

## Chapter 1

### SHOW AND TELL

What's wrong with this paragraph?:

The conversation was barely begun before I discovered that our host was more than simply a stranger to most of his guests. He was an enigma, a mystery. And this was a crowd that doted on mysteries. In the space of no more than five minutes, I heard several different people put forth their theories—all equally probable or preposterous—as to who and what he was. Each theory was argued with the conviction that can only come from a lack of evidence, and it seemed that, for many of the

guests, these arguments were the main reason to attend his parties.

In a sense, of course, there's nothing wrong. The paragraph is grammatically impeccable, and it describes the mystery surrounding the party's host clearly, efficiently, and with a sense of style.

Now look at the same passage as it actually appeared in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*:

“I like to come,” Lucille said. “I never care what I do, so I always have a good time. When I was here last, I tore my gown on a chair, and he asked me my name and address—within a week I got a package from Croirier's with a new evening gown in it.”

“Did you keep it?” asked Jordan.

“Sure I did. I was going to wear it tonight, but it was too big in the bust and had to be altered. It was gas blue with lavender beads. Two hundred and sixty-five dollars.”

“There's something funny about a fellow

that'll do a thing like that," said the other girl eagerly. "He doesn't want any trouble with *anybody*."

"Who doesn't?" I inquired.

"Gatsby. Somebody told me—"

The two girls and Jordan leaned together confidentially.

"Somebody told me they thought he killed a man."

A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward and listened eagerly.

"I don't think it's so much *that*," argued Lucille skeptically; "it's more that he was a German spy during the war."

One of the men nodded in confirmation.

"I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany," he assured us positively.

"Oh, no," said the first girl, "it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war." As our credulity switched back to her, she leaned forward with enthusiasm. "You look at him sometimes when

he thinks nobody's looking at him. I'll bet he killed a man."

What's the difference between these two examples? To put it simply, it's a matter of showing and telling. The first version is narrative summary, with no specific settings or characters. We are simply *told* about the guests' love of mystery, the weakness of their arguments, the conviction of the arguers. In the second version we actually get to see the breathless partygoers putting forth their theories and can almost taste the eagerness of their audience. The first version is a secondhand report. The second is an immediate scene.

What, exactly, makes a scene a scene? For one thing it takes place in real time. Your readers watch events as they unfold, whether those events are a group discussion of the merits of Woody Allen films, a lone man running from an assassin, or a woman lying in a field pondering the meaning of life. In scenes, events are seen as they happen rather than described after the fact.

Even flashbacks show events as they unfold, although they have unfolded in the past within the context of the story.

Scenes usually have settings as well, specific locations the readers can picture. In Victorian novels these settings were often described in exhaustive (and exhausting) detail. Nowadays literature is leaner and meaner, and it's often a good idea to give your readers just enough detail to jump-start their imaginations so they can picture your settings for themselves.

Scenes also contain some action, something that happens. Mary kills Harry, or Harry and Mary beat each other up. More often than not, what happens is dialogue between one or more characters. Though even in dialogue scenes it's a good idea to include a little physical action from time to time—what we call “beats”—to remind your readers of where your characters are and what they're doing. We'll be talking about beats at length in chapter 8.

Of course, anything that can go into a scene can also be narrated. And since scenes are

usually harder to write than narration, many writers rely too heavily on narrative summary to tell their stories. The result is often page after page, sometimes chapter after chapter, of writing that reads the way the first passage quoted above reads: clearly, perhaps even stylishly, but with no specific setting, no specific characters, no dialogue.

A century or so ago this sort of writing would have been fine. It was the norm, in fact—Henry James wrote at least one entire novel composed largely of narrative summary. But thanks to the influence of movies and television, readers today have become accustomed to seeing a story as a series of immediate scenes. Narrative summary no longer engages readers the way it once did.

Since engagement is exactly what a fiction writer wants to accomplish, you're well advised to rely heavily on immediate scenes to put your story across. You want to draw your readers into the world you've created, make them feel a part of it, make them forget where they are. And you can't do this effectively if you tell your readers

about your world secondhand. You have to take them there.

We once worked on a novel featuring a law firm in which one of the new associates led a rebellion against the senior partners. The writer introduced the new associate and two of his colleagues in the first chapter by describing their job interviews with senior partners. The interviews were given as narrative summary—she simply told her readers what the law firm was looking for in a new associate, described the associates' backgrounds, and explained why the firm hired them. She did include snippets of dialogue from the interviews, but since readers never found out who was speaking to the associate or where the conversations took place, there was nothing they could picture.

