

# 9

## Focus in Narrative

### Finding your Focus - Editing Ideas

Think: OCSRC. The structure you are aiming to develop in any narrative is :

- O is for Orientation : Describe where, when and why the action takes place and who is involved.
- C is for Complication : Describe the event or action which precipitates the sequence of events; the catalyst.
- S is for Sequence of Events : Describe the events that follow the complication, leading to a climax in the story.
- R is for Resolution : Describe the outcome to the story, the place and the people.
- C is for Coda : Finish the story with a moral or brief message (optional).

You also need to know about focus. This means eliminating things that do not contribute to the effect you want to create in your writing.

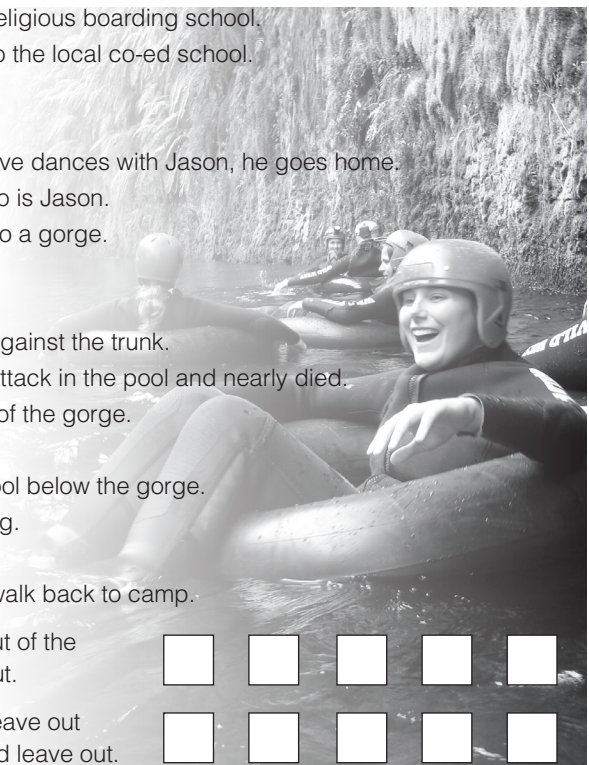
In a narrative, you improve focus on the action by **restricting description and exposition** but also by restricting **action**. If, for example, two interesting things happened on your camping trip, you would craft a better story about one of them than about both. In a description, you improve focus on the subject by restricting narration and exposition but also by restricting description. If, for example, you were describing your backyard, you would improve focus by showing a summer - winter contrast rather than trying to capture all four seasons, day and night, holiday and term time!

### Task 6 Less Can Be More

1 First read this list of possible parts for a narrative.

- i) Mark's mother dies and his father, a share-milker, sends him to a religious boarding school.
- ii) Mark's father gets his own farm when Mark is 15 and moves him to the local co-ed school.
- iii) Mark is awkward around the girls and blushes easily.
- iv) Mark falls for a pretty girl called Karen.
- v) Mark goes to the school dance but, when Karen dances the first five dances with Jason, he goes home.
- vi) Mark's class goes on a two-day bushcraft camp. Karen is there. So is Jason.
- vii) Karen is tubing down a river, misses the exit point and is swept into a gorge.
- viii) Jason says it's too dangerous to follow and runs to get help.
- ix) Mark grabs a tube and paddles into the gorge after Karen.
- x) Karen's tube is snagged on a log; the force of the water pins her against the trunk.
- xi) Karen remembers when a girl in her Year 7 class had an asthma attack in the pool and nearly died.
- xii) The log shifts under Karen's weight; she is freed and is swept out of the gorge.
- xiii) Mark is swept against a rock and breaks his arm.
- xiv) He is pale and shaking when his tube carries him into the quiet pool below the gorge.
- xv) Jason is standing beside Karen on the bank, pointing and laughing.
- xvi) Suddenly, Karen pushes Jason into the river.
- xvii) Karen makes a splint for Mark's arm and together they begin the walk back to camp.

