



Flashbacks: Telling A Non-Sequential Story

By
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As the title states, our subject this month is the theory and practice of non-sequential narration and the related art of handling flashbacks. We will also delve into the time travel genre of science fiction for just a bit to make a point.

The Ways to Tell a Story

As any writer will tell you, there is more than one way to tell a story. In fact, there are three. They all involve the order in which you impart information to the reader, and once having imparted it, whether you are allowed to take the information back.

Sequential Storytelling

The first approach to telling a story is in chronological order, which is the most straightforward and the easiest for readers to understand. You start your story at the beginning, proceed in an orderly fashion to the middle, and then on to the end without pause. People find it easy to follow chronological, or sequential, storytelling because that is the way we live our lives. We get up in the morning, go to work, have lunch, come home at night, eat dinner, put our feet up and watch a little television, then go to bed and sleep. The next day, we do the same thing all over again.

Sequential storytelling mirrors real life, which has a certain rhythm to it. In the real world, cause always precedes effect; the seconds march by in strict order, and that which comes first never comes later. In other words, a sequential story is one in which the farther into a book an incident takes place, the later the time of its occurrence.

In fact, sequential storytelling is all about time, which is its organizing principle. A movie I greatly enjoy relates the principle better than I can. The movie is *Disaster in Time* (1992), also released as *Timescape*. It stars Jeff Daniels and Ariana Richards as a widowed innkeeper named Wilson and his daughter in a small, mid-western town. Wilson is remodeling an inn when an odd group of travelers shows up on his doorstep and requests lodging. As the story progresses, Wilson learns that his guests are disaster-groupie time travelers who are there to observe the impact of a large meteor that is about to destroy most of the town.

Wilson figures this out too late to save his loved ones, but steals one of the time travelers' devices and goes back one day in time to a moment just before the meteor strike. He then works to warn everyone of the impending disaster. Toward the end of the movie, the boss time traveler shows up to straighten out the mess. It is the boss time

traveler who utters the most memorable line of the movie when he says, “There is a reason for time, Mr. Wilson. It keeps everything from happening all at once.”

This is a profound statement for a writer to keep in mind when working on a plot. That is because we all have a tendency to try to tell the reader everything all at once. Since writing a scene takes so much longer than reading it, we often become fearful that readers will not be able to follow us. To prevent this, we hurriedly spill our guts out all over the page, frequently making a mish-mash of our plot. In actuality, readers have no problem remembering the details of a story through several hundred, or even several thousand intervening words, so take your time and get it right.

A plot must have some order if it is to be understood. In the case of sequential plotting, we just put one foot in front of the other to allow the reader to follow along as though they were actually living the experience.

Picaresque Storytelling

The second way to tell a story is the picaresque form. Picaresque novels were originally developed in Spain and the word comes from picaresco, meaning “of, or relating to, rogues or rascals.” Originally, a picaresque novel was an episodic adventure with a roguish protagonist, but now the term refers to any story that is episodic in nature.

Picaresque is not used much in novels anymore. Its primary home is in series television. In most fiction, the characters are changed by what happens to them in the course of the story. In fact, showing the growth of the characters is one of the most important things a writer does in the course of a book.

In series television, the characters do not change from week to week. Whatever happened to them the previous week is forgotten by the next episode. Any bones that were broken have healed, the emotional scars from lost loves are washed away, damage to the hero’s car has been mysteriously repaired. The reason for this is simple. The producers want the freedom to play the episodes in any order during reruns. This is difficult if the hero retains the scars of the previous week’s action into the next week. If that were allowed, then playing the episodes out of order would be like watching a movie where the reels have been mixed up. To prevent confusion among viewers, television writers usually keep their stories self-contained so they can be shown in any order.

That is, by definition, picaresque storytelling.

Non-Sequential Storytelling

The third way to tell a story is to relate the incidents in the order in which the information will most enlighten the readers, which is not always in chronological order. This is called non-sequential storytelling, and can be extremely effective if done well. Unfortunately, because all of our life experience is sequential, it is more difficult to tell a story non-sequentially. It is more difficult because readers have an innate chronological sense and they become easily lost in a plot where you play games with the flow of time.

