

NARRATIVE *writing* HANDBOOK

Everything You Need to Know to Bring Your Personal Story to Life



By Ingrid Ricks

Hippie Boy

Narrative Writing

Handbook

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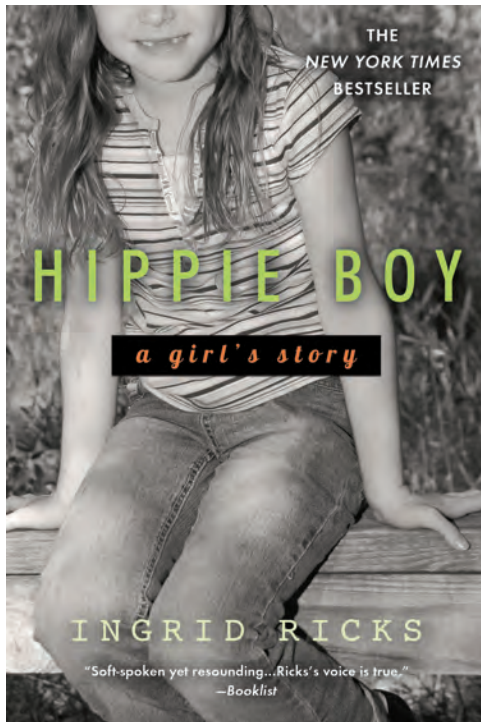
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Published by Ingrid Ricks

www.writeitoutloud.org



What Teachers Are Saying

"There are three major reasons why I will continue to use *Hippie Boy* in my English 9 classes: the story is very relatable to students, the students were engaged while we were reading and throughout the unit, and there are multiple ways to connect this book with Common Core Standards in authentic and engaging ways. My students and I also appreciated the in-depth discussions that the book inspired about things such as narrative techniques, personal power, and outlets for frustration. If we are to inspire the next generation to become literate and compassionate humans, it's vital that we bring stories such as *Hippie Boy*, that are accessible and meaningful to teens, into the curriculum." - *Alison Ersfeld, 9th grade English teacher, Meadowdale High School, Lynwood WA.*

"My students are just finishing *Hippie Boy*, and after answering questions about the chapters, I asked them to write about whether or not they liked the book (100% loved) and what they thought of the narrative experience and they loved that too. Xavier was in Mexico last week but finished your book on the plane—the kid

who reads ONLY sports books— loved yours." - *Nancy Branom, 9th grade English teacher, Department Chair, Edmonds Woodway High School*

"The myriad benefits of *Hippie Boy*: 1) It's a gateway and model to having students create their own narratives; 2) It reinforces the idea that everyone has a story to share—and that by sharing stories, we can understand each other better, allows teachers and students to bond on a different level; 3) *Hippie Boy* shows narrative structure and is a perfect model for using various timelines to tell a story." - *Stacy Wright, 9th grade English teacher, Lynnwood High School*

What Students Are Saying

"It changed how I think when writing, and made my writing more descriptive and emotional." - **Anna**

"Working with Ingrid Ricks definitely helped me develop my story. So did reading *Hippie Boy*. They both helped me understand how to set up my narrative story." - **Alexandra Smith**

"*Hippie Boy* should be in every classroom. Students should know that they are not the only ones."

"*Hippie Boy* really shows you the power of good writing, how healing it can be. It made me want to sit down and write out everything that's happened to me." - *Isabella Grace*

"Working with Ingrid and reading *Hippie Boy* taught me that narrative writing can be really deep and personal. Ingrid taught me how to write and let stuff out and as well as how easy it is to write about your life." - **Ashley S.**

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INTRODUCTION

When I first started working on *Hippie Boy*, I figured I knew how to write. After all, I'd spent much of my career working as a journalist and had been writing stories that covered the What, When, Why and How for years.

But what I hadn't learned was how to *SHOW* a story—how to bring it to life through dialogue, character development, setting, thoughts and emotions. I also struggled with story structure and how to create an effective story arc.

After hundreds of hours spent writing and revising, I finally wised up and sought help from a couple of amazing narrative writing instructors and editors. Thanks to their guidance, it all began to click—enabling me to tell the story from my adolescence in a way that would pull readers in and take them with me on my journey.

This narrative writing handbook is a simple how-to guide that incorporates the key lessons I learned during the years I spent writing *Hippie Boy*, as well as my experiences collaborating with English teacher Marjie Bowker and other educators, teaching narrative writing workshops, and working individually with hundreds of students to help them identify, structure and write their stories. It features easy, engaging writing exercises to help students learn key story structure and narrative writing techniques, and is designed to help anyone interested in writing their personal narrative to bring their story to life.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This narrative writing guide should be used in conjunction with *Hippie Boy*. Weave in the lessons as you are reading *Hippie Boy*, or read *Hippie Boy* in full and then use the story structure techniques and narrative writing lessons to bring your own story to life. If you are using this guide to teach narrative writing in your English class, I recommend breaking it out into a three-week unit as follows:

Week One:

- Students read first half of *Hippie Boy*
- Incorporate the following lessons/discussions:
 - What constitutes a personal narrative?
 - How to Identify the story you want to write
 - How to structure your story using the ABDCE, Journey or Perspective story structure
 - Character Development

Week Two:

- Students read second half of *Hippie Boy*
- Incorporate following narrative writing lessons
 - Setting
 - Dialogue
 - Emotion
 - Sensory Details
 - Opening Sentence that Grabs

Week Three:

- Students complete deconstructing *Hippie Boy* exercise
- Short classroom discussion re: Voice
- Students write and complete first draft of their 5 – 7 page personal narrative

IDENTIFYING YOUR STORY

Personal narrative isn't about writing your life story, it's about writing a story from your life. That story can be funny, sad, scary, embarrassing, gut wrenching, thrilling or horrifying. But it's got to have action and it's got to have a story arc that engages readers, takes them from POINT A to POINT B, builds to some sort of aha moment or climax, and leads to a realization/conclusion. Otherwise, readers won't care about your story.

Often times, while conferencing with students, they'll tell me they don't have a story because they think it takes a catastrophic event to pique someone's interest. It always makes me smile when I hear this because everyone's life is made up of stories—and it's that story that evokes strong emotion in you that will also evoke emotion in readers when effectively brought to life through words.

What I've found is that most people—teenagers and adults alike—have an idea of the story they want or need to tell but are waiting for permission to tell it. They need a listening ear from someone they know cares and won't judge them. Sometimes they also need a few prompts to help them lock in on that story they want to tell.

Here are a few questions I use to help students identify their story:

- What is the most emotionally difficult challenge you've had to deal with in life so far?
- Have you ever done anything extreme to get someone's attention? If so, why?
- What's the funniest thing that has ever happened to you?
- What's the scariest thing that has ever happened to you?
- What's the most exciting thing that has ever happened to you?
- Have you ever done something that you knew you shouldn't have done, but feel that if people understood the reasons behind your actions they would view them differently?

- Have you ever competed for something you really wanted (e.g. a sports team, a singing group, a dance team) and didn't get it?
- Have you been in a competitive situation where the game or performance was riding on you and you let your team/group down? Or you succeeded in a crucial moment and carried the team to victory?
- Have you ever felt let down by a friend or an adult in your life?
- Have you ever done something you regret and wish you could take back?
- Have the pressures of school—homework, relationships, social cliques, pressure to succeed—caused you anxiety or depression?
- What are you passionate about? What are your dreams?

Sometimes the story clicks with that first question. Other times it takes digging deeper to help students identify the story they want to tell. But the questions above are universal enough that one of them ultimately strikes a chord and helps unleash the story that is waiting to be told.

STRUCTURING YOUR STORY

Once you've identified the story you want to write, the hardest part of narrative writing is figuring out how to tell that story. Where do you start? Where do you end? What do you put in? What do you leave out?

I used to think that stories should all be told chronologically because I didn't know there was another way. That's how I started writing *Hippie Boy* until a writing instructor finally challenged me on it after critiquing my second chapter.

"Where are you going with this story?" he asked. "What's the key conflict?"

"Oh, it's getting there," I explained. "The real story starts when my mom meets and marries my awful stepfather, which happens in chapter 7."

I could hear the annoyance in his voice when he replied. "Well if that's the case, then that's where you need to start."

I explained to him that I couldn't start with my awful stepfather because there was a whole backstory about my parent's rocky marriage, my dad's explosive temper and his abandoning us all the time, and my mom's extreme devotion to religion that needed to be told in order to provide context for the readers.

"You've got to start with the key conflict so readers are hooked and have a sense for where the story is going," my narrative writing instructor said again. "After setting the stage for your readers, you can give all the backstory and context you need. Start with the action, give the backstory and then bring readers back into the main storyline. That's how you'll draw them in and keep them engaged."

It was a hard bit of advice to stomach at first, because it required a lot of revising and cutting of whole chapters that no longer made sense—either because they provided more background than was necessary with the new story structure or didn't help advance the story. But as soon as I learned that lesson with *Hippie Boy*, it all clicked. Now when I work with students on structuring their five-to-seven page personal narratives, I don't think about order of events. I'm focused on the story hook—the key conflict that draws readers in.

