
UNIT 15 NARRATIVE COMPOSITION-2

Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Samples of Writing
- 15.2 Style
 - 15.2.1 Simplicity
 - 15.2.2 Direct Conversational Style
 - 15.2.3 Individuality
 - 15.2.4 Concreteness
- 15.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.4 Key Words

15.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall continue our discussion on 'narrative composition' and present samples of writing to serve as models. We shall also discuss certain features of style. After completing the unit you will be able to write narrative composition better.

15.1 SAMPLES OF WRITING

Here are three samples of writing in the form of dialogues.

Example 1

This is a record of discussions at an Interview Committee, where members of a Board of Trustees are discussing the candidates for the post of the Principal of a school in a small town. The committee consists of two trustees and a specialist from the Board of Education. They have already interviewed a number of candidates and are now waiting for the last candidate to come in.

Chairman : If you don't mind, ladies and gentlemen, we shall compare notes before we interview the last candidate. I must say we have not had the response I expected. Perhaps we should have advertised more widely. Speaking for myself, I have not been impressed by anyone we have seen so far. At the same time, we must immediately find someone suitable as the admissions have to begin in May. The last candidate has good paper qualifications, but I doubt whether, being a woman, she will be able to manage the school well.

Mrs. Garg : Mr. Chairman, we can't reject her just because she is a woman. We must remember our school is co-educational, and a woman has as much right to apply for the post as a man. If we do not consider her purely on the ground of her sex, it will be very unfair.

Dr. Sharma : At present women are very conscious of their right to equality of opportunity for jobs, and if the story of discrimination on grounds of sex gets into the newspapers, the trust will have a tough job defending itself.

Chairman : I wish, Dr. Sharma, you would not bring newspapers and politics into every matter. My chief worry is that if we put a woman in charge of the school, she will have a tough time dealing with some of the teachers we have on the staff, let alone the children from the slums.

Dr. Sharma : Let's not get involved in political discussions.

Mrs. Garg : Yes, we'd better be quick. It's already late. I wish, Mr Chairman, we had a wider selection. The fact is Mrs. Fazalbhoy is very well qualified on paper. Shall we call her in and interview her first?

Chairman : You're quite right, Mrs. Garg. Let's get on with the interview. Please call her.

Exercise 1

Now give an account of the interview, keeping the following facts in mind :

- 1 Mrs. Fazalbhoy is a mature and experienced teacher.
- 2 The Chairman is worried about a woman being able to manage a difficult set of teachers.
- 3 Dr. Sharma is interested in getting the pupils from slums to attend school regularly.
- 4 Fines don't ensure regular attendance so well as parents wanting to get their children educated.
- 5 Mrs. Fazalbhoy has worked in a similar school before and is therefore used to such problems.

[illegible]

Example 2

The following dialogue narrates a particular incident, first from the point of view of a man and later from the point of view of his wife, giving rise to a great deal of humour.

It is the wedding anniversary of Mr. & Mrs. David, and they have invited the Joneses.

Mr. Roy Jones and Mr. John David have just finished dinner and are smoking together.
Mrs. David and Mrs. Jones are inside.

Jones : What a splendid meal ! I have not eaten so much for a long time.

David : Well, I can't complain of Maggie's cooking. Last month we went out to celebrate her birthday, but to be honest that meal was not a patch on this.

Jones : How long have you been married?

David : It's 30 years today. You know I could never remember the dates, birthdays and anniversaries, but now Maggie makes sure that I never forget. Sometimes I am amused to think I might have married someone who was the opposite of Maggie.

Jones : I can't believe that.

David : Let me tell you quickly before our wives return. You know, Roy, I'd always had a weakness for the fairer sex. When I met Maggie, I was already quite friendly with another girl. She was very different from Maggie — busy with her acting career, and couldn't boil an egg to save her life. I liked her a lot. I used to see Maggie on days when this other girl Lily was busy with her rehearsals. Now in those days I was more forgetful than I am now and one day I had asked Maggie to come to the pictures with me. The film was 'My Fair Lady', and at the last minute Lily rang me up asking me to take her to 'My Fair Lady'. I said 'Yes', forgetting about Maggie.

