

3.

## A SHAKESPEAREAN TEACHES NARRATIVE

Dr. Heidi Cephus

---

25 min read

### What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn how to write a narrative that engages your reader and accomplishes your purpose. You will use the framework of theater to think about ways in which you can make your narrative come to life for your audience. By the end of this chapter, you will be ready to construct your own scene, select relevant details, and show your reader the importance of your story.

### Key Terms

The following key terms from the theater world will help you think more deeply about your narrative:

- Plot
- *In Media Res*
- Soliloquy
- Thrust Stage
- Audience / Spectator

### Writing a Narrative that Comes to Life

#### What is a Narrative?

In simple terms, a narrative is a story or an account of events. Narratives allow us to identify and explain patterns in the world around us, helping our audience understand our experiences.

The storytelling at the center of a narrative is an act of memory making that responds to a basic human desire to be understood and remembered. Shakespeare captures this desire as Hamlet expresses his dying wish to his friend Horatio: “If thou didst ever hold

me in thy heart,” he urges, “draw thy breath [...] / To tell my story” (5.2.349).<sup>1</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda echoes this sentiment as the cast of *Hamilton* sings, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story” at the end of the musical. Researchers across disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, marketing, literature, and rhetoric and writing studies emphasize the importance of storytelling, or narrative, to the human experience.<sup>2</sup>

Storytelling is something that you already do on a daily basis. When you email a professor after missing class or recount the events of your drive to work to explain why you were late to a boss, you use narrative. You also use narrative to describe the events of a party, game, a class to a friend who was unable to attend. And, you consume narrative every day in the conversations you have with friends, the music you listen to, the TV shows you watch, and the media you consume both intentionally and unintentionally.

Because stories are so integral to our everyday lives, you have likely noticed narratives vary in their effectiveness. Have you ever listened to a friend tell a story, only to ask (perhaps silently), “What was the point?” Or, even worse, maybe you thought, “That doesn’t make sense.”

As you construct your own narrative, you need to make sure that you effectively convey events and communicate your purpose. For this chapter, I define **narrative** as *an account of events, organized logically and brought to life for the audience through intentional use of sensory details to accomplish a specific purpose*. This definition lays out the key components of a narrative:

- **An account of events**
- **Logical organization**
- **An intended audience**
- **Use of sensory details**
- **A specific purpose**

## Theater and Narrative

Writers often hear the advice: “Show, don’t tell.” And, in the theater, everything is about showing. For this reason, this chapter uses the model of theatrical performance to guide you through the writing of a narrative.

If you’ve ever been to a play (or watched a movie), you’ve seen a story come to life. Embodied characters act out events, which are organized with the intention of eliciting certain reactions or emotions from the audience. The actions on stage, the scenery and props, the sound effects, and the speeches create sensory experiences that help the audience feel like they are part of the action. If a play is successful, at the end you understand why the story was staged. Theater contains all the elements of narrative in an amplified form.

In this chapter, you will learn to use this knowledge to create more compelling narratives. By imagining the sensory experiences of the theater, you can more easily identify the elements that will bring your stories to life on the page.

The theater is especially useful for imagining a narrative come to life for three reasons:

- Because theater happens live, it engages all five senses.
- Because theater includes a live audience, it provides a source of direct feedback.
- Because theater happens in a limited space, it requires careful decisions about what details are essential to the story.

1. All references to Shakespeare’s plays in this chapter come from *The Riverside Shakespeare* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). Some spelling has been updated.

2. See, for example: Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Belknap: 2009); Michael Austin, *Useful Fictions: Evolution, Anxiety, and the Origins of Literature* (U of Nebraska Press: 2011); and Leonard Talmy, “Force Dynamics in Language and Cognition,” in Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics*, Massachusetts: MIT, vol. I. Ch. 7, 409-470.[3] “Rivals” in this case means something more akin to “partners.” (See “rival, n.2 and adj. 3.” OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press. (accessed May 10, 2021).

