

Writing Is Magic, Or Is It?



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Narrative Fiction Writing

The late Donald Graves, an inspirational writing teacher and researcher, was fond of saying, “You have a story to tell” (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE] 2013). These words come to mind as we consider the genre of narrative fiction writing.

‘You have a story to tell’ (NCTE 2013) is a powerful message for writers of all ages; storytelling is how we communicate our life experiences, how we connect with others, and how we think about our place in the world. In fact, students who gather family stories to tell in class create connections to their pasts and feel as though the knowledge they bring to school is just as important as the knowledge they learn from the teacher’ (Hamilton and Weiss 2005).

The process of recording the stories we tell, whether they are true or imagined, is the essence of narrative fiction writing. The Common Core State Standards assert that, “narrative fiction writing conveys experience, either real or imaginary, and uses time as its deep structure” and that “it can be used for many purposes, such as to inform, instruct, persuade, or entertain” (Appendix A, 23).

While we all have a story to tell, we should keep in mind that “how writers write is a complex, at times even quirky, process filled with starts and stops and twists and turns of seemingly infinite variety” (Peha 2003, 4). You have probably experienced how “even writers themselves are often at a loss to explain exactly how they do what they do” and that “many might even say they do things a little differently every time they start a new project” (Peha 2003, 4). As Steve Peha reminds us, “that’s just the truth of writing: there’s no one best way to do it” (2003, 4).

We agree. We also believe that, for narrative writers and writers of all genres, the pigeons that are tucked up the sleeves of magicians are the writing strategies that we can name. Instead of asking students to “add more,” we suggest, for example, that they try a circular ending or they add a metaphor. These are specific, named strategies that students can apply to their current piece of narrative fiction writing and also apply to future pieces of narrative fiction writing.

We believe that teaching students specific strategies will empower them with ways to “provide visual details of scenes, objects, or people; to depict specific actions (for example, movements, gestures, postures, and expressions); to use dialogue and interior monologue that provide insight into the narrator’s and characters’ personalities and motives; and to manipulate pace to highlight the significance of events and create tension and suspense” (CCSSO Appendix A, 23–24).

Let us begin our exploration of narrative fiction writing by looking at the skills and understandings identified in the English Language Arts Standards for Writing Informative/Explanatory Texts (CCSS 2010 available at <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/introduction>). These standards reflect what students should know and be able to do by the end of the identified academic year. As you look horizontally across the rows in the following chart, you will find the skills and understandings associated with writing narrative texts in grades 3 through 8. Looking vertically down each column, you will see how each skill or understanding increases in complexity. Rather than rewrite the standard in each box, we have included only the changes/additions from grade to grade, as reflected in the language that we have taken directly from the standards.

Grade	Skills and Understandings Students Must Demonstrate by the End of Each Grade					
	Introduce a Topic	Develop a Topic	Link Ideas/ Transitions	Precise language	Formal Style	Concluding Statement
Grade 3	Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.	Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations.	Use temporal words and phrases to signal event order.	N/A	N/A	Provide a sense of closure.
Grade 4	Orient the reader...	Use dialogue and description...	Use a variety of transitional words and phrases to manage the sequence of events.	Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.	N/A	Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

Grade	Skills and Understandings Students Must Demonstrate by the End of Each Grade					
	Introduce a Topic	Develop a Topic	Link Ideas/ Transitions	Precise language	Formal Style	Concluding Statement
Grade 5	...organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.	Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.	...and clauses...	Same as Grade 4	N/A	Same as Grade 4
Grade 6	Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context... organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.	Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.	...to convey sequence and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another.	...relevant descriptive details, and sensory language...	N/A	Same as Grade 4
Grade 7	...and point of view...	Same as Grade 6	Same as Grade 6	...to capture the action...	N/A	...and reflects on the narrated experiences or events.
Grade 8	Same as Grade 7	...and reflection...	...and show the relationships among experiences and events.	Same as Grade 7	N/A	Same as Grade 7

Writing Strategies Used in Narrative Fiction Writing

The narrative pieces in this chapter model the use of specific craft strategies. Through close reading, we identify the following writing strategies, and we discuss how the writer uses strategies to communicate and enhance the meaning of the narratives.