Knowing that the first chapter is not the best place for narrative summary—you want to engage your readers early on—we suggested that the writer turn these interviews into genuine scenes, set in the senior partner's offices, with extended conversations between the partners

and the associates. As a result, her readers got a much better feel for who the new associates were and a glimpse of the senior partners' humor and good nature. The book was off to a much more engaging start.

Showing your story to your readers through scenes will not only give your writing immediacy. It will give your writing transparency. One of the easiest ways to look like an amateur is to use mechanics that direct attention to themselves and away from the story. You want your readers to be so wrapped up in your world that they're not even aware that you, the writer, exist. But when you switch to narrative summary, especially if you go on at length, it can sometimes seem as if you are falling into nonfiction—breaking into the story to give your readers a lecture. This is especially true if you are using narrative summary for exposition. To write exposition at length—describing your characters' pasts or events that happened before the story began or any information your readers might need to understand your plot—is to engage your

readers' intellects. What you want to do is to engage their emotions.

Of course, there will be times when you need to resort to narrative summary, especially if you're writing a historical novel or science fiction, both of which usually require conveying a lot of information to your readers before you can touch their emotions. We'll talk about this in more depth in the next chapter, but for now let us say that you'd be surprised at how much exposition can be converted into scenes. Rather than describing the history of Hartsdale House, you can write a scene in which the present Lord Hartsdale points out some of the family portraits to his guests. Or rather than quoting an *Encyclopedia Galactica* article on how Llanu society is organized, you can simply drop your readers into the middle of that society and let them fend for themselves.

We once edited a book about Antonio Vivaldi, which was set, naturally, in eighteenth-century Venice. In order to follow the story the readers had to know some of the details of Venetian

society in the baroque era. But because the story was presented as the reminiscences of one of Vivaldi's students, it was difficult to work the information into the text. After all, why would the student write in detail about the society she lived in? As far as she was concerned, everybody knew what the *bocca di lione* was and how you gained admission to the Golden Book.

To solve this problem, the writer created a frame story about a modern-day researcher who had found the student's writings in an archive. The researcher would interrupt the student's story every once in a while to explain some of the background. But since the researcher's explanations were simply addressed to the reader, they read like the lectures they really were. We suggested that the writer give the researcher a personality and turn his lectures into scenes.

The writer did better. In the next draft, she had cast herself in the role of the researcher, and the lectures became first-person scenes of how she was visited by the ghost of Vivaldi on a trip

to Venice. Since her Vivaldi had a powerful character's voice ("That fool Mozart could roll around on the floor with the soprano between acts and no one cares. I leave the pulpit once and it follows me forever."), her tour through Venetian society took on a new life. It was shown rather than told.

Even though immediate scenes are almost always more engaging than narrative summary, be careful when self-editing not to convert *all* your narrative summary into scenes. Narrative summary has its uses, the main one being to vary the rhythm and texture of your writing. Scenes are immediate and engaging, but scene after scene without a break can become relentless and exhausting, especially if you tend to write brief, intense scenes. Every once in a while you will want to slow things down to give your readers a chance to catch their breath, and narrative summary can be a good way to do this.

One of our clients was given to short scenes in which characters met, talked, and then parted. All of the dialogue was well written and

advanced his story, but since the writer delivered only five minutes' worth of dialogue in each scene, it was as if he'd written his entire novel in five-minute chunks. Reading it was like jogging on railroad ties. He could have run some of his scenes together into longer scenes, of course (and we suggested he do so), but the real solution was to use narrative summary to work some extra time into his scenes.

For instance, in the next draft he showed two characters meeting for dinner, summarized the dinner itself in a paragraph or two of narration, and then showed the five minutes of after-dinner conversation that were really crucial to the story. By simply adding a few paragraphs of narration, he stretched the duration of some of his scenes out to two or three hours without two or three hours' worth of dialogue and action. As a result his book had a more expansive feel, and his readers had a chance to breathe.

Narrative summary can also give continuity to your story on a larger scale. We recently worked on a historical novel in which the main character

was forced to move to Spain during the time of the Inquisition. At first she was terrified of falling under the power of the inquisitors, but she slowly came to love the people of her new village so much that by the end of the novel, she stood up to the inquisitors in order to stay.

