

FUNDAMENTALS OF NARRATIVE NONFICTION

WHAT IS THEME

- **THEME:** Providing readers with enlightening insight about life through the narrator's experiences and perceptions of the world.
- Use the theme to drive your writing! Not only must it appeal to the reader but it must also appeal to you. You must want to, or even need to explore that particular theme for you to keep writing. Theme is the pulse of the story and if you choose correctly you will feel compelled (in a good way) to complete your story. If your theme is not compelling to you it will certainly not be compelling to your readers and you may produce limp, dead writing. So think very carefully, not just about your themes but about how you intend exploring them.

DEVELOPING THEME

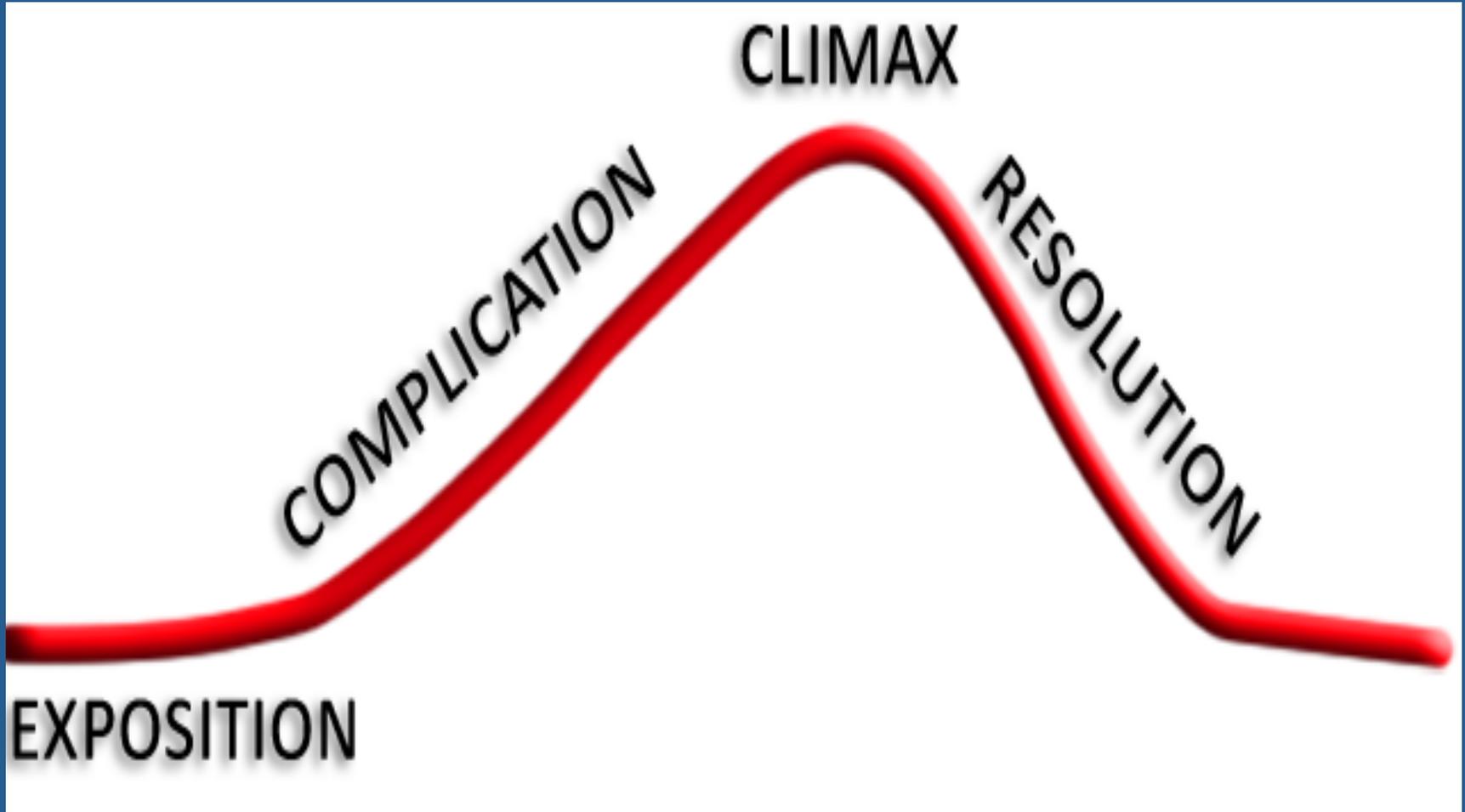
- Before you sit down to write your narrative, figure out your theme!
- Based on the prompt, your theme will be focusing on some aspect of your life that defines you as a person. You therefore need to figure out what that is before you write. For example, if you feel that one of your character traits is your **resiliency**, then you'll want to write about a difficult hurdle that you have overcome and how it made you stronger. If you want to write about losing a loved one, then the theme should be about how losing a loved one contributed to your **appreciation for family**. Perhaps you're writing about your high school sports team working together to win a major championship—an essay about the learning **the importance of teamwork**.

