

What makes a story?

You might be tempted to list things like characters, background, inciting incident, rising complications, climax and resolution, and while those are technically true, this isn't a literature class. It's good to know those things, but in creative writing you look at stories in a completely different way.

Stories are, at their most basic, made up of narrative and dialogue.

Dig a little deeper and you get exposition and direct action.

These are the things you're going to learn about today.

Exposition

Getting necessary information to
your readers without overloading
or boring them to death.

One of the most common forms of exposition is narrative exposition, but what exactly is that? Let's break down the words themselves:

NARRATIVE

This is information coming from the narrator of the story, not the characters. Dialogue, or “Speaking parts” is what comes from the characters.

Everything else, everything outside of direct quotations, comes from the narrator of the story.

The narrator can be one of the characters in the story (such as with first or second person point of views), but often they are unconnected to the actual story and are just reporting things to the reader (such as with third person point of view, the most commonly used point of view in writing).

EXPOSITION

This is when things are explained to the reader. It's often in relation to background information, setting, motivation, description, and meaning.

Some definitions from Merriam Webster:

-a setting forth of the meaning or purpose

-formal : the act of explaining something : clear explanation

“Exposition.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exposition>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2021.

Narrative Exposition

is when the narrator explains things to the reader instead of having them happen for the reader. It's usually explaining background and reasons.

It's the narrator saying: this is what happened, this is why it's this way, this is what's going on.

This can be through direct narration (the narrator explaining) or indirect exposition (the author leaves a clue that lets the readers understand information without having to directly state it).

EXAMPLE:

I come from a small town called Johnstonville. It was named after the richest of the founding families. The patriarch of which had bought the town's mayorship right along with the mansion sized house up on Rickerts Drive. His descendants still lived in it, lording over us plebeians below. This included Bracken Johnston, current star jock and High School senior who ruled the school and never had to take a test to pass it. He was my nemesis.

How is this an example of narrative exposition?

How many things are explained in this one paragraph?

Narrative Exposition isn't a bad thing to be avoided at all costs. It's actually a necessary part of any type of storytelling. The goal is to learn when and how to use narrative exposition so that your story reads with a good flow.

Too little narrative exposition

Your reader won't know what's going on and may get frustrated trying to figure it all out on their own. Readers are smart and pick up on things, but don't make them do it all themselves or they might just put your book down if they feel it's not worth it.

Too much narrative exposition

Your reader will likely get bored being told everything. When large blocks of information get put into a story, it's often known as a "information dump" or "info dump" and is generally seen as a negative.

Remember, exposition can be given in two ways:

Narrative Exposition

“Narrative exposition is the insertion of background information within a story or narrative. This information can be about the setting, characters' backstories, prior plot events, historical context, etc.”

Wikipedia contributors. "Exposition (narrative)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 20 Mar. 2021. Web. 27 Mar. 2021.

Indirect Exposition

“Indirect exposition, sometimes called **inclusion**, is a technique of worldbuilding in which the reader is gradually exposed to background information about the world in which a story is set. The idea is to *clue* the readers in to the world the author is building without them being aware of it. This can be done in a number of ways: through dialogues, flashbacks, characters' thoughts, background details, in-universe media, or the narrator telling a backstory. Instead of saying "I am a woman", a first person narrator can say "I kept the papers inside my purse." The reader (in most English-speaking cultures) now knows the character is probably female.”

Indirect Exposition

when the author gives hints instead of directly explaining

This can be as simple as giving a pronoun of he/she to indicate a character's gender or male/female, or can be used to include complex and nuanced information about character's backgrounds and relationships.

Mastering indirect exposition starts with understanding what it is, then practicing purposeful insertion of it into your stories.

It's one of the best ways to ensure your story gets necessary information without bogging the reader down in extensive exposition.

PRACTICE: Is it direct or indirect? How so?

1 - Ela came into my room without knocking, like always. She knew I hated it when she did that, like her being my older sister allowed her entry to my room whenever she wished.

2 - Jerome was born January 1, 2020. His mother called him a miracle baby, the first born of the year in his entire state, and she treated him special from that moment on. The boy could do no wrong in her eyes.

3 - Sara looked up. "What's wrong, sweetie?"
Mari snarled. "Nothing!"

Sara stopped what she was doing to face Mari, hands on hips. "Don't talk to me with that tone of voice, miss grumpy pants. Just 'cause you turned 18 doesn't mean you get to treat your mother that way."

Some tips and tricks when it comes to exposition:

- Many stories start with some narrative exposition, especially to set background, scene, description, and introduce one or more characters. Give the info necessary to understand where the story starts.
- Even if a story starts right in the middle of some action, exposition should be woven in throughout the action, or given attention to as soon as the action ends to ensure your reader knows where they are in the story and what's going on. Don't leave them wondering too long or they might just give up.
- Use a variety of narrative exposition and indirect exposition (in narrative or dialogue) throughout your story to give it a more natural flow of reading. Don't be afraid to hold some things back or to let readers figure something out for themselves. You must learn to find a good balance between all of these things.
- Pick your favorite author and really pay attention to how they give exposition (background, setting, character history, character introductions, etc.). Most authors tend to have a style to their writing exposition, whether they primarily give exposition through narration, dialogue, indirect narration, or a weaving of all three methods.
- One of the best ways to figure out if you have too much or too little is to simply ask someone to read your story with attention to that. “Were you confused at any point?” “Did you get bored anywhere?”

Let's not forget the dialogue and direct action.

We already know that dialogue is anything a character is actively “Saying,” right?

So, what is direct action as opposed to dialogue or narrative exposition?

Direct action is when something is actively happening in the scene. Things are going on, people are doing things, there's often talking or fighting happening. The narrator isn't giving background details or explaining necessary plot points, it's the characters doing things right then and there.

Direct action can be done all in narration or all in dialogue, but is most often a blending of the two.

Now you have all the parts to make a story.

It's getting them lined up, weaving them together in an interesting way to keep your reader engaged, that's the tricky part.

How do you do that?

Study how it's done and practice. Yes, practice reading and writing. You won't get better unless you read and write more, but it can't be mindless reading/writing. It must be done with purpose: read with an eye to how the author is shaping their work, how the author is giving you information, introducing characters and concepts, their use of exposition, dialogue, and action. Paying attention to what you're putting down and how you're doing it when writing. Having a good story idea isn't enough. If you can't shape it properly (and yes, that includes grammar), you won't get many readers sticking around to see just how awesome your story is.