The writer originally tried to capture her character's growing appreciation of her new home with a series of brief scenes spread over the several months it took for her feelings to evolve. But these short scenes lacked flow, which is especially critical at the beginning of the story. Instead, we suggested that the writer cut some of the shorter scenes and narrate the time that passed between the longer ones. Because the narrative summary was able to capture weeks or months of slow, steady growth, readers got a smooth sense of the development of the main character's feelings, with critical moments in that development illustrated by scenes. Readers could watch her feelings evolve, and that evolution invited them into the story and enabled them to identify with the heroine.

Narrative summary can also be useful when you have a lot of repetitive action. Say you are writing a book about a track star in which your hero participates in several races. If you show all of these races as immediate scenes, eventually they all start to read alike. But if you summarize the first few races—have them happen offstage, in effect—then the one you eventually show as a scene will have real impact.

And then, some plot developments are simply not important enough to justify scenes. If an event involves only minor characters, you might do better to summarize it rather than develop the characters to the point that you could write a convincing scene about them. Or if you have a minor event that leads up to a key scene, you might want to narrate the first event so that the scene, when it comes, will seem even more immediate in contrast.

We once worked on a short story in which the police were tracking a rather enigmatic suspect. In the course of the story, three events happened in quick succession: the police realized just what

the suspect was up to, they captured him, and he escaped during interrogation in a surprising way. Since the emphasis of the story was on what the suspect was up to rather than on his actual capture, we suggested that the capture be written as narrative summary. By not developing the capture into a full-blown scene, the writer was able to go almost directly from the first revelation to a second, more important revelation that comes during interrogation. The story moved at a faster pace, and the two important scenes were thrown into sharp relief because a key event between them was given as narrative summary.

So narration has a place in good fiction. Just make sure you don't use it when you should be showing rather than telling.

Up until this point, we've been talking about showing and telling on the large scale, about narrating what should be shown through immediate scenes. But even within scenes there

are ways in which you may tell what you should show. The *Gatsby* scene quoted above (Fitzgerald's version) shows us how people react to Gatsby, and shows us effectively. But the writer also *tells* us that the three Mr. Mumbles leaned forward "eagerly," that one girl spoke with enthusiasm, that a man nodded "in affirmation." Granted, stylistic conventions have changed since 1925, but even so, the telling detracts because it's not needed: we've already been shown what the writer then proceeds to tell us.

Writers usually indulge in this sort of small-scale telling to put across character traits or emotions. After all, the primary aim of fiction is to get your readers so involved in the lives of your characters that they feel what your characters feel. And they can't do that unless you make your characters' feelings clear. So you tell them. "Bishop Pettibone was never a man to allow his religion to interfere with his private life." "Wilbur felt absolutely defeated." "Geraldine was horrified at the news."

But telling your readers about your characters' emotions is not the best way to get your readers involved. Far better to show why your characters feel the way they do. Instead of saying "Amanda took one look at the hotel room and recoiled in disgust," describe the room in such a way that the readers feel that disgust for themselves. You don't want to give your readers information. You want to give them experiences.

It's more work that way, of course. It's easier simply to say "Erma was depressed" than to come up with some original bit of action or interior monologue that shows she's depressed. But if you have her take one bite of her favorite cake and push the rest away—or polish off the whole cake—you will have given your readers a far better feel for her depression than you could by simply describing it. People are depressed—or angry or relieved—in their own unique ways, so simply conveying the fact of the emotion to your readers doesn't really tell them who your character is. It's nearly always best to resist the urge to explain. Or, as we so often write it in

manuscript margins, *R.U.E.*

This tendency to describe a character's emotion may reflect a lack of confidence on the part of the writer. And more often than not, writers tell their readers things already shown by dialogue and action. It's as if they're repeating themselves to make sure their readers get the point. So when you come across an explanation of a character's emotion, simply cut the explanation. If the emotion is still shown, then the explanation wasn't needed. If the emotion isn't shown, rewrite the passage so that it is.

To show you what we mean, take one last look at the Fitzgerald scene, this time with the explanations taken out. (We've also made a few other editorial changes using the principles you'll be learning later in the book.) You can see from the results just how good a job Fitzgerald did in showing all the emotions he tagged for us unnecessarily:

"I like to come," Lucille said. "I never care what I do, so I always have a good time. When

I was here last, I tore my gown on a chair, and he asked me my name and address—within a week I got a package from Croirier’s with a new evening gown in it.”