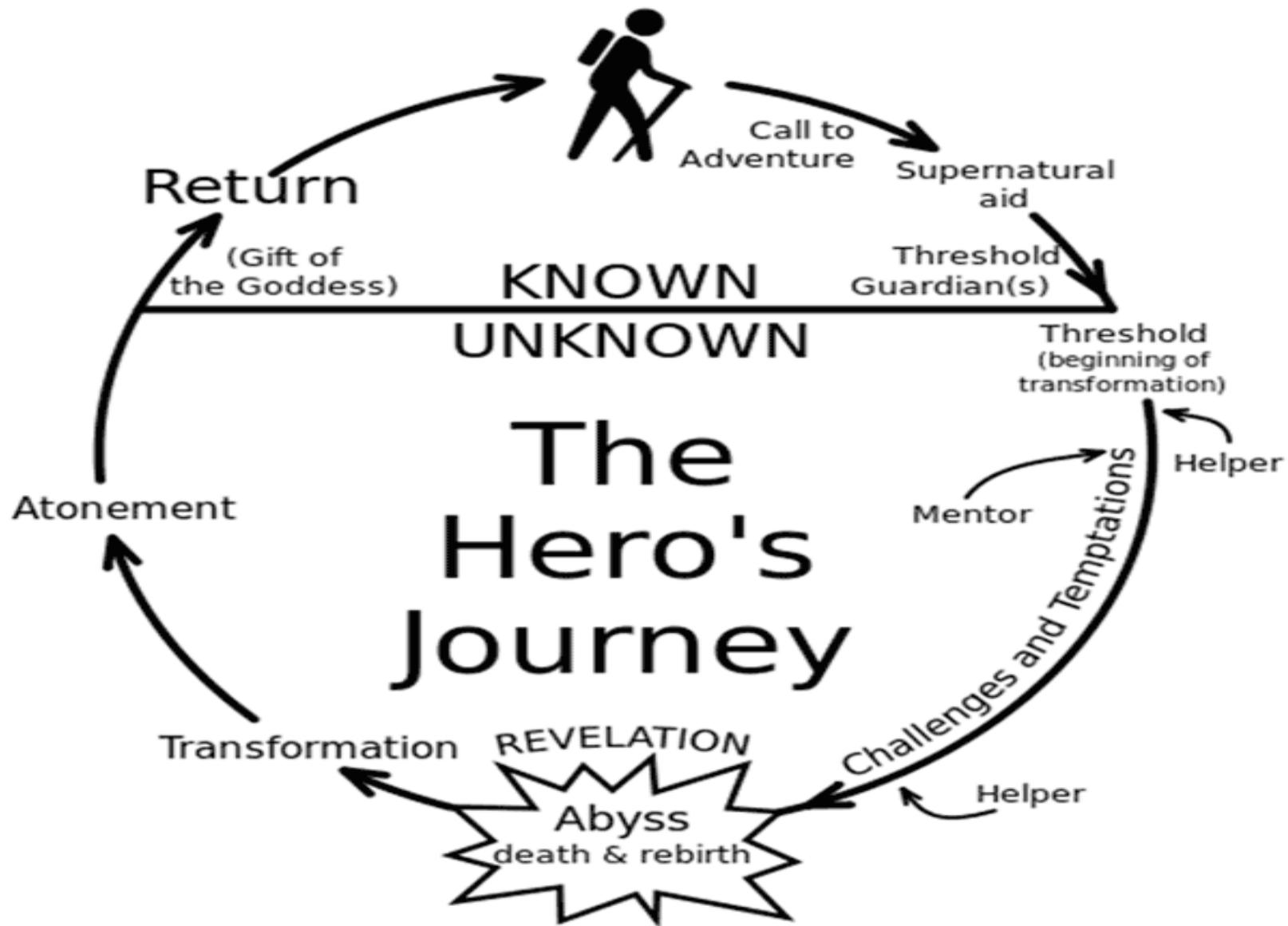
- **Alienation** – The effects of, the loneliness of, to cure it.
- **Ambition** – getting what you want, stunted by, thwarted.
- **Betrayal** – the pain of, in love and friendship.
- **Coming of age** – loss of innocence, rites of passage.
- **Courage** – courage to deal with conflict, lack of, developing, conquering with.
- **Culture** – discovering it, maintaining it, passing it on, fighting to preserve it, losing it.
- **Deception** – how to deceive, results of.
- **Discovery** – what does it take to discover new places, inner meaning, strength, even treasure.
- **Escape** – from life, routine, prison, drugs, family and job pressures.
- **Death** – how to escape, what happens after, consequences of.
- **Fear** – driven by, dealing with, conquering.
- **Freedom** – loss of, gaining, handling, fighting for.
- **Good versus evil** – survival of one despite the other, triumph of one over the other.
- **Isolation** – physical and emotional.
- **Jealousy** – trouble caused by, denial of, driven by.
- **Justice** – the fight for, injustice, truth versus justice.
- **Loss** – of life, innocence, love, friends
- **Loneliness** – no person is an island
- **Love** – love fades, is blind, can overcome all obstacles, can _____?
- **Lust** – for power, for sex.
- **Power** – the search for, the loss of, what we are willing to exchange for.
- **Poverty** - dealing with, overcoming
- **Prejudice** – racism, bigotry, snobbery, dealing with.
- **Sexuality** — coming into it, questioning it, losing it, etc
- **Security** – the loss of, the finding of the need for, how we act when security is shattered.
- **Spirituality and God** – the struggle to find faith, live without faith etc.
- **Survival** – man versus nature