In these three ways, the theater departs from the medium of film. However, if you have not been to the theater, you may find it helpful to imagine a TV show or a movie when thinking about your narrative.

The sections that follow break down the essential parts of a narrative, using examples from the theater to explain each one. Specifically, these sections draw examples from Shakespeare’s drama. Shakespeare wrote for what many scholars have termed “a bare stage.” In other words, he had no elaborate set pieces to help tell the story. Considering the strategies that Shakespeare used can help us become better storytellers.

## An Account of Events

“Come, let’s see the event” – Fabian, *Twelfth Night* (3.4.395)

At the center of any good story are answers to the questions: “What happened?” and “To whom?” In your narrative, you will answer these questions through your plot and characters.

### Plot

The **plot** is *the sequence of events in your narrative*. As the question, “What happened?” implies, one of the most essential elements of the plot is conflict and change. When deciding what event to portray in your narrative, think about a moment or experience in which your circumstances changed.

Focus on the event (or set of events) at the center of this change. Then, use basic plot structure to make sure you have included the relevant events:

- A story starts in **equilibrium**. This is the time before change occurs. In your story, you might give some background information to help the audience better understand your transformation.
- Then a **conflict**, or problem, is introduced, which prompts a change. In a narrative, this conflict might be between two people, two ideas, or two sets of values.
- The conflict produces a reaction, or set of events, called the **rising action**.
- These events build toward the **climax**, or the point of the story in which the outcome is determined.
- The events following the climax are called the **falling action**. This is where all of the things that have been determined in the climax start to fall into place.
- Finally, you reach the **resolution**, or the point at which things settle into a new normal.

Let’s look at how these plot elements play out in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

- At the beginning of the play, watchmen observe a ghost who looks like Hamlet’s father (equilibrium).
- The conflict begins when the ghost tells Hamlet that he was poisoned by Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle (conflict).
- Hamlet wrestles internally with the desire to avenge his father’s death and looks for ways to prove Claudius is guilty (rising action).
- The conflict comes to a head once Hamlet believes he has proof (climax).
- Then, Hamlet confronts his mother, accidentally kills Polonius, is banished, and is challenged to a duel (all the falling action, or the consequences of the climax).
- Finally, the play resolves during the duel, as Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup and Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius die when struck by Laertes’ poisoned sword (resolution).

Imagine if Hamlet had been a well-adjusted character, his father had lived to old age, and Hamlet had inherited the throne just as expected. I don't think it's far-fetched to suggest Shakespeare's play wouldn't have gained nearly as much popularity.

Even if your own story doesn't have as much drama as a Shakespearean tragedy, you can use the plot structure to establish which events are crucial to your narrative. As you brainstorm your own narrative, answer the following questions:

- What were things like before the events? (equilibrium)
- What happened to create conflict or what prompted a change? (conflict)
- As a result of this conflict, what happened? (rising action)
- When did the problem come to a head? (climax)
- What did you do as a result? (falling action)
- How was everything resolved? And what are things like now? (resolution)

The answers to these questions will provide you with a basic plot outline.

## Characters

Once you've decided what event to portray, you also need to identify the major and minor characters for your narrative. The major characters are the people who are essential to the story. In other words, the story cannot happen without these characters. When writing a personal narrative, you will be the protagonist, the character who is facing the conflict. The minor characters are there for support. They help add dimension to the story, but the story does not revolve around them.

Focus on the main characters. Consider who needs a name and what physical descriptions might help the audience put a face to the name. If you've ever read a play before watching it, you'll notice that many of these descriptions are missing (or imbedded in conversation). Because you will not have the benefit of the stage, you need to create visual elements through your writing.

Imagine that you are staging the episode. Thinking about the people in your story as staged characters will help you identify details that are essential to your understanding of the character and their role in your narrative. How would the character style their hair? What would they be wearing? What would they say and how would they say it? It might even help to identify the actor who would play the character. Ask yourself what about this actor or their past performances makes them a good representative of the person who they are portraying.