Jones : That must have been very awkward. What did you do?

David : I remembered having asked Maggie when I got near the theatre, and saw the two of them standing next to each other. I rushed into the restaurant across the road trying to decide what to do. Of course Lily walked off first, so I took Maggie to the picture.

Jones : And that decided you, I suppose.

David : Yes, I thought she must really like me to wait for me.

Mrs. Jones and Mrs. David now join their husbands. Mr. Jones tells Mrs. David (that is, Maggie) what her husband has told him about the incident thirty years ago that made him choose her as his wife. But Mrs. David has a different version to give them.

Exercise 2

Write in about 200 words what you think Mrs. David told them. You may like to consider the following suggestions :

- 1 In order to be dramatic the situation must turn out to be the opposite of what is presented in the dialogue so far.
- 2 Maggie and Lily knew each other and had decided that Maggie should wait for John.

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Example 3

A narrative needs a great deal of concrete detail to be effective and convincing. The writer tries to catch the reader's attention through an effective introduction.

Given below is an example of a masterly dialogue with which Jane Austen begins her novel *Pride and Prejudice* :

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she, "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know. Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! single, my dear. to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? How can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design! Nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

This is fairly simple and the writer sets the tone with the brief introductory comment. It is easy for the reader to see that what will follow is a social comedy and the writer is an ironic commentator. Notice how essential facts are communicated to the reader. We learn that Mrs. Bennet keeps her eyes and ears open and loves gossip. We also find that her one interest in life is marrying off her daughters to men of large fortunes. Mr. Bennet does not have the same views and makes fun of his wife. We get the feeling that the writer is more sympathetic towards Mr. Bennet and would like us to side with him.

We find that Mr. Bingley, who will occupy Netherfield Park, is likely to be an important character in the novel and a number of events will probably take place in Netherfield Park. The neighbourhood has people like Mrs. Long, Mr. Morris, and the Bennets, who are all a little awed and impressed by Mr. Bingley's wealth.

In this way the dialogue gives us a point of view as well as the relevant facts which are to be communicated to the readers.

15.2 STYLE

In writing narrations one of the skills to be cultivated is style. It is difficult to define style, as so many different definitions have been current. The easiest definition is the one by Swift: "Proper words in proper places make the true definition of a style." The most popular definition is: "Style is the man himself." While Swift's definition is very useful and clear, the other definition by Buffon conveys the idea that in everything you write you communicate a little bit of your inner-most self. Most students also know Chesterfield's definition: "Style is the dress of thought." This definition is quite often misunderstood to mean that you have something like content and then you dress it up in a fancy style, and many students think that lack of content or weakness of content can be covered up with a decorative style. At this point they may like to remember Whitehead's definition: "Style is the morality of mind." This definition indicates the close connection between style and the integrity of a writer's mind. Style will thus bring to your readers your approach, your point of view and your way of looking at things. It can never be separated from your basic mode of thinking. When we say a writer has a poor style, we mean that his way of writing does not leave a definite impression on the reader's mind. We are commenting on the way in which he expresses his attitude and opinions. So style is the individual manner in which someone writes or expresses his thoughts. Style is what the writer adds to the basic communication in language which comes from the use of linguistic units. The writer exercises his choice in the matter of sounds, words, grammatical patterns and their arrangements to convey his meaning.

The question that arises is how you can improve your narrative style. You should re-examine all that you write from the point of view of style and ask the following questions:

- 1 Does it communicate the idea that you have in mind?
- 2 Is there anything that slows down the flow of narration?
- 3 Is there any fault which can be removed, like faulty syntax, faulty diction, non-standard usage, etc.?
- 4 What can you do to improve communication? You can consider the following stylistic features:

a) simplicity, b) direct conversational style, c) individuality, d) concreteness.