Snapshot: When we use a camera, we take a snapshot to allow others to see exactly what we see. Writers can do this with words. A snapshot is a detailed physical description of

what you want your reader to see in his or her mind (Lane 1993). For example, authors might write a snapshot to show the physical details of a character's expression, the physical details of a place, or the physical details of a building.

Simile: A simile is a figure of speech. The writer compares two things by using the word *like* or by using the word *as*. The purpose of a simile is to paint a clear picture in the reader's mind by drawing on something the reader likely knows. You might have heard the similes: *as cute as a button* or *eats like a bird*.

Thoughtshot: According to creator Barry Lane (1993), in order to create a thoughtshot, writers stop the action for a brief moment and reveal what a character is thinking or feeling. Thoughtshots allow the reader to hear the exact words that the character is thinking. Writers often signal the use of a thoughtshot with phrases including, *I thought to myself*, *I kept thinking*, *I said to myself*, or *I wondered*. The exact thoughts are written in quotations or in italics.

Flashback: Although some stories are written entirely in the form of a flashback, students can also insert a flashback that is a relatively quick moment in the writing piece, a paragraph or so, in which the character remembers something meaningful that happened in the past. According to Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi, "glimpses into the past can be used to develop character, invite readers into significant moments gone by, or make contrasts that point to important changes that have occurred (2007, 113).

You will find a clean "student copy" of each mentor text in Appendix B. If you think your students will be able to understand, or at least get the gist of the text on their own, begin by providing them with copies of the text, have them read it independently (or with a partner), and annotate it as they read. In their jottings, they should note text features (e.g., italicized words, headings, and key words), interesting or unfamiliar use of language, the organizational structure of the text, questions the text raises for them, author's craft (e.g., alliteration, metaphor, varied sentence constructions, effective leads, transitions, and conclusions). If you think the text may be too challenging for your students to comprehend independently, distribute the clean copy and then engage in a guided close read. (See the next two sections for guidance.)

Once students have read and annotated the text (i.e., completed their "jottings"), call them together into a large group to discuss the content of the text (i.e., *What* does the text say?) and then to investigate how the author crafted the text (i.e., *How* does the text say it?). Rather than share our sample jottings directly with your students, we envision that you will use our annotations to help guide your students through the close readings.

Transitional Phrases to Signal a Flashback: Flashbacks are often signaled with phrases that ease transition for readers such as *I remember one time when*, *I remembered back to the time when*, *Once when I was*, or *My mind traveled back to when*.

Flash-Forward: In order to provide readers with a glimpse into the future, writers can stop the chronological sequence of events in a piece of writing and transition to a flash-forward. In a flash-forward, the character or narrator imagines a key event that could happen but has not yet happened. A flash-forward can be as short as a couple of sentences. These meaningful scenes are often signaled by phrases that ease the transition for readers such as *I imagined myself...*, *I began to think about...*, or *My mind drifted to the future...*

AAAWWUBBIS Words (After, Although, As, When, While, Until, Because, Before, If, Since): AAWWUBBIS serves as a mnemonic device for recalling subordinating conjunctions. A subordinating conjunction allows the dependent clause to join the main clause in order to express meaning. (*After we walk on the beach, we will get an ice cream.*) When a sentence begins with an AAWWUBBIS word, writers usually need to use a comma after the opening phrase (unless the main clause is very short). Writers can use AAWWUBBIS words to create sentence variety.

In addition to the word *although*, the words *even though* and *though* also count as AAWWUBBIS words, and in addition to the word *when*, the word *whenever* counts (Anderson 2005).

Dialogue and Dialogue Tags: Dialogue can be used to move the story along, to control the pacing, to reveal character's motivations, and to reveal a relationship among characters. Dialogue tags are also used to express a character's feelings or intent. For example, the dialogue tag, "with tears in her eyes" shows that the character does not want to leave her dog in the following sentence: "*I hope to see you soon, Frank,*" *whispered Lucy with tears in her eyes.*

Emotional ending: When a writer decides to write a story that shows strong emotion, it can be powerful to match the ending to the emotion conveyed throughout the story (Fletcher and Portalupi 2007).

