

Narrative writing -- A Lesson Learned

Draft due by the end of the class period

John and Lorraine learned many lessons because of their relationship with Mr. Pignati. Like John and Lorraine, we sometime have to learn lessons the hard way -- through mistakes or even tragedies or serious hardships. Sometimes, like the narrator in "Fire!" or Doug in "The Utterly Perfect Murder," we learn lessons by looking back at experiences that we might have thought were puzzling or even unfair at the time. Sometimes the lessons give us a new insight into relationships or how the world works or we gain a new physical or personal skill. Or maybe we learn something about honesty or compassion or friendship or families. Or perhaps we learn to walk in another's shoes.

The experience of the lesson can be made more powerful by thoughtful writing. If we can **show** the lesson rather than **tell** it, we can make the reader think more deeply. We can also avoid the feeling of a sermon that doing too much **telling** can give the reader. The following is an example of an opening that has been labeled with four different writing techniques that help **show** the event rather than **tell** about it. Those techniques are: *thoughts*, *snapshots*, *dialog*, and *thoughtshots*. See if you can figure out how each of these four works by reading this example:

(Sarah's thoughts) They'll never know if I don't tell them. Why do I always feel like I have to honest with them? Susan Brown isn't with her parents and they never find out. Not like those TV shows where the parents always find out in the end.

(Snapshot) Sarah stood by the front door, her hair blown in all directions. She could still hear the faint sound of Spike's Harley hitting third gear as he hit Main Street. She opened the door and sneaked into the hallway. Her feet sank in to the carpet.

(Sarah's thoughts) Oh my gosh! It's late. I knew we should have left earlier. If I could just get to my room, I could tell them I was in bed already.

(Dialog) "Sarah, is that you?"

(Dialog) "Yes, Mom."

(Snapshot) Sarah held her hands behind her back and shifted side to side on her feet.

(Dialog) "Honey, what happened to your hair? Was there a hurricane?"

(Dialog) "Oh, Mom, you know how kids are. They kept all the windows open."

(Snapshot) Sarah pulled her hair together in a ponytail and let it fall over her back.

(Dialog) "Tell me about the dance. You were with Spike, weren't you?"

(Thoughtshot) Sarah felt as if the floor was moving like a ship caught in an ocean swell. I will tell her, she thought. I always tell her.

(Dialog) "What a ridiculous thing to say!"

(Snapshot) Mom walked to the cupboard and took out a bottle of aspirin.

(example from Barry Lane's After THE END)

What do you guess was the situation* here?

What do you guess If you continued this story, what could you have happen that Sarah would learn from?

What lesson would you have Sarah learn?

Your assignment:

Think about a time you had to learn something the hard way -- either by making mistakes, by messing up, by having to work harder, by asking for help, or by having to look at something in a different way.

Write the story of this lesson. It might help you gain a perspective if you write this in third person (he/she rather than I). You might want to create an even further distance by imagining yourself as a much older you looking back at this experience. (Think of episodes of *The Wonder Years* or the stories "Fire!" or "The Utterly Perfect Murder") Write the story of your experience using snapshots, thoughtshots, thoughts, and dialog. Label these techniques in your draft like they have been in the example. Save and print your draft. Be sure to follow all of the writing guidelines.

*Answer: Situation: Sarah was not supposed to go out with Spike and now she's coming home late from the dance and her parents suspect she may have been driven by Spike on his Harley.