Consider the effect of these two versions of the same event:

Version 1: When I was in middle school, my friend brought a cow skull to school for show and tell.

Version 2: Elisabeth's spiral curls bounced as she reached her freckle-covered arm into the black garbage bag to retrieve her show and tell item. I heard gasps from the other students as she pulled out a cow skull.

Version 1 gives the reader basic information but does not tell the audience anything about the characters.

The additional details in Version 2 help establish Elisabeth as a character. Presumably in a longer version, the reader will learn more about her: perhaps that she received the nickname "Frizzy Lizzy" from her friends or that she spent hours outside each day on her parents' farm. The spiral curls and the freckles become small reminders of larger aspects of her character. In this example, "the other students" are the minor characters, who provide context but are not assigned names.

In your narrative, use less details when discussing minor characters. Similar to the above example, Shakespeare assigns names to his major characters—Hamlet, Romeo, Juliet, and Cleopatra, while relegating minor characters to their positions—First Gentleman, Gravedigger, or Page. You might follow a similar model, refer to these characters collectively (for example as "the crowd" or "other customers"), or even choose to exclude minor characters from your narrative altogether. Regardless, make sure all details about your major or minor characters are relevant to the story.

## Logical Organization

“Order gave each thing view.” – Duke of Norfolk, *Henry VIII* (1.1.44)

Once you have decided what event(s) to portray and which characters to depict, you must decide on the order of events. While the plot describes the chronological order in which events occur, you may choose to present your story in a different logical order. For example, you might start with the climax of your story and then use flashbacks or dialog to show the reader how you got to that point. Or, you may choose to keep your events in chronological order but skip forward in time, highlighting the most important events.

### Where to Start

Students often struggle with how to start their narrative. From a practical point of view, you probably do not want to start by writing your introduction. Start with the material that comes easiest to you or the part of your story that you are most excited to write. Once you have a draft, you can figure out how to introduce your narrative.

First drafts often begin and end by telling the reader why the experience was significant. Although, as a drafting technique, it might make sense to establish the purpose before you start writing, once you get to the final draft, consider what you want the introduction to accomplish and what the audience needs to know before they continue. Rather than contextualization, the audience needs to get a feel of the characters, setting, and tone of the story.

Place yourself in the audience of a theater. Imagine if you sat down and the play began with a 10-minute explanation of the theme, the characters’ backgrounds, and all the events that preceded the action. You would probably be bored, and you might even walk out of the theater.

To grab the audience’s attention, plays often start *in media res*, or *in the midst of things*. Here’s an example from the beginning of Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

**Bernardo:** Who’s there?

**Francisco:** Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

**Bernardo:** Long live the king!

**Francisco:** Bernardo?

**Bernardo:** He.

**Francisco:** You come most carefully upon your hour.

**Bernardo:** ’Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.

**Francisco:** For this relief much thanks: ’tis bitter cold

And I am sick at heart.

**Bernardo:** Have you had quiet guard?

**Francisco:** Not a mouse stirring.

**Bernardo:** Well, good night.

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,

The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

Notice how the play starts with a verbal exchange. The play does not provide the audience with background information about the two characters. At the beginning of the scene, the audience doesn’t know who Bernardo or Francisco are or even that they are Bernardo and Francisco. We don’t know the occasion of their meeting or the significance of it. Instead, Shakespeare drops the audience into the action, as if they have just walked into the middle of a conversation. By the end of this short exchange, however,

the audience has learned the two characters names, that the two characters function as some sort of guards working in shifts, that the night so far has been relatively uneventful, and that Horatio and Marcellus are “rivals.”<sup>3</sup>

The tension in the first exchange, created with the short responses suggests the possibility that Francisco and Bernardo are leaving something unsaid, a suspicion confirmed with the entrance of Horatio and Marcellus only a few lines later.

