

from Grand Union (stories)

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## PARENTS' MORNING EPIPHANY

1. Welcome to the Narrative Techniques Worksheet!
2. Feel free to take this worksheet home and review it with your child.
3. Let's get going!

Narrative Writers Use Techniques Such As . . .

### *Dialog*

The illustration underneath, on the children's worksheet, is a blank speech bubble. Nothing in it—just empty space. And yet in this matter, the worksheet is surely correct: these days it's best to say nothing.

### *Revealing Actions*

Here we have three sets of stick figures, all with big bellies. They are racially ambivalent (although one stick figure in each set has curly hair). Nobody has genitals, but one figure in each pairing has long hair, so come to your own conclusions. In the first set, let's say that the male—the one with short curly hair—is pushing over the long-haired girl. Stick figures are not by their nature expressive but she looks traumatized. In the second

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illustration, she has given her attacker a balloon. It's not clear why. Maybe to apologize for being the victim? They're both smiling. In the third iteration, they're hugging. Much has been revealed, but much remains unspoken.

### *Multiple Points of View*

A girl looks through a magnifying glass. Next to her, a boy looks through a magnifying glass. Next to him, a cat looks through a magnifying glass. This apparently exhausts the question of perspective.

### *1st Person Narrator*

A boy looking mightily pleased with himself holds a pencil bigger than his own head. Out of his actual head come three separate speech bubbles: "I" and "ME" and "MY." Well, *exactly*.

### *Inner Thinking*

Very curious. It's the blank speech bubble again, but this time, instead of its own emptiness being described by a nice, smooth line, now the line is crinkled and fluffy, like a cloud. Is what we think somehow more crinkly and fluffy than what we dare to say out loud? Or more dreamlike? Or more empty? The worksheet, intended as it is for fourth graders, avoids these secondary questions.

### *Description*

A painting rests upon an easel. A paintbrush is suspended in air, near the easel, but not in anybody's hand. The picture itself is a realistic pastoral scene: a little house, with smoke coming from the chimney, a field, a tree, the moon. Is the worksheet

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implying that description can and should only concern itself with the visible? That the work of description is to reinscribe the real? That the real, as it is conceived by the artist, should be by definition picturesque or pastoral? What kind of a worksheet is this?

### *Use Transitions*

A clock shows the time. It is a featureless clock with only hands, no numbers, but the time looks to be about ten past four. (I do not believe there is a hidden meaning in this.) Around the clock are some helpful suggestions: *A little later. Later. After that. The following day. Next!*

### *Turn Over the Worksheet*

Okay.

## Narrative Writers Aim Toward Goals Such As . . .

### *Set Up the Problem*

A car is speeding toward a cliff edge. The cliff edge is icy, it is midwinter. There is also a random tree branch sticking out halfway down the side of the icy cliff. An exclamation mark is written into the sky itself. You have to hand it to the worksheet: that's a hell of a setup.

### *Introduce the Characters*

Small stick kid with what looks like Bantu knots and glasses. Tall stick woman with Lana Del Rey haircut. Tiny baby stick

figure, crying, with single curl springing from head. Old stick figure with grandmotherly hair tied in a bun, walking with a cane. Arrows point to all of them, as if to say, LOOK AT ALL THESE CHARACTERS. But perhaps there are other ways to do this, beyond the worksheet's ken.

### *Show the Character's Motivation*

The Bantu-headed kid, glasses gone, is holding a gift-wrapped present. In his innermost thoughts—represented within a cloud-like bubble—he is dreaming of giving his gift to the girl with the Lana Del Rey haircut. And this, the classic love story, is indeed the motivation for many a narrative writer and yet how can I confess to the worksheet that it has never interested me in the least?

### *Stir Empathy*

Stir empathy! Here is a bowl, on which is written EMPATHY. The bowl appears to be filled with a thick, dark, swirly liquid, like melted chocolate. It is stirred by a spoon with a heart on it. Stir empathy! An aesthetic principle or an ethical one—or both? Hard to say. But on the main point there can be no argument: to stir empathy is the aim and purpose of all stories, everywhere, always. How can you doubt it? It's written right there in black and white on the worksheet!