Why would one want to tell a story other than chronologically? One reason is that life involves more than a single person. Do you remember what you were doing at noon yesterday? Me, too. How would we write a story encompassing both of our activities? The answer, of course, is that we would write your adventure, and then follow it with my

adventure, or vice versa. However, short of writing two independent stories and publishing them in parallel columns side-by-side, there is no way we can relate the simultaneously occurring events of yesterday simultaneously. One recounting has to take precedence over the other, and therefore, some disruption of chronological order is required.

In fact, you often see this technique used in battle scenes. We focus on a single soldier for a scene or an entire chapter. Then in the next scene or chapter, we switch to his opponent on the other side of the battlefield. Because these two men are fighting one another, showing both sides of the battle requires us to back up in time and relive the same events, but from a different perspective.

Even if we went to the trouble of printing the two points-of-view in parallel columns to simulate the fact that they happened simultaneously, no reader is going to read them that way. That is because the human brain can only concentrate on one thing at a time. Even if presented with stories printed in parallel, the reader must choose which column to read first.

In non-sequential storytelling, you present the facts in the order that will benefit the reader most. “All very good,” you say, “but can you give me an example of a non-sequential story?” Easily, especially if you have seen one of the many film adaptations of *Beau Geste*. The best of these was the 1939 movie that starred Gary Cooper, Ray Milland, Robert Preston, and Brian Donlevy.

In *Beau Geste*, the film begins when a column of the French Foreign Legion marches to Fort Zinderneuf in the middle of the Sahara Desert. The fort is under attack by Bedouin tribesmen and the column has been sent to relieve the garrison. When they arrive, they find the ramparts of the fort lined with dead men who have been propped up to look as if they are still at their posts. The commander sends bugler Digby Geste (Robert Preston) into the fort. Digby disappears. The major enters and finds the body of Legionnaire Michael "Beau" Geste (Gary Cooper) and nearby, the body of commanding Legionnaire Sgt. Markoff (Brian Donlevy). Markoff has a legion bayonet in his chest. After the entire column enters the fort, the bodies of the sergeant and legionnaire mysteriously disappear. When the relief column withdraws and shots are fired outside the fort, the column pursues what they think is an Arab attack, but as they look back, the fort mysteriously goes up in flames.

Having seen the end of the movie, we segue back to the beginning, to the lives of the three Geste brothers in England when they were children. A decade later, a valuable jewel is stolen, the brothers are implicated, and run off to join the French Foreign Legion. There they come under the command of Sgt. Markoff, a tyrant. One by one, we are introduced to the various members of Fort Zinderneuf's garrison, all the time aware that they are doomed. This foreknowledge adds zest to the story, and we are especially concerned about the fate of Beau Geste and his brothers.

By letting us see the ending of the movie first, the director sets up a story that is far more compelling than it would have been had he merely told it in chronological order.



We would not have identified so completely with the characters had we not seen them dead in the initial scenes.

Flashbacks

Most of *Beau Geste* is told in what is known as “flashback.” That is, the story moves along, and then suddenly, it segues to some point in the past. (“Segue” comes from music and it means to slide unobtrusively into something completely different.) By definition, a flashback is a scene that jumps to some moment before the start of the story. Flashbacks are used when it is necessary to deliver the readers information that cannot plausibly be imparted any other way, or as in *Beau Geste*, to establish a particular mood. Thus, a mountain climber freezing on an icy ledge may suddenly begin to think about the warm June day when he first met his sweetheart. A soldier on the battlefield, cowering in his foxhole, may suddenly be whisked to the birthday party he attended when he was ten years old.

Flashbacks are confusing because they represent discontinuities in the orderly progression of the story. People are not used to the plot jumping around and, unless done with considerable skill, a flashback just tends to confuse the hell out of them.

Luckily, there is a group of writers who deal with this problem routinely. I refer to the underpaid brotherhood of scribes who write science fiction stories (and yes, there are sisters in the brotherhood).

There is no evidence that science fiction writers handle flashbacks any better than anyone else. However, we have developed a mental model that makes it easier to keep track of the passage of time in non-sequential story lines. That model grows out of one of the staples of science fiction writing: the time travel story.

All good time travel stories have at their core the paradoxes that traveling in time makes possible. One of the reasons I enjoy *Disaster in Time* is that it handles the paradoxes of time travel intelligently and in an entertaining fashion. Other movies have done considerably less well over the years.

