

form awkward material into focused narratives. *Journey*, *Visitation*, *Aha!*, and *Bear at the Door* are the natural shapes that are at the heart of almost all fiction of any length. *Snap-shot* shows how to transform a visual technique into narrative form. *Blue Moon* tells how to make fantasy or improbability convincing. *Explosion* suggests ways of testing the limits of fiction.

Each shape closes with cross-referencing to the "Alphabet for Writers." I put the cross-references at the end of each essay since I didn't want to interrupt your reading. You might want to look at these entries while you're reading about a particular shape.

## ▼ FACADE

○ For this technique, tell an anecdote in the voice of a character who is *not* you. But as the character tells his story have him unknowingly undercut or discredit his explanation.

For example, our character, Shroub, tells the story of an argument he had with his roommate about whose fault it was that the cat threw up on the carpet. Shroub is explaining how irresponsible his friend was, and how he should have noticed it before it dried. But the more Shroub talks, the more garbled and excited he gets, and we realize it was Shroub who accidentally let the cat get out to eat grass that morning. We begin to sympathize with the roommate and believe that Shroub is



unconsciously denying his own responsibility. Not only can we see through his story, we can see through Shroub, and realize he's the kind of person who distorts events without even knowing it.

*Facade* is the first shape because it focuses on creating characters through their own voices. You want your people to live on the page, but you can't make them live by writing *about* them. Readers need to hear the characters speak for themselves.

Length of sentences, choice of words, sources of images, amount of repetition—all help create character.

McKivey came over to the house and said let's get going, don't ask no questions. I had about two dollars, grabbed what my mama calls my little thin jacket—where do you think you're going in that, she says butting in, and I say, so long, we're out of here. So I say what happened was entirely McKivey's fault. I didn't take no knife or nothing with me, just that little thin jacket and the two dollars.

You want your readers to think, I could hear that person talking. The more you capture the rhythms of speech, its hesitations, its phrases, its long, winding, run-on sentences, and its non-sentences, the closer you come to the feel of a real person. You've made the readers believe in the character. You don't have to be grammatical or correct if your speaker isn't. The character is talking, not you. Let that distinctive voice come through.

*Facade* is also our first shape because it creates tension. A story doesn't happen unless there is some problem, some oddity, some incongruity. In this shape the discrepancy between

the image the character wants to project and what actually comes across creates tension.

This way of creating character isn't a trick exercise. It goes on all the time. Friends, enemies, and cosmeticians try to make us see things their way. But we don't always believe them. We try to see through their words.

In order to embed information so that readers see more than the character, you have to have your character tell anecdotes with rich detail.

Suppose you have Morgan telling a story about what an admirable person his mother was, but you want your readers to realize that Morgan's mother was not so wonderful:

I would always run the bath for Mama. She was so tired from trying to get the maid to do what she was supposed to, and Mama said I was the only one who could get the water just right, and she let me bring in her fluffy bathrobe. Daddy said he was too tired from work, but Mama said that was all right we could do fine without him, and I did her back better than he did.

Even if Morgan interprets Mom's behavior one way, readers have enough specifics to make their own judgments.

Facades can be parts of stories or stories in their own right. You don't even need a listener. (Actually, it may get in the way to have another character say, "What happened then?" or "Uh-huh" or "Really?") You don't even need to establish a setting. Voice alone can create the story.

See *Character, Dialect, Dialogue, Frame Story, Tension, Voice*.



## ▼ JUGGLING

○ When you have your character do one thing and think about something else not only do you create tension, you create character. *Juggling* means the way you go back and forth between action and thought to create immediacy, tension, and character.

For example, your character is Loretta, the performer. It's a dangerous act—Loretta juggles hatchets. They're shiny and sharp, with hard hickory handles; if she doesn't concentrate, she can be badly hurt. But, though she's tossing them in the air, she's worrying about how to afford the nursing bills for her father. And that reminds her of when she was a little girl, and had collected four cans of bacon grease for the war effort,

and her father had told her, "You're a little soldier." Meanwhile we're nervous about those tumbling hatchets.

Make readers feel the physical immediacy of the action itself. Use an action you can describe authoritatively. Let's turn to another example. A man named Streater, for instance, is visiting a childhood skating pond. If Streater is fulfilling an old wish by ice-skating across a lake, you need to know enough about ice-skating and what natural lake ice looks and feels and sounds like to make readers feel the sensations.

That physical world has to be rendered in detail and interwoven throughout the story. If you push Streater onto the ice in the first paragraph, then drop into his thoughts for several pages, and don't return to the ice until the last paragraph, the forward motion and the immediacy of the action evaporate, and the momentum is lost. Interweaving thoughts and action keeps the story going, makes the reader feel physically there. If the character is cold and wet, keep the reader cold and wet.