“Did you keep it?” Jordan asked.

“Sure I did. I was going to wear it tonight, but it was too big in the bust and had to be altered. It was gas blue with lavender beads. Two hundred and sixty-five dollars.”

“There’s something funny about a fellow that’ll do a thing like that,” said the other girl. “He doesn’t want any trouble with *anybody*.”

“Who doesn’t?” I said.

“Gatsby. Somebody told me—”

The two girls and Jordan leaned their heads together.

“Somebody told me that they thought he killed a man.”

A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward in their seats.

“I don’t think it’s so much *that*,” Lucille said. “It’s more that he was a German spy during the war.”

One of the men nodded. “I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany.”

“Oh, no,” said the first girl, “it couldn’t be that, because he was in the American army during the war. You look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody’s looking at him. I’ll bet he killed a man.”

Even within descriptions that have nothing to do with character emotion, there are ways you can show rather than tell. Rather than telling your readers that your hero’s car is an old broken-down wreck, you can show him twisting two bare wires together to turn on the headlights or driving through a puddle and being sprayed from the holes in the floor. That way your readers can draw their own conclusions about the car’s condition.

And just to show that editors aren’t the only ones who notice showing and telling imbalances, here’s a quote from Frederick Busch’s *Los Angeles Times* review of Peter Ackroyd’s

*Dickens: Life and Times:*

The need to announce, along with a need to reinforce with comment what has just been clearly shown, results in tones more appropriate to Dickens' funnier re-creations of his father's pomposities: "So far had the young author already come..." "So did the real world enter Dickens' fiction..." "So did his life, interior and exterior, continue...." Where was Ackroyd's editor?

Bear in mind that "show, don't tell," is not a hard-and-fast rule. (In fact, none of the self-editing principles in this book should be treated as rules.) There are going to be times when telling will create more engagement than showing. In the Fitzgerald passage, for instance, the line "A thrill passed over all of us" is clearly telling. And yet this line, coming so close on the rumor that Gatsby may have killed a man, gives a flavor of cheap gossip to the scene that heightens its effect.

But in good fiction this sort of telling is the exception, and a rare exception at that. Because when you show your story rather than tell it, you treat your readers with respect. And that respect makes it easier for you to draw them into the world you've created.

***Checklist***

How often do you use narrative summary? Are there long passages where nothing happens in real time? Do the main events in your plot take place in summary or in scenes?

If you do have too much narrative summary, which sections do you want to convert into scenes? Does any of it involve major characters, where a scene could be used to flesh out their personalities? Does any of your narrative summary involve major plot twists or surprises? If so, start writing some scenes.

Do you have *any* narrative summary, or are you bouncing from scene to scene without pausing for breath?

Are you describing your characters' feelings? Have you *told* us they're angry? irritated? morose? discouraged? puzzled? excited? happy? elated? suicidal? Keep an eye out for any places where you mention an emotion outside of dialogue. Chances are you're telling what you should show. Remember to R.U.E.

### ***Exercises***

*Spot the telling in the following and convert it to showing. The answers (at least, our answers) appear at the back of the book.*

**A.** “Mortimer? Mortimer?” Simon Hedges said. “Where are you?”

“Look up, you ninny. I’m on the roof.”

“What in blazes are you doing perched up there?”

Mortimer Twill explained to Simon how his long-awaited cupola and weather vane had finally arrived. He just couldn’t wait for Simon to install the gadgets, so Mortimer had decided to climb up to the roof and complete the installation himself. He was still sorting through the directions.

“Come on down before you kill yourself,” Simon said. “I swear I’ll put them up for you this afternoon.”

**B.** I’d known Uncle Zeb for years, of course, but I didn’t feel like I really knew him until that first time I walked into his shop. All that time I’d thought he was just kind of handy, but looking at his tools—hundreds of them—and what they were and

the way they were organized, well, I could see he was a craftsman.

*If you're in an ambitious mood, take the following bit of narrative summary and convert it into a scene. Hint: feel free to create any characters or elaborate on the settings.*

**C.** Once you got off Route 9W, though, you were in another world, a world where two streets never met at a right angle, where streets, in fact, didn't exist. Instead you had "courts," "terraces," "ways," a "landing" or two. And lining these street-like things were row on row of little houses that could be distinguished, it seemed, only by the lawn ornaments. Travelers who disappeared into the developments had been known to call taxis just to lead them out again.