Through this exchange, Shakespeare sets the tone and gives the audience information needed to understand the story. As you are writing your narrative, consider whether you can use a short scene to establish tone and key ideas.

## Past Events

In *Hamlet*, we find out from the Ghost that the rumor that Hamlet’s father died when “A serpent stung [him]” is false. The Ghost informs Hamlet (and the audience) that “The serpent that did sting [Hamlet’s] father’s life / Now wears his crown” (1.5.39-40). In case Hamlet or the audience missed his accusation of his own brother, Claudius, the ghost more clearly articulates, “thy uncle stole, / With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial, / And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leperous distilment; [...] Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand / Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch’d” (1.5.61-64;74-75).

This murder happens prior to the actions on stage. By the time the play begins, Hamlet’s father is dead, and the ghost already haunts Denmark. The murder is, however, crucial to the events that unfold on stage. Without this accusation, Hamlet would never be driven to “Revenge [his father’s] foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.25). Rather than give the audience this context before the action starts, Shakespeare includes it in the fifth scene. In doing so, he influences audience perception. Already introduced to the skepticism that the other characters have expressed about the ghost, the audience must decide whether to trust this information or disregard it. Their decision affects how they judge Hamlet for the remainder of the play. The introduction of past events at this moment is intentional and provides an organic way to incorporate these details.

In your narrative, you may similarly use dialogue to provide important context for current events. For example, your friend might say, “Remember when we went to Dairy Queen? I forgot my wallet and Clint brought it to me.” If Clint is an important character, this story might explain how you first met.

You can also recall past events by using flashbacks or by communicating your internal thoughts. There are many ways to do this. You can use markers like “last year” or “a similar event occurred when I was five.” You can also jump back in time (sometimes a space between paragraphs is enough to clue in your reader). Or you can communicate your thoughts through writing that parallels a **soliloquy**, or *the type of speech an actor gives to himself (and the audience), but not the other characters on stage*. Let’s say you are pulling up in your friend’s driveway. You could use the drive to recall the first time you pulled into that same spot or a moment when you fought with that friend in front of her house.

## Gaps in Time

When deciding how to organize your narrative, also consider how you will handle the gaps between major events. For example, maybe you had a key experience at 5 that influenced how you dealt with another experience at 18. You won’t have time in your narrative to write about everything that happened between 5 and 18. So, you can use that space to strategically connect material.

My favorite example of Shakespeare jumping forward in time happens between Act III and Act IV of *The Winter’s Tale*. Act III ends with a detailed scene, where a shepherd and his son find an abandoned infant and observe a shipwreck. Act IV elaborates on the preparations for a sheepshearing festival 16 years later. Time, portrayed by an actor on stage, gives a speech bridging this gap and noting the important events that have happened during this span: the abandoned infant has been raised as a shepherd’s daughter, sixteen years have passed, the baby’s father has grieved, and a new character (Florizel) has entered the action.

---

3. “Rivals” in this case means something more akin to “partners.” (See “rival, n.2 and adj. 3.” OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press. (accessed May 10, 2021).

Zoom in on what’s important and zoom out on the filler material. In your narrative, consider which events need the stage treatment. In other words, if you were depicting the experience on stage, which actions would you depict, and which would you describe? See the section on **Sensory Details** below for more information on how to bring your events to life.

## An Intended Audience

“Call the noblest to the audience.” – Fortinbras, *Hamlet* (5.2.37)

At the end of *Hamlet*, young Fortinbras issues an order to “call the noblest to the audience,” cultivating a specific audience for the story Horatio intends to tell.

Your instructor may ask you to write for a particular audience. Or, you may have the opportunity to select your readers. Either way, you should keep your audience in mind as you are writing. Consider what the audience knows and how they will react.

Visualizing your audience in a theater (and especially a theater that possesses the characteristics of Shakespeare’s stage) will help you identify the characteristics that they possess and the reactions you want to elicit. When you think about the theater, you likely imagine a play in the dark with lighting on the stage. Such lighting helps us follow the action, but distances the audience from events.