PLOT VS THEME

- **Plot-** Plot is a literary term used to describe the events that make up a story or the main part of a story. These events relate to each other in a pattern or a sequence. The structure of a novel depends on the organization of events in the plot of the story. Plot is known as the foundation of a novel or story which the characters and settings are built around. It is meant to organize information and events in a logical manner. When writing the plot of a piece of literature, the author has to be careful that it does not dominate the other parts of the story.
- **Theme-** the central or dominant idea of a work. The theme is the moral of the story/novel.

THE NARRATIVE ARC





CHARACTERS

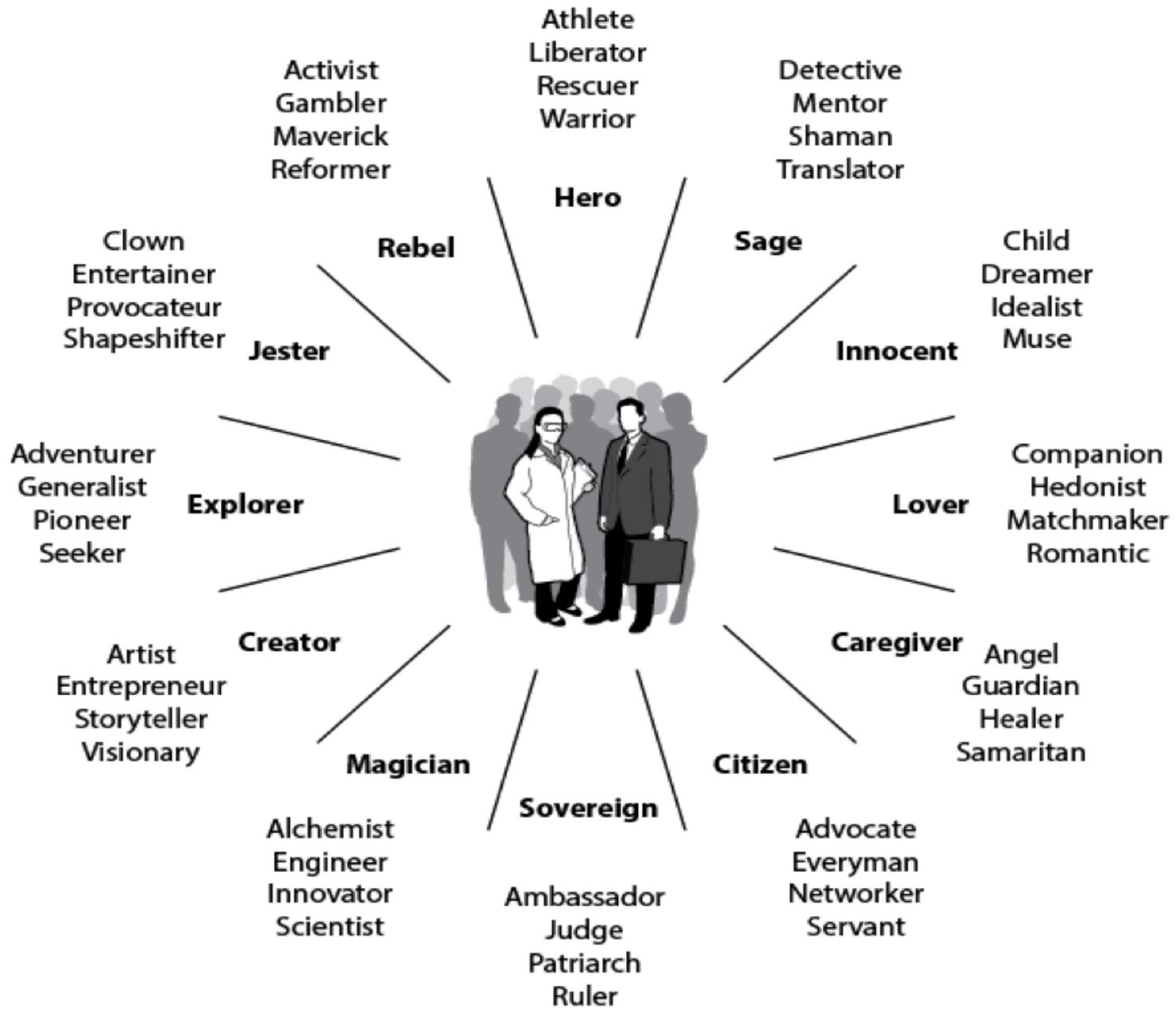
- **Narrator:** the person telling the story. In your essay, the narrator must **EVOLVE**.
- **Protagonist:** A protagonist is the main character in any story, such as a literary work or drama. The protagonist is at the center of the story, typically makes the key decisions and experiences the consequences of those decisions.
- **Antagonist:** An antagonist is a character, group of characters, institution, or concept that stands in or represents opposition against which the protagonist must contend
- **Round Characters** - usually main characters. Fully developed so that the reader can understand their personality and motivations.
- **Foil-** a foil is a character who contrasts with another character — usually the protagonist— in order to highlight particular qualities of the other character.

CHARACTER ARCHETYPES

- An **archetype** is a universal story, character, symbol, or situation. It's something that appears again and again in stories from all over the world.
- Archetypes are always somewhat in question. After all, no one has studied every culture in the world – that would be impossible – so we never know for sure whether something is truly universal.

CHARACTER ARCHETYPES