Going into a character's mind gives you enormous freedom. The human mind can think of an amazing amount in seconds—memories with the sharpest of details, images and sensations separated by years, voices from the past and fantasies for the future. A paragraph of thoughts ranging over decades can occur while a shoelace is being tied. Streater, out on the ice, might be recalling an argument with his brother many years ago or a recent puzzling conversation with a good friend. Streater might not even know why he is having these thoughts and be puzzled by them. But we now feel we know Streater as well as he knows himself.

There are some techniques that you must be aware of in writing a story with this structure. One is how to go back and forth between the actions and thoughts of your charac-



ter. It's relatively easy to slide from an external action to an internal one, like this:

Streater looked down at the old skates. The blue leather cracked and lined. The laces frayed. Damn. Nothing stayed the way it should. Not Elayne, not the house, nothing. He leaned down and pulled the laces to see if they had rotted. One snapped off right at the top eyelet.

In the first sentence the narrative voice puts us behind the character's eyes. The next phrases are what the character sees. The next ones are what the character thought, and the last two slide out of the character's thoughts to describe action, what the character does. In a couple of phrases we've learned of a complicated life involving specific and general disappointments, and now we want to know more. You do not have to say "he thought" every time your character thinks, though you'll often do that as another way of moving between thought and action. People don't usually think within quotation marks, so they're best avoided.

Give your character something interesting and active to do, something that requires mental concentration and physical effort. If you have elderly, frail Maria trying to dig a yellow-jacket nest out of her tomato patch, readers will be highly attentive. But tension is not generated merely by danger. If Maria's pride and dignity are dependent on her ability to take care of herself despite her age, her efforts to thread her embroidery needle could create great tension. If the action is important to the character, then it will feel important to readers. Or, conversely, as in the story of our juggler, you create tension if the character should be concentrating, but distracting thoughts and memories intrude.

This technique does not limit itself to any particular type of story or way of seeing the world. It can have serious or humorous intentions. If a surgeon is thinking about his argument with the Mercedes mechanic while he is performing a triple bypass, readers feel both a queasy sensation and some satirical purpose.

Tension can be generated by the trials of ordinary life—a character looking for a gift in a snobbish store, or trying to unravel a borrowed fishing reel. You'll see how positively readers react when they recognize their own feelings. Actions that are fundamentally passive, like sunbathing, don't work very well. It's true that sunbathing has a goal. There are even dangers and pitfalls (will he burn? will the clouds cover the sun?), but those fears don't exactly energize the story.

When you move between action and thought, your readers are simultaneously outside and inside. That interplay is at the heart of fiction.

See *Flashback*, *Immediacy*, *Interior Monologue*, *Point of View*, *Stream of Consciousness*.



trauma, he'll do things that he ordinarily would not: Wardle walks into the Starlite Cocktail Lounge ☆☆20 Girls 20☆☆.

You don't have to bring your character to a decision or a resolution or even to arrive at some major insight. A trauma generates its own energy. Readers want to know how it happened and what happened next, and that can create a story.

See *Character, Exposition, Flashback, Intrigant, Premise*.

## ▼ SPECIMEN

○ Write a story telling one anecdote about a memorable character.

People you've met are a rich source for your fiction. However, writing about your saints or monsters, clowns or heroes, turns out to be much harder than you might expect. You keep thinking, This is a terrific character, but I can't figure out how to tell the story.

Knowing too many incidents creates problems. There's the time Hubert climbed to the top of the Little River suspension bridge and did King Kong imitations, and the time he drove his MG into the Greyhound bus station lobby, and the time he put a smoke bomb in the teachers' lounge. But many inci-



dents don't necessarily form a satisfying story. The story needs a shape.

Choose (or invent) a single incident that is particularly revelatory, a *Specimen*. It should dramatize not just what the character does, but who he is—what could be going on inside him. You might tell a particularly hair-raising anecdote, like the time Hubert tried to get into the bank through the sewer system, but if the story stays on the surface of the action, what will readers come away with except the sense that this was a very wild guy? It might be better to tell about the time Hubert stole a major chemistry exam for a friend, but wouldn't look at the exam himself, even though he was weak in chemistry too. That incident seems more evocative, and indicates a character of some complexity. The bank incident seems more exciting, of course, but it has to be told in a way that is similarly revealing.

You have to ask: What kind of understanding do I have of this character? Do I know enough about Hubert's family and background to say more than he did this and he did that? Do I have the empathy to guess what went on in his head, how he thought and felt about what he did, and what he believed he was doing? And, how do I get that into the story?

