

Lesson 3:

What Makes a Story?

by Nestor Walters

In this lesson, we'll expand on the elements we touched on last time: person and place, and encounter a new one: conflict.

Person – People can relate to almost anyone, but they can't relate to no one. In general, your reader should know some of the following about the narrator: age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, etc.,

Your narrator is, of course, you. But there's more to it than meets the "I." If your application is meant to be an introduction to your prospective colleges, your essay must represent your *personality*: the combination of characteristics and qualities that set you apart from other people.

Again, standing out doesn't always mean being impressive, it just means being personal. For example, I taught myself calculus, got kicked out of the Navy, and can't throw a football. How many people do you know with that combination?

Place – Wherever you are or have been says something about you, gives context for your thoughts, emotions, and intentions. Look around right now. Are you sitting on the hood of a humvee, at a bus stop, at a desk in a nondescript barracks room, or sneaking onto NSI at your work computer when you're supposed to be reviewing Evals?

Think about it. If you're on the Humvee, it means you have a job that puts you near them, and that is interesting. If you're taking the bus, maybe you

can't afford a car, or don't want one, but something is implied about you that can be explored. Same with the barracks room and the work computer.

As a bonus, take it a step further: describe the place/object. If you're honest, you'll often find that the details you observe about a place indicate your emotions toward it. For example, we'll feel differently about a desk that is "smudged and chipping paint" versus one that is "rusting at its hinges, but solid."

P.s. *Place* also includes time, weather, season, etc.

Conflict sounds aggressive is actually quite simple: you want something, but for some reason you can't have it. Everyone has this. Even the sweetest, most patient, patchouli-sniffing, yoga-posing hippie in the world, has conflict every day all day.

Examples:

- a. You want to meditate but have to put your kids to sleep.
- b. You want breakfast but have to get out of bed.
- c. In the first lesson's mini-story, the narrator wanted to win the races *but* had to run hard. He wanted to obey the instructors *but* the tasks were difficult. His buddy wanted to clean up *but* couldn't without breaking the rules. Each of those is conflict on its own, but then there's added internal conflict by deciding which one to prioritize.

There's a pattern: Want X *but* can't because Y. That's conflict in a nutshell, and from conflict comes growth.

Here's an excerpt from "Medic on the Ground," an essay we'll explore in its entirety later. Read this paragraph on your own (without skipping forward) and look for phrases that describe a place, imply conflict, or let us know something about the narrator.

Excerpt:

...It's half past midnight by the time I land. I've had some rough starts to Army training exercises, but this Louisiana swamp jump is the worst. All around, I can hear the loud thuds and crude exclamations of my friends' landings. As their medic, I find each of them, make sure they're okay, then follow them through the humid marshland to our objective. This is the beginning of a 44-hour trek. When it's over...

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leaving this blank so you don't skip ahead

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Here's what I got. I'll use *italics* for person, underline for place, and **bold** for conflict.

...It's half past midnight by the time I land. I've had some rough starts to Army training exercises, but this Louisiana swamp **jump is the worst**. All around, ***I can hear the loud thuds and crude exclamations of my friends' landings***. As *their medic*, I find each of them, ***make sure they're okay***, then follow them through the humid marshland to our objective. **This is the beginning of a 44-hour trek**. When it's over...

So in these few lines, we get that our narrator is an Army medic, that he cares about his teammates, that he's parachuting in Louisiana, that he's jumped before, and that he has a long trek ahead. Of course, my summary took fewer words, but his storytelling is much more interesting and relatable because of the details he provides.

As a writing exercise, take the mini-stories you worked on from the last lesson, and ask these questions about them:

1. Who is talking? Age, gender, occupation, origin, ethnicity?
2. Where are they? Add two sensory details.
3. What do they want and what is keeping them from getting it?

Surprise yourself, let the words take over, have fun.