- The concept of archetypes was first developed by Carl Jung, a psychologist who discovered certain broad similarities among myths from all over the world. In particular, he noticed that “hero stories” all had similar elements, and that all cultural heroes had certain broad attributes in common. He theorized that this was because human beings all shared a **“collective unconscious”** – that is, a set of hard-wired expectations and preferences about stories. In much the same way that there is a “universal grammar” underlying all human languages, there may be a “universal grammar” of good stories.
- So archetypes are part of the key to what makes a story compelling. The best storytellers draw on universal archetypes in crafting their stories, and thus tap into something elemental in the human mind – and in many cases, they do this automatically, without ever setting out to write an archetypal story.



SETTING

- The historical, physical, geographical, and psychological location where a work takes place.
- Settings are important to readers because a setting can set the parameters for a story. Even without knowing the plot of a story, being given the location is enough that readers start to make assumptions about characters and events.



SYMBOLISM

- A person, object, action, place, or event that in addition to its literal meanings suggests a more complex meaning or range of meanings.
- Since literature is symbolic, its meaning is not simple or single. Because of the nature of symbols, literature has what is sometimes called "surplus meaning": one can never really exhaust or completely state the meaning of a piece of literature. Another reading, or another reader, will produce new meanings, or new shades of meaning.
- All good reads require input from readers. If everything is spelt out for the audience and nothing is left to the imagination, reading becomes a passive exercise. But if readers are required to interpret - to read between the lines and fill in the gaps - reading becomes far more active and stimulating. That is why good writers use symbols.