The structure I used for *Hippie Boy*, and the most common structure for short stories, is the ABDCE structure: Action, Background, Development, Climax and Ending. (I didn't realize this was the formula I was following until I read about it in Anne Lamott's excellent book on writing, *Bird by Bird*).

When helping students to shape their stories, I also recommend two other story structures that work well for short personal narrative: Journey structure and Perspective structure, which I'll discuss further in a bit.

Before jumping into structure examples, I want to drill down on one other key factor: the amount of time covered in your short personal narrative.

The easiest way to tell a short personal narrative is to pick a setting and tell the story from that setting. The story in itself should probably only cover a timeline of a few minutes to an hour. Yet by using the setting to ground your story and then incorporating flashbacks or thoughts along the way, you can cover a long period of time without losing your reader.

As you read the following stories, pay attention to the setting and how the author used that setting to tell his/her story.

STRUCTURING YOUR STORY: ABDCE STRUCTURE

Sometimes the ABDCE story structure weaves in the backstory along the way through several flashbacks or memories. Other times, it follows a straighter formula line.

Here's an example of an ABDCE Story Format:

STAINED

JAYCEE SCHRENK

I see red and blue flashing lights through the stained glass insert. Seconds later, three police officers push through the door and head straight to my dad, who is standing next to me. He leans over and whispers, "Keep your mouth shut."

A young male officer with dark hair addresses him. "Sir, we need to know what your daughter called for." But my dad doesn't say a word. He looks past him as if he's not even there.

I walk over to my mom, who is no longer crying. She's acting as if nothing has happened.

"Ma'am, will you tell me the story again? I've been here for domestic violence calls before," the overweight male officer says with a concerned tone. I'm surprised at his words; I didn't know about these calls. My head gets cloudy as the salt water builds up in my tear duct. I knew my dad had a temper, but hearing the police officer say something about "violence" makes me feel unsafe.

My mom glares at him and shakes her head. "I already told you! I have no idea why she called! Kids are full of shit when they don't get what they want. Go ahead, ask her!" She points to me accusingly.

Her words feel like knives cutting into my skin. How can she stand there and lie by calling me a liar?

He ignores her and waves over a female officer with piercing bright green eyes. She steps close and crouches down. I start to move away and she says, "Hey now, you don't have to be afraid. Can you tell me what happened?"

Her voice soothes me, but I know that soon after the officers disappear, the feeling will vanish along with my privileges of having a phone, watching TV, and playing with my friends. I clench my fists and dig my nails into my palms. I'm sick of being afraid, so I decide to take the risk.

"My mom and dad hurt each other. Why do they do that, when they say they love each other?" I start to choke on my own tears. She hugs me softly and assures me that justice will be served. I'm confused; I don't know exactly what "justice" means. As I hear the click of the handcuff, I rip myself from her grasp and watch my dad as he is walked across the yard and guided into the police car.

I'm shaking uncontrollably. *What have I done?*

"Dad!" I yell after him. "Please don't go! I'm sorry, Dad. Don't leave me. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do it, Dad. Please don't leave me!" Tears dribble off my chin as I'm screaming out the front door.

"Baby girl, you are my princess, so that means I am the queen. And your father? He's nothing more than a bank account," my mom said in her high-pitched voice as she hopped out of our silver Saab. I watched her walk to the cash machine in her dark-washed destroyed blue jeans and white flowing tank top with white flip-flops to match. I knew my mom was beautiful for her age; her style was plain, yet flashy. Her fingers were full of diamond rings, her wrists glinted with Coach bracelets, and ruby red earrings dangled off her ears. She returned to the car with stacks of hundred dollar bills—money to take me summer clothes shopping.

We ran up and down the mall from store to store, my hands holding multiple shopping bags. I felt as if my head was about to explode from the thrill of getting whatever my heart desired. I knew that most 6th graders in my class could never do this. I also knew that my mom had a bad problem with money and our monthly shopping trips were a secret between us. I always felt guilty but my dad rarely ever

noticed.

As I placed my stacks of clothes on the Pac Sun counter, I shot a guilty glance at my mom to make sure it was OK to buy everything I wanted. But she reassured me with a kiss on my forehead and handed the cashier four hundred dollar bills.

“Have a nice day, because I know we will!” she said, flashing him her award-winning smile. She had been unemployed for seven years and didn’t seem to care about the stress she caused my father as the breadwinner of the house. This was her third day of a three-day shopping spree and grownup, all-night parties.

I looked up to my mom; everyone seemed to enjoy her presence. Her laugh was contagious to most everyone she surrounded herself with, maybe because most of her friends were ganja enthusiasts or cokeheads. Even though she had puffed or snorted away her brain cells, I thought my mom was intelligent.

We skipped to the car, giggling and holding hands. I stuffed the back seat with our purchases and we headed home.

My dad was waiting for us when we pulled into the driveway. As he approached the car, I noticed that his hands were clenched and that his face was bright red. He still wore his mechanic work uniform with his nametag attached.

“Jenna, are you kidding me? \$20,000? This is the second time in two years that you have done this to me, to us, to your children! Did you have fun going out to the bar last night and snorting some blow with your slut friend, Teri? Huh? Are you really that selfish? We are going to lose the house! Give me it, give me the god damn money now!” he screamed.

I stood behind my mom, covering my face as I began to sob. I knew this fight would escalate because it had many times before, so I tried to be a distraction by crying louder. My dad crouched over, grabbed my forearm and dragged me across the pathway of our lawn.

My mom trailed behind us, screaming, “I didn’t do anything, Doug! I don’t know what you’re talking about! Leave her alone!”

I could feel his muscles tense as he clamped tighter on my arm. His walking turned to stomping as he guided me over to the black leather couch in front of the TV, grabbed the remote and cranked up the volume. He headed out the back French

glass door and slammed it shut.

I quickly turned off the TV so I could listen to their conversation, but I could only see their lips moving through the glass door. Then I saw my mom's face turn red and watched as she snapped her Channel glasses in two then threw them at my dad's head and ran for the door.

He followed her and his icy blue eyes locked with mine when he entered the room. I could tell by his vicious glare that I was not welcome.

"Go to your room, luv. And don't come out until I come and get you," he said in a voice that warned me not to disobey.

I headed to my room on the opposite side of the house and climbed on the desk in front of my window, planting my body on top. I gazed out at our front yard, wishing I was outside playing instead of stuck in this muggy room. I thought about all of the things I could be doing on a hot summer's day like this. *Maybe if I scrounge up a few dollars, I could buy ice cream cones and we could go to a park and play,* I thought to myself. *And maybe Dad would want to come if he isn't still mad at me.*

I slid off the desk and stepped towards my armoire, opened the door, and pulled out my underwear drawer. I dug towards the bottom until I felt the smooth glass of my piggy bank. I was fumbling with the cork, trying to pull it out, when I heard a loud thud.

I jumped on top of my desk again and got to my window in time to see my mom's body burst through the front screen door. She smashed onto the railing—almost flipping over it—and fell to the ground.

My hands went numb. I dropped my piggy bank and heard it shatter on my hardwood floor. Then I heard my mom's shrieks.

"DOUG, STOP!" she screamed, followed by more loud thuds.

In my hurry to get to her, I forgot about my broken piggy bank. I jumped down from my desk and landed on the pieces of glass. I felt a sharp pain as shards of glass sliced into the bottom of my feet, but I ignored it and bolted to the living room.

I stood frozen as I saw my mom lift her leg in the air and viciously slam her foot into my dad's rib cage. As he threw another blow, she retaliated by kicking his hand away from her body.

Something made my dad notice that I was standing there. I heard him gasp and say, "Oh, shit."

I knew my dad hurt my mom, but I had never witnessed it before. I had only heard her cries late at night. But whenever I hurried to her room to see what was wrong and comfort her, she would always send me back to my room saying, "You have school in the morning, go to sleep."

My dad tried to carry me away from the scene, but I panicked and thrashed my body around until I felt my feet touch the ground again. I ran into the kitchen, picked up my cell phone and dialed 911. As I fought away from him, he tried to rip the phone from my hand. I saw my escape: the front door.

I ran out, skipped down the stairs and sprinted up our street toward my neighbors' house. Don was like a grandpa to me.

I pounded on his door but there was no answer. I knew that he was a police officer and could help explain the situation to the 911 operator when she asked why I was calling. All I could do was repeat my address over and over again.

"Get her off the phone, Jenna!" my dad yelled. I didn't realize that my parents were right behind me.

I turned around and looked into my mom's red, puffy eyes. I could feel her fear. She grabbed the phone out of my hands.

"I have no idea what she's talking about," I heard her tell the operator. "Please, don't come. We're fine."

