the reader to “see” the wizard.

Instead, teachers must ask many specific, productive, detail generating questions (not yes/no questions) which will yield specific responses. This specific, productive questioning takes place during the MODELING portion of the lesson. The idea is that if teachers routinely ask productive, effective questions, students will not only have better responses, but will internalize the questioning and apply it independently as they write.

HOW TO WRITE AN ELABORATIVE SEGMENT:

- 1.) Identify the story critical character/setting/object you want to describe.
- 2.) Ask the class specific questions about the characteristics of the setting/character/object. These characteristics might include: color, size, texture, shape, material, age, condition, smell, sound it makes, what it reminds you of. **DO NOT USE YES/NO QUESTIONS.**
ex. Imagine you want to describe an old wheel barrow. Questions might include: How big is it? What was it made out of? What color is it? Was it smooth or rough? How old is it? Who did it belong to? What was it used for?
- 3.) Students often respond to these questions with short answers. However, children often know or have experienced more than they are able to articulate. Therefore, affirm their intentions by translating student responses into vivid vocabulary and interesting sentences to create an elaborative segment:

ex. The old wheel barrow at the back of the barn was way too big for the small boy to push on his own. Instead, he stood staring at its peeling red paint and ran his hand along the smooth, gray, weathered handles. He wondered if his grandfather had used it on the farm when he was a boy. It must have been almost one hundred years old and reminded him of something used way back in the olden days. Despite its age the wheel barrow was in very good shape. Someone must have taken very good care of it.

How to Generate Elaborative Detail

•Note the sentence variety in the elaborative segment describing the wheel barrow. It was not a “grocery list”–“It was big, old, gray, peeling, in good shape.” Nor was it a “broken record”–“It was big. It was old. It was gray. It was peeling. It was, it was, it was...” Instead, each sentence began in a slightly different way. The elaborative segment allows the reader to see the wheel barrow through the five senses of the main character. ***The vivid word choice and specific detail not only make for an interesting paragraph, but become powerful tools for building student vocabulary.***

Below, you will find a generic list of detail generating sentences that you may apply when creating elaborative segments of story critical characters, settings, objects:

MENU OF DETAIL GENERATING QUESTIONS AND SENTENCE STARTERS

QUESTIONS ABOUT A STORY CRITICAL CHARACTER -

- How tall/big was this character? • What color hair/eyes? • How old was the character? • What kind of eyes/nose/mouth/ears did he/she have? • What kind/color of hair did he/she have? (long, short, curly, straight, etc.) • What kind of marks, scars, or distinguishing characteristics did he/she have? • What was he/she wearing? • What kind of expression was on his/her face? • How did this character make you feel? • Who or what did this character remind you of?

QUESTIONS ABOUT A STORY CRITICAL SETTING -

- What was the temperature/weather like? • What kinds of trees/plants grew there? • How did the air feel? • What kinds of animals were there? • What kinds of buildings were there? • What kind of objects were around? • What kinds of sounds did you hear? • How did you feel about being there? • What did you smell?

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT A STORY CRITICAL OBJECT -

- What color was it? • What did it feel like? • What was its shape? • What size was it? • How old was it? • What was it made of? • What did it smell like? • What kind of sound did it make? • How heavy was it? • Who did it belong to? • Where did it come from? • What did it remind you of?

Notice that none of these are yes/no questions! Detail generating questions must be specific and must ask for particulars--not true/false/positive/negative! These are just some suggestions. Not all of them are applicable all the time, nor are these the only questions you can ask - students will likely think of other effective questions to add to this list.

Teaching Background -

What Feelings Look Like

Another aspect of elaborative detail, of “showing rather than telling” involves the feelings of story characters. Showing reactions to story events (both physical and emotional reactions) is a powerful means of revealing character, and of allowing the reader to relate to the character.

However, when revealing a character’s feelings, it is always more powerful to “show” rather than to “tell”:

Ex. Jack was really mad. That would be telling.

Jack stamped his feet. His face turned a deep shade of red. He slammed his fist on the table. This would be showing.