Mentor Text (Fiction): Excerpt from “Giving Back”

(See Appendix B for Complete Text)

GIVING BACK

By Jenn Bogard

Edwin zig-zagged through the boundary of beach grass that separated his great-grandfather’s old boat shop from the busy freeway. The shop was sheltered by weathered shingles—mostly yellow in color, yet the grays and greens of past generations peeked through. Edwin clasped the handle of the raw, splintered door bitten by years of icy winds and salty sprays. He creaked the door open and peered inside.

The shelves were still lined with gallons of resin and gallons of paint. Resting on the floor was an old cardboard box filled with sketches and secrets of boat building. As Edwin closed his eyes, he remembered thinly sliced curls of wood spiraling to the wide pine floor like pinwheels turning in a summer breeze. “The shop is just the way great-grandpa left it,” he thought to himself.

Additional Thoughts:

What do you wonder? What did you discover? What do you want to discuss?

Sample Jottings: Excerpt from “Giving Back”

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I wonder who is giving what back?

word choice

alliteration
(“b” sound)

repainted over the years- shows old age of shop

near ocean

Why “still”? Maybe it has been a long time

memory with great-grandfather?

simile/comparison

The shelves were still lined with gallons of resin and gallons of paint. Resting on the floor was an old cardboard box filled with sketches and secrets of boat building. As Edwin closed his eyes, he remembered thinly sliced curls of wood spiraling to the wide pine floor like pinwheels turning in a summer breeze. “The shop is just the way great-grandpa left it,” he thought to himself.

seems curious or unsure?

He visited the boat shop many times before.

Additional Thoughts:

What do you wonder? What did you discover? What do you want to discuss?

- Why did Edwin’s great-grandfather leave the shop? What happened?
- Why is Edwin visiting the boat shop?
- Great-grandpa is a boat builder.

Close Reading: Excerpt from “Giving Back”

What does the text say?

The purpose of this section is to address students’ comprehension and to focus on what the text says. Here, we model how to ask text-dependent questions in order to allow students to infer meaning.

1. Begin by asking students to share what they noticed: What did you jot down? What strikes you? What surprises you?
2. Guide students in figuring out what the text is saying. Have students retell what is happening in the passage. For example, students might say: Edwin visits his great-grandfather’s abandoned boat shop. He finds that the shop is set up just as his great-grandfather left it. He recalls a memory of seeing slices of wood spiral to the floor.
 - Ask: Who is the main character? What is Edwin doing? Point out how Edwin “zig-zagged” to his great-grandfather’s boat shop. Discuss the meaning of the word “zig-zagged,” and ask students to describe the mental image they see when they hear the word.
 - Ask students to consider the mood of this first sentence. They will likely find the mood to be carefree.
 - Ask: What is a boat shop? What does this tell us about Edwin’s great-grandfather? Discuss how he might be a boat builder for work or for a hobby.
3. Ask students to explain the meaning of the word “boundary,” and, how the beach grass is a boundary that separates the boat shop from the freeway.
4. Ask for key details about the appearance of the boat shop: What does the boat shop look like? What color is the boat shop? Is it more than one color? How do you know? Have students figure out what the author means when she writes that the colors of the past generations “peeked through.” What is the meaning of the word “generation”? What does the author mean when she writes that the colors “peeked” through?
5. Draw students to the phrase, “sheltered by weathered shingles.” Ask students: How would the shop be sheltered? How would weathered shingles shelter the shop? What does “sheltered” mean? What does “weathered” mean?
6. What do you think the appearance of the boat shop tells us? Discuss how the shop has been repainted over the years and how the appearance shows the passage of time. Students might also infer that the shop has been neglected.
7. Invite students to locate additional details in the first paragraph that show the condition of the boat shop. Discuss how the door is “raw” and “splintered.” What material is the door likely made of? What caused the door to splinter and to appear raw? Draw students to the phrase, “salty sprays.” After giving students a

Close reading is “an instructional routine in which students critically examine a text, especially through repeated readings” (Fisher and Frey 2012, 179). Using a short passage, students read carefully to determine what the text says and to uncover specific instances of the author’s craft, including items such as word choice, sentence structure, endings, leads, and more.