## **Chapter 2**

### **CHARACTERIZATION AND EXPOSITION**

Eloise had always assumed she would grow up to live like her mother—a quiet, sensible life full of furniture wax, good nutritious breakfasts, and compulsive bed making. But her first college roommate, Randi, introduced her to a whole new world, a world where you didn't have to tidy up before you invited friends in, where you didn't have to squeeze the toothpaste carefully from the bottom, and where you didn't have to pick up an iron for the rest of your natural life. Eloise felt like she

had been granted a reprieve after eighteen years in the June Cleaver Institute for Neurotic Young Girls.

Now, after spending ten minutes rooting through a pile of clothes to find a blouse that wasn't too dirty, then crunching across the living room carpet to spend another five hunting up a clean cereal bowl, she began to think that maybe there was something to be said for her mother's lifestyle.

After reading these paragraphs, you know something—possibly something important—about Eloise, her personality and background. But do you care? Most readers will probably be unable to work up more than the mildest interest in this character the writer is working so hard to put over.

You're likely to have spotted the culprit—there's a lot of narrative summary in that first paragraph—and may already have thought of a way to convert this material into a scene (you could have Eloise's mother make a surprise visit,

for instance). And, yes, one of the problems with this passage is that it tells us what it could be showing. In fact, the show-and-tell principle underlies many of the self-editing points we talk about from now on. But there's a second problem here: the writer introduces Eloise to his readers all at once and in depth—stopping the story cold for an overview of her character.

A lot of writers seem to feel they have to give their readers a clear understanding of a new character before they can get on with their story. They never bring a character onstage without a brief personality summary. Or else they introduce their characters with flashbacks to the childhood scenes that made them who they are—in effect, psychoanalyzing the characters for their readers.

It's often a good idea to introduce a new character with enough physical description for your readers to picture him or her. As with describing your settings, all you need are a few concrete, idiomatic details to jump-start your readers' imaginations (“A good-looking man in

his fifties,” for instance, is too vague to be interesting). But when it comes to your characters’ personalities, it’s much more engaging to have these emerge from character action, reaction, interior monologue, and dialogue than from description.

For instance, watching Eloise fish for clean clothes and crunch across her carpet is enough to tell us she’s a slob. We don’t need to know at this point how she became one. Later in the story, we could learn about her upbringing when her mother comes to visit. In other words, we could get to know Eloise slowly, with all the attendant pleasure of gradual discovery, the way we would get to know her in real life.

Another reason to avoid thumbnail character sketches is that the personality traits you tell us about when you introduce a character will (we would hope) eventually be shown by the way the character behaves in the story. After all, if you describe a character as an elegant society matron and then show her flicking food at her husband in a restaurant or picking her nose in church,

your readers won’t believe your description. If your characters actually act the way your summaries say they will, the summaries aren’t needed. If they don’t, the summaries are misleading. Either way, your fiction is likely to be much more effective without the character summary.

Also, when you sum up your characters, you risk defining them to the point that they’re boxed in by the characterization with no room to grow. Someone once asked Leonard Nimoy how he came to develop the complex relationship between Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock that was one of the chief strengths of the old *Star Trek* series. How had he gone about working out such a deep and authentic friendship beforehand? Nimoy simply said that he hadn’t—and in fact couldn’t have—worked it out in advance. Had he consciously mapped out Spock’s relationship with Kirk, that relationship would never have been any deeper than the plan he had worked out. Instead he played the character intuitively, and there was no limit to the depth the

relationship could attain.

When you define your characters the minute you introduce them, you may be setting boundary lines that your readers will use to interpret your characters' actions through the rest of the book. But if you allow your readers to get to know your characters gradually, each reader will interpret them in his or her own way, thus getting a deeper sense of who your characters are than you could ever convey in a summary. Allowing your readers this sort of leeway in understanding your characters enables you to reach a wider audience—and reach it far more effectively—than would defining your characters before we get to know them or analyzing them afterward.

Finally, sketching out your characters for your readers is just plain obtrusive. It's a form of telling that is almost certain to make your readers aware that you the writer are hard at work.

Some writers take a more subtle approach than simply describing a new character's

personality—they describe each new character's history. In the course of the story, they may even trace their characters' ancestry back two or three generations. It's perfectly understandable that a writer should undertake this sort of historical characterization. Delving into a character's past can be a good way for you to understand the character in the present. But though it may have been helpful for you to write a character's history, it may not be necessary for your readers to read it. Once you understand a character well enough to bring him or her to life, we don't have to know where the character came from.