“Showing” feelings involves facial and body movements. It can also involve the internal sensations of the main character. Below is a list of some common feelings and what those feelings might look like. Of course, there are countless other examples - these are provided as a starting point.

| <u>Feeling</u> | <u>What it Looks Like</u> |
|----------------|---|
| Happy | • smile on face • heart leaps • jump up and down • hands clasped together • eyes open wide |
| Sad | • eyes well up • lips quiver • heart drops • wring hands |
| Angry | • brow furrowed • frown • fists clenched • heart pounds • stamp feet • teeth clenched |
| Shocked | • mouth drops open • eyes open wide • heart pounds • cover mouth with your hand • jump back • gasp |
| Tired | • slump • yawn • eyes droop • legs feel heavy |
| Hot | • sweat beads on forehead • face gets red • wipe your brow • move slowly • fan yourself |
| Cold | • shiver • teeth chatter • hug yourself • blow into your hands • rub hands together |
| Frightened | • heart pounds • eyes wide open • start to sweat • knees feel weak • butterflies in stomach • mouth drops open |

The following lessons are designed to introduce students to showing rather than telling the feelings of story characters. Read through the lesson plans for suggestions on introducing and practicing these techniques.





SECTION 4: Suspense

Introduction to Suspense

A sense of suspense and anticipation is what hooks the reader and moves the story into the main event. Suspense building raises questions in the reader's mind. If the main character is wondering or worrying, so is the reader! The reader is so eager, anxious or involved that they feel compelled to read on to relieve the worry, fulfill the wonder, and answer the questions. Suspense, contrary to what people often think, does not have to be scary. It certainly can be, as readers love to be frightened (a powerful entertainment tool). But, another way to look at suspense is as story tension or a sense of anticipation.

There are several ways to build suspense or anticipation:

• Story Questions

Story questions can be raised directly or indirectly. The simplest way (directly) is to have your main character raise a question - to wonder or worry. In turn, the reader wonders and worries as well. The indirect approach involves telling the reader only part of what is going on—just a hint. This raises questions in the readers' mind and compels them to read on.

ex. Catherine couldn't believe her eyes. What in the world did Grandma have in that huge wrapped package? (Catherine and the reader wonder what's inside - and, if it is a gift for Catherine.)

• Word Referents

Tease the reader by not immediately revealing what "it" is. Describe a story critical character or object without naming it. Use word referents instead.

ex. Instead of writing: I saw a dragon in the cave. Use word referents. The creature was huge and dark as night. It made a soft rumbling sound. I could feel the mythical beast's hot breath on my face. (What is it? The reader is dying to know!)

Again, this doesn't need to be scary - read this example which provides a sense of anticipation:

Staring into the large box I felt my mouth curl into a smile. My heart began to race at the amazing gift inside. I covered my mouth, stifling the laugh I felt ready to erupt. I couldn't believe my good luck!

• The Magic of 3 This technique involves the convention in which a series of three sensory hints (involving any of the senses) are provided in a way that builds tension - the third hint leading directly to a revelation. (*see example next page*)



Name _____

MAIN EVENT

Don't Summarize! Make a Scene!

FULLY ELABORATED MAIN EVENTS are made up of a balance of:

- **ACTION**
- **DESCRIPTION**
- **THOUGHTS/FEELINGS**
- **DIALOGUE/EXCLAMATION**

And just for fun...

- **SOUND EFFECT**

Here are the productive questions that help to generate a fully elaborated MAIN EVENT:

ACTION: What did you do?

(Tell it in slow motion, S-T-R-E-T-C-H I-T O-U-T!)

DESCRIPTION: What did you see, hear, feel?

THOUGHTS/FEELINGS: What were you wondering, worrying, feeling?

DIALOGUE/EXCLAMATION: What did you say or exclaim?

SOUND EFFECT: What did you hear?

Name _____

Menu for Extended Endings

🍎 A MEMORY:

What did you remember most?

🍎 FEELINGS:

How did you feel about what happened?

🍎 WISH or HOPE:

What would you wish or hope?

🍎 DECISION:

What did you decide?

🍎 DEFINING ACTION:

What did you do?

The student writer, using the techniques and skills identified in the previous pages, is empowered to create narrative stories on their own. Teachers will model each skill with the whole class and then offer guidance as students practice each skill. Students are then given opportunities to put these skills to use in whole processed pieces. A processed piece is one that is written and revisited over a period of time, edited, and often published in some form: for example, a bulletin board or a class book.

Grades Two and Up – What you can expect:

Students at these grade levels learn the more complex characteristics of the narrative. The stories become elaborated with specific verbs and adjectives. They add dialogue, feelings, and action sequences to tell a story. Crafting entertaining beginnings and building suspense become skills they use independently. They understand that a story is written to entertain the reader.

You as parents can offer support in the writing process by becoming aware of the skills your child is learning, reading good literary examples to them on a consistent basis, pointing out the elements of writing after enjoying the story, and actively reading the stories your own young author creates.

Remember that each student is developing at his or her own rate. Always ask your child's teacher for guidance and specific suggestions relative to your child. He/she is the best professional resource you have for understanding your child's development.