- chance to figure out what a salty spray could be and what might cause a salty spray, discuss how this signifies close proximity to the salty ocean.
8. Have students share what they think is happening at the end of the first paragraph. Why do you think Edwin is peering inside as opposed to just heading right in?
 9. Invite students to reread the second paragraph. Ask: What is happening now? Ask: What do we know about the inside of the boat shop? Direct students to notice the word, “still” in the first line. Ask: What do you think the author wants us to know when she writes, “The shelves were *still* lined...” Students might infer that Edwin has not been to the boat shop for some time and that he is comparing how the shop looks to how he remembers it.
 10. Ask students to infer the meaning of the word *resin* and discuss how it might be a substance used in the boat building process.
 11. Direct students to the phrase, “secrets of boat building.” Ask them to infer what the author might mean when she writes that the box is filled with “sketches and secrets of boat building.” Students might infer that the sketches and plans are like secrets because they show how the boat is made or that they unlock the mystery of how the boat is made by detailing the specific measurements and directions.
 12. Ask students to explain what Edwin is remembering in the second paragraph. What are “thinly sliced curls of wood spiraling to the wide pine floor”? Students might not have knowledge of a wood planer, yet they might infer that the great-grandfather used some type of woodworking tool to shave and shape the wood in order to craft the boat.
 13. Have students infer what is happening to the wood when it is *spiraling*. Ask: What does the author compare the spiraling curls of wood to? Discuss the meaning of the word *pinwheels*. Why do you think she compares the falling wood to turning pinwheels? What image does this create in your mind? Is the wood falling slowly or quickly? How do you know? Point out the phrase *summer breeze*. Ask students to describe a summer breeze. Discuss the peaceful, joyful mood of this image.
 14. Finally, ask the students what they learn in the last sentence of the second paragraph. What does Edwin think to himself? How do you think Edwin feels about the shop being, “just the way great-grandpa left it”? Why do you think that? Gather students’ thoughts about why Edwin’s great-grandfather might have left the boat shop and when. Invite them to infer why Edwin is returning to the boat shop and how long it might have been since he last visited. Encourage students to use evidence from the text to support their inferences.



How does the text say it?

Here is the part when you invite students to reveal the pigeons tucked up the magician's sleeve. The intent of this section is to talk through *how* the text says what it says and to investigate the choices the author makes to reveal meaning. Discussion should involve literary devices, organization, and specific word choices.

1. Invite students to reread the first sentence, and remind them of the discussion you had about mood. Ask: How did the writer create the carefree mood of the first sentence? Draw students to notice the specific word choice, “zig-zagged.” Have students read the first sentence aloud. Ask: How does the sentence sound when read aloud? Students might notice the smooth flow of the lengthy sentence that adds to the mood.
 - Ask: What other choices did the writer make in this sentence? Students might point out the repetition of the beginning sound of /b/ in the words *boundary, beach, boat, and busy*. Ask them if they think the writer's use of this alliteration adds to the mood and helps establish the tone of the scene for readers. Discuss how this lead includes action and shows what Edwin is doing.
2. Remind students about their discussion of the condition of the outside of the boat shop and how the shop has stood for generations. They most likely agreed that the shop is tattered.
 - Ask: How did the writer show us the condition and age of the shop? Did she come right out and say that the shop was tattered? Have students reread the following sentence, “The shop was sheltered by weathered shingles—mostly yellow in color, yet the grays and greens of past generations peeked through.” Ask: What choices did the writer make in this sentence?
 - Discuss how the writer used words to create a detailed description so that we know exactly what the shop looked like. Tell students that a detailed description of what something or someone looks like is called a *snapshot*.
3. Invite students to reread the remainder of the excerpt to search for another snapshot.
 - Students will likely find the following snapshot: “The shelves were still lined with gallons of resin and gallons of paint. Resting on the floor was an old cardboard box filled with sketches and secrets of boat building.”
 - Tell students to think about why the writer used this snapshot. Ask: Why didn't the writer just say that the shop was filled with boat building supplies?
 - Discuss how the snapshot allows us to know exactly what the main character sees. Ask students to consider how this physical description of the materials in the shop reveals clues about the characters. For example, students might infer that the great-grandfather works in the shop to build boats using sketches and plans.

