

Literary Exposition

A report presented to members of The Dargon Project

at the 2003 Dargon Writers' Summit

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to briefly consider the subject of literary exposition. First, I will talk a little bit about the meaning of the term "exposition". Then, I'll talk a little bit about the "theory" of exposition, and then I'll get more into the "practice". Finally, I'll go over some methods of creating good exposition.

"Exposition". What is it?

Exposition: The *gradual, continual* exposing of information in a way that *keeps the reader reading at a pace evocative of the emotion* that the writer wishes to convey.

Well, it turns out that the term "exposition" is rather difficult to nail down. It is very probable that each of you will have a different idea of what it is I'm going to talk about. And some of you may be a little disappointed if I either don't cover something that you are interested in hearing about, or I cover something that you are **not** interested in.

So, what I'm going to do is give you my definition first.

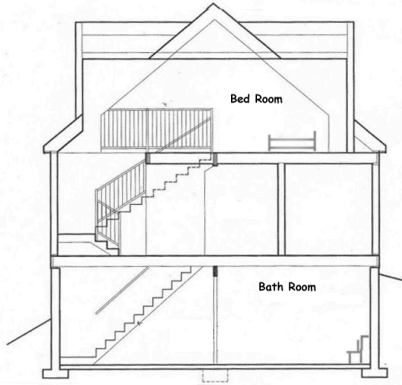
Exposition is the gradual, continual exposing of information in a way that keeps the reader reading at a pace evocative of the emotion that the writer wishes to convey.

Exposition Theory

Exposition is an important element in writing of any kind, not just fiction. When you compare writing to other creative activities -- activities in which you "create something from nothing" -- you find that writing has some unique aspects. For instance, take a practical art like a piece of modern architecture. People come to this structure with certain needs, be it an office, a museum, a home, whatever. The structure provides space for these needs in as comfortable or convenient a layout as possible, given restrictions of space and money.

Space and money, therefore, become restricting elements to the creation of a building. It is important for the architect to realize what his restrictions are so he can use them, avoid them, or manipulate them to achieve the best results.

Now readers also come to a piece of writing with certain needs: questions that they want the writing to answer, or maybe a more general understanding of a topic; or, as is often the case in fiction, entertainment and wonder. In all cases, readers come to writing for some sort of "information", whether that information presents facts or evokes emotion.



Writing, like architecture, tries to answer the needs of its readers in

as comfortable or convenient a layout as possible, but unlike architecture the restricting element for writing isn't space. No, what restricts writing is time, or more specifically "linear temporality". It is the fact that the reader can only read one word at a time, in a forward order that makes up phrases, then sentences, then paragraphs, then pages, chapters, books...

For that reason, writers must pattern this linear presentation of information to best meet the readers' needs. Exposition is my word for the technique of presenting this information. Without careful exposition of information in your writing, it is like building a three story house with bedrooms on the third floor and the only one bathroom... in the basement, or an industry building with a conference room situated right in the middle of a noisy production floor or call center. Exposition is very important to writing of all types.

Exposition Practice

Much of what I'm going to talk about next is taken from Jack M. Bickham's book "The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes". On page 79, Bickham says simply "Plan... Write... then Fix." Different people have different ways of writing, and some don't like to plan so much, some don't like to fix as much. For now I'm going to go over Bickham's method.

First, plan. In virtually every source I've read, the writers stress the importance of planning at

least to some degree before you write. I believe in letting everyone work in whatever way is most comfortable, but I think no matter how loose and flowing your writing style may be, you do have some idea of what you are going to be writing about, some idea of where your story is going to go, before you put pen to paper. Admit that much. Then write it down. Even just a brief statement of purpose, something short, to the point, and clear, can drastically help you to keep focus while writing and improve your exposition.

Bickham writes that you should at least have "a brief statement, as precise as possible, about what your planned story is essentially about." (pg 69-70) That statement shouldn't be any longer than about 150 words, and should include the basic plot, the name/identity of your viewpoint character, the character's goal, the name/identity of your primary opposition character, and what that villain wants.



