

Many Ways of Narrative Series: **Show and Tell (Narrative and Exposition in *Reflections*)**

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Abstract: In this inaugural contribution to this series, the late Josh Kanary (1979-2013) clarified the distinction between exposition (telling) and narrative (showing), and how they reinforce each other in *Reflections* articles.

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Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is a journal that focuses on the narrative style. Here at *Reflections*, we recognize that there are many forms that the narrative style can take, some of which are waiting for you to pen. We eagerly look forward to each unique story that makes its way to our desks, and we want to make sure that each story is told in the best way possible. To that end, what we are looking for in a submission is writing that leans heavily towards the narrative, story-telling style and keeps away from the expository style that lacks the details, emotions, and scene setting that the narrative style beautifully embodies.

Now, the definition of a narrative is very broad. It encompasses any form of story, regardless of how long or short the piece. Because of this, expositions and narratives will often overlap – narratives require some amount of exposition in order to tell the story, after all. However, a narrative is going to require much more description. In order to tell her/his story, a narrator is going to have to “show” the reader what happened, as opposed to simply “telling” the reader what happened. “Showing” is the narrative style that *Reflections* is looking for. “Telling,” on the other hand, tends to be exposition.

Exposition will often just set the scene of a story in order to provide the background information that the reader needs to understand in order to follow the narrative that comes after the exposition. However, in many submissions, the narrator never seems to leave the expository writing style and never seems to develop the piece into more of a narrative. As stated previously, the exposition simply “tells” the reader what happens, and although it is an important style, it should be used sparingly throughout the

narrative. For example, the following is exposition:

I realized the families at our agency needed a support group. However, there were no support groups in the area to which I could refer them. So, I needed to start my own. I went to my supervisor, and after some discussion, he approved it.

When *Reflections* asks for a narrative, we are asking for more than what the above example provides. There is so much more begging to be described here. How did you realize the families needed a support group? What was the moment when you had that epiphany? How did you feel when you realized you had to start your own support groups? And, most of all, what was the discussion with your supervisor? How did you convince your supervisor to approve it? Don't just “tell” us what happened, “show” us what happened. Here is an example:

It was Friday, and the clock's hands slowly moved to four thirty. The pain of a week of roadblocks pounded in my head and the call of the first warm weekend of spring made it difficult to concentrate. However, I knew my supervisor was feeling the same way. I knew that when he was tired and ready to go home, he didn't want to argue and would resign more easily to the requests of his employees. It was manipulative of me, but it was for the families.

“And I suppose you want to spearhead this,” he observed after I explained to him the need for a support group for our

families.

“I would be honored to, but I'd be happy with anyone as long as we could refer our families there,” I replied, knowing full well that this project was not going anywhere unless I took charge.

“You think you have time for this?” he asked, looking up from his e-mail with a doubtful glance.

“I'm sure I can find the time, and if not, I'll make time,” I replied, “It's for the families.” He sighed. He hemmed. He hawed. But, most importantly, he approved it.

There is a clear difference between the previous expository style and the above narrative style. It doesn't have to be long or extensive, and you don't have to go into more detail than you're comfortable with. However, a narrator needs to draw the readers in and put them right there in that room with you.

Most importantly, give yourself a voice. Make it clear that only the author and nobody else could tell the narrative the way you tell it. Let the reader hear you, understand you, and get to know you. This is your story – make it come alive!

So, now that the difference has been explained, get over to that pad of paper, typewriter, or computer. Tap into that narrative deep in your memory that the world needs to hear. *Reflections* is always accepting submissions, but don't use that as an excuse to put off perfecting that manuscript of yours. Get at it now while you are still feeling inspired. Once you're finished, we will be happy to work with you to make sure the manuscript is the best that it could be.

About the Author: Joshua Kanary (1979-2013), M.S.W., Cleveland State University School of Social Work, was an English major at Grand Valley State University. He served as a *Reflections* Graduate Assistant during 2012-2013, overseeing the copyediting process for *Reflections* and writing this piece, which was added in early 2013 to the Review Guidelines to assist reviewers, authors, and editors.