Exposition, Description and Dramatization in Memoir and Fiction

by Suzanne Fox

I. Exposition, description and dramatization: what are they?

When we become creative writers, we begin to use writing tools that are rarely taught in school, and at the same time to become more sparing with types of writing we were taught there. The most important shift we learn is that from exposition to dramatization.

Below, brief explanations of the two, with an equally brief stop at a midpoint, description, along the way.

- **Exposition** is the “telling” of things: the making of statements, the explanation of concepts, and so on. “I was a messy and creative child” is an example of exposition (I used italics just to set the sentence off, not because they are a part of exposition). It tells the reader a conclusion I have drawn without showing the details of evidence that led me to believe it, and without locating my former messy self in any particular place or time. The advantage of exposition for a creative writer is that it is concise and quick. When used to link scenes or signal relatively unimportant information, it is efficient. The disadvantage is that it is often quite general. The statement above could apply to many if not most children. It is also not very engaging. When reading exposition, a reader is mostly passive, like a student at a lecture in which information is being told. They have little freedom to make their own conclusions or share an experience with the writer.

- **Description**, though technically a form of exposition, is important enough to break out on its own here. It adds sensory information to pure exposition so that we as readers can understand what something or someone was like. This is obviously an important tool for the creative writer. Because of these evocations of the senses or emotions, it becomes more specific than pure exposition. It is also more interesting, allowing the reader to engage more fully in what the author is describing.

This example adds description to our original expository sentence: “I was a messy and
creative child. My room was always full of half-finished collections and projects. An ink spot in the middle of the beige rug, a shelf of glass horses posed as though facing each other in battle, a bit of melted Crayola Sky Blue on my radiator all showed evidence of past activities, fantasies, and games."

As you can see, this writing no longer applies to almost any child; description of particular things begins to evoke someone very specific. The disadvantages of description are that it can easily become both lengthy and static, forcing the reader and the text to “sit still” while the subject is being described. Using description well requires a writer to choose key details and edit out the rest.

**Dramatization** is the “showing” of things: the creation of scenes that are located in a particular place in time and in which things happen. It is the heart of the work of a creative writer because it is the form of writing that most deeply and powerful engages the reader in the text. As readers live a scene with us, they use all of the senses, their minds and their hearts to slip into the world we create, experiencing it as though it were reality. They can bring their own imaginations into the process and—this is important—form their own conclusions about what they are being shown.

Involving movement and possibly dialogue as well, dramatization is less concise than exposition or description, so it is best reserved for important scenes and information. Beyond that caution, it is the most powerful tool in the creative writer’s toolkit, and worth practicing and using often and well.

Here is a brief example of dramatization, placing the dramatized moment after the more expository “nugget” both previous examples have been built on:

*I was a messy and creative child. My room was always full of half-finished collections and projects. An ink spot in the middle of the beige rug, a shelf of glass horses posed as though facing each other in battle, a bit of melted Crayola Sky Blue on my radiator all showed evidence of past activities, fantasies, and games. The ink spot came from a fountain pen I begged my mother to buy me, promising her earnestly that I would use it with care. The day I brought it home from Figelson’s Stationery, I eagerly opened it up, too excited to get beyond the middle of my room. To my horror, blue-black ink squirted onto my hands, my dress, and the beige rug beneath me. Just trying to carry it over to my little desk got even more blue drips on everything around me. I can remember to this day how scared I felt. Mom was usually “on my side” but I knew this would infuriate her. Once I had the pen put safely down I had an idea. I scurried to the bathroom, pulled out her powder compact from the medicine cabinet, and tried to cover the stains with the beige powder. Inventive as they were, these efforts only made a bigger mess, and I ended up suffering Mom’s wrath not just for carelessness but for trying to cover it up. She didn’t spank or otherwise punish me, but she seemed ten feet taller than she had an hour before, and her frustration and disappointment made me feel ashamed and sad.*

As you can see, this dramatization allows the reader to experience my pleasure and my fear.
right along with me. It shows them what I mean by saying I was “messy and creative,” yet it also allows them to make their own judgments about whom, and just how “bad,” I was. It is completely specific, sharing a scene that happened like this to only one child, not many. At the same time, it is, again, rather lengthy, requiring quite a bit of material to come to life. It would not make sense to use this detailed strategy on a scene that was not quite important to the piece I was writing.