Everything that you do above and beyond a brief

statement is icing on the cake as far as planning is concerned. Another thing you might want to try is a detailed outline. Just list the plot points that you want to hit and the order that you want to hit them in. If you have ideas of information the reader will need in order to understand what is happening at each point, put them in the margin. Another idea is a mind map: simply put the plot points you want to hit in random places around a piece of paper, then let your mind free-flow ideas of things the reader will need to know at each point, and write those around that point. Then just order the points simply by putting a

number next to each one.

Now that you've planned, write. Follow your plan; remember your focus. If you forget, check. Just like an artist drawing a still life or a portrait, they don't stare only at the canvas as they paint, they keep looking up to double-check what the real image is. Do the same thing with your writing: put the written statement or outline or map or whatever somewhere that you can clearly see it and check it often.

Now, one thing that I must stress in the "writing" stage is that you must **just write**. It is very tempting in this stage to go back and adjust your plan over and over, or to go back and start looking for little errors to correct. Don't do it! Get 10,000 words down on paper according to your plan during this stage, don't do anything else. A common temptation is to make a major plot change, don't do it! Another temptation is to keep going back and re-reading what you've just written (before you're done writing) and say to yourself "This doesn't make sense. This is stupid. This is bad." And then you muck around with it trying to make that little paragraph you've just written into something amazing. **DON'T!!** This is the stage to write, so just write! Bickham cautions writers to not get caught up in minor characters or things that have nothing to do with the "point". (pg 71) Be a "bit leery" of new ideas that come to you if they involve major reconstruction of the plot.



When you've finished writing, it is time to fix. Don't fool yourself into believing that

there is nothing to fix, and don't go back and make major plot changes, yet. Re-read your story, make sure the pace is good, make sure plot points are clear, make sure exposition is good. **THEN**, add enriching subplots if you feel they will help, or make an objective decision to make a major plot change and re-write.

Five Stages of Pace:

1. Slow Exposition
2. Med. Slow Description
3. Medium Narrative
4. Med. Fast Dialog
5. Fast Summary

One thing that is essential to mention at this point is the idea of pace. As I said before, exposition is the art of presenting information in a linear fashion. A reader can only read one word at a time, you don't have much control over that fact. However, you do have control over how **fast** or

slow the information is delivered. Bickham says that there are 5 different speeds at which you can convey information. The slowest is what he calls exposition, the bare laying out of facts. This stops action and forces the reader into a very slow pace. Then, getting successively faster are description, narrative, dialogue and dramatic summary. If, in the fixing stage, you find that a certain part of the story seems to be dragging, you can adjust the pace to something faster by changing how you expose information. For instance, if you have a paragraph of details about a scene, you might expose it faster by changing it into dialogue. On the other hand, if you find a scene or part of a scene seems superficial or full of holes like Swiss cheese, you might want to go back and slow down the exposition, changing dialogue or summary to details or narrative.

When you are done with this, you have produced a *First Draft*. You're not done, but you've taken that giant first step to producing a finished story. For each draft, do the same thing: plan, write, then fix. Don't mix the phases just because you've finished draft 1. Keep it up until you feel the story is ready and then submit it.

A number of Dargon Project members who were in attendance when I first presented this at the 2003 Writers' Summit did not like Bickham's method. They recalled the example of architecture, and remarked that if you are in the midst of building something and some part of the plan doesn't work, you can't go back to the drawing board, nor can you wait until the building is completed to you fix the problem.

The fact is that, though Bickham stresses rigid adherence to the three phases in his method, the actual practice of using this method is likely to be a lot less cut-and-dry. You will probably run into problems that you didn't foresee in your planning stage that will utterly stop the writing stage, usually continuity errors of some sort. When this happens in writing, you can go back and replan, or you can skip over the problem and come back to it when you are done, but probably the best thing is to find a quick solution and move on. However, if you find that this happens a lot, you may want to stop writing and go back to plan in more detail. Now that you have an idea of what sort of problems you are running into, the planning will come more smoothly, and once you have planned for the problems, the exposition should come more smoothly.