SYMBOLISM

ANIMALS



Dove: peace, purity, simplicity

Fox: slyness, cleverness

Raven: death, destruction; they often play prophetic roles or function as a conductor of the soul

Lion: a solar symbol, power, pride

Peacock: pride, vanity

Serpent/Snake: temptation, evil

Mouse: shyness, meekness

Hawk: sharp, keen eyesight

Owl: wisdom, rational knowledge; messenger of death

Salmon: instinct; sacred wisdom

Cats: are often viewed as serpents of the underworld; they also symbolize cunning, forethought, and ingenuity

Lamb: serves as a manifestation of the power of Spring and renewal, sacrificial element, the children of God

Cuckoo: jealousy and parasitism, it lays eggs in the nests of other birds; laziness

SYMBOLISM

COLORS

Red: immoral; the color of the life principle, blood, passion, emotion, danger, or daring; often associated with fire

Black: seen as a cold and negative aspect suggesting passivity, death, ignorance, or evil; black hens are used in witchcraft as are black cats

White: innocence, life, light, purity, or enlightenment

Green: inexperience, hope; new life, immaturity; a combination of blue and yellow, it mediates between heat and cold and high and low; it is a comforting, refreshing human color; it is the color of plant life

Yellow: rotting, heat, decay, violence, decrepitude, old age, and the approach of death

Blue: cool, calm, peaceful; an insubstantial color in the real world except as translucency, the void of heavens

Pink: innocence, femininity

Purple: royalty, bruising or pain

Brown: a color somewhere between russet and black; it is the color of earth and ploughed land and soil, it represents humility and poverty

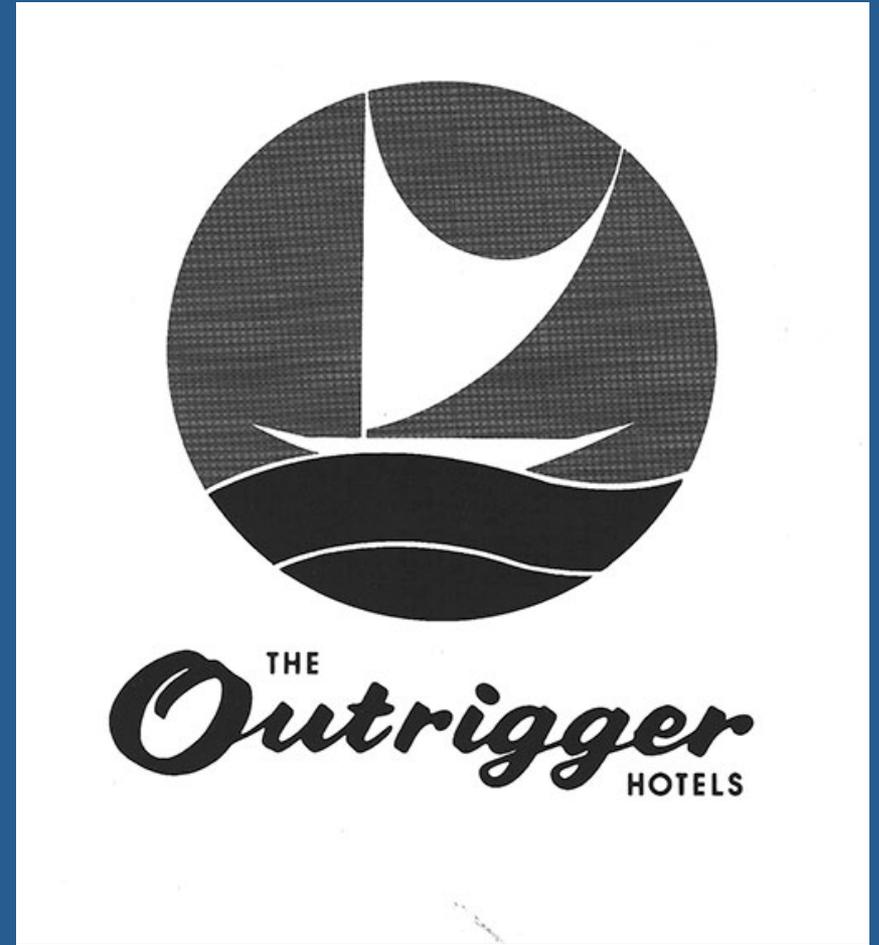
Orange: symbolizes the point of balance between the spirit and the libido; it may be the emblem of divine love or extreme lust