The betrayal I felt was unexplainable. It was if I was on my first roller coaster; everything was going too fast to comprehend. I felt my stomach lurch into my throat, choking me and making a huge tangle of organs and intestines. *How could my mom tell the operator I was a liar?*

I stared at her bruised, swollen eyes. I looked at her knees that were still bleeding from skidding across the wooden porch and tried to register it all in my mind.

"Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay," I hear the female officer say as the other officers push my dad into the back of the police car. Then they're gone.

I close the door, lock it, slide back against it and sob. So many emotions are swirling inside me. I feel so guilty for getting my dad arrested and taken away from us. And I know my mom's angry with me. But I also don't know what I did wrong. I thought I was supposed to call for help when there was trouble.

I look up and see my mom glaring at me.

"What?" I ask, hoping she hears the hurt in my voice.

"You don't understand what you just did," she says, flatly. Her neck has a red ring around it from where my dad choked her and her right eyebrow is split, blue and swollen. But there is no emotion on her face. "We have to do something, go somewhere. He'll be out by tomorrow morning."

That's when it hits me: she's scared of what my dad's going to do when he gets home. And now I'm scared, too.

I know we've got to get away. My mom needs help and I have to protect her. Suddenly I have an idea. I jump up and race to my room, gather the coins on the ground and count them out: five dollars. Five dollars to live on for who knows how long. After all of our shopping excursions, I know that five dollars isn't that much. But it's what I have. I grab my Disneyland suitcase, stuffing all I can fit into it.

I hurry back to the den; my mom hasn't moved. She's in a fetal position, rocking back and forth.

"Let's go," I say firmly. "We have to go to Teri's."

She nods, looking past me.

"No. Come on, Mom. Let's go!"

I can see that my words are starting to register. I pull at her arm and she finally stands up. Then she grabs her purse and we both head to our car to start driving toward our new life.

Stained was reprinted with the permission of Author Jacyee Schrenk. It first appeared in the student story collection, [Behind Closed Doors: Stories From the Inside Out](#)

Breaking down the story using ABDCE structure:

- 1) Author starts with the ACTION – the police arriving at her house in response to her frantic 911 call regarding her parent’s domestic violence.
- 2) She tells the backstory (BACKGROUND) leading up to the incident – which starts with the shopping trip with her mom. She continues to DEVELOP the story right up to where she opened it and then continues on.
- 3) The CLIMAX is reached when her dad is taken away in the police car, her mom is upset and the author has her aha moment –her mom is scared about what will happen when her dad is released and comes back.
- 4) The ENDING– or conclusion – is that the author, though only a child, realizes she needs to be the one to take charge of the situation. She gets her mom out of the house and away from the danger of her dad so they will be safe and can start a new life.
- 5) SETTING/STORY TIME LAPSE: Notice that the setting for the story is the author’s house. Because she opens with the police arriving in response to her 911 call and ends with them taking away her dad and her decision a few minutes later to coax her mom out of their house, the actual time covered in the story is probably a half hour at most. Yet through the background story she tells, the author is able to tell a much bigger story that covers the entire day.

JOURNEY STRUCTURE

A Journey structure—at least my definition of it—captures a journey the narrator is on: (e.g. a car ride to a hospital to visit a sick relative) and unfolds chronologically for the reader the same time it unfolds for the narrator. However, as the journey is unfolding, the narrator provides flashback stories or background information through his/her thoughts that give readers context and makes them care about the journey and the ending that awaits.

Here's an example of a Journey Structure.

A LIFE OF MY OWN

CASSIE COX

My husband and son sit watching, waiting for my name to be called. The auditorium is packed with families and friends who have come to celebrate our graduation from high school. Only I'm not an eighteen- year-old kid any more. I'm thirty one.

I count the number of students in front of me, waiting to receive their diploma; some of them are students I've taught in my five years as a high school English teacher. I battle the wave of nausea that washes over me and try to shut out the taunting thoughts pounding my brain as I look out at the parents in the audience and worry about what they might be thinking.

What? My daughter was taught by a high school dropout and teen mom? My child was promised a good education, but this is what she got? A dropout? A runaway? A failure? She probably couldn't get a teaching job at a regular school. What else is the district covering up? They just stuck my child with a throwaway teacher like Mrs. Cox.

I hear one of my students' names called and as he steps up to take his diploma, his family and friends erupt in cheers. Excitement races through me as the announcer continues to call the names of former students and soon-to-be graduates, but it's an excitement tinged with pain. *Where are my mom and dad? Where are my*

brothers and sisters? What about Coach Coleman? He was always my favorite teacher. Where are my high school friends and everybody that fills my childhood memories?

As I wait to hear my name called, long-buried memories claw their way to the surface.

I crouched on the floor of an old bus, huddled in a ball to stop myself from shaking. It was a freezing December night, but I'd been so focused on escaping my house that I'd forgotten to grab a coat. All I had on was a turquoise, pink and yellow plaid skirt that reached mid-calf, and a short-sleeved sweater that perfectly matched my turquoise ballerina shoes. I waited, shivering and alone, my breath fogging up the windows of the yellow school bus as I strained to hear the sound of Aaron coming to my rescue after his shift at the Dairy Queen.

I wedged my body between a bus seat and the steel wall, both to barricade myself from the frigid air and to keep myself hidden from view. I'd been hiding in the bus for hours, certain my parents were looking for me.

My gut clenched as I thought about my mom and her pleas to my dad when I told them I was pregnant.

"Please don't," she'd begged when he'd threatened to get the gun and hunt down Aaron. "Please just calm down and leave her alone."

"Cassie, honey, we'll get through this."

I thought about my sisters and brothers and about what everyone was doing now. Were they tucked into their beds, sleeping? Were they sitting together, safe and warm, talking about me? Were they worried?

My body grew numb and my heart ached as I thought of my friends comfortable in their homes watching *Saved by the Bell*. Tomorrow they'd be listening to history lectures and writing essays and practicing for the Christmas band concert while I wrestled with growing up overnight.

I was jolted out of my thoughts by an explosion of shoes crunching through the gravel outside the windows of the bus. An onslaught of flashlights

illuminated the windows just above my head. I slowed my breathing, afraid of being discovered and dragged back to my prison at home.

Murmuring voices blasted through the thin metal walls of the bus. “We’re checking the busses right now,” I heard one of the officers say into what I assumed was his two-way radio.

“No, we don’t see anything.”

“Look over there,” I heard another officer’s voice chime in. “Did you check that one? Scan the area.”

I pushed my body tighter against the wall and buried my head into my knees, trying to make myself invisible.

“I don’t see her,” the first voice said finally. “Let’s move on.”

At least another hour passed before I heard the doors of the bus squeak open and Aaron’s voice softly calling out to me.

“Cassie, come on. I’m here now.”

I warmed at the sound of his voice, and all seemed right again. I uncurled my body and walked on shaky legs to the arms I was willing to give up my life for.

I’d been planning my escape for weeks—ever since I found out I was pregnant.

Earlier that morning I shoved armloads of my belongings into large, black trash sacks before pushing them to the back of my closet to hide until my return from school. Walking out of school that day, I never once thought about the book I was sealing shut. I did not say good-bye to my friends or to the teachers who had been such a positive force in my life. I did not take one last glance around the band room, where my musical talents blossomed over the years. I did not snap a mental picture of the school and the classrooms that were my second home. I just walked out without considering this good-bye, and I never looked back.

After school I returned to my prison, immediately scanning the area. Dad was still at work, my brothers and sisters were lost in Scooby Doo, and Mom was busy wrapping Christmas presents in her room. *Perfect*. Taking the steps up to my

bedroom two at a time, I opened the closet, hefted my “trash” onto my back, and raced back downstairs to deposit my future on the curb: the next day was garbage day. My luggage huddled in plain sight, ready to make its getaway.

Later that evening, under a blanket of darkness, I bolted out of the front door of my home and scrambled toward the school bus I had scoped out earlier that week. Years on the track team served me well, and I made the run in fewer than five minutes.

It was after 11 p.m. by the time Aaron finally arrived to rescue me from the bus and take me to our hideaway. We drove the mile to my house and left his blue Chevy idling with the headlights off while the two of us gathered the trash bags stuffed with my belongings from the curb. I glanced up to my bedroom window. For years I fought to have my own bedroom, a luxury in a family as large as mine, but I knew even this could no longer provide me comfort.

I stared at my house one last time, saying a good-bye I still wish I could unsay. I cried, thinking about my little sisters. Christmas was almost here; unpacking our stockings and playing Monopoly and Payday were traditions that would go on without me.

In a small Southern town that housed a church on every other street corner, there was no longer room for a person like me. The oldest of eight children, my life had been filled with good people—people who graduated from high school and college before marrying their high school sweetheart and having kids and living out their lives in our safe town where everybody knew everybody. I didn’t know any church-going teenagers (like myself) who got pregnant at the age of sixteen.

Erupting applause snaps me back into the auditorium. Somehow I’ve moved closer to the stage and only three graduating students stand between my diploma and me. My eyes sweep the audience until they settle upon my husband and fourteen-year-old son, and once again, memories seize me.