Also, since the easiest way to bring out a character's history is through flashback, and since you bring your present story to a halt whenever you start a flashback, it doesn't take many flashbacks to make your present-time story jerky or hard to follow. So if you find your story too heavily burdened with the past, consider letting some of the past go. The characterization you draw from the flashback may not be needed, or you may be able to find a way to bring it out

in the present.

We recently worked on a book about a superficially happy man in his early forties who begins to explore his past after his second marriage fails. He starts out in an attempt to win his ex-wife back and in the end discovers that several people around him, including his closest friends, are not who he thought they were. The story of the hero's past, which included a bizarrely abusive mother, is critical to the plot, and the writer brought it out in a series of very well written flashbacks.

The problem was that the writer gave us flashbacks of the ex-wife's past, of the hero's father's childhood, and of the life of some of the hero's childhood friends. In the middle of the book, the writer included six chapters in a row made up entirely of flashbacks with a paragraph or two at the beginning and end to give the flashback a frame—the hero's present life simply disappeared for more than a hundred pages. We suggested that the writer cut all but the most essential flashbacks and let us get to know his

characters in the present rather than in the past.

So how do you go about establishing a character gradually and unobtrusively? The art of establishing a character is a large enough topic to make a book in itself, but there are some techniques that fall within the area of fiction mechanics. You can have one character characterized by another instead of by the writer. Rather than writing, "Cuthbert was not the sort of person whom others were drawn to immediately," you can have one of your characters say, "Like most people, I disliked Cuthbert on first sight."

Also, you can develop your character through dialogue and "beats" (descriptions of physical action. We'll cover both of these topics in considerable detail later. For now, if you want to learn who someone really is, watch what they say and do. And if you want your readers to get a feel for who your characters really are, show them to us through dialogue and action.

Another unobtrusive way to develop a character is to write not about the character directly but about other matters from that character's viewpoint. This amounts to your giving us your character's views of the world rather than your views of your character. We'll get into this in more depth in the following chapter, but for now consider the opening paragraph of Graham Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*:

It happened this way: Father Quixote had ordered his solitary lunch from his housekeeper and set off to buy wine at a local cooperative eight kilometers away from El Toboso on the main road to Valencia. It was a day when the heat stood and quivered on the dry fields, and there was no air conditioning in the little Seat 600 he had bought, already second hand, eight years before. As he drove he thought sadly of the day when he would have to find a new car. A dog's years can be multiplied by seven to equal a man's, and by

that calculation his car would still be in early middle age, but he noticed how already his parishioners began to regard his Seat as almost senile. "You can't trust it, Don Quixote," they would warn him, and he could only reply, "It has been with me through many bad days, and I pray God that it may survive me." So many of his prayers had remained unanswered that he had hopes this one prayer of his had lodged all the time like wax in the Eternal ear.

This characterization is not particularly gradual. We have known Father Quixote for all of one paragraph, but by its end we know quite a lot about him, his circumstances, his turn of mind, his sense of humor. But notice that Greene says absolutely nothing about Quixote himself. He talks about the priest's car, his parishioners, his prayer life, not about his character. Yet because we get all of this information from Quixote's point of view, the priest is there before us.

And we get to recognize him for ourselves, making our own judgments about his personality. When you present your readers with already-arrived-at conclusions about your characters, you leave your readers with nothing to do, and passive readers are at best unengaged and at worst bored. You need to let your readers take an active role in the writer-reader partnership to draw them into your story.

Everything we've said about characterization applies to exposition as well. Background, backstory (what happened before the story begins), the information your readers need in order to follow and appreciate your plot—all these should be brought out as unobtrusively as possible. When you give your readers all of your exposition all at once, you're likely to be feeding them more information than they can absorb. And unless you're John le Carré, you can't get by with forcing readers to flip pages back and forth in order to follow your story. Not to mention the

risk you run of lecturing your readers. A good rule of thumb is to give your readers only as much background information, or history, or characterization, as they need at any given time.

The theory and practice of circumventing burglar alarms was a major part of the plot in a client's police procedural. In the first draft, the writer included nearly an entire chapter on how the various types of burglar alarms work and how they can be defeated—which, of course, effectively stopped his story short while he delivered a lecture. In his second draft he worked the same information in at various places throughout the book, giving readers just as much burglar-alarm theory as they needed to know at any given point.