One such is a movie based on John Varley’s award-winning short story, “Air Raid.” The original story involved a group of time travelers from a dying future race. To gain new breeding stock, these operatives from the future kidnapped people off airplanes that were about to crash. In this way, they could abduct their victims without causing a disruption of history (a paradox) which could well destroy their future reality. Since these people were about to die anyway, no one would miss them if they were kidnapped, and lifeless duplicate bodies put in their place. The story was only five thousand words or so in length, but sufficiently exciting that someone decided to make a major motion picture out of it. The picture was *Millennium* (1989), starring Kris Kristofferson,



Cheryl Ladd, and Daniel J. Travanti, and directed by Michael Anderson. Varley wrote the screenplay.

The movie started out well when an FAA crash investigator meets a mysterious woman who seems inexplicably attracted to him. They have dinner together, one thing leads to another, and... well, you know. Later, he is alone in the hangar with the wreckage from the aircraft when he discovers a futuristic weapon in the tangled sheet metal of the plane. The weapon discharges as he fiddles with it, stunning him. While he is barely conscious, a flash of light illuminates the hangar and three people come through a glowing portal. One is the woman he had dinner with, except she does not seem to know him and is shocked when he calls her by name.

What has happened is that the woman, Louise Baltimore (Cheryl Ladd) is a time traveler, and though Kristofferson is meeting her for the second time in the hangar, she is meeting him for the first time. That is because her first trip to the present arrived “later” than her second. Likewise, the investigator’s “first” meeting with her is her “second” meeting with him. If all of this seems confusing, you are not alone. The director got confused as well and sort of lost the story about halfway through the movie. Too bad. It had possibilities.

Millennium’s problems illustrate a major difficulty with time travel stories. The English language is not equipped with enough tenses to keep everything straight when it comes to time travel. We have a past tense, a present tense, a future tense, and a few tenses that are more complicated — I go – I went – I will go – I have gone – I will have gone – I should have gone – I am going. But there is no tense that can handle, “Dear God, please make it didn’t happen!” Yet, if time travel actually existed, that sentence would make perfect sense.

What all of this has to do with flashbacks is this. Science fiction writers have developed a simple technique for keeping track of the story’s progress when tomorrow can be yesterday, or next year, or a thousand years in the past. Writers in other genres may never have the need to write a time travel story, but that does not stop them from using the same mental model when writing non-sequentially.

In most stories, all time references are to “universal time.” We keep the readers apprised by making explicit references to it – references such as April 5, or spring, or simply “early morning.” Universal time is measured by the slow, unvarying march of something called entropy, and it proceeds at a steady rate of one second per second.

In science fiction, we navigate our time travel stories using the “personal time” of the character. Since a time traveler is, by definition, bouncing around in universal time, we mark our position in the story by referencing the time traveler’s memory of what has happened. Thus, if the traveler jumps a thousand years into the past, spends twenty years there, and then returns to the present an instant after he left, he does not come back the same man. He comes back 20 years older, even though an observer who stayed behind will swear that he was gone but an instant.

This way, there is no cheating Father Time. When a time traveler has experienced the proverbial three-score-and-ten years of consciousness, he succumbs to old age just like the rest of us. The fact that subtracting his date of birth from his date of death results in a negative number is not significant. What counts is elapsed time on his personal odometer.

So, to keep from getting lost when narrating a non-sequential story or flashback (they are often the same thing), all you need to do is imagine that your character is a time traveler. Plot your story using his or her elapsed point-of-view (POV) duration and ignore what is happening with respect to universal time.

Why Flashback Use is Discouraged

When Sinclair Lewis was once asked by a young writer how he should handle a flashback, Lewis's response was succinct. He said, "Don't."

Flashbacks are the bane of creative writing instructors. They hate them because the students write them so poorly. The problem with a flashback is that it disrupts the flow of the plot. It is a discontinuity in the orderly passage of time throughout a story. Unless written well, flashbacks can be extremely confusing.

Still, no matter how much their instructors advise them to avoid flashbacks, most writers cannot resist the challenge. Mostly they fail in their attempt because they do not understand the rules for writing flashbacks. The first and most important rule for writing flashbacks is to avoid contorting your tenses so far out of plumb that they literally shout to the reader, "Hey, dummy! You are reading a flashback."

Ideally, all fiction should seem to be happening now, at this very moment! That may seem an odd statement since the vast majority of fiction is written in the past tense. However, when a writer pens, "I stepped across the threshold, tiptoeing softly so as not to alert the intruder," the reader has an immediate mental image of the action. Therefore, although fiction is written in the past tense, the past in question is the immediate past, the moment just before "now."