A character comes out of a dense cultural, social, and psychological matrix. The more richly this is suggested, the more resonant the portrait. Evocative details about the person's family, childhood incidents, intimate moments—all are clues that help us understand the character. And remember, too, that you're writing fiction; you're creating art. Actual facts are your raw material, not your boundaries.

The story will focus on a single main action that will pro-

vide tension, immediacy, and feeling. That means creating a setting, inventing dialogue, describing action, and rendering thoughts. While Hubert's stealing the exam, he's remembering last year, when his history teacher told him he'd probably end up in a state penitentiary.

Point of view makes a difference. For example, if you wanted to tell about an elderly woman who tried to convert the next-door family to her faith in Baha'i by bringing over wild strawberry jam and pictures of foreign children, the point of view is everything. To a busy parent, the story might be about an interfering, spooky old lady. To the child, the story could be of a fascinating, kindly eccentric. To the believer in Baha'i, it might be a story of her attempt to bring some life to a sad, sterile household.

If you write the story from the point of view of the memorable character, it forces you into imagining and rendering her thoughts and emotions rather than simply saying what the character did and said. A third-person central consciousness works well. Even more radical is doing it in first person, so that you must totally assume the voice and outlook of the character.

If you create a narrator character who tells about the memorable character, you can show their relationship, and their effect on each other. But the story must be about *both* of them. If the narrator isn't developed enough, he'll seem an unnecessary character. And if the narrator is overdeveloped, he can take over the story like a garrulous guide who won't let visitors experience firsthand what they came for.

*Specimen* has multiple meanings. Colloquially it's a person who's different—"He's a real specimen." Biologically it's an



example of a genus, a species, a type. And the medical sense is important too. The sample in the test tube is significant; the specimen reveals what's going on, unseen, inside a person.

*See Character, Point of View, Scene, Stories within Stories.*

▼  
**GATHERING**

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○ Put a main character in a situation that draws people together—a party, a competition, a meeting, a holiday festival. For example, Rosa Ciro is a young history lecturer at the retirement dinner for Professor Clarke. She's holding a cup of red punch in one hand. She can hear the Civil War historians teasing a woman graduate student about her feminist research. The Europeanists are complaining about parking spaces. Rosa sees how the professors fondle their vest buttons and comb their hair over their bald spots. She watches the bored spouses take up defensive positions on the sofas. It's the odd, minutely specific details that make a culture vivid on the page.



Create tension by telling the story from the point of view of a character who knows the culture intimately, has been raised in it or belonged to it, but now feels alienated. In a way, she knows it too well. The strain makes her rendering of the event crackle with tension. Rosa has been an adjunct teacher for four years. She knows that most of the faculty can't stand Professor Clarke, that even if she gets her dissertation published, the department won't hire her full time because the Medievalists are plotting to get the position, and also, there's no alcohol in the punch.

Another strategy is to tell the story from the point of view of a newcomer, a stranger. The outsider can see with fresh eyes what the group accepts as too ordinary to notice. Your character could be the wife of a first-year history professor. She overhears the casual sexist jokes or notices the way the professors never listen to each other. It's important, however, that you know the group well enough to be perceptive. Whether it's a meeting of Parents Without Partners or a Cajun homecoming, if you don't know the subculture intimately, your character is likely to notice only the most obvious mannerisms, or the story will simply reveal your own prejudices.

Don't let one person or a few people monopolize the story. Let your character hear snippets of talk as well as longer conversations. Keep her own dialogue short, and don't give her any speeches that would explain the story away. How can such a story end? The event itself can supply a natural end. The character doesn't have to act out what she feels. The drama between her and her surroundings is enough for a story.

See *Local Color*, *Realism*, *Scene*.

## ▼ A DAY IN THE LIFE

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○ In *A Day in the Life*, the shape is created by the unit of time involved. It could be a weekend if you were writing about a guy working at a Coney Island hot-dog stand. A single day for a teacher in a ghetto school. An eight-hour shift for a hospital emergency paramedic. A few hours for a weekly poker game. Ten minutes for a usual family breakfast. Five minutes for a man who makes his living by diving from a ten-story ladder into three feet of water.

Work is a rich source for *A Day in the Life* material. What people do for a living organizes their lives and influences their personalities. Salesmanship is not just a job, it's a way of life. But other activities are also revealing—a suburban high school



girl's daily trip home from school, or a single guy's Friday night at the bowling alley.

People like to know what goes on behind the scenes. Often what seems like prosaic information to you will be fascinating to outsiders. If you want to make readers experience what a morning shift in a fast-food restaurant is like, you'd describe the customer who always says, "Over easy but not too easy," the manager who checks the garbage for unused individual jellies, the graffiti scratched on the wall of the employees' toilet. Those idiosyncratic details create the feel of that life. You want to make your readers smell the grease.