Other Methods

Now, as I mentioned before, this is all just one method of organizing the story-writing process to improve exposition. Here are some other methods:

William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, in their Elements of Style, cite several "rules" that they feel

writers should follow to create good writing. One of them, rule 13 of the fourth edition to be exact, presents a neat method for cleaning up exposition (pgs 15-17). The rule is: Make the paragraph the unit of composition. Strunk and White suggest that, once you've settled on a subject that you will write about, see if you can break it down into sub-topics, each one of which will warrant at least one paragraph. Once you've ordered the sub-topics or the paragraphs developed by each of those sub-topics, see if each of the paragraphs can be grown into several paragraphs. "As a rule, begin each paragraph either with a sentence that suggests the topic or with a sentence that helps the transition." Before long, from a list of sub-topics you've grown a draft.

J. A. Cuddon, in A Dictionary of Literary Terms, quotes E. M. Forester's 1927 book Aspects of the Novel in suggesting that a writer should have a plot, but should view the plot and the story as separate elements (pg 513-514). The difference? Both plot and story involve a list of events in sequential order, but the story just shows that events transpired, while the plot gets into the causality of the events. Plot, he says, asks both what and why of all events and actions in a story in three tenses: what did happen and why, what is happening and why, and what will happen next and why. The suggestion being that when you write you should look at your organization as plot points which always point in three directions: back at what caused them, what is happening now, and what they could or will cause. In this way, the story takes on a wavelike cohesion where every event leads naturally from the last and to the next. As a writer, you could plan this out before you write or, with practice, do it while you write to create smooth exposition.

In his book, Literary and Thematic Terms, Edward Quinn portrays plot as a sort of play between characters and incidents (pg 248). His imagery is like two stable chemicals, one labeled "character" and the other labeled "incident" that, when combined react to create tension, drama, curiosity, etc. In effect, a story. However, he cautioned against viewing characters and incidents as separate things in the story, either one needs the other to be significant. One way of ordering your story is to create a detailed character first, then combine him or her with a series of incidents that require that character to react. So long as the character reacts naturally to the events as they occur, your exposition will be natural as well.

Donald Murray also lists some organizing techniques in his book, The Craft of Revision. One of his suggestions is to write as if you were having a conversation with your reader (pg 128-130). Pay attention to the questions that your readers will have while reading and then answer them the moment they are asked. If there is more than one question generated by a piece of text, he says just write down the questions, and then determine what the logical order would be in answering them. Using this method, you provide your reader with information in the most convenient manner: as soon as it occurs to them to ask, you give them the answer.

During the Dargon Project's 2003 Writers' Summit, a number of audience members had concerns about Murray's method. They noted that if you answer all of your reader's questions right away, your reader won't bother reading on. I think that Murray's advice has merit, but you have to take it with a professional grain of salt. You have to treat your writing as seduction, offering your reader a taste but withholding the greater truth until the end. Recall here my original definition for exposition included "keeps the reader reading". If you simply dump the story in the first paragraph, you won't be doing that at all.

It is also useful to note at this point the difference between artistic and utilitarian writing. Dargon Project members had remarked that following Murray's method too literally could lead to overly utilitarian writing, where everything that is written about happens for a reason. This is valid, but you also want to be careful writing about things that have no meaning to the reader. One example is writing about a character's events during her morning. You probably would not mention every time that character goes to the bathroom. If you did, the reader would probably expect that there is some significance to the event, and if there isn't, they might feel you are being overly wordy in describing meaningless events.

On the other hand, you may decide that you want to go over many tedious, insignificant details of an event in your writing in certain situations. This technique can help develop your characters (by showing their usual habits), detail a scene, set a pace to be interrupted later in the story, or simply create a particular mood in your reader. All of these are more aesthetic reasons for answering questions that your reader probably wouldn't ask, and can help flesh out a story tremendously. Of course, there are still reasons for showing these details (as listed above), and so, in a sense, they are still utilitarian. But you would have to think beyond Murray's method to know to include them.