Violet: composed of red and blue, it is the color of temperance, clarity of mind

SYMBOLISM



SYMBOLISM



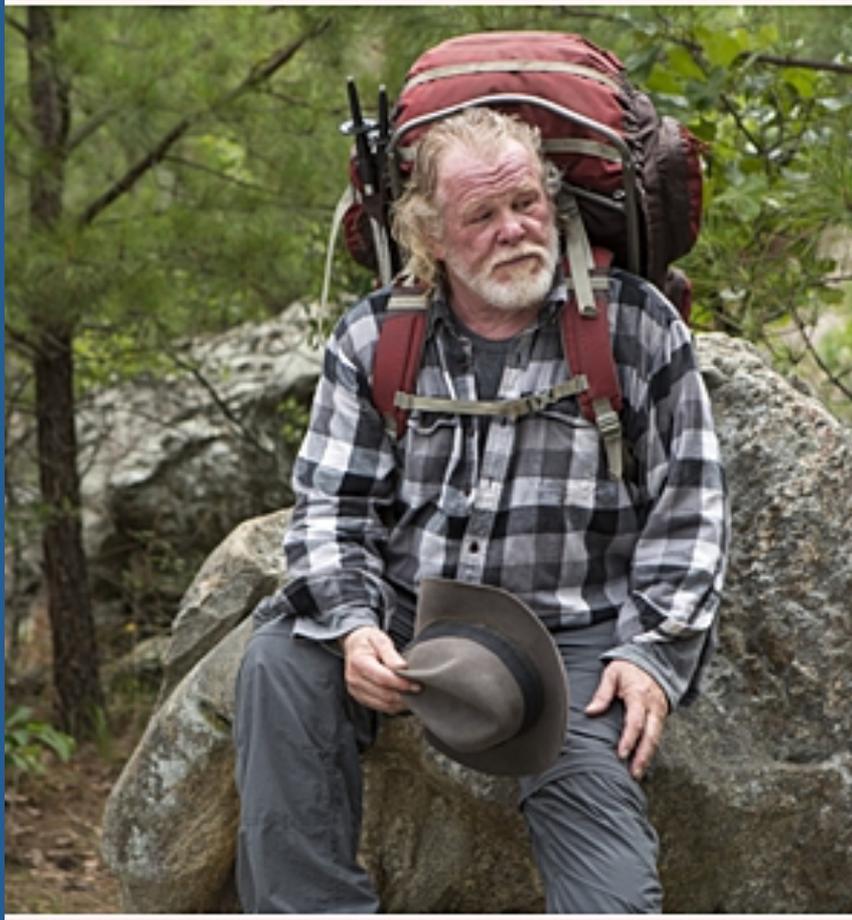
Symbolism: Springer Mountain



Symbolism: Mount Katahdin



Symbolism: Little Debbie



SENSORY DETAIL

- It is important to remember that human beings learn about the world through using the five senses. They are our primary source of knowledge about the world. Therefore, writing which incorporates vivid, sensory detail is more likely to engage and affect the reader.

SENSORY DETAIL

- **SIGHT:** Most common sense used in writing.
- **SOUND:** The human sense of hearing is an important means of communication. Next to visual details, auditory details are most commonly included in writing. This is because sounds give us a primary experience of the world. Sounds can remind us of personal memories, or can create images in our minds.
- **SMELL:** The sense of smell is commonly overlooked in writing. However, it is the human sense of smell that is most closely linked to the brain. The receptors in the brain responsible for processing smells are very close to the area of the brain responsible for the storage of memory.

SENSORY DETAIL

- **TOUCH:** The sense of touch encourages us to investigate the world around us by feeling it and learning the texture, shape, and size of things. Tactile images can be powerful sensory triggers. They allow a reader not only to visualize a scene, but to experience it. Inclusion of the sense of touch prevents the reader from remaining distanced or detached from the writing.
- **TASTE:** The human sense of taste allows a person to do much more than simply select and enjoy food. There are four familiar tastes: SWEET, SALTY, BITTER, SOUR. By appealing directly to any of these tastes, a writer has the unique opportunity to affect a reader's senses. Memories, feelings, people, and places can all be suggested through the sense of taste.