The pastor at Aaron's Pentecostal church was kind enough to give us shelter. I thought he and his wife were saving me, but this thought fled quickly. For four months my home was an over-sized walk-in closet, a dilapidated tin can that sat tucked out of sight, far from the prying eyes of civilization. The idea of being free and the boss of my own life was exhilarating. But it soon hit me that I had chosen imprisonment.

Brother and Sister Johnson gave Aaron a job and a paycheck from which they pulled out rent and grocery money and a tithe for the church. During the day, Aaron was free from the nothingness that had become my life. I was unreachable by all who knew and loved me. I had no television, no books, no medical care, no transportation, no news from home, no friends, no family, no life. I was utterly alone except for the cows that roamed the property. Isolation fortified my prison walls.

My daily schedule was empty. The most memorable part of my day was walking to the edge of the property to listen to the mooing of cows. I cried, broken, as they listened, never offering advice. The night I raced toward freedom, I never thought I'd spend my days talking to cattle.

Months of seclusion were taking their toll. Regret-filled thoughts overwhelmed me. For sixteen years, family and friends and school and sports and band—and people—had stuffed themselves into even the tiniest crevices in my life, and now, for the first time ever, I was so far from all I knew and loved that I wasn't even sure God could hear me. Finally, one afternoon in early March, I hit my breaking point.

"Aaron, I'm going crazy," I said as soon as he walked through the door that evening. "I have no one. I miss my family. I miss my friends. I want to go home. I can't be alone for another day."

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I watched anxiety creep across his face. I knew what he was thinking: that my parents would bring statutory rape charges against him like they'd threatened to do before.

"Cassie, you know what your parents will say," Aaron said, exasperated.

“They won’t let you see me again. They will turn me in to the cops. Is that what you want? Do you really want your parents to raise our child? You can never go back to school now. They don’t let girls like you stay in school. What do you plan on doing?”

Aaron continued to flood me with questions and concerns before settling upon a compromise. “Let’s call your parents and tell them we’ll come home if they let us get married.”

The next day Brother and Sister Johnson drove us to a pay phone, so our call home couldn’t be traced. I held out my hand and Aaron dropped several coins into my outstretched palm. Slowly, I slipped the coins into the slot and dialed the number that was no longer my own.

“Hello. Hello.” My voice quaked as tears erupted from my eyes.

“Mom?”

“Cassie, oh my god, Cassie. Is that you?” My mom’s voice broke through every wall I’d built over the past few months. “Cassie, baby, where are you? Don’t hang up. Please. Talk to me.”

“Mom, I want to come home.” I fought to keep my voice calm.

My mom’s voice remained frantic, panicked. “Cassie, where are you? You come home right now!”

“Mom, I will come home but only if you’ll let me marry Aaron. Please mom. I want to make this right.”

I held my breath, waiting for her reply. “Cassie, we’ll sign the papers. Just come home.”

Before all of my friends completed their junior year in high school, I was married and only months away from becoming a mother. By the fall of their senior year, my son had been born and the abuse had begun. A slap here. A shove there.

While my friends readied themselves for proms and weekend dates, I braced myself for another night with a man I feared; with a man who almost convinced me I was hopeless, worthless. While my friends attended pep rallies and weekend

parties, I worked to be perfect, to make sure *HE* would never have a reason to point a shotgun at me again.

A walk through the grocery store became a chore I abhorred. A walk through the grocery store, with Aaron trailing behind me, sounded something like this: “Why don’t you suck your fat gut in when you walk? Straighten your back? Did you even bother running a brush through your hair today?”

My paychecks from working fifty hours a week at a local daycare had to be handed over to Aaron immediately. He controlled everything about me. He told me where I could go, and where I could not go, unwiring the car each evening just to make sure things went his way. He even made sure I had no access to a telephone unless he was around to control my conversations. My life was not my own until Death saved me. A single car accident forever broke his hold on me.

A flashing light on my answering machine greeted me as I walked through the door of my apartment. I pushed play, moving to fill a glass with water. I only heard fragments, and I only listened to the message once.

There was a car accident—Highway 19—blown tire—100 miles per hour—no seatbelt—identify body.

Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god. I was safe. I was free. My life was my own.

+++

“Cassie Cox.” The sound of my name mercifully pulled me back, releasing me from a pain I will never again feel. As I step up to receive my diploma, I look across the audience one last time and the sounds of clapping and applause buoy me.

Everyone cheers for me, students and parents alike. I scan the crowd, and I spot my son. Then I lock eyes with my husband, my biggest fan, the man who has watched and supported me as I earned my G.E.D., as I graduated from college, as I landed my first teaching job, as I graduated with my master’s degree, and as I decided to return to school to earn my high school diploma.

Once again, I’m sixteen years old, but I am not a victim. I am victorious.

My mind bounces down the basketball court. *Coach Coleman, you continue to*

be one of my greatest inspirations in life. "Good enough" is still not good enough for me. Thank you.

I slip in to say a quick hello to my band director and my school counselor before thoughts jump to my parents.

Mom, dad, I'm sorry I hurt you and I know it's a little late. But I finished what I started. You'd be proud. I love you both so much.

I walk across the stage, take my diploma, and head toward a life that I love.

A Life of My Own was reprinted with the permission of Author Cassie Cox. It first appeared in the student/teacher story collection, [Through Our Eyes: In Black and White](#)

Breaking Down the Story – Journey Structure

- a) The journey is a fairly short one. The author is waiting in line to receive her high school diploma and the journey is completed when it's finally her turn and she is presented with her diploma.
- b) It's all the flashback stories she tells about her life journey (which follow the ABDCE structure -- action, background, development, climax, ending) that makes readers understand the significance of her receiving her diploma.
- c) SETTING/TIME LAPSE: The author uses the graduation ceremony in the high school auditorium as her setting to ground her story. The whole story takes place while she moves through the line and, as a result, the time lapse is only a few minutes. Yet by weaving in the backstory while moving through the line, she is able to tell a story that spans fifteen years.

Perspective Structure

The third story structure I use when working with students is the Perspective Structure. A perspective structure is a story that starts out in the present, tells a story from the past, and then ends the story back in the present where it started. This structure allows the author to reflect on the past and provide perspective about where he or she is now in life and the lessons that have since been learned.

Here's an example of a story told using a Perspective Structure:

RECKLESS

CHASE WERNER

The hairs on my forearms are standing up from the chilly air that circulates through the crevices in the antique floorboards of my rented bedroom.

I weave the loose matted carpet through my toes as I look down at the final settlement documents from my mother's passing. It seems as if all the emotion I have held inside me from that day two years ago has decided to make one last attempt at ridding my mind of what sanity it has left.

As I begin to lose myself in the plethora of pages, I feel the crushing sorrow and regret that has been haunting me for two years now press against my chest. It's like a horror movie replaying over and over in my mind. And once again I'm back to that day in the third floor apartment where I last felt the comfort of home.

The soreness I felt from my eyes getting the first stretch of the day made me realize that I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. I turned my head and looked at the clock sitting on top of my makeshift mini-fridge nightstand. It read 7:45 a.m., an

hour and a half past the time I was hoping to see.

“Oh shit,” I said, jumping out of bed.

I threw on an outfit and rushed down the hallway. I had been late more times that year than the rest of my total education combined and I had to be on time.

I heard an exasperated call coming from my mother’s bedroom. “Chase?”

I was so close to leaving my apartment. I knew I had no time to waste.

“Chase?” she called again.

I felt my body tense. I figured this was just some form of front she was putting up, like when she would miss work and have me cough into the phone to prove that her son was sick. Or when we couldn’t have something we wanted for Christmas because she said the IRS had messed up on our taxes that year.

I didn’t have time for this today.

Frustrated, I hurried to her bedroom and found her lying on her bed in an awkward position, like she had attempted to get off the bed and failed. Next to where her head was positioned, I noticed a red stain on the mattress sheet. I assumed it was blood from a gum disease that we both suffered from. My mother glanced up at me with a pleading look, as if I was her only chance of getting out of the bed.

“Can you help me to the bathroom?”

Her words alarmed me. She had never asked me to help her to the bathroom. But the clock also alarmed me. I had to get going or I was going to miss my bus.

I helped her out of her bed. My shoulders supported her entire body weight—her arm hoisted around the left side of my neck as I carried her gently to the bathroom and sat her on the toilet. A wave of concern rippled through my body. For an instant, I considered staying home and taking care of her because something was different this time. I had learned from experience that when things started to become different, it meant a lot of changes ahead. But my mother had been through a lot in her life and I figured she could make it through this, too. I had to get to school. I shot her a concerned look and briskly walked out of my apartment without even saying goodbye. I raced across the street where I barely caught the city bus to school.

I made it to my classes on time and forgot about the morning at home. At lunch Brytan, a friend of mine, asked me to hook him up, so he quickly drove us to my apartment.

I smelled something putrid the minute we stepped through the door. I had never smelled anything like it.