One thing that this opposition shows is that you can't follow a rule off of a cliff. What's more, all of the methods here might help you develop better exposition, but none of them are the "secret to writing". To be a writer, you must do more than just follow a plan, more than just answer questions. You must take many things into consideration, including the length of the story. Since for DargonZine we tend to concentrate on short stories, it might be best to stick with utilitarian details. Including too many aesthetic details might lengthen your story too much. However, as well-rounded writers, we should all realize that none of these methods are the "be-all-and-end-all" of writing, they are just ideas. Develop your own methods and share with the group!

Conclusion

So, I've talked a bit about what exposition is: the gradual, continual exposing of information in a

way that keeps the reader reading in a linear direction and at a pace evocative of the emotion that the writer wishes to convey. And I've spoken a bit about why that is important to consider when writing. A story, like a building or a piece of artwork, has to satisfy certain desires in its readers, and exposition is the key to satisfying those desires. I've also gone over several methods that other writers use to help maintain good exposition, and addressed some concerns members had at the original presentation of this paper. Hopefully, you have all come away from this with a greater understanding and appreciation for the ordering of information in your drafts.

Exercises

Exercise one: Murray's method. Get one volunteer and ask him to answer a question in one sentence: What happened to you at the airport when you were waiting for your flight? Or who did you see today? Or what surprised you as you were coming towards this place? Note that the question is not a "yes or no" question, and that it is not a question with a specific answer. It is a question about an **event**. Then, have someone else in the room ask the first question that came to mind when they heard the volunteer's answer, and have the volunteer answer that question. Go around the room having each person ask the volunteer the first question that comes to mind regarding the situation. Note that the questions will vary and may lead the story in random directions; this is because different readers will have different requirements from the story. You should write the story to your imaginary "ideal reader" who is as interested in your idea as you are.

Exercise two: Quinn's method. Gather a bunch of character traits from the group. Ask them what the character looks like, sounds like, acts like, get a brief bit of history and get a motivation (what he "wants"). Then go around the room with each person suggesting an "incident" that might generate a story. The incident can be ridiculous or it can be common, but it must be something that either prompts the character to **act** in a certain way, or else gives him an opportunity to **act** on his motivation. Members of the group can say subsequent events that would occur after the event that someone else mentioned, leading the character along like a rat through a maze. It isn't important if the group ever gets to an event that will let the character get directly to his goal (the object of his motivation), though if they do, switch to incidents that will suddenly prevent the character from winning.

Exercise three: Cuddon's method. Have someone throw out an event that can happen to a character, then ask for answers to the three questions "what happened in the past and why?", "what is happening currently

and why?", "what will this lead to and why?". Once someone answers the third question, present that answer as the new event and ask the three questions again. Continue as long as you can.

Dave's Presentation on Literary Exposition

Outline V.3

- I. Introduction
 - A. Summary
 - B. What is Exposition?
- I. Exposition Theory
 - A. Importance of Exposition
 - B. Linear Temporality
- I. Exposition Practice
 - A. Plan
 - 1. A brief statement
 - 2. Outline
 - 3. Mind map
 - A. Write
 - 1. Follow your plan
 - 2. Just write
 - A. Fix
 - 1. Make general fixes, then add subplots or plot changes
 - 2. Pace
 - a. What is pace?
 - b. How to control the pace
 - 3. Dargon Project Members' concerns
- I. Other Methods
 - A. Strunk and White's method
 - B. J. A. Cuddon's method
 - C. Edward Quinn's method
 - D. Donald Murray's method
 - E. Dargon Project Members' concerns
- I. Conclusion
- II. Exercises
 - A. Exercise one based on Murray's method
 - B. Exercise two based on Quinn's method
 - C. Exercise three based on Cuddon's method

Works Cited and Recommended Readings

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