The problem is that when you enter a flashback, you often slip into what I call the past past tense, or simply "past tense squared." This is the tense where every verb begins with "had." The sure sign that you have slipped into past tense squared is that you find yourself writing "had had," as in "Barney had had to see his wife, who was in the hospital that week." Indeed, when writing a scene in direct past tense, you should become suspicious each time you write the single word "had," as in "I had remembered," or "David had wanted to leave."

Slipping into past tense squared is an error because it highlights the fact that your flashback is an interruption to the story. The rule is simple: "Except for the sentence that brings you into the flashback and the one that takes you out, write the flashback precisely the way you are writing the rest of your story."

Do not use complex tenses. "I had remembered," must be changed to "I remembered." Replace "Barney had had to see his wife," with "Barney had to see his wife." If you find yourself writing, "David had wanted to leave," modify the sentence to "David wanted to leave." When writing a flashback, camouflage it as best you can by treating it the same way that you are treating the rest of the story.

There are several additional rules regarding flashbacks. These are:

1. No matter how short, the flashback is considered a separate scene and must be treated accordingly.

2. The flashback must provide an important point to your story. Otherwise, why bother?
3. The flashback needs to be an immediate scene, not a narration of what happened. Because of the danger of losing the reader's interest, you have to show them what happened directly.
4. Make the transition as unobtrusive as possible. This can be accomplished in two ways: You can either jump quickly into a flashback, or segue into it gently. The quick transition is more popular. It prevents the reader from sensing the flashback's onset, which may cause them to skip ahead a few pages to continue with the "real" story.
5. Flashbacks should begin with a "narrative hook," a sentence that grabs the reader's attention, whenever possible. An interesting initial sentence will go a long way toward keeping the reader interested although you have just forced them off the main story line.
6. Before embarking on your flashback, ask yourself the following question: "Is this really necessary?" If the answer is not a resounding "yes," then do not go there. Present the information directly whenever possible, and in flashback only when you have a compelling reason to do so.

That's all there is to it, *Mon Ami* (as they say in the French Foreign Legion). When you find that you have to disrupt your readers' chain of thought by jumping the story back twenty years into the past, then plan your transition carefully. Write something thrilling in the first sentence of your new scene, and continue in the same direct past tense that you have been using to tell the rest of the story. When you get through presenting your compelling background information, return to the main story as quickly as possible. If you find yourself planning more than two flashbacks in the same story, then think about asking yourself, "What the hell is wrong with me?"

The difference between non-sequential narration and flashbacks is that you can tell a story non-sequentially without going back beyond the beginning of the present story. By definition, if you do not jump back to before the beginning of the story, it is not a flashback. When engaged in non-sequential narration, such as in writing a double-sided battle scene, then plan your transitions carefully and use common time markers in both scenes. In other words, highlight the same "BANG!" in both scenes to remind the readers that the events are actually happening simultaneously.

Do all of these things, and you may actually write a successful flashback. Then again, if you are like most writers, you may not. So for one final time, do you really, REALLY need that flashback you have been planning? Can't you find some way to work the information into the plot directly? You can?

Good. Then why don't you do so?

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The End

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3. Antares Dawn - US\$5.00

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$5.00

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$5.00

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$5.00

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gibraltar Stars – First Time in Print — ^{US}\$7.50

The great debate is over. The human race has rejected the idea of pulling back from the stars and hiding on Earth in the hope the Broa will overlook us for a few more generations. Instead, the World Parliament, by a vote of 60-40, has decided to throw the dice and go for a win. Parliament Hall resounds with brave words as members declare victory inevitable.

With the balance of forces a million to one against *Homo sapiens Terra*, those who must turn patriotic speeches into hard-won reality have their work cut out for them. They must expand humanity's foothold in Broan space while contending with a supply line that is 7000 light-years long.

If the sheer magnitude of the task isn't enough, Mark and Lisa Rykand discover they are in a race against two very different antagonists. The Broa are beginning to wonder at the strange two-legged interlopers in their domain; while back on Earth, those who lost the great debate are eager to try again.

Whoever wins the race will determine the future of the human species... or, indeed, whether it has one.

12. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$5.00

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

Non-Fiction Books

13. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00

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17. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.