4. Draw students' attention to the author's choice of the word, *still* in the first sentence of the second paragraph. Why would the writer use the word *still*? What was she up to? Students might decide that the word choice, is a way to let her readers know that time has passed since Edwin had last visited the boat shop.
5. Invite students to find additional places in the excerpt in which the writer made careful decisions about word choices. Students might locate the phrase, *salty sprays*. Discuss how this precise word choice allows the reader to infer the location of the boat shop—by the salty ocean.
6. Students might also note the strong verb of *peered* and how it shows the reader that Edwin is curious or tentative after opening the door to the boat shop, as if he did not know what to expect.
7. Draw students to the specific word choice of *secrets* and how the box was, “filled with sketches and secrets of boat building.” Ask students to think about why the writer would choose to use the word *secrets*.
8. Have students reread the sentence: *As Edwin closed his eyes, he remembered thinly sliced curls of wood spiraling to the wide pine floor like pinwheels turning in a summer breeze*. Invite students to discuss: What is the author up to when she has Edwin remember back to this moment in his past? What is she revealing?
 - Discuss how the author uses a *flashback* to transition from the chronological sequence of the story to reveal how Edwin might have taken part in the boat-building process with his great-grandpa. Students might infer that he watched his great-grandpa shape the wood or that he helped his great-grandpa shape the wood.
9. Draw students' attention to the author's use of a simile in which she compares the spiraling curls of wood to “pinwheels turning in a summer breeze.” Discuss how this comparison may or may not make the scene more vivid for the reader. Ask students to share their opinions of the effectiveness of this simile.
10. Finally, the excerpt ends with the sentence: “*The shop is just the way great-grandpa left it,*” *he thought to himself*. Invite readers to infer why the author includes Edwin's exact thoughts. Ask students: What does the author reveal by showing exactly what Edwin was thinking? How does this thought show that it is significant to Edwin that the shop is the same?
11. Tell students that this technique of revealing the character's exact thoughts is called a *thoughtshot*. Invite students to discuss: How effective is this thoughtshot? Does it reveal his relationship with his great-grandpa? Do we know how Edwin feels about the shop being the same? Have students suggest how they might add to this thoughtshot to reveal additional meaning to the reader.



Zooming In: Analyzing Writing Strategies

Here are four strategies that the author uses that you can also implement with students using the suggested lesson ideas that follow.

1. **Snapshot:** The author uses the following snapshot to allow readers to create a mental image and picture precisely what the main character sees in the boat shop: *The shelves were still lined with gallons of resin and gallons of paint. Resting on the floor was an old cardboard box filled with sketches and secrets of boat building.*
2. **Simile:** The use of a simile helps set the tone and create the main character’s pleasant, heartwarming memory. For example, *a summer breeze evokes pleasant feelings of comfort.* The author compares the curls of wood to pinwheels turning in a summer breeze.
3. **Thoughtshot:** The action is stopped for a brief moment in order for Edwin to reveal his exact thoughts to the reader about his impression of seeing the shop after not having seen it for some time. The following thoughtshot allows readers to get inside Edwin’s head and to hear his exact words *“The shop is just the way great-grandpa left it,” he thought to himself.*
4. **Flashback:** The author transitions from the chronological sequence of events to a past event as Edwin remembers an experience at the boat shop. This short flashback allows the reader to infer that he spent time with his great-grandpa. The author writes: *As Edwin closed his eyes, he remembered his thinly sliced curls of wood spiraling to the wide pine floor like pinwheels turning in a summer breeze.*

Lesson Ideas: Excerpt from “Giving Back”

Once you and your students have identified instances of author’s craft, we believe it is important to name the strategies and to empower students to try out the strategies in their own writing. These lesson ideas provide you with opportunities for your students to practice the strategies with support from you and their peers.