### *Create the Setting*

The easel is back, with the same painting, and the suspended brush. The New York Public School Board turns out to be a very insistent proponent of literary Realism.

### *Show the Resolution*

The car is gone, the man is out of the car, and he's standing on the edge of the ice-covered cliff, clearly relieved, stick hand to his stick head, just saying PHEW. Don't ask me how that happened. Plot is not my strong point.

### *Draw in Your Reader*

A recognizable human boy with sneakers and hair and actual legs lies on his belly upon the floor, reading delightedly from a book, lost in it completely. Oh, I remember that feeling!

### *Clarity of Ideas*

A magnifying glass. Just that. No one's holding it and nothing's being magnified. It's like some kind of Zen *kōan*. It may have gone over my head.

### *I Made Revisions with My Goals in Mind*

It's a notepad being worked over by a pencil but the absence of a human figure suggests to me that the worksheet knows full well (but daren't tell the children) that the goal never truly comes before the revision but is created precisely by the revision itself.

### *The Theme Is Woven Through the Story*

It's the same notepad, but now the pencil is a needle and thread and the word it's sewing into the pad is: *theme*. I can imagine, a hundred years from now, this worksheet being found in the flooded wreckage of what was once New York, and a small

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religious sect forming around its precepts, and this penultimate instruction being the holiest tenet of their faith.

### *Clearly Move Through Time*

A boy is running. Behind him it says SPEED THINGS UP. A turtle passes him, heading in the opposite direction. Behind her it says SLOW THINGS DOWN. Well, that's the whole trick of the thing, right there.

## DOWNTOWN

A great Austrian painter—he lives in a forest in Hungary—came by the apartment one day with his daughters, both red-headed with pigtails, pale-faced, silent. They wore the kind of clothes you can't buy in any shop, you have to get them delivered direct from the turn of the century. Fucking angels, both of them. Meanwhile my kids raged around the place, dressed as tiny long-distance truckers, hyped-up on sour gummies. They clung to their tablets as if to items necessary for their very survival—colostomy bags, say. But I refused to be ashamed. Like everyone else in America these days, I stand in my truth.

On the other hand, he *is* a terrific painter. Of all the living painters he is the most livingiest and also the most painterly. About four years ago he found a whole new vernacular to the point that nobody sees much point in painting anymore, and so he has somehow both revived painting and killed it off simultaneously. Of course, we're all terribly jealous. His occasional visits to the city mean an awful lot and I was honored this time to get to be the one to host him and his pair of silent angels. I'd invited a few of my downtown crowd to touch the hem of his garment, but when he walked in with his girls we all saw straight away that there would be no garment-touching and no way would he agree to come to Café Loup with us to chew on some

## BLOCKED

What nobody gets is that the conditions were unusual, basically unrepeatable. I was young, full of beans. I'd just *created* beans, cars, grassland, Post-it Notes, the white rhinos, everything else, created them in an immanent sense, having replaced nothing with something, which—as even my harshest critics will admit—then led to everything else, beans included. Point is, it was a “first thought, best thought” kind of a situation. And when you create something out of nothing at such a tender age it's just a lot to take on, psychologically. It's a lot. That's not really why I withdrew, though. I was always going to withdraw, deep into myself. I understand that others do it differently, but for me, at the time, it was a principle. I found it self-evident that the thing should have its own engine, its own life, its own propulsion. It wasn't a theoretical pose—it was something I felt at a gut level. I still feel that way, really. Because otherwise where's the risk? You can't be in every household, sitting at a person's shoulder, asking: *So, what do you think of what I did there, or here—does that work for you? Can I do anything to improve your experience?* I mean, you can, but you're on a hiding to nothing. No matter what anybody tells you, the underlying principle is not consumer satisfaction. There's no feedback loop. You make it, you put it out there, you deal with the consequences. A lot of times

they're going to hate it and hate you for creating it, but if you can't deal with hatred you've got no business being in the game in the first place.