“What’s that smell?” Brytan asked, waving his hand in front of his face.

I ignored him and tried to ignore the smell because we were in a rush to make it back to school in time for fifth period. We quickly headed to my room. As we walked through the hallway, I shouted to see if anyone was home, but there was no reply. I figured my mother was out.

We left shortly after and made it back to school just in time for fifth period. I had made arrangements to catch a ride with Brytan after school so I wouldn’t have to catch the bus home. He dropped me off at a corner store up the hill from my apartment where I ran into my friend Jimmy. We walked down my hill toward the entrance of my apartments. That’s when I saw the ambulance. Suddenly I knew.

“I think my mom is dead,” I said, turning to Jimmy.

“Should I leave?” he replied.

“Yeah man, I think that would be best.”

Crossing the lot to my apartment, I couldn’t seem to find a feeling. My body was numb as I approached my home, waiting for confirmation of what I already knew in my heart. I headed up the stairs to the top porch where two paramedics, my auntie, and grandmother greeted me.

“Do you want me to tell him?” the paramedic asked my aunt. She reluctantly looked at me, water streaming down her face.

“Your mother is no longer with us,” she sobbed. My body felt as if the plane of existence that I had been living on had switched. I felt lost. I couldn’t believe this was true reality. There was no way my mother—the only person who has ever stuck around—had been removed without a moment’s notice. It was so unexpected that for a minute I was too stunned to think. My numbness was quickly replaced by fear. All that was suddenly running through my head was that I had around eighteen ounces of weed in my bedroom, which represented my only chance of surviving on

my own.

“Can I go inside?” I asked the paramedic, trying to keep my voice calm.

“Is that something you think you can handle, Chase?” my aunt quickly interjected.

The paramedic opened the door part way. Through the slit, I could see a white apparition on the floor that didn’t belong in the center of our living room. By the time the front door was fully open, I could see her lifeless body covered in a white shawl from head to toe.

I stepped inside, stood at her feet and looked down at her for a few seconds, trying to comprehend what I was seeing. Then I remembered what I had to do.

“Can I go my bedroom?” I asked the paramedic, still fighting to keep my voice steady.

He told me I couldn’t because a person called a coroner was going to come to my home and analyze everything, so everything had to be in the exact condition it was in before the paramedics arrived.

“Please? Just for a minute. I need to be alone,” I asked again, trying not to sound desperate.

“No, I’m sorry,” the paramedic repeated.

I walked through the remainder of my living room to the entrance the hallway where my mother’s bedroom glared at me. It was the location of the last memory I had with her. I couldn’t seem to find a solution. My mind was so lost. I walked down the stairs to where the grey square of pavement signals the beginning of the black top parking lot. I walked drudgily towards the opposite side of the lot so that the paramedics couldn’t hear my thoughts. I’ve always been easy to read and I didn’t want to make it apparent that I was stressing about what was in my bedroom.

I looked up at the third-story window with the light on. I knew that as soon as the coroner opened the door to my bedroom, all he would see was a copious amount of marijuana on my coffee table. At that point it would be over, and the worst day of my life wouldn’t only be imprinted on my heart, but also in my legal records.

I decided right then and there that I would do anything within my power to avoid getting arrested. My grandmother couldn't stand to be inside the apartment, so she stood outside at the bottom of our steps. I watched her cross the parking lot to join me.

"Are you okay, Mijo?"

I didn't know what to say so I just cut straight to the point. "Grandma, I got some stuff in my room that I don't want the coroners to find but the paramedics won't let me go in."

My grandma looked at me with a mix of surprise and disappointment. "What kind of stuff is it, Chase?"

"It's just weed."

My grandma turned around without saying a word and headed up the stairs to the apartment. Shortly after, I saw the light in my bedroom vanish. I waited for a moment until my grandma came down the stairs and walked towards me, away from the paramedic.

"I took care of it," is all she said.

I had nowhere else to go so my grandma invited me to stay with her. That evening was a blur. I was still too stunned to feel much of anything. The next day she flushed my weed down the toilet.

I'm in the room I've been renting from an elderly couple for the past nine months—living alone while working as a baker at a nearby teahouse and trying to finish high school.

I watch my tears hit the settlement papers and quickly move them so they don't get wet. The questions I've been asking myself for the past two years swirl in my head.

Why didn't I stay home that day? Why didn't I do more to help her? Why didn't I tell her I loved her? Why is it that you never realize what you have until you lose it?

I've had plenty of time to think about the things I would tell her if she was

still here. I would thank her for everything she did for me, and for being the only support and one constant in my life. I'd tell her how many things have changed for me and where things are headed. I think she would be proud if she could see me now.

I stare back down at the settlement papers one more time. I quickly scrawl my signature in the marked places, shove the papers into the envelope and lick it shut—and it feels like a final goodbye.

Reckless was reprinted with the permission of Author Chase Werner. It first appeared in the student story collection, [Behind Closed Doors: Stories From the Inside Out](#)

Breaking Down the Story: Perspective Structure

- 1) Author opens his story in the present alone in a room, staring down at his mom's final settlement papers that triggers feelings of guilt and regret as he thinks back to that day two years earlier when everything in his life changed
- 2) Author tells the story about the day his mom died and the nightmare that unfolded for him.
- 3) Author closes his story back in the present – in the room staring at the settlement papers. But now he's thinking about what he wishes that he had said to his mom, about what she meant to him, about what he wishes she knew about him now. And as he thinks about the positive changes he has made in his life in the two years since his mom's death, he realizes that she would be proud of him. That, in turn, gives him the closure he needs to sign the settlement papers and move on with his life.
- 4) SETTING/TIME LAPSE: As discussed above, the setting for this story is the small room the author rents from an elderly couple. The actual story that unfolds in that room takes only a few minutes: the author is reviewing his mom's final settlement papers, then signs them, puts them in an envelop and seals the envelop to signify moving on with this life. However, through the use of flashbacks and thoughts, he is able to tell a much bigger story about his mom's death two years earlier and explain what he's learned and how he's changed since her death.

WRITING YOUR STORY

Now that you know what story you want to tell and have an idea of how to structure it, how do you bring it to life through words?

As mentioned earlier, there's a huge difference between Telling a Story and Showing a Story. And the way you show a story comes down to these key narrative writing elements:

- Character Development
- Setting
- Dialogue
 - Thinking/Feeling
- Emotion
- Sensory Details
- Opening Sentence that Grabs Voice

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

It's easy to think about character development in visual terms. But bringing a character from your story to life involves so much more than physical description.

When describing the characters in your narrative, think of the following:

- What does he look like?
- What does he smell like?
- How does he sound?
- How does he carry himself?
- How does he dress?
- Is he charismatic or do people steer clear of him?
- Does he have any particular mannerisms? Rolls eyes, squints, stoops over when he walks, always smoking a cigar?
- What background can you give us about him that adds to his character and let's readers know who he is?

To give you a sense, below are two character examples of from *Hippie Boy*

Character #1 - Earl (my soon to be stepfather):

I should have slammed the door in Earl's face. It's what I wanted to do the minute I saw him standing on our porch, snow clinging to his greasy black hair like dandruff. He was thick and short, five feet seven at most, with pasty white skin and a bulging gut that pressed against his plaid shirt and hung in a lump over his giant silver belt buckle. I noticed that his fingernails were stained and filled with dirt, a dead giveaway that he worked as a mechanic even if Mom hadn't mentioned it. But it was his eyes that bothered me most. They were icy-blue and hard, magnified by thick glasses that made them look like they were going to pop out of his head.

“Is your mom here?” he asked.

I stared at him, wondering what she could possibly see in him.

“Yeah, she’s here,” I said finally, reluctantly stepping out of the way so he could come inside.

As soon as Earl entered, a smell that reminded me of rotting hamburger meat filled the air.

A couple of paragraphs later, I bring in background to further develop Earl’s character.

In the six months since her divorce from Dad, Mom had dated her share of losers. Connie and I figured it was a phase she was going through until she got back into the swing of things. But Earl was an all-time low. He was a homeless Vietnam vet who lived in the back of his Chinook mini-camper in a trailer park near the edge of town. He had been divorced at least twice and had several kids from other wives. He was Mormon, but he hadn’t been practicing for several years.

What do we know about Earl?

- **What he looks like:** Greasy black hair slicked back against his head, white pasty skin, short and stocky, bulging gut, icy blue, hard eyes with thick glasses that magnified them, stained, dirt-filled fingers
- **What he smells like:** Rotten hamburger meat
- **What he does for a living:** Mechanic
- **Where he lives:** The back of his Chinook mini-camper on edge of town
- **His background:** Married at least twice before, several kids from those marriages, Mormon but not practicing for several years, Vietnam vet
- **The narrator despises him:** I should have slammed the door in Earl’s face. Mom had dated her share of losers, but Earl was an all-time low,

Character #2 – My Dad

Everything about Dad attracted me. I thought he was as handsome as a movie star. He wore his strawberry-blond hair combed back against his head like Elvis, and had warm hazel eyes that were so big I could sometimes catch my reflection in them. When he smiled, his entire face lit up and he had a loud, booming voice that made people listen. I heard Grandma say he had the golden tongue because he could talk his way in or out of anything.