SKILLS FOCUS:

USING SENSORY DETAIL

- I like to go to the beach. There is a lot of sand and even some trees there. People play games on the beach, and some people like to swim. I used to go to the beach very often.

SKILLS FOCUS:

USING SENSORY DETAIL

- One place I enjoying going to is where the land and the ocean meet. This beautiful spot is my sanctuary in the sun—and I choose it very carefully. I look for a cool place under the trees and extend my beach chair on the white sand. The trade-winds that blow often carry a light sprinkle from the ocean, and a hint of saltiness. Peace consumes me whenever I see that beautiful white sand and feel the hot sun warming my skin. Mixed with the calming sound of the waves hitting the rocks in the distance, are giggles from the children building sandcastles. This is my happy place.

SKILLS FOCUS:
“SHOW, DON’T TELL”

Katz did not have a very healthy diet.

THIS TELLS THE READER SOMETHING

SKILLS FOCUS:

“SHOW, DON’T TELL”

- The following day, we went to the supermarket to buy provisions for our first week on the trail. I knew nothing about cooking, but Katz had been looking after himself for years and had a repertoire of dishes (principally involving peanut butter, tuna, and brown sugar stirred together in a pot) that he thought would transfer nicely to a camping menu, but he also piled lots of other things into the shopping cart — four large pepperoni sausages, five pounds of rice, assorted bags of cookies, oatmeal, raisins, M&M's, Spam, more Snickers, sunflower seeds, graham crackers, instant mashed potatoes, several sticks of beef jerky, a couple of bricks of cheese, a canned ham, and the full range of gooey and evidently imperishable cakes and doughnuts produced under the label Little Debbie.

THIS SHOWS THE READER SOMETHING

SKILLS FOCUS:
“SHOW, DON’T TELL”

- Although I like Canada, I sometimes miss India

THIS TELLS THE READER SOMETHING

SHOW DON'T TELL

I love Canada. I miss the heat of India, the food, the house lizards on the walls, the musicals on the silver screen, the cows wandering the streets, the crows cawing, even the talk of cricket matches, but I love Canada. It is a great country much too cold for good sense, inhabited by compassionate, intelligent people with bad hairdos. Anyway, I have nothing to go home to in Pondicherry .

THIS SHOWS THE READER SOMETHING

“SHOW, DON’T TELL”

- **Directions)** *In groups of two, you’re going to pick one of the “telling” descriptions below. Then, using carefully selected details, you’re going to write one paragraph that “shows” the “tells” below (one paragraph for each of the two your group chooses). You’ll be required to share one of your paragraphs with the class. Also, be sure to turn your paragraph in as you leave today. List the names of everyone in your group on the page.*
- **-My apartment is ridiculously messy.**
- **-My car is a real piece of junk.**
- **-Because I’m a college student, I’m always broke.**
- **-That person over there is clearly a tourist.**

WRITING DIALOGUE

- Writing dialogue is one of the most important and yet challenging parts of creative nonfiction. Readers will inevitably want to learn about you (the narrator) as well as your characters. They will want to hear the unique voice of each person: the syntax, diction, tone, rhythm, and colloquialisms that bring each character to life. It is crucial, then, that you reconstruct dialogue in a way that is authentic, engaging, and most of all, meaningful. Dialogue must never be haphazardly placed within a narrative. Always write dialogue with the goal of achieving something grander than having characters speak.

Dialogue that shows the relationship between characters

"What's the capital of Spain?" Jerry asked, pausing over his crossword puzzle.

Susan looked up from her book and rolled her eyes.
"Madrid, duh."

"Why are you so sarcastic all the time?" Jerry slammed his pencil on table. He looked like he was going to cry. "I don't think I can take much more of this."

Dialogue that moves the story forward

The phone rang, and Jerry picked it up. "Hello?"

There was a moment of silence on the other end. "Is this Jerry Simmons?" a male voice asked.

"Yeah. Who is this? "

The man paused. Jerry could hear him take a deep breath. "Jerry, my name is Dave. I'm your brother"

"If this is a prank, it isn't funny," Jerry said. "My family died a long time ago."

"Not your whole family," Dave said.

Jerry hung up the phone.

Read it aloud. If it doesn't sound natural, it isn't. Make sure it sounds different from prose. Remember, few people talk in complete sentences.