The most obtrusive type of exposition is, of course, a long discourse in the narrative voice, like the how-to on burglar alarms. As you'll remember from the first chapter, these blocks of what is essentially nonfiction can usually be converted into immediate scenes. But just because exposition takes place in a scene doesn't

necessarily mean it's unobtrusive. A few decades ago most stage plays opened with what they called "a feather duster." The maid (carrying a feather duster) would walk on the stage and answer a conveniently placed telephone:

Hello?...No, Master Reginald isn't here. He and Mistress Elmira went to the airport to pick up his brother Zack, who disappeared twenty years ago with half the family fortune and has now been found living in the Andes.... What? No, young Master Roderick isn't here either. He and his young lady, Faith Hubberthwait-Jones, have gone off to see his solicitor about the possibility of opening the trust left to him by Great-Uncle Fornsby.... Yes, she is Lord Hubberthwait-Jones's daughter—a fine old family, but not a penny to their name.... No, I'm afraid Blump, the groundskeeper, isn't here either. He's running the prize hound, Artaxerxes, in the Chipping Sodbury Meet in hopes of winning enough to cover his gambling debts.... Yes, thank you, I'll

tell them you called.

Technically this sort of thing is dialogue, but it doesn't sound like anything anyone on this planet, in this century, would actually say. It is possible to get exposition across unobtrusively through dialogue, but when your characters start talking solely for the sake of informing your readers, the exposition gets in the way of believable characterization. So be on the lookout for places where your dialogue is actually exposition in disguise.

The same holds true for interior monologue. We once worked on a historical mystery set in a sixteenth-century convent. At one point, the main character simply sat in her room and pondered such everyday details of convent life as why the sisters were given the rooms they occupied. Technically it was interior monologue, but it was also out of character—people simply don't sit around and think about everyday details of their lives. In the writer's next draft a new sister arrived at the convent and complained that

her room was too small, and the information came out naturally in a scene.

Or consider this scene, taken from a novel we edited a few years ago. The point of view is that of a church organist, sitting at her console and watching mourners file in for a funeral service:

She might've known Fitzhugh Jordan would be there. Some nerve, after all he did to keep that girl from coming home for Christmas. And just look at him, slipping into that pew beside his daddy, sweet as Gabriel blowing his horn. She was surprised Peter Griffith would let him in the church; then again, she wasn't, considering.

Peter and Melinda Griffith were the last ones. And not a minute too soon. Mary Lou was about to run out of music and have to repeat herself.

Peter walked right close to Melinda, though there could've been a wall of glass between them for all the contact they made. But Mary Lou had to admit they made a handsome

couple—Peter tall and dark like an Italian movie star, Melinda blond and sweet-looking, though looks do lie.

Melinda looked *wounded*, that was the only word for it. Hands fluttering, eyes glancing off people's faces like moths off a window.

The two of them followed Fitzhugh into the family pew, which meant Mary Lou could finally wind down.

She thought she'd close with "Abide with Me."

Once again, the writer uses interior monologue to bring out the recent history of the Jordan family in these paragraphs—Fitzhugh's opposition to "that girl" (whose identity is clear in the context), Peter and Melinda's lost love, Melinda's pain. And it all comes to the reader so unobtrusively. Mary Lou is such a credible character, and this material is so much *in character*, that none of this exposition feels like exposition. We take in the information not just painlessly but with real pleasure.

Again, just to prove that other people besides editors notice cumbersome exposition, here is a quote from Robert Stuart Nathan's review of Victor O'Reilly's *Games of the Hangman*:

The novel's other sins include vast passages of irrelevant exposition; people ignorant of common facts, such as the police official who says the dead boy was "from a place called Bern," only to have Hugo obligingly respond, "It's the Swiss capital," and characters awkwardly informing each other of things they already know, solely for the reader's benefit, as when one character asks, "Do you know the story of the original Alibe?" and Hugo replies, "Remind me."

Perhaps the toughest exposition challenge is introducing your readers to a new culture. This could be something as simple as conveying everyday life in rural Tennessee to readers who

may live in Palm Beach (or vice versa). Or you may have to re-create the sense of life in Restoration London or twelfth-century Paris or second-century Rome. In a science fiction or fantasy novel, it might involve conveying an ancient culture based on an alien biology living on a world with a unique geology. And your readers need to be in that culture from the start of your story. How do you transport your readers to strange new worlds without loading down your opening with a lot of exposition?

