

How to Write a Narrative

Before the third session of every study, we each write a **visual narrative** about a character in the passage to read aloud to each other. Sharing stories is great fun and highly insightful. If you learned to hate writing in school, this is different! We've cut out all the bad parts: no one will see or care about your spelling, punctuation, or any of the grammar-nazi stuff. We'll have already done the research, you'll have plenty of interesting things to write about, and—no grades!

We write narratives they help us *visualize* what is happening and *identify* with the person you are writing about. When you walk through the scene with a character, or stand in their shoes and ponder what they are thinking and feeling, you automatically connect with them. In fact, often the best stories come from weaving in details from your own life when you've had a similar experience.

PICK YOUR CHARACTER

The first step is to pick a character from the passage and write *as it happens* from your character's point of view. If the passage you are studying is *The Sending of the 12* (Mark 6:6-13), you could write as one of the 12 disciples, or as Jesus. But you aren't limited to just them, *because there were other people in the story who aren't mentioned*. You could choose to be the wife in a home two disciples stayed in, or a child watching a pair come to his village, or a village elder pondering how to receive them... you can be anyone!

THE FREE WRITING PROCESS

The part of writing that gets people down is the agonizing. Is my topic sentence any good? Should I use this word or find a synonym? Arrrrgh!

But we're not going to do any of that. Here's how this works:

1. Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Get your notes out in front of you.
2. Set a timer for one hour.
3. Pick one small idea to write about.
4. **Just Write!** Start anywhere—it doesn't have to be at the beginning. Don't waste time trying to come up with a perfect first sentence. Just make it up as you go!
5. When the timer goes off, you are done, whether your story is finished or not

DO NOT go back and edit what you wrote (that's a hole with no bottom!) DO NOT stop to clean up your spelling and grammar. DO NOT worry if your writing is 'good' or not. Just write!

This process is called "free writing"—instead of planning what to say, you just start writing. You make it up on the fly. Free writing is where the magic happens, because if you get into your narrative enough to forget the mechanics of writing and live the story with your character, you'll be identifying with them—and that's the goal! Your character will come to life, and tell you things about the scriptures that you've never seen before. Story-writing becomes an adventure of discovery, where you find yourself feeling and thinking what Peter or John or even Jesus might have thought and felt. That's gold.

And when the hour is up, you are done. Finished! Because, hey, this study is only looking at one little piece of a much larger story anyway!

PICTURE EVERYTHING

What makes a good story great is when listeners can *see what you are describing*. The goal is to tell the story in a way that creates a picture in your mind. For instance, to write about the Sending of the 12, you might say, “John was anxious about giving his first sermon.” But instead of simply telling us what John was feeling like a neutral observer, a better way is to become John, to experience what he experienced: “Heart racing, John hesitated for a moment, wiped his sweaty palms on his thighs, then stuttered out his first, halting words.” See the difference? The first version tells you *about* what happened, but the second one *shows* you. The second sentence never uses the word ‘anxiety’, but the racing heart, hesitation, sweaty palms, and stuttering show you a picture of what anxiety *looks like*.

USE YOUR IMAGINATION

The first time you do this, you’ll probably be wondering, “Is this *okay*? Is it okay to put words in Jesus’ mouth or feelings in Peter’s heart that aren’t actually mentioned in the bible?” Our problem is that we’ve been so trained to ‘rightly divide the word of God’ with imagination. It almost feels heretical.

But think of it this way: are there other details in the story that aren’t mentioned? Obviously—names, dates, the weather, and the time of day, to name a few. If you use your imagination to fill in those details, will you get it wrong sometimes? Yes, of course. But here’s the rub: if you refuse to engage your imagination to fill in *any* details, you end up with a blank canvas. And that is *certainly* inaccurate, 100% of the time!

To put it another way, we aren’t making doctrine, we’re making pictures—visual aids. As long as you are using your imagination to make pictures and not theology, you’re fine. Which leads to what is actually the most important question: if I want to truly identify with and understand the characters in scripture, is imagination a help or a hindrance? Without question, it is a help. In fact, I’m not sure it is possible to do so without it.

