

## Narrative Portraits in Qualitative Research

Narration and narrative are two key terms in writing fiction. Read on to learn what narrative is, as well as five types of narrative, with examples:

What is narrative?

Narrative is writing that connects ideas, concepts or events. The definitions below show three important aspects of narration in storytelling:

It connects events, showing their patterns, relating them to each other or to specific ideas, themes or concepts. It is a practice and art in that when we tell a story, we shape the narrative – the connection between events. Narrating a story involves shaping events around an overarching set of aims or effects (whether consciously or unconsciously). For example, in a comedic narrative, the overarching aim is to surprise/shock or otherwise lead the audience or reader to be amused.

Here are three definitions of narrative via the Oxford English Dictionary that illustrate the above ideas:

A spoken or written account of connected events; a story. The practice or art of telling stories. A representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values.

Now that we’ve clarified what narrative is, here are several types of narration, with examples and tips for using them well:

Common types of narrative:

Descriptive narrative Viewpoint narrative Historical narrative Linear narrative Non-linear narrative

Let’s explore each narrative type with examples:

Descriptive narrative

Descriptive narrative connects imagery, ideas, and details to convey a sense of time and place.

The purpose of descriptive narrative

Descriptive narrative has two key purposes:

To create a sense of setting, of time and place. To convey the mood and tone of said time and place (e.g. threatening, peaceful, cheerful, chaotic).

When we describe a pastoral scene in a rural setting, for example, we might linger on specific images (such as a wide, empty field, an abandoned tractor) to build up an overarching mood (such as peaceful simplicity).

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### Descriptive narrative examples

The Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a master of this type of narration. In *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), the third person narrator describes the unnamed seaside city in the Caribbean where much of the novel takes place. Marquez narrates the passage through the eyes of Dr. Urbino, one of the city's most distinguished doctors:

The city, his city, stood unchanging on the edge of time: the same burning dry city of his nocturnal terrors and the solitary pleasures of puberty, where flowers rusted and salt corroded, where nothing had happened for four centuries except a slow aging among withered laurels and putrefying swamps. In winter sudden devastating downpours flooded the latrines and turned the streets into sickening bogs. (p. 16-17)

In the space of a paragraph, Marquez shows how the city changes (or doesn't change) over centuries. This makes Marquez's setting more vivid and real. The narration passes from showing the city's history to its citizens' current ways of life. The narrator proceeds to describe the lives of poor inhabitants:

During the weekend they danced without mercy, drank themselves blind on home-brewed alcohol, made wild love among the icaco plants, and on Sunday at midnight they broke up their own party with bloody free-for-all. (p. 17)

Over the course of two pages, Marquez masterfully shows the city's mood, culture, unique spirit. His narration then zooms in closer on individuals' lives. The multiple time-scales in his narrative "past and present day" combine to give a rich sense of time and place.

### 2: Viewpoint narrative

Often, the express purpose of a section of narration is to help us understand the views and feelings of the narrating character or "viewpoint narrator". Point of view or POV is thus a key element of narration (read about different types of POV here and a definition of narration here).

The purpose of viewpoint narrative

Viewpoint narrative presents events or scenes to us so that we see understand them through narrators' feelings, desires, beliefs or values.

In omniscient narration, the narrator is able to share multiple characters' private thoughts, even in a single scene. In limited narration, by contrast, we can only see events through a single person's eyes at a time. [You can read more about different points of view here.]

Viewpoint narrative has power. We might interpret story events the way the narrator does. Because we don't have a different viewpoint for comparison, or because their voice is strong, self-assured. Yet the viewpoint narrator in a scene may be unreliable (they could lie about what truly happened, or gloss over details that, for example, make them look worse to others).

Authors like Vladimir Nabokov have written novels featuring protagonists who are unethical or even abusive. In novels such as Nabokov's *Lolita*, the reader has to remember that the narrating voice has its own agenda.

Viewpoint narrative example

Virginia Woolf is a master of filtering events via individual characters' perceptions. She often switches between multiple characters' viewpoints within a single page. This approach (called "stream of consciousness") lets her reveal characters' different fixations and personalities.