Shakespeare’s theater was different. There was no barrier between the audience and the stage. The use of a **thrust stage** meant that *the audience surrounded the stage on three sides*. Standing playgoers, known as groundlings, stood for the entirety of the production, jostled for position, and even leaned against the stage.

Because the productions happened during the day, playgoers could see other audience members as clearly as they could see what was happening on stage. If an audience didn’t laugh or clap at the right time or if they laughed or clapped at the wrong time, it had a big impact on the production. The actors had to compete for the audience’s attention and they did that by improvising, making direct eye contact, and using asides to speak directly to the audience.

Even if the stories you write are not produced on stage, you can still make a meaningful connection with your own audience by translating the power of physical embodiment in the theater into the words that you select for the page. Obviously, you can’t look into your audience’s eyes, respond to something they’ve said, or react when their attention fades. But you can still make that connection by considering how they will react. One way to do this is to have someone else read your story. Instead of asking them to edit it, ask them to document when they laughed, smiled, teared up, and so on. Ask them when they felt interested and when their interest waned.

By identifying your audience and seeking feedback, you can adapt your narrative to capture the audience’s attention. Consider what terms you might need to define, how much description or explanation the audience will need, and what part of your story will most interest your audience.

## Use of Sensory Details

“Awake your senses.” – Brutus, *Julius Caesar* (3.2.16-17)

The word **audience** comes from the same root word as auditory and *implies that playgoers primary engage with a play through sound*. Sometimes the word **spectators** is used to describe the same group of people. Spectators, from the same root word as spectacles, *implies visual engagement with a play*. Although this chapter primarily uses the word “audience,” considering both terms highlights the way playgoers or even readers engage through multiple senses.

Once you’ve identified your main plot points, decided which parts need the most emphasis, and selected a target audience, you are ready to fill in the details. These details are what transforms your narrative from telling to showing.

While you may be used to plays or movies with elaborate scenery, Shakespeare did not have this luxury when he wrote or directed his plays. In fact, evidence shows that 16th and 17th century public theater performances used very little scenery and few stage pieces. Furthermore, because such performances took place outside in the afternoon, the playwright had little control over the weather or lighting. If a scene took place at night under starry skies, Shakespeare had to figure out a way to communicate that to his audience

(characters carried lanterns or candles). And, some of the magic of Shakespeare is that he continues to communicate it to us today. Sometimes when you are writing a narrative, you might feel like you are creating something out of nothing. Imagining Shakespeare's stage might help you do this.

On the page, your audience cannot see the characters or hear their speeches. That means that you need to paint the scene with words.

The **Logical Organization** section of this chapter briefly mentioned the idea of zooming in and out. Zoom in on what you want the reader to notice. This means deciding which events deserve the stage treatment. In other words, if you were staging this scene, what events would happen on the stage?

Once you decide on these events, consider what is significant about each moment. Significance can come from a moment's relationship to other events or from symbolic value. Select the details that highlight this significance.

Take a moment to recall a scene from a play, movie, or TV show that particularly resonated with you. Consider all of the details that went into the production of that scene. If the scene was inside a building, what room was it in? What flooring was used? Walls? Lighting? Furniture? What props were present? What colors were used in the scene? Where were the characters positioned? From where did they enter or leave? What did they look like? How was their hair styled? What were they wearing? Consider the auditory components of the scene. Who spoke? What was their voice like? What did they say? What other sounds did you hear?

Now imagine this same scene without each component. How would it be different? What if, for example, all the sounds were taken away? Or you just had a narrator telling you what the characters did, but there was no movement?

By imagining your narrative played out on stage, you can identify details that will show rather than tell your experiences. While your final version will not include every prop, piece of scenery, or physical detail of a character, it should include enough of these for the reader to fill in the rest of the picture. The more essential that object, place, or person is to your story, the more details you need to provide about it. Use the following techniques to incorporate detail.