- a) For a story which shows that life isn't fair, which parts would you leave out of the story to improve the focus? Write the letters of 5 parts you could leave out.
- b) For a story which shows that only the brave deserve the fair you would leave out some different parts of the story. Write the letters for the 5 parts you could leave out.



### Task 7 Clues in the Narrative

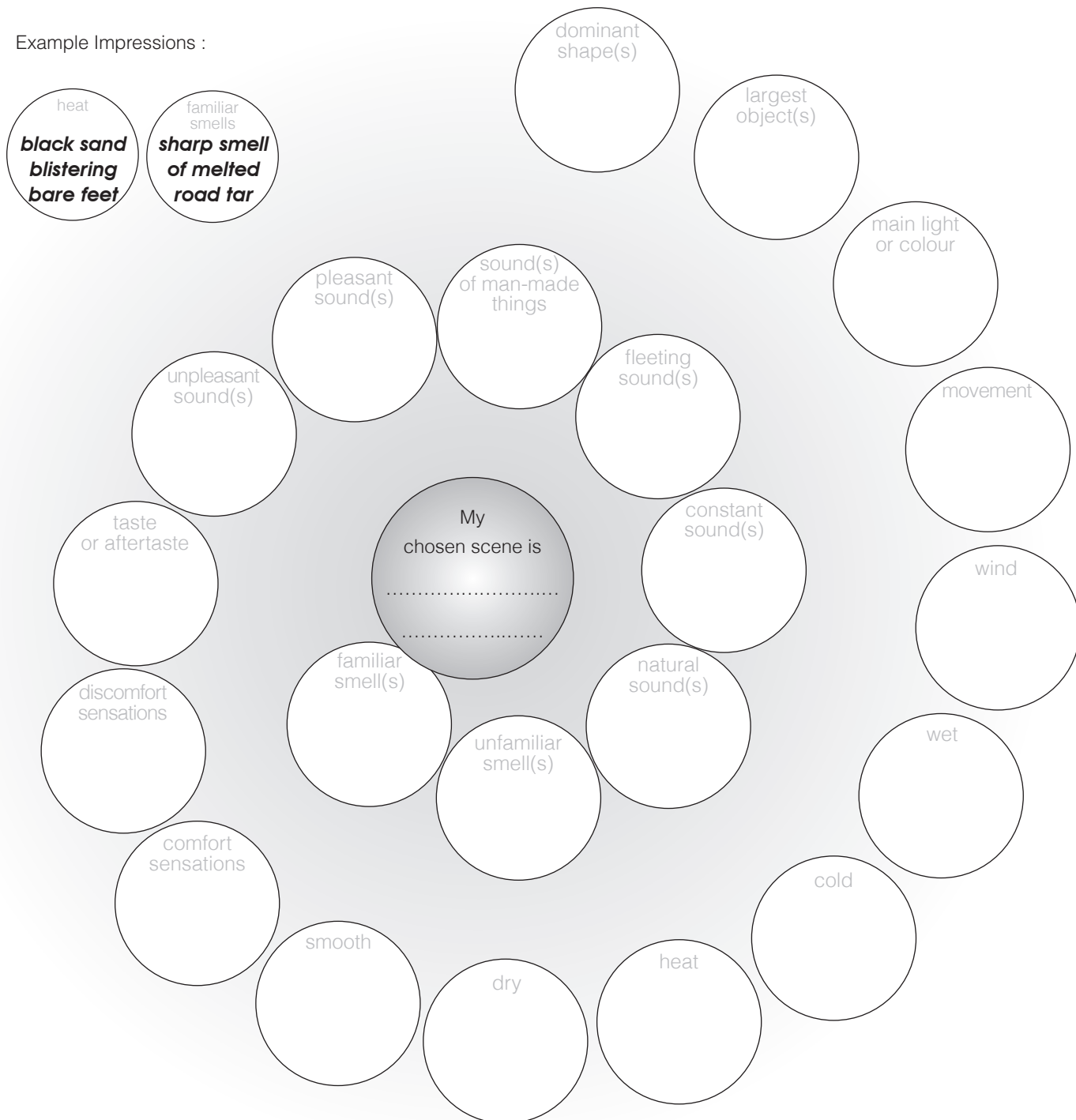
1 The focus in the story above is relationships. Usually these are developed through dialogue, as in the famous scene where Romeo chats up Juliet when they first meet. Mark is not a smooth talker like Romeo, so the story has to use less direct methods.