Include both routine and non-routine incidents. The schizophrenic who wanders into the fast-food restaurant may be an exception to an ordinary day, but the encounter shows how things like that happen from time to time in such a job. Don't load up a story with a number of unusual events, since too much happening in a single time frame not only strains credibility, but also is false to the real nature of the routine.

This shape needs to be wound tight. Other story shapes, like *Trauma*, have a natural tension because readers wonder about what will happen next. In *A Day in the Life*, the tension must be created in other ways—in the nature of the routine itself, in its oddness or its mundaneness, in its pressure or its killing monotony, or in the conflict between the character and the routine in which she is trapped.

This last point is the most important. The central character's thoughts allow you to bring in memories, fears, and longings that are not present in the immediate time-line of the story. The woman turning scrambled eggs with her spatula always wanted to be an illustrator—she's looking at her burnt hands and thinking about working with 4H pencils and

tracing-paper overlays; she's thinking about her first set of crayon pastels. The more you develop that character's thoughts, the richer the texture of the story. Readers will feel they're understanding something from the inside—not only the life, but what it feels like to live it.

See *Accuracy, Description, Realism, Texture*.



## ▼ SNAPSHOT

○ Single moments—crises, revealing incidents, or epiphanies—make crisp, focused short stories. But if you're dealing with a character's whole college career, fifteen years of marriage, or an entire life in one story, it's difficult to achieve that intensity. The work is likely to seem like a sketch for a novel, a summary rather than a story. A way of retaining immediacy while covering many years is to write a series of single moments, separate in time.

Think of this story as a series of public and private snapshots, of pictures taken at crucial moments. Real photographs are silent testimonials.

A family is grouped in the driveway in front of the new Buick. The father smiles broadly, with one hand on the hood, and the other on his wife's shoulder. The two children look thin and frightened.

An older couple are sitting stiffly on a couch in a living room of French Provincial furniture. She holds up a photograph of a Lhasa Apso on her lap.

We draw conclusions about these people's taste, their jobs, their happiness. Snapshots taken over a period of time show a cute baby on a blanket, a gawky teenager in a baseball uniform, a sullen-faced young man slouched on a car fender. Each photograph is immediate, resonant with its own meanings.

The literary equivalent of the snapshot is the anecdote, the scene. Each scene is as immediate as a snapshot:

Donna trembled in the closet. She'd been playing with the crayons. She had figured out how she could make the colors go under her nails so each finger was different. Daddy had used his lawyer voice. "Go to your room. No daughter of mine is going to eat supper with fingernails like that." She stared at her bright hands.

The next scene might be days or years later; you can make sure readers quickly understand when and where it's taking place by embedding that sort of information in the first sentence or two:

Donna looked at her fiancé. Why was she doing this? She tried to get her pink corsage straight. Her father gripped



her shoulder tightly. "I'm proud of you today," he said. "Joshua's a fine young man and, besides, he seems willing to put up with you." Her father smiled, as if it was a joke.

Choose evocative scenes that show what has changed and what remains the same:

Donna tried to explain to her father, "I'm not interested in support payments, I just want my half of what I can get for the house." "That's just what I thought you'd say," he said. "Just exactly."

As narrator you might stay unobtrusive, creating the scenes, and only supplying minimal information—just as a person showing an album of snapshots might say, "These are the Frontons in Sussex after Charles died," "This is Gwen's debutante party." Or you might comment freely on various characters, or tell straightforwardly how circumstances affected the history of a family, and make remarks, like "Then Gwen married this pompous little snob none of us liked. Here's a picture of him on their mahogany boat that never left the dock." Or your narrator can be reflective, meditative, and tell about his own reactions and actions. "We were all children then, but we didn't understand that. We thought we knew so much. Here's the four of us, at Sheepshead Bay, toasting our engagement."

The point, though, is to let the snapshots do most of the telling.

See *Mise-en-scène, Scene, Transitions*.

## ▼ BLUE MOON

○ *Blue Moon* stories appeal to our deepest selves. We enter the world of magic, myth, and dream—fabulous characters, unfathomable mysteries, or chimerical creatures. Our sleeping world, our childhood tales, our religious beliefs are full of happenings whose reality is not of this earth.

But dealing with the unexplainable presents problems. A good story in some way changes the consciousness of its audience. If the only reaction a story can bring is "Life sure is full of mysteries," or "Gee, that's spooky," then the work hasn't taken its readers anywhere except to the reiteration of a platitude. On the other hand, Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis,"