



Those Who Forget History

Using Backstory to Enhance Your Novel

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Lesson Two – Flashbacks and How to Use Them

Merriam-Webster defines a flash back as “a past incident recurring vividly in the mind,” and “an interruption of chronological sequence (as in a film or literary work) by interjection of events of earlier occurrence.”

I define flashbacks as a great opportunity to reveal backstory while at the same time advancing your plot.

There are four main types of flashback: Dialogue, Third-person narrative, Immersion, and Dreams. Each one can be used to spotlight an aspect of your fictional’s backstory.

Dialogue can be used when a fictional is telling a story. It’s a flashback, but told in the present. For instance, an old woman telling her grandchildren about her journey to America from Ireland during the famine. “The seas were fierce, with wind that filled the sails with its wrath. We were crammed into a tiny hold, one family to a narrow bunk that wouldn’t hold a grown man, and the single men and women forced to share. There was little food or sanitation or fresh air. And then the fever came.” That’s backstory, but told in this way, it’s not an information dump.

Third-person Narrative can be used for a flashback, but be warned: *use this tool sparingly*. It’s basically telling, and that’s something you want to avoid. It slows the pacing and takes the reader out of the action. “The woman thought back to her time on the coffin ship, with the wind howling and the dark hold where desperate refugees had been crammed to bursting.”

Immersion. This is just what it sounds like. You’re immersing your fictional (and hopefully your readers) into the flashback. This type of flashback should be written in “real time.” Include as many details as you deem appropriate: setting, dialogue, sights and smells and sounds. Just like in your present story, you want your flashback to engage the reader and make them feel like they’re there.

Dreams. A fictional who has recurring dreams usually has something traumatic in their background, and a dream flashback can be used to reveal different aspects of that trauma. If you

use this type of flashback, you can feed your readers more pieces of backstory each time it recurs.

Using Flashbacks Effectively

Flashbacks can enrich a story with depth and emotional resonance, but they must be used properly.

Triggers

When writing a flashback, you must have two real-time triggers. The first sends your fictional into the past. The second brings him back to the present.

Think of these triggers as parentheses to your flashbacks.

If your fictional is walking in a spring garden, she might smell lilacs and remember bringing the flowers to her mother on Mother's Day. A song that comes over the radio might remind her of her first kiss at a school dance.

Once the flashback is over, you need something to bring your fictional back to the present. A slamming door, an abrupt end to the music, a voice calling to her.

The one thing to remember about these triggers is that they can't be random. You can make them *seem* random, but always make sure they are relevant to your story.

Keep Flashbacks Brief

A flashback should be used to make one key point, so keep it as brief as possible. You don't want to explain your fictional's entire backstory in one flashback, and a long flashback can take your readers out of the story.

Use Flashbacks to Advance Your Story

When you first get to know someone, you don't expect to immediately hear every detail of their lives. The same goes for a flashback. If a bad breakup is part of the storyline, then by all means, incorporate such a flashback. On the other hand, don't go into a flashback about a party your heroine attended if it has nothing to do with the story.

Use A Light Touch

Don't use too many flashbacks in your story. You're writing the present story. If you use too many flashbacks, your readers will wonder where the story really started. Don't make flashbacks a story-within-a-story.

Assignment: Write a flashback scene with both a trigger going in and coming out.