



Creative writing can have a more free structure than an analytical essay or a lab report. A story or poem does not have a thesis – that is, it does not state an argument straight out. But stories and poems still have themes: central ideas or questions. They have structure and elements that the writer puts together to keep the reader involved and get a point across. Here are a few places to start and points to keep in mind. Some mention stories, but many of these guidelines can be used for poetry and creative nonfiction as well.

Characters

- **Who are the people you create?**

Often, they begin hazy, and you get to know them as you write. As you get to know them, let the reader know them too. Be specific. Maybe you begin with a tall, dark-haired woman. How many people do you know who are tall and dark? How are they different?

- **Let us see the character.**

How does she move? How does she enter a room? What does she see first? Do first?

- **Character isn't how people look; it's how people think.**

People show who they are by what they do. Some writers give a clear picture of a character without ever talking about what the character looks like. Kevin McIlvoy begins *Hyslop*:

“It’s one lucky eighty-seven-year-old jackass who’s jailer is his confessor.”

The man speaking is a devout Catholic and a life-long thief. As the book begins, he’s teaching his jailer to waltz. Aside from his age, we know nothing about his appearance – but we know a lot about him.

Point of View

- **Is one character telling the story directly, or is the teller telling a story about someone else?**

- **There are six main points of view:**

- First Person (“I”), when the speaker tells his own story: “I was born twice ” (Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*).
- Second Person (“you”): “With your feet in the stirrups, you should feel quite comfortable for reading; having your feet up is the first condition for enjoying a read” (Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*).
- The Second Person can also be used as an imperative (an order): “Meet in expensive beige rain coats, on a pea-soupy night. Like a detective movie” Lorrie Moore (*How to be an Other Woman*).
- Third Person Close is when we only see what one character sees and knows: “. . . as if that were the price he had paid for the privilege of looking out – eyes that allowed him to be seen” (Russell Banks, *Affliction*).

Point of View (continued)

- Third Person Omniscient is when the narrator knows everything: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
- Multiple narrators: moving from one speaker to another in either first person, like Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, or third person, like Russell Banks’ *The Sweet Hereafter*.

Conflict

- **What is happening to a character that makes you want to tell the story and makes us want to read it?**

In any story, something is compelling the characters to talk. Think about conversations you didn’t want to have, but you couldn’t rest until you did.

Bring the tension in early, and keep it tight. A story does not tell everything that happens in a character’s day. In the same way, dialogue does not tell every “um” and stumble in a conversation. Think of it as conversation’s greatest hits and cut to the chase.

Conflict can come from the inside or from the outside – or from both. An outside event like a breakup, an illness or an accident may make a character miserable or angry. A character who is miserable or angry may make things happen.

Plot

- **What happens to these characters?**

Stories do not have to happen in chronological order, but they do have to have some kind of logic and momentum. Events push characters to act, and characters push each other. Everything in a story has to happen for a reason; nothing is random.

- Let the writing tell you what happens; don’t force it.
- If one scene sticks, try writing another in another place. Let the characters move.
- If the characters move a lot or the time changes often, map out a timeline of the story.

Time

- **A narrator can tell a story immediately as it happens, or soon afterward while the emotions it raised are still fizzing in the air, or long afterward, looking back.**

You can write in the present tense: “I am walking home from work, and I see an ambulance pull up in front of my building.”

Or in the past: “She left two years ago, and on a Monday morning, as though she wanted to prove I was just another job she got tired of.”

Time (continued)

You can also put in flashbacks, glances to a time farther back than the time of the story: “He remembered the first time he had tried absinthe at a grotty cast-iron table in the square while his roommate kicked a way through the pigeons.” If you switch from one time to another in a story, make the switch into the new time clear – *the first time they had...*, *when she last...*, *the year before...* – and signal the switch back to the original time – *but now, this time, here in Atlanta*.

It can help to have a sight or sound or smell or event that triggers the memory that takes the narrator to the new time or recalls him to the first one.

Setting

- **Where does the story happen?**

It often helps to give the reader a firm sense of where the characters are. This can mean indoors, in a room, a house, or an office building; or it can mean outdoors, on Commonwealth Ave. at a stop on the Green Line, just after a two-foot snow storm. Are your characters in the country, the city, the suburbs? Where are they from? People can help to give a sense of place, and so can sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures.

Specific Detail

- **The more the better. What characters see and feel tells us about the world they live in, and it tells us who they are.**

What might you think about a man who is wearing

- an army jacket and a paint-stained baseball cap?
- a string tie and snakeskin boots?
- black jeans, a black sweater and a watch on a chain?

Remember that what your characters feel affects what they see. A mother who has lost her son might focus on his picture or his school notebook, for instance, and notice nothing else in the room. What your characters feel can also affect how they see: how would a violently angry man see a sunset?

This handout was expanded from a staff meeting presentation by Clark Knowles.