- a) Note two facts in Mark's background that explain why it was hard for him to talk to Karen. ....  
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- b) Identify the moment when speech is used to highlight the difference between Mark and Jason. ....  
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**Task 8** Sight, Smell, Taste and Touch

1 Think of a scene that you might choose to describe. Use the impression bubbles to brainstorm the sight, sound, smell, taste and touch elements of the scene. You can work from memory, a picture or your imagination. The examples below describe a beach in summer. The grey words are just prompts. Write over them.

Example Impressions :



- 2 Now choose a focus. You could focus on **details**, e.g. emphasise the human element or exclude the human element. Alternatively you could focus on the **mood**, e.g. emphasise the positive elements and omit negative elements.
- a) Write the kind of detail or mood you have chosen to focus on. ....
- b) Cross out (a single line is best) the impressions that you would not include in your description.

# 19 Mood Techniques

## Capturing the Correct Mood

You will find it useful both in practice and in redrafting to have clear ideas about the **sound devices**, **language features** and **syntax** that create mood effectively (see definitions on pages 5 and 6).

**Sentence Type** **Short sentences** read fast, so a rapid sequence of actions is effectively narrated by a series of short sentences. Short sentences are also abrupt and this makes them ideal for the introduction of sudden discoveries and radical changes. Thought goes even faster than action and can be neatly put down in sentence fragments or even one-word sentences. **Long sentences**, especially ones with many punctuated pauses, read slowly and have the right feel for slow processes like the fall of the tide or the coming of darkness. The mere size of these long sentences is also appropriate for the description of things that are big or impressive. There are four kinds of sentence : **statements**, **exclamations**, **questions** and **imperatives** (i.e. orders). Most of what you write will be statements, but variety is good. Exclamations reinforce a mood of excitement while questions (rhetorical ones) reinforce a thoughtful mood and imperatives contribute to the feeling of forcefulness and urgency.

**The Concrete Noun** Concrete nouns are the names of objects. They have the advantage that they create images, not just ideas in your head, and they can switch on memory and imagination. *She lay down among the weeds* gives an idea but not much of an image. *She lay down among the nightshade and forget-me-nots* gives a much clearer picture. It might also call up other ideas : nightshade and poison? Forget-me-nots and true love? Changing the nouns changes the mood : *nightshade and thistles* is grim, *buttercups and forget-me-nots* is innocent and charming.



**Emotive and Figurative Language** These are separate categories. Emotive language has some feeling built in to the word as well as its basic meaning; e.g. a *house* is a building but a *home* is a house with the feeling of love built in - *house* is not emotive, *home* is.

Figurative language comprises **metaphors** and **similes**. These terms are explained more fully in the **glossary** on page 5 and 6. We are treating these categories together because they overlap; many emotive words are metaphors and most similes pack an emotive punch. When you are re-drafting and you find a flat adjective, consider the **synonyms** for the word and choose the one with the most appropriate **emotive flavour**. Try using a Thesaurus to expand your vocabulary.

The language of sport is a rich source of emotive figurative language, though its creators are not required to show as much control as you are. The All Blacks will *murder* the Springboks, a 49 - 0 *hammering*, handing out representative blazers like *sweets*. Crusaders *throw down gauntlet* calls up impressions of extreme violence, sarcasm and old-time noble heroics. It is important that any figurative language you use is **fresh** or used in a fresh way, as the **cliché** about throwing down the gauntlet is here, to make a humorous connection with the rugby team name the Crusaders. Try introducing **adjectives** to increase the use of emotive language. (e.g. the **haunted** house).