Snapshot

Discuss with students how we can use a camera to capture a photograph, or a snapshot, that shows others exactly what we saw. Explain that writers can do this with words. When writers create a detailed description of what they want their readers to see in their minds, we call that a snapshot.

1. Locate a snapshot in a book. Have students notice how the author creates a picture in the reader’s mind as you read the snapshot aloud.
2. Bring in a physical object, such as funky sunglasses, an interesting hat, or a blooming plant. Guide students in writing a snapshot of the object, making sure that they describe, in detail, what they see.
3. Invite students to reread one of their own writing pieces. Have them reread for the intent of locating a spot where the reader might have difficulty picturing the story. Ask students to write a snapshot.

You might also model the use of a snapshot with **shared writing** by having the students help you add a snapshot to your own draft.

1. Write a short story or use the story below entitled, “Sixth Grade Camp.”

Sixth Grade Camp

“I can’t believe we were put into the birdwatching group,” I whined to my friend, Rob. We were walking through the forest with binoculars hanging around our necks.

“Ya, we’re not going to see anything,” Rob grumbled.

Once we got to a clearing in the woods, I held the binoculars up to my eyes. I waited. I scanned the trees. I saw something.

“It’s a bird,” I whispered with excitement. The binoculars let me see it up close.

Suddenly, being picked for the birdwatching group didn’t seem so bad.

2. Ask students to flag a spot in which a snapshot is needed to allow readers to visualize an important part. Discuss with students how the reader does not know what the bird looks like.
3. Ask students to find the specific place in the text where the snapshot could be added. Students might suggest adding the snapshot right after the sentence, *The binoculars let me see it up close.*
4. Discuss with students how there is no room to add a snapshot within the text, so a revision symbol is needed. Model how to draw the symbol of a camera after the word *close* in the text. Model how to draw the same symbol at the end of the writing piece and how that will allow you to add a snapshot. As students read along and come to the symbol in the text, they will need to jump down to the second symbol in order to read the snapshot.
5. Together with the students, write a snapshot for the bird. Tell students that you have a photo of what the bird might have looked like. Show them a large picture of an interesting bird from a calendar or from an Internet site.
6. Invite students into shared writing in which they look at the picture of the bird and offer sentences to describe what the bird looks like. Together as a class, participate in **shared writing** and create a short paragraph that describes the bird.
7. Reread the short story, jumping down to read the snapshot of the bird when you come upon the symbol of the camera.
8. Discuss with students how the snapshot allows readers to create a picture of the bird in their minds.

In **shared writing**, the teacher and students come up with ideas for the story together. The teacher writes the story down as it unfolds.

The snapshot strategy can also be taught by starting with a vague statement.

1. Display the sentence: “The kids were having fun on the playground.”
2. Discuss with students how this sentence does not show us exactly what the kids are doing on the playground or what they look like as they are having fun.
3. Invite students to grab their notebook and pencil. Take students to the playground to observe a recess time. Have them write a snapshot to describe to readers exactly what they see students doing on the playground. Is someone on the swings? Are there groups of kids laughing? What do their facial expressions look like?
4. When back in the classroom, have students share their snapshots and compare them to the vague statement, “The kids were having fun on the playground.”
5. Ask students to consider how the snapshot allows readers to create a mental image in their minds.
6. Give small groups additional vague statements and invite them to write snapshots. Statements might include: *The tropical fish look pretty* or *The truck was very old*. When possible, provide students with a visual, a concrete object, or a chance to observe as they are learning to write snapshots.
7. Invite students to locate a place to add a snapshot in their own writing.

Simile

Pull out the simile used in the text excerpt and display it for students: *thinly sliced curls of wood spiraling to the wide pine floor like pinwheels turning in a summer breeze*. Tell students that they will have the chance to evaluate the effectiveness of similes in various writing pieces, starting with the aforementioned simile from the excerpt, “Giving Back.”

1. Together as a group, complete the following chart:

Record the simile.	Is this a commonly used simile? Have you heard it before?	Explain what is being compared and why you think the author compares them.	What information does the reader need to know in order for the simile to make sense and to add meaning?	In your opinion, is the simile effective? Why or why not?