Having said that, there are a lot of things in there that I simply wouldn't do now, or not in the same way, if I had the opportunity to do it all again, from scratch. I'd be the first to admit that. When you're young you try to prove you can do it all, anything—you throw everything and the kitchen sink in there! You're profligate! You've got this sense of unlimited potential. You think you contain multitudes, and in my experience you kind of *do*, at that age, because you're still sufficiently flexible to contain multitudes, you haven't drawn lines around your shit yet and there is still something ineffable about you, something that can make space for whatever is *not* you. But that crowd inside thins out. Lord, does it thin out. For example, yesterday I was mooching around in my long johns when I had a thought, I wondered: What does it feel like to be a bat? Now, that sort of thing used to be a fruitful line of imaginative inquiry for me. But I didn't know yesterday and I still don't know. I've made my peace with it: I don't expect to know how a bat feels about anything any time soon. But I know how *I* feel. That's what you get left with, in the end: a very precise and intricate sense of how you yourself feel. Which is not nothing. When I started out I had no earthly idea about *that*. Now I know. People talk about checking back in and maybe reworking some things and adapting others and so on and so forth but those people do not know my mind, they do not know what I can face and what I find too much to deal with at the current time. Only I can know that. It might sound a little nuts, coming from me, but a lot of people could do with being a lot less judgmental.

Sometimes I am asked: How do you keep from getting depressed? Given the state of things. Given that it looks like the something you got started is on the brink of collapsing back into nothing? The answer has changed over time. I used to think parallel projects were the solution. Just keep on creating parallel projects and moving between them and then you never have time to get really down on any one of them. "Okay, sure, that's a roiling mess—but this one has got something, oh, it's really got something!" Of course, as soon as I felt one of these parallel projects was going well, a moment later I'd hate it, and want to move on to the next thing, which would then provide its own complications, and so on. And all the time some part of me understood that dropping one ball was a problem unlikely to be resolved by simply launching a whole load of other balls into the air. But for a while it worked, psychologically, for me. I can't speak for others. To me, it was beautiful to move between these parallel projects, never getting bogged down, not feeling defined by one way of doing things, feeling light, feeling free . . . Doesn't mean it wasn't avoidant behavior. I'm not a fool, I know when I'm being avoidant. But some of the most sublime things emerge as vehicles of distraction. Really depends on how you look at it. These days, I love a fragment. I don't think of a fragment as flawed or partial in any way. It's the completist model that got me into such trouble in the first place. Now I praise the half-done, the unfinished, the broken, the shard! Who am I to turn my back on the fragment! Who am I to say the fragment is insufficient!

At the same time, I *am* depressed. The difference is these days I just say it out loud:

I AM DEPRESSED.

At a certain point, given the way things are, it's a fair and rational response. The fact that I even have to defend the emotion tells you all you need to know about how large the distance has become between my mind and all other minds. It's really an issue. Mostly, when people talk to me about what they think and feel about it all, and their own relation to me or all of it, I willingly participate—as in, I will and do listen—but I remain keenly aware that in practical terms nine times out of ten we are not discussing or thinking about the same entity in any way, shape or form. On the one hand, I feel totally alienated by their interpretations; on the other, they find my perspective impossible even to *identify* never mind actually engage with. We're talking straight past each other. Have been for the longest time. Which is legitimately depressing, a word by the way that is not mine and which I hate to use, and only sound out now so as to be able to know you all better, and to share in your reality. Contrary to reports, naming things was not and never will be my bag. I myself never put things in bags. I barely recognize the existence of "bags," at least not as a collective noun. Nor would I ever, for example, have thought up the separate denomination "animal"—and then treated it as if it were a license!—no more than I would *ever have presumed* to describe a category called "emotions" or consider them as something you "have"—like a stone or a stereo—and then go on to define them morally, depending on what they did to my face muscles or tear ducts. That shit is not on me. Yet I still have to deal with people speaking to me as if all of that is reality—I have to at least appear to take it seriously. And I'm sure that behaving in this false way, in such bad faith, day in and day out, is what has inhibited me somewhat, and contributed to this sense of blockage. It doesn't