II. Using exposition, description and dramatization

As you begin to write memoir or fiction, you will learn to add dramatization to your writing, and also to limit your use of exposition and, to a lesser extent, pure description. Ideally, you will create a balance of these types of writing, allowing the reader to “sink” pleasantly into dramatized scenes or moments but also to move efficiently through exposition that links and places them.

Because exposition is so dominant in most academic and/or business training, it can be difficult to choose and use at first. I usually suggest that students and clients let their first drafts flow however they will, and then fix the exposition/dramatization balance in revision.

Once you have rough-drafted a piece of writing, the first step is to identify the exposition within it. Don’t be surprised if it comprises most or even the entire piece! Examples and signs of exposition that you may see in your writing include:

- frequent use of adjectives of judgment (beautiful, ethical, hard-working; inconsiderate, messy, lazy);
- broad conclusions based on experience not dramatized in the piece, based on or including statements of fact that are not tied to any one place or time;
- areas in which your language becomes intellectual and analytical, rather than tangible, emotional, or sensory;
- lengthy and static descriptions of how something or someone is, unconnected to any place, time or action; and,
- brief summaries or statements that summarize or simplify complex experiences, events, or realities; and,
- lists of actions or events over time.

Once you have identified these, think a bit about how and what you might add dramatization.

In general, you do not want to dramatize elements that are emotionally neutral, non-essential, or dull! To name just one common example, years in which nothing of significance happened should not usually be dramatized in either fiction or nonfiction. Instead, use exposition to indicate but move through them briskly. Sentences like “The next years were uneventful,” “The rest of Sally’s
childhood was a blur. She had barely any memories of it until the day they moved across country,”
and “World War II disrupted every aspect of ordinary life in London. Bomb shelters, blackouts, and
bombed-out ruins reshaped the city and its rhythms. The Royal William Theater closed in 1941 and
did not reopen again until after V-E Day,” are all examples of exposition well used to move through
relatively uninteresting periods of time in a narration.

Instead, save dramatization for key moments. Here are some questions that might help you choose
elements to dramatize. Though they apply to both, some of the questions will apply better to either
fiction or nonfiction than the other.

▶ What element(s) of the piece are most important to your message or theme?
▶ What element(s) of the piece carry the most tension or conflict (the conflict may be overtly
  expressed, or just implicit)?
▶ What element(s) of the piece are most inherently dramatic, colorful and/or emotional?
▶ Which moments in the sequence of events are crucial turning points when something
  significant changed?
▶ If you had to support one of your general statements or conclusions in a single place and
  time, what might it be?

The shape and “feel” of dramatized scenes varies from genre to genre, from author to author, even
from book to book. But generally, dramatized scenes will:

▶ have an identifiable beginning, middle and end in time;
▶ have a single specific setting, though movement can take place within that setting;
▶ Utilize a single viewpoint, of a participant in the scene or an omniscient narrator, which will
  not change during the course of that scene, though it may change to another viewpoint in
  another scene;
▶ Involve evocations of one or more senses that convey the feeling of that place, time, human
  “participants,” and experience; and,
▶ Involve some amount of dialogue, exchanges of speech formatted in quotation marks.

III. Read to learn!

In addition to working on the balance of exposition, description, and dramatization in your own
writing, you can deepen your understanding of these choices by reading memoirs or fiction by other
writers. In fact, such reading is virtually a must for improving your writing. Take a few pages of any
book you like and identify which one of the three techniques is being used at any given moment. Some great writers use considerable exposition, while others limit it severely. All good writers, however, use some balance of these tools to create a satisfying finished product, and you’ll hopefully have fun experimenting to find what that balance is for you.