

Narrative techniques

Below are many of the most-widely recognised and used narrative techniques from literature and scriptwriting. Some may be more familiar than others and similarly some may be best not being used in our own script. However, this resource asks you to consider each as a possibility by finding examples of as many as possible. This will allow you to then explore how useful or interesting each one is.

To complete the table, read the definition of each technique and then try to find as many examples as possible by writing the example in the empty column. You will need to conduct your own research to find examples of each, but some are much more common than others!

Technique	Definition	Example from script
Backstory	Story that precedes events in the story being told—past events or background that add meaning to current circumstances.	
Chekhov's gun	A dramatic principle that requires every element in a narrative to be irreplaceable, with anything else removed.	
Cliffhanger	The narrative ends unresolved, to draw the audience back to a future episode for the resolution.	
<i>Deus ex machina</i> (a machination, or act of god; lit. “god out of the machine”)	Resolving the primary conflict by a means unrelated to the story (e.g., a god appears and solves everything). This device dates back to ancient Greek theater, but can be a clumsy method that frustrates the audience.	

Eucatastrophe	Coined by J. R. R. Tolkien, a climactic event through which the protagonist appears to be facing a catastrophic change. However, this change does not materialize and the protagonist finds himself as the benefactor of such a climactic event; contrast peripety/ <i>peripateia</i> .	
Flashback (or analeptic reference)	General term for altering time sequences, taking characters back to the beginning of the tale, for instance.	
Flashforward	Also called prolepsis, a scene that temporarily jumps the narrative forward in time. Flashforwards often represent events expected, projected, or imagined to occur in the future. They may also reveal significant parts of the story that have not yet occurred, but soon will in greater detail.	
Foreshadowing	Implicit yet intentional efforts of an author to suggest events which have yet to take place in the process of narration. See also repetitive designation and Chekhov's gun.	
Frame story, or a story within a story	A main story that organizes a series of shorter stories.	
Framing device	A single action, scene, event, setting, or any element of significance at the beginning and end of a work. The use of framing devices allows frame stories to exist.	

<i>In medias res</i>	Beginning the story in the middle of a sequence of events. A specific form of narrative hook.	
MacGuffin	A plot device in the form of some goal, desired object, or other motivator that the protagonist pursues, often with little or no narrative explanation as to why it is considered so important.	
Narrative hook	Story opening that "hooks" readers' attention so they will keep reading.	
Ochi	A sudden interruption of the wordplay flow indicating the end of a rakugo or a kobanashi.	
Plot twist	Unexpected change ("twist") in the direction or expected outcome of the plot. See also twist ending.	
Poetic justice	Virtue ultimately rewarded, or vice punished, by an ironic twist of fate related to the character's own conduct.	
Predestination paradox	Time travel paradox where a time traveller is caught in a loop of events that "predestines" them to travel back in time.	
Quibble	Plot device based on an argument that an agreement's intended meaning holds no legal value, and that only the exact, literal words agreed on apply.	
Red herring	Diverting attention away from an item of significance.	

Self-fulfilling prophecy	Prediction that, by being made, makes itself come true.	
<i>Story within a story</i> (Hypodiegesis)	A story told within another story. See also frame story.	
Ticking clock scenario	Threat of impending disaster—often used in thrillers where salvation and escape are essential elements.	
Unreliable narrator	The narrator of the story is not sincere, or introduces a bias in his narration and possibly misleads the reader, hiding or minimizing events, characters, or motivations.	

BLACK SCREEN

Over the BUZZING sound of an electric engine we--

CUT TO:

EXT STREET/DAWN

A grainy, low-resolution view, seen from sixteen inches above street level. And we're moving fast -- nauseatingly fast.

From this angle close to the ground we FLY down a road strewn with war garbage: munitions, trash, rubber, animal shit -- all of which, from this odd, jarring perspective, looks gigantic, monstrous.

We zoom towards a crumpled COKE CAN, the white 'C' growing enormous on the screen, filling the screen like a skyscraper.

We SMASH into the can and barrel ahead.

A RAG flutters, blocks the view, then tumbles away, as we --

-- zoom downhill, see nothing but gray sand, then zoom back up hill and off, catching air, a flash of the horizon line, BRIGHT SUN, and land hard on a packed road.

We close in on one particular pile of trash, which is topped with a white plastic garbage bag, and stop. Puffs of dust and fluttering plastic.

We glide across the fluttering plastic. Flies buzzing. Advancing slowly, inch by inch, to the edge for our first glimpse *inside* the bag:

A RUSTY ARTILLERY SHELL.

CUT TO:

EXT MIDDLE EASTERN STREET/DAWN

A military ROBOT (about 3 feet long and 2 feet high, aka 'the bot') that rolls on tank-like treads and has a mechanical hand and an array of CAMERAS is moving around the bag.

TITLE OVER:

BAGHDAD, IRAQ - JANUARY, 2005

This is all taking place on a dusty stretch of road in a quiet section of Baghdad, barren except for a few shops, some cement houses and a couple of parked cars.