make me want to take new risks, that's for damn sure, or start afresh with something big. To what end? Everything gets twisted. Control is an illusion. I certainly have never personally drawn a line around "France," but at a certain point, when you've got this critical mass of belief in "France"—on the part of those who believe they are "citizens of France" and indeed separate entities each from the other—well, what are you going to do about it? Tell them to take another look? *Pardon, monsieur, madame—le monde n'est pas ce que vous pensez!* Please. "People" see what they want to see.

Instead of self-medicating, I recently got involved with a dog. Judge that however you may wish but I'll tell you right now I've never been happier. I no longer feel any anxiety as I pass by what I don't want to go back to, because each day I have a purpose, a direction, I really know what I'm doing. I've got to take dear old Butler for a walk and let him sniff all the things he likes to sniff without hurrying him or chivying him along in any way at all. That takes up half the day. And when me and Butler are done there's even a little time to flit through the parallel projects, never finishing any one of them, never raising any to the level of perfection, but feeling okay about all of them, neither delighted nor desperate. It's a life. I'll take it. There aren't many who do what I do but whenever I happen to come across a significant colleague—not any of the hacks, but one of the few I admire and more importantly whom I like—whenever I happen to run into one of these esteemed colleagues, maybe at the deli on Mercer, and we stop and greet each other, and they see me with Butler, I know very well what they're thinking. Me who used to be so high and mighty, shuffling round the neighborhood with this dumb-looking coonhound. What the

hell happened? Well, they can think what they like. I'm just very, very happy waiting patiently for this old dog to sniff the many things it likes to sniff, while my colleague smiles at me in that certain way, like there's something satirical about me now. I actually have a sense of humor, and I understand how funny it must look: me, with a dog! It's really a bad joke on myself, given that I once thought—when dogs initially appeared on the scene—that *this* time I had really managed to (inadvertently) offer, to the “people,” a revelatory illumination, a deep and renewing insight into the true nature of reality, when of course the exact opposite lesson is what they all seem to have taken from it. “That’s my dog,” you hear them announcing, pulling their leashes tight, with that smug look of ownership on their stupid faces. “Yeah, sure, you can pet my dog.” There’s no control, none whatsoever. I don’t worry: I’ve let it all go. I’m happy, I get to spend my days with a fantastic dog, I am no longer concerned whether or not I am the only soul left in existence who knows what a dog means and what it is for.

## THE CANKER

At the time of the Usurper, Esorik and her people lived beyond the mountains and had done for some time. Their island fell like a teardrop from the northeast side of the land, into that broad sea that was at once their livelihood, their conceptual foundation, and their best argument for independence—physical and spiritual—from the mainland, of which, in truth, they were an integral part. On her Labor days, Esorik was a fish-salter. She greeted the Ekalbia on the docks, and showed them where to hang their huge silk nets. Stronger women than she emptied the nets; cannier women negotiated with those bloody-minded, green-eyed nomads over the price. Esorik’s task was to heave the little gray fish by the spadeful onto her pallet of squat rectangular tubs, then pack them in salt. Sometimes, as she did this, the sun set in pink and purple bands across the horizon, and on those occasions, she felt almost grateful for Labor days and understood their purpose. The rest of the time she smelled of fish. Salt got into any little cut on her hands. She looked forward to her final cycle.

On Praxis days, she was a teacher: she taught the children of her district how to tell stories and more importantly the names of the various forms. The Snake with the Tail in Its Mouth. The Resurgence. The Straight Arrow. The Sinking Ship. As Praxis,