

Narrative Time

Like life, stories and novels take place in time and can be structured in many different ways. Here are some common ones:

Chronological timeline

Appropriate for adventure stories and stories driven by the action. This kind of novel needs to start in the action and cannot have a slow build up unless you establish a hook by somehow hinting to the reader what may happen in the future. A kind of ‘If I had known then what I know now, I would never have...’ device. An example of this is ‘The Icarus Girl’ by Helen Oyeyemi.

Advantages: This is the easiest timeline to deal with because everything happens in the right order.

Disadvantages: Linear narratives can become monotonous. Ways to counter this are to jump cut (as in a film) – e.g. jump forward into the next action to avoid mundane passages where characters are just being moved from place to place or one situation to another. Where necessary (and it often isn’t necessary), you can establish your new scene and then give a brief summary of what happened in between (see Scene and Summary for more examples). You can also start chapters in the middle of the action, which breaks up the linear feel and creates suspense. (Why has Rita just chucked a glass of wine over her boss?) Suspense can also be created by setting up a moment of tension (your protagonist is trapped in the house with a savage dog) and keeping the reader waiting for the outcome by cutting to something else – e.g. a dramatised memory of a similar emotion he experienced in the past when the school bully trapped him in the playground, or you could cut to another character and what they are doing, e.g. his girlfriend waiting impatiently for him outside the opening of her first art exhibition.

Staying entirely in chronological narrative would make for a thinner story lacking in texture as it would cut out the ability to throw light on present events by showing their causes in the past. This can be got around by using summary or flashback to present previous events where these are relevant to the present plot.

Linear narratives can also lack psychological depth as in real life past, present and future are all present in the mind at the same time; only the enlightened live entirely in the present. But this psychological layering can be dealt with in a chronological narrative by using internal flashbacks and imagined consequences or projections.

Total Flashback

This is a relatively well known convention, especially in films, useful for stories in which there is some past mystery or tragedy which the protagonist is working through in order to come to terms with their past.

The story starts in the present of the narrative with a prologue in which the character looks back at what happened, then it goes back to the beginning of the past story and continues until it reaches the present again. At this point, the story may end, or it may continue to tell us what happened after that and how the opening situation was eventually resolved. In this type of timeline, the promise that must be fulfilled is that the past story will solve the mystery, return to the time where the narrative started, and create a satisfactory resolution. A very successful example of this structure is ‘The Secret History’ by Donna Tartt.

Advantages: Allows the opportunity to create a strong hook for the reader which will carry them through the opening of the chronological narrative, which may not be so compelling, but the knowledge that some mystery is going to be revealed will keep the reader reading. Most of the narrative, after the opening, remains chronological.

Disadvantages: It needs to be made very clear to the reader that they are being taken back into the past and the relevance of the past narrative to the problem or mystery established in the opening must be quickly evident. There is a long gap between the setting up of the ‘now’ narrative and its conclusion, so the opening hook will have to be powerful enough to carry the reader through until the drama picks up in the past narrative. In a short story one mystery may be enough – in a novel you may need to set up other mysteries/problems/obstacles that need to be resolved during the course of the story, so the reader’s curiosity is at least partially satisfied before the end.

Some novels are written in **partial flashback** so they start in the same way as with **total flashback** but the narrative rejoins the present of the Prologue before the end and then continues on from there.

Alternating Flashback

Another method of using flashback is to have the two narratives – present and past – move along side by side in alternating sections throughout the story. Past sections can be told chronologically or may be given as random flashbacks as memories are triggered in the protagonist’s mind in the present. As this can be confusing for the reader, keeping the present section chronological is recommended.

Advantages: Allows for flexibility as you can move backwards and forwards in time, and maximises the suspense potential of your material, allowing for build up of tension as what is revealed in the past sheds light on the present and vice versa – e.g. characters can hint in the present (either in their thoughts, censored memories or in dialogue with other characters) about events that happened in the past, while the past sections can set up mysteries that will not be resolved until later in the past or present narratives.

Disadvantages: This is a complex structure and requires constant revealing of smaller mysteries and setting up of new ones in order to keep the reader reading on. If not done skilfully, it can confuse the reader. Also, editing can become a problem as the writer’s familiarity with the text can make it hard to remember what has been revealed when and what effect it will have on the

reader and moving anything involves changing everything else. (I speak from experience having used this structure myself!) Feedback from other readers is especially useful to a writer here. 'The House at Riverton' by Kate Morton is an example of this structure.

Unusual timelines

There are also novel with more unusual time structures - jumping around in time as in 'The Time Traveller's Wife' by Audrey Niffenegger, or starting at the end and going backwards like Sarah Water's 'The Night Watch', but these need to be chosen with good reason, because they enhance the story and bring out your themes, rather than just as a gimmick.