Storytelling Notes

This document reviews some of the tools you have at your disposal to create a vivid narrative. Many of these are on display in the narratives we are reading. Look for them!

1. Imagery: Generally, this is what makes writing vivid. Something is an image if it evokes one or more of the five senses: sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and physical feelings.

This is opposed to abstract language, which pertains to thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Generally, this sort of writing is weaker than imagery, and so should be used sparingly. Whenever you find yourself writing a sentence that starts "I thought..." or "I felt" or when you find yourself using words that are purely abstract (love, fear, embarrassment, etc.) you are probably writing about abstractions. Each and every abstract assertion that you make in writing needs to be supported with (or replaced by!) imagery.

For example, the sentence "My dad is kind" is an abstract assertion. Kindness is not a quality you can see or hear or smell. And so one option would be to follow this abstraction with some examples of kind things he does. Or, better yet, replace the assertion with imagery:

   When I was six I bashed my dad's foot with a hammer by mistake and instead of yelling at me he gently picked me up and explained how to properly use the tool. Then he gave me a box of nails that rattled as I slid it across the table.

Do you see how, from this concrete description, we understand that the dad is kind, without the writing having to say it? The goal is to convey abstract ideas (love, kindness, fear, etc.) through imagery.

2. Dialogue: This is when you have people actually speak in your narrative. It looks like this:

   The young bank teller looked at me and said, “Sir, your account is all screwed up.”

   “It is?” I said, pretending to be surprised. “What’s the problem?

   “Well, it’s just, there’s no money in it.”
Dialogue like this does a few things: it communicates information, paints an active picture, and develops personality. It’s much more interesting to show a conversation like this than it is to tell the same conversation in summary: *The young bank teller was abrupt and rude and so I acted surprised when in reality I wasn’t*. Dialogue is a way to keep your writing concrete.

3. **Setting + Place (specific moments):** This refers to where and when you narrative takes place. It’s about establishing context for your story. Give your story a home. Paint a picture of a place and a certain time of your life.

In addition to this sort of surrounding information, it is also important to realize that stories are comprised of specific moments and interactions. Your first day on the job; your last day at that school; the time you and your grandmother sang the national anthem before a Mariners game. Build your narrative with specific conversations and memories. You will use these things to provide examples for your reader of the feelings, emotions, and ideas you want to get across.

4. **The Surprising Detail:** Every now and then you’ll want to drop in a detail that your reader doesn’t necessarily see coming. This doesn’t mean you should make up something absurd. Instead, try to add color to your narrative by presenting a less than obvious way of describing something.

5. **The Tiny Elephant Principle:** This is a safeguard against language redundancy. Imagine you saw an elephant walk by. What might you say to your friend standing there? Maybe, “Whoa! Look at that elephant!” And your friend would look, expecting to see a rather large animal. The point is that the adjective *large* is already included in the noun *elephant*. You wouldn’t have to tell your friend that a large elephant walked by because, well, *all* elephants are large.

If, on the other hand, you saw a *tiny* elephant walk by, you would need to specifically mention that to your friend. “Whoa,” you might say. “Look at that tiny elephant!”

What does this have to do with writing? Start to be aware of what nouns (and verbs) already imply an adjective or adverb that you might be tempted to use. That way you won’t have to use the modifying word. Don’t write about large elephants. If it’s an elephant, just say it’s an elephant. Never use two words (or three) to describe what you can with one. Only use adjectives and adverbs (like *tiny*) if they are absolutely necessary.

6. **A list:** We all know what a list is, but it can be a very effective and concise descriptive tool. A list is a way to quickly characterize a person, place, time, event, etc. with a *range* of characteristics. This helps make your narrative vivid by implying a variety of details all at once. An example of a list: His freshman year of college passed in a blur of late nights, early mornings, and weekend trips to the disco-themed bowling alley.