

Effective Flashbacks

An extended flashback is a dramatic way to tell past events, but it interrupts the flow of the story. A flashback can derail the current actions and dissipate any momentum already gathered. You risk losing reader interest. The most effective technique is to weave bits and pieces of recollection throughout. Delivered at the right moment, a flashback enhances and deepens the story. The tricky thing about writing a flashback is transitioning into the past and then transitioning back to the present.

Tense to use for Flashbacks

If the main story is written in...

Write the flashback in...

Present Tense

He runs

Past Tense

He ran

Past Tense

He ran

Past Perfect Tense

He had run

1. Find a trigger to ignite a flashback

Create some external stimulus that pushes your character's consciousness into the past that lets the reader know that the content is important.

2. Find a trigger to return to the present

The reader needs to understand why the character is jarred back into the present. This reorients the reader to the story. Subtlety counts. You might use actions for the character to reemerge into the present—a ringing telephone, or someone or something special.

3. Keep it brief

Choose one important point that you want to get across with your flashback, cut it down to its key moments. If readers have to go through pages of backstory, they will wonder why you did not incorporate the flashback into the time frame of the novel.

4. The flashback needs to advance the story

A flashback should always serve as a tool to advance what is happening in the present.

5. Use flashbacks sparingly

Use a flashback when there is no other effective way to get an important piece of information across.

Exercises on using flashback effectively and sparingly

Rewrite the following flashback more interestingly, using dialogue.

She stared at the boy sitting opposite her in the noisy café. She could hardly believe he was her son. Twenty years since she had last seen him...a tiny baby with a shock of black hair. How she had resented his new parents.

Had, had, had... Past perfect quickly gets cumbersome. Cut the 'hads' and make this flashback more immediate.

Sweating, he had glanced in the mirror. The Mercedes had been coming up fast behind him and he'd panicked. What should he do? He had wondered whether he should stop, pull in and hope for the best, but suppose Bob had a gun or a knife. What if Bob demanded the cash? He had left that back home with Sue. In the end, he had decided to chance the cops giving chase. Then he had started panicking about Sue and whether they would find her.

Blend this flashback with the present, insert some dialogue and bring it to life.

Elizabeth sat in the hospital with her hysterical mother. She had known her father was ill, but had not realized he was this bad. Why hadn't Mom said so on the phone? Mention it now and it might start a fight, but so what? She glanced at her mother, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.