BREAK THE RULES TO MAKE DIALOGUE AUTHENTIC

WEAK: “I’m going to leave for school now.”

STRONG: “I’m off.”

WEAK: “Hey sweetie, I’m hungry. I think we should stop at a restaurant for something to eat. Perhaps we should go to that Mcdonalds on 2nd avenue.”

STRONG: “Starving, sweetie. Let’s hit up that Mickey D’s on 2nd.”

WEAK: “It is cold outside tonight. I recommend that you bring your hooded sweatshirt.”

STRONG: “Freezing out there. Grab your hoodie.”

Get rid of filler dialogue that doesn't add anything to the plot or help with understanding the character.

LACKING AUTHENTICITY AND IMPORTANCE

- "Alex," my mother asked, "what were your activities and pursuits at your middle school today?"
- "I had a full day of activities, Mother. My teachers were stimulating, and my English class was especially delightful."

AUTHENTICITY AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

My mom, washing dishes behind the sink, starts with her daily interrogation: “How was school today?”

“I don’t know. Alright, I guess.” Ignoring her, I open my backpack, remove a book and start flipping through the pages. But of course, she starts again.

“Is that The Hunger Games? I heard that’s terrific.” She places a wine glass into the kitchen cabinet and grabs another from the drying rack.

“It’s better than the crap we usually read.”

“Alex, your mouth.” Not two-seconds later, the glass slips out of her hand and explodes onto the floor, covering the new granite tile with thick, aqua-colored shards. “Damn it, “ she screams. “Son of a bitch!”

She looks up at me and we both laugh; something we haven’t done together in far too long.

I grab a broom from the closet and hand it to her. “My English class is actually pretty decent,” I tell her that I’m going to head up to my room to read.

She looks at me in the eyes, smiles, and starts sweeping. “I’m so proud of you.”

Sometimes, in order to keep the peace, it’s best to tell your parents exactly what they want to hear. I climb the long stairway, open my door, throw my backpack onto my bed and turn on my Playstation.

Things to remember when writing dialogue

- Write it as realistically as possible. MAKE IT AUTHENTIC!
- Make it clear who is speaking when.
- Do not give too much information or unrealistic information in dialogue.
- Keep the conversation moving.
- Make it as easy to read as possible.
- Strike a balance between describing the scene (the theme, plot, and exposition) and the dialogue itself.

MAKE DIALOGUE AUTHENTIC

"I...oh...I threw out the filter papers."

I gave a sound that wasn't quite a laugh and said, "They couldn't have weighed two ounces."

"I know, but they were great for throwing. Fluttered all over." He dribbled on more water. "The toilet paper seems to be working OK, though."

We watched it drip through and were strangely proud. Our first refreshment in the wilderness. He handed me a cup of coffee. It was swimming in grounds and little flecks of pink tissue, but it was piping hot, which was the main thing.

"Yeah, I gotta eat something every hour or so or I have, whaddayacallit, seizures."

"Seizures?" This wasn't quite the reunion scenario I had envisioned. I imagined him bouncing around on the Appalachian Trail like some windup toy that had fallen on its back.

"Ever since I took some contaminated phenothiazine about ten years ago. If I eat a couple of doughnuts or something I'm usually OK."

"Stephen, we're going to be in the wilderness in three days. There won't be doughnut stores."

He beamed proudly. "I thought of that." We had arrived at the baggage carousel, and he pointed out a green army-surplus duffel and let me pick it up. It weighed at least 75 pounds. He saw my look of wonder. "Snickers," he explained. "Lots and lots of Snickers."

Rules of punctuating dialogue

- Start a new paragraph when a new person speaks or a large passage of action interrupts the speaking.
- NEW SPEAKER = NEW PARAGRAPH
- Use quotation marks to surround all spoken words on both sides.
- Use speaker tags to show who is talking
- Use the proper end marks.
- Endmarks always go inside the quotes.

Endmarks – possibly the most difficult part of dialogue.

Use a comma if the dialogue is a statement and there is a speaker tag following.

Example:

“Welcome home,” she said, stepping forward to take his hand.

When a speaker tag interrupts the speech...

Treat it as parenthetical information and use a comma on either side.

“I can’t believe,” she said, “that you are finally here.”

THE END

- If you enjoy this type of creative writing, then I HIGHLY suggest that you take ENG 273N: Creative Nonfiction. This advanced writing course will teach you far more about narrative nonfiction.