I was proud to be Dad's daughter. I loved it that he was his own boss, made his own rules, and was working his way to becoming a millionaire— which he said was only a matter of time now. Everything about his life appealed to me, and I wanted it desperately.

As a self-employed salesman, Dad got to come and go as he pleased. He spent his time traveling the country, sleeping in motel rooms, and eating in restaurants. When he came home for visits, he often showed up in a new truck or van he had talked the local dealership into giving him for no money down. And he always dressed nice. When he wasn't in a suit, he wore jeans, a nice button-down shirt, and real leather cowboy boots.

What do you know about my dad?

- **What he looks like:** handsome as Elvis Presley, strawberry blonde hair, warm hazel eyes, a smile that lights up his entire face
- **What he sounds like:** Loud booming voice that people listen to
- **He is charismatic and persuasive:** golden tongue, can talk his way in and out of anything. Always talking dealerships into giving him a new van or truck for no money down
- **He's a free-spirited dreamer:** Self-employed, dreams of becoming a millionaire, lives on the road – sleeping in motels, eating at restaurants

- **He cares about appearances:** Always dressed in a suit or real leather cowboy boots, button down shirt and new jeans, and he's always driving new van or truck
- **The narrator adores him:** Everything about Dad attracted me; I was proud to be dad's daughter. Everything about his life appealed to me and I wanted it desperately.

Bring Your Character To Life – Your Turn

Now it's your turn. I want you to think of a prominent person in your life—a parent, a coach, a friend, a step parent, a bully, an enemy—and make a list of everything that comes to mind.

- Visual
- Sound
- Smell
- Touch
- Mannerisms/Habits
- Personality
- Background

Note: While short stories often don't have the room to paint an extensive character sketch, this exercise will help you in identifying the key characteristics you want to include in your story.

Once complete, use the list you've created to write a paragraph that brings your character to life for readers.

SETTING

In order to put readers into your story with you, you need to paint the setting for them so they can fully envision it. Does your story take place in a house? On a street corner? In a speeding car? At school or work? What time of day is it? Is it cold, hot?

The setting doesn't have to be a long, detailed description. It can be an active setting that puts readers there and keeps them anchored in your story.

Here's are a couple of examples of active settings from Hippy Boy.

Mississippi House – Chapter 2

The house Dad rented for us was small, only about 900 square feet, and the front yard was noisy because of all the cars and semi-trucks whizzing by on the four-lane highway next to it. But it was new. And compared to our ancient, rundown house in Utah, it was luxurious.

The minute we pulled up to the curb in our dirty, rusted brown Buick, I sensed things were improving. I raced into the house with Connie to check things out.

The first thing I noticed was that the narrow, closet-sized kitchen had its own dishwasher, which meant Connie and I didn't have to scrub dishes anymore. The eating nook next to the dishwasher opened into a family room with new cream-colored, wall-to-wall carpet.

"Connie, you have got to come here and check this out," I yelled. "It's got a fireplace!"

I had always dreamed of a fireplace and I loved the way my feet sunk into the soft plush carpet. At home, our carpet was so old that some areas were worn bare to the plywood floors beneath it. It was like walking on cement.

The other side of the kitchen led to a small, rectangular living room, which featured the same cream-colored carpet. At the end of the living room was a short hallway that opened to three small bedrooms, with a bathroom sandwiched between the first two. Mom and Dad's bedroom had its own bathroom.

"This is great!" I squealed as I examined the kids' bathroom. "It even has a shower in it!"

Connie and I equated having a shower and two bathrooms to being rich. Our house in Utah had only one bathroom and an old claw foot tub that looked like it belonged in the 1800s.

What's the setting? What do we know about it?

- Narrator is moving into new house
- It's small – only 900 square feet
- Looks new – has a dish washer, wall to wall carpet, living room and two bathrooms with a shower
- Not in a good location – noisy, sits next to a busy four-lane highway
- Narrator feels rich compared to life at her old house

On the Road - Chapter 15

It was still dark when I stumbled into the rest stop bathroom to brush my teeth and get ready for the day. I splashed cold water on my face and pulled out the Neutrogena face soap I kept carefully wrapped in a thin, white cotton washcloth I had taken from a Motel 6. The soap was critical when I was traveling with Dad because between the heat and the junk food, my face was prone to breakouts and it was the only thing that kept my skin smooth and clear.

I spent the next few minutes brushing the tangles from my shoulder-length hair and applying a quick coat of mascara, trying to make myself out in the blur of

metal on the wall. Then I headed into the handicap toilet stall to change into a fresh pair of shorts and a clean tank top. It was 5 a.m. and time to hit the road if Dad and I wanted to make it to Wisconsin at a decent hour.

By the time I returned to the station wagon, Dad had already put away our pillows and sleeping bags.

“You took so long I could have slept for another half hour. Are you all cleaned up and beautiful now?” he asked as I slid into the passenger seat beside him.

What’s the setting? And what do we know about it?

- Rest area bathroom
- Blur of metal on the wall that passes for a mirror
- Handicap stall to change her clothes
- Narrator spent the night in the station wagon with her dad in a rest area
- Still dark outside – only 5 a.m.
- Detail of stolen wash cloth from Motel 6 (budget motel) and fact that they spent night in car tells readers they don't have much money

Bringing Your Setting to Life – Your Turn

Now it's your turn. Think of the setting where your story takes place and start with a list of descriptions (visual, smell, sound etc.). Once done, turn that list into a paragraph about that setting. Make sure to put yourself into the setting to make it active and interesting for your readers.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue can be tricky, because it's about so much more than just putting what someone says into quotes.

Here are two key rules to remember about dialogue:

- 1) It's not just what's being said, but how it's being said and what the character is doing while saying it.**
- 2) Dialogue is important, but often it's what's not being said that's most critical. In other words, what are you, the narrator, THINKING and FEELING in response to the dialogue?**

Dialogue Rule #1: It's not just what's being said, but how it's being said and what the character is doing while saying it.

Think about conversations you've had with people, and how much the meaning of the words change depending on how the character is saying it.

- a) Is the person being serious or sarcastic?
- b) Is the person yelling the words, whispering the words, yelping the words in fear?
- c) What is he doing while talking?

Here's an example of how the meaning of a quote can change depending on how it's being said and what the person is doing while saying it.

"You're such an idiot!" he screamed, his fists clenched and pulled back, like he was about to hit me.

"You're such an idiot," she said, laughing affectionately. She smiled warmly and pulled me in for a hug.

Now think about a prominent character in your life and think about how that person speaks. Do they have a certain way of talking? Do they speak with an accent or a drawl?

The importance of keeping dialogue true to the character was another important lesson I learned while writing *Hippie Boy*.

My dad was most at home on the street and had a certain way of talking. He always talked in slang, always used a booming, friendly voice that people related to. But because I didn't want him to sound uneducated, I changed his dialogue slightly so it was more grammatically correct.

The editor I was working with immediately called me on it.

"Is that really how your dad talked?" she asked. "From everything you've written about him, he sounds like a charismatic guy. But his dialogue is completely flat."

When I reviewed his dialogue, I realized she was right. So I went back and rewrote his words in the way he really said them. Instead of "I think it's time to stop working, don't you?" It became, "I think it's quitten time, don't you?"

Instead of stopping his sentence short: "If there's an apartment available, it's ours." I continued on with the sentence as he said it so it became: "If there's an apartment available, it's ours," my dad said, a grin breaking open across his face. "Nobody says 'no' to me, Ingrid. Don't you know that about your daddy by now?"

Once I allowed myself to be free and write his dialogue exactly the way he talked and sounded, his personality came through and he came to life on the paper.

Dialogue Rule #2: Dialogue is important, but often it's what's not being said that's most critical. In other words, what are you, the narrator, THINKING and FEELING in response to the dialogue?

I've worked with hundreds of students on their stories and this is by far the biggest missing element in their writing. They do a good job of writing a string of dialogue. But they forget to include what they are thinking and feeling in response to that dialogue. Remember: Readers CANNOT read your mind. If you don't tell them what you're thinking and feeling, they won't know – which takes away from their experience and makes them less vested in your story.

This was also the biggest challenge for me when *writing Hippie Boy*. In fact, I had already finished writing the manuscript and had found my first agent when the same editor who made me aware of the issue with my dad's dialogue pointed out how much my manuscript lacked my personal thoughts and feelings.

When she did, it was like she'd turned on a light for me. I spent the next six weeks combing through the manuscript, adding what I was thinking and feeling in every place that I could find. By the time I was done, the manuscript had grown by fifty pages and I knew I had a much stronger story.