EXPLORE IMPACT AND EMOTION

Significant events in life have significant emotional impacts. Although the gospels don’t often mention emotion, we can be sure it was there. For instance, when Jesus heals a man who’d been disabled for 38 long years at the pool of Bethesda, how did he react? The book of John merely says he ‘began to walk.’ Wait—that’s all?!? If it was me, I’d be crying, laughing, dancing, praising... I might go off to share my joy with friends and family, or kneel right there on the pavement and tearfully thank Adonai for his favor. The way a normal human being like you would react gives us some good insight on how this man did.

Human emotions haven’t changed in the last 2000 years. So if your character experiences something significant, just ask yourself, ‘How would that impact me?’ Emotions are involuntary reactions to stimuli, so even the human Jesus himself had feelings similar to yours!

EXAMPLES

Here are some additional tips, with examples:

1. **Build vividness by using the five senses.** The smells, the quality of the light, what people were wearing, how a character moved or spoke can all make a story come alive to your emotional brain. Run through the five senses to think of more details.
 - a. Dull: *Peter steered the boat toward shore.*
 - b. Adding the sense of touch: *The wet deck rocked under his feet as Peter gripped the steering oar, its handle polished smooth from years of sliding through his rough fishermen's hands.*
 - c. Flaccid: *They went to the market to buy bread.*
 - d. Adding sounds and smells: *The pungent odor of fish mixed with baked bread hit his nostrils as John turned the corner and entered the square. A cacophony of vendors calling out to customers and women haggling over the price of a loaf filled the air.*

2. **Show instead of tell.** Showing the person's feelings in an action makes a much better story than just naming the emotion. Think about what a person does, looks like, or says if they have a certain feeling, and write that.
 - a. Flat: *He felt sad.*
 - b. Graphic: *The old man buried his face in his hands and sobbed.*
 - c. Stoic: *The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus.*
 - d. Real: *Their rejection stung, like a slap on the cheek. It took the wind out of you. Jesus hesitated for a moment, rocked back on his heels by the ferocity of their anger.*

3. **Convert internal dialogs into concrete events.** Internal dialogs ("Peter wondered if he was thinking correctly about it. How would Jesus handle this?) lose people, because you can't visualize what's going on inside someone else's head. If you realize you are writing too much of what people are thinking, add another actor to bring those internal thoughts into concrete words or actions:
 - a. Internal dialogue: *Peter wondered if the crowd was growing angry. How will I respond if they do?*
 - b. Concrete action: *Peter leaned over against John, and whispered, "I hear rumblings in the crowd. Do you think they are getting angry at us?" "How should I know!" John replied fiercely. "I'm just trying to figure out how to stay out of harm's way if they do!"*

4. **Write as the person instead of about them.** Writing as an outside observer puts distance between the reader and your character. Instead, write as if you are looking through that person's eyes:
 - a. Distant: *Andrew was a typical Galilean disciple: late teens, intensely religious and a little awkward socially.*
 - b. Intimate: *Glancing furtively around himself, Andrew sized up the group. The others shuffling by in the dust seemed just like him: awkward teenagers with dark, intense eyes who—just like I do, he realized with a start—looked at the ground whenever someone caught their gaze.*

5. **Fill in the details from our research.** Take what you've learned so far in our study and make educated guesses about what the characters would have seen, said and done to fill out the story:
- a. Just scripture: *[Jesus] came into his hometown, and his disciples followed*" (Mark 6:1)
 - b. So much more: *"Still panting a bit from the climb, the party rounded a spur and Nazareth came into view. A mere 400 inhabitants lived in stone houses often built right into the steep hillsides, their grain and good hidden in storerooms carved into the soft chalk below. Vineyards, grain fields of wheat and barley, plus figs, olives and a few oaks climbed the terraces above the village."*
 - c. Just scripture: *"He got up and rebuked the wind and the sea"* (Mt. 8:26)
 - d. So much more: *"Jesus grabbed the mast with one arm and stepped up onto the thwart. "Hey, wind!" he cried loudly, his hair streaming out behind him. "Enough! Tone it down! And you, waves," he ordered, pointing to the dark water. "No more of this. Be still!" As soon as he said it, the rocking of the boat decreased. With a satisfied nod, he sat back down on the deck.*