## Task 20 Establishing Urgency and Intensity

- 1 **Sentence fragments** are incomplete sentences usually lacking a verb or a subject. They can be used creatively to establish a mood of urgency. Here is an example : *Not breathing. Oh God! Quick; CPR. Clear airway. Breathe. Now check heartbeat. Nothing!* Write your own intense experience using only sentence fragments.

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- 2 **Short Sentences.** Narrate a fast-paced set of actions using short sentences, as in this example : *The front of the raft jammed under the cliff. In a second it flipped. Rocks punched me and tore at my clothes. I couldn't see. I couldn't breathe. Then I was clawing wildly towards the light.*

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## 21 Structuring Narrative Writing

### From Brainstorming to Structure

Now we are ready to look at the skills you need to **design** a story. The first of these is how to **brainstorm** and how to get from the brainstorm to the **essay structure**. Because there are different kinds of creative writing, they are going to have different kinds of brainstorming and different essay structures. First let's look at narrative writing.

#### Structuring Narrative Writing

Your story will have a **timeline** (first event, second event etc). The natural thing to do, therefore, is to put the events into *chronological* (time) *order*. Next, you need to choose the event on the list that is going to give the **strongest ending**. It probably won't be the last thing you wrote down. Then you need to choose an event that is going to give a **strong opening** - one that is going to introduce *dynamic action* or pose an *interesting challenge* for your hero. It probably won't be the first thing you wrote down.

Now examine the events you left out *before* the event you chose to open with and *after* the event you chose to end with. If the events are still important to the understanding or emotional impact of the story, then select the best place to relate them. This means you will, for example, write a *flashback* - which is a good skill to practise.

Next, look at the events between the beginning and the end. If there are too many, **cut out the weaker ones**. If there are too few, either **split the events** on your list into separate ones or **invent some extra action**. Take the time to do this properly because it will give you an **effective story structure** and you can get on with the writing with confidence.

So, what are the **strongest endings**? You have to forget about the way stories are told on the TV news or in the newspaper where they tell you the endings in the first sentence or two. The simplest and always reliable ending is **the major climax** where after an intense effort or conflict the hero wins or loses. Trickier, but often more true-to-life, is **the anticlimax** where the story builds up towards some dramatic climax, but the end is a sudden let-down. For example . . .

*Boy meets girl, boy falls for girl, girl is nice to him, always speaks to him when they meet, boy is ready to ask her to the school ball, girl says she has something special to ask him after school, boy is happy, then girl asks him to introduce her to his best friend because she likes him. Aww.*

This story is also an example of the **late disclosure** technique where the writer hides something important from the reader until late in the story. 'Control' means not over-explaining your ending, ideally not explaining it at all. If the hero makes a big decision, we don't need to know what happened then; the decision is the most important thing.



### Task 24 Structuring a Story

Here are the events of a simple story listed in chronological order.

- Jason gets a hunting rifle for his fifteenth birthday.
- then . . . Jason and his father go hunting with Jason's cousin and his father.
- then . . . Jason and his cousin skate about their hunting skill and each bet that they will kill the first deer.
- then . . . The party splits into two father-son pairs to hunt along each side of a ridge.
- then . . . Jason and his father come across fresh signs of deer as they climb.
- then . . . Jason sees something brown move in a thicket and takes a shot at it.
- then . . . Jason runs into the thicket and finds the body of his cousin.
- then . . . They tramp out of the bush and call the police.
- then . . . Three weeks later Jason is tried and found guilty of manslaughter.

1 Task : Choose the **best end point**. It should be at the most dramatic or most moving moment of the story. Write down the letter of the event you choose.

2 Task : Choose the **best structure** : start with **interesting action**, then get **any necessary explanations** over with, and build steadily to **the climax**. This means putting events out of time order. Write down the letters of the events in their new order.