BEFORE and AFTER examples

Below is an exchange with my dad from *Hippie Boy*. It was just before my ninth birthday and my dad had promised me a weekend getaway complete with a night at a Holiday Inn and room service, which I'd fantasized about all evening. But when it

came time to go to the hotel, he broke his promise and said we would be spending the night at his saleslady's apartment instead, who turned out to be his girlfriend.

Here's the exchange BEFORE adding what I was thinking/feeling:

"Well, there you are, Ingrid," Dad said. "Guess what? Patricia just offered to let us spend the night here. Wasn't that nice of her?"

"But Dad, I thought you said we were going to get a room at the Holiday Inn."

"I know," he replied, "but it's late and it'll be hard to find a motel room. And this way we save some money."

"But what about room service?" I asked.

"It's probably closed by now anyway, and like I said, this saves us a lot of money."

I followed him into the hall next to her bedroom. Patricia was busy pulling out a pillow and blankets from a nearby closet. She started to apologize for not having a bed for me, but Dad interrupted.

"This is just fine. Isn't it, Ingrid?"

I stared at the floor and nodded my head.

Here is the same exchange with my dad, but now I've included what I'm thinking and feeling:

"Well, there you are, Ingrid," Dad said, pretending to be surprised. "Guess what? Patricia just offered to let us spend the night here. Wasn't that nice of her?"

He might as well have punched me in the stomach.

His words sucked all of the air out of me and for a minute, I couldn't speak. When I did find my voice, it was quivering and small.

"But Dad, I thought you said we were going to get a room at the Holiday Inn."

"I know, but it's late and it'll be hard to find a motel room. And this way we save some money."

“But what about room service?” I pleaded. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to break through my chest.

“It’s probably closed by now anyway, and like I said, this saves us a lot of money.”

Dad shot me a look that warned me not to press the issue any further.

I fought back the scream making its way up my throat. A volcano of tears rushed to my eyes, ready to explode. But there was no way I was going to let either Dad or Patricia see me cry. I bit my lip to hold it all in and tried to keep my body from shaking as I followed him into the hall next to her bedroom.

Patricia was busy pulling out a pillow and blankets from a nearby closet. She started to apologize for not having a bed for me, but Dad interrupted.

“This is just fine. Isn’t it, Ingrid?”

I stared at the floor and nodded my head.

Here’s another example of dialogue, this time from a scene in Chapter 5 of *Hippie Boy*.

As you read through it, notice how little dialogue there actually is – and how much is taking place outside of the dialogue that brings the situation to life and puts readers there with the narrator. Pay attention to what the main character (my dad) is saying and how he’s saying it. Pay attention to what the narrator (me) is thinking, feeling, observing and doing in response to his dialogue. Also notice how the third character’s (my mom) dialogue impacts the situation.

“Ingrid! Connie! Come to the kitchen now!”

Dad’s angry, thundering voice triggered a panic button inside me. My nine-year-old mind started spinning and racing through the past week, trying to remember what I had done wrong. Nothing was ringing a bell, but from the sound of

his voice, I was sure we were in trouble.

"I said, 'Come to the kitchen!'"

I raced to the room, fighting the urge to throw up. Connie, now twelve, came scurrying down the living room hallway and arrived at the same time. Our eyes locked for a second and I saw my fear mirrored in hers. We both turned toward Dad, who was pacing next to the table and looked like a lion ready to pounce.

"Go get your shoes on," he ordered. "You two are doing the grocery shopping."

For a second I felt relieved. Dad was angry, but he didn't seem to be angry with us. Then the weight of his words sank in. He wanted Connie and me to do the grocery shopping.

Mom never allowed us to pick out food from the grocery store. She always planned our meals ahead of time from the *Meals on a Budget* recipe book she'd been given by one of the sisters at church. She made a detailed grocery list before leaving the house so she knew exactly what she needed and wouldn't make an impulse buy that she would regret later.

I shot a nervous glance at Connie and then looked at Mom. She was sitting near the end of the kitchen table. The blood had drained from her face and I could see tears bubbling in her eyes. As soon as she saw me looking at her, she turned away.

Dad pulled a hundred dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Connie.

"Here. This ought to cover it."

I eyed the crisp, green bill Connie was now clutching and heard myself gasp. In my nine years, I had never seen that kind of money.

I looked at Mom for some sign of approval. Her lower lip was quivering.

"Jerry, you can't let them do the grocery shopping. That money has to last us the entire month." Her voice was quiet and pleading.

Dad didn't respond. Instead, he turned back to Connie and me.

"I said to go get on your shoes. I'll meet you both in the truck." I didn't dare look back at Mom. We ran to our rooms, grabbed our shoes, and hurried outside.

Dialogue: Now It's Your Turn

I want you think of a recent exchange you've had with someone, an exchange that resulted in some sort of argument or conflict.

Now write the dialogue taking into account everything you've learned in rules #1 and #2—including what was said, how it was said, the mannerisms of the person talking to you, what you were thinking and feeling in response to what was being said, and what you actually said, how you said it and your mannerisms while saying it.

EMOTION

Bringing emotion to life can be difficult. It's easy tell readers about your emotions—you were angry, you were sad, you were elated, you were excited. But how do you show that emotion so they can experience it with you?

People physically respond to emotions differently. For example, my dad had an explosive temper and just before he erupted, it was like watching the mild mannered guy from the TV show *The Incredible Hulk* morph into a monster. My dad's hands would clench into fists, the veins in his neck would bulge, his face would turn a reddish-purple color and then ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE.

Example: Rather than telling readers I was distraught that my mom had decided to let my soon-to-be stepfather decide if I could spend time with my dad, here's how I showed it for readers.

I swallowed the screams making their way up my throat as I headed back to the living room to report the news to Dad.

My stomach felt like a hundred bees were buzzing inside it, angrily stinging me as they bumped up against their prison walls. My thoughts were racing so fast I couldn't focus on any of them. I could see my hands trembling, and I wanted to reach out and hold Dad's hand for support, but he looked too angry to touch.

Here's another example. This time the emotion is fear as I'm being summoned into my mom and Earl's bedroom for an unknown confrontation that scares me.

I shot a final dirty look at Connie and Heidi before leaving the room,

determined not to let them see the panic that was shooting through me.

I tried to get back into my zone-out state as I followed Mom and Earl into their bedroom, but I could feel the blood rushing to my face, and my heart was pounding too hard to relax. Just the thought of being in such close proximity to Earl made me want to puke.

Emotion: Now It's Your Turn

Think about what physically happens when you get scared or upset. Do you tremble? Do you scream? Do you cry? Is your stomach a wreck? Do you feel like you're going to throw up? Make a list of what physically happens to you and then use those words to write a paragraph about a time you were extremely upset or scared.

SENSORY DETAILS

Sensory details build on the work you've already done with character development and setting. It's just a matter of continuing to weave the five senses—sight, sound, touch, smell and hearing—into your story and to focus on detail in general. Slow down when you are writing. It's the details that will paint the picture for your readers.

Here's an example of a scene that uses lots of sensory details. It's a continuation of the grocery store shopping scene from *Hippie Boy* (Chapter 5) that I started with in the dialogue section.

Our mouths watered as we eyed the ice cream and frozen pizzas, which we forced ourselves to pass. But when I spotted the pot pies, my favorite food, I stopped.

"I think we should get these," I said to Connie, preparing to argue my case. "I mean, each of them is a meal by themselves and they are easy to make."

I loved potpies—especially chicken potpies. Once or twice a year, Mom surprised us with them. I loved that they were each in their individual packages, which meant that we could eat them directly from the tin. I also loved the thick, creamy broth, the chunks of chicken, and the way the peas and carrots tasted like the broth itself. But the best part was the pie crust. I was always careful to save the crust for last. I would make a small hole in the top of the potpie, just big enough for my spoon, and eat out all of the broth, chicken, and vegetables. Then I slowly ate the crust, letting it melt in my mouth. Just thinking about it made my stomach growl.

"Please, Connie," I continued. "They're so good and they don't use up any dishes, which means cleaning the kitchen will be easy on the nights we eat these."

It didn't take much convincing. We pulled out twelve of them, ensuring we had enough for two dinners. We also decided that a large bag of tater tots made good dinner sense and tossed those into the basket.

On Connie's advice, we skipped the bread aisle because just across the parking lot was a Wonder Bread Outlet. It's where grocery stores took bread that couldn't be sold because the loaves had been squished or had exceeded the expiration date stamped on the bottom of the bag. But they were always at least half off the regular price.

The checkout clerk eyed us suspiciously as she rang up our groceries but she didn't say anything—even when Connie handed her the hundred dollar bill. She returned a five dollar bill and change to Connie, who tucked the money into her front pocket. Then the two of us walked our carts jammed with food over to the Wonder Bread store and pushed them just inside the shop, where we could keep an eye on them.

I followed Connie to the bread section that covered the back wall.

"Look, Ingrid," she said, motioning to the sign by the bread. "Ten loaves for one dollar! Mom is going to LOVE this."

All of the ten-cent loaves were at least a week over their expiration date. We picked through them carefully, leaving behind the ones that felt hard and stale when we cupped the bags with our hands.