## The Five Senses

Focus on the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. If you are writing a narrative about your own experiences, think about what you saw, heard, smelled, tasted, or felt. To practice, set a 5-minute timer and write down everything you sense during those 5-minutes. Because we experience things through the senses, the best way to show your experience to the reader is by activating their senses.

## Metaphor

A related way to involve your reader is by incorporating simile or metaphor. What did an object look like, sound like, smell like, taste like, or feel like? For instance, let's say you are describing a squeaking noise. Is it more like the sound created as a basketball player pivots on the court or the sound created as a teacher drags a sharp piece of chalk down the blackboard? Or is it something else entirely? What feelings do these sounds evoke in your body? Metaphors use the audience's own memory to help the reader understand an unfamiliar experience. Great writing will help the reader feel the sensation of the response in their body. Thinking about your own reaction will help you develop effective comparisons.

## Dialogue

Writing dialogue is another way to help drop your reader into your scene. Sometimes students feel intimidated because they can't remember the exact conversation that they had with someone years ago. However, in personal narratives, it is okay to take minor creative liberties to communicate a point. If you remember the gist of the conversation, you can still put it into dialogue.

By using the senses, metaphor, and dialogue, you can paint a picture of characters, scenery, and events to engage your audience at a sensory level.



## A Specific Purpose

“I have spoke to the purpose.” – Hermione, *The Winter’s Tale* (1.2.100)

This chapter has asked you to imagine your story as if were to be produced on the stage. As you continue to do so, make sure to write with a clear purpose in mind. Ask yourself:

- Why am I telling this story?
- What do I want the reader to get out of my story?

Deciding on your purpose might take some work. And while it is tempting to just pick an event and then later add in a purpose, that’s not going to create the best narrative. A strong narrative starts with purpose.

To explore and identify purpose, consider starting with some journaling work. The following prompts may help you arrive at an idea for your paper and help you understand why it is important to tell that story:

- What keeps you up at night?
- What defines you as a person?
- What do you wish other people knew about you?
- Are you the same person you were 5 years ago? Why or why not?

Sometimes students feel like they don’t have a life changing moment to write about. That’s okay. Your story might be more subtle. Some of the best narratives start with small moments that seem insignificant. Focusing on the details around these moments and making theme come to life will result in a better narrative than a big moment with little relatability.

## Conclusion

Following the advice in this chapter will help you write an engaging narrative that accomplishes a specific purpose. Remember, there are different styles of writing, and Composition I is a great place to try these out. Reading a variety of narratives as you prepare to write your own will help you identify the required components and find a style that works for you.

## Discussion Questions

Use the following questions to further explore the ideas in the chapter and begin brainstorming for your own narrative.

1. Think of a time you used storytelling (i.e. narrative) in your everyday life to persuade or inform someone. Were you effective in achieving your purpose? Why or why not?
2. Think of a narrative that you have recently read, listened to, or watched. Then, answer the following questions:
  - How did it begin? How might switching the order of the narrative switch the outcome or interpretation of the story?
  - Who was the audience for this narrative? How do you know?
  - What was the narrative’s purpose? How do you know? What details in the text or story contributed to this purpose?
3. Imagine you are staging an event from your life. Think about the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings that would help this moment come to life. Make a list of details you could add for each of the five senses.

## About the Author



Heidi Cephus

<https://twitter.com/HNCephus>

Heidi Cephus holds a PhD in English from the University of North Texas, where she conducted research on the connection between bodies and judgment in Shakespeare's plays. More recently, she has focused on depictions of women's work from Shakespeare to today. In addition to teaching and researching Shakespeare, Dr. Cephus has 13 years of experience teaching composition courses, including 3 years at Oklahoma State. Currently, she is employed as a Choice and Success Advisor at a Colorado high school. In her spare time, Dr. Cephus enjoys playing disc golf, running, and reading detective fiction.