You might want to check out our online bookstore for some suggested resource materials. The *Comprehensive Narrative Writing Guide* is our professional resource designed for grades 2 – 7. Other helpful resources include *The Most Wonderful Writing Lessons Ever* by Barbara Mariconda and *Super Story Writing Strategies and Activities* by Barbara Mariconda and Dea Auray

What you can do to support your student writer:

- At each grade level you may want to offer a special notebook for your child. Encourage them to write in it often. Some suggestions for entries include; journal entries (reflecting on the day or an event), poetry, narrative stories, expository notes, drawings of special events or photos, vacation journals, and segments of writing that they wish to practice. Encourage lots of detailed description using the five senses to elicit powerful language. Play with words in the notebook to find different length sentences and more interesting word choices.
- Read a wide range of stories with your child. Enjoy these stories with your child and then you might ask them to point out and teach you some of the literary techniques they have learned. In this way they are reinforcing the concepts already learned. It also develops confidence in writing and helps them feel like the “expert”. Everyone needs a shot of high self esteem!

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• **Specific Skill: Beginnings**

The beginning of the story is where the author captures the readers attention. The techniques we use to hook the reader include: **action** (*what did you do?*), **dialogue** (what did you say or exclaim?), **thought or question** (*what did you wonder or worry?*), **sound** (*what did you hear?*). Ask your child to find one of these beginnings in a story they have read. Perhaps together you can revise a boring beginning by applying one of the techniques.

- You might want to find an interesting picture in a book or magazine and use one of the skills learned to write an entertaining beginning based on the picture.

• **Specific Skill: Elaborative Detail**

This is where the author stops the story action and describes a critical story element, either a character, setting, or an object. Your child is being taught to identify an area where a description is critical and then to use highly descriptive language with good sentence variety.

- Ask your child some productive questions that will elicit specific rather than general details. For example: *What color / size / shape is the character or object? How big or small is it? What is it wearing? What can you hear in the setting? What do you see?*
- Help your child to use their five senses when describing. Play a game using your five senses. You might want to go outside and enjoy the sounds, sights, and smells of spring. Then, see which family member can write the best description. Or choose a familiar household item and describe it using all of your senses-see who can guess what you are describing.
- Find a character that shows some emotion. An author might share how a character is feeling by describing the emotion. Pantomime some emotions with your child supplying words to the facial features and body language. We call this **showing** instead of **telling**.

• **Specific Skill: Suspense**

The ability to leave the reader hanging or wondering what will happen next is a powerful writing technique. Your child is learning how to do just that! They are using **story questions, word referents, and The Magic of Three** (a technique that involves using three sensory hints-the third hint leads to the revelation) to convey a sense of urgency or anticipation. Ask them to teach you what each of these techniques is all about.

- **Find evidence of red flag words.** Red flag words such as *suddenly, just then, or before I knew it* signal a transition in the story. Ask your child how they use those words when writing. Write a list of other red flag words and phrases.
- Play a family game. Describe something without naming it, our version of I Spy. Use word referents in your description. See who can guess what you are describing.

- **Specific Skill: Main Event**

The main event is the problem, adventure, or experience that the story is all about. You might ask your child what techniques they have learned to write the main event. Hint: **action** (*What did you do?*), (*What did you see, smell, feel?*), **thoughts** (*What did you wonder or worry?*), **feelings** (*How did you feel?*), **dialogue** (*What did you say or exclaim?*), and **sound** (*What did you hear?*).

- When reading with your child find the main event of the story. For a list of books that support main event look in our **literature corner** on this website.
- Think of a time when something meaningful happened to you. (Something that might have happened when you were a child.) Tell that story to your child in a summary format and then, with your child's help, try to stretch it out and add some of the main event skills. Which version would you rather read?
- **Specific Skill: Extended Endings** The extended ending comes **after** the conclusion of the event. It should leave the reader satisfied that the story is over. Ask your child how an author might extend the ending of the story. Hint: **memory** (*What do you remember most about the adventure or experience?*), **hope/wish** (*What do you hope or wish for based on the experience or adventure?*), or **decision** (*What will you do based on the adventure or experience?*)
- Remember a family vacation with your child. See if you can add a hope or wish to the end of that vacation, or maybe make a decision like: *Next time I will not chicken out. I will definitely go parasailing.*
- **Some high interest topics for stories include:**
 - ***Imaginative adventures:*** rocket ship rides, space aliens, giants, elves, kings, queens, knights, pirates, mermaids, and deep sea creatures
 - ***Personal experience stories:*** special trips, ocean visit, animal tales, first loose tooth, making mud pies, building a fort, a day spent with a grandparent, and a new baby