Here's a list of some of the sensory details that were used in this passage:

Sight: Our mouths watered as **we eyed the ice cream and frozen pizzas**, which we forced ourselves to pass. But when **I spotted the pot pies**, my favorite food, I stopped.

Taste: Our **mouths watered**; loved the **way the peas and carrots tasted just like the broth itself**.

Touch: I slowly ate the crust, letting it **melt in my mouth**. We **pulled** out twelve of them; we picked through them carefully, leaving behind the ones that **felt hard and stale** when **we cupped the bags with our hands**

Sound: The checkout clerk eyed us suspiciously as she **rang up** our groceries **but she didn't say anything**.

Details in General: I loved potpies—especially chicken potpies. Once or twice a year, Mom surprised us with them. I loved that they were each in their individual packages, which meant that we could eat them directly from the tin. I also loved the thick, creamy broth, the chunks of chicken, and the way the peas and carrots tasted like the broth itself. But the best part was the pie crust. I was always careful to save the crust for last. I would make a small hole in the top of the pot pie, just big enough for my spoon, and eat out all of the broth, chicken, and vegetables. Then I slowly ate the crust.

Sensory Details: Your Turn

Now it's your turn. Pick one of the three scenarios listed below, imagine yourself in that setting and write a paragraph that focuses on sensory detail – and detail in general.

If possible, try to include all five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Note: if you already have a setting in mind from the story you plan to write, you are welcome to write a paragraph about that setting instead.

1. A day at the beach
2. Dinner at your favorite restaurant
3. A night out with friends at a bowling alley

OPENING SENTENCE THAT GRABS

Most readers today suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder. You've got to get their attention immediately and drag them into your story or you'll lose their interest.

As a result, your opening sentence is critical. Don't worry about nailing it down when you first start writing your story. Unless it automatically comes to you, wait until you have your story draft down on paper before heading back to the beginning and working on an opening sentence that will hook your readers.

Once I understood that I needed to start my story with the action/key conflict in my story (AKA my stepfather, Earl), I knew that my book had to open with the first time I met Earl— which was when he showed up on our front porch to take my mom out on a date. But I struggled to come up with that opening sentence that was going to hook readers. I started with a long unwieldy sentence: “I knew I was in trouble the first time I saw him standing on our porch.”

That didn't work so I tried again: “The minute I opened the door and saw him standing there—snow clinging to his greasy black hair like dandruff—I knew I was in trouble.”

Clearly that didn't work, either. I continued to struggle with my opening sentence for several days. Then one night, just as I was drifting off to sleep, it hit me: “I should have slammed the door in Earl's face.”

The minute the words popped into my mind, I knew I had nailed the lead. It was active, intense and made readers curious.

Why did I want to slam the door in Earl's face? I knew people would want to know the answer to this question, which would keep them reading.

Writing An Opening Sentence That Grabs: Your Turn

Now it's your turn. Using one of the scenarios below, come up with an opening sentence that is going to leave your readers hanging, make them curious, and force them to keep reading to find out what happens.

Scenario #1

You've just been in a bad car accident with a good friend.

Scenario #2

You've just discovered you are holding the jackpot-winning lottery ticket.

Scenario #3

You've just been fired from your job.

VOICE

There's a lot to be said about Voice. But I'll keep it to these two things:

1. Don't try to sound like someone else; just be you. In the same way that you need to develop the characters in your story so that they accurately reflect the person you are writing about, write your story in a way that's true to you and the way you sound, think and respond. Remember, it's a personal narrative – meaning you, as the narrator, take center stage. So be true to who you are.
2. Be authentic. Don't embellish your story so that it will be more interesting to your readers because a) it's dishonest and b) it's easy to tell when a story doesn't ring true and actually takes away from the power of it. As I mentioned in the beginning of this guide, a story doesn't have to be huge or catastrophic to resonate with readers. In fact, those stories are sometimes less powerful because they are harder to relate to. It's those stories that have a deep emotional impact on you that will also impact your readers when written correctly.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: Deconstructing Hippie Boy

Now that you know how to structure a story and bring it to life through narrative writing techniques, test what you've learned by breaking out the story structure in *Hippie Boy*.

Using the ABDCE Story structure, see if you can identify the following from Hippie Boy:

- 1) **Action:** How does the story open in a way that brings readers in? What's the key conflict of the story?
- 2) **Background:** What background does the narrator provide to give you the necessary context to understand the situation she faces and why certain characters act the way they do?
- 3) **Development:** Write a paragraph explaining how the story develops and ultimately leads to the Climax/Aha Moment? Is there any foreshadowing of things to come?
- 4) **Climax:** What is the Climax/Aha Moment?
- 5) **Ending:** What does the narrator learn about herself/her dad in that Aha Moment that leads to the ending/closure? How does the story end and what do you believe the narrator's life will be like moving forward based on the ending?

Bringing It All Together: Your Turn

Now it's your turn to take everything you've learned and write your personal narrative.

Your assignment is to write a 5-to-7 page story from your life using one of the three story structures: ABDCE, Journey or Perspective, and incorporating all of the narrative writing techniques to bring your story to life.

Take that story from inside you that needs to be told, start writing and give it everything you've got. And when you are done, if you feel up to it, share it with the world via an in-class reading, your friends and family, or social media to ensure your story and voice is heard.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether you're planning a career in business, technology, science or liberal arts, knowing how to effectively tell a story and bring it to life through words is key to success.

I have a friend who started her career as a programmer and entrepreneur, sold her business for millions of dollars and then continued working as a business consultant for both start-ups and Fortune 500 companies. A few years ago, she took a two-year sabbatical, moved to New York and enrolled in Colombia to pursue a degree in playwriting because she realized that business was all about personal storytelling, and knew she needed to hone her storytelling skills.

Knowing how to tell a story will help you in any career path you choose. But this is only one of the benefits of personal narrative. For me, personal storytelling is a way to foster understanding and awareness. It's also a way to find healing, validation and empowerment.

It was my own struggle with the pain from my childhood—followed by my ultimate decision to write my story—that made me understand the life-changing power of personal storytelling.

I'd tried to write *Hippie Boy* for more than a decade. But the emotions bottled inside me were so painful I cried every time I opened my computer to write and decided it was easier just to keep the hurt safely tucked away. Then, in late January 2004, I was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa, an incurable degenerative eye disease that is slowly stealing my eyesight. In my ongoing quest to save my vision, I sought treatment from a doctor in San Francisco who focuses on whole body health. He kicked off my appointment by asking me to tell him about my childhood. Within minutes, I was sobbing. That's when the doctor said two life-changing things to me.

He said, “Do you realize that you are carrying a huge negative energy charge inside of you over something that has happened more than twenty years ago and you’re still giving your former stepdad and those circumstances your power?”

The idea that I was still letting my ex-stepfather take my power and voice all these years later was troubling. But that was nothing compared to the doctor’s next words. He said, “If you don’t think that carrying this inside of you is impacting your physical health, you’re crazy.”

The doctor then told me about a groundbreaking study called ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences), which documents a direct correlation between emotional trauma in childhood and disease in adults. He also talked about Epigenetics – environmental factors such as emotional trauma and stress that turn on genes that trigger disease. When it hit me that holding onto the anguish from all those years ago could actually be causing me to go blind, it was a huge wake up call for me. It was hard, but I finally sat down and wrote my story and by the time I was done, I had found my voice and power and was no longer a victim of my past.

The experience was so healing and empowering for me that I knew I wanted to help teenagers dealing with similar struggles to find their voice and power through writing. Not long after voicing this intention, I received an email that would change my life. It was from Marjie Bowker, an English teacher at a nearby alternative high school, who had read *Hippie Boy* and thought it would resonate with her students. She invited me into her classroom, where we used *Hippie Boy* as a guide to help her students reclaim their voice by writing their personal narratives.

It was during our initial month-long collaboration—which ultimately spanned four years and led to four student story anthologies—that I discovered my passion: using my story and experiences to excite teens and adults alike about personal narrative and inspire them to go deeper in their writing, all while helping them to find healing and empowerment by sharing the story they need to tell.

ABOUT



Ingrid Ricks is an author, speaker and narrative writing instructor. Her memoirs include *The New York Times* Bestseller *Hippie Boy* and *Focus*, a memoir about her journey with the blinding eye disease Retinitis Pigmentosa. She is currently working on a memoir about her quest to save her eyesight.

Ingrid's essays and stories have been featured on Salon and NPR. Along with writing, she is passionate about leveraging narrative writing to give both teens and adults a voice. In addition to facilitating narrative writing programs in schools and teaching narrative writing

workshops for adults, she serves as a featured speaker for various organizations and conferences, where she discusses the power of personal storytelling, turning adversity into assets, embracing the moment, and the secret to becoming a dreamer who does.

She lives in Seattle with her husband and two daughters. For more information, visit: www.ingridricks.com or her program website: www.writeitoutloud.org