

Checklists for effective narrative writing

1. Opening/setting scene or introducing characters

Some possible options for opening a story 'to grab the reader'

- using dialogue, e.g. a warning given by one character to another
- asking the reader a question
- describing some strange behaviour of one of the characters
- using a dramatic exclamation (Help!) or dramatic event
- introducing something intriguing

Techniques for introducing characters

- using an interesting name
- limiting description on how the character feels, e.g. sad, lonely, angry or what they are, e.g. bossy, shy
- relying on portraying character through action and dialogue
- using powerful verbs to show how a character feels and behaves, e.g. muttered, ambled
- giving the thoughts and reactions of other characters
- revealing the characters' own thoughts and ideas

2. Build-up/creating setting

- making the characters do something
- using detail based on sense impressions – what can be seen, heard, smelt, touched or tasted
- basing settings on known places plus some invented detail
- using real or invented names to bring places alive – to help to make the setting more real and more believable
- creating atmosphere, e.g. what is hidden, what is dangerous, what looks unusual, what is out of place
- using the weather, time of day and season as well as place
- lulling the reader into a false sense of security that all is well

3. Dilemma

- introducing a problem
- using 'empty' words, e.g. 'someone' to create suspense
- using short sentences to be dramatic
- strengthening nouns and verbs rather than adding adjectives and adverbs
- employing suspense words such as 'suddenly', 'without warning'
- drawing the reader in by asking a question
- occasionally breaking the sentence rule by using a fragment to emphasise a point, e.g. 'Silence!'
- varying sentence openings by sometimes starting with an adverb, e.g. 'Carefully'; a prepositional phrase, e.g. 'At the end of the street'; a subordinate clause, e.g. 'Although she was tired, Vanya . . . ' or 'Swinging his stick in the air, he . . . '
- delaying the revealing of the 'monster' by shadows, sounds, etc.
- using ominous sounds, darkness or cold to build the tension

4. Reaction/events

- building on many of the techniques already used in the earlier part of the story
- varying sentences structures by using longer sentence to get a rhythm going to describe the increasing tension as events unfold
- using alliteration and short sentences to portray sounds within the action
- using metaphor and simile to help paint the scene and describe the feelings of the characters
- introducing further possible complications, using connecting words and phrases such as 'unfortunately . . . ' or 'what he hadn't noticed was . . . '

5. Resolution and ending

Techniques for resolving the dilemma

- allowing help to arrive in an unexpected form, such as 'It was at that moment that . . . '
- making the character(s) do something unexpected
- showing that the problem/dilemma was only in the characters' minds and not real
- allowing the character some extra effort to overcome the problem
- only resolving a part of the dilemma so the characters learn a lesson for the future

Some possible options for closing a story

- making a comment about the resolution
- using dialogue – a comment from one of the characters
- using a question
- making a mysterious remark
- telling the reader to remember or do something
- showing how a character has changed
- using one word or an exclamation
- avoiding clichés such as 'The end' or 'They all lived happily ever after' unless it is a fabrication of a traditional story
- reflecting on events and perhaps providing a moral
- allowing the main character to think aloud
- introducing an element of mystery, e.g. 'Vanya would never know how lucky she was that . . . '
- looking to the future
- revisiting where the story began