Take, for example, this scene in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Septimus Smith is a World War I veteran whose mental health is crumbling. His Italian wife Rezia feels unease and longs for her home country. Woolf switches from paragraph to paragraph between Septimus and Rezia's viewpoints, in third person:

Human nature, in short, was on him " the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him. Dr. Holmes came quite regularly every day. Once you stumble, Septimus wrote on the back of a postcard, human nature is on you. Holmes is on you. Their only chance was to escape, without letting Holmes know; to Italy " anywhere, anywhere, away from Dr. Holmes. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), p. 81

Then to Rezia's POV in limited third person:

But Rezia could not understand him. Dr. Holmes was such a kind man. He was so interested in Septimus. He only wanted to help them, she said. Woolf, p. 81.

Woolf's gift for narrative means that she can narrate individuals' fears and obsessions within a single page without breaking the flow. Woolf reports Rezia's words within narration, instead of using dialogue. This allows Woolf's narrative (and changing viewpoints) to flow into each other without interruption.

3: Historical narrative

In genres such as biography, autobiography and various historical subgenres (e.g. historical romance or WWII fiction), a lot of narration recounts events in the past. Of course, the author may choose to tell a war story in a tumultuous present tense. There's no single way to narrate the past. Yet it serves a common purpose:

Historical narrative example

One thing common to historical narrative in different genres is it shows historical process. It links causation from event to event, showing the chain reactions that lead to how things pan out.

This is why in historical narrative, such as narration sharing a character's backstory, we often have words showing order of events. Such as the words bolded in this example:

First, the city was a fledgling thing. In the early days, there was one traffic light, and if you were doing your driver's license, you could be damned sure you'd have to drive past it. In later years, as the local publishing industry grew, it became a hotbed of hotshot journalists-in-training. So the city needed more traffic lights (and the related tender corruption to write about).

A sense of historical cause and effect, of long stretches of time condensed, is typical of historical narrative.

Historical narrative and time words

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), about tragedies that strike twin siblings born in Ayemenem in India and their family, is full of rich historical narration. Note the phrases and words that convey time's passage, e.g. "Six months later".

Rahel was first blacklisted in Nazareth Convent at the age of eleven, when she was caught outside her Housemistress's garden gate decorating a knob of fresh cowdung with small flowers. At Assembly the next morning, she was made to look up depravity in the Oxford Dictionary and read aloud its meaning. Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997), p. 16

Roy proceeds to narrate Rahel's expulsion, revealing Rahel's inquisitive mind in the process:

Six months later she was expelled after repeated complaints from senior girls. She was accused (quite rightly) of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors. When she was questioned by the Principal about her behaviour (cajoled, caned, starved), she eventually admitted that she had done it to find out whether breasts hurt. Roy, p. 16.

Through narrating events in the past, in Rahel's schooling, Roy fleshes out a sense of her character. She shows her inquiring, rule-breaking nature while also showing the strict social backdrop that conflicts with it. By narrating Rahel's history, or backstory, Roy foreshadows future conflicts between Rahel's individualism and society's expectations.

#### 4: Linear narrative

Linear narrative is narration where you tell events in the order they happened, i.e. in sequence. This type of narrative is typical of realist fiction where the author wants to create the sense of a life unfolding as a character experiences day to day or year to year.

The purpose of linear narrative

Linear narrative shows causation clearly. When we see what happened to a character yesterday, then today, then tomorrow, it's often easier to notice patterns and chains of cause and effect.

Stories told in a linear time-frame might be told mainly using past, present, or even future tense. Yet each event flows on simply from the previous incident described. Often this helps to create what Will Self calls "the texture of lived life", as we see characters going through this, then that, then the next thing.

#### Example of linear narrative

David Mitchell's genre-bending *Cloud Atlas* (2004) spans multiple eras, settings and characters, and is nonlinear as a whole. Yet one section of his book, titled "Half-Lives" The First Luisa Rey Mystery is written as a mystery/thriller. This section in itself is linear narrative, told in the present tense.