Bear in mind that this kind of background is really characterization, only what's being characterized is a culture rather than a person. And as was the case with characterization, readers can best learn about your locations and backgrounds not through lengthy exposition but by seeing them in real life.

Consider, for instance, the opening scene from Diana Wynne Jones's *Dogsbody*:

The Dog Star stood beneath the Judgment Seats and raged. The green light of his fury

fired the assembled faces viridian. It lit the underside of the rooftrees and turned their moist blue fruit to emerald.

“None of this is *true!*” he shouted. “Why can’t you believe *me*, instead of listening to *him?*” He blazed on the chief witness, a blue luminary from the Castor complex, firing him turquoise. The witness backed hastily out of range.

“Sirius,” the First Judge rumbled quietly, “we’ve already found you guilty. Unless you’ve anything reasonable to say, be quiet and let the Court pass sentence.”

“No I will *not* be quiet!” Sirius shouted up at the huge ruddy figure. He was not afraid of Antares. He had often sat beside him as Judge on those same Judgment Seats—that was one of the many miserable things about this trial. “You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said, all through. I did *not* kill that luminary—I only hit him. I was *not* negligent, and I’ve offered to look for the Zoi. The most you can accuse me of is losing my temper—”

“Once too often, in the opinion of this Court,” remarked big crimson Betelgeuse, the Second Judge, in his dry way.

“And I’ve admitted I lost my temper,” said Sirius.

“No one would have believed you if you hadn’t,” said Betelgeuse.

A long flicker of amusement ran around the assembled luminaries. Sirius glared at them. The hall of blue trees was packed with people from every sphere and all orders of effulgence. It was not often one of the high effulgents was on trial for his life—and there never had been one so notorious for losing his temper.

It takes a lot of self-confidence to drop readers into the middle of the trial of a star god by a council of his peers and leave so much unexplained—readers never see the hall of blue trees again, for instance, and we don’t learn what a Zoi is until near the end of the novel. And yet, this approach works, in part because the emotions are so powerful that readers are drawn

into the story despite the unanswered questions. Indeed, finding the answers is one of the things that keeps readers reading. Also, by never explaining her situations, by trusting her readers to keep up with her, Jones pays her readers the compliment of assuming them to be intelligent.

And that's a compliment any writer would do well to pass along.

### ***Checklist***

Look back over a scene or chapter that introduces one or more characters. How much time, if any, have you spent describing the new characters' character? Are you telling us about characteristics that will later show up in dialogue and action?

How about character histories? How many of your characters' childhoods have you developed in detail? Can some of these life stories be cut?

What information (technical details,

characters' past histories, backgrounds on locations or families) do your readers need in order to understand your story? At what point in the story do they need to know it?

How are you getting this information across to your readers? Have you given it to them all at once through a short writer-to-reader lecture (see exercise B)?

If the exposition comes out through dialogue, is it through dialogue your characters would actually speak even if your readers didn't have to know the information? In other words, does the dialogue exist only to put the information across?

### ***Exercises***

**A.** *How would you develop the following character through a series of scenes? Keep in mind that the scenes don't have to be consecutive and that some of the material*

*need not be included at all.*

Maggie had reached the cusp of her childhood, that gray area between girl and woman when she could be either, neither, or both almost at will. There had not been (and probably would not be) a lonelier time in her life. She could no longer associate with children, whose interests now bored her. But she wasn't comfortable with adults, for she still carried the energy of a child and couldn't slow herself down to the adults' pace.

And so she found herself trapped between the banal and the dull, trying to shape her life with only the help of her contemporaries, who were as adrift as she was. Given all this, was it any wonder she sometimes seemed, well, exasperated (and exasperating) to her parents?

**B.** *Now try the same thing with a*

*passage of exposition.*

The county had changed over the years. It had all started with the George Washington Bridge, which finally put the west side of the Hudson within commuting distance of New York City without the bother of trains and ferries. Then had come the Tappan Zee Bridge, a second artery running right through the heart of the county. It was only a matter of time before the family farms were turned into developments and the little two-lane roads became four-lane highways.

Fred could remember when Nanuet had only one traffic light. Now it had a string of twelve of them on Route 59 alone, mostly in front of the mall. (The Mall!) And Route 59 itself was well on its way to becoming a continuous string of malls and shopping centers, all the way from Nyack to Suffern and beyond. It had reached the point where shoppers outnumbered residents three to one on a busy day.