Given below are four short passages illustrating each of these qualities, and exercises to practise these qualities.

15.2.1 Simplicity

Example 4

The passage given below is remarkable for its simplicity.

The language is used to make statements, and the reader has to supply almost nothing from his imagination. Articles in newspapers are often written in this style.

There is a product on the market that is sold in a jar. The jar is inside a box. The box is inside a bag. The bag is inside a carrier. This is known as packaging.

Consumers only want the product, so packaging creates a problem for them. As soon as they have unwrapped the product, the jar, the box, the bag and the carrier are no longer packaging. They have all become useless. They have become rubbish.

There are two kinds of rubbish. Both of them are nasty. The first is rubbish thrown into dustbins. The second is rubbish thrown anywhere else. This second kind of rubbish is called litter. But manufacturers defending non-returnable, throw-away bottles, for example, argue that litter is not their responsibility. The public are to blame. In other words, litter does not become litter until it is thrown away. Before that it is called packaging.

(From W.S. Fowler, *Proficiency English*, Newspaper article, Page 1)

Exercise 3

Write a paragraph in the same style about one of the following :

- 1 Water supply canals being polluted by slums nearby.
- 2 Picnics and public places.
- 3 Cleanliness : personal and public standards.

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15.2.2 Direct Conversational Style

Example 5

Given below is a passage which is notable for its direct conversational style. The writer speaks directly to the reader and tries to present his point of view, which is very uncommon.

“I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least, and it is commonly more than that — sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements. ... When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shopkeepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them — as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon — I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago.

(From Henry Thoreau : ‘Walking’)

Exercise 4

Write the first paragraph of an essay in this direct conversational style on a subject from the list given below :

- 1 Travelling on a slow train.
- 2 Living in a small village.
- 3 Giving up all machines.

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15.2.3 Individuality

Example 6

The passage below has a style which is very individual. Note the use of words which are too heavy and solemn for the context and give rise to humour.

Lord Ickenham raised his eyebrows. "Not stop here? Are you suggesting that we go out into that rain? My dear lad, you are not aware of the grave issues involved. This morning, as I was leaving home, I had a rather painful disagreement with your aunt. She said the weather was treacherous and wished me to take my woolly muffler. I replied that the weather was not treacherous and that I would be dashed if I took my woolly muffler. Eventually, by the exercise of an iron will, I had my way, and I ask you, my dear boy, to envisage what will happen if I return with a cold in the head. I shall sink to the level of a fifth class power. Next time I come to London it would be with a respirator. No! I shall remain here, toasting my toes at this really excellent fire."

(From P.G. Wodehouse : *Uncle Fred Flits By*)

Exercise 5

Write a paragraph similar in style which brings out the individual character of the speaker.

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15.2.4 Concreteness

Example 7

The following passage is an example of concreteness in descriptions:

At DAYBREAK Billy Buck emerged from the bunkhouse and stood for a moment on the porch looking up at the sky. He was a broad, bandy-legged little man with a walrus mustache, with square hands, puffed and muscled on the palms. His eyes were a contemplative, watery grey and the hair which protruded from under his Stetson hat was spiky and weathered. Billy was still stuffing his shirt into his blue jeans as he stood on the porch. He unbuckled his belt and tightened it again. The belt showed, by the worn shiny places opposite each hole, the gradual increase of Billy's middle over a period of years.

(From John Steinbeck : *The Red Pony*).

Exercise 6

Write a similar description of someone you see everyday, e.g. a bus conductor, a milkman, or a shopkeeper.

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15.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have presented a number of sample passages to illustrate

- narratives in the form of dialogues, and
- different stylistic features.

15.4 KEY WORDS

'concreteness : definiteness

'diction : choice of words and phrases in speech and writing

'individuality : individual character

style : manner of writing or speaking

'syntax : sentence-construction; the grammatical arrangement of words in speech or writing

'usage : customary practice