Luisa Rey is a young journalist who becomes a target of powerful people when she investigates health and safety failings at a nuclear power plant.

Mitchell creates suspense and tension by placing Luisa's narration in third person and the present tense. The present tense narrative creates a sense of immediate action, unfolding now. Mitchell also creates tension by separating Rey's inner monologue from events happening around her:

Luisa Rey hears a clunk from the neighbouring balcony. "Hello?" Nobody. Her stomach warns her to set down her tonic water. It was the bathroom you needed, not fresh air, but she can't face weaving back through the party and, anyway, there's no time " down the side of the building she heaves: once, twice, a vision of greasy chicken, and a third time. David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (2004), p. 90.

The linear chain of events " feeling uneasy and ill at a party, getting sick " occur on a simple timeline of "this happens, then that".

#### 5: Nonlinear narrative

Different types of narrative include narration that does not follow events in the order they happened.

Chronological events (e.g. what happens in 1990 followed by what happens in 1991) don't have to match up with the order of narrative events. The author might share key details from 1990 before going back to the events of 1987 in the

story.

However, as novel writing coach Romy Sommer says, avoid making the first several chapters of your novel all backstory:

An issue I see with a lot of beginner writers is they tend to write the backstory as the story itself. If you do find yourself writing the first few chapters being all about the backstory [â€¦] you may need to ditch the first few chapters. Romy Sommer, â€œUnderstanding character arcs: How to create charactersâ€™, webinar preview here.

The purpose of non-linear narrative

Non-linear narrative has various uses:

It can represent the narratorâ€™s emotional state or consciousness. For example, a severely traumatized narrator who has flashbacks might tell events in a jumble of chapters set in different years, out of sequence, as they try to piece together fragments and memories. It can show stories with related arcs or themes unfolding in different places and times. In Michael Cunninghamâ€™s retelling (of a sort) of Woolfâ€™s *Mrs Dalloway*, characters living in different time periods have personal experiences and tragedies that echo events from Woolfâ€™s book as well as Woolfâ€™s own life. It can build suspense. For example, Donna Tartt opens *The Secret History* by telling the reader about a murder. We next meet the murder victim alive, as the story jumps back to the events leading to his killing.

Example of nonlinear narrative

Donna Tarttâ€™s prologue to *The Secret History* (1992) is a masterful piece of non-linear narration. Within the first page, we know thereâ€™s been a murder and the first person narrator is somehow complicit. Tarttâ€™s opening paragraph reveals a lot but still builds anticipation:

â€œThe snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. Heâ€™d been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. It was one of the biggest manhunts in Vermont history â€" state troopers, the FBI, even an army helicopter; the college closed, the dye factory in Hampden shut down, people coming from New Hampshire, upstate New York, as far away as Boston.â€™ (p. 1)

Yet next thing we know, we're back in the days when the narrator first met Bunny, and Bunny Corcoran is very much alive. This non-linear recalling of events gives us a dramatic moment before its buildup. Yet Tarrt still delays our complete gratification by making us wait for full understanding of what happened, and why.

Use examples of narrative to improve your own narration

Read through the examples of narrative above and try exercises based on these authors' narrative styles and techniques:

1. Write a paragraph of historical narrative describing a character's home city and how it has changed over the years. In the next paragraph, describe how a character or section of the population spends a typical weekend in the city, showcasing more of the city's unique details.

2. Write a scene using viewpoint narrative showing two characters preoccupied with different worries, in the third person. Write the scene entirely in narration. Any speech must be reported speech and not dialogue. For example: "He told her that he was tired of the city and was thinking about moving abroad." In the first half, filter narration through the first character's thoughts, but then switch to the other character's point of view. How do they see things differently?

Does your skill in narration need developing? Our writing coaches will help you craft better narrative.



## Reference

[Psychology II Essentials \(Essentials Study Guides Book 2\)](#)

[Program Evaluation Theory and Practice: A Comprehensive Guide](#)